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Japan-Korea dialogue over the comfort women issue—a historical symposium held in Seoul

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Photo: Japan-Korea Joint Symposium on the Comfort Women Issue (taken by Sasaki Kazuyoshi)

<On September 5, 2023, Japan-Korea Joint Symposium on the Comfort Women Issue was held at the Seoul Press Center, which dealt with the truth about the comfort women issue and the illustrations depicting comfort women in Japanese and South Korean school textbooks. Experts from Japan and South Korea explored the differences in the historical perceptions of the issue and their influence on education. This meeting deepened the understanding regarding the historical issues between the two countries and searched for new steps toward a better relationship.>

On September 5, the second Japan-South Korea joint symposium was held, titled “The truth about the comfort women issue and its illustrations in Japanese and South Korean school textbooks.”

From Japan, Professor Nishioka Tsutomu at Reitaku University, Director Yamamoto Yumiko of the International Research Institute for Historical Controversies and Mr. Matsuki Kunitoshi, Senior Researcher of the same Institute took the platform and stated that the comfort women issue originated in Japan.

A fictitious story created by Mr. Yoshida Seiji was reported as if it were fact by the *Asahi Newspaper*. This was the beginning of it all. Then, the United Nations Human Rights Committee and the International Labor Organization (ILO) stated that “the comfort women were sexual slaves,” without conducting any substantial examination, and accepted a statement submitted by Japanese leftists at face value. The Japanese Government at the time did not refute the story and even apologized as if Japan had been to blame. In Japan, school textbooks are to be selected by teachers belonging to Japan Teachers’ Union and thus textbooks reflecting the self-deprecating view of history were widely adopted.

From South Korea, Ryu Sok-Chun, former Yonsei University Professor, I Uyong, Research Staff of Rakuseidai Economic Research Institute and Kim Jong-heon, President, Korean History Textbook Research Institute took the platform and stated that though comfort women “were sold” based on the

contract of indentured labor, there was not such a system nor the word for the labor and therefore it was mis-translated into human trafficking. Korean school textbooks are intended to imbue Korean children with hatred toward Japan and lack objectivity.

The attendants from Japan participated in a demonstration against the anti-Japan groups on the following day, September 6, held in front of the former Japanese Embassy.

The difference between pro-Japanese and Japan experts

In South Korea, those who like Japan are called pro-Japanese and those who are well-versed in Japan are called Japan experts.

Pro-Japanese are people who like Japanese culture, and under the former Moon Jae-in administration, they were called traitors and felt ashamed of themselves. Former President Park Geun-hye was regarded as pro-Japanese, having been influenced by her father.

Japan experts are well-versed in Japan. Some pro-Japanese claim to be Japan experts so that they may avoid being called traitors. Lee Nak-on, who served as Prime Minister in the Moon Jae-in Administration is regarded as Japan expert from his experience as a correspondent stationed in Tokyo for the daily Dong-a Ilbo. President Yoon Suk-yeol's father, Mr. Yoon Ki-jung, an economist, who passed away last month, was also a Japan expert.

New pro-Japanese are emerging. While examining the issues of the comfort women and the so-called mobilized workers, they came to realize that Japan's assertions are right and that Korean assertions are wrong. Thus, they criticize and accuse the anti-Japan Koreans. They are against their anti-Japanese claims.

While pro-Japanese are admirers of Japan, Japan experts do not stand on Japan's position, but they do not blindly criticize Japan without reason. The new pro-Japanese think that the anti-Japan attitudes based on fabrication or distortion are not good for South Korea.

Activities and aims of those opposing the anti-Japan attitudes

Those who oppose the anti-Japan claims have been demonstrating in support of their cause since June 24, 2020, in front of the former Japanese Embassy on every Wednesday, demanding the dissolution of the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance and the removal of the Comfort Woman Statue. This is the same site and the same hours of the same day where the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, the predecessor of the Korean Council for Justice, staged its

“Wednesday demonstration” since 1992, when Japanese Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi visited South Korea.

In May 2020, the former comfort woman Lee Yong Soo revealed the questionable wrongdoing on the part of the Council for Justice and Ms. Yoon Mee-hyang, former director of the Council. After her revelation, people opposing the anti-Japan claims stood up and were joined by pro-Japanese and others.

Those opposing anti-Japan attitudes say that they are running out of time. At present, nine former comfort women are still alive, and their average age is 94.4. Korean people have been donating huge sums of money to support the former comfort women, but through Ms. Lee Yong Soo’s revelation, it became clear that only small amounts of money are left at their disposal.

When there are no longer any surviving former comfort women, the Council for Justice, having lost people’s trust, will soon lose the reason for its activities and eventually fall into dissolution. Then, the removal of the comfort woman statue will be the matter of time.

The comfort woman statue was established by the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, the predecessor of the Korean Council for Justice. Anti-Japan protesters set up a tent beside the statue for surveillance. It is customary that any object occupying the public road should be immediately removed in the absence of the caretaker by the district in charge of the road for safety reasons.

Photo: September 6, anti-Japan protesters and the comfort woman statue.

Photo: A rally held by protesters against the anti-Japan protesters in front of the former Japanese Embassy.

If the Korean Council for Justice is to stop acting without any involvement of protesters against the anti-Japan protesters, the latter may possibly lose an opportunity to have their voices heard. A member working against the anti-Japan protesters says that their goal is to have the comfort woman statue in front of the former Japanese Embassy removed, at least while the remaining former comfort women are still alive.

Regarding the two rallies held side by side by the anti-Japan protesters and anti-anti-Japan protesters, citizens of Seoul seem to be hardly attracted by them. The rallies take place from noon to one in the afternoon. Workers in the neighborhood office buildings head to restaurant for lunch without paying

much attention to the rallies and after lunch, they directly go back to their offices. Only a very few people look from a distance at the protesters shouting their slogans and singing protest songs. They may feel as if watching a show after lunch for the rest of the lunch break. Fifty to sixty police officers stand on their guard lest the two groups should clash with each other, looking equally idle and just waiting for the time to pass by.

The truth about the comfort women victims

The Korean news media describe former comfort women as victims. According to their statements, they spent a year or two living at a comfort station. For a little over 30 years after the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan was established, to this day, those women have been at the whims of anti-Japan groups and the anti-Japan governments, and third-party persons who have nothing to do with the former comfort women have used them as means of earning money. They have been exposed to the eyes of many people in their life and everyday living, being robbed of their privacy. In this sense, the former comfort women who have gone through these hardships may duly be called victims.