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The Comfort Women, the Asian Women's Fund and the Digital Museum

Wada Haruki, translated and introduced by Gavan McCormack

The original Japanese version is available here.

Introduction:

Six decades have passed since the end of the Pacific and East Asian War and the collapse of the Japanese colonial empire, but responsibility for colonialism, war, and their accompanying atrocities, continues to agitate Japan and East Asia. It is widely believed that Japan refuses to apologize or face the truth of history, much less compensate victims. Such a belief is, however mistaken, although it is true that it took five decades before any such steps were taken and the adequacy of the steps taken has been debated and continues to be debated.

In 1995, the Murayama government expressed its "deep remorse" over colonialism and aggression, apologized in particular to the victims of the imperial Japanese forces so-called "Comfort Women" system of sexual slavery, and set up a fund, the Asian Women's Fund, through which between then and 2007 it offered apologies, monetary compensation, and health and welfare support by way of atonement to the surviving victims, now elderly women in their 70s and 80s. The Asian Women's Fund formula did involve apology and compensation, but it did not satisfy those who insisted that the Japanese state had to admit its criminality, apologize unequivocally, and provide compensation direct from the Japanese state. The Fund was a joint project of the "people of Japan" and the Government, and it assumed moral, but not legal responsibility. Many therefore denounced it as a devious attempt to evade full and proper legal responsibility, and rejected the solatium or "sympathy" payments as an inadequate substitute for full compensation by way of legal right.

Proponents of the Fund, prominent among them the author of the following introduction to the digital archives, Wada Haruki, did not disagree with the principle of the criticism, but made a two-pronged response. First, they argued that an imperfect resolution was all that was possible under the political circumstances. Far better to provide compensation and apology while the surviving comfort women were still alive, than to fail to act. Second, they insisted that responsibility should anyway, in principle, be shared between government and people, since the imperial Japanese Army soldiers could not escape or shift their personal responsibility for the crime onto the state. Wada stresses the unique character of the Fund as a joint act by state and people. In response to a national appeal, substantial funds were contributed by ordinary people, former soldiers undoubtedly among them, and the payments to individual victims were made from those funds, while administrative costs and the costs of the welfare and health support fund were paid from government coffers.

Within Japan, Wada and his associates were the butt of anger on the part of many of their hitherto allies among progressives in general, feminists in particular, for the inadequacy of their efforts, and simultaneously on the part of many right-wingers for whom it was outrageous that any responsibility at all was conceded, many of them continuing to insist that there never was any state-run "Comfort Women" system. In the region, especially South Korea, criticism on the former of these grounds forced the Comfort Women support groups to reject the Fund and the government to establish its own support fund instead.

In 2007, with the winding-up of the Fund, its resources were preserved in the form of the Digital Museum introduced in the following note by Wada Haruki, its original proponent and executive managing-director. By gathering, translating, and publishing the key documents, Fund organizers have opened their work to scrutiny while making available a valuable resource for the study of the comfort women and Japan's wartime military. (GMcC)

The term "Comfort Women" refers to the women who, during the last war, were rounded up into Japanese military Comfort Stations by the Japanese army and forced to provide sexual services for soldiers. The problem of these women, ignored or forgotten for long after the war, was taken up in South Korea in the 1990s after the democratic revolution had been carried out. Under pressure from the victims themselves who "came out" in public, the Japanese government investigated Japanese and other materials, and by the "Kono Statement" issued by Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono in 1993 expressed regret and apology, recognizing that the Japanese army had been directly involved in inflicting deep wounds on the dignity of the women, leaving them with physical and mental scars that were hard to heal. When the Murayama government was formed in 1994, the question of redress began to be considered, based on this understanding, and in July 1995 the Asian Women's Fund was established. A "letter of apology" signed by the Prime Minister and a letter from the Chief Director of the Fund was handed to each and every one of the victims who would accept it and they were given a solatium payment of two million yen contributed by the public together with between 1.2 and 3 million yen in medical and welfare support paid from government funds. This was done until 2002 for victims in the Philippines, South Korea, and Holland. In Indonesia, the project took the form of construction of welfare facilities for the aged [rather than individual apology and compensation], and with the winding up of those activities the Asian Women's Fund was dissolved on 31 March 2007.

Statement by then Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the end of the war, launching the Fund. You can view the texts in Japanese by clicking here, and in English translation, here.

The Asian Women's Fund was a Foundation set up in accord with a decision of the government of Japan but managed by volunteers who were private citizens. Because all its operating expenses were paid out of public funds, it was a quasi-public organization, whose activities were under the direct supervision of the Cabinet Office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and were conducted in accord with government policy. The Board of Directors and Management Council, made up of private citizens, tried at all times to conduct the operation out of a concern to accomplish apology, solatium, and reconciliation.

However, from the time it was launched the Fund was severely criticized by the victims themselves and by victims' support groups in the victim countries who insisted on state redress, and also by domestic groups in Japan that took the same position. Support groups and victims in the Philippines and Holland agreed to deal with the Asian Women's Fund, though maintaining their critical

stance, but South Korean and Taiwanese movement groups maintained to the end their opposition to the activities of the Fund, and involved their governments too in that opposition. The Asian Women's Fund was eventually dissolved without having been able to engage in any activities whatever on behalf of victims in China, with whose government it was unable to reach any agreement, or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, with which Japan has no diplomatic relations.

On the other hand, from 1996 when the Asian Women's Fund began, within Japanese society there was a counter-current of opposition to the Kono statement and denial of the existence of the Comfort Women problem, and a movement grew to ignore the activities of the Asian Women's Fund and to neutralize its influence. Some ruling party politicians participated actively in it, and at times that led to serious situations. It is well known that even in 2006 a movement to reconsider the Kono statement flared up in real earnest.

Looking back over these events, the Asian Women's Fund decided to set up a digital museum, "The Comfort Women Issue and the Asian Women's Fund." The first purpose was to have the understanding arrived at by the government of Japan and the Asian Women's Fund on the Comfort Women question preserved permanently and become the basis for the way the Japanese people understand the matter. The government has released the materials it had collected on the Comfort Women problem. The second purpose was to clarify the way in which the Asian Women's Fund was initiated, how it conducted its business, and what it accomplished. To that end, by providing detailed explanation of the Fund, and preserving and publishing as much as possible of related materials, we have made it possible for them to be subjected to critical study.

This digital museum was set up fully funded by the government of Japan, and its contents have been settled on the responsibility of the Asian Women's Fund in consultation with relevant government agencies. In that sense, this digital museum can be said to have been set up in 2007 by the cooperation of government and people, just as all the activities of the Asian Women's Fund were carried out "in cooperation between the government and the people."

As well as having its Asian Women's Fund address, www.awf.or.jp, with its own server, it is also incorporated in the National Diet Library's WARP project (click here to access.)

How to Visit

Upon entering www.awf.or.jp in the internet address column, the main page of the digital museum opens. Clicking on "continue" brings up the welcome from Asian Women's Fund's Chief Director, Murayama Tomiichi. The opening is a quote from the Murayama Statement. Then, clicking "proceed" opens the Entrance Hall. You can then access any section by clicking on the appropriate catalogue entry, and by clicking at the right hand entry where it says "English" the entry will appear in English.

In the Guide at the top of Room 1 are to be found "reference materials." Clicking on this, a list of reference materials for the entries in Room 1 appears. Representative materials are displayed in Room 1 but those wishing to see the whole can refer to the number of volumes or pages of each source in the library's "Historical Materials on the Comfort Women" section. If you click on the word "English" attached to the item in question, the material on display can be read in English.

In the Guide that heads Room 2 appears the cover of a pamphlet issued by the Fund in 1997. If you click on this, you can refer to representative pamphlets introducing the Fund's activities. You might want to move from browsing through the pamphlets to reading the exhibits in Room 2. Following Room 2, there is an entry "Full Text here" and if you click on that, documents held in the library's "Documents of the Government of Japan and the Asian Women's Fund" appear.

Here and there in Room 3 appears the sign "Images here." Clicking on this, you can see short video clips. (Click The section "Voices of the Victims" contains the tragic words of some of the victims, which you can hear while seeing the images. In the explanation to the section on "Recollections of those Connected to the Running of the Fund" there is a list of Fund office-bearers. In this section you can read the recollections of those connected with the recording of the "Oral History – Asian Women's Fund." You can also read here in English the memoirs of women victims from Holland and the Philippines.

Room 4 displays documents of the United Nations' Human Rights Committee, its sub-committee for the promotion and protection of human rights, the ILO, the government of Holland, and the US Congressional Research Service, either in the English original or with English translation attached. Then are displayed materials concerning the suits launched by Korean, Filipino, and Taiwanese victims in the various "Comfort Women" claims. Finally, materials concerning the "Draft Law for promotion of a solution to the problem of wartime sexual forced victims problem" presented to the Diet are contained in full and the proceedings of the debates conducted in July and December 2002 are introduced.

Room 5 introduces the Fund's "Women's Dignity Promotion Project." If you follow directions and click on any of the four posters in the directory, an enlarged version appears which can be downloaded.

In the "library stacks" under "Historical Materials related to the Comfort Women," are contained first the full five volumes of "Government Investigation – Compilation of Materials related to the 'Comfort Women' that were published jointly by the Fund and Ryukei Shobo publishing company. In the section of government and Fund documents, there are 38 documents. The Korean text of the Prime Minister's letter of apology is also included. The Memorandum of Understanding with the Philippines, Indonesia, and Holland, and the final report, are also included. In the section of the proceedings and materials of the Asian Women's Fund, related materials and newspaper cuttings collected over the period of the 98 meetings of the Board of Directors are included. Some have not before been published. We believe the materials will be useful for any investigation into the activities of the Fund, and in order to understand the debate over the Comfort Women issue in Japan and elsewhere during the period of existence of the Fund.

Finally, there is the section on the publications and videos of the Fund, where you can consult and download issues from No 1 to No 28 of the "Fund News," and all periodical publications of the Fund. You can watch part 1 of the 2000 video "Our Problem Now – Women, War, and Violence, from the Asian Women's Fund" which introduces for about 30 minutes the Comfort Women problem and the activities of the Asian Women's Fund.

It might help to better understand the whole if you were to look at this video as the last thing, after seeing the museum.

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Posted at Japan Focus*, February 1, 2008.*

See related articles on the comfort women at Japan Focus:

- *Tessa Morris-Suzuki "Japan's 'Comfort Women': It's time for the truth (in the ordinary, everyday sense of the word)" March 8, 2007.*
- *Kikue Tokudome "The Japanese Apology on the "Comfort Women" Cannot Be Considered Official: Interview with Congressman Michael Honda" May 31, 2007.*
- *Rumiko Nishino "The Women's Active Museum on War and Peace: Its Role in Public Education"December 16, 2007.*

Also see:

- *Chris Hogg "Japan's divisive 'comfort women' fund" in* BBC News*, April 10, 2007.*

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