

Toward Resolution of the Comfort Women Issue—The 1000th Wednesday Protest in Seoul and Japanese Intransigence

慰安婦問題解決へ向けて—ソウルにおける1000回目の水曜抗議集会と日本の非妥協性

Okano Yayo

Translated by A. Tawara, N. Tajima and O. Schaefer

Japanese original text [here](#).

On August 1991, Korean former “comfort women,” (women who were forced to serve as sex workers for the Imperial Japanese Army) including Kim Hak-sun, the first to speak publically about her experience, began to raise their voices. Before then, the issue had only been discussed quietly in postwar Japanese society. Previous testimonies had come from soldiers, partly in the form of romanticized memoirs of their time spent with the women.

One important new witness is Mizuki Shigeru, a leading Japanese manga artist, who provided detailed descriptions of a “comfort station,” that is, a military brothel, in his book *Soin Gyokusai Seyo* [All of You Shall Die for Honor] (14-15.) based on his personal wartime experience. In his afterword he wrote, “I can’t help but feel irrational resentment when I write war chronicles. Maybe the spirits of the war dead make me feel that way.” There Mizuki told of a soldier who shouted, “Thirty seconds for each!” and another who said, looking at the long queue in front of the station, “Hey Sis, about 70 more to go. Be patient.” This important historical testimony reveals how the Japanese army set up comfort stations in the very front lines at that time. (See Matthew Penney, [War and Japan: The Non-Fiction Manga of Mizuki Shigeru](#))

The existence of comfort women, a suppressed issue that had almost been forgotten in postwar Japan, came to the fore in 1991. That was when the surviving comfort women started to talk about their own experiences. Women who were forced into providing sexual services started making people aware that the “comfort women” system had been nothing but sexual slavery. Until then, discussion of the issue had been considered taboo in Korea, and many victims had been unable to talk about it at all, even with their families.

In January 1991, some of Korea’s former comfort women and their supporters started a protest march in the bustling lunch-hour street in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. They had only one demand: acknowledgment of the crime in the form of an apology from the Japanese government to each and every one of the former comfort women. The apology — meant to make the Japanese public widely aware of the harm done to these women as a historical fact — includes a vow to never repeat the same mistake, and to acknowledge that the issue has not been settled legally.

Every week for the past 20 years, 1,000 times now since the first demonstration, they have continued the Wednesday protest. On December 14, 2011, the group marked its 1000th protest. Simultaneous protests were also held in several places in Japan, and were attacked relentlessly by vocal opponents.

[Video](#) of the event and unveiling of the

monument with English subtitles and Korean original.



The comfort woman statue outside the Japanese Embassy in Seoul is dressed according to the weather by citizens. Photo by Shin So-young.

In Osaka, some shouted “Liars!” at the protesting women despite the fact that the Japanese government had long since acknowledged the existence of “comfort stations” and “comfort women” based on

official wartime documents. A high school girl responded to the shouts by saying, “I wish it were a lie.” Don’t we all. More than anyone, the victims no doubt strongly wish that their gruesome experiences were just a nightmare.

On the 1000th day in Seoul, KwonHae-Hyo, the M.C. of the event, put it this way: “The *halmeonideul* [respected “elderly women”] wish that they would not need to hold the Wednesday protest anymore after next week.”

On that day three actresses conveyed the feelings of the Harumoni in their dramatic reading of a Korean translation of this monologue by the American writer Eve Ensler.

Courtesy of Eve Ensler and V-Day

Each year in conjunction with the V-Day Spotlight, Eve pens a new monologue. This is her monologue, written in 2006 in conjunction with V-Day’s sponsorship of a comfort women speaking tour in the United States. It is based on the testimonies of the ‘Comfort Women.’

Say It

By Eve Ensler

Our stories only exist inside our heads

Inside our ravaged bodies

Inside a time and space of war

And emptiness

There is no paper trail

Nothing official on the books

Only conscience

Only this.

What we were promised:

That I would save my father if I went with them

That I would find a job	I couldn't bend
That it was better there	I couldn't.
That I would serve the country	What they did to us over and over:
What we found:	Cursed
No mountains	Spanked
No trees	Tore bloody inside out
No water	Sterilized
Yellow sand	Drugged
A desert	Slapped
A warehouse full of tears	Punched
Thousands of worried girls	Raped.
My braid cut against my will	What we saw:
No time to wear panties	A girl drinking chemicals in the bathroom
What we were forced to do:	A girl killed by a bomb
Change our names	A girl beaten with a rifle over and over
Wear one piece dresses with	A girl's malnourished body dumped in the river
A button that opened easily	To drown.
50 Japanese soldiers a day	What we weren't allowed to do:
Sometimes there would be a ship of them	Wash ourselves
Strange barbaric things	Go to the doctor
Do it even when we bleed	Use a condom
There were so many	Run away
Some wouldn't take off their clothes	Keep my baby
Just took out their penis	Ask him to stop.
So many men I couldn't walk	What we caught:
I couldn't stretch my legs	Malaria

Syphilis	Nothing
Gonorrhea	A shocked father who never recovered
Stillbirths	And died.
Tuberculosis	No wages
Heart disease	Hatred of Men
Nervous breakdowns	No children
Hypochondria	No house
What we were fed:	A space where a uterus once was
Rice	Booze
Miso soup	Smoking
Turnip pickle	Guilt
Rice	Shame
Miso Soup	What we got called:
Turnip Pickle	Ianfu--Comfort Women
Rice Rice Rice	Shugyofu--Women Of Indecent Occupation
What we became:	What we felt:
Ruined	My chest still trembles
Tools	What got taken:
Infertile	The springtime
Holes	My life
Bloody	What we are:
Meat	68
Exiled	79
Silenced	84
Alone	93
What we were left with:	Blind

Slow

Say it.

Ready

Say sorry

Outside the Japanese Embassy every
Wednesday

Say we are sorry

Say Me

No longer afraid

See Me

What we want:

Say it

Now soon

Sorry.

Before we're gone

This [video](#) prepared by Okano Yano documents the December 14, 2011 commemoration of the 1000th Wednesday demonstration before the Japanese embassy in Seoul and the unveiling of the statue (Korean and Japanese text).

And our stories leave this world,

Leave our heads

This [video](#) is a presentation of a demonstration by the Women's Action Network, Tokyo in support of the comfort women commemoration and analyzing the issues. (Video in Japanese with English text.)

Japanese government

Say it

Please.

We are sorry, Comfort Women

Okano Yayo, a specialist in Western political philosophy and modern political theory, teaches in the Graduate School of Global Studies at Doshisha University. Her most recent book is *Justice Rooted in an Ethics of Care: Reconceptualizing Equality* (in Japanese).

Say it to me

We are sorry to me

We are sorry to me

Recommended Citation: Okano Yayo, "Toward Resolution of the Comfort Women Issue—The 1000th Wednesday Protest in Seoul and Japanese Intransigence," The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol 10 Issue 50, No. 2, December 10, 2012.

To me

To me

To me