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Ingyu Oh, Kansai Gaidai University

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Book Review:

Writing New History of Comfort Women

Asahi Shimbun no Ianfu Hōdō to Saiban [The Reports of Comfort Women by the Asahi Shimbun and Litigations], by Kitano Ryūichi, Asahi Shimbun Shuppansha, 2020, 539 pages, 978-4-022-263098-8, 1,900 Yen + Tax.

Ingyu Oh, Kansai Gaidai University

“Our memory reaches back through recorded history. The book of memories still lies open. And you here now are the hand that holds the pen.” – David Ben-Gurion’s 1960 speech to the Mossad agents who captured Adolf Eichmann.

Doing and learning history involves four mutually exclusive processes: (1) learning published historical facts by heart; (2) investigating and exploring history to find new facts and arrive at new interpretations; (3) recording and preserving historical evidence, including artefacts, written materials, documents, testimonies, and others; and (4) actively creating and reconstructing history by waging war against historical revisionists (or anyone who is involved in the 4th type of doing and learning history). Kitano’s 539-page tome belongs to the fourth, as he is deeply embroiled in creating new pages in history by going beyond the process of recording and preserving historical evidence.

As Kitano states clearly in the beginning, one of the purposes of writing up his book was to make available to the *Asahi Shimbun* a new manual on how to deal with such groundless strikes against the newspaper company by any social or political interest groups that want to revise history on their own terms. In this sense, the book can be a useful lesson for any group that represents historical victims including those of the Holocaust. In other words, this book is not a simple history book but a battle manual for the people who are fully engaged in a daily confrontation with rightwing historical revisionists who want to delete the historical atrocities caused by the aggressors and reduce their victims to mere liars and deceivers in history.

The war of aggression, revenge, and negotiations for reconciliation are parts of history that are still being written in every corner of the world. The birth of any nation sprouts out from the memories of such atrocities and aggressions. In a similar vein, the birth of South Korea and new Japan in 1948 and 1952, respectively, has fanned and fueled the ongoing war over the comfort women issue that many people still want to throw down the gauntlet to the responsible parties. In doing so, both parties on the victims’ and aggressors’ sides face problems of “not knowing” too much about what really happened some 80 to 85 years ago.

Therefore, instead of completing what seems impossible (i.e., correctly memorizing what really had happened), what is feasible from now on for the 4th type historian is to record and make comments about the ongoing battle between the survivors (and their representatives) of victims and aggressors. To Kitano, the battle has been mostly over the newspaper coverages and the class action suits against the newspaper articles by the rightwing groups. The book indeed allocates the bulk of its pages to the court battle documents, as if he were almost touting loudly that the so-called “comfort women issue” is none other than studying the ongoing battles between the victims and aggressors. It is however noteworthy that the victims’ representative, the *Asahi Shimbun*, is a Japanese newspaper company, not that of South Korea’s. In fact, no South Korean newspaper has done anything what the *Asahi Shimbun* has been doing, including the publication of Kitano’s new book.

The battle not only ranges from the class action suits filed with the Japanese courts but those occurred in the U.S. as well, making the comfort women issue a global one that is inclusive of the victims and aggressors (and their representatives) from all around the world. Victims and their representatives include Koreans, Japanese, Taiwanese, Filipinas, Dutch women, Americans, and others, whereas aggressors and their representatives are mostly Japanese and Japanese Americans. The globalization of the comfort women issue itself therefore produces a historical meaning: It is a “postcolonial” war waged by Koreans and some conscientious Japanese against Japanese “prewar” imperialism.

The core issue of the war on Japanese imperialism surrounds the question of whether the Japanese imperial army used force and abducted Korean and other colonial girls for their sexual abuse and slavery. The question of the “direct” involvement of the army, instead of the official interpretation by the postwar Japanese government that the comfort girls were either voluntarily applied for the job or deceived by Korean and Japanese private recruiters, is still debated tenaciously by both sides. However, this book makes it clear that the newspaper report in support of the victims’ version is not defamation against the Japanese or Japan, even as the court is not interested in confirming the truthfulness of the victims’ version (e.g., the verdict of the court regarding the class action suits filed by the rightwing groups against the *Asahi Shimbun*). This also means that the reportage of the rightwing or aggressors’ version of the historical atrocity is not defamation against the victims and their advocates, either (e.g., the Uemura defamation lawsuit against the rightwing groups and their magazines).

In the meantime, the two governments in South Korea and Japan tried twice to settle the matter for good, the first during the Murayama cabinet (1994-1996) and the second during the third Abe cabinet (2014-2017). Although the Murayama cabinet publicly and officially apologized for the war atrocities including the comfort women issue, it failed to provide public funds to compensate the victims, whereas the Abe cabinet offered public funds of recompense, although it failed to apologize publicly for the war atrocities including comfort

women. As much as the legal battles have remained at a stalemate, so has the intergovernmental confrontation over the comfort women issue.

At the end of the day, both parties will realize that investigating, writing, and memorizing historical facts are meaningless, because what it all boils down to is how to win the historical battle over whose writings and whose interpretations are correct. Even though the Pacific War has been over since 1945, the postcolonial war over colonial memories continues awaiting a final victor. It is unlikely that we will see how the war will eventually end. However, one thing is clear: history writers like Kitano will keep emerging offering their battle records. The battle of memories!

Ingyu Oh is Professor of Sociology at Kansai Gaidai University, Osaka, Japan, and the editor of Culture and Empathy. As the former president of the World Association for Hallyu Studies, he has written several articles and books about Korea-Japan relations and Hallyu. In the 1990s and 2000s he investigated and wrote articles on the issue of Comfort Women.