[International Conference in Honor of the 80th Anniversary of the Liberation of Korea]

Searching for New Perspectives on Contemporary History of Korea: Rethinking Decolonization, Military Occupations, and the Ideas for a Democratic Korea

August 4-5 2025 / KCCI, Seoul
[Hosted by Northeast Asian History Foundation,
Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies (SNU), Institute of Social Sciences (SNU)]

Conference Proceeding

Why Do Differences in Historical Perception Arise?: The Influence of Strong Mobilization in a Weak Empire

Masaru TONOMURA
Tokyo University

Historical issues have long been a source of conflict between Japan and South Korea. Despite various efforts to establish a shared understanding of history, opposing viewpoints have persisted. To understand this conundrum, this study examines how the realities of colonial rule are perceived, remembered, and narrated as history, and how the differences in perception between Japanese and Korean people arise.

First, the common recognition between Japanese and Korean people is that "the colonial rule of the Japanese Empire was extremely powerful." This is acknowledged not only by those who emphasize the harm inflicted by the Japanese Empire but also by so-called "colonial modernization theorists." However, the Japanese colonial government did not completely monitor, manage, or indoctrinate the people. This was the case in the Japanese mainland as well.

It is true that Japan's wartime mobilization was very coercive. This "strong mobilization" was, in fact, a product of its "weak rule." It was because of its incomplete management of residents, the lack of surveys or registration of the labor force required for mobilization, and the difficulties in administrative procedures for conscription that the colonial ad-

ministration had no choice but to forcibly gather people in every possible way. Additionally, the recruitment of "comfort women" was also carried out in a situation where the administrative authorities could not adequately monitor or manage the Korean communities, leading to legal violations such as abduction and fraudulent recruitment.

However, few people knew that "weak rule" led to "strong mobilization." Instead, the Korean people subject to these policies thought that they were direct measures taken by the powerful administration equipped with legal authority to control and mobilize the people. This perception persisted and spread widely even after the war. Regarding labor mobilization, the term "jing-yong (conscription)" of the National Mobilization Act and the National Conscription Order was used. It encompassed different cases, including a kind of formal contract between an employer and an individual (although in reality, state coercion was often involved). Nonetheless, labor mobilization was perceived as a policy-driven and legally based practice authorized by the National Mobilization Act.

Regarding the mobilization of "comfort women," during the war, there was a saying that they were recruited as Women's Volunteer Corps (yeoja jeongsindae) in Korea and Japan, and then, after liberation, the words became a record in historical texts as evidence of the policy-driven and organized mobilization of "comfort women." In Japan, such discourse was virtually nonexistent, but from the 1970s onward, it began to emerge as a narrative based on information from South Korea. Today, it has been confirmed that the mobilization of Women's Volunteer Corps to military factories and other locations was separate from the mobilization of "comfort women," but the explanation based on the abovementioned perception that the Japanese Empire mobilized "comfort women" through policy and institutions has been generally accepted.

In contrast, the view of the Japanese imperial bureaucrats differed from the discourse that had been passed down in Korea.

First, addressing the question of legal grounds, they said that the mobilization of Koreans to workplaces in Japan under the National Mobilization Law and the National Conscription Order occurred after September 1944, and that the work of "comfort women" did not fall under

the scope of national mobilization, thus being unrelated to the National Mobilization Law (this implies that "comfort women" were not recruited as Women's Volunteer Corps under the Imperial Order for the Mobilization of Women for Labor). Additionally, addressing the "Yoshida Seiji testimony," they said that even considering factors such as the administrative command structure, the relationship between civilian officials and military personnel, and the destabilization of public order, there was no basis for the claim that the Yamaguchi Prefecture's Labor Service Association (Labor Service for the Nation Association) conducted "slave hunting" in Jeju Island pursuant to military orders. These explanations were accurate and reasonable.

However, it is not possible to simply dismiss the perceptions and memories of the Korean people as inaccurate or meaningless. Regardless of whether there was legal basis or official involvement, the Korean people perceived the labor mobilization as no different from the organized coercion of the Japanese Empire, as for them, it represented a form of wartime mobilization.

At the same time, it is necessary to point out that there were possible errors with the perceptions and memories of the ruling class, which could provide accurate explanations based on legal interpretations. Under "weak rule," Japanese imperial bureaucrats could not manage or control the internal dynamics of the Korean people's independent communities. They had no way of knowing what was happening within those communities, nor could they fully understand how the Korean people viewed the Japanese. Therefore, even though there were cases of forced mobilization, illegal abductions, and fraudulent recruitment leading to the recruitment of "comfort women," they were unable to fully grasp this reality. As a result, the Japanese came to hold perceptions and memories that were at odds with the actual situation, believing that they maintained good relations with the Korean people.

And those Japanese who failed to fully grasp the reality of colonial rule often speak of the past as if they alone possessed the accurate facts. Such an attitude stems from the colonialist mindset that the Japanese are capable and the Koreans are ignorant and incapable. Overcoming the af-

tereffects of colonial rule and deepening historical understanding is the path to resolving these historical conflicts.

Born in 1966, Masaru TONOMURA received a Ph.D. from Waseda University in 2003. In 2007, he was appointed an Associate Professor at the Graduate School of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies, the University of Tokyo, and has been serving as a Professor since 2015. His primary research interests include the history of Koreans in Japan and wartime mobilization in colonial Korea. His major publications include *A Historical Study of Korean Communities in Japan* (Ryokuin Shobō, 2002) and *The Forced Mobilization of Koreans* (Iwanami Shoten, 2012).