

## **The Japan-South Korea Students' Forum: New Discoveries and Spirit of Trust Borne Out of Candid Dialogue**



On July 1, 2003, the Asian Women's Fund (AWF) hosted a forum for Japanese and South Korean students entitled "*The Present, Past and Future of Relations between Japan and South Korea: Dialogue for a New Generation*"

at the United Nations University in Tokyo. The forum was divided into two parts: Session I, titled "*The Issues of 'Comfort Women' and Japan-South Korea Relations: Our Views,*" and Session II, "*The Current State of Relations between Japan and South Korea (South Korea and Japan): Our Plans for Change.*" The seminar was jointly hosted by the Asian Women's Fund, a legally incorporated foundation, and the United Nations University, with the support of Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The event was well attended by over 140 people, mostly students, requiring additional seating to be brought in to the packed conference room.

Seventeen students from South Korea, sixteen Japanese students, and two South Korean students studying in Japan met to discuss the dawn of a new era in relations between Japan and South Korea. Starting with an exchange of opinions based on interests with respect to each other's country and individual experiences, the students launched into discussions on the past history of the bilateral relationship and how they envisioned its future. Opinions were candid but the atmosphere was calm. The students departed with the promise of being in touch with each other via email.

The South Korean youths who attended were students of either Kwandong University or Sogang University (Graduate School of International Studies). Students from Chuo University, Tsuda College, Tokai University, Kyorin University, Meiji University and Waseda University represented the Japanese delegation. Korean students currently residing and studying in Japan were also present. Professor Won-woong Lee of Kwandong University, Mr. Takanori Aiba, lecturer at Waseda University, Professor Yozo Yokota of Chuo University, and Ms. Momoyo Ise, Executive Director of the AWF, attended as advisors.

South Korean students and students of Chuo University participated in the morning discussion, followed by the afternoon forum open to all students. The idea for a such a Japan-South Korea Student's Forum (Forum) first came about after Professor Lee asked his South Korean students to write a report on a Japanese book titled "*The Issue of 'Comfort Women' and the Asian Women's Fund*" (eds. Onuma, Wada, Shimomura) which he had translated into Korean. The Japanese students were given the same book to read in advance to prepare for the Forum.

In his keynote address, Professor Lee stated: "You are the heroes and heroines of the future. Continue your open dialogue. Do not let the shadows of the past stand in the way. You must be determined not to repeat the mistakes made by a previous generation, and be equally determined to present a vision of a new South Korea-Japan relationship based on trust and respect, not revenge or a distortion of the truth."

Most of the South Korean students had never visited Japan before. The Forum got under way with their impressions of Tokyo, their experiences staying in a hotel and on using the subway. The discussion soon moved on to the topics of 'comfort women' and the AWF's projects. Many South Korean students expressed their surprise at the extent of monetary contribution from Japanese citizens and talked frankly about the misunderstanding and disinterest which remain in South Korea. The Forum was student-led, with one South Korean and one Japanese student acting as joint facilitators for each session. Discussions revolved around facts, actual events, personal experiences and thoughts, and the debates were conducted in a non-confrontational manner.

(Continued to page two where facilitators from the two countries share their thoughts about the Forum.)

### **The Japan-South Korea Students' Forum: "The Present, Past and Future of Relations between Japan and South Korea: Dialogue for a New Generation"**

Lingering Sense of Victimization and Being the Perpetrator  
Frank Dialogue Key to Any "Solution"

Lee Ji-Won

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“Sincerity is appreciated everywhere by everyone.” This is the conclusion I reached after participating in the South Korea-Japan Students’ Forum and engaging in discussions with fellow Japanese students. Our views on the topic of ‘comfort women’ differed but this was a result of misguided history lessons, distortion of the facts by the media as well as differences in national identities and education. We were able to deepen our understanding of each other through exchanges of sincere opinions.

In general, I felt that the South Korean students tended to hold on to a sense of victimization, thinking, for example, that “the Japanese do not intend to apologize for crimes which they committed in the past. In fact, they plan to revive imperialism.” At the same time, I also learnt that the Japanese students, being conscious of the mistakes made by a past generation, seemed to harbor feelings of guilt as wrong-doers, expecting that “it will take a lot for the South Koreans to forgive us,” with some students feeling “ashamed to be Japanese after learning about the issue of ‘comfort women’.”

But can the issue of ‘comfort women’ be resolved in its entirety by a neat demarcation between the aggrandizer and the victimized, and through offers of monetary compensation? Vast numbers of citizens were casualties of the invasion and occupation of South Korea and other Asian countries. The war took its toll even on Japan, the very country responsible for the war. Looking at the issue from a broader perspective, the events and circumstances of the time were heavily responsible for these countless sufferings. Calling one country the victim and the other as a perpetrator does not solve this issue which is mired in historical complexities.

Nonetheless, the violation of the victims’ human rights undoubtedly calls for compensation. In reality, a solution acceptable to all parties has been elusive. While South Koreans regard the issue of ‘comfort women’ as a problem of “Japan’s national shame” and continue to press for official compensation from the Japanese government, the Japanese, on the other hand, have been searching for alternative solutions that do not incorporate state compensation.

Different perceptions towards the same problem have hindered progress towards a solution. This is the underlying reason why the projects of the Asian Women's Funds were not well received in South Korea or in the Republic of Taiwan. The AWF provided compensation (atonement money) as a realistic way of offering assistance to former 'comfort women' suffering in poverty and illness. South Koreans, however, misinterpreted this gesture as another example of how the Japanese government continues to avoid legal responsibility for its own actions.

A "perfect solution," if that is what is desired, requires open dialogue that will clarify any misunderstandings. This will free both countries from past constraints and will be the stepping stone towards reconciliation and the dawn of a new South Korea-Japan relation.

Through our experiences at this Forum, we have learnt that sincerity in dialogue leads the way for open communication. By cultivating a deeper mutual understanding, I feel we have secured a small foothold towards a more amicable South Korean-Japanese relationship. I hope that the elder generation will also approach dialogue with an open mind and wider perspective so that they, too, can better understand each other. The future of this bilateral relationship should become more positive with an increasing number of youths sharing the same visions. As we become active members of society in the future, I believe that a more mature relationship based on mutual support will evolve between South Korea and Japan.

Finally, I would like to offer my sincerest gratitude towards Professors Lee and Yokota, Executive Director Ise of the Asian Women's Fund, and the other organizers of the Forum for providing us with this valuable opportunity.

### **Let's Not Repeat Historical Mistakes ~ A Day of Meaningful Dialogue and Exchange**

Shin Jung-A

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Several months have passed since the South Korea-Japan Student's Forum, but I can

still clearly remember my sentiment and thoughts of that day. The truth is that I did not initially expect much when a South Korea-Japan Student's Forum was first proposed as a platform to discuss the issue of 'comfort women.' In the past, discussions on South Korea - Japan relations, including the topic of 'comfort women,' have been numerous but the talks more often than not have been formalities that have failed to achieve meaningful solutions or agreements. Contrary to my expectations, however, I felt that the Forum was extremely successful. It was an invaluable opportunity for a free exchange of opinions between students of the two countries. We were able to hear first hand the true voices of the Japanese students, not those of the politicians or the media.

Students offered their frank opinions in the morning and afternoon discussions on the issue of 'comfort women' and the past, present, and future of the South Korea-Japan relations. The talks revealed my ignorance of certain issues and of the existence of different perceptions towards the same problems. To begin with, Japanese students tended to regard the 'comfort women' issue as a question of universal human rights or women's human rights, whereas most South Korean students saw it as a national or political problem. I then found out that the majority of Japanese students learnt about Japan's colonization of South Korea and the issue of 'comfort women' through the media as adults, not through history textbooks and lessons during their school years. Finally, I gathered that Japanese students felt that South Koreans continue to harbor ill feelings towards the Japanese.

In fact, South Korean antipathy towards Japan is not as strong as the Japanese students may believe, particularly amongst the younger generation. The influence of media and problems in education have contributed towards these misperceptions, but more importantly, opportunities for dialogue such as those provided by the South Korea-Japan Student's Forum have been far and few in between. I have since become convinced of the importance of dialogue.

I thought the candor of the Japanese students and the translation system which facilitated our mutual understanding were two of the most positive aspects of the Forum. I recall Japanese students stating their frank opinions regarding the sensitive questions of compensation for 'comfort women,' the statements of the former victims, and the controversy over the existence of proof. I was also impressed by the translation system which helped all of us overcome language barriers to expedite open discussions.

It was a pity, however, that the talks seemed to dwell predominantly on the past. I feel we could have had more discourse on the overall theme, the present and future of South Korea-Japan relations. Furthermore, it was regrettable that unlike the panelists, the audience did not have any opportunity to speak out. The audience would have had other constructive opinions and diverse perspectives to offer, but due to the limited time, we did not have a chance to hear them out.

By improving on these points, I hope that discussions at the next South Korea-Japan Students' Forum will offer a varied agenda including other themes such as universal human rights, women's issues and South Korean-Japanese cultural exchange.

Regardless of whether we agreed or disagreed on any one topic, we all understood the need to learn from the lessons of history and to vow never to make the same mistakes of the past. We concurred that the younger generation, as "global citizens," must take an active role in establishing a forward-looking and constructive Korea-Japan relationship based on dialogues and exchanges which are free from the constraints of politics and national sentiments. In this context, I believe the Korea-Japan Student's Forum achieved a significant objective. I hope that this meaningful experience will be repeated again, to be held regularly and alternately in South Korea and Japan, providing opportunities for many students of both nations to participate and to prepare the groundwork for further dialogue.

I would like to extend my deepest appreciation to The Asian Women's Fund and Professors Yozo Yokota and Won-woong Lee for providing us with this invaluable opportunity.

### **Standing on Common Ground: Fearless Pursuit of Dialogue** **Yuka Kubota, Graduate School of Law, Chuo University**

Having been designated a facilitator for the Japan-South Korean Student's Forum only a few days prior to the event, I arrived at the venue feeling restless. Instead of looking forward to the discussions, I was overcome with uncertainty about the direction the talks would take. My nervousness was exacerbated by the fact that the agenda had not been finalized.

However, my anxiety vanished after attending an informal meeting between South Korean students and Chuo University students prior to the afternoon session. The session did not follow a specific agenda; the talks revolved around a somewhat general discussion of ‘comfort women,’ with varying degrees of complexities in arguments evident. Yet all of the students were clearly intent on hearing each other out. I was moved by the candor evident in the debates.

My worries about the proceedings seemed inconsequential when I realized the importance of the opportunity given to the students through this Forum to share time and space with each other, and the positive impact this would have on their future. I then began to feel much more relaxed.

The afternoon began with a discussion on “*The Issue of Comfort Women and Japan-South Korea Relations.*” I acted as a joint facilitator along with a fellow South Korean student, Shin Jung-A, an extremely intelligent woman and my saving grace. Shin is fluent in English after having spent some time in the United States. Because I do not speak Korean, we used English to carry out our responsibilities. The afternoon developed into an absorbing session with eager participation from all students. The views expressed were indeed varied, making it impossible to pigeonhole opinions along national lines. But I detected one thing all participants had in common. They stood on common ground in their fearless pursuit for discussion and debate.

When the session finished, Shin and I thanked each other and exchanged contact information. I was happy that I now felt much closer to Shin. I could not attend the evening party, but sent Shin an email of gratitude. She replied a few days later to say that she arrived back safely in South Korea. As I consider the issue of ‘comfort women’ in the future, I will always remember the faces of the students participating in the Forum. My next challenge is how to make the most out of this valuable experience.

**“A Country So Close, and Even Closer” ~ Sharing the Same Space and Time**

**Tamiyuki Kihara,**

**School of Political Science and Economics, Meiji University**

I had the opportunity to participate in the Japan-South Korean Student's Forum as a joint facilitator with a fellow South Korean student.

A total of approximately forty South Korean and Japanese students were seated in a square configuration in the large conference room, sporting earphones to listen to the simultaneous interpretation. The atmosphere was akin to that of some high level international conference.

My role as a facilitator was to moderate the discussion along with a South Korean student. The chosen theme was "*The Current State of Relations between Japan and South Korea: Our Plans for Change,*" a wide-ranging subject indeed. From the start, I was tense worrying about how to keep the discussion under control and how to steer it back onto course should it digress. Keynote statements from one South Korean and one Japanese student marked the beginning of the session. This is when my work began.

The session lasted only one hour, and ended as quickly as it started. In retrospect, it did not even feel like an hour. During this time, my tension unknowingly dissipated and I found myself actively listening to the students' discussions. The debate centered on the present status of Japan-South Korea relations as a legacy of the past. Students were unabashed in stating their opinions. Both countries have their own ways of interpreting the same historical event. At the Forum, opinions differed because the participants were students and citizens of their respective countries. Unanimous agreement on any one issue is never easy to attain.

Despite the dissimilar perspectives, I became aware that the Japanese and South Korean students shared a common goal. Without exception, the students wanted to improve their understanding of each other. I never once witnessed a situation where a Japanese or South Korean student would justify his or her opinion after negating another student's viewpoint. The debates were nothing but constructive, with participants always making an effort to understand a different opinion before they had their say. They were willing to meet each other half way and their attitudes reflected this common belief. A neighboring country which is often regarded as being so close yet so far away seems that much closer after dialogue. This was an extremely moving and uplifting occasion for me.

After the end of the discussion, South Korean students sang “Arirang” and the Japanese students followed with “Sakura.” The 140-plus attendees broke out into a resounding applause for each other. It was a moment when Japanese and South Korean students shared the same space, time and smile in that large conference hall.

## **Pray for Happiness for all Mankind; Never Repeat Past Mistakes**

**Lai Hau Min**

**Attorney at Law, Formosa Transnational**

**(Liaison for the Asian Women's Funds Projects in the Republic of Taiwan)**



In December 1996, Professor Shinkichi Eto and Ms. Mitsuko Shimomura of the Asian Women's Fund (AWF) came to see me at my office with these words: "the Asian Women's Fund has been established with the cooperation of the Japanese government to carry out projects of atonement for former 'comfort women.' We would like to ask for your assistance in this matter."

I was deeply moved when I learnt of the projects of atonement offered by the Asian Women's Fund. It remains difficult to pass judgment on the rights and wrongs on the issue of 'comfort women,' a problem which dates back half a century. My decision to help came out of my belief that the atonement projects represent the humanity and morality of the Japanese government and its people. I accepted the offer by saying, "We can never go back in time to relive a different life. The former 'comfort women' are advanced in age, requiring medical and social welfare assistance. It is our duty as human beings to address the needs of these elderly ladies who are entering their twilight years. The projects must be implemented urgently considering this reality, as well as from a humanitarian perspective." Many fellow countrymen have criticized me for being unpatriotic by participating in AWF's activities, but I did so out of the strength of my own conviction.

I acted as the liaison between the elderly ladies referred to as 'comfort women' in the Republic of Taiwan and the Asian Women's Fund.

Many Taiwanese were critical, asserting that compensation money should come directly from the Japanese state treasury. Many more elderly women would have accepted AWF's projects if there were fewer such critics. Regardless of the number of recipients, however, I firmly believe that the Asian Women's Funds' activities in Taiwan

were undeniably successful.

I would like to say to the people of Japan that the issue of ‘comfort women’ is extremely complex. It is important never to repeat any conduct in which a nation state is held culpable. For this reason, war must be avoided altogether in the future. Together with the citizens of Japan, I wish for peace and happiness for all mankind.

## **Tackling Violence Against Women** **The Role of the Asian Women’s Fund**

**Hiroko Hashimoto**

**Member, Advisory Committee**

**Head, Department of Information and Social Sciences, Jumonji University**



I was working as a representative of the Japanese government at the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) as a Social Affairs Officer in the Women in Development Section at the time when the Asian Women’s Fund was established. My work at the UN involved improving the human rights and status of women in Asia. Through my involvement in women’s movements, I came to believe that compensation for ‘comfort women’ must come from the Japanese treasury. Yet I also realized that a law calling for such governmental compensation stood a slim chance of being passed in the Japanese parliament after a prominent Diet member remarked that “comfort women were participants of commercial activities.” Furthermore, many of the victims, now elderly, were beginning to pass away. I decided to become involved in AWF’s work after concluding that AWF’s projects offered the next best solution under these circumstances. As a native of Yamaguchi Prefecture, near Hiroshima, I have witnessed first hand the difficulty of becoming officially recognized as a nuclear bomb victim, as was the case for many of my relatives. In situations requiring extreme sensitivity to privacy such as for the ‘comfort women,’ I felt that it would be more appropriate for the government to fund the projects but let an NGO with professional expertise commit to the actual work.

I also believed I could make use of my experiences and contacts to contribute to women's dignity projects, another active area of the Asian Women's Fund. Upon returning to Japan one year after AWF was established, I started by attending international conferences on women's human rights and the trafficking of human beings.

Some NGO's have criticized AWF by saying that "the projects of atonement were a failure because most victims refused to accept these offers." Over half of the women who came forward as former 'comfort women' have indeed accepted the contributions; the Japanese government has provided medical and social welfare assistance in the amount of three million yen per person in South Korea and the Republic of Taiwan, and 1.2 million yen per person in the Philippines. How can anyone say that the projects have been a failure?

The atonement projects have been completed in South Korea, the Philippines and the Republic of Taiwan. As long as the victims are alive, however, I feel that AWF, as an NGO, should continue its assistance in other ways. This flexibility is one advantage AWF has in being an NGO.

Currently in Japan, no other governmental agency specializes in women's dignity issues including violence against women. With increasing international expectations, it will be advantageous for AWF to continue its activities in areas other than atonement projects for the sake of Japan and the status of Japanese women. Precious little research and information exist on these women's issues. AWF could develop into an institution specializing in these areas of concern.

### **The Need for Atonement; a Brave Victim's Testimony Convinces Me of the Need for Atonement**

**Teruko Kanehira,  
Board member of the Asian Women's Funds,  
Former Vice-Governor of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government**



During my time as Vice-Governor, I represented the Metropolitan Government Assembly at a committee meeting where the subject of ‘comfort women’ was first brought up. Although this subject had already been discussed in the National Diet, I had previously never come face to face with this issue in a public setting.

We became aware of this issue only after a “victim” bravely came forward to identify herself as a former “comfort woman.” After hearing her speak of her experiences, I became convinced that atonement was imperative.

Soon afterwards, I was recommended to take up the post of a director at AWF. To be honest, I was initially ambivalent about the position since I was uncertain about what steps could be taken so long after the end of war, and what my role in this would be. I could also sympathize with those who pressed for direct compensation from the Japanese government. In the end, the overriding reason why I accepted the position came from my belief that time was simply running out. While others may continue their campaign for governmental compensation, AWF would help by listening and responding, to the best of its ability, to the wishes of the elderly victims. I found out afterwards that others working for AWF felt the same way.

At the onset, we were all in agreement that the projects of atonement offered by the Asian Women’s Fund’s should have three constituent parts: 1) a letter of apology from the Prime Minister; 2) “atonement money” donated with sincerity from the Japanese people; and 3) medical and social welfare assistance projects financed by the Japanese government. But we had yet to agree on how these projects would be implemented given different national, cultural and physical environments. This was particularly the case in the areas of medical and social support. We started by analyzing the current situation of the victims, staying up past midnight everyday discussing how best we could provide maximum assistance in a timely manner to these elderly women. The hard work did not bother us as we were united in wanting the goodwill of the Japanese people to reach the victims as quickly as possible. Until the projects were finally delivered, however, we did have moments of doubt as to whether our decisions were correct.

We first delivered the projects of atonement to the Philippines, followed by South Korea. Frankly, a very difficult situation awaited us in South Korea, but we managed to complete our mission in January 1997. We held numerous discussions lasting well into the night regarding AWF's trip to South Korea. Chairperson Hara appointed me as the head of the delegation to South Korea during one of the final meetings. Once there, I first delivered the Prime Minister's letter to the victims. One elderly former comfort woman (*harmoni*) became very tearful, staring intently at the letter as if to say that "I am finally holding a letter from the Japanese Prime Minister in a hand." I then delivered an apology from the Japanese people, followed by the atonement money. The situation was extremely emotional and I was only capable of concluding by saying that "no amount of apology or 'atonement money' can make up for the indignity and pain suffered by you, the victims, but I only hope that you will take to heart the sincerity of the Japanese people."

AWF's projects in South Korea faced many setbacks, including suspension and reversal after our visit. By dealing with each problem as it arose, we were finally able to conclude our projects there.

The Asian Women's Fund represents a synthesis of the cooperative efforts of the Japanese government and people in trying to find an acceptable solution to the complex "historical" issue of "comfort women." Personally, I owe much to the brave former victim who came forward. Her testimony made me aware of the issue of 'comfort women' and the acute need for atonement. It is thanks to her that I have been given the opportunity to assist AWF in trying to find solutions through the projects of atonement.

The Asian Women's Fund still bears a heavy responsibility of compiling valuable video footage, research information and materials as historical records to pass on to future generations with the hope that such mistakes will never be made again.

I pray for the health of the elderly victims of South Korea with whom I had the honor to meet and embrace.

### **Upon Completion of the Atonement Projects in Three Countries**

**Haruki Wada,**  
**Proponent and board member of the Asian Women's Funds,**  
**Professor Emeritus, The University of Tokyo**



The projects of atonement in the Philippines, South Korea and the Republic of Taiwan are now complete. This follows the conclusion of the projects in the Netherlands which were implemented in a slightly differently manner. I would now like to bring attention to the following four outstanding issues.

In Korea, former comfort women (*harmoni*) who accepted the projects of atonement from the Asian Women's Funds have yet to achieve social recognition. These recipients want the South Korean government and its people to know they are satisfied despite the controversies. We cannot say that the projects in South Korea have been concluded until these women are fully accepted by their society. I have repeatedly brought this up at meetings with the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (the Korean Council). The Korean Council's response was that it did not plan to make this into an issue. I strongly hope that the Korean Council can find a way to approach the South Korean government on this matter.

Secondly, the number of South Korean and Taiwanese victims who accepted the projects of atonement amounted to less than half of those officially recognized as victims. AWF should not take the blame for this result. The Japanese government, who established the framework for AWF, must explain how this fact ought to be interpreted.

Thirdly, South Korea, the Philippines and the Republic of Taiwan were designated recipient countries after diplomatic negotiations. Now that the projects of atonement have come to an end, we need to know why benefits will not be extended to "comfort women" from other countries such as China, North Korea, Malaysia and Micronesia. It seems unjust to offer atonement to Taiwanese and South Korean victims but not to women in China or North Korea. The Japanese government, not AWF, must clearly

set forth its reasons for not extending the projects.

Lastly, one of the current major foreign policy concerns of the Japanese government is negotiations for diplomatic relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. In the 2002 Pyongyang Declaration, North Korea agreed to waive all past claims against Japan in return for economic assistance.

A similar agreement was made in the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea. Yet despite this agreement, projects of atonement of the Asian Women's Funds were carried out in South Korea. It then follows that the Japanese government is under obligation to offer the same to North Korea. Some two hundred North Korean women are reportedly recognized as victims. If each person is to receive five million yen as did their South Korean counterparts, the entire project will require financing of approximately one billion yen.

These issues will require hard thinking and action before any solution can be reached.