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Japanese revisionist drivel exposed by former 'comfort woman'

As I explained last week, I recently met former “comfort woman” Lee Yong-soo, 89, at a rally in Seoul held at the site where the contentious comfort woman statue is located. Afterwards I joined her on a trip to the House of Sharing, where 10 other former comfort women are currently residing.

During our journey we conversed mostly in Japanese about her hellish experiences in a Japanese military brothel, with some help from a Korean interpreter. It is a poignant saga of abduction from her village at age 16 and ending up on an air base in Taiwan, where she initially resisted her rapists. They beat and tortured her (with electricity) until she succumbed.

One young kamikaze pilot nursed her wounds, and they became so close that not long before his final departure he composed a song for her, saying he would become a star in the heavens and always be there for her. He taught her this and some other Japanese songs that she sang for me in a soulful tenor.

At one conference, after she sang this song he composed for her, a Taiwanese lady stood up and said that the "Shinju" in the lyrics must refer to the air base in her town, which is now used by the Taiwanese military. This led to an investigation that corroborated Lee's story.

After 2½ years, she finally made it home around May 1946. When she arrived at her family's house they were conducting a memorial service for her, not knowing anything about her fate; her mother fainted upon seeing her, fearing she was a ghost.

A friend of hers had lured her outside her home in 1943 when they were kidnapped together, but they were later taken to separate destinations. Her friend also made it home after the war, and one day stopped by to apologize for her complicity in the abduction. Soon after, she committed suicide.

Over the years Lee only told her mother about her ordeal, because she could not bear the thought of marriage and needed to explain why she fended off pressures to wed. She began to learn Japanese from a boarder at her family home, a journalist who had split from her husband when he was diagnosed with Hansen's disease (leprosy). Later, she continued her Japanese language studies at university.

Lee dislikes the expression "sex slave" because she finds the words so degrading, and insists that she be described as a comfort woman, defying the preference of activist groups. I think she has earned the right to be called whatever she wants.

She mentioned that she has flown overseas 100 times and spoke of her pending travel schedule that will take her to Japan in May and in July to the U.S. for the 10th anniversary of H. Res. 121, the congressional resolution that called on the Japanese government to unequivocally acknowledge, apologize and accept responsibility for the coercive recruitment of young women into a system of sexual servitude.

On our journey, she said: "What right does Japan have to tell us what to do with statues placed here? It's absurd. Japan has no right." Asked about Japanese Ambassador Yasumasa Nagamine's return to Seoul, she said she can't understand why he left or why he came back. She believes any money received from Japan should be sent back, and demanded that Tokyo offer a sincere apology and take legal responsibility for the comfort women system.

She angrily tore into the 2015 Tokyo-Seoul agreement on the issue, saying, “It might make sense if there are no survivors, but I am here and alive, so how could Park make such a ridiculous agreement?”

In her view, young Japanese don't know enough about this issue and they must be taught, because they need to know what was done. Lee condemned Abe and the revisionists for trying to erase this history, fuming, “They are waiting for all of us to pass away so they can forget this history.” That is why the statues are important: because they will remain as sentinels of history long after the comfort women pass on.

“Why are they interfering with statues here and in the U.S.?” Lee asked. “They want to erase history.” She then added: “Abe has never apologized to us. He is the problem. The Japanese should remove him, not our statues.”

Lee lives alone and takes care of herself in the provincial city of Daegu near her home village. Other than some arthritis in her knees, she feels fit and embraces life with gusto. She says she has no regrets about registering as a comfort woman back in the early 1990s and exposing her painful personal past, believing it is her destiny and duty to keep the memory alive.

When we arrived at the House of Sharing there were a few comfort women in the communal lounge, all looking quite frail, while the others remained in their rooms. Aside from the home, there is a museum on three floors that powerfully conveys the lives derailed and horrors endured. A large map is emblazoned with crimson marks showing where comfort stations were located all over Asia wherever the Japanese military had invaded and occupied. It is unforgettable.

The house attracted about 10,000 visitors in 2016, an amazing number given its remote location and distance from public transport. Most visitors are Korean but apparently school groups from Japan visit too, leaving behind origami cranes.

A new building under construction will house the remains of other comfort women and provide more exhibition space. The increased funding for this private facility was inspired by the 2016 hit “Spirits Homecoming,” a feature-length film about the comfort women that drew 1.7 million Korean viewers. Director Cho Jung-rae began the project in 2002, drawing on the experience of volunteering at the House of Sharing. He relied for half of the film's \$2 million production budget on crowd-funding from 75,000 donors. The film raised awareness about the House of Sharing, and donations followed.

Outside there are memorials to each of the comfort women who have died at the facility and a graveyard for them. The half-buried naked torso of an elderly comfort woman, breasts sagging, rises out of the ground nearby, a statue perhaps symbolizing a nearly forgotten history painfully exhumed. Revisionists seek to rebury this history, but the indefatigable Lee won't let them.

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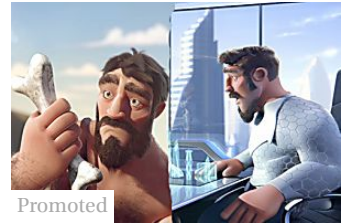
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