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## **“Comfort women” Problem as a Catalyst for Civil Society and Nationalism in Japan and South Korea**

### **Abstract**

The term “comfort women” refers to the women, mainly from the Korean Peninsula and China, who had been forced to serve as sexual slaves by the Japanese Imperial Army during the Second World War. The problem emerged at the beginning of the 1990s and became an impediment especially in relations between Japan and South Korea. The article analyzes how the “comfort women” issue was approached to by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in both countries. It is argued that while the problem led to invigoration of civil society institutions, it also incited strong nationalist movements. Anti-Japanese feelings in South Korea contributed to lack of flexibility in negotiations with Japan and rejection of the apologies by the government of that country. Such reaction, in turn, weakened the position of moderate NGOs in Japan that tried to compensate the victims, and made them prone to criticism from right-wing movements. The paper examines these complex developments.

**Keywords:** “Comfort women”, Japan, South Korea, civil society, nationalism

The former sexual slaves who had suffered from the Japanese Imperial Army have been dubbed as “comfort women” (Japanese *ianfu*, Korean *wianbu*). They started their struggle for historical truth and compensation at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, igniting a severe diplomatic crisis between Japan and South Korea. The aim of this article is to examine how the involvement of NGOs and civic movements in the “comfort women” issue in both countries made the resolution of the problem harder to achieve. It is argued that despite the intention to compensate the victims by moderate NGOs and politicians

in Japan, linkage of the problem with national pride led to involvement of nationalist movements that hampered any attempts at reconciliation. As such, the “comfort women” issue may be interpreted as a catalyst for both civil society and nationalism.

## Literature Review and Analytical Framework

The “comfort women” issue has attracted interest from scholars since the emergence of the problem in the 1990s. A lot of researchers focused on uncovering the historical truth about the crimes committed against sexual slaves by the Japanese Imperial Army.<sup>1</sup> Political and social scientists have usually contrasted human rights NGOs involved in the “comfort women” issue against the Japanese government. As indicated by George Hicks, democratization of South Korea enabled NGOs in that country to undertake new initiatives on history problems.<sup>2</sup> Jane W. Yamazaki stressed that as women rights activists “have an agenda that goes beyond the immediate needs of the victims,” they do not really desire resolution of the problem.<sup>3</sup> Chizuko Ueno, in turn, analyzed the revisionist and feminist stances on “comfort women” as ways for constructing national identity.<sup>4</sup> The analytical framework proposed in this article tries to examine the influence of civic movements on governmental policy in its entire complexity. It is argued that Tokyo remained under pressure both from the civic groups that demanded reconciliation with South Korea and from those that denied past wrongdoings by the Japanese Imperial Army.

Civil society can be defined as “the sphere of institutions, organizations and individuals located between the family, the state and the market in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests”.<sup>5</sup> Such definition does not differentiate between the organizations that promote human rights and those that advocate national prejudice or even violence.<sup>6</sup> Nationalism can be divided into two categories: individualistic-libertarian and collectivistic-authoritarian. While the former can be linked with the notions of national sovereignty achieved through democracy and civil society, the latter focuses on the concepts of national uniqueness and reification of community, which often leads to exclusion of the people of different ethnic origins.<sup>7</sup> The “comfort women” problem has attracted an equal

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<sup>1</sup> Yuki Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women. Sexual Slavery and Prostitution During World War II and the US Occupation*, Routledge, New York 2002; George Hicks, *The Comfort Women. Japan's Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York and London 1994; Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Jūgun ianfu* [Military Comfort Women], Iwanami Shoten, Tōkyō 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Hicks, *Comfort Women*, p. 173.

<sup>3</sup> Jane W. Yamazaki, *Japanese Apologies for World War II. A Rhetorical Study*, Routledge, New York 2006, p. 70.

<sup>4</sup> Chizuko Ueno, *Nationalism and Gender*, Trans Pacific Press, Melbourne 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Helmut K. Anheier, *Civil Society. Measurement, Evaluation, Policy*, Earthscan, London–Sterling, VA 2004, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism. Five Roads to Modernity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge–London 1992, pp. 3–17.

attention from the NGOs that promoted human rights and from the nationalist movements. Instead of focusing on the former or the latter, the article examines the impact of both kinds of civic groups on the development and potential resolution of the problem.

The paper is composed of four sections. The first one briefly summarizes the emergence of and the initial Japanese response to the “comfort women” issue. The second section analyzes the contribution of moderate Japanese civil society groups to an attempt at compensating the victims. It is followed by an examination of the impact of South Korean NGOs’ involvement in the issue on the hardening of the position of South Korean government. The last section describes opposition from Japanese right-wing groups to the policy of apologies and compensation. It is argued that while the “comfort women” issue invigorated civil societies in both countries, it also contributed to exacerbation of animosities between both nations. Lack of reconciliation resulted from the involvement of nationalist movements in the problem rather than from the stance of the governments.

### Emergence of the “Comfort Women” Issue

The “comfort women” issue first emerged during South Korean President Roh Tae-woo’s visit to Japan in May 1990, when Seoul requested from Tokyo a list of Koreans forcefully conscripted as sexual slaves by the Japanese Army.<sup>8</sup> In October 1990, South Korean women rights activists issued a six-points joint declaration, in which they demanded 1) admittance by the Japanese government of forced conscription of “comfort women”, 2) apology, 3) disclosure of all information on war atrocities, 4) erection of a memorial monument for the victims, 5) compensation for those who survived or their families, and 6) reflection of historical truth in education in order not to repeat the past wrongdoings.<sup>9</sup> One month later, several South Korean NGOs formed the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (Hanguk Jeongsindae Munje Daechaek Hyobuihoe).<sup>10</sup> In December 1991, a group of 35 South Koreans, including former soldiers and “comfort women”, filed a suit against Japan in the Tokyo Regional Court. They demanded apologies and 20 million yen of compensations for their suffering. As a result, Seoul increased pressure on Tokyo to conduct a comprehensive investigation on this issue.<sup>11</sup>

In January 1992, Chief Cabinet Secretary Katō Kōichi admitted that the Japanese military had been involved in the “comfort women” problem. He stated it “could not be denied that the former Japanese Army participated in some form in such activities as

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<sup>8</sup> Shimada Masao and Tian Jianong, *Sengo nitchū kankei 50 nen – Nitchū sōhō no kadai wa hasaretaka* [50 Years of Post-War Sino-Japanese Relations – Were the Mutual Sino-Japanese Tasks Fulfilled?], Tōhō Shoten, Tōkyō 1997, p. 414.

<sup>9</sup> Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Jūgun ianfu*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>10</sup> Wada Haruki, *Ianfu mondai no kaiketsu no tame ni. Ajia Josei Kikin no keiken kara* [For the Resolution of the Comfort Women Problem. From the Experience of Asian Women’s Fund], Heibonsha, Tōkyō 2015, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Shimada and Tian, *Sengo nitchū kankei*, p. 414.

recruitment of comfort women and management of comfort stations”.<sup>12</sup> Katō expressed his deep regret, remorse and apology for this fact, and he promised to continue investigation on the involvement of the Japanese government in the “comfort women” issue. During his visit to South Korea in January 1992, Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi issued explicit apology for the colonial rule and for the recruitment of “comfort women”.<sup>13</sup> After returning to Japan, the prime minister ordered all ministries and agencies to search any documents related to the problem. In July 1992, Chief Cabinet Secretary Katō disclosed the result of the inquiry. He emphasized that “the Government had been involved in the establishment of comfort stations, the control of those who recruited comfort women, the construction and reinforcement of comfort facilities, the management and surveillance of comfort stations, the hygiene maintenance in comfort stations and among comfort women, and the issuance of identification as well as other documents to those who were related to comfort stations”.<sup>14</sup> Katō offered “sincere apology and remorse” to the victims.<sup>15</sup>

While the investigation confirmed involvement of the military in running comfort stations, it did not prove that the army had coercively conscripted women. Under South Korean pressure, Tokyo decided to continue the source query, including interviews with historians, former soldiers, officials, managers of comfort stations, and 16 victims in South Korea.<sup>16</sup> In June 1993, South Korean Foreign Minister Han Sung-joo specified four conditions of acceptance by Seoul of an apology from Japan regarding “comfort women”: 1) recognition of coerciveness, 2) display of “an utmost effort to clarify the overall picture”, 3) promise to continue the inquiry, 4) expression of willingness to learn from history.<sup>17</sup> Eventually, in August 1993, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kōno Yōhei issued a statement in which he admitted involvement of the military in running comfort stations and coercive recruitment of “comfort women”, explicitly apologized to the victims, and promised to commemorate the difficult past “through the study and teaching of history”.<sup>18</sup> In order

<sup>12</sup> Nihon no Zento to Rekishi Kyōiku o Kangaeru Wakate Giin no Kai (ed.), *Rekishi kyōkasho e no gimon* [Doubts over History Textbooks], Nihon no Zento to Rekishi Kyōiku o Kangaeru Wakate Giin no Kai, Tōkyō 1997, p. 507.

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Policy Speech by Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa during His Visit to the Republic of Korea*, 17 January 1992, Viewed 17 March 2020, <<http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/1992/1992-appendix-2.htm>>.

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Statement by Chief Cabinet Secretary Koichi Kato on the Issue of the so-called “Wartime Comfort Women” from the Korean Peninsula*, 6 July 1992, Viewed 17 March 2020, <<http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/postwar/state9207.html>>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> Nihon no Zento to Rekishi Kyōiku o Kangaeru Wakate Giin no Kai (ed.), *Rekishi kyōkasho*, pp. 300–308; Wada, *Ianfu Mondai*, pp. 87–90.

<sup>17</sup> Study Team on the Details Leading to the Drafting of the Kono Statement etc., *Details of Exchanges Between Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) Regarding the Comfort Women Issue: From the Drafting of the Kono Statement to the Asian Women’s Fund*, 20 June 2014, Viewed 17 March 2020, <<http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000042171.pdf>>, pp. 5–9.

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono on the Result of the Study on the Issue of “Comfort Women”*, 4 August 1993, Viewed 17 March 2020, <<http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/women/fund/state9308.html>>.

to avoid a negative feedback from Seoul, the contents of the statement was meticulously negotiated with South Korea.<sup>19</sup> As a result, the document met with a favourable reception from Seoul. The South Korean government remarked that the statement reflected to a considerable extent its position and expressed hope that the “comfort women” issue would be no longer a pending problem in bilateral contacts.<sup>20</sup> Despite these reassuring remarks, the problem had already evolved to the point that it was outside of control of the governments of both countries.

### Japanese Civil Society’s Response to the “Comfort Women” Issue

After the emergence of the “comfort women” issue, the Japanese government received many petitions from Japanese NGOs and civic movement activists who demanded Tokyo to assume responsibility for the difficult past, apologize, and pay indemnities to the victims. It is this popular pressure, along with consideration for maintaining friendly relations with the Republic of Korea, that compelled Japan to issue the Kōno Statement. Nevertheless, the document left the question of potential compensation open. Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs maintained that all mutual financial claims from the past had been resolved when Japan established diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1965.<sup>21</sup>

Pressure from Japanese human rights NGOs became one of the factors that prompted decision makers to seek reconciliation with South Korea. Favourable conditions to compensate the victims appeared in June 1994, when the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) formed a coalition government with two moderate parties: Japan Socialist Party (JSP) and New Party Harbinger (NPH). Both Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi and Chief Cabinet Secretary Igarashi Kōzō originated from the JSP and were eager to finally resolve all problems that were a legacy of Japan’s difficult history. While the Socialists insisted on issuing even more explicit apologies than those articulated in the Kōno Statement, the Liberal Democrats were divided over further concessions to the victims. On the one hand, LDP leader, Foreign Minister Kōno Yōhei, who had been the author of the 1993 statement, sympathized with left-wing politicians. On the other hand, he had to take into consideration the stance of the numerous nationalists in the LDP who opposed paying any indemnities to the victims. In December 1994, the ruling coalition issued its first report on “comfort women”. To a great extent, it repeated the conclusions of the Kōno Statement, but it contained more detailed proposals on how to compensate the victims for their suffering “from a moral standpoint”. The document called “on all Japanese to understand and share this commitment, and on Japanese people from a wide spectrum of the population to participate in activities that fulfil this responsibility”.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Study Team on the Details Leading to the Drafting of the Kono Statement etc., *Details of Exchanges*, pp. 9–12.

<sup>20</sup> Wada, *Ianfu mondai*, p. 98.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 103.

<sup>22</sup> Asian Women’s Fund, *The First Report on the So-called Wartime Comfort Women Issue*, 7 December 1994, Viewed 17 March 2020, <<http://www.awf.or.jp/e6/statement-05.html>>.

In June 1995, Chief Cabinet Secretary Igarashi issued a statement in which he announced establishment of the National Fund for Asian Peace and Women (*Josei no tame no Ajia Heiwa Kokumin Kikin*). While the compensations would be collected from the private sector, all costs of running the fund would be covered from the state budget. It was a significant success of the moderates, as otherwise management costs would have significantly reduced the amount of money available to the victims. Another concession from the conservatives was a promise that the prime minister would personally sign a letter of apology to each victim. Despite these achievements, many civic movement activists were still sceptical about the agreement as they demanded a more explicit contribution from the government. Igarashi convinced the LDP to cover the cost of welfare and medical treatment for former “comfort women” from the state budget. This concession sufficed for most of Japanese human rights activists to reluctantly support the compromise.<sup>23</sup>

The fund, popularly known as the Asian Women’s Fund (*Ajia Josei Kikin*), was officially launched in July 1995. Its role was to collect money from private persons and institutions in order to distribute indemnities to “comfort women” who lived in China, Taiwan, South Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines, and the Netherlands. A group of twenty proponents of the fund included such prominent figures as the widow of former Prime Minister Miki Takeo, Miki Mutsuko, President of the Japanese Trade Union Confederation Ashida Jinnosuke, or Tokyo University Professor Wada Haruki. In mid-July 1995, they issued an appeal for donations, in which they emphasized that while they held different opinions on whether the government should be officially involved in the compensation process or not, they were united in their desire to provide help to “comfort women” as fast as possible due to the victims’ advanced age.<sup>24</sup>

The amount of collected money rose to more than 400 million yen by June 1996.<sup>25</sup> Particularly important were the contributions from trade unions and profession groups, such as local public organizations, tax offices, central administration, police, Self-Defence Forces, or Japanese embassies abroad. Motivations of contributors were various – from the youth who felt responsible for the misdeeds of their grandfathers up to the veterans who felt remorse for having used the services of “comfort women” during the war. The biggest disappointment was cold reception of the initiative and relatively small contributions from big businesses. Generally, however, the campaign provided sufficient funds to cover expenses of the project. It was decided that each victim regardless of nationality would receive two million yen of atonement money from private donations, in addition to welfare and medical treatment allowances commensurate to the cost of living in separate countries (3 million yen to South Koreans) from the Japanese government.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ōnuma Yasuaki, “*Ianfu*” *mondai to wa nan datta no ka* [What Was the “Comfort Women” Problem?], Chūō Kōron Shinsha, Tōkyō 2007, pp. 13–15.

<sup>24</sup> Asian Women’s Fund, *An Appeal for Donations for the Asian Women’s Fund*, 18 July 1995, Viewed 17 March 2020, <<http://www.awf.or.jp/e6/statement-08.html>>.

<sup>25</sup> Wada Haruki, *The Activities of the Asian Women’s Fund in 1995–2006*, 19 November 2006, Viewed 17 March 2020, <<http://www.awf.or.jp/pdf/0210.pdf>>.

<sup>26</sup> Ōnuma, “*Ianfu*” *mondai*, pp. 38–43.

The Japanese civil society not only positively responded to the appeal for donations, but it also kept putting pressure on the government to continue the reconciliation process. When the new LDP leader Hashimoto Ryūtarō replaced Murayama Tomiichi as prime minister in January 1996, he initially displayed a very passive posture towards signing apology letters. Protesting this approach, Miki Mutsuko resigned from the Asian Women's Fund in May 1996. As a result, Hashimoto met with criticism from human rights NGOs and the media, and he eventually agreed to sign the letters.<sup>27</sup> In each letter, the prime minister expressed "sincere apologies and remorse to all the women who underwent immeasurable and painful experiences and suffered incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women".<sup>28</sup>

Establishment of the Asian Women's Fund was criticized as an insufficient measure to compensate the victims by a part of Japanese civic groups, especially those of left-wing leaning. In December 2000, an NGO Violence Against Women in War – Network Japan, chaired by a renowned Japanese human rights activist Matsui Yayori, organized a mock tribunal for those who had been responsible for creating the system of comfort stations. After one year-long proceedings in Tokyo, the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery issued final judgment in the Hague that "convicted" ten decision makers, including the late Shōwa Emperor.<sup>29</sup> In 2003, Japanese activists established the Women's Fund for Peace and Human Rights and launched a campaign to establish a museum devoted to commemorating "comfort women." The Women's Active Museum of War and Peace was opened in Tokyo in 2005. The founders based their activity on "five principles: (1) to focus on wartime sexual violence with the viewpoint of gender justice, (2) to collect and exhibit documents which clarify the responsibilities of the perpetrators along with facts and testimonies of individual victims, (3) to make the museum a hub for activities to achieve peace and a non-violent future, (4) to be organized as a grassroots movement disconnected from the state power, and (5) to advance solidarity of movements beyond national borders."<sup>30</sup>

While Japanese NGOs remained divided over the extent to which Japan should compensate the victims and punish the perpetrators, the "comfort women" problem contributed to invigoration of civil society in Japan. Numerous ordinary citizens felt responsibility for the difficult past, participated in the donation campaign, and put pressure on the government to continue the reconciliation process. Such measures, however, turned out to be insufficient to satisfy South Korean civic movements involved in the "comfort women" issue.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, pp. 36–37.

<sup>28</sup> Asian Women's Fund, *Letter from Prime Minister to the Former Comfort Women*, 1996, Viewed 17 March 2020, <<http://www.awf.or.jp/e6/statement-12.html>>.

<sup>29</sup> Tōgō Kazuhiko, *Rekishi to gaikō – Yasukuni, Ajia, Tōkyō saiban* [History and Diplomacy – Yasukuni, Asia, Tokyo Tribunal], Kōdansha, Tōkyō 2008, pp. 71–72.

<sup>30</sup> Rumiko Nishino, Ichioyo Muto, Hikaru Kasahara, *Women's Active Museum on War and Peace. Creating a Space for Hub of Activism for Peace and Gender Justice*, "Women's Asia 21: Voices from Japan", 16 (2006), p. 43.

## Involvement of South Korean NGOs in the Problem

From the very beginning of the "comfort women" issue, it aroused strong emotions among the South Koreans and attracted attention from civic movements in that country. The NGOs gathered in the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan rejected apologies from Tokyo and refused to cooperate with the Asian Women's Fund. As a result, instead of serving mutual reconciliation, Japan's attempt at compensating the victims contributed to the rise of anti-Japanese nationalism in South Korea.

Despite expressing unequivocal apologies, Japanese Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi was met with violent demonstrations during his visit to Seoul in 1992.<sup>31</sup> When Japanese politicians achieved a compromise on establishment of the Asian Women's Fund in 1995, most of South Korean civic activists considered it insufficient to atone for the difficult past. The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan rejected apologies, treating them as insincere, and demanded shouldering full legal responsibility for the forced conscription by Tokyo, which would entail punishing the perpetrators. What contributed to such an approach were the opinions expressed by individual Japanese cabinet members who kept denying historical truth. The Council demanded a formal apology to each victim from the Japanese Diet instead of the prime minister. In addition, it suspected that Tokyo channelled compensations through private funds to avoid taking direct responsibility for the past crimes.<sup>32</sup> Some of the Japanese proponents of the Asian Women's Fund, who had been involved in the South Korean democratization movement, were now treated as traitors by their colleagues. For instance, Ōnuma Yasuaki admitted that he had to face protests and threats from both left and right-wing activists to an extent that the police patrolled the vicinity of his house for one year.<sup>33</sup>

The NGOs from South Korea started cooperating with similar organizations from other countries. In 1992, the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery established the Asian Women's Solidarity Forum, which gathered NGOs from all Asian nations that had suffered from the Japanese occupation. The organizations promoting the rights of former "comfort women" became active participants of the Fourth United Nations (UN) World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995. They issued a resolution that requested Tokyo to renounce funding atonement money through private donations and pay the reparation from the state budget. In addition, victims from all countries were called to join the Asian Women's Solidarity Forum.<sup>34</sup> Thanks to the efforts of South Korean NGOs, in January 1996, Special Rapporteur of the UN Commission on Human Rights on Violence against Women Radhika Coomaraswamy admitted that the word "comfort women" did "not in the least reflect the suffering, such as multiple

<sup>31</sup> Shimada and Tian, *Sengo nitchū kankei*, p. 416.

<sup>32</sup> Chih-Chieh Chou, *An Emerging Transnational Movement in Women's Human Rights: Campaign of Nongovernmental Organizations on "Comfort Women" Issue in East Asia*, "Journal of Economic and Social Research" 4-2 (2003), pp. 160-169.

<sup>33</sup> Ōnuma, "*Ianfu*" *mondai*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>34</sup> Chou, *Emerging Transnational Movement*, pp. 171-172.



rapes on an everyday basis and severe physical abuse, that women victims had to endure during their forced prostitution and sexual subjugation and abuse in wartime”, and that this practice “should be considered a clear case of sexual slavery”.<sup>35</sup> She emphasized that Japan’s responsibility for the crimes should not be limited to moral dimension, but should be also assumed in the legal sphere as a crime against humanity.<sup>36</sup>

South Korean government was put in an awkward position due to the rejection of apologies and compensation from Japan by human rights NGOs. Seoul wanted to end the diplomatic clash with Tokyo as soon as possible, but it could not ignore the popular sentiments. Initially, the South Korean government displayed understanding regarding the creation of the Asian Women’s Fund, but it hardened its stance when the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery refused to support the Japanese initiative. Only a small part of victims from South Korea decided to participate in the program. Those who received indemnities from Japan were exposed to severe criticism in their country, and they were refused the right to South Korean governmental allowances for former “comfort women”, introduced by the Kim Dae-jung administration (1998–2003).<sup>37</sup>

The victims continued pursuing lawsuits against Japan. In July 2003, Tokyo High Court rejected the lawsuit submitted by the bereaved Korean families in 1991.<sup>38</sup> In 1998, the Shimonoseki branch of the Yamaguchi Prefectural Court ruled in favour of the plaintiffs, but this decision was overturned by the Hiroshima High Court in 2001, which was upheld by the Supreme Court of Japan in 2003. Lawsuits concerning former “comfort women” were also filed in the US, but with no success.<sup>39</sup> Under human rights NGOs’ pressure, in August 2011, the Constitutional Court of Korea ruled that Seoul’s passive posture in negotiations with Japan on compensation for the victims violated the constitution. As a result, South Korean politicians intensified their efforts to gain new concessions from Tokyo. In December 2011, human rights activists erected a statue of a “comfort women” to celebrate the 1000<sup>th</sup> demonstration that was regularly held every Wednesday in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. Despite the fact that the monument was built illegally, South Korean authorities did not react. In the same month, President Lee Myung-bak visited Tokyo, where he insisted to comprehensively discuss the “comfort women” issue. In response to the Japanese demand to remove the controversial statue, he stressed that without a full resolution of the “comfort women” problem, additional monuments could be built in the future.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> United Nations, Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Its Causes and Consequences, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, in Accordance with Commission on Human Rights resolution 1994/45. Report on the Mission to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the Republic of Korea and Japan on the Issue of Military Sexual Slavery in Wartime*, E/CN.4/1996/53/Add. 1, 4 January 1996, Viewed 16 March 2020, <<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/228137#record-files-collapse-header>>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>37</sup> Ōnuma, “*Ianfu*” *mondai*, pp. 33–75.

<sup>38</sup> Asian Women’s Fund, *Lawsuits in Japanese Courts*, Viewed 18 March 2020, <<http://www.awf.or.jp/e4/lawsuit.html>>.

<sup>39</sup> Ōnuma, “*Ianfu*” *mondai*, pp. 144.

<sup>40</sup> Yomiuri Shinbun Seijibu, “*Nitchūkan*” *gaikō sensō. Nihon ga chokumen suru “ima soko ni aru kiki”* [“Japan-China-South Korea” Diplomatic War. The Crisis that Japan Faces “Here and Now”], Shinchōsha, Tōkyō 2014, pp. 172–191.

Park Geun-hye, who as the first woman assumed the office of South Korean president in February 2013, put much emphasis on resolving the “comfort women” issue. In June 2013, the South Korean Ministry of Gender Equality and Family established a taskforce for the examination of the sexual slavery problem, with the participation of those civic activists who opposed a compromise with Japan. At the same time, South Korea intensified its efforts in promoting knowledge on the “comfort women” issue in the US, for example through the construction of new monuments dedicated to the victims. In January 2014, in turn, the South Korean Ministry of Gender Equality and Family announced it would petition adding the documents on sexual slavery to UNESCO’s Memory of the World Programme.<sup>41</sup>

Pressure from human rights activists effectively hindered signing an agreement on “comfort women” issue between Japan and South Korea. When finally both governments achieved a compromise in December 2015, it infuriated the NGOs that represented the victims, as they had not been even consulted by politicians. According to the bilateral deal, Tokyo once more apologized for the past crimes and agreed to pay additional one billion yen to the former “comfort women”. In exchange, Seoul promised to irreversibly resolve the “comfort women” problem and remove the controversial statue from the vicinity of the Japanese embassy. For human rights activists, such a concession was unacceptable, as the statue had become an important symbol of national martyrdom. Popular dissatisfaction with the agreement led to formation of a widespread movement by human rights NGOs, nationalists, and feminists. Student protesters started guarding the statue, artists sold its miniatures to raise funds necessary to create the Foundation for Justice and Remembrance that supported the surviving “comfort women”, and Korean communities all over the world promoted erection of similar monuments abroad. What additionally offended human rights campaigners was the fact that Prime Minister Abe clarified that Japan would not pay reparation, but rather humanitarian donation to the victims.<sup>42</sup> Under popular criticism, the South Korean government did not dare remove the statue, and the future of the agreement was put into question after left-wing-leaning Moon Jae-in replaced Park Geun-hye as president in May 2017.

Involvement of the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan as well as other human rights, feminist, and nationalist movements in the “comfort women” issue explains why the problem became so difficult to resolve. South Korean NGOs of various backgrounds unanimously rejected apologies from Japan and persuaded the victims to refuse accepting atonement money from the Asian Women’s Fund. Civic groups’ unyielding posture forced Seoul to issue new demands towards Tokyo, which, in turn, contributed to the rise of anti-Korean nationalism in Japan.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, pp. 153–156.

<sup>42</sup> Vicki Sung-yeon Kwon, *The Sonyōsang Phenomenon: Nationalism and Feminism. Surrounding the “Comfort Women” Statue*, “Korean Studies” 43 (2019), pp. 6–39.

## Japanese Nationalist Groups' Reaction to the Compensation Policy

For Japanese right-wing radicals, both issuing apologies to “comfort women” and establishing the Asian Women’s Fund epitomized treason of national interests. Nationalist groups violently criticized any attempts at reconciliation with South Korea by moderate politicians, and they put pressure on conservative lawmakers to retract the Kōno Statement.

Right-wing activists vehemently protested the apologies and compensation policy instituted by moderate Prime Ministers Miyazawa Kiichi and Murayama Tomiichi in the 1990s. The nationalists started organizing wider movements in the second half of the 1990s. The most prominent new organizations included the Society for History Textbook Reform (*Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho o Tsukuru Kai*), established in 1996, and the Japan Conference (*Nippon Kaigi*), formed in 1997. While the two mainstream conservative NGOs focused on lobbying in the Diet, smaller right-wing groups organized street demonstrations. In 2000, they tried to disturb the proceedings of the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery by projecting loud noises from sound trucks. As they used violence, some of activists were arrested.<sup>43</sup>

Discourse on the “comfort women” issue re-emerged when Abe Shinzō became prime minister in September 2006. Although Abe claimed that “comfort women” had not been conscripted by force, at the beginning of October 2006, he stated that he would not retract the Kōno Statement.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, to avoid criticism from right-wing groups, in March 2007, he mentioned there was no proof that “comfort women” had been conscripted against their will. This controversial statement was widely commented abroad and prompted US lawmakers to support a special resolution on the “comfort women” problem.<sup>45</sup> To stop this initiative, in June 2007, Japanese right-wing activists and politicians published an advertisement in *Washington Post*, in which they stressed that there were no proofs of forced conscription of “comfort women”. Paradoxically, as the advertisement created an impression that Japan did not really regret for its deeds from the past, even more Congresspersons supported the resolution.<sup>46</sup> Eventually, the resolution was passed in July 2007. It stipulated that the Japanese government “should formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner for its Imperial Armed Forces’ coercion of young women into sexual slavery”.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Tomomi Yamaguchi, *Revisionism, Ultrnationalism, Sexism: Relations Between the Far Right and the Establishment Over the “Comfort Women” Issue*, “Social Science Japan Journal” 21-2 (2018), pp. 221–226.

<sup>44</sup> Uesugi Takashi, *Kantei hōkai: Nihon seiji konmei no nazo* [Collapse of the Kantei: The Puzzle of Confusion of Japanese Politics], Gentōsha, Tōkyō 2011, p. 88.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 169–170.

<sup>46</sup> Tōgō, *Rekishi to gaikō*, pp. 93–96.

<sup>47</sup> US Congress, *H.Res.121 – A Resolution Expressing the Sense of the House of Representatives that the Government of Japan Should Formally Acknowledge, Apologize, and Accept Historical Responsibility in a Clear and Unequivocal Manner for Its Imperial Armed Forces’ Coercion of Young Women Into Sexual Slavery, Known to the World as “Comfort Women”, During Its Colonial and Wartime Occupation of Asia and the Pacific Islands from the 1930s through the Duration of World War II*, 110th Congress, 30 July 2007, Viewed 16 March 2020, <<https://www.congress.gov/bill/110th-congress/house-resolution/121/text>>.

Passage of the resolution through the US Congress became an incentive for nationalist groups in Japan to intensify their initiatives. In 2007, several organizations, including the Group to Restore Sovereignty (*Shuken Kaifuku o Mezasu Kai*) and Citizens' Association Against Special Privileges for Japan-resident Foreigners (*Zainichi Tokken o Yurusanai Shimin no Kai*), established the Action Conservative Movement (*Kōdō Suru Hoshu Undō*). They criticized the Society for History Textbook Reform and the Japan Conference for excessive elitism and inaction. The new organization focused on street rallies instead of lobbying in the Diet, and it attracted younger members than traditional conservative groups. In 2011, the Action Conservative Movement started holding “anti-Wednesday demonstrations” in front of South Korean embassy in Tokyo.<sup>48</sup> In addition, the founder of the Movement, Nishimura Shūhei, created the Citizens' Group Aiming for the Withdrawal of the Kōno Statement (*Kōno Danwa no Hakushi Tekkai o Mezasu Shimin no Kai*) that conducted an online signature campaign against the apologies to “comfort women”.<sup>49</sup>

The debate on “comfort women” re-emerged in Japan as soon as Abe returned as prime minister in December 2012. Abe's cabinet was composed of many members of the Japan Conference, who had frequently put into doubt the credibility of former “comfort women”. The new administration decided not to directly challenge the Kōno Statement, but only to establish a study team that would examine the process that led to its issuing. In June 2014, the team published final report that revealed that the text of the statement had been meticulously negotiated with the Korean side.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, the screening process did not bring any new discoveries on historical truth regarding the “comfort women” issue. Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide reaffirmed that the government upheld and did not intend to revise the Kōno Statement, while adding that under the first Abe administration the government had issued a cabinet decision “stating that women were not forcefully taken away”.<sup>51</sup>

In August 2014, right-wing radicals gained a new argument to fight the Kōno Statement. Newspaper “Asahi Shinbun” issued sensational apologies for having based a series of articles on forced conscription of “comfort women” on fabricated testimonies by Yoshida Seiji. In the 1970s, Yoshida revealed in his memoirs that when he had served in the Japanese Imperial Army during the war, he had been directly involved in kidnapping hundreds of women in the Korean Peninsula and Jeju Island. Publication of a Korean translation of Yoshida's book in 1989 became one of incentives for human rights activists to start public discourse on “comfort women”. Despite the fact that the details of Yoshida's stories had been put into doubt by numerous historians, “Asahi Shinbun”

<sup>48</sup> The author observed such demonstration on 10 July 2013. The demonstrators held banners saying in Japanese and Korean that “comfort women” were “mere war-time prostitutes” and calling their forced conscription “the greatest lie in history”. A banner in English said “We never forgive sexual assault and genocide done by South Korean in the Vietnam War!”.

<sup>49</sup> Yamaguchi, *Revisionism, Ultrationalism, Sexism*, pp. 222–226.

<sup>50</sup> Study Team on the Details Leading to the Drafting of the Kono Statement etc., *Details of Exchanges*, p. 17.

<sup>51</sup> Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, *Press Conference by the Chief Cabinet Secretary (PM)* (Excerpt), 20 June 2014, Viewed 17 March 2020, <[http://japan.kantei.go.jp/tyoukanpress/201406/20\\_p.html](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/tyoukanpress/201406/20_p.html)>.

for years refused to assume responsibility for these inconsistencies.<sup>52</sup> Although Yoshida's memoirs constituted only a fraction of evidence that led to the Kōno Statement, when the newspaper finally admitted its mistake, it became a pretext for right-wing politicians to undermine the credibility of all testimonies on forced conscription of "comfort women".<sup>53</sup> In particular, Japanese nationalists demanded the UN to retract Radhika Coomaraswamy's report that was partly based on Yoshida's revelations. Reacting to their request, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay expressed her regret for lack of progress in seeking by Japan "a comprehensive, impartial and lasting resolution of the issue of wartime sexual slavery".<sup>54</sup> Encouraged by right-wing activists, in October 2014, Prime Minister Abe officially asked Radhika Coomaraswamy to amend her document, but she refused.<sup>55</sup>

Meanwhile, nationalist groups intensified their activities. At the beginning of the second Abe administration, numerous anti-Korean "hate speeches" were held in Tokyo and Osaka by the Citizens' Association Against Special Privileges for Japan-resident Foreigners. While mainstream conservative organizations valued the prime minister's revisionist efforts, radical activists criticized the government for not retracting the Kōno Statement and for signing the 2015 agreement with South Korea. In addition to "anti-Wednesday demonstrations", the Action Conservative Movement increased the frequency of protests in front of the LDP headquarters in central Tokyo.<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, an important role was played by Nadeshiko Action, a conservative women's organization that exclusively focused on the "comfort women" problem. Nationalist activists not only held counter-demonstrations opposing rallies of human rights NGOs, but they also started emulating events prepared by left-wing movements. In particular, they organized seminars, exhibitions and conferences, as well as promoted passage of right-wing resolutions on the "comfort women" issue by city councils all over Japan.<sup>57</sup>

Unceasing diplomatic crises between Japan and South Korea, incited by the nationalists from both countries, contributed to the rise in anti-Korean sentiments in Japan. According to opinion polls conducted by the Cabinet Office, sympathy among the Japanese towards

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<sup>52</sup> Hosaka Masayasu, *Abe shushō no "rekishikan" o tou* [Questioning Prime Minister Abe's "Approach to History"], Kōdansha, Tōkyō 2015, pp. 236–259; Wada, *Ianfu mondai*, pp. 43–87.

<sup>53</sup> As emphasized by Wada Haruki, the investigators that conducted research on "comfort women" prior to issuing the Kōno Statement interviewed historians who denied Yoshida's story, so that Yoshida's testimonies eventually did not become a basis for the statement. See: Wada, *Ianfu mondai*, pp. 90–91.

<sup>54</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of High Commissioner, *Japan's Approach to the Issue of "Comfort Women" Causing Further Violations of Victims' Human Rights – Pillay*, 6 August 2014, Viewed 17 March 2020, <<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14920&LangID=E>>.

<sup>55</sup> Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, *Press Conference by the Chief Cabinet Secretary (Excerpt)*, 16 October 2014, Viewed 17 March 2020, <[http://japan.kantei.go.jp/tyoukanpress/201410/16\\_a.html](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/tyoukanpress/201410/16_a.html)>.

<sup>56</sup> The author witnessed such demonstration on 18 April 2012. The participants held banners saying that unless the LDP retracts the Kōno Statement, it should be called a false conservative party that betrayed its own country.

<sup>57</sup> Yamaguchi, *Revisionism, Ultrationalism, Sexism*, pp. 227–235.

South Korea dropped from 63.1% in 2009 to 26.7% in 2019.<sup>58</sup> According to an opinion poll conducted by the Genron NPO, in turn, 55.8% of Japanese cited constant criticism on history issues as the main reason of their negative impression of South Korea in 2013.<sup>59</sup> In 2019, this percentage slightly dropped to 52.1%, but additional 23.8% of respondents indicated the “comfort women” problem as the crucial factor influencing their lack of sympathy towards South Koreans (“comfort women” issue had not been taken into account separately in the 2013 poll).<sup>60</sup>

Nationalist movements were unable to force the Japanese government to repeal the Kōno Statement or abandon the 2015 agreement, but they became much more influential than in the 1990s. In particular, their activity led to partial undermining of credibility of the victims in the eyes of ordinary Japanese citizens, which, in turn, facilitated the Abe administration to question compliance of the Kōno Statement with the Japanese national interest.

## Conclusion

The “comfort women” problem became a catalyst both for human rights NGOs and right-wing movements. Nevertheless, while left-wing organizations and nationalist groups cooperated over the apologies and compensation policy in South Korea, in Japan they represented opposite poles of the debate. The Japanese society’s widespread response to the call for atoning to the victims for the crimes committed by the Imperial Army presented an opportunity for reconciliation between both countries. Unfortunately, the two sides displayed insufficient flexibility in dealing with the “comfort women” problem. Reaction of Tokyo to South Korean demands was slow, and the reconciliation policy was undermined by lack of repentance by individual conservative politicians. Human rights NGOs in South Korea, in turn, excessively stiffened their stance, instead of at least partly appreciating the Japanese government’s efforts to compensate the victims.

In subsequent decades, civic movements made a lasting reconciliation almost impossible to achieve. The rise of anti-Japanese nationalism in South Korea contributed to the strengthening of anti-Korean sentiments in Japan, thus weakening the position of moderate Japanese politicians against such nationalists as Abe Shinzō. Reinvigoration of right-wing movements under the second Abe administration, in turn, facilitated the government to question patriotism of human rights activists, which further alienated them from the society. This tendency was symbolized by re-examination of the process of

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<sup>58</sup> Cabinet Office, *Gaikō ni kan suru yoron chōsa* [Opinion Polls on Diplomacy], 2003–2019, Viewed 29 April 2020, <<https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/index-gai.html>>.

<sup>59</sup> Genron NPO, *The 1st Japan-South Korea Joint Opinion Poll*, 14 May 2013, Viewed 29 April 2020, <[http://www.genron-npo.net/en/opinion\\_polls/archives/5263.html](http://www.genron-npo.net/en/opinion_polls/archives/5263.html)>.

<sup>60</sup> Genron NPO, *The Japan-South Korea Joint Public Opinion Poll 2019*, 12 June 2019, Viewed 29 April 2020, <[http://www.genron-npo.net/en/opinion\\_polls/archives/5489.html](http://www.genron-npo.net/en/opinion_polls/archives/5489.html)>.

drafting the Kōno Statement and by disclosure of fabrication of Yoshida Seiji's memoirs. All these complex developments confirm the gravity of bottom-up civic movements in dealing with history issues, which belong to the most sensitive topics in international negotiations.

### **Acknowledgements**

This article is a result of research conducted as a part of project "Neoclassical Realist Analysis of Japan's Policy on History Problems" financed by the National Science Centre, Poland (DEC-2019/33/B/HS5/00846).