



Sink the Asahi! The 'Comfort Women' Controversy and the Neo-nationalist Attack 朝日を潰せ！「慰安婦」問題とネオナショナリズムの攻撃

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How did Japan's 135-year-old liberal flagship end up in the crosshairs of neo-nationalists?

David McNeill and Justin McCurry

Before last year it is doubtful that many Japanese knew the location of Glendale, California – an L.A. suburb with a population of 200,000 known for its large Asian population and the Big Boy fast-food chain. That's changed, thanks to an unimposing bronze statue of a young woman installed last year in a local park that has become a microcosm of the toxic history war between Japan and South Korea.



The statue was meant to commemorate the suffering of women herded into wartime Japanese brothels – and to symbolize justice denied. Since the unveiling, however, the city has been targeted by diplomatic protests, hundreds of angry letters and a lawsuit demanding its removal. Japanese nationalist politicians even say the statue has triggered discrimination against Japanese schoolchildren in America.

The dispute took a farcical turn on Oct. 21 last year when Glendale City Council heard testimony from long-winded rightist video blogger Tony Marano. Marano travelled hundreds of miles from his home and took a break from warning against nefarious communists, Koreans who “eat dogs off the street” and President Obama’s plot to turn America into a Muslim nation, to pick up the cudgel against the hated memorial.

Known among nationalist circles in Japan as the “Texas Oyaji”, Marano appeared to believe he was speaking on behalf of an entire country as he told

the council that the statue “has been perceived by Japan and by the people of Japan as an insult and a slight to their honor.” He urged the council to demonstrate that the city was not “bashing” Japan by removing it.

How did it come to this – a nondescript community on the edge of Los Angeles’ massive urban sprawl becoming the focus of a struggle between two East Asian nations for the world’s sympathy, if not its conscience? If rightist revisionists are to be believed, the *Asahi Shimbun* is to blame.

In one of Japan’s largest lawsuits, over 8,700 people, led by Watanabe Shoichi, an emeritus professor at Sophia University, have demanded an apology from the *Asahi* for “spreading erroneous facts to international society.” Right-wing politicians say Japan’s flagship liberal newspaper has dragged the nation’s name through the gutter and, in the words of the lawsuit, “damaged Japanese people’s honor.”

All this began when the newspaper ran a series of articles in the 1990s on Yoshida Seiji, a former Japanese soldier who said he had corralled Korean women into wartime military brothels. In the revisionist narrative, that in turn triggered the 1993 Kono Statement that acknowledged the Japanese army’s role and eventually led to the [U.S. House Resolution 121](#) of 2007, calling on Tokyo to “formally acknowledge” and “unequivocally” apologize for the sordid episode.

Yoshida’s testimony had been discredited years ago. Starting in September 1982, he was featured in 16 articles in the *Asahi* through to the 1990s, by which time historians had smelled a rat. When he died in 2000, his story was widely considered bogus, even among Korean and Japanese scholars on the left. According to one *Asahi* editor, the issue of Yoshida’s testimony had become an impediment to reporting at the newspaper. “Readers were calling in and asking us about it. Journalists were being questioned about it repeatedly on reporting assignments,” he recalls.

Pressure for a retraction intensified after Abe Shinzo took power in late 2012. Eventually, something had to give, says the editor. “*The Sankei* was running articles about this once a week.” *The Yomiuri* too had become more aggressive. “We felt we were being pushed into a corner.” The departure of most of the reporters and senior editors at the *Asahi* associated with the comfort women coverage provided the opportunity for a clean break.

In August last year, the newspaper’s senior management rounded up mid-level editors and said the paper was going to bite the bullet. “They were told that it couldn’t be avoided any more,” says the editor. The reaction, he says, was “relief.” Morale was high, despite the inevitable blow to the *Asahi*’s prestige, but he admits: “It should have been done much earlier.” The newspaper told its 20 million readers it had been “unable to see through” Yoshida’s “fraudulent testimony.”

Right-wing critics trace the pitched political battles over the comfort women issue back to the *Asahi*’s coverage, and by extension blame the newspaper for Japan’s diplomatic deep freeze with South Korea. Mizuno Takaaki, a veteran *Asahi* correspondent who now teaches at Kanda University of International Studies, scoffs at that view. There were many soldiers’ accounts predating Yoshida’s memoir, he points out.

"I always say, Japanese journalists should be ashamed that we didn't report it until 1991," he says. "It is common sense that there were other accounts because there were so many former soldiers with experience of ianfu (comfort women)." He says that's why so many ordinary Japanese people contributed to the 1995 compensation fund, set up by Japan following the Kono investigation. "Because they felt guilty about what happened, and sympathy toward the women."

Undeterred, revisionists have spent the months since the *Asahi's* summer mea culpa contending that Yoshida's discredited testimony alone is proof that wartime sex slaves never existed. For them, the idea that Japanese imperial forces, with or without the help of local brokers, forced the women to work in frontline wartime brothels is a figment of fevered progressive imaginations.

Abe's nationalist allies have sprayed their bile in myriad directions. Having built up a head of steam in their campaign to discredit Japan's liberal broadsheet, they turned their attention to international critics of Japan's wartime conduct who, they claim, had been duped by Yoshida's testimony. The two authors of this article are among those who have been the target of smears from online activists and gutter journalists.

Aside from demanding the removal of comfort women statues in the United States and South Korea, they heaped scorn on the 2007 US House of Representatives resolution. The right found an unlikely supporter in the centrist *Mainichi Shimbun*, which ran an article suggesting that Yoshida's testimony had influenced US policymakers. "The US House resolution recognizes the comfort women system as 'forced military prostitution by the government of Japan' and bitterly criticizes Japan, saying the system was 'unprecedented in its cruelty and magnitude, the *Mainichi* said, citing "gang rape, forced abortions, humiliation, and sexual violence resulting in mutilation, death, or eventual suicide in one of the largest cases of human trafficking in the 20th century."

The *Mainichi* went on to falsely claim that a document containing Yoshida's memoirs had been attached to the draft resolution. The paper subsequently admitted that was not the case in its critique of the *Asahi* and review of its own coverage of the issues. In fact, [the document in question](#) was written in 2006 and attached to a memorandum explaining the comfort women issue to US congressmen.

American experts who helped draw up House Resolution 121 in 2007 agreed with the conclusion reached by a recent independent investigation into the *Asahi* debacle – that there was no clear evidence that Yoshida's testimony had unfairly turned international opinion against Japan. "The Yoshida testimony, and its wide-spread errors and fabrications, is seen by ultra-rightists in Japan as a golden opportunity to reverse history and discredit the entire documentary evidence regarding the comfort women tragedy," said Dennis Halpin of the US-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins University, and one of the authors of the 2007 resolution.

"This new campaign to discredit the comfort women via Yoshida reminds me of [Japan's] attempts two decades ago, when I was serving at the US Embassy in Beijing, to discredit the Nanking Massacre because of some factual discrepancies found in the late author Iris Chang's historic work *The Rape of Nanking*. It is classic deniers' strategy, but unlike in Europe where Holocaust deniers are limited to a fringe element, the historic deniers in Japan contain some very prominent elements from Japanese society."

Nippon Kaigi, one of the main drivers of the apologist movement, has been compared to the freemasons and the American Tea Party movement in its creeping influence over politics and bid to rekindle lost neonationalist values. Nippon Kaigi is arguably more influential than both, with over 200 local chapters, 35,000 fee-paying members, mass petitions and a network that reaches deep into parliament. Nearly half the Japanese Diet is listed as supporters including **16 members** of the Abe cabinet. Prime Minister Abe is a "supreme advisor."

Larry Nicksch, whose 2006 memorandum had been the focus of the *Mainichi's* inaccurate coverage, believes the vilification of the *Asahi* bodes ill for the Kono statement. Having survived an investigation in 2014 that basically upheld its historical accuracy, the 1993 apology is again in Abe's sights, says Nicksch. The revisionists "take this isolated episode falsely claimed by Yoshida and try to build an argument that the falsehood of the Yoshida claim proves that there was no 'coercive recruitment' of comfort women anywhere in Japan's wartime empire."

"Some revisionists state that there was a single exception regarding Dutch comfort women for a brief period of time until the Japanese military stopped it. But the whitewashing of coercive recruitment is general. Since the Kono Statement does assert that there was coercive recruitment, the history revisionists contend that the falsehood of the Yoshida claim refutes the Kono Statement; thus, the Japanese government should refute it, too."

Nicksch continues: "Prime Minister Abe tries to have it both ways. He says things that encourage the history revisionists, but he also makes statements that put some distance between himself and the revisionists. My sense is that he will not change the Kono Statement in 2015. He has said too many times that he won't change it. However, he might not oppose a move in the Japanese Diet to pass a resolution refuting the Kono Statement."

The *Sankei* and the *Yomiuri* have demanded exactly this. The *Japan News*, the English-language edition of the *Yomiuri*, ran close to 50 articles, editorials and guest columns in late summer and fall last year slamming the *Asahi*, including a four-part series in which it claimed that "the *Asahi's* stories on the comfort women issue over the decades have been a significant factor in the entrenchment of the distorted view that 'the Japanese military systematically and forcibly took away women to serve as comfort women' for its soldiers."

In fact, the Kono Statement was the product of years of research by Japanese historians citing both official documents and the documented testimony of former comfort women as well as campaigning by Korean and other former military sex slaves. Likewise, [as historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki points out](#), the discredited Yoshida memoir and *Asahi's* reporting of it had nothing to do with Resolution 121 – and so said the group of experts who helped write it. The scholars were moved to make this clear after the *Mainichi* newspaper reported exactly the opposite after interviewing them. "All of us were astonished," they recall in [a statement released afterwards](#).

"We had *unequivocally* told the reporters that the Yoshida memoir and *Asahi's* reporting of it were *not* factors in the consideration, drafting, or defense of the [resolution]," they said in a statement. "We emphasized that one discredited source would not form the basis of research for Congress." In fact, they said, "There was ample documentary and testimonial evidence from across the Indo-Pacific region to support the fact that Imperial Japan organized and managed a system of sexual slavery for its military as well as for its colonial officials, businessmen and overseas workers."

The odd sense shared by the Resolution 121 experts that the *Mainichi* reporters had made their minds up before they walked through the door, is one the authors of this article, Justin McCurry and David McNeill, recognize. After the *Asahi's* retraction, we were approached by several Japanese news organizations asking the same question: Wasn't the *Asahi* coverage of Yoshida's testimony on the comfort women issue a major influence on reporting by foreign correspondents?

We both have a clear answer: no. Neither of us had even heard of Yoshida until this year. Over the last decade, however, we have interviewed many of these women first hand, in South Korea and elsewhere. We have visited the House of Sharing, a museum and communal refuge for

the small number of surviving comfort women outside of Seoul.



House of Sharing

journalist Kojiri Tomohiro in 1987 in a case that has never been solved. The main target this time is Uemura Takashi, a former Seoul bureau chief now vilified for his comfort women coverage.

An article in the weekly magazine *Shukan Bunshun*, expressing outrage that Uemura was to be employed at Kobe Shoin Women's University, triggered a tsunami of hate mail. "As soon as the story came out, 200 messages a week flooded into the university office," Uemura said. He left the school, then retreated to his native Sapporo, where he found part-time work at Hokusei Gakuen University. The hate trail followed him, this time including a threat to blow up the university and harm his family.

Uemura has filed a lawsuit against Bungei Shunju, the publisher of *Shukan Bunshun* and right-wing historian Nishioka Tsutomu, [accusing them of defamation](#). A third-party enquiry, partly into the *Asahi's* coverage of the comfort women issue, has exonerated him. "I believe that *Shukan Bunshun's* articles and Mr. Nishioka's statements helped trigger acts of terrorism against freedom of expression," he said in January this year. "I have concluded that the two parties who called me a fabricator should be held legally responsible."

Where might all this be heading? A national "anti-*Asahi Shimbun*" committee, led by lawmaker Nakayama Nariaki plans to widen the boycott and haul its editors and journalists before the Diet. Sakurai Yoshiko, a high profile revisionist, added an ominous note. "I believe, the people at the *Asahi* perhaps fail to comprehend what a real national crisis their decades of shoddy reporting has brought about," she blogged. "In all candor, I am tempted to say that there really is no medicine that can cure the *Asahi*."

All this, along with a boycott campaign led by the *Sankei*, has taken its toll. The *Asahi* circulation is down by over quarter of a million since the Yoshida retraction. Revisionists deny they are trying to crush the 135-year-old paper. "I hope we can force the *Asahi* to change its stripes and admit its past mistakes," says Kase Hideaki, co-author of the recent revisionist bestseller *Falsehoods of the Allied Nations' Victorious View of History, as Seen by a British Journalist* with Henry Scott Stokes. He says he has "many dear friends" in the *Asahi*. "It did many good things, including supporting our last war in liberating the rest of Asia."

In the spectrum of difficult choices facing the paper's editors, reverting to its flag-waving, wartime incarnation will surely seem the least palatable. Whatever its editors decide, however, the neo-nationalist knives are out. There are signs that criticism of the *Asahi* is transforming into a sustained campaign to discredit the Kono statement, as the region nears the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II this summer.

Abe and his administration have demanded changes to a 1996 report by the UN commission on human rights – known as the Coomaraswamy Report. In January this year, the prime minister pledged to "correct" the international record on comfort women, citing a US textbook that refers to Japan's wartime military brothels. His close confidant, Inada Tomomi, policy chief of the Liberal Democratic Party, expressed outrage in the Diet that American children were being taught: "that our ancestors were a group of rapists, murderers, and kidnappers." Such accusations violated "the rights of Japanese children living in the US," she said.

It is not difficult to see how a very different politician might take the heat out of the history issue. Inada could, for example, use the Diet instead to demand an apology from the United States for its indiscriminate bombing of Japanese cities 70 years ago, a campaign that killed over half a million people – mostly civilians. The demand could be part of a wider probe into the issue of war crimes on both sides. Niksch says that if Abe, along with his South Korean and US counterparts each uttered just eight words – I believe the Kono Statement is historically accurate – then "the tone and substance of the Japanese history issue would change for the better".

In the pitched ideological battles over Japan's wartime program of sexual slavery, the voices of survivors, such as Yu Hui-nam, a House of Sharing resident who was 16 when she was taken to work in a brothel in Osaka, are often drowned out. "I was ashamed and humiliated," she said of her initial refusal to return to South Korea after Japan's defeat. She revealed the truth about her past only when other former comfort women started coming forward many years later. "We were snatched, like flowers that have been picked before they bloom."

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- Asia Pacific Journal and Hokusei University Support Group, [Japan's Fundamental Freedoms Imperiled](#)
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- Nishino Rumiko and Nogawa Motokazu, [The Japanese State's New Assault on the Victims of Wartime Sexual Slavery.](#)
- Uemura Takashi (translated by Norma Field), [Journalist Who Broke Comfort Women Story Files 16.5 million Yen Libel Suit Against Bungei Shunju: Uemura Takashi's Speech to the Press](#)