

Names, Bones and Unpaid Wages (1): Reparations for Korean Forced Labor in Japan

William Underwood

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(Part 1 of 2)

By William Underwood

QUESTION: Choose the correct statement about Korea under Japanese rule.

- 1) A government-general was established and Ito Hirobumi was the first governor-general.
- 2) Korea was the first foreign territory acquired by Japan after the Meiji Restoration.
- 3) The system of giving Koreans Japanese names was implemented at the time of annexation.
- 4) Koreans were forcibly transported to Japan during World War II. [1]

Four is the correct answer to the world history question, according to the test administered across Japan by the University Entrance Examination Center in January 2004. The uproar was predictable and instantaneous, reflecting the advance made in recent years by deniers of Korean forced labor in Japan. Fujioka Nobukatsu, a Tokyo University professor and central figure within the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (Tsukurukai), the influential group that pushes history textbooks minimizing or rejecting Japanese culpability for war and colonialism, went on the offensive in the conservative Sankei newspaper and Seiron opinion journal. Fujioka labeled the national entrance exam a “leftist test,” charged that it was hindering

resolution of the North Korean abductions issue, and demanded to know the identities of the test’s question makers.

Fujioka stressed that the term “forced transportation” (kyosei renko) came into use only during the 1960s and depicted the entire Korean forced labor program as a falsehood intended to weaken Japan. By February 2004, a group of young Diet members belonging to the long-dominant Liberal Democratic Party was demanding that all references to Korean forced labor be removed from textbooks, a trend already well under way. “They have been extremely masochistic,” Education Minister Nakayama Nariaki observed about history textbooks in November 2004, “so it’s really good that there are now fewer references to the so-called comfort women and forced labor.”[2]

Even leading Japanese researchers have refined their language and redrawn distinctions regarding the diverse circumstances of “group importation,” an evolving process through which 700,000 Koreans were coerced into working for private companies in Japan between 1939 and 1945. Consider, for example, an edited Japanese volume published in 1996 under the title “An Appeal from Neighboring Countries: Corporate Responsibility for Forced Labor.”[3] The next book in the same series appeared in 2000 and was called “Corporate War Crimes: Corporate Responsibility for Forced Labor.”[4] However, the 2005 book by three veteran members of the research group (Yamada Shoji, Kosho Tadashi and Higuchi Yuichi) bore the notably more circumspect title of “The Wartime Labor Mobilization of

Koreans.”[5] But despite the shift in terminology on the cover of the latest book, put out by one of the country’s most prominent left-leaning publishers (Iwanami Shoten), the trio makes extensive use of official records to refute the denial theorists, whose several recent works typically contain words like “myth” and “fabrication” in their titles.[6] The historical record, carefully considered, makes clear that Japan’s “labor mobilization” programs for Koreans involved forced deportation from Korea and forced labor in Japan, with the degree of coercion increasing over time.

Because Japanese society is sharply divided about the nature of Korean forced labor and labels for describing it, and because there is no strong consensus regarding Japan’s colonial rule of Korea from 1910 to 1945, Japanese remain far from agreement with Koreans about how to come to terms with this major aspect of their nations’ shared past. However, doing nothing about the legacy of forced labor, the prevailing approach for the past six decades, is no longer an option. The singularly complex and dynamic Korean forced labor reparations movement is being empowered by the direct involvement of the South Korean state and the activities of a transnational civil society that are without parallel in Asia or perhaps anywhere.



Asian students sift soil for Korean bones in Hokkaido, August 2006 (Peacetown photos)

PRESSING BILATERAL ISSUE

Building on a pledge of official cooperation extracted from Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro by South Korean President

Roh Moo-hyun at their December 2004 summit meeting, the Seoul government’s 85-member Truth Commission on Forced Mobilization under Japanese Imperialism (website [available](#)) has been conducting fact-finding investigations at dozens of former worksites across Japan since April 2005. Truth Commission visits to Hiroshima and Nagasaki highlighted the Japanese government’s poor track record of providing medical care for non-Japanese victims of the atomic bombings and included tours of factories owned by Mitsubishi Corp., the top wartime munitions maker that was responsible for bringing many Korean hibakusha to Japan. After receiving special permission to enter a long-sealed evacuation tunnel dug late in the war by labor conscripts in Hyogo Prefecture, the South Korean commissioners saw wall graffiti calling for Korean independence.[7] The South Korean consul general from Vladivostok accompanied the research team sent to the Russian-occupied island of Sakhalin, where tens of thousands of Korean conscripts were abandoned and remained stranded throughout the Cold War. It had previously been known that the Sakhalin Koreans had toiled at mines and lumber mills, but their forced labor on whaling ships, intended to provide food as well as alternative sources of oil for the war effort, is among the numerous historical facts only now coming to light.

On August 7, South Korean and Japanese officials carried out the first joint government inspection of a charnel house containing cremated Korean remains, in the Chikuho region of Fukuoka Prefecture. In Tokyo last June, Japan and South Korea held their fourth state-level meeting about repatriating the remains of Korean civilian and military conscripts still stored in Japan. Seoul was informed that the remains of 1,169 civilian laborers have now been located. Supplied in response to Japanese government requests last year, data about these remains was provided by municipalities in 1,507 cases, by corporations

in 147 cases and by temples in 15 cases. It was agreed that South Korean family members will begin memorial pilgrimages to sites in Japan where their relatives died before the end of the year, and that the 1,135 sets of mostly military remains long held at Yutenji Temple in Tokyo will be handed over at an early date. This pledge concerning the Yutenji remains, however, involves only the 705 sets slated for return to South Korea; bones belonging to the 430 Koreans originally from the north were not discussed. South Koreans will also begin observing Japan's stepped-up efforts to retrieve human remains from overseas battlefields, and the two governments will discuss the bones issue again in September.

In South Korea in July, the Roh administration announced its legislative proposal for compensating surviving forced laborers and family members using state funds, a step made necessary because the much-criticized 1965 treaty that normalized relations between South Korea and Japan waived the rights of victims to claim compensation from the Japanese state or corporations. The highest payouts of around \$20,000 would go to bereaved families of conscripts who died or went missing during the war, with medical assistance for survivors and educational benefits for families also being planned. The administration hopes to begin disbursing funds in 2007, but passage of the measure is far from certain because the popularity of Roh's progressive Uri Party (or "Our Open Party") is at an all-time low. In fact, one reason for the growing strength of South Korea's so-called "new right" is waning enthusiasm for the government's dozen or so historical truth commissions. These seek not only to establish an accurate record of forced labor, but also to affix blame for colonial-era collaboration with Japan and the myriad abuses of state power during the long postwar period of military dictatorship.

Heading the list of 3,000 collaborators published last summer was Park Chung-hee.

Once a junior officer in the Imperial Japanese Army, Park was South Korea's military ruler from 1961 to 1979 and approved the normalization treaty's "economic cooperation" formula that brought \$300 million in grants, \$200 million in low-interest government loans and \$300 million in commercial loan credits—while sidestepping issues of Japan's colonial responsibility. Park's government channeled most of the funds into industrial development, quietly using less than 10 percent of the grant money in the mid-1970s for compensation in 8,500 cases of military conscription involving fatalities. If the conservative Grand National Party currently headed by Park's daughter regains power when Roh's term expires in 2008, there will be a dampening effect on the historical truth commission process, which has been criticized for perpetuating a national victim mentality and for its selective focus that avoids matters dealing with North Korea.[8] Yet South Korea's impressive shift toward participatory democracy will ensure that citizen demands for forced labor reparations outlive Roh Moo-hyun, even if his successor displays less personal leadership in confronting Japan.[9] Activists are also now publicizing the names of South Korean corporations that were major beneficiaries of the economic aid from Japan, foremost among them the giant steelmaker known as Posco, and urging these firms to establish a fund to assist forced labor victims.

Closely related to South Korea's domestic compensation plan, the Truth Commission on Forced Mobilization had received nearly 220,000 applications for forced labor certification as of the June 2006 filing deadline, with about three-quarters of the applications filed on behalf of deceased victims and three-quarters involving civilian labor in Japan. Roughly 15,000 applications have been certified so far. Although hampered by a shortage of specialists and the massive scope of its task, the Truth Commission has already advanced the healing process by recognizing

thousands of victims and collecting testimony during public hearings across the country, compiling a first-person record of forced labor and a long list of Japanese corporations that benefited. The commission even reported in May 2006 that it will certify as involuntary conscripts a number of Koreans convicted of Class B and C war crimes stemming from mistreatment of Allied prisoners of war; the men, long considered to have been collaborators, were newly described as “double victims” whose honor should be restored.[10] Oral histories have been published, in Korean and Japanese, and a documentary movie is being planned. The expansive global reparations movement of recent years offers few precedents for such committed state involvement in redress efforts targeting a neighboring democratic state.

Besides belatedly repatriating cremated Korean bones and ashes, the Japanese government is expected to eventually provide the South Korean Truth Commission with two long-suppressed master name rosters necessary for verifying the identities of applicants for certification as forced laborers. The Welfare Pension Name Roster was compiled by the Welfare Ministry during the war, as corporations withheld workers’ mandatory contributions to the national pension fund. The Unpaid Financial Deposits Report details the wages and related allowances owed to workers but never paid out by corporations; it was compiled after the Welfare Ministry instructed companies to deposit these monies into the national treasury in 1946. In fact, the Bank of Japan today possesses 215,147,000 yen in unpaid wages for Korean forced laborers, with the deposits (consisting of 167,791,400 yen in cash and 47,355,600 yen in marketable securities) now worth perhaps \$2 billion.[11] Surprisingly, the Truth Commission is not currently calling for release of the unpaid wage deposits. Rather, the Seoul government has proposed paying equivalent compensation from its own state coffers in documented individual

cases. Tokyo has reportedly requested South Korean forbearance regarding the deposits until diplomatic relations can be restored with North Korea. Roughly ten percent of conscripts came from the north and their compensation claims are still open.



Ainu memorial rites for Korean forced laborers in Hokkaido and remains headed home to Korea, August 2006 (Peacetown photos)

Complementing the state-level external pressure from across the Sea of Japan, or the East Sea to Koreans, the Japanese government and corporations are being pressed in new ways from within and below. The redress movement’s advocacy capabilities have been greatly enhanced by the Truth-Seeking Network for Forced Mobilization (hereafter, the [Truth Network](#)), a Japanese group made up of professional historians as well as citizen researchers and activists. The Truth Network was formed in July 2005 specifically to facilitate the work of the South Korean government’s Truth Commission within Japan and has grassroots chapters throughout the country, most visibly in places like Fukuoka, a center of the wartime coal industry and forced labor. Network members are also active in issues involving history textbooks, Yasukuni, constitutional revision and discrimination against minority groups like burakumin and Korean residents (zainichi Koreans).

SUMMER FOCUS ON REMAINS

“Together with Bereaved Korean Families: Solving the Remains Problem in Summer 2006” was the theme of the ambitious, recently concluded [Truth Network reparations project](#).

Aimed at raising awareness of Korean forced labor in general and the bones issue in particular, and funded primarily by private Japanese donations, the month-long program of events featured visits to Japan by 20 South Korean family members of conscripts who died on the job, along with public memorial services and symposiums at 28 sites nationwide. The project began in Tokyo in late July. Following a meeting with sympathetic members of parliament, Buddhist mourning rites in the Soto Zen tradition were held in the presence of remains and mortuary tablets from Yutenji Temple.

Persistent citizen-level visits to the main branches in Kansai of three Buddhist sects with a total of 35,000 temples and charnel houses nationwide have proved instrumental in gaining the cooperation of religious organizations in locating remains; most bodies initially fobbed off the state's 2005 request for information. Having issued an apology for its wartime role in 1992 and signed a confidentiality agreement with the Truth Network, only the Soto Zen sect responded with enthusiasm from the start. In recent weeks, the Shinshu Otani sect has begun surveying its temples beginning in Kyushu, while the Jodoshinshu Honganji sect will send out surveys this fall "based on the responsibility religious organizations bear for having cooperated in a war that went against Buddhist teachings, and in keeping with the goals of peace and opposing war." [12] The citizens' network will follow up these written surveys with temple visits and oral interviews, concentrating on areas known to have had Korean as well as Chinese forced laborers.

The climax to the summer program came in Sarufutsu village in Hokkaido from August 18-25. Two-hundred fifty Japanese, Koreans, zainichi Koreans, Chinese and Ainu jointly excavated a communal grave in an open field containing the unidentified remains of Koreans who died during the wartime construction of a nearby airfield. Remains were recovered of at

least ten suspected forced laborers who had apparently been cremated on the spot, according to South Korean forensic specialists who supervised the operation. [13] These were taken to South Korea for DNA testing, while the Japanese research team in Hokkaido is continuing to search for records that might identify the deceased. Many of the participants in the project were students who camped near the excavation site and engaged in cultural exchange activities. Making fuller use of the internet than Japanese activist groups usually do, the Truth Network and affiliated South Korean websites uploaded photos and citizens' resolutions from the events in Hokkaido and other regions on a near-daily basis.

The Fukuoka portion of the "Together with Bereaved Korean Families" program, held over three days in early August, offered further insight into the innovative nature of redress activities and the borderless cooperation making them possible—while also illustrating the obstacles reparations backers continue to face. Utilizing cremation records from a town office in Chikuho, Japanese researchers confirmed earlier this year that 33 of the 45 coal miners killed in a gas explosion at Mitsubishi's Iizuka coal mine on March 22, 1944, were Koreans. The information was promptly forwarded to the Truth Commission in Seoul.

Two nephews of Yi Chon-gwan, a 25-year-old worker killed in the explosion, having recently filed an application with the commission, were then notified of his death 62 years earlier. Compounding the lack of remains for inclusion in the family's ancestral gravesite, the grave itself fell into disuse because Yi, an only son and unmarried, was not present to maintain it. Observing the fixed-interval mourning rites prescribed by Buddhist tradition became impossible because the family was never informed of the exact date of Yi's death, much less the circumstances involved.

Yi's 57- and 65-year-old nephews were accompanied to the site of the Mitsubishi Iizuka mine, which closed in 1963, by Japanese members of the Truth Network and two Koreans from the state Truth Commission, as well as by newspaper and TV reporters. They were shown dilapidated but still partially lived-in "tanju," or company row houses, and provided the sketchy details of their uncle's life and death in Japan. The elder nephew asked how many workers lived in each room and how much food they were given. The mineshaft's roof and walls collapsed during a series of two dozen coal dust explosions that began at one a.m., the relatives were told, and two Japanese police officers died while attempting rescues.

Mitsubishi flooded the shaft with water, according to a company history, and then drained it one month later. Retrieval of decomposed bodies began in June 1944, three months after the disaster, with victims being identified by numbers on shirts and helmets. Yi's body was finally brought up on July 22, the date shown on his cremation certificate. But the ashes of Yi Chon-gwan, who the nephews said had been escorted out of his village by police officers in 1941, were never returned to his family in Korea and have not been located in Japan. As TV crews filmed, the younger nephew solemnly filled a small box with sand and pebbles from the mine site to take home. Memorial services were later held in both countries.

The Korean relatives met with officials of Mitsubishi Materials Corp., successor to the mining arm of the former zaibatsu, but the company reported that all records for the Iizuka mine were destroyed decades ago. Neither an apology nor any information regarding the whereabouts of Yi's remains was provided. The elder nephew asked Mitsubishi how many conscripts the company used and suggested that interviewing retired mine employees might yield clues about his uncle's bones. At the nearby town office the Koreans

were given the cremation record listing Yi Chon-gwan's Japanese-assigned name (Iwamoto Jukan) and, because they are relatives, the cause of his death ("fatal injuries due to explosion"). Cremation records have become an invaluable tool for researchers over the past year, but municipalities are withholding information about causes of death—and corporate involvement—on privacy grounds, despite the passage of more than half a century.

The delegation next visited the regional Social Insurance Office and asked to see records of Yi's contributions to the national pension fund, and for a refund of the money. All Japanese firms with five or more workers were required to enroll them in the pension system during the war. But because the office maintains handwritten rosters containing tens of thousands of names, the Koreans were told it would take at least one month to find Yi's name. Pension contributions have been refunded to a very small number of former Korean conscripts in recent years, initially following a Japanese court order, but the amounts average one dollar or less. A stop at the Fukuoka office of the Mining Safety Inspection Bureau was scratched from the group's itinerary, since Truth Network members were told on two previous visits that accident fatality reports are maintained for only 30 years.

The Fukuoka events concluded with a public symposium attended by 150 people. The presentation by a member of the South Korean Truth Commission was called "The Bones Speak: Here I am, Let Me Go Home Now." The speaker appeared to be in his mid-30s and somewhat older than most commission members who visit Japan, confirming that a younger generation of Koreans is now picking up the reparations torch as those with first-person experience of forced labor pass from the scene. The nephews of the deceased Korean worker also directly addressed the Fukuoka

public. The elder nephew, a long-time member of the Bereaved Families Association for Korean Victims of the Pacific War, a citizens' lobbying group that predates the 2004 formation of the government Truth Commission, requested continued cooperation in sending back Korean bones.



August 2006 tour by Korean relatives of Mitsubishi mine tower in Chikuho, along with historical rendering from the landmark's signboard

"We could breathe the same air that our uncle breathed and scoop up the same dirt he walked on," he said via a Truth Network translator, later adding that the public forum was like a funeral for his uncle. However, the symposium's first question from the floor came from a young man likely connected to the Tsukurukai's efforts to deny the forcible nature of the labor program. The man observed that the phase of mobilization formally called "conscription" began in 1944, tactlessly offering his opinion that the uncle had come to Japan in 1941 as a voluntary contract laborer. The man agreed that Korean remains should be sent home as soon as possible, but asked for clarification regarding this perceived discrepancy in Yi's work status "because I have pride as a Japanese person."

Truth Network members pointed out that more than half of Koreans working in Fukuoka coal mines escaped from their job sites, primarily as an act of resistance. It was also noted that the vast majority of workers were never paid the

wages they earned, a reality that severely undermines the "contract worker" thesis. Moreover, Yi's father was already 60 years old when he came to Japan. In Korea's Confucian society of the time, it would have been shameful and unlikely for such an only son to abandon his parents by willfully leaving home. Yi Chon-gwan's nephews returned to South Korea the next day. Fukuoka activists are now planning the local segment of this fall's nationwide series of public meetings, tentatively to be called "Forced Deportation and Forced Labor on Paper and in Reality." They are still trying to track down Yi's bones.[14]

NORTH KOREAN CONNECTION

Just as the legacy of colonialism colors present Japanese-Korean relations, modern-day politics is strongly influencing the process of coming to terms with the past. Three North Koreans whose relatives died during forced labor were originally scheduled to take part in the Tokyo segment of "Together with Bereaved Korean Families," but they were denied entry visas by the Japanese government on July 24 due to Pyongyang's missile tests earlier in the month. The following day subscribers to an email newsletter put out by the Truth Network, which assisted with the North Koreans' immigration paperwork, could read the transcript of a combative telephone conversation in which a Justice Ministry official defended the visa refusal. The Truth Network quickly issued a written appeal to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to investigate the government's decision, then explained the UN appeal during a press conference and emailed the text to redress backers. Even on slower news days, the Truth Network's daily email digest offers Japanese translations of relevant articles from Korean media sources, keeping Japanese activists up to date on the progress of their overseas counterparts. These developments demonstrated the movement's media and communications savvy, while

underscoring the vulnerability of remains repatriation to being hijacked by political events. The North Koreans ended up recording a videotaped message that was played at the Tokyo gathering.

Truth Network members from Japan as well as Truth Commission members from South Korea have made several trips to North Korea to collect forced labor testimony and show name lists to families. The father of one of the North Koreans barred from Japan was killed on Tawara Island in September 1943 after being conscripted into civilian work for the Japanese military; his remains are among those in Yutenji Temple now claimed by North Korea. Japanese officials displayed some Yutenji remains to a North Korean delegation as part of a December 2004 memorial service. But the online English version of the Chosen Shinpo, published by the pro-North Korea group of zainichi Koreans known as Chongryun, insisted that the bones box contained “materials which were recognized only as a stone and a slip of paper.” This indirect accusation from Pyongyang followed Japanese claims that remains purported to be of a deceased victim of abduction by North Korea were not authentic.[15]

The online Japanese version of the Chosen Shinpo drummed up support for the summer reparations program and covered events more energetically than mainstream Japanese media, and in a generally accurate manner. The Chosen Shinpo website in May posted name rosters and lists of corporations, compiled by a Chongryun-affiliated research group, for 3,057 Koreans believed to have died during forced labor in Hokkaido and Fukuoka.[16] The same website’s three-part series in April about extensive forced labor at coal mines belonging to the family of Foreign Minister Aso Taro (discussed below) starkly contrasted with the Japanese media’s general avoidance of the issue.[17] Chongryun was cooperating in remains repatriation work with Mindan, the

pro-South Korean organization of ethnic Koreans in Japan, until Pyongyang’s missile tests prompted the rival groups to dissolve the historic reconciliation pact they had signed only last spring. Despite ideological divisions, the Truth Network maintains working relationships with both camps. It does not, however, have a large number of ethnic Korean members.

Mired in a confrontational relationship with the Japanese government and itself a current user of forced labor, the repressive North Korean state is another actor in the messy and multidirectional reparations process that cannot be ignored. The Pyongyang regime, in fact, has undermined redress efforts through frequently exaggerated propaganda, nuclear weapons development, missile launches and, above all, the abduction of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 80s. Reparations supporters have tried to gain traction for their movement by linking the relative handful of abductions to Japan’s massive labor draft system. These attempts at issue framing have mostly failed due to intense, emotional Japanese public support for the abductees and their families. The result has been to prioritize Japanese suffering and make sustained comparisons of the historical events essentially a media taboo. The North Korean abductions have also served to relativize Japan’s far greater responsibility, politicizing the return of the North Korean remains held in Japan and turning the issue into a diplomatic trump card. “If you want to talk about the humanitarian and human rights issues, I hope you would speak to North Korea,” said Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe Shinzo in late July, brushing aside press questions about blocking North Korean family members from entering Japan.[18]

But the return of remains to South Korea is certain to move forward, as the coordinated pressure from the Seoul government and Korean-Japanese citizens’ networks cannot be so easily rebuffed. The Japanese government

says it is participating in the endeavor on “humanitarian grounds,” eschewing any implications of liability for colonialism and the systematic exploitation of Korea and its people. Koreans and their Japanese supporters, on the other hand, desire a fuller accounting that clarifies the reality of the forced labor system and the circumstances of individual deaths. They argue that government and corporate apologies, along with dignified state ceremonies for handing over remains, would be most appropriate. The Truth Network aims to eventually open a memorial museum in Japan to commemorate the injustice and educate Japanese society about it. Striving to create what they call a “regional peace infrastructure,” transnational activists envision the remains project as a crucial step in building historical truth-based ties between Japan and Northeast Asia.

REDRESS WATERSHED IN 2005

A striking feature of the reparations movement is that the steady progress achieved over the past 18 months has coincided with a dramatic deterioration in state relations between Japan and South Korea due to Yasukuni, textbooks and a territorial dispute. The Roh administration in January and August 2005 made public all 35,000 pages of diplomatic records of negotiations leading up to the 1965 treaty with Japan, setting a new regional standard for information disclosure while disregarding a Japanese request to keep the records secret until after establishment of Tokyo-Pyongyang ties. A South Korean court had ordered the release of a small portion of the records in a lawsuit against the state involving victims of forced labor and the atomic bombings; Roh responded by disclosing everything. The diplomatic documents depicted the unbridgeable gulf between the two countries regarding the legality of the 1905 Ulsa Treaty that deprived Korea of its diplomatic rights and the 1910 annexation, as well as the basis of economic assistance and

the status of the island known as Takeshima to Japanese and Dokdo to Koreans.

The records also confirmed that, as the lawsuit plaintiffs suspected, Seoul had explicitly promised Tokyo it would not make further state reparations demands. In fact, South Korea continuously attempted to advance claims for forced labor during the 14-year negotiations, at one stage demanding \$364 million on behalf of 1.03 million civilian and military conscripts and at another point calling for compensation of \$2,000 for Koreans killed during conscription, \$1,650 for those wounded and \$200 for those who returned home uninjured.[19] It has since become clear that the Japanese negotiating team, in a position of relative strength and determined to yield very little ground, acted in bad faith by withholding vital information and then demanding proof of forced labor that only it possessed. The end result was a normalization accord that has insulated both the Japanese state and industry from compensation claims for four decades. Former conscripts and families began filing new lawsuits against the Seoul government in the wake of the 2005 records disclosure, which is a major reason why compensation via national legislation is being planned by South Korean authorities.

The “Year of Friendship” marking 40 years of restored ties went from bad to worse following Japanese claims to ownership of the disputed islets. Individual South Koreans burned Japanese flags, cut off their fingers and even immolated themselves in protest, while the nation’s navy named a new warship “Dokdo” and fighter jets began daily patrols of the volcanic outcroppings. Roh Moo-hyun declared in a March 1 speech, marking the anniversary of a 1919 uprising against Japanese rule, that Japan’s forced labor and comfort women systems were tens of thousands of times worse than the abductions by North Korea. “Japan must make the truth of the past known and offer sincere apologies and, if necessary, pay

compensation. Only then can we be reconciled,” said Roh, warning of a “diplomatic war” in the making. Alluding to the existence of global reparations norms that activists elsewhere have posited, he added that “before it is a legal issue, this is an issue of universal ethics in a human society and a matter of trust between neighbors.”[20]



Yi Chon-gwan’s nephews at Fukuoka temple with soil from Mitsubishi Iizuka coal mine

Having himself apologized in 2003 for the 1948 massacre by Korean police of 20,000 Cheju Island residents, Roh continued suggesting that Japan deviates from a global redress standard during an April state visit to Germany, where he praised the host nation’s approach to its wartime past and supported Germany’s bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations—while pointedly declining to support Japan’s. Roh told a leading German newspaper that Japan’s postwar behavior has been a “grave global misfortune” and said that “the Japanese attitude does not fit with mankind’s universal values.”[21] Marking the sixtieth anniversary of Korea’s liberation, the South Korean government said in August 2005 that Japan continues to bear legal responsibility for “inhumane illegal acts” committed against the country and its nationals before and during the Asia Pacific War. Individual claims involving comfort women, forced laborers abandoned on Sakhalin and A-bomb victims were said to remain unresolved by the 1965 treaty. Seoul indicated it would informally support the claims at the UN and elsewhere, rather than officially pressing them with Tokyo on the victims’

behalf. Although the Roh administration must balance its harsh criticism of Japan with the need for cooperation in returning remains and supplying lists of names and financial deposits, the current situation is a far cry from the 1998 state summit where Roh’s predecessor received a written apology from Japan and agreed that South Korea would not continue raising historical issues.

Within Japan, against this acrimonious state-level backdrop, the newly formed Truth-Seeking Network for Forced Mobilization sent a hard-hitting questionnaire about Korean forced labor redress to candidates for the Diet’s lower house elections in September 2005, and then posted the results at the group’s website. The Truth Network also pushed at the grassroots level for fuller compliance with the Japanese government’s calls for information about human remains. Many corporations, municipalities and temples felt free to ignore what was essentially a South Korean request channeled through Tokyo, but repeated queries in person and by phone from tax-paying citizens in local communities demand more serious attention.

The Nagoya city government located more than 200 sets of unclaimed Koreans remains but did not report any information to national authorities because it could not confirm that the deceased had entered Japan as conscripted workers. Local governments in Gunma Prefecture, where a memorial to deceased workers was recently erected, located no remains at all during the initial survey, prompting activists to appeal directly to fellow citizens for information. When the burial and cremation department of the Tokyo city government reported no information about Korean remains, citizen researchers examined a name list at the city’s large mausoleum for unclaimed war victim remains and quickly picked out 50 probable Koreans. The Tokyo mausoleum maintains the identified but unclaimed remains of some 3,700 Japanese

killed in the American firebombing campaign of 1944-45; entire families were wiped out in the indiscriminate attacks in which more than 100,000 perished.[22]

Japan informed South Korean at the September 2005 state conference that 868 sets of civilian conscript bones had been located, but with only eight out of the 108 corporations surveyed providing data. This sparked criticism from the Truth Network in Japan, which pegs the number of corporations that used forced labor at well over 2,000, and from individual members of the Truth Commission in South Korea desiring a more aggressive approach. “I believe victims, not governments, should be given priority. I’ve often clashed with the (Roh) administration. I don’t even care if I’m fired,” said the commission’s secretary-general, a lawyer who had helped force disclosure of the treaty documents—and who later resigned his post.[23] Heading the list of recalcitrant companies was Aso Corp., the successor to Aso Mining and the family firm headed during the 1970s by Aso Taro, the current Japanese foreign minister. Charged a South Korean Truth Commission official in asking the Japanese side to try harder: “The corporations’ remains survey has been insincere. It is also strange that the family company of the foreign minister, who should be setting an example, has provided no information whatsoever.”[24]

ASO INVOLVEMENT

Somewhat mysteriously, in February 2006 the Foreign Ministry (headed by Aso Taro) was informed by Aso Corp. (headed by Aso Taro’s brother) that in 1984-85 the Fukuoka company had returned six sets of Korean remains to family members still living in the vicinity of the Aso Yoshikuma coal mine. During redevelopment in the 1960s, a large pit containing the remains of an estimated 504 people, cremated and placed in containers (“tsubo”) was discovered near the entrance to the recently closed Yoshikuma mine. Aso

Mining soon built a charnel house a few hundred meters from the communal grave and transferred the tsubo into it; the pit was then filled in and a community center was built on the Yoshikuma site.[25]

Fukuoka prefectural records show that Aso Mining reported having 7,996 Korean workers as of March 1944, among whom 56 had recently died and an astounding 61.5 percent had escaped, suggesting the grim working and living conditions. The company operated a total of seven Kyushu coal mines at its peak, as well as a small mining operation on the South Pacific island of Celebes late in the war. Although the large scale of the Yoshikuma grave was unusual, smaller unmarked communal graves have been discovered around the region following the postwar decline of the Chikuho mining industry. Kyushu mining companies did return remains to Korea during the first years of labor conscription, but toward the end of the war frequent attacks by American submarines lurking in sea lanes made the practice impossible.

In the early 1970s, zainichi Koreans belonging to Chongryun and activists with the Nichibenrei group of progressive Japanese lawyers began researching the area’s legacy of Korean forced labor. Hayashi Eidai, a respected Chikuho-based historian who has written 50 books about forced labor and other aspects of Japanese war conduct over the past three decades, was also involved in these seminal efforts. Hayashi gained access to the Aso-built charnel house in 1975 and photographed six tsubo bearing Korean names, with the remainder of the ashes belonging to working-class Japanese with no known next of kin. Hayashi returned to the charnel house the following year to gather information for a television documentary. By 1976, however, all six sets of Korean remains had been removed from the shelves. He was shown a small hole beneath the shelves and told that the Korean remains had been deposited in an underground

storage area, an unusual funerary practice that was not further explained. Aso Taro was president of Aso Corp. at the time, overseeing its transformation into a major cement company. He resigned upon his election to the Diet in 1979.

Korean conscript remains may have been removed from the shelves of the Aso Yoshikuma charnel house because they were viewed as a potential liability for the family scion's political career. Today, Hayashi and local Truth Network researchers doubt the veracity of Aso Corp.'s recent report to the Foreign Ministry, suspecting instead that the six sets of Koreans remains are essentially being concealed beneath the Aso Yoshikuma charnel house. Hayashi said there were no Korean families still living around the mine to receive the remains in the 1980s and wondered what new information might have enabled the company to hand them over at that time: four decades after the war's end, two decades after the remains were exhumed from the Yoshikuma site, and one decade after they were removed from the charnel house shelves following the first researcher inquiries.[26]

Koreans were not the only forced laborers at Yoshikuma. Three hundred Allied POWs performed forced labor at the Aso mine between May and August 1945, a fact first reported by Japan Focus last April.[27] The revelation produced a stream of critical news stories in overseas media that continued until July, when Foreign Minister Aso privately participated in a memorial service at an Osaka temple for Allied POWs who died in Japan. Aso had originally invited several foreign ambassadors to what would have been the first state-level memorial ceremony for POWs, but disinvited them at the last minute due to the international controversy.[28] (A smaller number of ambassadors did attend a POW memorial service at the Osaka temple for the first time in late August, but the Japanese government was not represented.) Aso has

never acknowledged that the company founded by his father used POW forced labor and, tellingly, Japanese media have avoided all mention of the fact—even though Aso is a candidate to become Japan's next prime minister. The Yomiuri Shimbun, on the other hand, did run a story about the Korean remains from the Aso Yoshikuma mine and even published Hayashi's 1975 photo of the Korean remains containers.[29]

The episode illustrated a major roadblock impeding progress on forced labor reparations: Japanese corporations as well as government agencies are refusing to divulge information they very likely possess, and the compliant Japanese media is failing to expose their intransigence. Indeed, the appointment of Aso Taro to lead the Foreign Ministry in October 2005, at the very time that South Korea was protesting the lack of bones-related cooperation, demonstrated Japanese determination to manage the process and prevent deeper questions of responsibility for war and colonialism from creeping in. Among his string of provocative remarks justifying Japan's past conduct, Aso said in 2003 that the colonial-era system of assigning Japanese names to Koreans had been initiated at Korean request. In fact, conscripts were typically given Japanese names prior to being sent to Japan or elsewhere outside Korea. Aso's assertion about the name system outraged the South Korean public, prompting a major television station to dispatch a film crew to Chikuhō to report on Korean forced labor at Aso Mining.



Tsubo bearing Korean names at Saishoji Temple in Chikuhō, 1970s (Hayashi Eidai photo)

WARTIME CONSCRIPTION OVERVIEW

“All the Emperor’s children” was an often-repeated slogan framing the 35-year relationship between the colonial rulers and the ruled in general and the Korean forced labor program in particular. As with Japan’s colonization of Taiwan beginning in 1895 and the formation of Manchukuo beginning in 1932, rule over the Korean peninsula involved a “hub and spokes” system in which peripheral regions were sources of manpower, raw material and food for an expansive empire. Benefits of the co-prosperity zone accrued mainly to Japanese nearest the hub, and to the relative handful of non-Japanese colonial elites who collaborated with them.[30] Japanese agricultural modernization policies in Korea led to wartime

labor surpluses there, which combined with the systematic confiscation of rice for export to induce many Koreans to migrate from ancestral villages. Japanese rule produced extreme political, economic and social dislocation, compounded by state-sponsored suppression of Korea’s language and culture.

Koreans began freely migrating for paid employment in Kyushu coal mines beginning in the 1890s and their numbers increased rapidly during the labor shortages caused by World War I. By the eve of World War II there were hundreds of thousands of Koreans in Japan, living in segregated areas amid heavy racial discrimination but materially better off than many in their less industrialized homeland. A modest middle class composed mainly of small business owners also emerged. Wartime labor researcher Donald Smith has noted that class hierarchies in wartime Kyushu coal mines existed alongside racial ones. Korean miners died on the job 20 percent more often than Japanese miners and their nominal wages (in most cases never ultimately paid out, as explained in the next section) were about one-third less. “While the differences in Japanese and Korean working conditions were significant, they were narrow enough to suggest that exploitation of the two groups was fundamentally similar in character, and that Japan’s elites were willing to sacrifice working class lives, regardless of nationality, to the imperial cause,” Smith concludes. In his view, treatment of Korean miners during the war represented more an intensification of harsh pre-war conditions than a wholly new phenomenon.[31]

After the National General Mobilization Law took effect in 1939, increasing numbers of Koreans began migrating to Japan in groups under forcible conditions. The three stages of the Korean labor program were 1) “recruitment” (boshu) beginning in July 1939; 2) “official mediation” (kan assen) beginning in February 1942; and 3) “conscription” or

“requisition” (choyo) beginning in September 1944, with enactment of the National Conscription Law. The stages reflected the increasing gravity of labor shortage as the war turned against Japan. The Korea Labor Association, an all-purpose labor provision agency staffed by Koreans but ultimately controlled by Japanese, was launched in July 1937. That same month Japan committed itself to general war against China which, along with war against the Allied nations in 1941, ensured that manpower shortages would grow ever more severe.

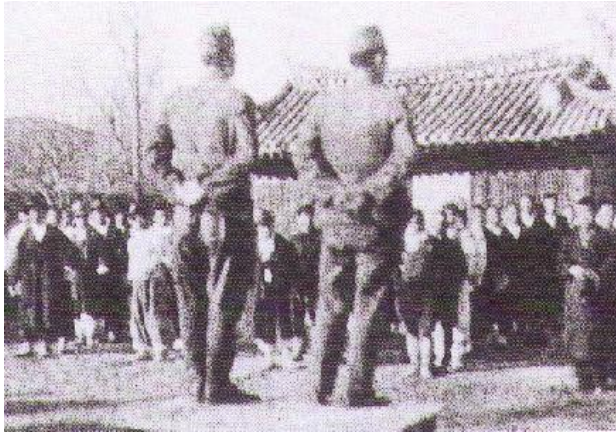
Japanese companies were the primary actors during the initial “recruitment” phase, as the colonial bureaucracy assigned township-level recruitment zones to specific firms, which secured workers in groups of about 50. Forcible pressure beyond that intrinsic to colonialism was relatively slight, but there was some police involvement and changing jobs in Japan was prohibited. During the more systematic and centralized “mediation” phase, Korean administrators became the main players and pushed hard to fill regional procurement quotas. There was heavy pressure for laborers to continue working in Japan beyond their two-year contract terms instead of returning to Korea. Earlier this year the South Korean Truth Commission obtained a letter urging these contract extensions that was sent out to workers by the Japanese governor-general’s office in October 1941, two years after mobilization began, making clear the state’s active role in the labor management of Koreans. The commission received the letter from the bereaved family of a worker who renewed his contract with Mitsui Corp. and was then killed in a mining accident in Hokkaido in 1942.[32] The final labor “requisition” phase was openly forcible. The 1944 conscription law made working for the increasingly futile war effort, in either civilian or military capacities, a legal duty for Koreans, Taiwanese and Japanese alike. Colonial officials simply ordered Koreans to join Japan-bound work groups and

abductions sometimes occurred.

All three phases can be reasonably described as “conscription” in the generic sense that this article employs, although mobilization through the physical coercion of the third stage was adopted only after more subtly forcible methods of indoctrination, deception and social stigmatization proved incapable of meeting labor needs. Reinforcing pre-existing class differences, Koreans with some schooling usually worked at factory jobs while the unschooled ended up performing manual labor at mines and heavy construction sites. More than 300,000 Koreans entered Japanese mines between 1939 and 1945, accounting for nearly half of the total number of Koreans mobilized and one-third of all miners during peak employment.[33] More than 170,000 of these mining conscripts were assigned to Fukuoka, which is said to have the most human remains today.[34] A collaborationist organization called the Kyowakai functioned as a general union for Korean workers in Japan but was firmly controlled by Japanese authorities. Koreans were largely segregated from Japanese on the job, living in separate fenced compounds and deprived of freedom of movement. Yet a national average of 40 percent of workers (50 percent in Fukuoka and 60 percent at Aso Mining) fled from their job sites, a course of action made possible by the existence of Korean ghettos where escapees could blend in and black market labor brokers could help them find less oppressive employment.

The most commonly cited number for Korean civilians conscripted into working for private companies in Japan after 1939 is 667,684, the grand total reported by the Labor Bureau of the Welfare Ministry in October 1945. Yamada, Kosho and Higuchi agree this is the best-documented single figure, but point out that it understates the number of female “teishintai” factory workers and omits both Korean farm workers and civilians sent to Japan late in the war for defense against an anticipated

American invasion.[35] Between 20,000 and 30,000 Koreans may have died in Japan during the 1930s and 1940s, with around 10,000 sets of remains being sent home after the war.[36]



Undated photo of colonial officials recruiting workers in Korea (Hayashi Eidai)

The three veteran researchers say four million is a reasonable estimate for all Koreans mobilized to all destinations. This includes up to 940,000 mobilized outside of Korea (with nearly 300,000 military conscripts being added to the civilian figure of 667,684) and more than three million mobilized inside the country, although entire classes of victims remain omitted.[37] Koreans forcibly mobilized overseas by the Japanese military consisted mostly of civilians serving in frequently dangerous support roles, along with actual soldiers and guards for Allied prisoners of war. Other researchers present higher figures for mobilization outside of Korea of up to one million civilian conscripts and 365,000 military conscripts, with Petra Schmidt providing the best overview of the larger numbers in English.[38] The tens of thousands of Korean “comfort women” who were violently forced into military sexual slavery represent a class of labor conscription usually considered separately.

Yamada, Kosho and Higuchi sum up the system of Korean forced labor in Japan by noting five

features that applied to Korean workers either exclusively or to a uniquely high degree: 1) most wages were withheld; 2) they were not free to change jobs; 3) workplace supervision was based on violence; 4) working conditions were severe and working hours were long; and 5) food, clothing and living quarters were substandard.[39] Wages for Koreans were mostly withheld during the war and then never paid out afterward. Partly to discourage escapes, Korean workers were typically provided with pocket money at most. Corporations funneled the bulk of wages into mandatory “patriotic savings accounts” and made regular deductions for the national welfare pension fund, as well as for room and board and the cost of transportation from Korea. Companies, not workers, maintained possession of the savings and pension passbooks, while promises to send money home to families in Korea mostly never materialized. All of the emperor’s children were not treated equally.

EARLY POSTWAR TREATMENT OF KOREANS

Japanese government vice-ministers decided at a meeting on August 21, 1945, barely one week after the emperor’s surrender announcement, that sending the 700,000 group-imported conscripts back to Korea should be a top priority. The vast majority of Koreans desired to return home as soon as possible, especially workers who had come to Japan during the most forcible “requisition” phase. They had endured some of the most brutal work conditions, many had left all family members in Korea, and there were high hopes for a Korea liberated from colonial rule.[40]

Maintenance of political and social stability, and conditions of labor surplus with the return of millions of Japanese troops, were major reasons for fast-tracking the repatriation of conscripted Koreans. Toward the end of the war an increasing number of workplaces had

experienced violent disturbances involving Korean as well as Chinese forced laborers, and it was feared that working-class Japanese might become radicalized and join them, a scenario that in fact showed signs of unfolding in places like Hokkaido and Tohoku. Also, corporations either could not or did not wish to materially provide for idled workers who had become unprofitable, making it to industry's financial benefit to be quickly rid of the Koreans—especially since most workers were sent home without being paid their wages.

Most Korean conscripts had returned to Korea by the end of 1945, but no provisions were made during this period for repatriating the remains of those who had died in Japan. Others died on the way home in shipwrecks, sometimes involving unauthorized vessels. A temple in Saitama Prefecture today houses the remains of 131 Korean shipwreck victims, many of them mixed together in cardboard boxes. Forty-five sets of these remains were exhumed on Tsushima Island by the Japanese government in 1983-84 and 86 sets were exhumed on Iki Island by a Hiroshima citizens' group in 1976, as the latter victims were returning from forced labor in that devastated city.[41] On August 24, 1945, a Japanese naval transport ship called the *Ukishima-maru* exploded, most likely after hitting an American mine, and sank near Kyoto just after setting out on a repatriation run. The 524 Koreans killed consisted of 410 military conscripts and 114 civilians including women and children; 280 sets of these remains are now in Tokyo's Yutenji Temple.

In Korea on August 21, 1945, the governor-general's office requested in an appeal to Tokyo that wages for labor conscripts be sent to Korean families as originally promised but never carried out, noting that strident demands for the money were beginning to threaten security.[42] Having left Japan with assurances that corporations would forward their wages to Korea, demobilized workers began pressing

their wage claims with the Seoul-based *Nihonjin Sewakai*, an organization representing Japanese still in the country, until American military authorities in southern Korea halted the demands in the interest of stability. Instead, the American GHQ in Korea began compiling the forced labor compensation demands itself, forwarding tens of thousands of claims to the newly formed South Korean government in 1948. Former workers continued pursuing compensation with the Seoul administration, which intended to advance their claims—by seeking 565,000,000 yen on behalf of 105,000 victims—during negotiations for the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty.[43]

But South Korea was not invited to San Francisco under the American-crafted “separate peace,” which served to buttress Japan's position that it could not owe “reparations” to South Korea because the countries had never been at war and the 1910 annexation of Korea had not violated international law. It is a position that the U.S. has also always maintained. Korean representatives had in fact been similarly blocked from participating in a key international peace conference at The Hague in 1907, and the world's leading nations (themselves ruling over formal or informal colonies) had readily granted their collective imprimatur to Japanese suzerainty over Korea from 1905 onward.[44] Considering the contemporary question of forced labor reparations from a normative human rights standpoint, however, whether victims were nationals of an illegally occupied Korea or bona fide subjects of the Japanese emperor makes little difference. The fact remains that still-living Korean forced laborers are today owed salary arrears by still-operating Japanese companies who have been shielded for six decades by the Japanese government.

Numerous violent disturbances involving thousands of Koreans and Chinese occurred at

Hokkaido mines in the weeks following Japan's surrender, as described in a detailed study by a teacher at a Nagasaki technical college that exemplifies the community-based nature of much of the ongoing research.[45] Unpaid wages and other owed benefits were a central factor in the immediate postwar unrest, and the leftist League of Korean Residents in Japan (hereafter, the Korean League) became a pivotal actor. Another actor was the Construction Industry Association, which by September 1945 was already taking steps to resist Korean wage demands and evade war crimes prosecutions for the widespread abuse of Chinese forced laborers. The Mining Industry Association soon joined these "defensive" efforts, while "offensive" efforts by the united corporate front succeeded in obtaining massive state compensation from that fall until the following spring for costs companies claimed they had incurred as a result of the Korean and Chinese labor programs.

In early November 1945, the Korean League began demanding death and disability payments for Koreans at the Ashio copper mine, where 42 percent of Chinese workers had also died. This prompted Furukawa Mining Corp. to seek guidance from the Welfare Ministry, which in turn consulted with GHQ. After the Korean League rejected a ministry-drafted compensation plan, Ashio mine officials exaggerated the likelihood of mass violence in a direct appeal to GHQ, resulting in one hundred U.S. Army soldiers being sent to the mine for a month. An Ashio-only compensation scheme was then drawn up by an American army officer who valued security above fairness; it paid out half of the amount the Welfare Ministry had offered and all Koreans were repatriated from Ashio by the end of November. The Ashio mine supervisor congratulated himself on the win-win outcome in a report to Furukawa corporate headquarters.[46]

A handful of other companies paid out small amounts of compensation on an ad hoc basis during this period, mostly for workplace deaths and severe injuries, but the hardball approach by the Japanese state and industry prevailed. GHQ made some attempts at mediation, motivated by concern that the unpaid wages problem could destabilize both Japan and Korea, but clearly sided with the Japanese establishment. By early 1946 Japan's Home Ministry was instructing police agencies nationwide to crack down on the activities of the Korean League, which had growing ties to the Japanese Communist Party and was starting to stress the cruelty of forced labor and the exploitive nature of capitalism. The Welfare Ministry rejected the Korean League's repeated requests to join its compensation negotiations with corporations on the grounds that the League was not a legally recognized union; the state further prevailed upon GHQ to criminalize the group's confrontational worksite visits.

WAGE DEPOSIT DUPLICITY

The following chronology of events explaining how and why Japanese companies never paid Korean conscripts the wages they had earned became clear only in the 1990s and has apparently never been described in English.[47] Komazawa University's Koshiro Tadashi began unraveling the mystery by obtaining extensive internal communications from the early postwar period between the head office of Nippon Steel Corp. and its Kamaishi foundry in Iwate Prefecture, which has remained a focal point for forced labor redress efforts. In 1997, Nippon Steel paid condolence money to families of Koreans killed during the American naval shelling of Kamaishi at the tail end of the war, in an unprecedented settlement that included a memorial ceremony at the site and the repatriation of remains. Bereaved families, however, then sued the Japanese state for the refund of wage and pension deposits. The Tokyo High Court in

separate verdicts in December 2005 and April 2006 confirmed that the state continues to possess these deposits, but ruled that the 1965 treaty nullified the families’ rights to claim the money. The court further confirmed that the Japanese state never attempted to notify families about the deposits before 1965.

In April 1946, eight corporations met with the Korean League and GHQ representatives from Morioka at the Iwate prefectural government office. Backed by the local government, the “Iwate proposal” presented to all companies in the prefecture that June called for condolence money for deaths and injuries on the job in the respective amounts of 5,000 and 2,500 yen, depositing the money with the prefectural branch of the Welfare Ministry, and providing the Korean League with a per-capita fee for administering payouts to workers. Local worksites were inclined to accept the Iwate plan, demonstrating the relatively progressive sense of accountability in some peripheral regions. But the central government and the headquarters of corporations in Tokyo blocked the plan’s adoption. They desired smaller payments, feared setting a national precedent and wanted to avoid dealing with the Korean League at all. With a large percentage of uncompensated workers already back in Korea, however, the League was the main entity pursuing their claims in Japan—and by October 1946 had, in fact, settled 340 cases involving 43,314 workers.[48]

Occupation authorities, responding to direct demands from former conscripts in both Japan and Korea, in July 1946 ordered a Hokkaido steel mill to remit unpaid wages to GHQ itself, for forwarding to Korea and distribution by GHQ there. The Muroran foundry complied by handing over 173,457 yen and four sets of human remains. Other Hokkaido companies deposited monies into a special GHQ account at the Bank of Japan, with the account of one Sapporo-based administrative unit of the U.S. Army swelling to over 3,000,000 yen.[49]

Although a more systematic solution was becoming unavoidable, that summer saw heavy backsliding in the willingness to negotiate on the parts of the state and corporations, which were presumably emboldened by growing signs that Occupation policies would permit significant wartime-postwar continuity within Japan’s political and economic institutions.

At a September 1946 meeting involving the Korean League, Iwate prefectural officials, the Welfare Ministry and GHQ, the League was informed that the Iwate proposal of the previous June had been officially withdrawn, prompting an extended angry protest by League representatives. Agreement was reached at that meeting to pay between 1,000 and 5,000 yen to Koreans back in Korea, but that plan was rejected by corporations the following month during meetings of the construction and mining industry groups.



Former workers’ quarters at Mitsubishi Iizuka mine

The Japanese government finally moved forward with a solution—the freezing and effective confiscation of wages and all other owed benefits—that was largely a reaction to the Korean League’s pursuit of compensation on the basis of accountability for involuntary conscription. Tokyo was also determined to transform the problem of unpaid wages into a

state-to-state matter with whatever government might later emerge in Korea. Kosho cites a June 1946 Welfare Ministry memo to corporations anticipating future reparations demands upon the Japanese government and advising companies not to rush in dealing with individual cases. Kosho further suggests the government's approach to compensation for conscription was initially intended to discourage the looming confiscation of property owned by Japanese still in Korea.[50]

On October 12, 1946, the Welfare Ministry—with American approval—ordered corporations to deposit all unpaid sums for Korean, Taiwanese and Chinese workers into the Bank of Japan. Corporations were also instructed to provide information about individual deposits such as the amount, number, date, location, recipient's name and address in Korea, dates of starting and stopping work, and an itemized breakdown of monies involved. All of this data was to be submitted in triplicate to the heads of regional Welfare Ministry bureaus. Then when the regional bureaus received requests for deposits, they were to disclose full documentation to the petitioner. In case of disputes between petitioners and companies regarding the amount of money on deposit, regional bureau chiefs were to investigate and reach a mutually acceptable compromise. "Openness of information and fairness were the two main characteristics of the unpaid monies deposit system," Kosho explains—on paper at least.[51]

The deposit system functioned far differently in practice, as insincere implementation by Japanese corporations was followed by a decades-long cover-up by the Japanese state. Drawing on those portions of the Welfare Ministry-compiled Unpaid Financial Deposits Report submitted to Japanese courts and industry documents obtained by researchers, Yamada, Kosho and Higuchi show that companies resisted the state-mandated

program mainly by providing false or misleading calculations of worker savings withheld during the war—or by simply refusing to provide breakdowns for savings amounts at all. Instead of calculating the earned compensation actually due, for example, a Saga Prefecture shipyard with 541 Koreans reported that it had already provided each worker with 30 days' wages, a stipend for travel to Seoul, 10 yen for sundry expenses, some rice and 30 hardtack biscuits. A different shipyard with 1,891 Korean workers reported providing similar compensation, along with some clothing and daily use items.[52]

While careful attention was paid to calculating corporate expenses (which had already been partially reimbursed by the postwar state), great diversity and major gaps in the reporting of deposits owed to Korean workers resulted in these amounts being inordinately small. One factory made deposits for a small number of teenage girls that were up to three times higher than other companies' deposits for adult male workers. Some firms failed to deposit any money for workers on the job less than two full years, thereby excluding the entire class of Koreans brought to Japan during conscription's final, most forcible phase. Nippon Steel's Kamaishi worksite made deposits for only 690 workers, barely half of its Korean workforce. The steel giant's Osaka foundry deposited nothing for the 163 Koreans it transferred to a different jobsite following American bombing in June 1945. Out of the 3,042 deposits recorded for Nippon Steel's Yahata foundry, 84 percent lacked addresses and everyone was listed as having started work in January 1942 and stopped in September 1946. There were even discrepancies for some companies between amounts reported by corporate headquarters and branch worksites, raising the possibility that some money earmarked for deposit may never have arrived in state coffers.[53]

Mitsubishi Corp., the company with perhaps the worst track record regarding its war

responsibility, appears to have stonewalled on depositing unpaid wages, according to the three scholars. Mitsubishi's Takashima coal mine in Nagasaki used both Korean and Chinese forced laborers, but deposited no money beyond what it claimed it had already paid workers. Deposits made by the Hiroshima shipyard belonging to Mitsubishi Heavy Industries averaged less than half of those made by Nippon Steel's Osaka plant; no dates of service were provided and home addresses in Korea were listed only at the county level. Mitsubishi attempted to explain the unusually small deposits by telling the Hiroshima District Court that Koreans were able to freely withdraw their savings at any time. "It is unthinkable," the three authors dryly observed, "that any corporation received an exemption from the wartime system of mandatory savings deposits." [54]

By 1948, Japanese corporations had finished depositing unpaid wages as per the Welfare Ministry plan, but neither the government nor industry ever attempted to inform the Korean state or individual workers about the funds. The establishment of the Rhee government in Seoul that same year made notification theoretically possible, especially since some corporations obeyed ministry instructions by providing Korean addresses down to the street level. While notification would have been difficult during the Korean War of 1950-53, the existence of the wage deposits was later treated as a state secret during the drawn-out negotiations leading up to the 1965 restoration of bilateral ties.

Fukushima Mizuho, chair of the Social Democratic Party, forced the Japanese government to admit in the Diet in 2004 that the Bank of Japan now holds deposits worth perhaps two billion dollars, if adjusted for six decades of interest and inflation. [55] But the state insists the deposits have been commingled and cannot now be matched with individual former conscripts, who in any case

have lost the right to claim their money under the terms of the 1965 accord. This stance is similar to that originally adopted by Switzerland's government and secretive banking industry in the mid-1990s, when it began emerging that banks had confiscated massive deposits belonging to Holocaust victims after willfully failing to notify survivors and heirs. International political pressure and litigation in American courts eventually forced the Swiss banks to set up a compensation fund of more than one billion dollars.

The existence of two vital documents dating to the 1940s—the Unpaid Financial Deposits Report and the Welfare Pension Name List—has also been confirmed. The Japanese government still refuses to make these records public, but it did begin furnishing partial conscription name lists to the South Korean government in the 1990s. In 1965, in response to opposition party questioning soon after the treaty with South Korea was concluded, Japan's foreign minister falsely told the Diet that the government did not possess any financial information related to Korean labor conscription, suggesting that all records had been destroyed during American firebombing. Also in 1965, in order to make doubly sure the wage deposits would never be disbursed, the Diet enacted a "Special Measures Law" defining all outstanding claims of Koreans as property claims waived by the normalization treaty. While the United States has actively and passively abetted Japan throughout the postwar period in side-stepping accountability for war and colonialism, the extent to which the U.S. government during and after the Occupation was aware of Japanese duplicity regarding the wage deposit system remains unclear.

MILITARY CONSCRIPTS CHEATED

A Miyazaki Prefecture homemaker helped reveal in 2004 that the Japanese government prior to 1965 made elaborate preparations to compensate the families of 22,182 Korean

soldiers and civilian conscripts killed while serving with the Japanese military—and that funds earmarked for this purpose were set aside in the national budget. The salary arrears and related indemnification for this “gunjin-gunzoku” class of military conscripts also now reside in the national treasury, apparently included in the commingled deposits being investigated by Diet member Fukushima.

The government’s remuneration plan for military conscripts was separate from the corporate deposit system for civilian conscripts, but the final result was identical: Korean conscripts were never paid. The emergence of information about the state scheme underscores the complementary nature of grassroots activism in Japan and South Korea, the cross-fertilization of redress efforts involving various subsets of forced labor, and the privileging by the Japanese government of hardships borne by military personnel above those of civilians.[56]



Korean military conscripts on Pacific island circa 1943 (Newsis photo)

Aoyagi Atsuko first became active in the comfort women reparations movement in the early 1990s. She later joined legal efforts in Japanese courts involving the Ukishima-maru, the Korea-bound repatriation ship that sank in August 1945 with the loss of 524 lives, most of

them military conscripts. Soon after the tragedy, radical members of the Korean League began charging that the vessel had been deliberately blown up as part of a “wholesale massacre,” claiming that up to 8,000 people had been on board and 5,000 had been murdered. North Korea continues to echo these claims even today, but Aoyagi stressed during recent reparations events pegged to the disaster’s anniversary that the ship almost certainly exploded after hitting a mine, while criticizing leftist propaganda for its counterproductive effect. A long-running mystery over the exact number of Ukishima-maru passengers resulted from the Japanese government’s suppression of an investigative report—including a verified passenger list—that it compiled in 1950.

The state denied possessing the 1950 Ukishima-maru report and made other false assertions throughout the course of the ultimately unsuccessful compensation lawsuit, but the South Korean government was told of its contents in 2003 and passed the information on to bereaved families. Relatives were also given “individual investigation charts” for the Ukishima-maru fatalities that had been drawn up by the Japanese state. Community-based Japanese researchers like Aoyagi, although previously unaware of the charts, already knew that on February 28, 1950, the government had ordered unpaid financial benefits for Korean and Taiwanese military conscripts to be deposited with the state. On July 15, 1950, the Ministry of Finance reported the total amount of these “gunjin-gunzoku” deposits to American Occupation officials, with the figures broken down by branch of military service.

Japanese and Korean researchers jointly pieced together that the “individual investigation charts” were part of a detailed Japanese government plan to compensate Korean families of deceased victims of both the Ukishimaru-maru accident and military conscription in general. Just as for deceased

Japanese soldiers, the Korean and Taiwanese next of kin were to receive funeral expenses, condolence money, bereaved family allowances and salary arrears. Ultimately, however, they received nothing, typically not even official confirmation of their relatives' individual fates or the return of remains. Two reasons for Japan's about-face were the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 and the San Francisco Peace Treaty, which unilaterally stripped Koreans of their Japanese nationality when it took effect in 1952 and made them ineligible for the generous benefits that were soon extended to former Japanese servicemen and bereaved families. The legal transformation of Koreans into non-Japanese, as they had been before 1910, turned the compensation question into a state-level diplomatic issue. Japan had "mobilized Koreans under the premise of sharing a common fate," Aoyagi writes, "but afterward these victims were discarded like worn-out shoes." [57] Only the families of the 25 Japanese crew members killed aboard the *Ukishima-maru* ever received compensation.

Frequently described as a "gift from heaven" for Japan's economic recovery, the Korean War along with the intensifying Cold War also proved to be a godsend enabling the state to evade paying reparations for Korean forced labor. It was by no means a foregone conclusion that the 1946 deposits of corporate wages and benefits owed to civilian conscripts, or the 1950 deposits of wages and benefits owed to military conscripts by the state itself, would never be disbursed. Rather, by 1965 the window of opportunity for payment to victims had slammed shut.

Japan had intended to pay state reparations for the 20,000-plus deaths of military conscripts. But Seoul's stubborn insistence on compensation for the far larger class of corporate forced laborers resulted in the Japanese side's shift to Plan B: the Japan-South Korea normalization treaty's lump-sum economic cooperation formula, backed up by

the 1965 Diet measure making doubly sure neither civilian nor military deposits would ever need to be paid out. In 1969, Japan sent the remains of 8,835 Korean soldiers and militarily conscripted civilians to South Korea. Some 6,000 sets had been returned during the Occupation under American supervision and 1,135 sets are now stored in the Tokyo temple, meaning thousands of "gunjin-gunzoku" remains are still unaccounted for. The Japanese government tries to avoid all discussion of the forced labor financial deposits and has never indicated its ultimate plan for the money, said to be frozen in non-interest-bearing accounts.

William Underwood, a faculty member at Kurume Kogyo University and a Japan Focus coordinator, is completing his doctoral dissertation at Kyushu University on the topic of Chinese forced labor redress. He can be reached at kyushubill@yahoo.com. This is the first of a two-part series, posted at Japan Focus on September 10, 2006. Part two is [available](#).

ENDNOTES

[1] Yamada Shoji, Kosho Tadashi and Higuchi Yuichi, *Chosenjin Senji Rodo Doin*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2005; 1-2.

[2] *Ibid.*; 8.

[3] Yamada Shoji and Tanaka Hiroshi, eds., *Rinkoku kara no Kokukatsu: Kyosei renko no kigyo sekinin (2)*. Tokyo: Soshisha, 1996.

[4] Kosho Tadashi, Tanaka Hiroshi, Sato Takeo et al., *Nihon Kigyo no Senso Hanzai: Kyosei renko no kigyo sekinin (3)*. Tokyo: Soshisha, 2000.

[5] Yamada, Kosho and Higuchi 2005.

[6] Prominent among these recent works are Okada Kunihiro, *Chosenjin Kyosei Renko ha Atta no ka: Jijutsu ga kataru 'kyosei renko'*

setsu no kyoko. Tokyo: Nihon Seisaku Kenkyu Sentaa, 2003; and Chung Daekyun, Zainichi Kyosei Renko no Shinwa. Tokyo: Bunshun Shinsho, 2004. For a Chikuhō-specific denial, see Satani Masayuki, Tanko no Shinjitsu to Eiko: Chosenjin kyosei renko no kyoko. Nogata, Fukuoka: Nippon Kaigi Fukuoka Chikuhō Chapter, 2005.

[7] “Kankoku no chosadan ga Nishinomiya chikago kansatsu.” Asahi Shimbun online, Nov. 16, 2005.

[8] See Sheila Miyoshi Jager, “Korean Collaborators: South Korea’s truth committees and the forging of a new pan-Korean nationalism.” Japan Focus, June 6, 2005. [Available](#). See also Jaewoo Choo, “Politics, Price of Seoul’s Collaboration Probe.” Asia Times Online, March 31, 2005.

[9] See Emanuel Pastreich, “The Balancer: Roh Moo-hyun’s vision of Korean politics and the future of northeast Asia.” Japan Focus, August 1, 2005. [Available](#).

[10] “Kyosei doin higai nintei he, Kankokujin moto BC kyu senpan.” Asahi Shimbun online, May 19, 2006. See also Yutaka Shuichi, “‘Japanese’ war criminals seek redress.” International Herald Tribune / Asahi Shimbun online, May 20, 2005.

[11] Lee Jin-woo, “200 billion yen for war victims deposited in Japanese bank.” Korea Times online, Oct. 26, 2004. [Available](#). Hun-Joo Cho, “Japan continues to conceal documents on unpaid wages for forced laborers.” Dong-A Ilbo online, Jan. 23, 2005. [Available here](#). Ichikawa Hayami, “Seoul to compensate forced laborers during Japan’s 1910-45 colonization.” Asahi Shimbun online, Feb. 23, 2006.

[12] “Bukkyokai, Chosenjin ikotsu chosa ga honkakuka.” Asahi Shimbun online, July 28, 2006.

[13] “‘Jinkotsu 10-taibun’ kakunin, Chosenjin ikotsu hakkutsu shuryo.” Asahi Shimbun online (Hokkaido edition), Aug. 26, 2006. “Sarufutsu no senji choyosha, ikotsu 9 tai wo kakunin, Nicchukan kyodo kakkutsu shuryo, DNA kantei he.” Hokkaido Shimbun online, Aug. 25, 2006.

[14] The author accompanied the Korean group and Truth Network members on the Aug. 10, 2006, tour of Chikuhō and attended the Aug. 11 public meeting in Fukuoka called “Kankoku-Chosen no Izoku to Tomo ni: Ikotsu Mondai no Kaiketsu he.”

[15] Gavan McCormack, “Disputed Bones: Japan, North Korea and the ‘Nature’ controversy.” Japan Focus, April 18, 2005. [Available](#). “The remains of North Korean victims in Yutenji were fake,” The People’s Korea online, Dec. 25, 2004. “Memorial service & symposium on problem of remains of victims of forcible drafting held in Japan,” The People’s Korea online, Dec. 25, 2004.

[16] “Chosenjin kyosei renko giseisha no meibo kokai, Chosenjin Kyosei Renko Shinso Chosadan.” Chosen Shinpo online, May 26, 2006. “Senjichu no Chosenjin shibo joho, Hokkaido-Fukuoka de 3000 nin koe.” Asahi Shimbun online, May 24, 2006.

[17] The three April 2006 articles about Aso Mining are available [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#), or at the Chosen Shinpo online [website](#).

[18] “Abe defends Japan’s denial of entry to North Korean group.” Japan Times online, July 26, 2006.

[19] Ryu Jin, “Panel to compensate victims of colonialism.” Korea Times online, Jan. 17, 2005.

[20] “Roh urges Japan to pay ex-slaves.” International Herald Tribune online, March 2, 2005.

[21] “President Roh slams Japan in Allgemeine

Zeitung.” Korea Times online, April 8, 2005.

[22] “Chosenjin ikotsu chosa de joho miotoshi, Tokyo-to, saichosa he.” Asahi Shimbun online, Dec. 2, 2005.

[23] Ichikawa Hayami, “Korean on mission to find his countrymen.” Asahi Shimbun online, Sept. 17, 2005.

[24] “Aso gaisho no kankei kaisha, choyosha ikotsu joho teikyo sezu, Kankoku de hihan.” Yomiuri Shimbun online (Kyushu edition), Dec. 24, 2005.

[25] “Aso gaisho no shinzoku kigyo, tanko shikichinai no Chosenjin ikotsu 6 tai wo henkan.” Yomiuri Shimbun online (Kyushu edition), Feb. 28, 2006.

[26] This account of Korean remains from the Aso Yoshikuma mine is based on an unpublished manuscript received from Hayashi Eidai in July 2006 and follow-up telephone conversations with him.

[27] Christopher Reed, “Family Skeletons: Japan’s foreign minister and forced labor by Koreans and Allied POWs.” Japan Focus, April 29, 2006. [Available](#).

[28] Matsubara Hiroshi, “Japan Foreign Minister’s Visit to POW Remembrance Service Backfires.” Japan Focus, Aug. 2, 2006. [Available](#).

[29] Yomiuri Shimbun online, Feb. 28, 2006 (Endnote 25).

[30] See W. Donald Smith, “Beyond the Bridge on the River Kwai: Labor mobilization in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Zone.” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 58, Fall 2001.

[31] Ibid. Despite the prominence within Korean-Japanese relations that the forced labor

issue has lately assumed, English accounts are scarce. Besides Smith’s 2001 article, Petra Schmidt’s extensive 2000 article in the *Asia-Pacific Journal on Human Rights and the Law* focuses on the compensation question as well as wartime events. Michael Weiner’s *Race and Migration in Imperial Japan* is a valuable book-length treatment, but it was published in 1994 as the contemporary reparations movement was just gathering steam. The main source for this paper’s historical account of Korean forced labor and its postwar legacy is the 2005 Japanese book by Yamada, Kosho and Higuchi cited in Endnote 1.

[32] “Japan’s forced labor claims debunked?” Dong-A Ilbo online, Feb. 20, 2006.

[33] Smith 2001.

[34] Doji Shiro and Kawahara Ichiro, “Chosenjin ikotsu kokyo toku: Henkan he torikumi hajimaru.” Asahi Shimbun online (Fukuoka-Kitakyushu edition), Aug. 27, 2005.

[35] Yamada, Kosho and Higuchi 2005; chapter 3.

[36] Nakamura Akemi, “Koreans want answers to slave laborers’ fates.” Japan Times online, July 29, 2006. The figure is attributed to Kansai University professor Uesugi Satoshi, a leader of the Japanese Truth Network.

[37] Yamada, Kosho and Higuchi 2005; 6.

[38] Petra Schmidt, “Japan’s Wartime Compensation: Forced Labour.” *Asia-Pacific Journal on Human Rights and the Law* 2 (2000); 1-54.

[39] Yamada, Kosho and Higuchi 2005; 11.

[40] Yamada, Kosho and Higuchi 2005, chapter 7, is the source for this discussion about worker repatriation.

- [41] Chang Sokkyong, “Hone ga Kataru: ‘Watashi ha koko ni iru, hayaku kokyo ni kaeshite kure.” Speech by South Korean Truth Commission member at Fukuoka public event called “Kankoku-Chosen no Izoku to Tomo ni: Ikotsu Mondai no Kaiketsu he,” Aug. 11, 2006.
- [42] Yamada, Kosho and Higuchi 2005; 259-60. Chapter 7 is the basic source for this section.
- [43] “Maegaki,” in Yamada Shoji and Tanaka Hiroshi, ed., *Rinkoku kara no Kokukatsu: Kyosei Renko no Kigyo Sekinin* (2). Tokyo: Soshisha, 1996; 7.
- [44] See Alexis Dudden, *Japan’s Colonization of Korea: Discourse and Power*. University of Hawaii, 2005.
- [45] Moriya Yoshihiko, “Nihon Haisen Chokugo no Hokkaido Ishikari Kuchi Taden de no Hikyosei Renko Chugokujin Chosenjin no Toso.” *Sasebo Kogyo Koto Senmon Gakko Kenkyu Hokoku*, No. 36, 1999.
- [46] Yamada, Kosho and Higuchi 2005; 235 and chapter 7.
- [47] Main sources for this section are Yamada, Kosho and Higuchi 2005, chapter 7; Kosho Tadashi, “Maegaki” and “Kyosei Renko Mibaraikin ha Dono yo ni Bosshu sareta ka,” in Kosho Tadashi, Tanaka Hiroshi, Sato Takeo et al., *Nihon Kigyo no Senso Hanzai: Kyosei Renko no Kigyo Sekinin* 3, Tokyo: Soshisha, 2000, 6-8 and 48-72; and Yamamoto Naoyoshi, “Jinken Shingai no Chingin Mibarai,” in Kosho, Tanaka, Sato et al. 2000 (same as preceding reference), 81-90.
- [48] Yamada, Kosho and Higuchi 2005; 238.
- [49] Ibid.; chapter 7.
- [50] Ibid.; chapter 7.
- [51] Ibid.; 247.
- [52] Ibid.; 232.
- [53] Ibid.; chapter 7.
- [54] Ibid.; 252.
- [55] See Endnote 11.
- [56] The basic source for this section is Aoyagi Atsuko and Stephen Wolfe (trans.), *Japan’s Postwar Responsibility for Forced Draft Mobilization of Koreans*, condensed translation of Chosenjin Chohei-Choyo ni taisuru Nihon no Sengo Sekinin. Nagoya: Fubaisha, 2005. See also Yumi Wijers-Hasegawa and William Underwood, “Korean Forced Laborers: redress movement presses Japanese government.” *Japan Focus*, Feb. 23, 2006. [Available](#). The Japanese state has similarly devalued the suffering of Japanese civilians by refusing to compensate families of the hundreds of thousands killed during the American firebombing of 1944-45. See Hanai Kiroku, “Slighting the Air-Raid Victims.” *Japan Times* online, Aug. 28, 2006.
- [57] Aoyagi and Wolfe 2005; 60.