Japan’s ‘Comfort Women’ and Historical Memory: The Neo-nationalist Counter-attack

YONSON AHN

INTRODUCTION

Among the controversies and conflicts over interpreting Japan’s Second World War history (sometimes referred to as the Asia-Pacific War, 1931–45) is the debate over the issue of ‘comfort women’. Since 1970, and particularly since the 1990s, numerous studies on the ‘comfort women’ have sustained remembrance of the issue in Japan, Korea and across the English-speaking world. This body of literature examined the involvement of the Japanese state, the role of nationalism, sexual violence, colonialism and transnational feminism. In response, Japanese neo-nationalists, known as ‘historical revisionists’ in Japan, since the 1990s have attempted to erase this issue from public memory. This nationalist ‘historical revisionism’ (rekishi shūseishugi) ‘proposes to replace the “masochistic” view of “leftist” historians (jigyaku shikan) by a “bright” historical narrative as the basis for a “healthy nationalism” or patriotism’.1 Japan’s neo-nationalists set out explicitly to ‘preserve the national essence (kokutai)’, for example, ‘to honour the special (dokutoku) values, traditions and the culture of their country’.2 Authors working within this framework include Fujioka Nobukatsu,3 Watanabe Shōichi,4 Nishio Kanji,5 Sakamoto Takao,6 Nakamura Akira,7 Hosaka Masayasu,8 Nishioka Tsutomu,9 Hata Ikuhiko,10 Kusaka Kimihito,11 Okazaki Hisahiko and cartoonist Kobayashi Yoshinori.12 These authors have challenged the literature on the ‘comfort women’ with respect to the following issues:

1. the terminology of the ‘comfort women’
2. state involvement in the ‘comfort station’ project
This chapter investigates the themes raised in recent works of ‘historical revisionism’ and analyses the representation of ‘comfort women’ in neo-nationalist discourse in Japan. In doing so, it also examines the way Japanese neo-nationalists represent the ‘comfort women’ in their reconstruction of the memory of the Asia-Pacific War.

**TERMINOLOGY OF ‘COMFORT WOMEN’**

To begin, the very term ‘comfort women’ (ianfu) is questioned by authors such as Fujioka Nobukatsu and Watanabe Shōichi. The full expression, jūgun ianfu, literally means ‘comfort women who followed the military.’ Fujioka argues that jūgun is a reference to gunzoku, that is, civilians who had official status in the military. Fujioka and Watanabe claim that the women had no such official status in the military but were ‘paid prostitutes’ taken by traffickers who served ‘client soldiers’. The neo-nationalists as a group seek to distance the state and the military from the ‘comfort women’ by insisting that they had no official status in the military, a question to which we return below. The heart of the problem, however, lies not only with the inappropriate use of the term jūgun, but also ianfu which means ‘comfort women’, since the term ianfu describes the women’s experience in a euphemistic way. Yet, the improper use of the term ianfu has been conveniently ignored by the neo-nationalists.

Some mainstream liberal activists and scholars who have worked on, or written about, this issue also reject the term jūgun ianfu because of the euphemism in the term ianfu, ‘comfort women’. They prefer to refer to the women as ‘sex slaves’ (seidorei), based on the slavelike conditions (such as detention, confinement and lack of autonomy) under which the women were forced into sexual servitude. For example, a report from the United Nations Human Rights Committee by Radhika Coomaraswamy in February 1996 described the ‘comfort women’ as ‘sex slaves’. I use the term ‘comfort women’ here in order to record the euphemistic and subtle implications of the term as well as to address the international debate which has principally been conducted on the basis of the term.

In Korea, the term chōngsindae—the Women’s Volunteer Labour Corps, teishintai in Japanese—has generally been used to frame the experience of the ‘comfort women’. Chōngsindae were mobilized ostensibly to work in various sectors to support the war. This mobilization was conducted on the basis of Imperial Japan’s Manpower Mobilization