

EDITORIAL / Asahi Shimbun makes long-overdue corrections over ‘comfort women’



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The Yomiuri Shimbun

After a review of its reports on the so-called comfort women issue, which has become a huge thorn in the side of Japan-South Korea ties, The Asahi Shimbun has admitted its mistakes in the reports—albeit partially—and retracted some of the contents.

The retractions allude to reports on remarks by Seiji Yoshida, who claimed to have forcibly taken away local women from Jeju Island, South Korea, to make them serve as comfort women. During World War II, Yoshida was said to be the former head of the mobilization department of the Shimonoseki Branch of Romu Hokoku-kai, an organization in charge of recruiting laborers.

In September 1982, the newspaper reported—without verification—the remarks of Yoshida, who claimed to have “hunted up 200 young Korean women in Jeju Island.”

Misperceptions about Japan

The report added fuel to anti-Japan sentiment in South Korea, and also became a basis of misperception of Japan spreading through the world. In its Tuesday morning edition, the Asahi concluded—for the first time—that Yoshida’s remarks were baseless, and finally retracted the newspaper’s reports regarding the remarks.

We cannot help but point out the correction should have been made at a much earlier stage. Doubts about Yoshida’s remarks have been raised as early as 1992. The newspaper’s negligence in allowing the issue to linger for more than 20 years is deplorable.

The Asahi has, by its own account, reported about Yoshida on at least 16 occasions. Historian Ikuhiko Hata raised doubts over Yoshida’s remarks in 1992, but the newspaper has long refrained from making a correction.

In March 1997, The Asahi Shimbun carried a special article on the reports about the comfort women issue. However, the newspaper only said it was unable to confirm the authenticity of Yoshida’s remarks.

Yoshida’s remarks were cited by a 1996 U.N. Human Rights Commission report compiled by Radhika Coomaraswamy, helping propagate a misunderstanding in the international community that the forcible recruitment of comfort women took place.

Another serious problem with the Asahi’s reports is the mix-up between comfort women and female volunteer corps.

In a front-page article carried in January 1992, the Asahi stated that “South Korean women became the major target of forcible recruitment conducted in the name of the female volunteer corps. The estimated number [of victims] range from 80,000 to 200,000.”

The report was issued just before then Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa’s visit to South Korea. It prompted the government to conduct an investigation into the comfort women issue, resulting in a statement issued by then Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono, which expressed the government’s “sincere apologies and remorse” to former comfort women.

In Tuesday morning’s edition, the Asahi admitted its mistake over the mix-up for the first time, saying that the female volunteer corps refers to groups of women mobilized for work in munitions factories and elsewhere during wartime and are “completely different” from comfort women.

“We have been working not to confuse the two since 1993,” the newspaper said in the Tuesday edition. However, the Asahi’s reports have prompted the false understanding that even girls of primary school age were recruited as comfort women.

The Asahi defended its coverage by saying in its two-page spread: “Little progress had been made in investigating the comfort women issue at that time. Some documents to which [Asahi] reporters referred contained statements in which the female volunteer corps was mixed up with the comfort women.” Then the special feature said that some other national dailies had also

published articles containing a similar mix-up.

In reporting on the female volunteer corps and Yoshida in initial stages, The Yomiuri Shimbun also ran some stories including factual errors. In the late 1990s and onward, however, we corrected such errors through our editorials and other articles.

Assertions unchanged

We question the Asahi's assertions about how so-called comfort women were kept at facilities to provide sex for soldiers. Though the heart of the matter was whether they were recruited by force, the national daily argued that great importance must be attached to the fact that those women were caught in a situation marked by "a coercive nature" with which they had been "deprived of freedom."

In initial stages, the Asahi continued to insist the crux of the problem was that these women had been forcibly recruited, citing testimony from Yoshida and other sources. However, the testimony and data used by the paper as a basis for its reasoning were later disproved. Then the Asahi started to argue that the retention of those women in facilities had a coercive nature.

The Asahi's assertion has remained fundamentally unchanged in this respect, as illustrated by its latest feature, which stated that the essence of the problem lies in the fact that "women were deprived of freedom in brothels, and their dignity was violated."

There is no doubt that a large number of women, including those from the Philippines and Indonesia, had their honor and dignity injured during World War II. There may have been cases deemed inexcusable from a present-day human rights perspective, even if no coercive action was taken by the prewar government and the military.

Still, it is necessary to discuss two issues related to the whole controversy as separate matters—that is, how to deal with sex-related issues facing soldiers and whether the Japanese wartime military was involved in forcibly recruiting women for the provision of sex.

Questions can be asked as to the appropriateness of calling the Japanese government to task by insisting coerciveness was prevalent in the provision of sex by those women in a broad sense of the term. We believe focusing on such questions is an attempt to sidestep the real issue.

Gaining a proper perception of history requires thorough efforts to uncover the whole truth behind any historical issue.

Better Japan-ROK ties needed

South Korean President Park Geun-hye strongly opposed a report issued by the Japanese government in June regarding the results of investigations into how the so-called Kono statement on comfort women was drafted and issued in 1993, using Coomaraswamy's U.N. report and other data as a basis for her assertion. Her unbending hard-line stance on Japan is unlikely to change.

The government should not easily compromise on the controversy. It must persist in urging

South Koreans to gain a proper understanding of our government's stance on the comfort women dispute.

Relations between Japan and South Korea are strained today. There has been no summit meeting between the two nations for more than two years. We hope the media and the public in both nations will come to have an accurate grasp of all the facts, a task essential for their respective efforts to build a future-oriented relationship between the two neighbors.

(From The Yomiuri Shimbun, Aug. 6, 2014)



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