



# The Butterfly Effect on Human Rights and Democracy: *Perceptions of the Comfort Women Issue in French Journalism*

You-ki MIN

## Abstract

*Herein I analyze how the French media understand and analyze the comfort women issue. To this end, I review related articles from four major French dailies and three French weekly magazines published between 1990 and 2019. The French press, whether on the right or left, recognize that the Korean comfort women victims, and the civil movements supporting those victims, have contributed to strengthening women's human rights at the global level. They argue that Japan, where historical revisionism prevails, has not faced the truth on this issue. The French leftist press further criticizes the United States for failing to condemn properly Japan's war crimes at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal under the pretext of the Cold War. One French journalist predicted that the future of a democratic and pacifist Japan depended on the sincere resolution of the comfort women issue. The public testimony of comfort women in the early 1990s may be likened to the tiny flapping of a butterfly's wings. The nearly thirty years since this testimony has seen a great butterfly effect, including criticism of the politicization of history in order to conceal or beautify past mistakes, the reinforcement of human rights, and the prospect of advancing democracy.*

**Keywords:** comfort women, sexual slavery, human right, democracy, historical revisionism, French journalism

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You-ki MIN is professor in the Department of History, Kyung Hee University. E-mail: solidarite@khu.ac.kr.

## Introduction

Comfort women are not a familiar research subject in French academia.<sup>1</sup> By the spring of 2020, only ten academic papers in total had been published on the topic.<sup>2</sup> The first article that treated the issue of comfort women from the perspective of women's rights was by a French feminist writer, a professor at the University of Paris VIII, in an interview with Byun Young-joo, the director of Korea's first comfort women documentary (Byun and Cixous 2003).<sup>3</sup> Following this, an article criticizing wartime sexual violence against women (Lévy 2012), articles that considered the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery, held in 2000 as a result of the international women's movement (Nishino 2009; Lévy 2014), and an article that dealt with the legal meaning of this tribunal (Montavon 2019), were published. An article that appraised the responsibility of Japan (Bae 2017) and an article claiming that the Korea-Japan Agreement on Comfort Women of 2015 had created an obstacle to solving the issue of human rights because it did not reflect the opinions of the victims (Kouzmine 2016), were also published. Articles that dealt indirectly with this issue discussed such things as the comfort women issue and the Japanese peace movement since the 1990s, the impact of Japan's admission to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court on the comfort women issue, and an analysis of the gender issues within a discourse on Japanese postcolonial nationalism.

To date there has been no French-language research monograph focused on the comfort women. A search in SUDOC, an aggregate catalog of French university libraries, on the terms *femmes de réconfort* (comfort women) and *esclaves sexuelles* (sex slaves) finds 67 books registered as of March 2020, primarily research monographs or collections of documents in Korean, Chinese, Japanese, and English, with one German-language research monograph. Such a search finds only five books in French: one translation of an English book, two translations of Korean graphic novels,

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1. The term "comfort women" is not capitalized in this paper except in the case of a quotation.
  2. These results were found on the following three sites on March 26, 2020: <https://www.cairn.info>; <https://persee.fr>; <https://journals.openedition.org>.
  3. Byun Young-joo directed the 1995 documentary *Najeun moksori* (*The Murmuring*).

one novel written by a French novelist,<sup>4</sup> and one report on armed conflict and gender issues published by the Swiss National Commission for UNESCO.

Although academic interest in the comfort women issue has not been great, interest in the Japanese military sexual slavery as an important topic in modern world history has increased in France. A history textbook for high-school sophomores, published by Nathan Publishing in August 2016, introduced Asian victims in a chapter dealing with World War II, including the sexual slavery issue in the wake of the Nanjing Massacre and wartime forced labor, as follows: “Tens of thousands of women, mainly of Korean origin, the ‘comfort women,’ were forced into prostitution” (*Le Quintrec* 2016, 144). *L’Histoire*, a very popular monthly magazine established in 1978 and aimed at a general audience, published an article on the comfort women in June 2016. The article opens by saying that the realization of the Korea-Japan Agreement on Comfort Women of 2015 “seems to be at a standstill” (Souyri 2016, 13), and introduces the history of the issue and the development of the conflict between the two countries. A graphic novel published in Korean by Kim Keum Suk in 2017, based on the testimony of one comfort woman victim, was translated and published in France in fall 2018, where it was well received.<sup>5</sup> A famous French historian of the French Revolution, and professor at the University of Paris I, Pierre Serna, published a review of this work in the daily *L’Humanité*, in which he commented: “This is the best answer possible to the emerging controversy around the images that should accompany a reflection on gender, race, and colonization” (*L’Humanité*, November 15, 2018).

The Japanese Imperial Army was directly and indirectly involved in sexual slavery over the fifteen years of war spanning from the Manchurian

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4. This novel by Juliette Morillot, *Les Orchidées rouges de Shanghai* (Shanghai Red Orchids), published in 2001, is based on the testimony of a Korean victim of Japanese military sexual slavery whom the writer met in Seoul in 1995.

5. A French translation of the original Korean work, *Pul* (Grass), which appeared in 2017, was published in 2018 under the title *Les Mauvaises Herbes* (Weeds). The French-language version won the Grand Jury Prize at the first *Prix bulles d’humanité* (Humanity Comic Book Award) established in 2019 by the French daily *L’Humanité*.

Incident of 1931 to the conclusion of the Pacific War in 1945. Debates are mixed on the sexual slavery issue of this period, as are the links between the comfort women issue and gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, colonialism/post-colonialism, collective memory, and history. And this complex issue is not restricted to a sole nation, but extends to the wider context of global history. France has been an important defender of human rights at the international level. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the ways French media has reported on this issue of the comfort women.

**Table 1.** Coverage on the Comfort Women in French Newspapers and News Magazines

Publication type/name	Position	Year of foundation	Total number of articles	Period of coverage	
Daily newspaper	<i>Le Figaro</i>	Center-right	1826	31	2006–2019
	<i>Le Monde</i>	Center-left	1944	92	1992–2019
	<i>Libération</i>	Center-left	1974	38	1992–2019
	<i>L'Humanité</i>	Left	1904	20	1992–2019
Weekly news magazine	<i>Le Point</i>	Center-right	1972	31	2010–2019
	<i>L'Obs</i>	Center-left	1964	45	2010–2019
	<i>L'Express</i>	Center-left	1953	31	2010–2019

Source: Online archives of each newspaper or news magazine.

As Table 1 shows, over the last thirty years (from 1990 to 2019), we found 292 articles related to comfort women in the online archives of the four newspapers, *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*, *Libération*, and *L'Humanité*, and the three weekly news magazines, *L'Express*, *L'Obs*, and *Le Point*. Looking at the total number of articles, *Le Monde* had the most. In the daily newspapers examined here there appeared quite a few interesting articles posted by correspondents in Japan and South Korea. There were also many articles appearing in the aforementioned weekly magazines that reused short news items pulled from the AFP (Agence France-Presse, a global French news agency). Also published were analytical articles posted by correspondents

who were East Asian experts.

The French press, whether on the right or left, consider the responsibility, the expression of apology, and the compensation by Japan for Japanese military sexual slavery victims from a critical perspective. Both South Korea and Japan are critical of approaching the issue from a nationalistic perspective and feel positive toward the civic movement that understands the victims' demands for justice and advocates for them. Moreover, the French leftist press is highly critical of the postwar war crimes trials led by the United States that later enabled Japanese rightists to glorify their country's dark past.

The French media's articles on Japanese military sexual slavery have produced three major discourses, that of strengthening women's rights, the rightward shift in Japanese politics and historical revisionism, and the measure of democracy. In this article, I analyze the historical meaning of the comfort women issue as a litmus test for democracy by examining the contents of French media coverage related to these three discourses.

### **Strengthening of Women's Human Rights**

Japanese military sexual slavery victim Kim Hak-sun's public testimony in 1991 lifted comfort women out of a long state of oblivion. The Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (hereafter, the Korean Council), which was established in November 1990, began a "Wednesday Demonstration demanding that Japan redress the Comfort Women problems" in front of the embassy of Japan in Seoul on January 8, 1992, ahead of the Japanese prime minister's visit to Korea. In the French media, *Le Monde* reported the visit of the Japanese prime minister and first covered this issue of the comfort women on January 17. The newspaper reported in July of that year that the results of the Japanese government's investigation into the issue were inadequate, commenting that "the stigmata of a hidden past is growing like bamboo after rain" (*Le Monde*, September 5, 1992).

The comfort women included many Koreans as well as Chinese, Filipinos, Indonesians, and European women living in Southeast Asia. Since

the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery was not an issue restricted to a single country, but was a fundamental international violation of human rights, after the 1990s the demand for justice and resolution became a *global cause*, and, as one French daily noted, the resolution of the issue would be a decisive step forward for the women's rights movement (*L'Obs*, November 21, 2016). Victims of wartime sexual slavery in other countries, however, were less organized than those in Korea, and their voices of protest were too weak to attract international support. In October 2016, the Chinese Comfort Women History Museum opened on the campus of Shanghai Normal University, due entirely to the personal efforts of Chinese historian Su Zhiliang. The French media that reported on the opening quoted the words of Edward Vickers, a British researcher at Kyushu University, who claimed that the Chinese Communist Party only deals with the comfort women issue as a "means to weaken Japan on the international stage" (*L'Obs*, March 8, 2017). Even if this researcher's assertion partially reflected the Japanese perspective on this issue, it was true to some extent that the Chinese government and its civil society were less active in solving the problem than their Korean counterparts.

Therefore, since the 1990s, Korean civil society has greatly contributed to the global women's rights movement triggered by the comfort women issue. One French newspaper reported that Lee Hyo-chae, representative of the Korean Council, criticized the rape of women in the Yugoslavian civil war, and said during a Wednesday Demonstration on April 14, 1993, that the comfort women issue must be made widely known to the world to prevent such crimes (*Le Monde*, April 16, 1993). *L'Obs* published an article by Stéphane Mot, a French writer and journalist living in Seoul, who attended the thousandth Wednesday Demonstration in December 2011. This article reported on the Wednesday Demonstration, in which citizens from all over the world participated, including activists of all ages, and introduced seven things that victims were demanding from the Japanese government in the name of justice: an official acknowledgment of war crimes; a complete revelation of the truth about the crimes of military sexual slavery; an official apology; legal reparations; punishment of those responsible for war crimes; an accurate recording of such crimes in official history textbooks; and the

erection of a memorial for the victims of military sexual slavery and the establishment of a related historical archive and museum.<sup>6</sup>

On August 4, 1993, the Kono Statement, which first acknowledged Japan's responsibility in the comfort women issue, was announced. A coalition government without the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was formed on August 9, 1993, a result of the defeat of the LDP in the general election of July 18, 1993, which was the first time since 1955 that the LDP had failed to form a government. Murayama Tomiichi of the Socialist Party, who served as prime minister from June 1994 to January 1996, founded the Asian Women's Fund (AWF) through civic fundraising in July 1995 to support surviving comfort women victims. One French newspaper reported on the victims' contention that weak financial support by civic fundraising tended to exempt the Japanese government from its responsibility (*Libération*, August 15, 1996). Another French newspaper reported that most of the victims were opposed to fundraising at the private level without official and public recognition of Japan's responsibility (*Libération*, August 16, 1996). In her book, Ueno Chizuko, Japan's leading feminism activist, asserted:

Citizens offer "support" and "solidarity"; however, they cannot offer an "apology" or "compensation" on behalf of the state, so apart from expressing citizens' responsibility with this fund, citizens had to put pressure on the state to show responsibility. However, the Japanese women's movement failed to do so because of its lack of capacity. (Ueno 2014, 268)

Although they could not pressure the state to take responsibility, Japanese civic social-movement groups established the Violence against Women in War-Network Japan (VAWW-NET Japan) in 1998 and worked in solidarity with international women's groups, such as the Korean Council, to restore honor and justice for the comfort women. As a result, the Women's

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6. Stéphane Mot, "A Séoul, les 'femmes de réconfort' de l'armée japonaise réclament justice" (In Seoul, the "Comfort Women" of the Japanese Army Demand Justice), *L'Obs*, December 15, 2011.

International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery was held in Tokyo in December 2000. French media emphasized that the tribunal had declared that the wartime rapes of women were "crimes against humanity" rather than a "necessary evil," although the tribunal had no real effect, and reported that the tribunal had convicted ten defendants, including Emperor Hirohito. The tribunal then quoted Japanese human-rights activist Kobayashi as saying that it "will be a reference for all the violence inflicted on women in the conflicts of Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, Timor, and Chechnya."<sup>7</sup>

In March 2011, Korean comfort women victims raised funds at the Wednesday Demonstration to help the victims of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, saying "we know better than anyone else about human suffering and sorrow."<sup>8</sup> This was rated by the French media as the most touching humanitarian initiative to help disaster victims in a neighboring country. In May 2013, the right-wing mayor of Osaka caused controversy by asserting that comfort women were needed in war, and that sexual violence decreased after American soldiers on military bases in Okinawa were able to visit brothels. In response, Okinawan women's groups protested they could not tolerate the idea of women being used as tools for men's sexual desires, whether in wartime or not (*Le Figaro*, May 16, 2013). It was not controversial when Nakasone Yasuhiro, the Japanese prime minister from 1982 to 1987, in his memoir published in 1978, described his time serving as a naval officer in the Pacific War and mentioned the installation of comfort stations providing sexual services to soldiers. However, Yoshimi Yoshiaki, professor at Chuo University, told a French journalist in 2007 that "it would certainly be controversial now" (*Le Figaro*, March 26, 2007). The cries of Korean former comfort women demanding justice that began to be heard in the early 1990s have certainly contributed to improving the recognition of women's rights issues.

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7. Dominique Bari, "Tokyo. Ouverture aujourd'hui du Tribunal international des crimes de guerre contre les femmes" (Tokyo. International Tribunal for War Crimes against Women Opens Today), *L'Humanité*, December 7, 2000.

8. Philippe Mesmer, "La Corée du Sud se mobilise pour venir en aide à son voisin japonais" (South Korea is Mobilizing to Help its Neighbor Japan), *Le Monde*, March 21, 2011.



However, Japan's insufficient recognition of its responsibility and its refusal to apologize and compensate were major factors in the deterioration of the Korea-Japan relationship. The Korea-Japan Agreement on Comfort Women that was announced at the end of 2015, the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Pacific War and the fiftieth anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relationships between Korea and Japan, was covered by most French newspapers and weekly magazines. However, from December 28 to 30, 2015, a series of articles detailed criticisms and concerns in Korea and Japan with the term "historical agreement."<sup>9</sup> Citing remarks by Korean comfort women victims and civil society activists, these French publications introduced the reasons behind Korean criticism towards the agreement as follows: First, it was nothing but a political and diplomatic agreement that did not reflect the will of the victims. Second, the Japanese government did not take full legal responsibility for restoring the dignity and human rights of the victims. Third, economic support provided to the former comfort women did not constitute formal compensation.

A few years later, a French newspaper asserted that the 2015 agreement had been "accompanied by derisory compensation, with the impossible object of extinguishing any controversy," with neither signed documents nor English translations that would help one to understand more accurately the vocabulary of the two countries (*Le Figaro*, January 17, 2018). Since the 2015 agreement, Japan has demanded the removal of the Statue of Peace, which was erected by civil society groups in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul as a symbol of the victims of sexual slavery on the occasion of the thousandth Wednesday Demonstration in December 2011. Japan claimed that they had come to an agreement with the Korean government that the statue would be relocated. The South Korean government, however, claimed the agreement was to discuss the relocation of the statue with those involved. The French media introduced both positions simultaneously (*L'Obs*, January 6, 2016). Alexis Dudden, a professor of history at the University of Connecticut, through *Le Figaro*, criticized Japan's opposition to

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9. These articles appeared in *Le Monde* of December 28, 29, and 30, and *Libération* and *Le Figaro* of December 29 and 30, respectively.

the installation of comfort women statues, symbols of the victims of sexual slavery, around the world as follows:

Some demand that we should unbolt the statues of some historical figures for their misdeeds, but Japan is the only country to demand the destruction of statues of victims. No developed nation pushes historic denial at the highest levels of government like this.<sup>10</sup>

Japan's request for the removal of the statue was also controversial in San Francisco. Known as the Column of Strength, the San Francisco Comfort Women Memorial was installed in September 2017 after Mayor Edwin Lee acquiesced to the request of civic groups. San Francisco rejected a request from the Japanese government to remove this "symbol of the struggle faced by all women who have been and are forced to endure the horrors of sex slavery and trafficking."<sup>11</sup> As a result, Osaka City notified San Francisco of the termination of their sister city relationship, which had been in place since 1957.

Many French media reported on the death in February 2019 of Kim Bok-dong, one of the first former comfort women to testify in the early 1990s. One paper described her as a women's rights activist, saying she fought honorably for Japan's sincere apology and compensation, not money (*Le Monde*, February 6, 2019). Japanese female freelance journalist Shiori Ito, during an interview with French media after the publication of the French translation of her 2017 book, in which she describes her experience of rape, said that meeting a Korean comfort women victim, and being able to talk with her about her own trauma for the first time, was the most important moment in her life (*L'Obs*, May 12, 2019).

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10. Régis Arnaud, "La Corée du Sud et le Japon s'écharpent sur la question des femmes de réconfort" (South Korea and Japan Squabble over the Comfort Women Issue), *Le Figaro*, January 17, 2018.

11. Philippe Mesmer, "L'hommage aux 'femmes de réconfort' hérisse les nationalistes japonais" (Tribute to "Comfort Women" Bristles Japanese Nationalists), *Le Monde*, October 12, 2018.

## Japanese Historical Revisionism

In addition to helping advance women's rights, the struggles of the comfort women also apprised the world of Japanese war crimes. On August 4, 1993, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei recognized Japan's responsibility and expressed "sincere apologies and remorse," when announcing the results of the government's investigation. The French media expressed both praise and concern about the so-called Kono Statement. As one paper put it, although this was "a small step" toward solving the problem, and the Japanese government no longer denied the existence of the comfort women, Japan did "not yet want to recognize everything."<sup>12</sup>

The victims of sexual slavery wished to receive a sincere apology following Japan's Kono Statement; however, no further action was forthcoming from the Japanese government. Rather, Abe Shinzo, who became president of the LDP and prime minister in September 2006, and a member of the postwar generation, asserted that the Kono Statement "went too far" (*Le Monde*, March 6, 2007) and that there was no evidence of the compulsory recruitment of comfort women. Abe's claim was raised at the time the US House of Representatives Resolution 121 (hereafter HR121) was being debated; HR121 demanded that Japan acknowledge, apologize for, and accept historical responsibility for Japanese military sexual slavery. Lee Yong-soo, a victim of Japanese sexual slavery, attended a US Congressional hearing where she shouted out, "I'm living proof!" (*Le Monde*, March 6, 2007). Further, the US ambassador to Tokyo claimed that the comfort women were forced prostitutes (*Libération*, March 20, 2007). Prime Minister Abe announced that he would not revise the Kono Statement, but he made no "new official act of repentance," and ignored the appeal of HR121 (*Le Monde*, June 29, 2007).

Abe, who resigned as prime minister in September 2007 due to health issues, was reelected prime minister in December 2012. The new Abe cabinet, just as it had done when Abe first came to power, again broached

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12. Dominique Bari, "200.000 femmes prostituées de force pendant la guerre" (200,000 Women Forced into Prostitution during the War), *L'Humanité*, August 6, 1993.

the possibility of revalidating the testimony of comfort women and revising the Kono Statement, to which the *Sankei shimbun*, representing the right-wing, offered its support. Then, a French newspaper claimed that “Japan has launched a new ‘memory war’ in Asia that will increase hatred” (*L’Humanité*, February 25, 2014). In the end, the Kono Statement was not revised. However, the victims who demanded a more sincere apology and further action, along with the civic groups that supported them, believed that the Japanese government was trying to reject even the first step in recognizing the country’s responsibility.

The publicization of the Japanese military sexual slavery issue had opened a Pandora’s Box on Japan’s colonial and wartime actions (*Le Monde*, August 12, 1993). On August 15, 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, Murayama Tomiichi of the Socialist Party, who had been elected prime minister in June 1994, issued a statement in which he expressed remorse and offered an apology for the damages and suffering inflicted upon Asians through Japan’s colonial rule and invasions. *Le Monde*’s reporting noted that, unlike Germany, “The Murayama Statement is not yet accompanied by in-depth work on history and collective memory that can give old and new generations a clear and undistorted view of events” (*Le Monde*, August 18, 1995).

However, the LDP’s Hashimoto Ryutaro, who took over from Murayama as prime minister in January 1996, stifled the work on resolving the problem. In July 1996, Hashimoto visited the Yasukuni Shrine, where the bodies of war criminals of the Pacific War were enshrined. It had been eleven years since the last visit by a Japanese prime minister. The visit was recognized by French journalists as a symbol of the “sustained avoidance” of an official apology for the comfort women (*Le Monde*, July 31, 1996). On August 15, 2006, anniversary of Japan’s defeat and the liberation of many Asian peoples, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro made the inappropriate decision to visit the Yasukuni Shrine. Then, in December 2013, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo made a visit to the shrine. French articles on Japanese prime ministers’ iterative visits to the Yasukuni Shrine argued that their visits manifested a denial of the Nanjing massacre and of the comfort women, and noted how, in response, there was opposition from China and

Korea (*Libération*, August 18, 2006; *L'Obs*, January 9, 2014).

When descriptions of comfort women appeared in Japanese junior high-school history textbooks, elements of the Japanese right formed the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (JSHR) in late 1996, removed the passages from history textbooks, and engaged in activities meant to gloss over colonial rule and war crimes. In August 1997, a final decision of the Japanese Supreme Court was handed down in the case filed against the state by Ienaga Saburo, a historian who had fought against the government's censorship of history textbooks. The decision acknowledged a certain abuse of discretion on the part of the Ministry of Education regarding the unconstitutional censoring of the Nanjing massacre, wartime sex crimes, and biochemical weapons testing on human subjects by the so-called Unit 731. One newspaper reported that the decision had created a fissure in the government's official historical negationism (*Le Monde*, August 31, 1997).

In 2005, the history textbooks created by JSHR also created controversy. One article criticized these history textbooks' silencing of the sexual slavery issue, saying, "sometimes it's hard to face the truth in Japan."<sup>13</sup> In Japan, right and the extreme right have spread historical revisionism in order to break from existing historical views and strengthen national pride. This and historical negationism, also called denialism for its denial of war crimes, are two sides of the same coin and were welcomed by conservative Japanese politicians.

The French media took a very critical stance on the rightward shift in Japanese politics. The French press continued to argue that the United States was responsible for this rightward shift in Japan. Allowing Japan to emphasize itself as a victim of the atomic bombings, made possible the rise of Japan's historical revisionism; however, fundamentally, the United States had prioritized anti-communism in Asia over the democratization of Japan. As one paper asserted, it was because the US failed to clear up war crimes that the war criminal Kishi Nobusuke was able to become prime minister in the late 1950s (*Le Monde*, June 8, 1995).

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13. Dominique Bari, "Les trous de mémoire du Japon" (Memory Holes of Japan), *L'Humanité*, April 7, 2005.

Using the Cold War as an excuse, in the immediate postwar years the United States set at liberty major war criminals at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (also known as the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal), and “completely ignored” the issues of sexual slavery issue and the activities of Unit 731 (*L’Humanité*, December 1, 2000). Unlike the Nuremberg Tribunal, which had condemned the major Nazi war criminals, the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal issued Emperor Hirohito an indulgence, “denied justice,” and established the starting point for “Japanese amnesia.”<sup>14</sup> From the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, the United States began to argue for Japan’s military role on the international stage. The Japan Self-Defense Forces were dispatched to the Persian Gulf in 1991. In 1992, Japan enacted a law allowing participation by its forces in UN peacekeeping operations and dispatched troops to Afghanistan and Iraq to support the US war on terror after the attacks of September 11, 2001. *L’Humanité* reported that the dispatch of the Japanese forces amounted to nothing less than the denial of the Nanjing massacre, sexual slavery, and Unit 731 (*L’Humanité*, August 6, 2005).

In 2010, the centenary of the Japanese occupation of Korea, Japanese Prime Minister Kan Naoto of the Democratic Party issued a statement expressing regret and apologies for Japan’s colonial rule; however, he made no direct mention of the illegality of forced annexation or the comfort women issue. In response, Lionel Babicz, a professor at the University of Sydney, said that the statement would leave “a bitter taste of a missed opportunity,” adding that Japan concealed “still vivid wounds” (*Le Monde*, September 15, 2010). It was only after the Democratic Party came to power in Japan—from 2009 to 2012—that Japan was able to reflect on and apologize for the annexation of Korea. At the end of 2012, Abe Shinzo returned as prime minister with the election victory of the conservative LDP. The French media analyzed Abe’s background of right-wing extremism, frequently mentioning the fact that Abe’s maternal grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, was a war criminal. In 2014, *Libération*’s Kyoto correspondent

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14. Philippe Pons, “Hirohito et l’amnésie japonaise” (Hirohito and Japanese Amnesia), *Le Monde*, January 11, 2001.

wrote that Japan “has never been forced to face its past,” and was “obviously far behind” in confronting its past compared to Germany, commenting that Japan’s nationalist right had made friends in power.<sup>15</sup>

In 2014, the chairman of the Japanese public broadcaster NHK recklessly remarked that comfort women were common in all countries in wartime. This was the same remark the Osaka mayor had made a year before. One article introducing this reported that such provocative remarks by right-wing extremists seemed to have become acceptable after the reelection of Abe in 2012 (*L’Humanité*, February 5, 2014). A Japanese historian was quoted in a French newspaper saying that Japanese right-wing politicians, unlike German ones, even if they had expressed apology, were not facing the past directly (*Libération*, May 22, 2013). Another French paper noted how repeated reckless remarks on comfort women by Japanese leadership, remarks reflecting that leadership’s revisionist ambitions, had raised suspicions among Koreans that the remorse expressed was “not sincere” (*L’Obs*, March 10, 2014).

The French press also noted how the deepening conflict between two important US allies, South Korea and Japan, was hampering then President Barack Obama’s East Asian strategic vision of strengthening the alliance in order to restrain China’s emergence (*Le Monde*, April 23, 2014). Thus, US Secretary of State John Kerry, during the second Obama administration, argued that robust trilateral coordination between South Korea, Japan, and the United States should be maintained in response to North Korea’s nuclear threat. The newspaper that introduced Kerry’s remarks, *Le Figaro*, evoked the need for a proper understanding by the United States of the historical conflicts in East Asia, citing John Delury, professor at Yonsei University in Seoul, who said that the United States “underestimated the weight of history” in East Asia.<sup>16</sup> President Obama, who visited Seoul in April 2014, remarked at a press conference that everyone should recognize that comfort

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15. Arnaud Vaulerin, “Au Japon, la droite nationaliste sait quelle a un ami au pouvoir” (In Japan, “the Nationalist Right Knows it has a Friend in Power”), *Libération*, February 27, 2014.

16. Sébastien Falletti, “Les tensions entre Tokyo et Séoul fragilisent le ‘pivot’ d’Obama vers l’Asie” (Tensions between Tokyo and Seoul Weaken Obama’s “Pivot” to Asia), *Le Figaro*, February 15, 2014.

women had suffered “a terrible, egregious violation of human rights.”<sup>17</sup> In covering these remarks, *Le Monde* suggested that Japan wished to separate political and security issues from historical ones; however, Japan’s neighbors and the US did not.

*Le Monde* did point out, however, that the US could not press Japan hard on the comfort women issue, because the US military had used a similar system during its postwar occupation of Japan (*Le Monde*, June 29, 2007). In April 2015, the United States gave Abe Shinzo his first opportunity as prime minister to address a joint session of Congress. Criticizing Abe’s revisionist perception of the comfort women issue and objecting to providing an opportunity for his speech, several US congressmen invited Lee Yong-soo, a comfort women victim, to attend Abe’s speech. In his address, Abe expressed deep remorse for World War II and deep repentance for the war’s American victims; however, avoiding Lee Yong-soo’s gaze, he made no mention of the comfort women. Congressman Mike Honda, a sponsor of HR121 in 2007, judged Abe’s speech “shocking and shameful.” Abe’s speech had mainly focused on economic and military cooperation with the United States, and relevant reports in France included the fact that the comfort women demanded justice in the name of honor and dignity from the Japanese government, which sought to ignore or minimize the sexual slavery issue (*Le Point*, April 29, 2015; *Le Figaro*, April 30, 2015). One French analytical article ridiculed the fact Abe did not truly apologize for Japan’s imperialistic past, but merely “played with words.”<sup>18</sup>

In March 2015, on the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II, Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel visited Japan and told the Japanese to face up to their past (*Le Monde*, March 10, 2015). In May of that year, more than 200 historians, mostly American but including some Europeans, sent an open letter to Prime Minister Abe, demanding he take responsibility for the country’s repressive colonial history “in both word and deed.” In Japan, historians, legal professionals, journalists, and human

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17. Bruno Philip and Philippe Pons, “Le délicat ‘rééquilibrage’ de la politique d’Obama en Asie” (Obama’s Delicate ‘Rebalancing’ in Asia), *Le Monde*, May 1, 2014.

18. Philippe Mesmer, “Face au passé impérial, Shinzo Abe joue sur les mots” (Faced with the Imperial Past, Shinzo Abe Plays with Words), *Le Monde*, June 4, 2015.



rights activists have echoed this demand. Kono, who first recognized Japan's responsibility for the comfort women in 1993, advised Abe to accept the truth at a joint press conference with former Prime Minister Murayama, who apologized in 1995 for the colonial rule, and said that denying what undoubtedly happened is tantamount to tainting the honor of Japan (*L'Obs*, June 9, 2015). The same article mentioned the results of a joint poll by Korean daily *Hankook Ilbo* and Japanese *Yomiuri shimbun* indicating that 73 percent of Japanese did not trust Korea and 85 percent of Koreans did not trust Japan. *Le Monde's* Tokyo correspondent wrote later that year that Japan's historical revisionism was damaging the country's image, and the author emphasized that for the sake of its honor Japan should put its trust in pacifism through a genuine apology for its colonialist past (*Le Monde*, June 25, 2015). In a later editorial, *Le Monde* opined that it was ill-advised to distort historical truth for the sake of a state accused of crimes committed by its imperial army, and broached German Prime Minister Willy Brandt, who had apologized on bended knee in Warsaw in 1970 (*Le Monde*, August 16, 2015).

Despite the appeals from Western historians and Japanese intellectuals, Prime Minister Abe's speech on the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II failed to demonstrate true responsibility for Japan's past actions. The United States exerted pressure on South Korea's President Park Geun-hye and Japan's Prime Minister Abe to resolve the conflict between them in order to strengthen their trilateral alliance. Such American pressure remained a subject of the French media a few days prior to the announcement of the Korea-Japan Agreement on Comfort Women on December 29, 2015, and even after it. Both left-leaning and conservative newspapers in France argued that the agreement, which could neither assuage comfort women victims in Korea nor satisfy extreme nationalists in Japan, was only reached because of Washington's East Asia strategy (*Le Figaro*, December 29, 2015). Another article asserted that, under pressure from the United States, Abe wanted to be recognized by his compatriots as the leader who had finally resolved this thorny problem, while Park Geun-hye wanted to be evaluated as having resolved the comfort women issue that her father, Park Chung-hee, had failed to address when he normalized

diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan in 1965, and criticized “the politicization of history” by the two countries, who held the past “hostage to an often misplaced national pride.”<sup>19</sup>

### **The Final Item in Pandora’s Box: Hope for Democracy**

The Pandora’s Box that was opened by the Kono Statement in the early 1990s made Japan’s repressive colonial rule and war crimes widely known. Japan’s historical revisionism and negationism of the rightward shifting politics and the right-wing extremists were to close Pandora’s Box, yet one hope remains. The comfort women issue revealed the quality of democracy in East Asia. The French media recognized that the first reportage by Korean media and the first testimonies of the comfort women victims were made public thanks to Korean democratization in 1987 (*Le Monde*, September 5, 1992). The Korean victims of sexual slavery suffered a second pain after the end of the war, because, in the patriarchal society in which they lived, they were compelled to conceal the fact that they had suffered from sexual slavery (*Libération*, April 20, 2018). However, in a newly democratized society, those victims began to break that wall of silence.

A 1996 French article interviewed Byun Young-joo, the director of a documentary film on the comfort women. Byun said that she sensed the *heroizing* by some Koreans of the comfort women victims as a collective Korean Joan of Arc, standing up bravely against Japan and its past crimes. But Byun argued that this only resulted in viewing the victims through a nationalistic frame. Some Korean people had previously turned their backs on the comfort women, considering them to be a national shame, but now they were praising them from a nationalistic perspective (*Le Monde*, May 30, 1996). Director Byun’s point is that the comfort women issue should not be dealt with from a nationalistic approach; she stresses that from

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19. Philippe Pons, “Japon: le Négationnisme de Shinzo Abe à l’épreuve des intérêts économiques et sécuritaires” (Japan: Shinzo Abe’s Negationism to the Test of Economic and Security Interests), *Le Monde*, December 29, 2015.

the beginning the comfort women issue was a matter of women's rights, and moreover, human rights. A 2001 French article reporting on Japan's distortion of a Japanese history textbook claimed that Japan bore a huge responsibility for wartime sexual slavery and the comfort women. However, a Korean history textbook made no mention of the Korean collaborators involved in recruiting such comfort women. Moreover, Korea failed to eliminate the pro-Japan collaborators under the post-liberation Rhee Syngman government and thus had forgotten "to clean their doorsteps" (*Le Monde*, August 15, 2001). Four years later, the author of this article praised President Roh Moo-hyun's progressivist efforts at investigating the Jeju April 3rd Uprising and the activities of the Presidential Committee for the Inspection of Collaborations with Japanese Imperialism (*Le Monde*, April 13, 2005).

In 2015, a Japanese magazine relativized the Japanese military sexual slavery issue by reporting on the rapes committed by the South Korean military during the Vietnam War. In February 2017, *L'Humanité*, also reported on past issues between South Korea and Vietnam. The article continued by mentioning the expression of regret made by then President Kim Dae-jung on his visit to Hanoi in 1998, Korean civic groups bringing medical support to villages damaged by Korean forces as an apology for what Koreans had done during the Vietnam War, and finally, the words of Korean comfort women victims as follows: "we as Koreans apologize to the Vietnamese people who suffered."<sup>20</sup> The *L'Humanité* article, however, criticized Park Geun-hye's conservative government for compiling history textbooks justifying the dispatch of troops to Vietnam but not mentioning war crimes.

*Le Monde*, a French center-left paper, which had shown itself critical of the rightward shift in Japan, was also critical of the Park Geun-hye government. In particular, the paper pointed out that the Korean government's attempt to diminish negative descriptions of the country's past dictatorships in history textbooks limits freedom of expression and

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20. Lina Sankari, "Vietnam-Corée. La guerre sans fin des mémoire" (Vietnam-Korea. The Endless War of Memories), *L'Humanité*, February 6, 2017.

at the same time undermines its moral authority to criticize the Abe government's historical revisionism (*Le Monde*, March 17, 2016). The same paper also reported President Park Geun-hye's political scandals in detail (*Le Monde*, December 6, 2016). These scandals contributed to the defeat of the conservatives in the South Korean general election of April 2016 and led to the widespread so-called Candlelight Protests that began in October of the same year. *Le Monde* pointed out that the Korea-Japan Agreement on Comfort Women of 2015, in which victims' opinions were ignored, was another factor behind the protest. These Candlelight Protests subsequently led to the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye and the victory of the progressivist Moon Jae-in in the May 2017 presidential election.

In December 2017, the Korean government, which had reaffirmed its democracy with the process of President Park's impeachment, announced the results of its review of the process leading to the comfort women agreement, and apologized for hurting victims whose opinions were excluded. The Korean government did not annul the agreement or demand renegotiations, because the agreement was merely an official promise between the governments, but it did assert that the agreement would not resolve the comfort women issue. As a result, South Korea dismantled the Japan-Korea Joint Fund Foundation, which had been established in 2015. A French newspaper reporting on this claimed that Korean public opinion was that Japan had tried to solve the comfort women issue with cheap money but without assuming any legal responsibility (*Le Figaro*, July 5, 2019).

Since the 2015 agreement stipulates that the comfort women issue is resolved "ultimately and irreversibly," French media also reported that Japan opposed the Korean government's review and its dismantling of the Joint Fund Foundation. However, no French media reports criticized Korea's attitude, perhaps because the French media recognized the 2015 agreement as nothing more than a political compromise that excluded victims' positions. One international strategic expert in France demanded that Korea accept the agreement even if it were not a complete solution, and that Japan should understand that apology fatigue would not hinder the improvement of bilateral relations between the two countries (*Le Monde*, August 14, 2019).

In French media coverage of the comfort women issue, China is rarely

mentioned except in news of Japanese politicians' visits to the Yasukuni Shrine and protests over the distortions in history textbooks. Insofar as the comfort women issue, the French media seems to recognize that China "manipulates history extensively for the purposes of its regime" (*Le Monde*, August 15, 2001), and as with Japan, with China it is usually a case of nationalism "playing with fire" (*L'Obs*, November 18, 2016). The French media have high regard for the dynamic growth of Korean democracy, including the public resistance to conservatives' attempts at historical revisionism in textbooks. At the same time, French media generally recognize that Japan's democracy is threatened by the growth of the far right and its increased political influence.

As mentioned above, because of the Cold War, the United States failed in its support of Japan's democracy at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, and from the French press's point of view, for the sake of *national cohesion*, after the war Japan needed to bury its past rather than remember it; however, this has been combined with a democratic retreat (*Le Monde*, August 16, 1995). The French press has reported on how the conservative LDP, to satisfy right-wing extremists, exerted pressure on the public broadcaster NHK in 2001 to redact a documentary on war crimes, including the comfort women issue (*Libération*, February 2, 2005). This undemocratic media control by the Abe government has been reported several times in French media.

When comfort women comics by Korean artists were exhibited at the world-famous Angoulême International Comics Festival in January 2014, the Japanese ambassador to France expressed regret and demanded the cancellation of the exhibit, the festival organizers refused to do (*L'Obs*, January 30, 2014). In January 2015, it became known that the Japanese government had demanded a revision of an American high-school history textbook dealing with the sexual slavery issue (Bentley et al. 2014); however, the publishing company rejected the demand, because the textbook's contents were "based on facts."<sup>21</sup> According to the report, the Japanese government had been promulgating the *official* version of Japan's history

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21. Alexander Martin, "U.S. Publisher Rebuffs Japan on 'Comfort Women' Revision," *Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 2015.

as part of the budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the name of “international communication” (*Le Figaro*, April 8, 2015).

In Japan, where the right-wing extremists are obsessed with the past glory of the empire, the sexual slavery issue has been considered taboo. For this reason was the May 2012 exhibition of photographs of comfort women by a Korean photographer that was being held in Tokyo interrupted (*Le Figaro*, July 7, 2015). In January 2017, an article reporting news that books denying comfort women and the Nanjing massacre had been placed in the rooms of the Japanese APA hotel chain also reported that the Japanese government had announced the suspension of a support fund for UNESCO after the Nanjing massacre records were registered with UNESCO’s Memory of the World in 2016 (*L’Humanité*, January 19, 2017). Another related article criticized the Japanese government for indirectly encouraging behavior like that of the APA hotels (*Le Point*, August 1, 2018). In August 2019, in Nagoya, the bronze statue representing the comfort women, which was on display at an arts festival, was excluded from the exhibition through the intervention of the mayor of Nagoya due to public controversy. The article that covered this called it “the worst censorship” and expressed concerns about democratic retreat in Japan (*Le Figaro*, August 5, 2019).

An article reporting on the LDP’s victory in the December 2014 general elections concluded that the many votes received by right-wingers, who want to revise Japan’s Peace Constitution and protest the UN’s sexual slavery report, revealed the deep crisis in Japanese democracy (*Libération*, December 15, 2014). French media reported that the Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference), a right-wing extremist lobby group that had some influence over Abe Shinzo, was the cause of the rightward shift and democratic retreat in Japanese politics. The group was reported to have been founded in 1997 by former imperial military officers and religious shintoists in opposition to socialist Prime Minister Murayama’s 1995 statement of apology for colonial rule (*Libération*, May 8, 2015; *L’Obs*, May 21, 2015).

In 2016, *L’Obs* republished an online article from 2013 that criticized Japan’s historical revisionism. The main content of the article, which described Prime Minister Abe as the “worst enemy of Japan’s democracy,” is as follows. The origin of Japan’s historical negationism, which would

be punishable by law if it occurred in France, is the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, “the most despicable moment of democracy for the United States.” The absence of justice at this tribunal, at which the US did not punish the majority of Japanese war criminals under the pretext of the Cold War, allowed “corruption of democracy from its inception” in contemporary Japan. No one could imagine the German chancellor endorsing a historical revisionist group that denied Nazi crimes, the article argued, yet there were many figures around the Japanese prime minister who wanted “to destroy democratic Japan and return to imperial Japan.”<sup>22</sup>

In 2016, *L’Obs* also republished a 2014 article by Stéphane Mot that criticized the retreat of Japanese democracy, a result of lobbying by right-wing extremists. This article argues that when the United States gave the emperor an indulgence to maintain the imperial system, Japan maintained its former imperial system without any democratic elements in the judiciary or education save for the Peace Constitution. Historical revisionism attempts to destroy such weak democracy and even the pacifism of Japan. Revisionists claim “the Nanjing massacre is fabricated, that the ‘comfort women’ were voluntary prostitutes, that the aggression in Asia was the liberation of Asia from Western powers, and that the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal was an abuse of jurisdiction by illegal conquerors who punished patriots incorrectly.” According to Mot, the international community should help the passive Japanese people restore Japan’s democracy, which has been reduced by right-wing extremists. The “nationalistic reactions of Korea and China, like ping-pong, has the risk of provoking Japanese nationalists.” The confrontation is not Korea against Japan or China against Japan, but “democratic and peaceful Japan against imperial Japan.” And “regaining trust in East Asia is the desirable resolution to the ‘comfort women’ issue,” an issue which has already become a global cause.<sup>23</sup>

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22. All the quotes in this paragraph are from Stéphane Mot, “Le Japon prisonnier de son extrême droite révisionniste” (Japan, Prisoner of its Revisionist Far Right), *L’Obs*, November 18, 2016 (original online publication, May 13, 2013).

23. All the quotes in this paragraph are from Stéphane Mot, “En finir avec Nippon Kaigi, le lobby révisionniste japonais” (Put an End to Nippon Kaigi, the Japanese Revisionist Lobby), *L’Obs*, November 21, 2016 (original online publication, November 2, 2014).

## Conclusions

In early February 2019, those who participated in the funeral procession of Kim Bok-dong, who testified at the UN Committee on Human Rights in 1993 as a comfort women victim, held large cards in the shape of a yellow butterfly. In 2012, she and other comfort women had created a fund for victims of wartime sexual violence and women suffering from various forms of violence around the world with the name of the Butterfly Fund. The butterfly symbolized the hope among comfort women, whose human rights had been violated on strange battlefields in unfamiliar countries, might fly back to their hometowns freely. The tiny flapping of the wings of a butterfly can have immense and unpredictable consequences. In the early 1990s, the testimony of victims of Japanese military slavery contributed to the improvement of women's rights globally for thirty years, and in East Asia, it became a litmus test of democracy.

For geopolitical reasons, Japan was required to play a certain role in the security system of East Asia. However, still-vivid wounds left by the history of colonized Korea, such as comfort women, made it difficult for Japan to fulfill this role properly (*Le Monde*, June 13, 2018). Even after the Korea-Japan Agreement on Comfort Women of 2015, which clarified the "ultimate and irreversible resolution," French media, without criticizing Koreans' perception that this issue had not been fully resolved, seem to understand to some extent. In order for Japan to fulfill its role as one of the world's economic powers on the international stage, it should show its sincere intent to take responsibility for history without denying or changing the past. Japan's future hangs on this.

The comfort women issue was a taboo that most Japanese perpetrators would take to their graves. However, Fumiko Kawata, a writer who published in 1987 a book on Korean comfort women brought to Okinawa by the Japanese military, said that their stories were shocking to her as a human, and that Japan's future depended on resolving this problem (*L'Obs*, January 25, 2017). In the positive view of the future Japan, women's rights will be respected, historical facts will not be revised or denied because of political interests, the media will not be controlled, artists' freedom of expression will not be violated, and its dark history will no longer be concealed.



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