

On This Topic



## Global Perspectives on the Comfort Women Issue: *Thirty Years after First Being Publicized*

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### The Comfort Women Issue: “A Past that does not Pass”

On January 8, 2021, the damage claim suit filed by 12 former comfort women, victims of the Japanese military, against the Japanese government was adjudicated in the Seoul Central District Court. The court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and ordered the Japanese government to pay US\$84,000 to each of the victims. The main issue in this lawsuit, which had begun in 2016, was whether a Korean court could exercise jurisdiction over the Japanese government, based on the rules of state immunity. The South Korean Department of Justice declared that since the Japanese military comfort women system was an anti-humanitarian act committed deliberately, systematically, and extensively, jurisdiction could be exercised regardless of any rules on state immunity. The plaintiffs were happy with the outcome not just because of the financial compensation, but more

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because it was the first time that the offense had been officially declared as a crime under the law.

The Japanese military comfort women issue has been one of the main sources of conflict between South Korea and Japan over the past 30 years. In addition, this issue is considered the most significant among the issues concerning women's human rights during wartime, and it is also a global issue linked to the international cause of human rights. This is well illustrated by struggles over a memorial statue for comfort women set up in Berlin in late 2020. At the end of September 2020, the Korea Verband (Korea Association), a German civic group centered on Korean immigrants, erected in a square in Berlin a Statue of Peace intended as a memorial to the victims of Japanese sexual slavery (comfort women). The undertaking had the permission of the authorities of the Mitte District, the historical heart of Berlin. In early October, however, under pressure from the Japanese government, the head of the Mitte District ordered the statue's removal. In protest to this order, not only the civic group that erected the statue but also citizens across Germany held various demonstrations. Eventually, in early December 2020, the Mitte District Assembly rescinded the previous order from the head of the District, and decided to keep the statue permanently.

As with France's Vichy Regime, which has been called a "past that does not pass" (Rousso and Conan 1994), to many human rights advocates in Korea, East Asia, and around the world, the issue of Japanese military comfort women, or victims of sexual slavery, is also a past that does not pass, even thirty years after the comfort women issue first came to public attention. In January 1990, Yun Chung-ok, professor of women's studies at Ewha Womans University, published an article on the comfort women issue in the pages of the *Hankyoreh* newspaper. In November of the same year, 37 women's and civil society movement groups in South Korea organized the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (hereinafter, the Korean Council). On August 14, 1991, on the eve of the 46th anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japanese occupation, at the offices of the Korean Women's Associations United, Kim Hak-sun, a former comfort woman, testified publicly of the damages she

suffered as a victim of sexual slavery. Thereafter, in June 1993, Kim Bok-dong, another former comfort woman victim, testified about her painful experiences at the World Human Rights Conference in Vienna, convened by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.

On August 4, 1993, the Japanese government issued the so-called Kono Statement, acknowledging for the first time Japan's responsibility for the comfort women system. However, beyond this initial step, the Japanese government has come up with no genuine solution sought for by the victims. The victims of Japan's past sexual slavery, and the Korean Council that supports them, have since the 1990s continuously made the following seven demands of the Japanese government: that it acknowledge the past war crime of sexual slavery; reveal the truth; issue an official apology; make legal reparations; punish those responsible; accurately record the crime in history textbooks; and erect a memorial for the victims and establish a historical museum on the issue. In late 2015, the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, the conservative governments in South Korea and Japan announced the Korea-Japan Agreement on Comfort Women. The announcement indicated that by this agreement the South Korean government would establish a foundation to support former comfort women victims with a budget provided by the Japanese government and that the comfort women problem would thereby be resolved "ultimately and irreversibly." However, since the agreement was made without consulting the views of the victims themselves, and did not fully reflect the long-standing demands of those victims, it was difficult to implement the terms of the agreement. After reviewing the diplomatic process that led to the agreement, the progressive government of South Korea, which had been inaugurated in 2017, indicated that while it did not deny the agreement between the governments, it respected the will of the victims who refused to accept the terms of the agreement.

The reason it is so difficult to resolve this issue, even after the passage of thirty years since it was first publicized, is because the Japanese government continues to ignore the aforementioned seven demands of the victims and thinks the problem can be solved merely by token financial compensation. A more fundamental reason is that Japan neglects the

historical importance of this issue and understands it only as the cause of a diplomatic spat between the two countries.

In Japan, extreme right groups and some conservative elites argue that the comfort women were voluntary prostitutes. However, as the Japanese government itself indicated in its Kono Statement of 1993 that the Japanese army was directly or indirectly involved in the comfort women system, it is clear that comfort women are victims of forced prostitution. When this issue first gained public attention in South Korea in the early 1990s, the media in various Western countries began to report related news. From the early 1990s as well, major daily newspapers in the United States and United Kingdom used the term “comfort women,” or alternately, “sex slaves” or “sexual slaves” for readers who did not know the meaning of “comfort women” (*New York Times*, February 23, 1992; *The Times*, July 7, 1992). Similarly, French media used the terms “*femmes de réconfort*” (comfort women), together with the “*esclavage sexuel*” (sexual slavery) (*Le Monde*, September 5, 1992). In official UN documents, the term sexual slavery first appeared in the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action, adopted in June 1993 at the World Human Rights Conference in Vienna. Thereafter, in January 1996, the expression “military sexual slavery” appeared in the title of a report related to comfort women by Special Rapporteur R. Coomaraswamy filed with the UN Commission on Human Rights. In Japan too, the term “comfort women” was translated as “sex slave” in English-language media in that country from the 1990s. However, since the rightward shift in Japanese society and politics from the 2010s, this expression “sex slave” has fallen out of favor in Japan. In November 2014, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* apologized to its readers for having previously referred to “comfort women” as “sex slaves” in its English edition. A French newspaper that reported on this, however, argued that denying the term “sex slaves” ran counter to the testimonies of victims and the findings of historical research (*Libération*, December 8, 2014).

Japanese conservative politicians have sometimes viewed comfort women as a necessary evil of war. For example, Hashimoto Toru, the mayor of Osaka from 2011 to 2015, remarked in May 2013 that comfort women were needed in order to boost the mental power of soldiers on the

battlefield (*Asahi Shimbun*, May 13, 2013). Thereafter too, he criticized the international pressure on the Japanese government to resolve the comfort women problem, remarking that during the two world wars many similar systems providing sexual services to soldiers existed in European countries. Indeed, throughout history crimes of rape and sexual violence against women occurred during war. In fact, there is evidence that private establishments of prostitution existed near military bases or near the battlefield in many countries. Yet, the Japanese military comfort women system was systematically and deliberately organized and operated over a long period of time with the direct and indirect involvement of the Japanese military and was a war crime that created a huge number of female victims forced into prostitution. According to Yoshimi Yoshiaki, a Japanese historian who researched official documents of the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy, the comfort women system began in 1932, the year following the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, was significantly expanded from 1938, when the Sino-Japanese War began, and was maintained until 1945, when the Pacific War ended.

Historical facts cannot be negated, even if someone tries to deny them out of shame. However, conservatives in Japan who claim that the comfort woman was not a sex slave effectively deny the results of historians' studies and discussions. A report by Special Rapporteur Gay J. McDougall, filed with the UN Commission on Human Rights in 1998, estimated that the number of comfort women during World War II, based on various records of the Japanese military, was at least 200,000. This figure matches that in a study by Yoshimi Yoshiaki (1995), also based on official military and government documents. Another estimate from Japanese academia is the much lower 20,000. The Japanese extreme right cites this deviation as another basis for denying historical facts, arguing that the historical evidence of the comfort women remains unclear and uses the disparity of estimates to argue how the issue has been manipulated by anti-Japanese forces. However, even those scholars who provide the lower estimate do not deny the substance of the comfort women issue.

Feminist activists and civic groups in Japan have recognized the importance of the comfort women issue as a representative case of the

violation of women's rights in wartime, and have shown solidarity with colleagues in South Korea, China, and other countries around the world. As a result, in December 2000, the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery was convened in Tokyo. Although this tribunal had no judicial authority, it convicted all those charged with crimes against humanity, and held Hirohito, the Japanese emperor during the war, responsible.

### **Global Interest in Japanese Military Sexual Slavery**

The publicity in South Korea in the early 1990s surrounding the issue of Japanese military comfort women is related to the toppling through democratic civil strife of the long-standing military dictatorship in South Korea in 1987. From 1987, with the end of the repression of free media and weakened patriarchal authority, South Korean society came to see the importance of democracy and pluralistic values, and civil society movements began to spread these values. As the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery became known to the world, global interest in the issue also grew. As background to the issue were three global contexts of the post-Cold War order. The first was the civil war in Yugoslavia (1991–2001), which emerged from collapse of the Cold War order that saw German reunification and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This conflict reinvigorated international interest in wartime rape, which came to be recognized as a human rights violation. The war in Yugoslavia served as a steppingstone towards prosecuting wartime sexual violence for the first time in history. The prevalence of wartime rapes became a global issue and contributed in 1993 to the foundation of the International Criminal Court for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in 1993 under UN Resolution 827.<sup>1</sup>

Even after the aforementioned Coomaraswamy Report of 1996

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1. Up until its closure in 2017, the ICTY indicted a total of 161 individuals for war crimes. Among these, 78 individuals were charged with sexual violence and 32 were convicted for their culpability in crimes of sexual violence. Refer to the ICTY homepage, accessed January 9, 2021, <https://www.icty.org/en/features/crimes-sexual-violence/in-numbers>.

and the McDougall Report of 1998, via its Human Right Committee, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, and Committee against Torture, the United Nations throughout the 2000s and 2010s continuously urged Japan to make sincere efforts toward resolving the comfort women issue. In September 2018, following the Korea-Japan Agreement on Comfort Women of 2015, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination recommended the Japanese government “ensure a lasting solution to the issue of ‘comfort women’ with a victim-centred approach, inclusive of comfort women of all nationalities, accepting responsibility for its role in the violation of the human rights of these women.”<sup>2</sup> From the end of the Cold War order to the present, the UN and international human rights organizations have continued to pay attention to the violation of women’s rights in wars and ethnic conflicts in parts of Africa, and in areas where armed Islamic fundamentalist groups are active.

As for the second context, the geopolitical importance of East Asian security due to the United States’ world-order initiative following the dissolution of the Cold War, the rise of China, and North Korea’s nuclear tests should be mentioned. After the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, China recorded rapid economic growth, by the mid-2000s reaching the Group of Two (G2) of the global economy alongside the United States. Since the mid-2010s, China has been increasing its global influence through the Belt and Road Initiative, and has been greatly strengthening its military forces. In 1993, North Korea declared its withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which it had joined in 1985, and declared in 2005 that it possessed nuclear weapons. Since its first nuclear test in 2006, North Korea has raised military tensions in East Asia with continuous nuclear and missile tests. The United States, which has major interests in the Asia-Pacific region, built a peace order in East Asia and responded to security threats during the Cold War through its

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2. UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), *Concluding Observations on the Combined Tenth and Eleventh Periodic Reports of Japan*. CERD/C/JPN/CO/10-11, August 30, 2018, 6.

alliances with South Korea and Japan. However, after the dissolution of the Cold War order, as China's political, economic, and military threats became increasingly apparent and North Korea's development of nuclear weapons progressed, the United States adopted a new strategy. The United States demanded South Korea and Japan resolve their historical conflict and strengthen their mutual military cooperation.

The last context is the growing global interest in the dark past and forgotten history of the modern and contemporary periods, the relationship between history and memory, and the various public commemorations that began in earnest after the dissolution of the Cold War order. The end of the Cold War contributed to academic development by enabling people to overcome ideological tendencies. In Britain, studies on the history of the British Empire from a new perspective progressed significantly, and the violation of human rights that occurred in the course of the dissolution of the British Empire was publicized. Historical research revealed facts regarding the violent suppression of the Mau Mau armed independence movement in Kenya during the course of the decolonization of the British Empire in the 1950s and 1960s. In 2013, the British government acknowledged the tortures and human rights violations inflicted on participants in the Mau Mau Uprising and promised financial compensation to the victims. Before Britain, France promoted historical memory as a major issue at the academic and social levels. Along with the accumulation of studies on the Vichy Regime, crimes against humanity, namely the participation of four former public officials of the Vichy Regime in the Holocaust, were prosecuted and brought to trial in the 1980s and 1990s, 40–50 years after the end of World War II. More important was the memory of the war of independence in Algeria. As historical records related to Algeria, which gained its independence in 1962, were released in the 1990s, historical facts about the torture and violence committed by the French military during the Algerian War were systematically investigated and brought to light.

In the rapidly expanding flow of globalization after the dissolution of the Cold War, the debates on history and memory and the academic and social debates related to postcolonialism unfolding in certain regions or

countries resonated in other countries or regions where similar debates were beginning to unfold. The issue of Japanese military sexual slavery did not become a subject of academic research outside of East Asia, with the exception of scholars of the East Asia in the United States and Europe, due to problems with access to historical sources and language barriers, yet the issue was widely reported internationally via various media.

### **Recognition of the Comfort Women Issue by Major US and European Media**

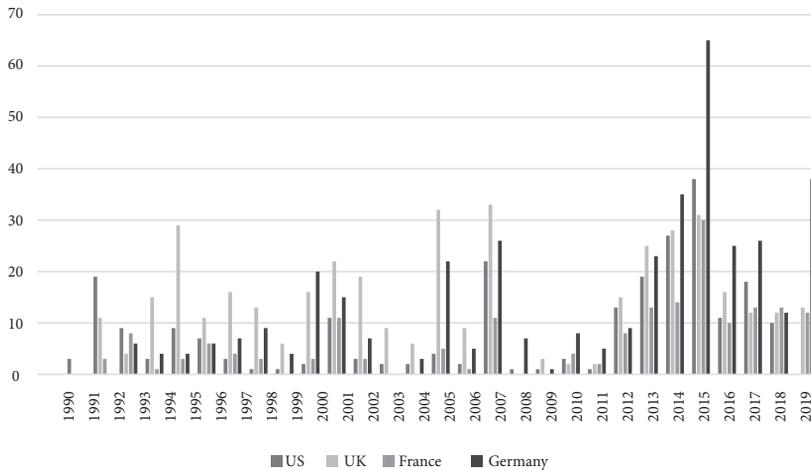
In East Asia, the issue of Japanese military comfort women has been quite extensively studied since the early 1990s. Though the objectivity of studies based on historical sources was not to be doubted, many studies emanating from the three East Asian countries of Korea, China, and Japan in the 1990s failed to fully break from the framework of nationalist narrative. As parties to this sensitive issue, scholars from these countries produced studies permeated, perhaps unknowingly, by subjective and emotional perceptions and understandings. Studies infused with nationalist colors simplified the access routes to this subject, which is actually a global human rights issue. Since the 2000s, as studies from feminist perspectives increased, the limitations of studies from nationalistic perspectives were gradually overcome. Thereafter, from the 2010s, complex access routes to studies on this subject have emerged. Not only in the fields of history and women's studies, but also in diverse fields in the humanities and social sciences, such as law, political science, sociology, literature, and film studies. These studies also incorporated diverse themes, to include the issue of victim compensation, related civic movements, the perspectives and discourses of media reports, cultural and artistic representations, politics of memory, etc. In addition, in the 2000s and 2010s, studies based on transnational methodologies were conducted not only in academia in South Korean, but also in the United States. Studies from this perspective were expanded to include the process of building a statue intended to remember comfort women victims, symbolic representations of the statue,

solidarity activities of global civic movements, and comparisons of sexual violence in wartime. Studies to compare South Korean and Japanese media reportage on the comfort women issue were also conducted. Most recently, a joint work of scholars of East Asian studies in the United States was published that examines victim support activities in South Korea, Japan, and the United States from a transnational perspective (Min et al. 2020). However, studies on how major Western countries other than the United States perceive and understand this issue have yet to be undertaken.

It is through media reports in such venues as newspapers, magazines, and broadcasting that an issue attracts larger social attention. Since the end of the Cold War, North America, Europe, and East Asia have come to exert strong political, economic, and cultural influence on the international order. It is already known how the media of South Korea and Japan have reported on the comfort women issue in East Asia, but since they are interested parties, these publications reveal a tendency toward mutual criticism in their analyses of related facts. Therefore, one can conjecture that relatively objective perspectives on this issue by the mainstream media might be found in the major countries of North America and Europe, which are not directly interested parties in the comfort women issue and have major global influence.

**Table 1.** Newspaper Coverage of the Comfort Women in the US, UK, France, and Germany

Country	Newspaper (number of articles related to comfort women)	Period
US	<i>New York Times</i> (143), <i>USA Today</i> (16), <i>Wall Street Journal</i> (86)	1991–2018
UK	<i>The Guardian</i> (55), <i>The Independent</i> (48), <i>The Times</i> (107), <i>Daily Telegraph</i> (69), <i>Financial Times</i> (118)	1992–2019
	<i>Daily Mail</i> (13)	2001–2019
France	<i>Le Monde</i> (92), <i>Libération</i> (38), <i>L'Humanité</i> (20),	1992–2019
	<i>Le Figaro</i> (31)	2006–2019
Germany	<i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</i> (115), <i>Süddeutsche Zeitung</i> (50), <i>Die Welt</i> (40), <i>Tageszeitung</i> (45), <i>Tagesspiegel</i> (28), <i>Neue Züricher Zeitung</i> (54)	1992–2019



**Graph 1.** Annual Distribution of Comfort Women Coverage in Newspapers in the US, UK, France, and Germany (1990–2019)

Source: Online archives of each newspaper mentioned in Table 1.

Over the thirty years since the comfort women issue first came to wide public attention, mainstream daily newspapers in the United States and major countries in Europe such as Great Britain, France, and Germany published quite a few articles on the subject (see Table 1). Graph 1 shows the numbers of articles by year. For the 1990s, many articles appeared in 1995, which was the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II. In that year, Murayama Tomiichi, then Japanese prime minister from the Socialist Party, issued a statement of apology for the Pacific War and for the aggression and colonial rule that preceded that war. Many media reports appeared in 2000 due to the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal held in Tokyo that year. The year 2005 also saw much reporting on comfort women in conjunction with great international pressure on Japan for its trend toward historical revisionism regarding its colonial rule and aggression on the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II. In 2007, which also saw a large number of articles, the United States House of

Representatives passed its Resolution 121 on Comfort Women, requiring Japan to admit its historical responsibility for military sexual slavery. Lastly, many related stories appeared in 2015, just before and after the Korea-Japan Agreement on Comfort Women.

This special topic of the *Korea Journal* seeks to present a global perspective on this issue through four papers that analyze reporting on the comfort women issue in US, French, German, and British media, respectively. When the Cold War began, the United States made Japan the cornerstone of an anti-communist alliance in Asia and expressed little criticism of Japan for its war crimes during World War II. Chanhaeng Lee's study shows how the American media's critiques of the comfort women issue as a human rights discourse in the early 1990s was the product of the end of the Cold War. His critical analysis also shows how the realist reports of the American media about the experience of comfort women contain voyeuristic or Orientalist elements while lacking any specific analytical explanation of the issue's context. Parallel to its human rights discourse, the United States understood the comfort women issue as one of nationalist conflict between Korea and Japan, and staked out a middleman position. While viewing the conflict between South Korea and Japan, the United States quietly reproved both countries.

However, when the South Korea-Japan conflict intensified to the extent that it threatened the interests of the United States, the United States tried to control and manage the situation through security discourses. Even in 2007, when human rights discourses predominated, security discourses continued steadily in conservative media. However, with regard to the comfort women issue, the East Asian security discourse came to the fore during the administration of President Obama, from early 2009 to early 2017. During this time, major US media, whether progressive or conservative, poured out security discourses and found the root cause of the East Asian crisis in China. In addition, in accordance with its Pivot to Asia strategy, the United States attempted to consolidate US interests by forcing military and diplomatic cooperation between South Korea and Japan. The 2015 Korea-Japan Agreement on Comfort Women was the result of US strategic interests. Of course, the parties to the agreement

were South Korea and Japan, but the Obama administration did not hesitate to put pressure on South Korea and Japan to settle the comfort women issue for the benefit of the United States and East Asian security.

The study by You-ki Min analyzes articles related to the comfort women issue in major French daily newspapers and weekly magazines and enables us to think about this issue both in terms of human rights and in terms of the development of democracy. Among French general daily newspapers and weekly news magazines, there are more center-left or left-leaning ones than conservative-leaning ones. Regardless of the tendencies of media, all of them call attention to Japan's responsibility for its sexual slavery system and direct a critical voice at the Japanese government for its passive approach toward resolving the issue. French media produced a fair amount of analyses that naturally and logically sympathize with activism demanding justice for Korean victims and with the civic movements that support such activism. French media are very critical of the conservative shift of Japanese politics since the late 1990s. The French media reports examined by Min argue that the political and social influence of Japan's conservative and nationalist right and extreme right groups, which deny Japanese war crimes during World War II, such as the Nanjing massacre and the sexual slavery system, and glorify the country's history of aggression and war, works to stymie the development of democracy in Japan. French media has also not spared the South Korean attitude, criticizing its tendency to understand the comfort women problem from a narrow nationalist perspective, and noting also the bias in Korean history textbooks during the country's authoritarian and conservative regimes.

The French media also sharply criticize the United States, arguing how the US bears heavy responsibility for the conservative shift of Japanese politics. They argue that the US's failure to properly deal with Japanese war crimes in the immediate aftermath of World War II resulted in Japan not fully overcoming its historical mistakes and the creation of structural weaknesses in Japanese democracy. Further, French media take the view that after the dissolution of the Cold War system, the United States allowed Japan to increase its military power in order to respond to security threats in East Asia posed by China and North Korea. They evaluate that

the Korea-Japan Agreement on Comfort Women of 2015 to be the result of US pressure and the respective political interests of conservative leaders in South Korea and Japan, and not a true solution to the problem because the victims' opinions were excluded. Above all, French media indicate that censorship of media or the arts in order to glorify or gloss over negative history, including the comfort women issue, is anti-democratic, and suggest that the future of Japanese democracy depends on that country coming to honest terms with its dark past.

In general, in East Asia, Germany and Japan are perceived as a pair of contrasting models in the settlement and reconciliation of past history (Buruma 1994). In her article reviewing German media reports and comments on the comfort women issue, Yong-suk Jung offers a valuable categorization of the themes of this reporting: conflicts of the history of post-colonialism and post-imperialism, wartime sexual violence and women's rights, and memorial and memory politics. German journalists generally believe that the German experience of historical reconciliation, that is, the so-called German model, can serve as a reference for East Asia. They argue that just as Germany's admission of and apology for the Holocaust and war crimes eventually led to its recognition as a member of the international community and its position as practical leader of the EU, Japan might simultaneously gain a moral position and economic benefits in the East Asian international community by taking the lead in solving historical conflicts. In this regard, the German viewpoint of the comfort women issue is generally liberal, regardless of the political orientation of the media in question. That said, more leftist-oriented media have more feminist viewpoints, focus more on wartime sexual violence and women's rights, and demand responsibility from the Japanese government from a humanitarian position for support of and solidarity with universal women's rights.

Jung also reviews the conflicts and disputes that arose in Germany around the erection of a memorial statue for comfort women. Memory in the era of globalization crosses boundaries with a vitality all its own. It is not tied to the frame of a certain territory or group but creates new and diverse meanings depending on what other memories it is connected

with. In this sense, German media regard the transnational activism to install a statue to the memory of comfort women as a test of the possibility or impossibility of the *deterritorialization* of memory and the solidarity of global memory. In addition, German media also raise questions about the validity of the German model to East Asian historical conflicts and reconciliation because Germany's "reflective memory culture" focuses only on the Holocaust and has yet to deal with issues of violence and wartime sex crimes in Germany's past colonies.

Woonok Yeom analyzes reports on comfort women in the British media while comprehensively analyzing British society's viewpoint on war crimes during World War II, the resolution of conflicts over past history, and women's rights. When the issue of comfort women began to be reported in British media in the early 1990s, the main trigger of interest was the overlap with sexual violence in Yugoslavia and British prisoners of war during the Pacific War. British reporting in the 2000s tends to point out the problems of Korea-Japan bilateral relations cool-headedly from the standpoint of a third party that does not have a direct or vested interest in the relationship.

As Yeom points out, the British media's perspective on the comfort women issue is both multi-directional and selective. When writing the history of violence, such as in the two world wars, the Holocaust, colonization, or decolonization, some common experiences cannot be resolved through the framework of the nation-state. Hence, a network of transnational memories is formed. The British media also participate in transnational human rights politics and memory politics. At the same time, however, the attention of the British media is selective. The reason for this stems from the fact that Britain was an imperialist state with vast colonial holdings. The British media criticize Japan as a shameless state that refuses to pay compensation for its past colonial regime and system of sexual slavery and argue that Britain should contribute to universal human rights. Yet beyond principled argument, the media offers no recommendations on concrete and practical efforts. Thus, the British media's attitude toward the Japanese military sexual slavery system seems to hesitate between that of defender of human rights and bystander to their violation.

## Making Global Collective Memory for Human Rights and Democracy

Studies examining how the media of the United States and major European countries perceive and understand the Japanese military sexual slavery issue have multiple outcomes. Such studies provide an opportunity to broaden the scope of the relationship between Japan and Korea—offender and victim—during the colonial period and World War II. At first, these states do not seem to be interested parties in the immediate issue at hand; in other words, they seem to maintain the objectivity of a third party. Nevertheless, they cannot be free from their own political interests, and this means that their studies produce another layer of understanding as they seek to bring this local issue to global attention. This will enable a universal understanding and recognition of history at the global level and contribute to broadening the horizons of transnational history and global history. It could stimulate many case studies of violence, especially the violations of the human rights of women during colonial rule or war, and enable the organization of a history of collective memory that will identify the importance of peace and human rights at the global level.

After the comfort women issue emerged in the early 1990s, 240 persons self-reported as victims of wartime sexual slavery to the South Korean government, but as of the end of 2020 only 16 are still living. Among the seven demands of the victims, two of them, financial reparations to victims and the punishment of the responsible persons, will soon become impossible as both victims and perpetrators will have all died. However, other demands, such as the clarification of the truth, accuracy in history textbooks, the construction of monuments to the victims and a history museum, will continue to be insisted upon at the level of civil movements for human rights or public history, even if none of the victims survive. In countries where democracy functions properly, the past will not be denied or glorified for national pride, and the efforts of media and the arts to report and spread the truth of history will not be censored. It is hoped that the papers treating this special topic of *Korea Journal* will help to revitalize multilateral historical studies on the victims of past repressions around the world, especially the women victims of the violation of human rights in wartime. In addition, it is hoped that this group of papers will

become a reference for those contemplating the promotion of human rights and democracy at the global level.

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