

Collective Memory and Politics: 'Comfort Women' in Current Relations between South Korea and Japan¹

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Abstract. The article analyzes how the “comfort women” issue influences current relations between the Republic of Korea and Japan. In the early 20th century, Japan annexed Korea, and the memories of colonial-era humiliation are vivid in Korean collective consciousness. As a result, issues of the past often sour bilateral relations even today. Recently, Seoul has been actively pressing the issue of sexual slavery in Japanese military brothels, and differences over this seemingly irrelevant issue have impeded political and military cooperation.

Articles on former sexual slaves (also called *wianbu* in Korean) have resurfaced time and again in Korean press throughout the 1940-80s, but the problem internationalized only in the 1990s, when a broad public discussion started. Although Japan maintains that the 1965 bilateral normalization resolved all issues of the past, Tokyo has several times offered official condolences and compensations to the victims, however Seoul found these steps or the tone thereof unsatisfactory. Most recently, in 2015, Abe Shinzō and Park Geunhye signed an agreement to close the *wianbu* issue, but the document irritated South Korean public and opposition, so Seoul abandoned it. President Moon Jaein, who came to power in 2017, continued this course and added pressure on related

¹ This work was supported by Russian Science Foundation (Grant No. 19-18-00017 “Problems of the historical past in Japan’s relations with the countries of East Asia and Russia. Lessons for Russia”)

historical problems, such as Korean forced laborers in imperial Japan. As the crisis deepened, Tokyo introduced economic sanctions against South Korea (technically on unrelated grounds).

Conflicts stemming from collective memory are a characteristic feature of North East Asian political culture. They are a popular tool in foreign and domestic policy of many countries. This, coupled with the irrational nature of nationalism and imperfection of regional security, makes issues of the past a very real threat to the present.

Keywords: collective memory, “comfort women”, Japan, relations between Japan and South Korea, Republic of Korea, *wianbu*.

Introduction

In the collective memory of the Korean people, the period of Japanese colonial rule in 1910-45 has remained as a time of oppression and national humiliation. Inevitably, this influenced the perception of Japan in Korean society. Not only the immediate witnesses of the colonial era, but also their present-day grandchildren and great-grandchildren retain this negative view of Japan. It also seems that the emotional attitude to the neighboring country is affected by the economic and cultural competition with it, which has been growing since Japan and South Korea became the leaders of regional development in the late 20th century. At the same time, Tokyo and Seoul are highly dependent upon each other. There is large-scale mutual trade and investment, while, in the military-political dimension, both nations are in the American “camp” as allies of the United States, which “destines” them to cooperation.

Notably, the difficult issues of the past not only influence the public opinion, but also find their expression in politics, defining the statements and actions of the authorities. One can provide the example of the territorial dispute over the Liancourt Rocks (the Korean name is Dokdo, the Japanese one is Takeshima), which also has historical roots. Korea condemns periodical “pilgrimage” of Japanese politicians to the

Yasukuni Shrine, where members of the Japanese military who died in conflicts of the late 19th – early 20th centuries, including those who were convicted as war criminals in the aftermath of World War II, are worshipped as *kami* deities. Often, Korean politicians of different levels demand compensations and apologies for various historical episodes. In the years of the presidency of Park Geunhye, the Republic of Korea started to actively use in politics the problem of sexual exploitation of Korean women in Japanese field brothels in the 1930-40s. The differences with Tokyo on this issue, which, seemingly, had remained in the past, frequently hampered political and military cooperation.

Brief Historical Overview

The system of military brothels (“comfort stations”, as they were officially called) appeared in the Japanese military in the 1930s. By means of them, Japanese authorities tried to tackle the issue of rape, so as to reduce the number of conflicts between servicemen and the population of the occupied territories. Besides, the “comfort stations” were supposed to maintain the morale of the soldiers, and the control over the women working there excluded the possibility of espionage through prostitutes and allowed to protect the men from sexually transmitted diseases [Piper 2001, p. 161]. Girls aged 15 to 20 from countries dependent on Japan were taken to the brothels. Exact data on their number and nationality are impossible to obtain; the estimates present in the literature vary from several tens of thousands to almost half a million of women [Kim 2014, p. 83]. It is believed that the majority of workers were Korean women. There were also Chinese and Filipino women, as well as women from Indonesia (including Dutch women) [Kim 2014, p. 83]; some Japanese women worked there too.

In Japanese, the girls working in the stations were called *ianfu* (慰安婦), which is usually translated as “comfort women”. The Korean reading of the same characters is *wianbu* (위안부), and this became the established term in the Korean studies literature. Interestingly,

the same euphemism was eventually applied to prostitutes whom the American servicemen stationed in South Korea visited [Lee 2015, p. 344].

The ways by which the “comfort women” were taken to the stations varied. A part of them, seemingly, the smallest one, took on the work voluntarily, fully understanding its nature. Most girls were deceived, accepting the offers of high-paid work in the metropole. There were also cases of forced “recruiting”, or girls being sold by their families [Varga 2009, p. 289].

It is rather difficult to compose a general picture of the conditions of life and work in the stations. It seems that these varied depending on the military unit. Many witnesses describe prison-like conditions combined with brutal treatment and beatings; in such stations, the girls were essentially property of the military, and they were treated accordingly. According to other surviving *wianbu*, their work was strictly regimented, but they had free time, were given money for personal expenses, etc. However, in all cases, medical examinations were conducted regularly, and in the case of being diagnosed with sexually transmitted diseases, the women were given medical aid, albeit with primitive means. The main reason for this was, of course, not care about the welfare of the “comfort women” themselves, but the need to secure their “working capacity” and the care about the health of the servicemen. Soldiers and officers paid for attending the brothels and, theoretically, the girls were supposed to receive wages for their services, but, in reality, it happened in far from all cases, and, apparently, the management of the station often kept the money [Howard (ed.) 1995, p. 200].

The conditions of recruitment, work, and life of the *wianbu* were understandably deteriorating as the war went on. The “comfort women” had essentially no possibility to quit their work. Even if the superiors “permitted” a girl to leave, she would have nowhere to go, because, as a rule, the stations were far from their homes. As a result, only a minority of them survived: after the capitulation of Japan, nobody evacuated the “comfort women”, many could not return home and went missing, and some of them were killed by retreating troops.

One of the goals of creating the stations was the desire to lower the degree of animosity towards the Japanese in the areas of their stationing by means of reducing contact between the military and the local population. Ironically, after many years, it was the problem of the *wianbu* that became one of the key factors of anti-Japanese sentiment forming and becoming self-sustaining in the region.

It is believed that the “comfort women” issue became a socio-political problem only in the early 1990s. The publication of the memoirs of one of the *wianbu*, Kim Haksun, in 1991 is usually pointed out as the turning point. After her, other women told about their experience. A natural question arises: why did they keep silent for so long? Usually, the explanations involve the burden of traditional morals and the patriarchal system of Korean society [Lee 2015, pp. 347-348]. After all, blaming the victim is not infrequent in discussions of sexual violence even today (and not only in Korea).

The perception of the *wianbu* issue as a relatively new phenomenon is widespread not only among the general public, but also in the literature, but this is not exactly correct. Indeed, until the early 1990s, the issue was not discussed by politicians, but this does not mean that no information about the “comfort women” could be found before that.

The memoirs of Yoshida Seiji, published in 1977 and 1983, where he described the system of “comfort stations” and his participation in their organization, gained a certain infamy. Even though, in the 1990s, these publications laid the ground for discussion and drew the attention of Korean and Japanese public, soon, multiple factual mistakes and inconsistencies were discovered in the memoirs [Nozaki 2005]. In response to this, the author stated that his books were rather works of fiction. Due to this confusion, the Japanese right-wingers consider the *wianbu* a myth created by Yoshida, and his confession – a proof of invalidity of claims against Tokyo [The Asia-Pacific Journal 2015].

Nevertheless, the Korean society still knew about the problem before the 1990s, and it was even regularly mentioned in newspapers. For instance, a researcher Yoshikata Veki found 23 mentions of “comfort women” in South Korean central press from 1945 to the 1960s (primarily

in the 1960s), and in 1970s-80s the number rose to approximately 300 [Yoshikata 2015].

The fact that the *wianbu* issue became pronounced exactly in the early 1990s had concrete historical reasons. In the late 1980s – early 1990s, the South Korean society only began its democratization processes. The nascent feminist movement could use this problem to assert themselves in the time when criticizing domestic issues was not an easy thing to do [Asmolov 2017]. After gaining the attention of the state, the issue ceased to be purely humanitarian or historical. Incidentally, Japanese feminists were generally sympathetic to the complaints and demands of the Korean women, thus showing ideological, rather than national solidarity [Wöhr 2006, pp. 68-71].

Internationalization of the Issue and the Political Conflict Around It

Therefore, in the early 1990s, the *wianbu* issue gained the attention of the general public and was quickly becoming an international political problem. In 1991, soon after the memoirs of Kim Haksun were published, three former Korean “comfort women” brought a case to a Japanese court against the nation’s government. Tokyo was forced to react. The government started an investigation, and, as a result of it, the Cabinet Secretary General Kono Yohei made an official statement. He said that Japan recognized the existence of the problem and the fact that the recruiting and service of the girls were, “as a rule”, not voluntary. Tokyo also apologized to the former *wianbu* and promised not to turn away from historical facts. Kono’s statement claimed that the *wianbu* were usually recruited by private individuals, but that, “in some cases”, the civilian and military authorities were also involved in the process [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1993].

In 1995, the Asian Women’s Fund was established to provide compensations to the victims. The funds were partially provided by the Japanese government, and through it, former *wianbu* could receive

approximately 5 million yen each. However, both a certain evasiveness of Kono's statement and the format of the compensations did not satisfy the South Korean side. The public and the authorities had the impression that Tokyo wanted to distance itself from them problem and to evade responsibility by creating a non-state fund [Kim 2014, p. 89].

A principled and permanent element of Tokyo's position is the statement that all disputed historical questions were closed during the normalization of Japan-South Korea relations with the signing of the 1965 Agreement on the Settlement of Problems Concerning Property and Claims and on Economic Co-operation [Lobov 2015, pp. 118-119]. The agreement stated that all problems "concerning property, rights and interests of the two Contracting Parties and their nationals [...] [were] settled completely and finally." [Gukga beomnyeong jeongbo senteo 1965].

The Republic of Korea, aiming to draw wide international attention to the *wianbu* issue, tried to take it beyond the framework of bilateral relations and often succeeded in that. For example, in 1996, the UN Human Rights Committee prepared a report in which it condemned the system of Japanese field brothels and, despite Tokyo's protests, qualified it as sexual slavery [United Nations Commission on Human Rights 1996]. For a long time, Seoul lobbied in the US Congress the resolution on "comfort women", calling for Japan to recognize its responsibility for the situation [Kim 2014, p. 90]. The political meaning of such an approach is obvious: the US is the ally of both nations and frequently influences the foreign policy of both Seoul and Tokyo, so South Korean and Japanese elites sometimes see Washington as an authoritative arbiter. When the US parliament eventually adopted the said document [United States House of Representatives 2007], this naturally became a symbolic moment for the Republic of Korea.

The "domestic" factor of maintaining the relevance of the issue was a 2011 decision of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Korea. It said that the authorities were not protecting the national interests on the *wianbu* issue actively enough and that such passivity ran counter to the Constitution [Heonbeop japanso 2011]. The document was not an

international one, but it also contained a response to Japan's objections: the South Korean court declared references to the 1965 agreement inappropriate. According to its opinion, because the problem of "comfort women" was not widely known at the time of signing, one must not deprive the victims of the right to receive compensations based on this agreement.

However, the increasing international pressure and emotional intensity produced a result contrary to the one expected: Japanese elites were increasingly irritated by the unceasing demands of the Koreans. In 2006-2007, and later in 2012, Abe Shinzō came to power. He holds nationalist views and does not believe that Japan must continue its public repentance for events that happened more than half a century ago [Hein 2016, pp. 447-448]. The South Korean public is quite concerned about his views, statements, and actions, and the very fact of his being a prime minister seems to be a reason for suspecting Japan of insincerity on the *wianbu* issue.

Japanese right-wing politicians are generally not prone to seeing the "comfort women" situation as a unique one, or one worthy of attention. It is usually portrayed as a part of reality of any war, or a military variant of prostitution under state supervision (such a system appeared in Japan in the 19th century) [Toloraya (ed.) 2015, p. 176]. On the other hand, the decentralized nature of the phenomenon is often spoken about: the existence of the stations is recognized, but their establishment is not seen as a state policy, which is crucial for the Koreans. Private businessmen are named as the organizers and beneficiaries, and it is claimed that the girls themselves were receiving a considerable remuneration, which means that it was not slavery, but voluntary prostitution.

The 2011 decision of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Korea, seemingly, gave new life to the fading discussion of the problem. Of great impact was the initiative of South Korean activists to create monuments to the *wianbu*. The first of them appeared in Seoul in front of the Japanese embassy, and it was placed in such a way that the diplomats going to work had to pass by it. The monument presents a girls sitting on a chair in a tense, silently accusing posture, as if expecting apologies.

The empty chair nearby is a symbol of the dead “comfort women”. The monument immediately became the object of intense attention: in winter, the monument is dressed in warm clothes, and periodic displays of disrespect towards it are generally condemned.

In 2013, Park Geunhye was elected president of South Korea. Despite the constant and active nature of Japan-South Korea cooperation, the new leader did not strive to establish dialogue with Tokyo, naming the worry about Abe Shinzō’s right-wing views and the controversial position of his administration on the *wianbu* issue among the reasons for this.

The United States had to intervene in the situation once again. The consolidation of pro-American powers of the region would have been beneficial for Washington, but it was the “comfort women” issue that at multiple occasions disrupted military-political agreements between its closest allies in North East Asia.

By 2014, the US diplomacy had managed to persuade Park Geunhye and Abe Shinzō to meet. Nevertheless, Japan remained evasive on the *wianbu* issue: there were periodical statements on the need to revise the 1993 Kono statement or the 1996 UN committee report. South Korean public was highly irritated by the Japanese leader’s statements where he claimed that the existence of the forced system of *wianbu* had not been proven, or mentioned the “comfort women” in the context of the calamities of war of the entire world history [Hein 2016, pp. 454-455], which the Koreans perceive as an attempt to justify the crime.

The “comfort women” issue remained central to the bilateral consultations, and, by late 2015, the sides managed to achieve a mutually acceptable decision. Tokyo made additional apologies, and Seoul took on the obligation to remove the controversial monument from the Japanese embassy. At the same time, the Republic of Korea established a fund to pay compensations to the former *wianbu*, and the Japanese government contributed 1 billion yen (ca. 10 million US dollars) to it. Japan stated multiple times that, with the achievement of this agreement, it considered the issue to be completely settled [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2015]. The compromise nature of the document paradoxically set the ground for its failure. The opposition in

both nations did not accept the agreement, as the leaders were accused of betraying national interests. Unsurprisingly, the realization of the agreement eventually stalled.

In the summer of 2016, activists from the Korean diaspora almost simultaneously placed the copies of the Seoul monument in several cities of the world (for example, in Sydney and in one of the neighborhoods of Los Angeles). In the first days of 2017, Tokyo recalled its ambassador in Seoul after another monument appeared in front of the Japanese consulate in Busan. In September 2017, another, more “international” monument was installed in San Francisco, portraying three women, a Korean, a Chinese, and a Filipino, standing on the pedestal holding hands, and in front of them in deep reflection stands the author of the first memoir of *wianbu*, Kim Haksun. Soon, as a protest, the mayor of Osaka declared the cessation of sister-city relations with the American city [Time 2018].

In the Republic of Korea, the logic of inter-party struggle does not imply any compromises: the opposition rejects many policies of the ruling party as a matter of principle. For example, the center-left forces, which opposed the Park Geunhye administration and won a coalition majority in parliament in 2016, fiercely criticized the signed document [Lee 2016]. Eventually, when Park Geunhye was removed from office before the end of her term as a result of a large-scale political scandal and imprisoned, the reputational damage that accompanied these events also affected the popularity of the initiatives linked to her name. During the presidential elections of 2017, all five candidates vowed to revise the 2015 agreement.

Moon Jaein, an opposition politician who became president, could not support the *wianbu* agreement for a number of reasons: the unpopularity of the “deal” in society, party solidarity, and the spoiled image of Park Geunhye, who was the Korean initiator of the agreement. He did not openly break it, trying to avoid the deterioration of relations with Japan, but the Korean side was not hurrying to implement it. For example, the work of the fund that was established according to the 2015 agreement did not go as planned. The South Korean government reimbursed it the

compensations that had been payed, so as not to use the Japanese money and send it back instead. At the same time, civil society activists opened their own “competing” organization with similar goals. Eventually, Moon Jaein declared the “inevitable withering” of the joint fund [Choe 2018], and, in July 2019, it was closed against the background of protests from the Japanese side.

During the presidency of Moon Jaein, the “Seoul format” statues stopped appearing, even though, in 2018, some countries (the Philippines, Taiwan) followed suit and installed their own monuments to honor the women from their countries (the Philippine one was soon removed). However, the *wianbu* monument in the Korean capital did not disappear.

At the same time, the new government of the Republic of Korea was actively using sensitive historical problems and related disputed issues in its foreign policy. For example, during the visit of the US president Donald Trump to Seoul in 2017, at the welcome dinner, one of the former “comfort women” was introduced to him, and in the menu, there were shrimps from the sea around the disputed island of Dokdo (Takeshima). The South Korean media seemed triumphant as they showed the photos of Donald Trump’s embrace with the elderly woman and reported the resulting protests of the Japanese Foreign Ministry [Chosun Ilbo 2017]. The appeal to Washington had a double-sided hidden meaning. On the one hand, the US is the “senior” ally of both South Korea and Japan, and both nations have to take into consideration its opinion. On the other hand, it was America who would have been the main beneficiary of the unrealized settlement.

Furthermore, during the presidency of Moon Jaein, South Korean leadership and society were mounting pressure on Japan on a different issue linked to the shared history. In the autumn of 2018, and in the summer of 2019, the Supreme Court of the Republic of Korea satisfied several claims against Japanese companies concerning their use of forced or low-paid labor of Koreans during the years of colonial rule (1910-1945). Notably, this issue became an instrument of not only foreign policy, but also of domestic politics of the Republic of Korea. The previous

administration of Park Geunhye was accused not only of inaction on this issue, but also of corruption-related delaying of the litigation [Arrington 2019]. The case of the workers soon gained a “practical” aspect: after the Japanese companies, backed by Tokyo, refused to satisfy the claims for compensations, their assets in the Republic of Korea were arrested.

Japan’s irritation about the collapse of the 2015 “final” agreement being accompanied by a new painful issue resulted in steps that were seemingly suggested by the logic of the US-China trade war, which was unfolding at the same time. Citing the danger of leaks of sanctioned materials to the DPRK, Tokyo restricted the import to South Korea of a number of chemicals necessary for the production of semiconductors, which was bound to severely affect high-tech industries and the economy as a whole [Kim 2019].

The Reasons and the Results of the Politicization of the “Comfort Women” Problem

One can easily see that, as the history of the *wianbu* issue unfolded, a steady growth of its presence in the public discourse in general and in the Japan-South Korea relations in particular was visible. The first newspaper publications of the 1940s – 1980s did not draw sufficient attention, even though their number was growing over time. In the 1990s – 2000s, the compensations to the “comfort women” and the protection of their rights were mostly on the agenda of civil society organizations and activists, and it was mainly due to their pressure that the Kono statement was made.

In the 2010s, the civil society organizations switched to “actionist” work. For example, it was them who initiated and conducted the installation of the *wianbu* monuments. One cannot but notice that their actions are “synchronized” with the position of the state, with the “slumps” of their activity coinciding with the maneuvering of the government (incidentally, a similar dynamic can be noticed in the work of groups using balloons to send propaganda materials from the South

to the DPRK). It is probable that the South Korean authorities delegate to civil society groups some questionable steps, from which they can distance themselves, should the necessity arise.

Generally speaking, recently, the *wianbu* issue, as well as other problems of the historical past, has turned from a second-rate conflict topic of the South Korea-Japan relations into a powerful force defining the entire agenda of bilateral interaction. From the military-political point of view, Japan and South Korea are elements of the rigid American security system. The elites of both nations are virtually unanimous in believing this choice to be right and strategic, but Seoul and Tokyo also compete for regional influence and markets. In this sense, the historical issues are, on the one hand, a “valve” for regulating conflict tension, and, on the other hand, an effective instrument of reputational and even sanction-related struggle within accepted boundaries set by their alliance affiliation.

Though the *wianbu* issue has so far exerted such a strong influence upon the South Korea-Japan relations, its history testifies that the approach to solving it has to be broader, while solving it completely within the bilateral framework will not be possible. For example, it is obvious that a potential solution found by Seoul and Tokyo will hardly satisfy Pyongyang, which is also vocal about the issue. Moreover, in addition to Korea, the “comfort women” were also recruited in China and in South East Asia.

The conflicts based on the difficult issues of shared history are a characteristic feature of the political culture of North East Asia in general. Though, in some cases (for example, in that of Korea and Japan), these conflicts are more salient, every nation of the region has historical grievances, ranging from moral to territorial, against its every single neighbor. As a rule, the more justified grievances become actively politicized, but the logic of some of these is sometimes not bound by facts, and there are enough grievances in store to bring them up should the relations deteriorate.

Besides, historical issues often become a tool of domestic politics. The South Korean and Japanese cases show that the “negligence” of the authorities in defending the historical honor of the nation is

often exploited by the opposition. On the other hand, the authorities themselves often address the painful problems of the past to “redirect” the discontent of the masses originally aimed at themselves [Dyachkov 2013, pp. 105-106].

The stability and inexhaustibility of historical issues is to some extent caused by their political “functionality”: having been raised once, they are seldom finally closed and are regularly used to solve current problems. In this sense, one must point out the intransigence of Seoul, which time and again finds faults in Tokyo’s position, be it the lack of precision of statements, the ambiguousness of confessions, or the incompleteness of apologies. On the other hand, both in the Republic of Korea and in Japan, from a certain point the elites became hostage to the situation that they themselves had caused to overheat: the pressure of the electorate and the logic of escalation deprive the politicians of direct control over the conflict.

This, together with the irrational nature of nationalist sentiments, as well as the imperfection of the system of regional security, makes the issues of the past a real threat to stability in the present.

Politicization and Historiography

As far as purely academic aspects are concerned, one can say that the *wianbu* issue has gained little coverage in Russian scholarly literature and is potentially interesting for a non-political study, but a historian studying it inevitably faces a number of difficulties.

Fist, the range of available sources is almost exclusively limited to the memoirs of the *wianbu* themselves. No relevant documents, both from the central Japanese government and the local military and civil authorities, are available. In many cases, these documents just did not survive to this day (colonial archives were being deliberately destroyed after the capitulation), and the ones that still exist may remain classified due to obvious political reasons. The memoirs of the women describe more or less the same variant of organization of the stations, which

permits one to assume a centralized nature of the phenomenon. However, it is impossible to clarify this crucial question by referring to documents.

The accounts of the “comfort women” leave much to be desired as a historical source. The surviving victims of these events are extremely few, and all of them are older than at least 85. It is difficult to compose even a somewhat coherent picture of the phenomenon based on their recollections. There are no stations described in two different accounts, and factual inconsistencies or later “additions” are not infrequent. One cannot rule out the possibility of the public discussion and the eventual international scandal influencing the contents of the testimonies in this way or another.

The literature did not escape the same fate. A large number of publications on the *wianbu* (including ones in English) are not fully academic in their purposes, but rather serve to reinforce the political position of this or that side. A hypothetical neutral study would most likely satisfy neither opponent and would be interpreted by them as a propaganda diversion or an attempt to taint the national honor. One must point out that the researchers who approach the issue not from national, but more general ideological positions (for example, from the point of view of gender), are notably more balanced in their approach.

The sensitivity and the complexity of the problem are exacerbated by the presence of related or parallel issues. For example, after the liberation from Japan, in the years of the Korean War (1950-53), the South Korean army had “special comfort units” (which were probably preserved as a remnant of the Japanese system) [Soh 2008, pp. 215-216, 224]. As has already been mentioned, later, a local “industry” of sexual services existed around American military bases [Moon 1997], and these businesses and their workers were called the same way in Korean – *wianso* and *wianbu*. A similar phenomenon was also present in Japan in the years of American occupation [Wöhr 2006, p. 68]. Furthermore, in Vietnam and in Korea there are currently more than a thousand people of mixed Korean-Vietnamese origin (a common if politically incorrect term is *Lai Dai Han*) [Moon 2015, p. 18]. A significant number of them were born during the Vietnam War (1964-1973)

as a result of South Korean servicemen raping Vietnamese women, as well as prostitution, which probably had organized nature [Gil 2015]. The objections of the Korean side (the denial of the centralized character of the phenomenon, claims of its “naturalness” for wartime, etc.) resemble the Japanese position on the *wianbu* issue.

Despite all the named difficulties, only a complex historical study of such problems is able to determine, rather than construct the truth, becoming a true monument to the victims and a testimony of crimes. Korea and Japan are not the only two nations divided by shared history. The same difficulties have been faced, for example, by Russia and Poland – and, to overcome them, the Group on Difficult Matters was established, which, after several years of work, produced a landmark book “White Spots – Black Spots” [Torkunov, Rotfeld (eds.) 2010]. The communication and the work of scholars can help to find the truth together and to reconcile the peoples with each other and with their common past better than any political agreements.

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Russian edition of the article:

Japanese Studies in Russia, 2019, 4, 72-87.