

CHOSEN, TAKEN, AND RETURNED:
Korean “Comfort Women” and the Struggle against Japanese Colonial
and Post-Colonial Legacies

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To Sun-Yang, who gave me life.

To Rina, who makes life joyful.

To Ku-Ja, who lives on in my memories.

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Abstract

The existence of the “comfort women” continues to create social and political controversy as survivors, former colonies, and the Japanese government struggle to align for their own end goals for redress and reconciliation. The question of responsibility and who is to blame range on a variety of accusations that are highly dependent on cultural perspective and public rhetoric. Since the first “comfort women” survivors have come forward to testify in South Korea, their stories have proliferated into different channels run by several activist and political organizations, unfortunately leading to inconsistency in the appropriation of this historical issue. Skepticism of the “comfort women” issue has been fueled by the disorganized efforts of South Korea and other nations with histories of Japanese colonization to construct misinformed and hostile narratives of denial that seek to preserve Japanese international clout. This thesis, which looks at Korean, Japanese and international scholarship and documentation on the “comfort women”, with direct reference to testimonies from survivors, seeks to navigate through the politicized obscurity of the issue and address the core elements present in the history of Korean “comfort women” in order to provide a critical perspective behind the importance of the subject. It argues that Korean women were systematically dehumanized and targeted by Imperial Japan, which was motivated by sexual exploitation and cultural genocide, prior to and during the Second World War. This argument is supported with analyses into the cultural devaluing of women, the experiences of capture and collaboration between survivors, and the current state of redress and reconciliation efforts framed by Korean and Japanese post-war memories.

Keywords: colonialism, reconciliation, comfort women, sexual violence, war crimes.

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This thesis is the result of a year's worth of intensive research into an uncomfortable and horrific historical tragedy that is as of yet, unresolved for many survivors. This work would have not been possible were it not for those who inspired me to fight on behalf of the "comfort women". My grandmother, who was born during the Japanese occupation, never talked about her experiences, and I grew up in ignorance of the fact until I grew older. My parents, who held it important to educate me in the history of my heritage, began telling me of what my grandmother endured, and what she saw happen to young girls who were family and friends. The stories my grandmother sought to spare me from, and the memory of the "comfort women" that lived in my parent's hearts ignited my desire to one day somehow preserve and share these stories. When my grandmother passed away in late January this year after fighting a long battle against Alzheimer's, my grief only fueled my conviction to complete this thesis to the utmost of my ability. I owe many thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Vanessa S. Oliveira, for her willingness to support this thesis, and her kindness and patience during the research and writing process. I am also incredibly grateful to Mary Lynn Bracht, who directly inspired me to write my thesis on the subject of the "comfort women" after I had the pleasure of reading her book, *White Chrysanthemum* last summer. Mary was also gracious enough to participate in an interview behind the research and writing process of *White Chrysanthemum*, which aided me in developing the correct perspective and framework for this thesis. Finally, I give many thanks to the scholars, researchers, and activists cited in this thesis who have contributed to the fight for redress and reconciliation on behalf of "comfort women" everywhere. I dedicate this thesis to those who suffered under Japanese imperialism and those who continue the fight against it.

Introduction

1927, Japanese-occupied Korea. Yi Ok-Pun was only twelve when she was kidnapped. Yi belonged to a family of six, of which she was the only daughter, and was fortunate enough to attend school as her father was financially stable, running a general supplies business in Yeongcheon, a city located in North Gyeongsang Province. After moving to Ulsan, a city located on the south-east coast of the peninsula, two agents, Japanese and Korean, abducted Yi and confined her for three months before placing her on a ship bound for occupied Taiwan. After four years of labor as a house servant, she was transferred to an Imperial Japanese military base where she was forced into service as a “comfort woman”—coerced organized prostitution meant to provide entertainment and sexual relief for soldiers. Yi Ok-Pun was raped, physically abused, and forced to service anywhere between twenty to thirty Imperial Japanese servicemen per day. She attempted to commit suicide, only to survive bitterly. She watched conscripted Korean countrymen die in Japan’s futile defenses against the Allies’ advance. She was twenty years-old when she finally returned home at the end of the Second World War, and she had no choice but to lie to her weeping mother about where she had been, what she had survived, and what she had lost.¹

South Korea and Japan are widely considered to be two main components to the political tripartite of East Asia, including China. The two nations have histories that date back as far as the Neolithic period, steeped in rich socio-cultural developments and fierce intergenerational conflict.² Indeed, Korea and Japan are—in some respects—sibling nations, having mutually influenced each other over centuries through trade, cultural development, and warfare. Though

¹ Ok-Pun Yi, “Taken Away at Twelve,” edited by Keith Howard. *True Stories of Korean Comfort Women* (London: Cassell, 1995), 96–103.

² Bruce Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 25.

modern political relations between Korea and Japan are currently stable and cautiously operate on ideals of mutual respect, this has not always been the case. Japan has historically sought to formally invade the Korean Peninsula and seize political control through military means, unsuccessfully by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1592 during the Imjin Wars, and successfully in 1910 by Imperial Japan with the annexation of Korea.³ The annexation, which established total political control over Korea, lasted until 1945 with the defeat of Imperial Japan and its unconditional surrender to the Allies during the Second World War.⁴

Over the period of the occupation, most Koreans suffered while a few reaped the benefits. The annexation effectively allowed Imperial Japan to colonize Korea under policies of political and cultural subjugation thinly veiled under ideals of “promot[ing] the welfare and prosperity of Koreans” and “consolidat[ing] the identical interests of Japan and Korea in the Far East by the amalgamation of two peoples whose similarity in race and past culture makes such a task possible.”⁵ In reality, multiple thousands of Koreans were pressed into service by Japanese colonizers, working as forced labourers, military conscripts, and in the case of Korean girls and women, sex slaves. Known today by many as “comfort women”, it is estimated that approximately 200,000 to 400,000 Korean and pan-Asian women were exploited at the hands of Imperial Japan; most official records were destroyed upon the end of the Second World War.⁶

The majority of the women who were forced into Japanese military prostitution were tricked, kidnapped, or sold into sexual slavery, dispersed amongst military bases and Japanese-

³ Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, 76, 145.

⁴ Edward J. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853–1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 252.

⁵ Toyokichi Iyenaga, “Japan's Annexation of Korea.” *The Journal of Race Development* 3, no. 2 (1912): 201.

⁶ Chunghee S. Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 23.

controlled municipalities across Asia such as Manchuria and Burma (current day Myanmar).⁷

Sexual and non-sexual abuse, and murder were the conditions these women endured from Imperial Japanese soldiers and servicemen. Of the approximate 200,000 total, only 240 Korean women retain records of their past service. Of the 240, only *twelve* remain alive at the time of this writing.⁸

This thesis's intent is to gather attention to the Korean "comfort women" issue (CWI) as a mass-organized crime against women during wartime, and by doing so, I will argue that Korean women were specifically designated by the Japanese as dehumanized resources to further their colonization efforts. This thesis seeks to assert that Korean women were systematically targeted in an attempt to commit cultural genocide upon the Korean ethnic identity. In the periods leading up to the annexation of Korea and the Second World War, Korean women were vulnerable to exploitation due to pre-existing elements in Asian cultures that enabled abuse towards women, and have not yet received the reconciliation they deserve due to warped nationalist narratives stemming from both Korean and Japanese institutions. Drawing upon post-wartime documents and testimonies from survivors, official documentation from human rights committees, and interviews from survivors and perpetrators this study attempts to support these claims and answer questions posed by my research during the time of writing: Why were Korean women considered so valuable to Japanese soldiers, who considered racial purity to be an inseparable aspect of their culture? Were there any Korean "comfort women" who knowingly volunteered for service in Japanese military brothels? To what extent was the colonial Korean government implicated in the mobilization of "comfort women"? Who should be blamed for

⁷ Chin Sung Chung, "Korean Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan," edited by Howard, *True Stories of Korean Comfort Women* (London: Cassell, 1995), 13–4.

⁸ "Only 12 "comfort women" victims remain after another passes away." *Hankyoreh*, February 25, 2022. https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1032618.html.

Korean CWIs, and why is reconciliation between Korean “comfort women” and the government of Japan even necessary?

The “comfort women” issue (CWI) in general remains under-exposed in Western public attention concerning war crimes, or is discussed minutely in edited collections dealing with the Second World War; in recent years, more international scholarly attention has been drawn on this topic, particularly by East Asian scholars.⁹ The existence of Korean “comfort women” is a deeply painful and uncomfortable subject that shocked me when I first became aware of their stories as a child. The issue is comparable in importance to more well-known tragedies such as the Holocaust or the physical and cultural extermination of indigenous peoples by Europeans. This thesis approaches the topic of Korean “comfort women” as one that deserves international attention and criticism alongside Western-monopolized or Eurocentric social-justice issues, and aims to empower Asian historical narratives.

Chapter Outlines

The three chapters in this thesis cover several elements surrounding the conception, existence, and post-war memory of Korean “comfort women”. The first provides an overview of the historiography on the subject and a structural look at “comfort women” recruitment and organization, as well as collaboration between Korean and Japanese authorities, to explore what being a “comfort woman” entailed under Japanese imperialism and colonization. The second addresses cultural and historical factors and institutions present in Korean and Japanese societies that enabled exploitation and violence against women, and the eventual existence of “comfort

⁹ See Nayoung A. Kwon, *Intimate Empire: Collaboration & Colonial Modernity in Korea & Japan* (Bogart: Duke University Press, 2015); Pyong Gap Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”: Military Brothels, Brutality, and the Redress Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021); Soh, *The Comfort Women*; Hirofumi Hayashi, “Disputes in Japan over the Japanese Military ‘Comfort Women’ System and Its Perception in History.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 617 (2008); and Maki Kimura, “Listening to Voices: Testimonies of “Comfort Women” of the Second World War.” *Gender Institute* 8, (April 2003).

women” and Japanese military prostitution. The third and final chapter addresses the post-war memories of “comfort women” survivors, Korean and Japanese public opinion, and memorialization. The chapter also addresses the state of politics surrounding the CWI between South Korea and Japan, as well as academic and civil activism fighting for redress and reconciliation.

Unravelling the Identity of Korean “Comfort Women”

In 1910, Imperial Japan formally annexed and occupied Korea, initiating a process of colonization and cultural extermination expressed through the erasure of Korean culture and identity, the imposition of Japanese customs and lifestyles, and the systematic targeting of Korean men and women as cheap and expendable labor. This chapter will examine the context of Japanese annexation, the historiography on “comfort women” and provide a condensed look into their life experiences, including their recruitment, organization, and abuse. In order to expand further on the CWI as a multifaceted issue, this chapter analyzes Korean collaboration in the mobilization of “comfort women” as well as the impact of cultural erasure and genocide. In addition, it challenges the image of these women as powerless victims of history, and shifts the narrative into one that empowers them as survivors of organized assault.

Figure 1.1. “Map of the territory of the Korean kingdom of Joseon.”



▲ Map of Joseon (15th century)

Source: The Academy on Korean Studies, *The Center for International Affairs*, April 2018, http://www.ikorea.ac.kr/webzine/1804/focus_eng.html.

Prior to and at the time of annexation, the Korean Peninsula was under the control of Joseon, a kingdom that formed after the fall of the ancient proto-Korean nation of Goryeo in 1392, (succeeding the Three Kingdoms period between several rival powers from 37 BC to 918 AD).¹⁰ Joseon ruled the Korean Peninsula (pictured in figure 1) for over five-hundred years, developing sophisticated schools of art, sciences, and philosophy under Confucian and Neo-Confucian influence.

Joseon was plagued by external foreign threats to sovereignty and internal corruption over its lifetime. Diplomatic relations with Japan, once cordial, had withered after the Imjin Wars (1592–1598), which were fought between Edo Japan under *daimyo* Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Joseon supported by Ming China.¹¹ The *yangban*, a social class composed of wealthy bourgeoisie and bureaucrats connected to the nobility, held monopolies on land ownership, which severely restricted domestic economic growth and bound the *sangmin* working class into serfdom as farmers and laborers.¹² Women in Korean society during this period were considered to be little more than subservient laborers and child bearers under patriarchal Neo-Confucian teachings, unlike their predecessors in the Goryeo and Three Kingdoms periods who held distinctively more societal and matrilineal power.¹³ Increasingly isolationist foreign policies enacted and enforced by subsequent kings and state officials in response to European encroachment (e.g. French and Portuguese expeditions) into the Pacific did not improve

¹⁰ Kyung Moon Hwang, *A History of Korea* (New York: Red Globe Press, 2016), 31.

¹¹ Kazui Tashiro, "Foreign Relations During the Edo Period: *Sakoku* Reexamined." *Journal of Japanese Studies* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 287.

¹² Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, 52–3.

¹³ Hwang, *A History of Korea*, 21, 64.

conditions either. Joseon was politically weakened by its isolation while Japan remained relatively more receptive to foreign influences and technology (with certain exceptions).¹⁴

Figure 1.2. “The *Daewongun*.”



Source: Photograph by Homer B. Hulbert, *The Passing of Korea*, New York: Doubleday, Page, & Co., circa. 1898,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Heungseon_Daewongun_Portrait.jpg.

By the late 1800s, internal corruption had crippled Joseon to such a degree that last-ditch efforts to Westernize and industrialize were at this point largely futile: isolationism enforced by the *Daewongun* (akin to a regent) Yi Ha-Eung (1820–1898, depicted in figure 2) and the declining power of the monarchy against the *yangban* aristocracy had cost Joseon many of the opportunities to develop that Japan had seized for itself after its opening in 1853.¹⁵

¹⁴ Tashiro, "Foreign Relations During the Edo Period: *Sakoku* Reexamined", 286, 293.

¹⁵ Robert L. Reynolds, *Commodore Perry in Japan* (New York: American Heritage Pub. Co., 1963), 23.

Inner Turmoil and Division

During the years leading up to annexation, Joseon was thrown into a period of political instability. King Go-Jong and Queen Myeong-Seong (later Emperor and Empress of the Korean Empire) were during this time attempting to implement social and economic reform.

After a series of internal clashes that resulted in Chinese and Japanese intervention, negotiations between China and Japan resulted in the signing of the Tientsin Convention in 1885. The Convention placed Joseon into a co-protectorate relationship between Imperial Japan and Qing China, both of whom—under no circumstances—would militarily interfere in Korean affairs.¹⁶ The Convention was orchestrated by Japan, who held out on the knowledge that the conservative and indecisive government of Joseon, which continued to struggle in implementing meaningful political and economic reform, was highly likely to request Chinese intervention in response to internal conflict, and that China would opportunistically leap at the offer. Japan's bet paid off in 1894, nine years after the Tientsin Convention was signed.

Between 1885 and 1894, the return to conservative domestic policies led to a resurgence in the power of the *yangban*, who continued to impose severe land taxes upon the *sangmin*, who revolted several times in different factions across the peninsula.¹⁷ In April of that year, Joseon requested military intervention from both China and Japan; however, China had moved first and deployed soldiers without sending prior notice to Japan, breaching the terms of the Tientsin Convention.

¹⁶ Hwang, *A History of Korea*, 114.

¹⁷ Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, 115, 119.

Figure 1.3. “King Gojong wearing a western-style royal uniform.”



Source: Photographer unknown, *Wikimedia Commons*, October 12, 1897, Gyeongbokgung Palace, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gojong_of_the_Korean_Empire_02.jpg.

Between 1885 and 1894, the return to conservative domestic policies led to a resurgence in the power of the *yangban*, who continued to impose severe land taxes upon the *sangmin*, who revolted several times in different factions across the peninsula.¹⁸ In April of that year, Joseon requested military intervention from both China and Japan; however, China had moved first and deployed soldiers without sending prior notice to Japan, breaching the terms of the Tientsin Convention. The Japanese government was quick to capitalize on the opportunity and accused China of violating their prior agreements.¹⁹ In July, King Gojong (as seen in figure 3) was taken prisoner by the IJA while the *Daewongun* was reinstated as a puppet ruler over the new government, which promptly cut all ties to China and ordered its forces to leave the peninsula.²⁰

¹⁸ Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, 115, 119.

¹⁹ Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword*, 67–8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

China refused to comply or recognize the pro-Japanese government as legitimate. As a result of this disagreement, the First Sino-Japanese War promptly began, fought over the “independence” of Joseon.

In reality, this was a struggle between two predatory world powers over a vulnerable and impressionable stockpile of resources and political advantages, one fighting to keep it, and the other fighting to seize it. Japan emerged the victor and on 17 April 1895, the Treaty of Shimonoseki was signed with China, granting, amongst other articles, the unconditional autonomy of Joseon from any and all forms of vassalship to the latter.²¹ Apart from Japan’s now unchallenged influence over Joseon, the treaty had several unforeseen consequences, most notably the rise of Tsarist Russia’s interest in Korean affairs. Russia had held reservations towards the growing influence of Japan over East Asia, and began staking an interest in the Korean Peninsula as a geopolitical prize and buffer against Japan.²²

Deterioration of Korean Politics

The situation back in Joseon was quickly becoming unsalvageable. Queen Myeong-Seong was considered to be a key personality against the anti-Japanese movement in Korean society. Myeong-Seong was a radical breakaway from the subservient roles expected of women in Korean society, most of all as the wife of the king of Joseon, who were traditionally little more than vessels meant to bear heirs to the throne. Myeong-Seong personally lobbied for modernization and Westernization of Korean society, and advocated for societal reform such as the education of women. Go-Jong, who lacked the personal confidence or education to effectively manage state affairs, was said to have greatly relied on Myeong-Seong’s counsel.²³

²¹ Paine, *The Japanese Empire*, 40.

²² Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword*, 168, 426.

²³ Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, 94.

On 8 October 1895, Queen Myeong-Seong was assassinated. The operation was carried out by a team of *rōnin* (masterless and vagabond *samurai*) recruited by Miura Gorō, the Japanese Foreign Minister appointed to Joseon (depicted in figure 4), in broad daylight at Gyeongbokgung Palace.²⁴ Historian and Asianist author Peter Duus condemned the assassination as a “hideous event, crudely conceived and brutally executed.”²⁵ Shortly after the murder, the *Daewongun*, who had collaborated with Gorō in the planning of the assassination, once again took up residence in the royal palace as his headquarters.

Figure 1.4. “Viscount Miura Gorō, Japanese Foreign Minister to Joseon.”



Source: Photographer unknown, *Kinsei Meishi Shashin vol.2*, circa. 1926, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Miura_Goro.jpg.

The death of the Queen sparked outrage amongst Korean society and invoked condemnation from Western powers, though no response came about from the Japanese government towards Gorō and his supporters. Anti-Japanese sentiment flared and social

²⁴ Ibid., 121.

²⁵ Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword*, 111.

movements demanding the removal of any and all foreign interference in Korean affairs began to grow in the wake of the assassination. The loss of the Queen shattered Go-Jong who began ceding more power to the Japanese, until in a desperate effort to reclaim sovereignty, he declared the creation of the Korean Empire on 13 October 1897.²⁶

Tensions between Japan and Russia over the Korean Peninsula and disputed territories in Manchuria eventually came to a head with the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, in which Japan once again emerged the victor.²⁷ The contested rights to exploit Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula were ceded to Japan under the Treaty of Portsmouth signed in 1905.²⁸ Japan finally achieved political monopoly over the Korean Empire, declaring its status as a protectorate state with the Eulsa Treaty signed later that year with pro-Japanese Korean collaborators. The treaty stripped the Korean Empire of its right to conduct international relations with any other powers without Japanese approval, once again plunging the nation into isolation.²⁹ Go-Jong attempted to prevent the signing of the Eulsa Treaty, having secretly sought the intervention of the international community at the Hague Convention in 1907, but his efforts were unsuccessful.³⁰ Go-Jong could only watch as his nation capitulated to the will of Japan.

22 August, 1910: a date that lives in infamy in Korean history. A Japanese delegation arrived at the capital of Seoul, demanding to meet with Sun-Jong and his ministers. With them, they brought a final treaty that would grant Japan complete control over all aspects of the Korean Empire. Thanks to the political machinations of Japan and Korean collaborators, the annexation

²⁶ Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, 123.

²⁷ Paine, *The Japanese Empire*, 52.

²⁸ Hwang, *A History of Korea*, 123–4.

²⁹ Paine, *The Japanese Empire*, 71.

³⁰ Hwang, *A History of Korea*, 129–30.

was now complete, and over five-hundred years of Korean sovereignty died with the signing of a pen.³¹

In the following years, Japan would colonize Korea and subjugate its peoples, renaming citizens with Japanese names, forbidding the usage of the Korean native language or *hangul* (alphabet), and forcing many of the former *sangmin* working class into labor under Japanese colonists who filled the vacuum left behind by the *yangban* bourgeoisie.³² The annexation of Korea was essentially political warfare, and the end state Japan pursued was the total assimilation of Korea into its empire. Guerilla armies and peaceful resistance movements alike were brutally suppressed by Japanese police and military forces, while Korean archeological sites and artifacts of cultural significance were desecrated and expropriated to fit Japan-centric versions of Asian history (which Japan used to further justify its takeover of Korea to the international community).³³ This pervasive cultural and political war extended to the very genetic identity of the Koreans, who as a colonized people began to intermingle with immigrating Japanese under voluntary and involuntary circumstances. In short, the Joseon Dynasty, after floundering in isolation, constant toadyism, corruption, and societal stagnation, was put out of its misery by Japanese expansion, leaving Korean civilians to pay the cost while the collaborative Korean and Japanese governments reaped the benefits. And so, the suffering of Korean women taken as “comfort women” began.

³¹ Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, 145.

³² Christine De Matos & Mark E. Caprio, *Japan as the Occupier and the Occupied* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 131, 136.

³³ Hyung Il Pai, “The Creation of National Treasures and Monuments: The 1916 Japanese Laws on the Preservation of Korean Remains and Relics and Their Colonial Legacies.” *Korean Studies* 25, no. 1 (2001): 78.

Becoming a “Comfort Woman”

Scholars have disputed the root causations of the comfort women issue (CWI), but there is a general consensus that it is an expression of predatory colonization efforts spearheaded by Imperial Japan.³⁴ Some scholars have taken a quantitative approach to Japanese military prostitution with a focus on the logistics of human trafficking and institutional exploitation,³⁵ while others have constructed a more qualitative narrative around the personal experiences and testimonies of Korean “comfort women” survivors in order to connect cultural and ethical elements to their analyses.³⁶ The scholarship on “comfort women” draws heavily from East Asian/colonial Korean and CWI studies that seek to deconstruct misconceptions and myths surrounding their identity.

In Japan-dominated Korea, the choices for Korean women when it came to survival were severely limited if one was not married to a well-connected individual that posed no threat to or supported the Japanese, such as civil servants, police/military officers, or government bureaucrats. The degree of personal shame that came with having relations with or marrying an agent of the Japanese Empire or a Korean Japanese collaborator would have been a weight many Korean women had to endure, either voluntarily or horrifically involuntarily. It is in this world that being a Korean woman posed immense danger to oneself.

With the 1940 opening of the Pacific theater in the Second World War, the demand for expendable or cheap Korean labor that would spare Japanese craftsmen from menial or

³⁴ See Chung, “Korean Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan;” Pyong Gap Min, “Enough Information, but the Issue was Buried for Half a Century.” Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*; and Chunghee S. Soh, “From Multiple Symbolic Representations to the Paradigmatic Story.” Soh, *The Comfort Women*.

³⁵ See for example Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*.

³⁶ See for example Soh, *The Comfort Women*; and Yonson Ahn, *Whose Comfort?: Body, Sexuality And Identity Of Korean 'Comfort Women' And Japanese Soldiers During WWII* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd., 2020).

dangerous tasks was at an all-time high.³⁷ Korean men entered service as factory workers, construction personnel, and conscripts in the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy (IJA and IJN), sent abroad to other Japanese colonies such as Manchuria and even to Japanese cities such as Hiroshima and Nagasaki to contribute to the war effort.³⁸ Korean women, some of whom had never even had their menarche (the first menstrual cycle), had been disappearing since the beginning of the occupation in 1910. Some, wanting to provide an income in the harsh wartime economy for their families, walked onto trains and boats smiling and laughing with their friends, expecting to travel abroad in service as a nurse or cook. Others were snatched off the streets or sold by relatives and acquaintances.³⁹ For years, these women, most of whom would never return home or see their families again, experienced horrendous trauma and abuse at the hands of Imperial Japanese soldiers.

Over the course of the occupation, Korean women as young as eleven years and up were conscripted as “comfort women”, and it is roughly estimated (due to a lack of documentation stemming from the destruction of records by the Japanese government near the conclusion of the Second World War) that each of these women had to have serviced a maximum of 100 Imperial Japanese servicemen during their internment.⁴⁰ Further statistics conducted by the Korean Council and Research Institute in 1993, 1997, and 1999 reveal that out of 103 recorded Korean “comfort women” survivors, the majority were recruited via coercive and forcible methods such as abduction, employment fraud, and human trafficking, with only four cases of “voluntary” participation (given the survivor’s misinformed preconceptions of what service as a “comfort

³⁷ Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword*, 405.

³⁸ Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, 183.

³⁹ Howard, *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*, 41, 65, 96.

⁴⁰ Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*, 80, 84.

woman” might entail).⁴¹ A question then arises: what determines the status of a Korean woman as a “comfort woman” or not?

Korean scholar Chin Sung Chung presents brief demographics on nineteen survivors, including age, financial and marital status, and hometowns. The youngest recorded survivor was eleven years of age while the oldest was twenty-two, with sequential deviation in age between the extremes.⁴² Chung suggests that according to the survivors’ testimonies, younger women, especially those of under-age and belonging to poorer households, were specifically targeted and preferred by the Japanese.⁴³ Demographic studies conducted by the Korean Council and Research Institute present data that corroborates the pattern in age distribution, with eight cases out of one-hundred and three survivors between eleven to twelve years of age, and the majority of cases (fifty-nine survivors) between sixteen to twenty years of age.⁴⁴ A United States Army report written in 1944 (see Appendix A) detailing the ages of twenty survivors liberated from a Imperial Japanese “comfort station” in Burma (current-day Myanmar) after two years of internment displays a nearly identical pattern of distribution between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five years. Based on these studies, multiple assumptions can be made.

First, it can be assumed that Chung was correct in suggesting the Japanese preferred to target and conscript younger women. In fact, the Japanese did so in full breach of three international laws implemented by the former League of Nations regarding the protection of

⁴¹ Ibid., 90.

⁴² Chung, “Korean Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan,” edited by Howard, *True Stories of Korean Comfort Women*, 17–8.

⁴³ The legal age by international agreement under the League of Nations was twenty-one. Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*, 84.

⁴⁴ “Japanese Prisoner of War Interrogation Report No. 49.” United States Office of War Information: Psychological Warfare Team Attached to U.S. Army Forces India-Burma Theater, Record Group 208. *Records of the Office of War Information*. Last modified October 1, 1944.

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Japanese_Prisoner_of_War_Interrogation_Report_49. Accessed on October 18, 2021.

women and minors against human trafficking and sexual exploitation: the 1904 International Agreement for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic, the 1910 International Convention for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic, and the 1921 International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children.⁴⁵ However, the Japanese government exploited loopholes with regards to the recruitment of “comfort women” on the grounds of colonized people being exempt from these laws. In this way, Japan continued to recruit and exploit under-aged and of-age women from its colonies avoiding foreign attention or intervention, until reports arose of Imperial Japanese soldiers capturing and raping European and Western women stationed in Asia as colonists, missionaries or nurses.⁴⁶

Second, the age demographics strongly suggest that the Korean women conscripted into service as “comfort women” were not—as right-wing Japanese politicians, conservative journalists, and apologetic academics such as J. Mark Ramseyer have claimed—licensed and experienced sex workers legally volunteering to partake in what former Liberal Democratic Party legislator Seisuke Okuno claimed in a 1996 address to be a “commercial activity”.⁴⁷ In fact, post-war records state that even Korean elementary schools for girls were deemed as recruiting grounds for potential “comfort women”, with school teachers (either paid or forced to do so by colonial authorities) acting as agents that coerced under-aged girls into “working abroad” to support their families.⁴⁸ It is important to consider the social and economic context Korea found itself in during the occupation period. Apart from families directly involved in collaborative relations with the Japanese or wealthy enough prior to the occupation, many if not most Korean

⁴⁵ Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*, 84.

⁴⁶ George Hicks, *The Comfort Women: Japan's Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 57.

⁴⁷ Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 66.

⁴⁸ Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*, 95.

households struggled under a restrictive wartime economy meant to benefit foreign Japanese markets and strip Korea of its natural resources.⁴⁹ Income was desperately needed, but volunteering for service in sex work was unthinkable for most Korean women raised under traditional Neo-Confucian or even Western values. Therefore, it must be assumed that only a few Koreans, out of the majority of under-aged women conscripted, knew exactly what they were signing up for, which only strengthens the prevailing argument that these women were forced into sexual slavery, not engaging in pursuits of financial gain. The concept of “voluntarism” is an apologetic illusion within the context of a colonial period of exploitation: under-aged girls cannot “volunteer” to be sexually abused or raped during or outside of wartime.

One example of such a case of coercion can be found in the testimony of Oh Om-Ok, who in 1937, at sixteen years of age, was tricked by a Korean agent working for the Japanese into believing she would be working in a textile factory located abroad in Japan. Instead, she and a friend were placed on a train bound for Manchuria and would spend the remainder of the Second World War in service as “comfort women”, until Japan’s unconditional surrender in 1945 and the liberation of Korea by Allied forces. Oh was forced to sexually service a minimum average of five and a maximum of ten Imperial Japanese servicemen per day, and though she was paid for her services, Oh struggled to suppress the physical and mental trauma she had to endure during her time in service: “I wept a lot in the early days...I realized that I must do whatever they wanted of me if I wished to survive.”⁵⁰

Ramseyer, in his controversial article “Contracting for sex in the Pacific War” argues that Korean and Asian women chose to engage in prostitution under the Japanese military because

⁴⁹ De Matos & Caprio, *Japan as the Occupier and the Occupied*, 113–4.

⁵⁰ Omok Oh, “I Thought I Was Going to a Textile Factory,” edited by Howard, *True Stories of Korean Comfort Women*, 66.

“they believed prostitution offered them a better outcome.”⁵¹ According to Ramseyer, “women knew that recruiters could lie, knew that brothel owners could cheat, and did not quietly defer to abusive parents.”⁵² What Ramseyer critically fails to address or acknowledge in his study, however, is that the majority of cases concerning Japan’s conscription of Korean “comfort women” did not reflect pre-existing structures of licensed or un-licensed prostitution. They were, in vulgar terms, the procurement of “fresh meat” into military brothels. Across every testimony analyzed, “mobilization”, as Chung states, “was violent and coercive”, and was far from formal business agreements conducted with contracts, pay advances, and “paying off debts” as Ramseyer argues.⁵³ Ramseyer’s remarks, therefore, lack relevant historical contextualization, insult Oh’s memory as well as the rest of Korean “comfort women” victims, and trivializes the violence they endured as inevitable by-products of their “financial decisions”.

Within his population sample of 103 survivors, Pyong Gap Min categorizes the means of recruitment for “comfort women” into six types: coercive means (12%); abduction or kidnapping (17%), partially coercive means and methods (15%), employment fraud (37%), human trafficking (15%), and voluntary or semi-voluntary participation (4%).⁵⁴ With regards to his sixth category, “Voluntary or semi-voluntary participation,” however, Min affirms that “[under-aged Korean ‘comfort women’] should be considered legally as involuntary participants in Japanese military brothels, regardless of the mode of their mobilization.”⁵⁵ Chunghee Soh goes further to address the instances of explicit voluntarism by Korean women of legal age by mentioning the

⁵¹ J. Mark Ramseyer, “Contracting for sex in the Pacific War.” *International Review of Law and Economics* 65 (March 2021): 2.

⁵² Ramseyer, “Contracting for sex in the Pacific War”, 2.

⁵³ Chung, “Korean Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan”, 20.

⁵⁴ Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*, 89.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

contemporary view argued by modern apologetics towards Japanese culpability: “even those who became ‘prostitutes’—in the sense that they ‘voluntarily’ entered [Japanese military brothels] without overt physical coercion and received money for their services—were also often under economic and social compulsion.”⁵⁶

Organized Exploitation

For the Japanese, the sourcing of under-aged Korean girls, who most likely had never experienced penetrative sexual intercourse with a man, addressed the abhorrent issues of “quality” and “quantity”. Quality referred to ensuring the “comfort women” provided to Imperial Japanese servicemen would be free of venereal or sexually-transmitted infections and diseases.⁵⁷ Quantity referred to the problem of consistent recruitment and procurement of new “comfort women” to replace those that could no longer physically or mentally function, or died from their injuries. Mass-conscripting Japanese women who had never experienced penetrative sexual intercourse or were free from STIs/STDs into service as “comfort women” would have been counter-productive to the Japanese war effort: the undeniably indignant reaction from Japanese civil society would be disastrous to national morale and fighting spirit.⁵⁸ Hence, Koreans—alongside other captured women of various ethnicities—suffered to fill the need, with especially severe physical and psychological consequences.

Scholarly work and primary sources provide evidence that the Japanese and Korean governments were equally responsible for the coerced recruitment of under-aged Korean “comfort women”, and that the conscription of Korean “comfort women” was a meditated, mass-organized military operation over the course of the occupation and the Second World War. The

⁵⁶ Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 114.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁸ Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*, 26, 85.

Japanese specifically targeted under-aged demographics of Korean women outside of the established sex industry in order to fulfill the aforementioned necessities of quality and quantity, aided by collaborative Korean agents. Chunghee Soh argues that apart from the obvious implications of the Japanese, Korean participation in the issue must be considered within the frame of a cultural and societal failure to both prevent and address gendered structural violence against Korean women.⁵⁹

The conscription of “comfort women”, according to Soh, not only stemmed from the environment of war perpetuated by Japan across Asia, but also by patriarchal and exploitative elements found in Korean socio-cultural family dynamics. These dynamics stripped women of autonomy or power and quite literally sold them into sexual slavery. Soh cites the testimonies of “comfort women” survivors Mun P’il-Gi and Yi Sang-Ok to present evidence of her claims concerning the prevalence of “institutionalized *everyday* gender violence” and “masculinist sexual culture” in Korean society.⁶⁰

Mun P’il-Gi was eighteen when she was first recruited by a Korean agent with promises of travel abroad and opportunities to study. Mun had had a lifetime desire to study and attend school, which was harshly discouraged and rejected by her father, who conservatively disapproved of the education of women. The treatment suffered by Mun at the hands of her father, who burned her schoolbooks and beat her, instilled painful feelings of bitterness and resentment towards her role as the eldest daughter as well as her inability to access education or personal freedom. When the Korean agent approached Mun with propositions of possible escape, Mun accepted his offer and left without notifying her family. Only after she was transferred into

⁵⁹ Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 237–8.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

custody of the Japanese police and placed on a train bound for Manchuria did she begin to realize that she had been deceived.⁶¹

Yi Sang-Ok was younger than Mun: fifteen when she was taken by a Japanese agent under the pretense that she would be employed in an overseas factory in Japan. Like Mun, Yi also desired to educate herself and attend school, but in her case, her older brother forbade her from pursuing these ambitions, “burn[ing] [her] books, threatening to kill [her] if [she] attempted to go to school again.”⁶² Unable to endure her brother’s abuse, Yi ran away from home and left for Seoul to stay with her aunt who managed a textile shop. Her aunt’s family sympathized with Yi’s desire for education and financially assisted her in order to attend school, but her brother continued to express his condemnation and uphold his threats towards Yi should she ever return home. Running out of options, Yi witnessed a group of Korean women being recruited by a Japanese agent with promises of employment and requested to be included. Yi along with the original group of women were taken to Shimonoseki in Japan, where instead of a factory, they were taken to a Japanese military brothel run by collaborative Korean civilians.⁶³

Ramseyer argues that licensed Korean “prostitutes” received an upfront advance at the beginning of their service as well as regular installments of payment that easily allowed them to repay deducted expenses (such as clothing, room, and board) and return home.⁶⁴ This is a gross oversimplification and misrepresentation of the experiences faced by Korean “comfort women”. According to Soh, “the proprietor deducted expenses for her clothes, cosmetics, and other personal belongings from the monthly income, so, Yi recalled, she never actually held money in

⁶¹ Mun P’il-Gi, “Mun P’il-gi and Her Daughterly *Han*,” edited by Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 82.

⁶² Sang-Ok Yi, “More Daughterly *Han* Narratives,” *ibid.*, 86.

⁶³ Yi, “More Daughterly *Han* Narratives”, *ibid.*, 87.

⁶⁴ Ramseyer, “Contracting for sex in the Pacific War”, 5.

her hand.”⁶⁵ Therefore, Soh argues that both Mun and Yi are examples of Korean women who were not only victims of Japanese sexual exploitation, but also harmful and sexist cultural dynamics present in Korean society that directly magnified the vulnerability of Korean women as targets for sexual slavery.

Min refutes this argument, stating that Korean involvement was structural and political rather than cultural, and to suggest so reduces the accountability of Japanese involvement and orchestration of events.⁶⁶ Min cites the harsh wartime economy implemented over Korea by Japan as an occupier as a stressor in socio-economic dynamics, especially amongst lower-class *sangmin* and agricultural households. “Thus,” he argues, “the extreme poverty caused by the government’s economic exploitation of Korea was more responsible for their negligence and sale of daughters than Confucian patriarchal customs were.”⁶⁷ In effect, Min accuses Soh of having ignored or undermined the overall detrimental effects of Japan’s colonization upon Korea, which suggests that Korean culture and family dynamics are inherently flawed and backwards—an argument apologists and justifiers for Japanese war crimes against Koreans have historically weaponized.⁶⁸ Surviving documentation from IJA and IJN records (seen in figure 1) incriminate the extent of Japan’s drafting and bureaucratic organization of the mass rape and exploitation of “comfort women”.

⁶⁵ Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 87.

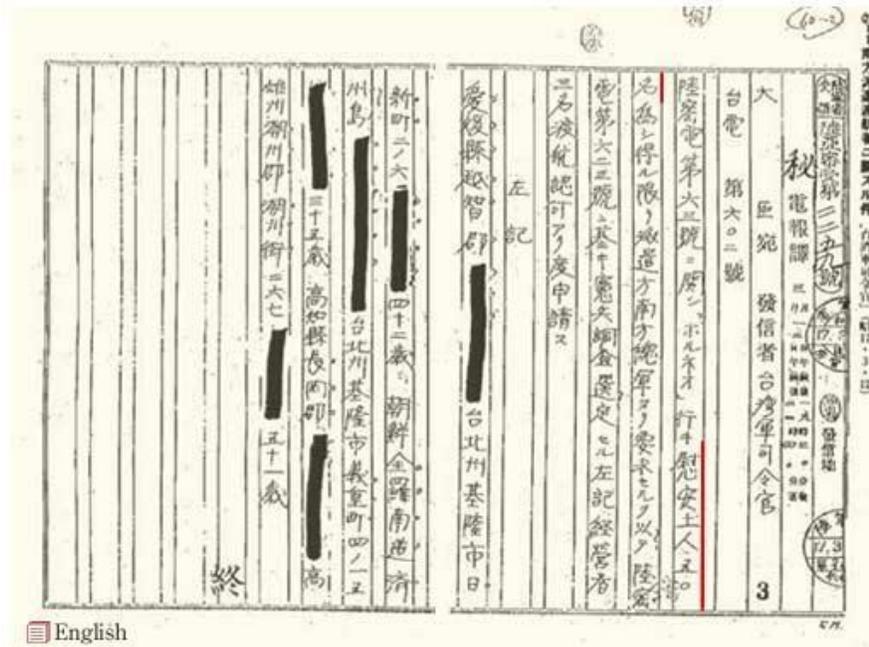
⁶⁶ Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*, 100.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁶⁸ Toyokichi Iyenaga, “Japan’s Annexation of Korea.” *The Journal of Race Development* 3, no. 2 (1912): 205.

Fig. 1.5. “Telegram sent by Imperial Japanese Army Command of Taiwan to the Army Minister.”

The Commander of the Taiwan Army to the Minister of War “On the Travelers Going to South”, 12 March 1942, *Shiryoshusei*, Vol. II, pp. 203-204.



The text reads: ‘in regards to the Army Minister secret telegram No. 63, I would like to ask travel permission of the following three business managers who were chosen by our Military Police...as the Southern Army General Command had requested that 50 native comfort women, or as close to that number as possible, should be sent to the Island of Borneo.’ Names are censored.” Source: IJA Commander of the Taiwan Army, *The Asian Women’s Fund*, March 12, 1942, <https://www.awf.or.jp/e1/facts-06.html>.

Japanese war crimes historian Hirofumi Hayashi reveals that the IJA and IJN created the “comfort women” as assets for the war effort. The IJA and IJN organized the logistics and infrastructure required to implement “comfort women” into the world of the military; the experiences and trauma suffered by “comfort women” were deemed inconsequential by Japan's Imperial General Headquarters.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Hirofumi Hayashi, “Disputes in Japan over the Japanese Military ‘Comfort Women’ System and Its Perception in History.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 617 (2008): 125.

This is not to say that Soh is incorrect in drawing attention to the misogynistic and patriarchal aspects of conservative and traditional Korean Neo-Confucian culture, which has directly and indirectly resulted in the suffering and exploitation of Korean women. However, fixating on the economic plight of patriarchal Korean households as a decisive factor towards the recruitment of comfort women toys with inequitable racial arguments concerning cultural poverty.

Ramseyer goes beyond to claim that the fault lied with neither the Japanese or Korean governments, or the Imperial Japanese military, but “[i]nstead, the problem involved domestic Korean recruiters who had been tricking young women into working at brothels for decades.”⁷⁰ However, his claim ignores undebatable evidence presented by Soh, Min, and other scholars who have written on CWIs concerning the explicit implication of all mentioned actors who are supposedly blameless. In response to the controversies his article garnered, Ramseyer went on to lengthily defend his claims by taking a hardline approach into a complete and explicit denial of the CWI: “Korean women were not programmatically and forcibly conscripted by Japanese soldiers in Korea into comfort station work. There is no contemporaneous documentary evidence of forcible conscription.”⁷¹ What Ramseyer seemingly repeatedly fails to realize is that his views on the supposed “inaccuracies” of relying primarily on survivors’ testimonies have been indulged by the censorship and destruction of information, records, and documents during and after the Second World War by Japanese authorities.⁷² Thus, both his original article and his response are stunted in their scholarship.

⁷⁰ Ramseyer, “Contracting for sex in the Pacific War”, 5.

⁷¹ J. Mark Ramseyer, “Contracting for sex in the Pacific War: A Response to My Critics.” *Harvard Law School John M. Olin Center Discussion Paper*, no. 1075 (January 4, 2022), 1.

⁷² Ramseyer, “Contracting for sex in the Pacific War: A Response to My Critics”, 34.

In truth, both Soh and Min place blame upon Korean agents who collaborated with the Japanese in the recruitment and mobilization of “comfort women”, many of who seemed “to have known that the women they recruited were destined to provide sexual services to Japanese soldiers at Japanese military brothels.”⁷³ Both also argue that resolving the Korean “comfort women” requires knowledge of the extent of roles Korean collaborators played in the recruitment and exploitation of “comfort women”. In both Mun and Yi’s cases, as well as many other survivors’, collaborative agents embedded within Korean society were consistently present alongside Japanese authorities, reaching levels as high as national organization fronts such as the Korean Women’s Volunteer Labor Corps.

The Women’s Volunteer Labor Corps Front

The Volunteer Labor Corps program was established in Japan and across its colonies during the late 1930s to address the critical need for labour in wartime industries, though the impressment and conscription of the Korean population had long been utilized under legal and illegal means by the Japanese government since the beginning of the occupation.⁷⁴ It is estimated that under the Volunteer Labor Corps, over two-hundred thousand Korean men of school-age were pressed into manual labour or conscripted into the Imperial Japanese military.⁷⁵ Records for Korean women (some of whom are depicted in figure 2) in service are even more in-exact, ranging from anywhere between 4,000 to 70,000 in number.⁷⁶

⁷³ Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*, 101.

⁷⁴ Igor R. Saveliev, “Trapped in the Contested Borderland: Sakhalin Koreans, Wartime Displacement and Identity,” edited by Christine De Matos & Mark E. Caprio. *Japan as the Occupier and the Occupied*, 174.

⁷⁵ Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 18.

⁷⁶ Tok-Song Kim, “Migyol 25 Nyon: Chosindae.” *Seoul Shinmun*, August 14, 1970. Edited by Soh. *The Comfort Women*, 20.

While the Women’s Volunteer Labor Corps operated under legitimate practices by “hiring” preferably unmarried Korean women between the ages of twelve to thirty-nine (whose salaries were often withheld or cycled back into Japanese treasuries) to serve in factories, workshops, and munition lines for the war effort, the organization also served as a convenient means for Japanese authorities to conscript Korean women into service as “comfort women”.⁷⁷

In one anonymous testimony, a survivor was coerced into joining the Volunteer Labor Corps sometime after 1938 to free her imprisoned father, who had refused to work for or support the Japanese war industry and adopt a Japanese name.

Fig. 1.6. “Korean women tasked under the Women’s Volunteer Labor Corps saluting a Japanese officer.”



Source: Photographer unknown, *Mainichi Newspapers Company*, June 1944, Accessed on March 3, 2022.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Women_volunteer_corps2.JPG#filelinks.

Once agreeing to the terms of employment however, she was immediately transported to a Japanese military brothel in Jakarta, and *en route* underwent a forced surgical procedure that

⁷⁷ Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 18.

permanently sterilized her (this operation, while not constant across all “comfort women” experiences, was nonetheless a method used by the Japanese to prevent pregnancies and enact cultural genocide-driven violence against female populations).⁷⁸ It must be clarified that not all participants of the Women’s Volunteer Labor Corps can be considered “comfort women”, as many remained employed in legitimate front industries (though these participants may also have experienced sexual abuse and harm from Japanese occupation forces). These women who were strictly employed and utilized as laborers are identified under the term *jungshindae* (정신대 lit., “volunteering body corps”). However, Min’s analysis of the testimonies of one-hundred and three Korean “comfort women” survivors, some of whom were falsely employed under the Women’s Volunteer Labor Corps, indicates that the two methods of mobilization for Korean women are not completely mutually exclusive.⁷⁹

Keeping in mind the prevailing differences, the organization of the Women’s Volunteer Labor Corps spanned from Japanese and collaborative Korean government offices to extremely localized environments such as elementary schools for girls and rural neighborhoods. Schoolteachers, male and female, Japanese and Korean, acted as recruiting agents for the Volunteer Labor Corps, keeping an eye out for “healthy girls from poor families.”⁸⁰ Other more forcible methods were used by municipal police and military forces to deceive, intimidate, threaten, and outright kidnap younger and older Korean women under justifications provided by wartime civilian drafting.⁸¹ Yonson Ahn cites the testimony of “Kim Un-Jin” (pseudonym), who

⁷⁸ Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 230.

⁷⁹ Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*, 39.

⁸⁰ Ahn, *Whose Comfort? Body, Sexuality, and Identities of Korean “Comfort Women” and Japanese Soldiers during WWII*, 11.

⁸¹ Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 19.

was recruited into the Women's Volunteer Labor Corps deceptively at just twelve years of age in 1944 and taken away to a Japanese military brothel located in Japan, is yet another example of wartime civilian drafting being weaponized as an opportunity to procure underaged and young Korean women for use as "comfort women".⁸² The terms of employment for the Women's Volunteer Labor Corps sometimes included a contractual legal document signed by the victim as a means of control (this occurred on an inconsistent case-by-case basis depending on the means of recruitment): practically a "consent" form that voided what little rights and dignity Korean women from lower classes had had left under the occupation. These contracts also served to falsify and inflate Japanese government and military records by labelling the Korean women who were transferred from labor duties into service as "comfort women" as legitimate employees of the state, thereby attributing an illusion of some kind of voluntarism (though the full extent to which this record falsification was carried out by the Japanese is unclear due to the late and postwar destruction of official documentation).⁸³

Regardless of scale, most scholars recognize that the Korean Women's Volunteer Labor Corps operated on legitimate and illegal fronts concerning wartime labor and the procurement of new "comfort women". Some, such as Chung, argue that the majority of Korean comfort women were in fact sourced from *jungshindae* (Women's Volunteer Labor Corps workers) who were sexually targeted and transferred into Japanese military brothels.⁸⁴ Others such as Soh refute this argument, attributing it as a collective misidentification of female Korean victims of Japanese colonialism by nationalists seeking to weaponize a myth concerning an ethno-cultural historical

⁸² Ahn, *Whose Comfort?*, 181.

⁸³ Tomomi Yamaguchi, "Revisionism, Ultrationalism, Sexism: Relations Between the Far Right and the Establishment Over the 'Comfort Women' Issue." *Social Science Japan Journal* 21, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 229.

⁸⁴ Chin Sung Chung, *Ilbon'gun Songnoyeje* (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2004), 20–1.

tragedy, and drawing a clear line between *jungshindae* and “comfort women” victims.⁸⁵ Soh argues that the utilization of the *jungshindae* identity reinforces Korea’s self-preserving socio-historical ideal of “comfort women” as the “‘virgin’ mobilized coercively or deceptively as a labor recruit,” “obscures their individual personhood,” and that evidence concerning the actual recruitment of “comfort women” from the Women’s Volunteer Labor Corps is inconsistent and lacking.”⁸⁶ Min, however, goes against Soh’s claims of *jungshindae*-sourced “comfort women” as nationalist historical warping to argue the establishment of two orders of Korean women who were exploited by Japan during the occupation: *cheonyeogongchul* (체녀공출, lit., “virgin supply”), who were unmarried young women coerced or forced into service as “comfort women”, and *jungshindae* who were sexually abused and ultimately utilized as “comfort women”.⁸⁷ Across the testimonies that Chung, Soh, and Min, and other scholars have analyzed and provided in their writings, employment fraud, whether under the Women’s Volunteer Labor Corps or not, is nonetheless a recurring factor.

The Role of the Colonial Korean Government

After the annexation in 1910, the Korean government effectively became a puppet organization under Japanese ministers, supported by Korean collaborators such as Prime Minister Yi Wan-Yong and others belonging to the educated elite and the *yangban*. These political collaborators, later derogatorily branded *chinilpa* (친일파; lit. “pro-Japan faction”), initially thought themselves to have Korean interests at heart at best, viewing Japan as a benefactor that would guide Korea out of its backwater squalor and aid in its modernization and

⁸⁵ Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 58–9.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 58, 72. 76.

⁸⁷ Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*, 89.

reformation.⁸⁸ At worst, other collaborators viewed pledging allegiance to Japan as a profitable venture that would line their pockets with money or ensure they remained in power.⁸⁹ As the occupation progressed, however, collaborators found themselves confronted with harsh realities, such as cultural erasure and assimilation, the exploitation of Korean labour and natural resources, and the Korean populace being effectively held hostage by colonial forces. Some began to view the occupation as a harsh necessity for culling the self-sabotaging aspects of Korean socio-political affairs before a “distant day of independence”, while others turned a blind eye to the suffering of the Korean people.⁹⁰

The Office of the Government-General of Korea was confirmed to have been directly involved in the planning of procuring girls and women for Japanese military brothels during the occupation. Divisions of the IJA would regularly make requests for a certain quota of Korean women to be sent to their units as new “comfort women” recruits before and after large-scale deployments to the battle front.⁹¹ The Women’s Volunteer Labor Corps occasionally served as a front organization for the recruitment of “comfort women”, but the Government-General of Korea extensively used the central bureaucratic infrastructure constructed by the Japanese to enlist heads of townships and regions to conduct recruitment drives for unmarried women belonging to low-income families.⁹² These women would be lured by the prospect of working abroad in Japanese factories and the ability to provide for their families. However, when

⁸⁸ The arrival of the Japanese admittedly eliminated much of the convoluted and patrimonial bureaucracy that had plagued Joseon politics, centralizing government offices. Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, 152.

⁸⁹ Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 138.

⁹⁰ Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, 157.

⁹¹ Kakou Senda, *Jūgun Ianfu: Seihen (Military Comfort Women: The Main Edition)* (Tokyo: San’ichi Shobo, 1990), 113.

⁹² Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 139.

deception failed or did not produce adequate numbers, Korean authorities turned to the use of force.

The most infamous branch of the colonial Korean government was its domestic police force, of which forty to fifty percent remained of Korean ethnicity across the occupation.⁹³ Across several testimonies from survivors, the role of the colonial police force consistently fulfills one of explicit culpability. Policemen, Japanese and Korean, kidnapped, coerced, and raped Korean women during nation-wide hunts across towns and cities on behalf of Japanese military brothels.⁹⁴ Policemen of Korean ethnicity were especially known for using appearances of “race kinship” to instill a false sense of security in young girls, who did not expect to be abducted or harmed by who they viewed as countrymen. Socio-cultural power dynamics concerning male positions of authority in Korean society only facilitated this predatory relationship.⁹⁵

Erasure of Identity and Cultural Genocide

The origins of the “comfort women” system supposedly stem from the Imperial Japanese Ministry of the Army’s efforts to minimize destructive and wanton wartime rape during and after battles, such as in the case of the Rape of Nanjing (December 1937). However, the inner workings of the organization of “comfort women” suggest more insidious motivations. Cultural genocide is, according to Raphael Lemkin, part of a multifaceted whole that makes up a large-

⁹³ Ibid., 153.

⁹⁴ See Mun P’il-Gi, “Mun P’il-gi and Her Daughterly *Han*,” edited by Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 82; Chunghee S. Soh, “More Daughterly *Han* Narratives.” Ibid., 90; Pyong Gap Min, “Illustrations of Different Modes of Mobilization.” Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*, 92–3; “Further Promotion and Encouragement of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Including the Question of the Programme and Methods of Work of the Commission. Alternative Approaches and Ways and Means within the United Nations System for Improving the Effective Enjoyment of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.” UNITED NATIONS Economic and Social Council: COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS (Last modified January 4, 1996), 13.

⁹⁵ The Korean Council and Korean Research Institute, *Gangjero Kkeulryeogan Choseonin Gunwianbudeul (The Forcibly Drafted Korean Comfort Women)* (Seoul: Hanul Press, 1993), 288–9.

scale attack on every aspect of a captive or colonized people. Cultural genocide targets a people's way of life in order to facilitate their complete and utter destruction, usually comprising of an attack on the symbols of the group or by violent interference with religious or cultural activities.⁹⁶ These attacks can manifest as the forbidding of the usage of a native language and the stripping of national and ethnic identity.

Korean women who became “comfort women” were oftentimes renamed with Japanese names, forbidden to speak Korean with their compatriots, and forced to wear Japanese or Chinese-styled clothing in lieu of *hanbok* (traditional Korean clothing sewn from a variety of light fabrics).⁹⁷ In this manner, Japanese authorities stripped away the cultural and ethnic identity of Korean “comfort women”, not to mention the more violent sexual attacks on the Korean Neo-Confucian importance of chastity and purity before marriage. By targeting members of Korean society who were directly responsible for producing and rearing the next generation, Japanese efforts to commit cultural genocide upon the Korean populace were most explicitly seen in the case of the Korean “comfort women”.

An important distinction to make between “comfort women” and sex workers during wartime, such as those during the First and Second World Wars in Germany and other European nations, is the significance of genocidal rape. Genocidal rape consists of sexual violence directed at a specific group in order to eradicate the ethnic identity of the former, as opposed to wartime

⁹⁶ Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944), 79–95. See also Edward C. Luck, “Cultural Genocide and the Protection of Cultural Heritage.” *J. Paul Getty Trust Occasional Papers in Cultural Heritage Policy*, no. 2 (2018): 20.

⁹⁷ See Hak-Sun Kim, “Bitter Memories I Am Loath to Recall,” edited by Howard, *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*, 35; Sun-Nyo Ha, “I Would Rather Die,” *ibid.*, 60; Okchu Mun, “Back to My Wretched Life,” *ibid.*, 107.

rape which is more indiscriminate and widespread in nature.⁹⁸ For example, German military brothels operating throughout occupied European territories during the Second World War were organized under similar principles (compared to their Japanese counterparts) in order to provide debased sexual release for soldiers.⁹⁹ However, the Germans did not explicitly seek to eradicate the ethnic identity of the women incarcerated in military brothels to the extent that the Japanese attempted with Korean women. European women were kidnapped and coerced into service as sex workers in a similar fashion to Korean “comfort women”, but were not targets of organized cultural genocide.

Conclusion

Based on this historiography, several verdicts can be drawn. The first is that specific demographics of Korean women were identified and targeted by Japanese and collaborative authorities outside of the established sex industry at the time. Truly voluntary participation from these demographics must have had to have included full knowledge or debriefing of the extent of sexual abuse and exploitation. Therefore, counter arguments against the CWI concerning Korean women “volunteering” to become Japanese military prostitutes must take into account the inherently unscrupulous methods and legal terms used by Japanese and collaborative Korean agents.

The second is that Korean “comfort women” should not be labeled as helpless victims of Japanese imperialism, as this argument strips the autonomy and agency of the individual testimony. Many Korean “comfort women” unjustly suffered and endured horrific abuses to their personhood and dignity, some of which will be explored and explained in the following chapter.

⁹⁸ Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Are Women Human?* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 209.

⁹⁹ Nanda Herbermann, Hester Baer & Elizabeth R. Baer, *The Blessed Abyss: Inmate #6582 in Ravensbruck Concentration Camp for Women* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 33–4.

Some Korean women saw fit to establish exclusive relationships with Japanese military officers (some of which were mutually dependent or even arguably romantic in nature) as a means to escape the brutality of the common-use brothel and gain better chances to survive.¹⁰⁰ In any case, this study suggests that Korean “comfort women” should be considered to be survivors of trauma, not simply as victims.

The final verdict of this chapter addresses which parties should be held responsible for the tragedy of the Korean “comfort women”. Merging Soh and Min’s arguments (and even taking Ramseyer’s into consideration), both Japanese and collaborative Korean actors in the narrative are equally to blame. In dialogue with this scholarship, this thesis suggests that every level of organization and manpower overseeing the recruitment, transportation, and rape of Korean “comfort women” were, are, and should be held accountable, regardless whether they were Japanese or Korean in origin.

¹⁰⁰ Ahn, *Whose Comfort?*, 135.

Systems of Oppression and Dehumanization

The mobilization of Korean women as “comfort women” for Japanese military brothels could not have been undertaken without extensive political, logistical, and economic support from both the Korean and Japanese governments. The implication of both governments in this crime against women also suggests that the exploitation of women in such a manner was morally or ethically permissible in both Korean and Japanese societies. This is not to say that Korean and Japanese societies were objectively oppressive towards women without exception: in certain cases, women could still attain inheritance, education, and political influence, albeit severely limited in comparison to men.¹⁰¹ Rather, certain elements present in Korean and Japanese societies enabled behaviours of sexual violence against women: the framework for the future exploitation of Korean women on such a scale as one committed during the occupation was already in place by the time that the Japanese took over.

In the previous chapter, we covered a brief overview on Korean women and the roles they endured within the Japanese occupation, with examples of methods used by the Korean and Japanese governments to recruit women into sexual slavery as well as testimonies from survivors that framed the use of politics, bureaucracy, and military operations as oppressive tools. This chapter examines the root cultural causes of this tragedy: the norms, factors and institutions present in Korean and Japanese societies that facilitated or allowed the sexual and non-sexual exploitation of women through civil and military means. By analyzing and cross-referencing testimonies from Korean “comfort women” survivors and Imperial Japanese servicemen, and evaluating Korean and Japanese gender roles and norms during the late 19th to early 20th

¹⁰¹ Hwang, *A History of Korea*, 64.

centuries, we can establish a better explanation as to why this tragedy was allowed to occur in the first place.

Neo-Confucianism as a Foundation for Korean Women's Oppression

In Western popular culture leading up to the period of the occupation, Korea was culturally and politically overshadowed by Japan, who, prior to and after the *sankoku* isolationist policy, had extensively invested in its international image to appeal to Western interests. For example, the *Japonisme* movement in European fine art during the late 19th century, which proliferated Japanese art forms into mainstream attention, was widespread in its popularity, influencing figures such as Vincent Van Gogh, James Tissot, and Claude Monet.¹⁰²

Korea on the other hand fared poorly: the “Hermit Kingdom” was, as British explorer and naturalist Isabella Bird described after her visit to Seoul in 1898 (pictured in figure 1), a filthy cesspool that bred poverty and sickness.¹⁰³ American journalist and correspondent Jack London in 1903 during his travels through the peninsula condemned the very nature of the Korean people as “utter[ly] worth[less]”, “spiritless”, and apathetic to self-preservation or morality.¹⁰⁴ Though Bird and London's observations are at face-value discriminatory and prejudiced, they must be taken into context with Korea's socio-political system and civic culture at the time. Both Bird and London correctly observed that the *yangban* bourgeoisie and corrupt regional governments were directly to blame for the dismal social state of Korea. Needless to say, Korea's stagnation compounded the struggles of the *sangmin* working class to survive, which would have

¹⁰² Karin Breuer, *Japanesque: The Japanese Print in the Era of Impressionism* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2010), 41.

¹⁰³ Isabella L. Bird, *Korea and Her Neighbours: A Narrative of Travel, with an Account of the Vicissitudes and Position of the Country* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1898) 266.

¹⁰⁴ Daniel Metraux, *The Asian Writings of Jack London* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), 297.

repercussions on the cultural and political dynamic of Korea before and during the Japanese occupation.

Fig. 2.1. “Koreans gathered by a stream flowing through Seoul. Some can be seen bathing or washing their clothes.”



Source: Photographer unknown, *Vintage News Daily*, circa 1890, Seoul, https://1.bp.blogspot.com/-RAKyb_W4ftA/X4s9J-6BhYI/AAAAAAD5y8/k4nPi26vuSkQF0D-VEScDguAOB3bbvCrACLcBGAsYHQ/s1000/seoul-1890s-31.jpg.

Harsh living conditions and dogmatic Neo-Confucian ethics did not make most things easy or enjoyable for Korean women, especially those belonging to *sangmin* (the working class) or financially struggling households. Conservative Korean Neo-Confucianism forbids (or at the very least severely frowns upon) women from finding formal employment away from homemaking duties, and in modern times continues to influence, either subconsciously or explicitly, discriminatory behaviours against women in blue or white-collar occupations in Korea.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Jean R. Renshaw, *Korean Women Managers and Corporate Culture: Challenging tradition, choosing empowerment, creating change* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2011), Chapter 3, Section 1, para. 2.

Confucianism is thought to have been introduced to Korea during the Three Kingdoms period between 37 BC to roughly 918 AD by traveling Chinese scholars and monks.¹⁰⁶ After the founding of the Joseon dynasty, Neo-Confucianism, which reformed teachings from its forebear to better suit Korean society, rose to prominence as the official state philosophy between the 14th to 16th centuries, undergoing further development in the later half of the Joseon dynasty.¹⁰⁷ Confucianism at its core is a culmination of tenets with which to conduct one's life virtuously and righteously, comparable to Hellenistic moral philosophies that assert a worldview built upon ethics. Where Confucianism and Hellenistic philosophies diverge, however, is on the nature of human beings possessing inherent and inescapable flaws. The Hellenistic view of evil or wrongdoing is portrayed as Sisyphean: a struggle with a demon that never dies. Confucianism instead views morality to be relative in the grand scheme of cosmic balance: push and pull, life and death, good and evil, yin and yang.¹⁰⁸ Chinese and Korean philosophers attempted, and continue to attempt to extract pragmatic approaches to life from these very abstract and metaphysical beliefs.

When it comes to the societal standing and treatment of women, interpretations of Neo-Confucianism have attempted to embody and maintain the cosmic balance by addressing the female “yin” as the natural counterpart to the male “yang” spirit. During the Joseon era (1392–1897), women were ideally entrusted with maintaining the health and happiness of their households by raising their children virtuously and providing support and care to their husbands. In such a manner, Neo-Confucianism was meant to preserve and reinforce a unique Korean

¹⁰⁶ Hwang, *A History of Korea*, 31.

¹⁰⁷ Youngjin Choi, “The History of Confucianism in Korea,” edited by Chang & Kalmanson. *Confucianism in Context*, 34.

¹⁰⁸ Roger T. Ames, “What is Confucianism?” edited by Chang & Kalmanson. *Ibid.*, 69; *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. 2005. Season 1, Episode 20, “The Siege of the North, Part 2.” Directed by Dave Filoni. Aired December 2, 2005 on Nickelodeon.

identity that fostered collectivism rather than the constant infighting between clans of the Three Kingdoms period.

In reality however, this distinction led to the creation of several gender norms and expectations that limited the power and role of Korean women as little more than assets that satisfied the male needs. Furthermore, it contributed to establish other stifling societal rules such as rigid class distinctions and institutionalized discrimination against the poor and disabled, which only served to promote government corruption.¹⁰⁹ Korean women who suffered sexual assault or rape outside of formal marriage, whether during war or peacetime, were seen to have dishonored themselves and their families by allowing such a violation of dignity to take place: it was then expected for the survivor to leave in exile or regain her honor by taking her own life. During Ming and Qing China's incumbency as Joseon's overlord state, the systematic offering of virgin Korean women as "tributes" to Chinese emperors under the enforced tributary system was a regular occurrence, though it did not excuse the survivors in the eyes of Joseon society, who derogatorily labeled them *hwanhyangnyeo* (환향녀, lit., "returned woman") and outcast them from society if they were repatriated back to their families; many chose to commit suicide rather than live with the indignity.¹¹⁰ The linguistics of *hwanhyangnyeo* evolved overtime into the more vulgar term *hwanyangnyeon* (환양년, lit., "returned whore/bitch"), which was used in casual vocabulary to refer to "loose" or sexually promiscuous women. In this way, Neo-Confucian attitudes towards women's sexuality and "chastity" established a culture of shame around Korean women, which continues to persist in modern times.¹¹¹ It is because of this culture that

¹⁰⁹ Wonsuk Chang, "Confucian Person in the Making," edited by Chang & Kalmanson. Ibid., 99.

¹¹⁰ Pae-Yong Yi, *Women in Korean History* (Seoul: Ewha Womans University Press, 2008), 114.

¹¹¹ Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 204.

many “comfort women” survivors immediately after the Second World War concealed what had happened to them in order to reintegrate back into their families and society, as seen best in the case of survivor Lee Yong-Soo.

Lee Yong-Soo (pictured in figure 2), who is a well-known “comfort woman” survivor and activist in South Korea, was sixteen years-old when she was coerced into service. Lee, prior to being taken away, had lived with her family and worked as a trainee *jungshindae* (정신대, lit., “volunteering body corps”) with the Korean Women’s Volunteer Labor Corps while attending school.

Fig. 2.2. “Korean ‘comfort woman’ survivor Lee Yong-Soo at a press conference in Daegu, South Korea.”



Source: Yonhap News Agency, *The Korea Times*, May 25, 2020, Daegu.
https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2020/06/356_290419.html.

In 1944, Lee along with a childhood friend, were deceived by a Japanese agent who offered them new clothes and shoes, and were sent to a Japanese military brothel stationed in Taiwan. Lee was

raped while travelling to Taiwan by Imperial Japanese sailors, and continued to be forced to service a unit of Imperial Japanese commandos for the next year. She, like other “comfort women” of any non-Japanese nationality, was given a Japanese name and was forbidden to speak her native language under threat of severe physical punishment. During and after her time as a “comfort woman”, Lee suffered from chronic venereal disease, post-traumatic stress disorder, and androphobia (a fear of men).¹¹² Upon returning home to her mother, Lee kept her experiences a secret from her family out of shame and fear that they would reject her:

I found my house, just as run down and poor as before. My mother asked if I was a ghost or a real person and fainted. I couldn't dare think about getting married. How could I dream of marriage? Until recently I had suffered from venereal disease. My parents and brothers didn't know what I had been through...These days I hum a song, *Katsua*, putting my own words to the tune: “*You dragged us off against our own will. You trod on us. Apologize and repay to me the debt that is owed. This lament, can you hear it, my mother and father? My own people will avenge my sorrows.*”¹¹³

Lee, who is one of the thirteen Korean “comfort women” still alive today, continues to lobby for reconciliation for “comfort women” survivors of all nationalities. In an interview with the Washington Post in 2015, Lee Yong-Soo is no longer ashamed or living in fear of what she has suffered: “I am a proper lady and a daughter of Korea,” Lee declared. “I don't want to hate or hold a grudge, but I can never forgive what happened to me. I must stand up for myself and the others. [Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe] should act like a man and face the truth of the crimes that were done to us. I was robbed of my youth, and I want him to apologize before I die.”¹¹⁴

¹¹² Yong-Soo Lee, “Return My Youth to Me,” edited by Howard, *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*, 88–93.

¹¹³ Lee, “Return My Youth to Me”, 94.

¹¹⁴ Pamela Constable, “70 Years Later, a Korean 'Comfort Woman' Demands Apology from Japan.” *The Washington Post*, April 22, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/70-years-later-a-korean-comfort-woman-demands-apology-from-japan/2015/04/22/d1cf8794-e7ab-11e4-9767-6276fc9b0ada_story.html. Accessed Jan 12, 2022.

Some scholars who have written on Korean women argue that Neo-Confucianism is actually inherently built towards male dominance, citing historical and modern injustices against Korean women and labeling the philosophy better suited for an “agricultural society and economy” that needed to survive rather than develop as a sophisticated and equitable civilization¹¹⁵ Chunghee Soh attributes some of the consequences of Neo-Confucianism gone awry—such as gender inequality in masculinist sexual culture and patriarchal abuse of power against wives and daughters at home; [and] class exploitation in society under capitalist economy—as some of the root causes of Korean “comfort women” survivors’ suffering.¹¹⁶ The idea that Korean Neo-Confucianism is inherently misogynistic and oppressive towards women is a precarious argument to make as Neo-Confucian ideals are deeply ingrained and intertwined into the Korean cultural identity; attacking Neo-Confucianism as a whole devalues the positive aspects of the philosophy, such as filial piety and collective harmony, and suggests that Koreans who culturally identify with their ethnic legacy are also inherently misogynistic and discriminating against women due to embodying Neo-Confucian values.

However, stating that Neo-Confucianism was the sole root cause of the history of women’s suffering in Korea is an unfair accusation. In fact, philosophical scholar Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee defends Confucianism as being “able to meet the challenges of feminism and to address feminist concerns regarding women’s oppression without going beyond its theoretical framework.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Aanchal Midha, Savreen Kaur & Niveditha .S. “Confucianism and Changing Gender Roles.” *International Journal of Advance Research, Ideas and Innovations in Technology* 4, no. 1 (2018): 349.

¹¹⁶ Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 105.

¹¹⁷ Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, “A Feminist Appropriation of Confucianism,” edited by Wonsuk Chang & Leah Kalmanson. *Confucianism in Context: Classic philosophy and contemporary issues, east asia and beyond* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 176.

What needs to be realized is that Neo-Confucianism, for all its ideals and like many other faiths and worldviews, had been twisted by human imperfection and constant isolated exposure and development to male-dominated institutions. What may have begun as principles to instill a degree of dignity and protection towards women against violence degenerated into patriarchal and sexist paternalism that sought to restrict women's autonomy, rather than genuinely conserve dignity. Korean feminist scholar Kyunja Jung directly addresses this as the enforcement of a distorted double-standard regarding sexuality that still has been seen as a matter of "loss of virginity" or a matter of "protection of chastity," for women by men.¹¹⁸ As Neo-Confucianism became severely dogmatic in the latter years of the Joseon dynasty, "[w]omen's subordination to and separation from men," Jung argues, "was vital to upholding this system."¹¹⁹

In effect, Korean women were already facing a state-sanctioned ideology that enabled devaluation, objectification, and trivialization over generations by the time Imperial Japan made any formal moves toward influencing Korean affairs. Simultaneously, Neo-Confucianism idealized the "perfect" Korean woman as a paradoxical symbol of experienced motherhood and innocent virginity vis-à-vis nationalist rhetoric. Feminist historian Sue Morgan observes that "[h]istorically, nationalist movements have made extensive use of gendered imagery in which women—their behaviour, dress-codes and, quite literally, their bodies—become eulogised as bearers of authentic, national, or pre-colonial tradition."¹²⁰ By the time that the Empire of Japan rolled into the peninsula, they simply made themselves at home, building upon the gendered principles of dogmatic Neo-Confucian culture.

¹¹⁸ Kyunja Jung, *Practicing Feminism in Korea* (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 2013), Chapter 3, Section 1, para.1.

¹¹⁹ Jung, *Practicing Feminism in Korea*, Chapter 3, Section 2, para.2.

¹²⁰ Sue Morgan, *The Feminist History Reader* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2006), 33.

Pre-Colonial and Colonial Korean Institutions Perpetuating Exploitation

Nationalist rhetoric surrounding Korean women as pure virgins and esteemed mothers did little to realistically empower or uplift them in social, economic, and political environments. Political offices and white-collar businesses in pre-colonial Korea between 1895 and 1910 were monopolized by Korean and Japanese males, with extremely rare exceptions as in the case of Queen Myeongsong (17 November 1851–8 October 1895).¹²¹ Most Korean women who desired to work away from home undertook physical labor, ran eating establishments, and served in the state-organized entertainment industry as courtesans and hostesses known as *kisaeng*. The *kisaeng*, comparable to their Japanese equivalent the *geisha*, were entertainers who composed one of the lowest possible social ranks in the Korean caste system: the *cheonmin*, shared with butchers, slaves, and shamans. The *kisaeng* tradition dates back to the Three Kingdoms period originating in the proto-kingdom of Goryeo, where women born into low status families were oftentimes sold to the state as slaves to relieve financial burdens.¹²² Any woman regardless of status could in theory become a *kisaeng*, even those belonging to the *yangban* aristocracy, but the occupation was seen by many as an undesirable and unfortunate necessity to cater to the needs of the upper class. This is not to say that the *kisaeng* were simply sex workers that were brutalized or abused to the degree that “comfort women” would later have to suffer. *Kisaeng*, considered to be property of the state, were given extensive training and education in the arts at formal “schools” from an early age. *Kisaeng* (depicted in figure 3) studied dance, music, fine art, literature, and even medicine, which they used to host and entertain the social elite: government officials and bureaucrats, scholars, and military officers.¹²³

¹²¹ Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, 94.

¹²² Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 218–19.

¹²³ Yi, *Women in Korean History*, 62, 74.

In modern historiography and cultural memory, *kisaeng* are immortalized and idealized as tragic figures of great artistic significance that held love for their country such as Joo Non-Gae, who according to popular mythos, is said to have slayed Keyamura Rokusuke, a general of the invading Japanese forces and a *samurai* of martial prowess, onto a cliff using her charms during the Imjin Wars in the late 16th century. Once Keyamura was close enough, Joo locked him in a death's embrace and cast herself off the cliff, killing them both in revenge.¹²⁴ Other famous *kisaeng* live on in folklore as having amassed great wealth and retiring from service, or marrying a rich sponsor and living happily ever after in blissful innocence.

Fig. 2.3. “A painting of *kisaeng* performing a traditional sword dance for nobles.”



Source: Shin Yun-Bok, NATIONAL GUGAK CENTER, circa. 1758, Joseon
<https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2016/03/01/artsDesign/Paintings-come-to-life-on-stage/3015677.html>.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 115.

The stark nature of human trafficking and exploitation present in the history of the *kisaeng*, however, remains a subject Korean scholars have been reluctant to address out of fear of tarnishing what has become a facet of Korean nationalism. This historical romanticism surrounding Korean women's history detracts from what is otherwise a narrative of state-sanctioned exploitation. Soh states that the boundary between 'entertainment' and 'prostitution' became fuzzy in the lives of traditional *geisha* and *kisaeng*, especially the low-ranking ones, and that for all the modern idealization, the existence of the *kisaeng* is an expression of "masculinist sexual culture (a shared feature of patriarchal societies, including Japan and Korea)."¹²⁵

The *kisaeng* industry persisted in Korea until 1895 after the assassination of Queen (posthumously Empress) Myeong-Song, whereupon the Korean government under King Go-Jong with the support and influence of Japanese officials, passed the Gabo Reforms.¹²⁶ The Gabo Reforms sought to implement sixteen core laws concerning the reorganization of the state government to eliminate bureaucratic redundancy, and one-hundred and six cultural reforms addressing "outdated" aspects of Korea society, including the restrictive caste system built upon Neo-Confucian dogma. In effect, the Gabo Reforms ended hundreds of years of state-sanctioned slavery overnight, yet many *kisaeng* found themselves forced to continue their work, now lacking protection from the government and funding for education or formal training. The *kisaeng* industry began to degenerate into a more recognizable form of prostitution, though artistic elements and traditions from the Joseon era of entertainment continued to endure even past the point of the annexation and occupation.

¹²⁵ Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 116.

¹²⁶ Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword*, 82.

Under the provisional Japanese-led Korean government, the *kisaeng* industry was absorbed as a licensed profession that required the supervision and approval of the Japanese colonial police. During this time, *kisaeng* became repurposed as entertainers for Japanese officials and tourists showcasing a bastardized impression of pre-colonial Korean culture, and prostitution and sexual services became more explicitly marketed and commonplace.¹²⁷ This bastardization and fetishization of Korean culture as an “exotic” and “primal” Other was part of the larger “Korea Boom” movement in Korean-Japanese popular culture during the colonial era. Theater productions, literature, and motion pictures casting an objectifying lens on Korean women became increasingly popular amongst the Japanese public even as the Korean ethnic identity was repressed, and the *kisaeng* remained objects of fascination and male desire under an ironic cross-fire of Orientalism perpetuated by Japan (as seen in figure 4).¹²⁸ Nayoung Aimee Kwon calls this the “ultimate irony of Japanese Orientalism...unwittingly reflect[ing] an objectifying gaze toward itself as it schizophrenically sought to identify with, yet distinguish itself from, its Asian neighbors vis-à-vis the West.”¹²⁹

The *kisaeng*, however, continued to paradoxically exist in Korean opinion as an art which preserved the last few dregs of “pure” Korean culture, and a “whore’s profession”. Kim Ok-Sil, a Korean “comfort women” survivor, had desired during her youth to become a *kisaeng*, drawn by romantic depictions and stories of their lifestyle and beauty:

One day, I overheard neighborhood women talk about *kisaeng*...I heard them say that *kisaeng* learn how to sing, play music, and dance. Given the oppressive atmosphere in my home, where I was forbidden to learn anything, I began to feel a strong desire to be *kisaeng* so that I could wear pretty clothes and ride in the palanquin (a type of carriage carried by servants). I quietly left home thinking that once I became *kisaeng*, I would

¹²⁷ Insuk Lee, “Convention and Innovation: The Lives and Cultural Legacy of the Kisaeng in Colonial Korea (1910–1945).” *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 23, no. 1 (2015): 93.

¹²⁸ Kenneth Ruoff, “Japanese Tourism to Korea, Circa 1940: The Tension between Tourism Promotion and Assimilation Policies.” *The Asia Pacific Journal* 9, no. 1 (Mar. 14, 2011): 2.

¹²⁹ Kwon, *Intimate Empire: Collaboration & Colonial Modernity in Korea & Japan*, 109.

help my grandmother live in comfort. [I] managed to find a school for *kisaeng*. There I told the teachers about my desire and passed their test by impressing them with my singing ability...I was taken in as a foster daughter on the spot...Before a week passed, however, father and grandmother showed up. My father shouted with rage, "This girl is bringing shame to the ancestors and the neighborhood." My grandmother tearfully entreated me to come home. What could I do? Grabbed by my father, I had to return home.¹³⁰

Fig. 2.4. "Poster advertising a *kisaeng* dance performance by Choi Seung-Hee in Tokyo."



Source: Sai Shoki, "Poster advertising the dance performance of Ch'oe Sunghui in Tokyo," in Nayoung A. Kwon, *Intimate Empire: Collaboration & Colonial Modernity in Korea & Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 112, fig. 6.6.

Later in life, sixteen-year old Kim was tricked by Japanese policemen (one of whom was an ethnic Korean) into thinking she was to be sent to work at a textile factory in Japan. Instead, Kim

¹³⁰ Cited in Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 89.

spent the next three years as a “comfort woman” stationed in the infamous city of Nanjing (the site of the Rape of Nanjing) in China. She would never see her grandmother again.¹³¹

Kim Ok-Sil’s story showcases the lingering Neo-Confucian attitudes and stigma around services like the *kisaeng* as well as the gaudy appeal preserved by the Japanese to ensure Korean and Japanese citizens would be satiated with entertainment and sexual services, which would have been unbeknownst to most young girls attracted to the supposed glamour of the profession. The persisting *kisaeng* institutions under the Korean and Japanese governments, as well as the preservation of patriarchal practices only further proves that pre-existing infrastructures of masculinist sexual culture present in Korean society enabled the Japanese to capitalize on the abject objectification and exploitation of Korean women.

The significant involvement of Korean agents and collaborators who participated in the recruiting, kidnapping, and pimping of their fellow countrywomen is at once shameful and unsurprising given the attitudes surrounding women’s agency and value in Korean society. According to Pyong Gap Min, Koreans played an almost equal role to Japanese, although Japanese policemen, military policemen, officials, and soldiers sometimes supported Korean recruiters.¹³² In a case study conducted by the Korean Research Institute and Council between 1993 to 2004, out of 103 testimonies from Korean “comfort women” survivors, thirty-nine cases involved a Korean agent, and nineteen cases involved a Japanese-Korean team or organization. The number of cases that involved only Japanese agents, in comparison, is forty-three (the remaining five had no formal recruiter).¹³³ Several testimonies from Korean and Chinese

¹³¹ Ibid., 90.

¹³² Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*, 101.

¹³³ Ibid., 101.

“comfort women” survivors record cases of ethnic Korean civilians managing Japanese military brothels on behalf of the units.¹³⁴

There were certain exceptions, however, when it came to Korean complicity. “Comfort woman” survivor Cheong Seo-Woon recalls how an ethnic Korean conscripted as a soldier into the IJA unit in Indonesia helped rescue her and the other girls in the brothel: “There was a local Indonesian who [came] to pick up [the] officers' laundry. A soldier, Korean, who was drafted to the Japanese troop, wrote a letter then asked [the Indonesian] to deliver it to the Allied forces in a hurry. That’s how the Allied forces found where we were”.¹³⁵

As a general rule, however, Korean collaborators and agents are equally accountable to answer for the suffering of Korean “comfort women”. These records of cooperation lend them to the greater picture of responsibility falling upon Korean gendered values, norms, and expectations as having failed to prevent this tragedy.

Elements of Patriarchy and Violence against Women in Imperial Japan

Though these elements present in Korean society conveniently set into place the foundations for the exploitation of women by the time of the occupation, Japan had had an extensive history of patriarchal and masculinist sexual culture, exploitation, and violence against women. Like Korea, Japan had long organized its political, economic, and social structure around male-dominated leadership that left Japanese women little options for socio-economic freedom or expression. Like Korea, Japanese women were and are caught between paradoxical nationalistic narrative. Japanese women are often celebrated as carriers of tradition and sources of stability, yet they are also often pitied by their sisters abroad as second-class citizens

¹³⁴ Howard, *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*, 44, 66, 82, 106.

¹³⁵ Viddsee, “Herstory - War Crushed Her Body But Not Her Soul // Viddsee.com.” *YouTube* video, 10:54. August 3, 2017. https://youtu.be/eXu_0in6_IM.

inhabiting a first-class nation. They are portrayed by many scholars as happy consumers content with the status quo, but they are also criticized for their seeming complacency in the face of blatant sexual inequality.¹³⁶

The mythos of male superiority in Japan can be traced as far back as the purported legendary origin of the nation itself. Two deities, the male Izanagi and the female Izanami, were burdened with heavenly purpose to create a sacred land from the formless Earth. In arguably sexually charged imagery, Izanagi and Izanami used a jewelled spear to churn the dark waters of the void until a milky foam congealed, dripping down from the spear and from the droplets, forming a simple and bare island. Descending down to the island, the divine siblings erected a “heavenly pillar” in commemoration of their creation and decided to cement their union and the foundation of this new sacred land with a marriage ceremony followed by sexual intercourse. On their first attempt, the female Izanami initiated, to the objection of Izanagi, who argued that as the male he should have taken the lead. The union resulting from Izanami’s decision led to the birth of a malformed child who was deemed an abomination and promptly abandoned. On their second attempt, Izanagi was the one to initiate and the union was considered a “success” with the birth of several of the Japanese home islands and deities. Izanami would later die in childbirth after bearing the god of Fire, and the tale ends in tragedy as the two deities become sworn enemies after a failed attempt by Izanagi to resurrect Izanami from Yomi, the Land of the Dead.¹³⁷ This mythological enmity between the sexes has greatly contributed to defining the gender hierarchy in Japan as an expression of cultural identity: if it was good enough for the gods, it was good enough for the mortals to follow suit.

¹³⁶ Ayako Kano, *Japanese Feminist Debates: A Century of Contention on Sex, Love, and Labor* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 2.

¹³⁷ Basil H. Chamberlain, tr, *A Translation of the "Ko-Ji-Ki," or "Records of Ancient Matters"* (Yokohama: Lane, Crawford & Co., 1882), 19–20.

During the Edo period of Japan (1603–1867), life for Japanese women had some similarities to their Korean counterparts. Though Confucian influence was not as prevalent or integrated into Japanese society as Joseon Korea, restrictive and discriminatory measures existed nonetheless, cemented in religion, tradition, and social norms and expectations. Institutionalized forms of exploitation such as legalized prostitution and sex work in the form of official red-light districts known as *yūkaku* (遊廓, lit., "pleasure quarters") existed to cater the needs of masculinist sexual culture, in which Japanese women were employed in organized and state-sanctioned and regulated brothels to entertain men who could afford their services.¹³⁸ Outside prostitution, Japanese women's roles took on the nature of the ideal housewife that persist: elegant, composed, obedient to her husband, and self-reliant.¹³⁹

The modernization that came with the Meiji Restoration in 1868 did away with many traditional institutions and cultural expressions deemed “backwards” and outdated in the face of Westernism, and attempted to reform Japanese society as to follow more European models of conduct and ethics.¹⁴⁰ However, the sex industry under the Meiji government continued to persist and even thrived regardless of emancipation reforms that technically “freed” Japanese women from prostitution (this attempt would later be emulated in the Korean Gabo Reforms). In reality, the reforms had little practical effect on a sex industry that had survived for hundreds of years without harassment, and government censuses during the period actually display an increase in the sex industry market: a greater population of men desired to hire sex workers, and a greater

¹³⁸ Joseph Ernest De Becker, *The Nightless City: Or, the History of the Yoshiwara Yūkwaku* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5–6.

¹³⁹ Kano, *Japanese Feminist Debates*, 105–106.

¹⁴⁰ Paine, *The Japanese Empire*, 5.

population of women were meeting the demand.¹⁴¹ In this way, the Japanese government continued to profit off the sex industry via taxation and significantly contributed to national revenue during the transition between the Edo and Meiji administrations.¹⁴² As the Imperial Japanese military became more formalized and centralized, Japanese military brothels that specifically and exclusively catered to servicemen were established as Japan sought to pursue expansionist goals in China and Russia; according to Soh, approximately twenty-thousand Japanese women were employed as *karayuki-san* (a colloquial term for young Japanese women sold into sexual slavery) by 1910.¹⁴³

Upon the annexation of Korea in 1910, the Japanese sex industry expanded towards Korea and China, establishing Japanese-run brothels for both civilian and military use. This was the first formal instance of the “comfort women” initiative pursued by Imperial Japan during its attempted colonization of Asia. Yoshimi Yoshiaki’s research on “comfort women” has led to his own categorization of Japanese military brothels into three distinct types: those directly run by the military for the exclusive use of the troops or civilian military employees; those managed by civilians but supervised and regulated by the military for the exclusive use of the troops or civilian military employees (the most numerous type); and finally facilities, including restaurants, open to the general public but designated as comfort stations, where military personnel were given special priority.¹⁴⁴ Pre-existing structures of sex work and red-light entertainment—such as the *kisaeng*—were absorbed under this initiative, though the Korean and Japanese industries were not completely mutually inclusive and remained distinct from each

¹⁴¹ Amy Stanley, *Selling Women: Prostitution, Markets, and the Household in Early Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 193.

¹⁴² Stanley, *Selling Women*, 194.

¹⁴³ Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 114.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

other. The image of the “ideal and virtuous daughter, wife, and mother in one” was nothing but nationalistic sentiment when it came to making a profit off of the sexual exploitation of both Korean and Japanese women. Their exploitation would only grow worse as the Imperial Japanese military became increasingly involved in their affairs.

The Imperial Japanese Military as the Oppressor

It is no secret among military and social historians alike that some of the most vicious, horrifying war crimes during the Second World War were committed by the Imperial Japanese Military, against soldiers and non-combatants alike.¹⁴⁵ As of today, the United Nations defines “war crimes” as behaviors or actions during armed conflict that breach a set of statutes: “[g]rave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949...[o]ther serious violations of the laws and customs applicable in international armed conflict, within the established framework of international law (e.g. ‘[c]ommitting rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, as defined in article 7, paragraph 2 (f), enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence also constituting a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions’)...[and] [o]ther serious violations of the laws and customs applicable in armed conflicts not of an international character.”¹⁴⁶ The Imperial Japanese Army and Navy are inexcusably guilty of breaching all of these statutes to a large degree.

One has to then pose several questions given the atrocities committed by the Imperial Japanese military: what within Japanese society led to the creation of amoral pawns? Why did Imperial Japanese servicemen feel the need to commit such violence against women to the

¹⁴⁵ Yuma Totani, *The Tokyo War Crimes Trial: The Pursuit of Justice in the Wake of World War II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 108.

¹⁴⁶ "War Crimes." United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect. <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/war-crimes.shtml>.

degree that occurred? Were there any exceptions to the status quo or conscientious objectors? What made them different from the rest?

Japan and Korea share civil dynamics of very strong national identities that are unified by ethnicity alone. In stark contrast to most Western nations, one will never be fully considered “Korean” or “Japanese” if physical appearances and social behaviors differ by any margin from the established norm. From a positive perspective, this creates a bond of national solidarity that transcends social and economic class to reinforce a collectivist culture that seeks to work towards the common good. From a negative one, it can and has led to xenophobia, racism and discrimination against minority groups, and “Othering” of those deemed societally inferior.

During the initial deployments of newly recruited Imperial Japanese servicemen during the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, diaries written by soldiers record awe, curiosity, and ultimately disgust at what they called *dojin* (土人, lit. “earth person”). Japanese historian Naoko Shimazu explains how “*dojin*” historically referred to a person who belonged to a particular land or territory. It was during the years directly preceding and during the Meiji era that the term began to have colonial connotations. Imperial Japanese soldiers began using “*dojin*” as a slur against indigenous peoples in occupied lands, in what Shimazu calls an unequal power relationship.¹⁴⁷ This attitude was not uncommon in the social dynamic of Meiji Japan. Domestic propaganda sought to instill the Japanese public with a sense of nationalistic pride and entitlement towards conquered peoples, such as the Koreans and the Chinese. An entry in Infantry Sergeant Iwai Shichigoro’s diary displays the typical contempt towards colonized peoples normally held by Imperial Japanese servicemen: Iwai talked of the Chinese houses as being ‘smelly’ and described

¹⁴⁷ Naoko Shimazu, *Nationalisms in Japan* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2006), 59–60.

them as ‘pigsty-like Chinese houses. Also, he remarks that ‘Chinese food is inedible’, and so on. Iwai was obsessed with the filth of the way of living of the ‘*chinkoro*’ (Chinkies), and mentioned it repeatedly in his diary. The patriotic Iwai even complained that the Chinese railway tracks were not the same as the Japanese.¹⁴⁸

Sergeant Shichigoro’s attitude was shared by many servicemen who underwent culture shock after leaving their homes for the colonized frontier. Shock gave way to fear, disgust, and eventual hatred, dehumanization, and objectification of the peoples living in occupied and annexed territories. However, for some Japanese servicemen, pity, compassion, and even affection was felt towards the colonized peoples enduring their occupation, including Koreans. A “Mr. Honda”, who served in the Imperial Japanese Army in Hankow, China, spoke fondly of the Korean women he encountered while using Japanese military brothels; his complicated testimony is filled with regret, pathos, and respect towards Korean women, under the standing circumstances. “As an aging veteran,” Soh describes, “Honda expressed his gratitude to the *ianfu* (‘prostitutes’) for having comforted a great number of troops. Further, he stated that he now regards women as godly for the great role they play in producing posterity for humanity and that he felt sorry for what he did to women during his days as a soldier.”¹⁴⁹ Regardless of whether Mr. Honda now holds women in high esteem or not, the weight of his past remains with the memory of the “comfort women” who suffered, and the presence of a good few is overshadowed by the existence of the cruel majority.

¹⁴⁸ Iwai Shichigoro, “Iwai Shichigoro: Nichiro sensō jūgun nikki,” provided by Yamagata-shi shi henshū iinkai, *Yamagata-shi shiryō* 37 (1974), 7–12.

¹⁴⁹ Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 191–192.

Fig. 2.5. “The IJA 228th Infantry Regiment of the 38th Division marching towards Hong Kong.”



Source: Photographer unknown, *Wikimedia Commons*, December 8, 1941, Hong Kong. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:228_regiment_in_HK.jpg.

Imperial Japanese soldiers (pictured in figure 5) underwent harsh and rigorous training and mental conditioning that was designed to produce fanatical shock troops willing to kill and lay down their lives for their Emperor in sacred battle. Drawing from principles of *bushido* (武士道, lit., “the way of the warrior”) traditionally followed by *samurai* as a kind of code of honor and battlefield conduct, Japanese military training bases and officer academies were merciless in quite literally beating out what they perceived to be insubordination, weakness, and “effeminate sentiment”.¹⁵⁰ In one account provided by the diary of Private Hanama Tasaki, one can see a degree of the abuse recruits suffered during training and unit life:

First, poor Private Nakamura got it. The open palm of Private First Class Tanaka resounded loudly as it caught the Private squarely on his left cheek...“Fool! Don’t you know what roll-call is?”...Private Nakamura quickly regained his posture after the first

¹⁵⁰ Edward J. Drea, *Japan’s Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853–1945* (University Press of Kansas, 2009), 49, 68.

shock and mumbled, ‘Yes, sir.’ His eyes, which stared straight ahead in the position of a soldier at attention, were filled with stark terror. The other First-Year-Soldiers, standing beside him, too remained motionless and rigid, as if oblivious to what was happening beside them... These slaps with the open hands were not so painful physically, but the great noise they made was a powerful demoralizer... The fisted blows, which were administered on rare occasions, were the painful ones, but they were easier to take, since they were over with quicker... This practice of disciplining by slapping was not unique to Squad Three but universal in the Japanese Armed Forces, and no subordinate ever thought of resisting, for it would have been insubordination and punishable by death.¹⁵¹

In manners as suffered by Private Nakamura, training within the Imperial Japanese military perpetuated a self-sustaining cycle of abuse and toxic hyper-masculinity that manifested itself in battlefield aggression. By providing an outlet before and after combat via the provided brothels and “comfort women”, Japanese senior command was able to utilize sex and intimacy as a means to both target colonized women and control soldiers stretched to the limit of their physical and mental capacity. This is not to label each and every Imperial Japanese soldier to be a monster; good men served underneath the ensign of the Rising Sun, and some even treated “comfort women” as fellow human beings rather than “toilets”, as was the colloquial term amongst IJA soldiers.¹⁵² Unfortunately, collaboration is still to be considered culpability.

Conclusion

Great care must be taken when critiquing and analyzing societies through the framework of historical tragedy, as oftentimes the lines between culture and ethnic identity are intentionally established as to be blurred and overlapping; harmful questions are then drawn onto the so-called inherent merits of ethnic races. Nevertheless, it remains clear to say that there were extensive and deeply rooted cultural elements within both Korean and Japanese societies and gendered norms that facilitated the oppression of “comfort women” sent to Japanese military brothels. Scholarly

¹⁵¹ Hanama Tasaki, *Long the Imperial Way: A Japanese Soldier in China* (Burtyrki Books, 2020). eBook.

¹⁵² Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*, 119.

work and testimonies provided lead one to assume that the relationship between Korea and Japan is no longer as simple as “victim” and “oppressor”, but rather “enabler” and “opportunist”.

The Lingering Ghost of Reconciliation

Since the first survivors of Japanese military sexual slavery publicly came forward to testify, the memorialization of Imperial Japanese occupation (1910–1945) and exploitation has become a key component in relations between Japan and Asiatic nations across the Pacific, particularly within South Korea and international Korean communities. Great care is exerted by scholars of former occupied nations to avoid skewing these narratives with nationalistic and political agendas, though emotions still run deep in collective memory. Other civilian and government institutions have taken a less moderate approach in adapting and interpreting the “comfort women” issue (CWI) in order to pursue various goals and end-states regarding reconciliation, political and economic concession, and international reputation. In response, the post-war Japanese government has grieved, stalled, and neglected the allegations from former occupied nations as increasing numbers of “comfort women” survivors capable of testifying succumb to post-traumatic wounds or old age.

This chapter will explore the resulting intergenerational trauma affecting survivors and their families, as well as the politics of remembrance surrounding the “comfort women” in Korea and diasporic communities. The chapter starts by exploring the memories of Korean “comfort women” survivors and the Korean public’s relationship with the CWI, as well as Japanese war memory and public opinions towards international CWI. Finally, it analyzes past and current-day reconciliation movements and efforts from Korean and Japanese institutions to frame the progress made on true reconciliation, and both the governments of Korea and Japan’s obligations to address sexual war crimes committed against Korean women.

The Survivors and Attempts to Forget, Re-Integrate, and Remember

Fig. 3.1. “An emotional Kim Hak-Sun at a press conference in 1991.”



Source: Photograph provided by the Northeast Asia Foundation, *Korea JoongAng Daily*, August 14, 1991, Seoul, South Korea.

<https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2007/11/12/features/Breaking-the-silence-about-secret-comfort-women-past/2882636.html>

When Kim Hak-Sun (pictured in figure 1) took the stage in front of a committee organized by the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) on 14 August, 1991, she shocked the Korean public with her story:

My life ended when I was 16 years old. I cannot speak of everything that happened back then. I was less than a human, I was a public toilet that received feces of the Japanese military. I could not think. When the soldiers were after me, I bit their lips to run away, then got captured...I always thought that I have to reveal what happened someday. Seeing the Japanese war flag on the TV makes me anxious. Hearing the word “Jung” from ‘Jungshindae’ [Korean Women’s Volunteer Labor Corps] stops my breath. I continue to live because I want an apology. I want my youth back.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan. <https://womenandwar.net/kr/testimonies/>. Accessed on January 28, 2022.

At the age of sixty-seven, Kim trembled and held back tears as she recounted her experiences as a “comfort woman”. She spoke of how “when [she] was running away in the beginning, [Japanese soldiers] just followed [and raped her] when they caught [her]. [Kim] was 17 then.”¹⁵⁴ Kim became a rallying figure overnight in South Korea as public outrage exploded against the Japanese government, and her testimony sparked the beginning of many other “comfort women” survivors from across the world coming forward to share their stories. However, the road leading up to Kim’s ground-breaking testimony was filled with immense trauma for Korean “comfort women survivors”, who suffered in silence.

Due to societal Neo-Confucian attitudes towards women’s sexuality and victims of rape, survivors remained silent in the years after the Second World War and attempted to resume normal lives through various means.¹⁵⁵ Some were able to conceal their physical and psychological scars from society and resume some degree of normalcy in their lives. Some, like Kim Hak-Sun, were reviled and abused by family members, and struggled to financially support themselves. A surprising few even reminisced fondly of the Japanese servicemen they met during their time at military brothels.¹⁵⁶

These differences in experiences, however, do not dilute the overall severity of the tragedy. Elsa Brown, on the politics of difference in women’s history and feminist politics, stresses that there exists a “basic level” from which historians need to operate from when

¹⁵⁴ Hye-Jin Han, “Kim Hak-Sun, abducted and abused as a “comfort woman” when she was 17 years old, tells all with tears.” *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, August 15, 1991. <https://newslibrary.naver.com/viewer/index.nhn?articleId=1991081500329112004&editNo=10&printCount=1&publishDate=1991-08-15&officeId=00032&pageNo=12&printNo=14141&publishType=00010>. Accessed on September 28, 2021.

¹⁵⁵ Constance Youngwon Lee & Jonathan Crowe, “The Deafening Silence of the Korean Comfort Women: A Response Based in Lyotard and Irigaray.” *Asian Journal of Law and Society* 2, no. 2 (November 2015): 347.

¹⁵⁶ Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 181.

comparing and contrasting individual and collective women's history. Brown argues that "recognizing and including difference is, in and of itself, not enough...we need to recognize not only differences but also the relational nature of those differences."¹⁵⁷ When it comes to differing "comfort women" narratives, less-difficult or even profitable experiences under Japanese sexual slavery do not excuse or lighten this tragedy whatsoever, and should be viewed in relation to exploitation and women's autonomy.

Jung Ok-Sun, whose body was physically violated by Imperial Japanese soldiers, is relentlessly haunted by her memories. Jung's experiences as a "comfort woman" are some of the most severely traumatic in nature and required an enormous amount of courage to share at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in 1996.

Jung Ok-Sun was thirteen when she was kidnapped by an Imperial Japanese soldier during a routine trip to the village well in Phabal-Ri (located in current day North Korea) and taken to a garrison stationed in Hyesan. En route, Jung was raped by several colonial policemen: "When I shouted, they put socks in my mouth and continued to rape me. The head of the police station hit me in my left eye because I was crying. That day I lost my eyesight in the left eye."¹⁵⁸ When she arrived at the garrison, Jung bore witness to horrific abuses and crimes against humanity:

One Korean girl who was with us once demanded why we had to serve so many, up to 40, men per day. To punish her for her questioning, the Japanese company commander Yamamoto ordered her to be beaten with a sword. While we were watching, they took off her clothes, tied her legs and hands and rolled her over a board with nails until the nails were covered with blood and pieces of her flesh. In the end, they cut off her head. Another Japanese told us that "it's easy to kill you all, easier than killing dogs". He also

¹⁵⁷ Elsa B. Brown, "What has Happened Here," edited by Morgan, *The Feminist History Reader*, 302.

¹⁵⁸ "Further Promotion and Encouragement of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Including the Question of the Programme and Methods of Work of the Commission. Alternative Approaches and Ways and Means within the United Nations System for Improving the Effective Enjoyment of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms." UNITED NATIONS Economic and Social Council: COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS (Last modified January 4, 1996), 13.

said “since those Korean girls are crying because they have not eaten, boil the [girl’s] flesh and make them eat it”...then they swung wooden swords at us and made us drink the broth. One Korean girl caught a venereal disease from being raped so often and, as a result, over 50 Japanese soldiers were infected. In order to stop the disease from spreading and to ‘sterilize’ the Korean girl, they stuck a hot iron bar in her private parts...when they pulled the [bar] out, a lump of burnt flesh was attached to it.¹⁵⁹

After two pregnancies, Jung’s uterus was forcibly removed, sterilizing her for life. Afterwards, Jung attempted to flee twice but was unsuccessful; as punishment, Japanese soldiers desecrated Jung’s body with tattoos (pictured in figure 1) and left her for dead in the mountains along with two other women. She was eventually rescued by a passing local and returned to her home at the age of eighteen.

Jung’s story is one of the most disturbing amongst the recorded testimonies of Korean “comfort women” survivors, and has been especially galvanizing amongst civil movements for redress and reconciliation. Other survivors have struggled with androphobia (phobia of men), substance abuse, and other chronic physical and psychological disorders (e.g. post-traumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, insomnia, sexually-transmitted diseases) which inhibited their ability to fully re-integrate into Korean society.¹⁶⁰

Similarly with Holocaust survivors, studies on the long-term effects of physical and psychological trauma on “comfort women” survivors have suggested that persisting health issues are prevalent amongst not only survivors, but their children as well. A specific study conducted by the Special Committee for Gender-Equality and Family of Korean Neuropsychiatry

¹⁵⁹ “Further Promotion and Encouragement of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Including the Question of the Programme and Methods of Work of the Commission.” UNITED NATIONS Economic and Social Council: COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS, 14; Geon-Woong Park, “Tattoo: The Story of a Grandmother who was a Japanese Military Comfort Woman.” Khan and Khan's Folk (Last modified December 16, 2013).

¹⁶⁰ Jee Hoon Park, KyongWon Lee, Michelle D. Hand, Keith A. Anderson, and Tess E. Schleitwiler, “Korean Survivors of the Japanese ‘Comfort Women’ System: Understanding the Lifelong Consequences of Early Life Trauma.” *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* 59, no. 4 (July 2016): 339.

Association on six biological descendants of “comfort women” survivors showed that five of the six had suffered from low to severe psychological disorders across their lifetimes.¹⁶¹

Fig. 3.2. “Tattoos left by the Japanese on Jung Ok-Sun’s body.”



Source: Bulb Head, Twitter post, March 9, 2019.

https://twitter.com/head_bulb/status/1102952546534973440/photo/2.

One of the anonymous participants, “A”, shared details of her life growing up as the child of a “comfort woman” survivor:

[W]hen her father found out that her mother was a former “comfort woman” he became furious and beat up her mother like a mad man... After A became an adult, she used violence against her lovers when she became angry. She hated herself for being so violent but couldn’t change. Her violence even continued towards her spouse during her marriage, and she eventually got divorced.¹⁶²

As in “A”’s experience, the post-war lives of most of the survivors and their families were filled with difficulty. Survivors that married or remarried often struggled to hide or overcome their trauma from their spouses—some never married at all. Entering the workforce and financially supporting oneself proved to be especially challenging given their persisting health issues, and

¹⁶¹ Jeewon Lee et al., “Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma: Psychiatric Evaluation of Offspring of Former ‘Comfort Women,’ Survivors of the Japanese Military Sexual Slavery during World War II.” *Psychiatry Investigation* 16, no. 3 (March 2019): 249–50.

¹⁶² Cited in Lee et al., “Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma”, 250.

many survivors depended on barebone government subsidies as their primary source of income for themselves or their families.¹⁶³ In this way, “comfort women” survivors were both socially and economically marginalized by their own nation long before Kim Hak-Sun testified, and continued to be reluctant to testify or register as a “comfort woman” survivor with the South Korean government long after.

Korean Public Sentiment and Remembrance

In the years immediately after the end of the Second World War, a limited population of Koreans outside of the government were aware of the “comfort women” due to a lack of public prosecution against the Japanese government at the Tokyo War Crime Tribunals of 1946, diverted concerns towards the growing ideological divide between the northern and southern regions of the nation, and general disinterest.¹⁶⁴ Before and after the interruption of the Korean War (1950–1953), the government authorities began the slow process of investigating several reports from destitute women brave and enraged enough to tell of having been exploited as military prostitutes during the Japanese occupation. In a report drafted by the General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Forces, United States Pacific forces were well-acquainted with the existence of Japanese military brothels in former colonies (e.g. Burma) utilizing captured Korean women as “comfort girls”.¹⁶⁵ U.S. personnel were also extensively involved in the rescue and liberation of Korean “comfort women”, as seen in the case of Gang Mu-Ja, who was liberated in Palau:

To make sure whether we were Koreans or not, an American soldier asked us one by one if we understood *Arirang* [a popular Korean national folk song] and *Doraji* [another popular Korean folk song named after the bellflower plant root]. When I answered ‘yes’

¹⁶³ Ahn, *Whose Comfort?*, 148–9.

¹⁶⁴ Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 168.

¹⁶⁵ Dennis Halpin, “MacArthur Document Reports Imperial Japanese Military’s ‘Sanction’ of Comfort Women Brothels.” US-Korea Institute at SAIS, 2013.

by nodding my head while crying, he said ‘Okay’ and gave me a chocolate. Calling my [Japanese] name ‘Maiko,’ which he seems to have found in a document from a Japanese military unit, he [said he] felt sorry that I had had such a difficult time.¹⁶⁶

Regardless, South Korean society continued to modernize and cast away anything that gave semblance to the colonial period, including social injustices such as the CWI. The prevalent attitudes towards women and their autonomy in Korean society, as well as survivors’ reluctance to openly testify, only compounded the isolation and ignorance surrounding the “comfort women”. It was not until the rise of Korean organized women’s groups and movements in the 1980s that attention was focused upon past crimes against women during the occupation.¹⁶⁷

Across the 1980s, increasingly oppressive practices by the military government under South Korean president Chun Doo-Hwan led to pro-democracy protests across the nation. The Gwangju Massacre (18–27 May 1980)—during which police and military forces maimed and murdered student protesters peacefully demonstrating against martial law—resulted in a nationwide wave of anti-government sentiment. South Korean citizens were imprisoned, tortured, killed, and—in the case of women—sexually assaulted and raped.¹⁶⁸ This renewed assault against women in Korea, this time by domestic forces, directly led to the establishment of women’s groups which sought to reform Korean societal norms that stigmatized and marginalized victims of sexual abuse. In 1987, the Korean Women’s Associations United (KWAU) was formed, composed of twenty-eight national women’s organizations across the nation. University students, professors, and scholars composed the majority of the KWAU in its

¹⁶⁶ Cited in Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*, 155.

¹⁶⁷ Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*, 48–9.

¹⁶⁸ Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, 382.

inception, and began turning a critical eye on past and current social injustices against women in Korea.¹⁶⁹

Without the efforts of the KWAU, the testimony of Kim Hak-Sun in 1991 may not have even been possible. Between 1987 and 1991, KWAU-affiliated organizations and activists sought to shed light on sexually abusive and predatory practices that were institutionalized within the Korean government. During the height of the anti-government protests, South Korean police forces, under authorization from Chun Doo-Hwan, were known to utilize sexual torture against female protestors and demonstrators as an anti-protest tactic and interrogation method. Methods included humiliating women with sexually oriented curses and verbal abuse, physically punishing the women after they had been stripped nude, and forms of sexual violence ranging from [molestation] to rape.¹⁷⁰ This was seen by the Korean Church Women United (KCWU)—the precursor organization to KWAU—and the educated public as a disturbing echo of the Japanese colonial period, and female activists went as far to allow themselves to be captured and sexually abused in order to document these tactics first hand.¹⁷¹

The sacrifices of KCWU members would eventually pay off with the founding of the KWAU and the beginnings of formal inquiries into “comfort women” redress. In 1980, Yun Chung-Ok, a professor at Ewha Women’s University, began conducting extensive research into the Korean “comfort women” issue (CWI), having grown up during the occupation and hearing rumours of girls being snatched away, never to be seen again. Yun requested funding and support from the KWAU in 1987 and led an investigative team to Japan that interviewed

¹⁶⁹ Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 110–2.

¹⁷⁰ Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*, 56.

¹⁷¹ Hyun-Sook Lee, *Hanguk Gyohoe Yeosong Yeonhaphoe 25 Nyeonsa (A Twenty-five Year History of Korean Church Women United)* (Seoul: Korean Church Women United Press, 1996), 289.

Imperial Japanese veterans, diasporic Koreans taken as laborers and conscripts, and eyewitnesses of Japanese military prostitution during the Second World War.¹⁷² Thanks to Yun's efforts, the CWI gradually became more well-known amongst the Korean public, and a revival of interest arose amongst academics and social activists.

Yun's unsolved problem with her research, however, revolved around actually finding a "comfort woman" survivor who was willing to testify. While much progress had been made in Korean women's autonomy and sexuality, cultural stigmas and the fear perpetuated by them remained, especially in the minds of older generations. By a stroke of fortune, in mid-1991 Yoon Yeong-Ae, then-executive director of the KCWU, happened to come into contact with a friend of a Korean atomic bomb survivor, Lee Maeng-Hui. Lee's friend was none other than Kim Hak-Sun.¹⁷³ The rest is history.

After Kim's testimony, other "comfort women" survivors gradually came forward with their stories to share. Some revealed their identities openly, while others requested anonymity. The more the survivors shared, the Korean public began the undeniable process of facing their nation's grim past of exploitation and collaboration. Efforts to memorialize the CWI in educational and civil institutions such as university curricula, public educational centers and memorials, and historical research became heavily invested in by the Korean public, such as the Statues of Peace (as seen in figure 2) placed in cities across the world with native and diasporic Korean populations, and the Comfort Woman History Center located in Gwangju, South Korea. Civil expressions of remembrance were not exempt from political ramifications, however. After a memorial statue depicting girls from Korea, China, and the Philippines (as seen in figure 2,

¹⁷² Korean Council, *Hanguk Chongshindae Munjae Daechaek Hyeophoe 20 Nyeonsa (A Twenty Year History of the Korean Council)* (Seoul, Hanul Press, 2014), 30–2.

¹⁷³ Min, *Korean "Comfort Women"*, 64.

representing the “comfort women” drawn from those nations) was erected in San Francisco by the Comfort Women Justice Coalition (CWJC) in 2017, Osaka formally severed ties with San Francisco as its sister city in protest.¹⁷⁴

The memorialization of the CWI has also surpassed scholarly studies and proliferated into mixed media. Historical fiction literature, fine art, films, music, and even graphic novels (such as Geon-Woong Park’s “Tattoo” webcomic, pictured in figure 3) on the topic of Korean “comfort women” have arisen to international audiences, sharing the stories of these women around the world.

Fig. 3.3. “The statue in San Francisco, California, memorializing Korean, Chinese, and Filipino ‘comfort women’.”



Source: Photograph by Justin Sullivan, *The New York Times*, October 4, 2018, San Francisco, California. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/04/us/osaka-sf-comfort-women-stature.html>.

¹⁷⁴ “Osaka cuts San Francisco ties over ‘comfort women’ statue.” *BBC news*, October 4, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45747803>.

Mary Bracht's *White Chrysanthemum* follows the fictional account of sisters Hana and Emi, *haenyeo* (해녀 lit., "sea woman") siblings living in Jeju Island during the Japanese occupation.

Bracht's novel follows the lives of the two sisters as Hana is taken away to become a "comfort woman", while Emi remains behind and is forced to marry a Korean collaborator. Bracht explores themes of patriarchal abuse, toxic masculinity, collaboration, and remembrance in her writing, backdropped by Hana's experiences as a "comfort woman". Bracht succeeds in providing a stark and compelling glimpse into the CWI that forces the reader to confront both Japanese oppression and Korean collaboration.¹⁷⁵

Other contemporary interpretations of "comfort women" activism include the 2017 South Korean film *I Can Speak*, which gained international attention for its bold presentation of the CWI subverted through dramatic comedy (though some criticized the two-dimensional general vilification of the Japanese and the exclusion of historical Korean collaboration).¹⁷⁶ The official music video for the song "나의땅" ("My Land") was released by South Korean hip-hop artist BeWhy for the tenth anniversary of the Korean independence movement. In the video, brief imagery of a young girl sitting on a bench and wearing a scarf is included to directly reference the Statue of Peace, erected to pay remembrance to underaged girls forced into service as "comfort women" during the Japanese occupation of Korea.¹⁷⁷

Overall, the Korean public's reception of the CWI has pivoted from one of social stigma to a desire to learn and remember out of respect and grief. In Korean social psychology, the

¹⁷⁵ Mary L. Bracht, *White Chrysanthemum* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2018).

¹⁷⁶ Hyun-Seok Kim, dir. *I Can Speak*. Republic of Korea: Lotte Entertainment, 2017. DVD.

¹⁷⁷ Byungyoon Lee, "BeWhY (비외이) - 나의땅[Official Music Video]." *YouTube* video, 02:56. January 31, 2019. <https://youtu.be/tdW8o1JWjcl>.

emotional concept of *han* (한恨, lit., “hatred, resentment”) is deeply tied to post-colonial memories and the past, particularly towards the exploitation suffered during the Japanese occupation. *Han* is a complex feeling that cannot be expressed simply through English transliteration. *Han* encompasses feelings of grief, simmering rage, sorrow, mourning, nostalgia, and kinship to one’s nation and culture. Korean psychologists and sociologists have argued that *han* uniquely binds the nation and diasporic Korean community together and transcends generations: if you are Korean, then you are born with *han* in your heart.¹⁷⁸

Fig. 3.4. “Title page from the webcomic ‘Moonshin’ (문신, “Tattoo”) by Geon-Woong Park, artistically interpreting the scars and tattoos of Jung Ok-Sun.”



Source: Geon-Woong Park, Khan & Khan’s Folk, December 16, 2013.
<https://ppuu21.khan.kr/390>.

¹⁷⁸ Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 81.

When it comes to the stories of the “comfort women”, known affectionately as *halmoni* (할머니, “grandmother”), *han* is an integral driving force behind collective Korean memorialization and remembrance, which remains highly emotionally charged to this day.

Korean Politics Surrounding the CWI

The South Korean government’s relations with “comfort women” survivors and the reconciliation movement is more complicated than they would like to admit. On the surface level, the South Korean government makes it a priority to address the CWI when it comes to national remembrance, publicly revering survivors as heroes, and holding the Japanese government responsible for its past actions. However, the CWI within political spheres of influence in South Korea has become burdened with stifling bureaucracy, nationalistic jingoism, and opportunism.

When Kim Hak-Sun testified in 1991, questions then began to be posed by academics and critics concerning what the South Korean government had been doing to address this issue prior to Kim’s broadcast. In 1951, the South Korean government attempted to establish preliminary negotiations with Japan on the subject of compensation for forced Korean labor during the occupation, but found itself too occupied with the ongoing Korean War to properly invest in the endeavor.¹⁷⁹ The prior International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE, also known as the Tokyo War Crimes Trial) between 1946 and 1948 had also failed to effectively address the topic of East and South-East Asian exploitation under Imperial Japanese rule, though

¹⁷⁹ *Memorandum of Conversation, by the Officer in Charge of Korean Affairs* (Washington, December 12, 1951), 1313.

the subject of Dutch women forced into Japanese military prostitution was motioned by representatives from the Netherlands.¹⁸⁰

The uncomfortable truth was that little to no effective action was taken by the South Korean government on behalf of the “comfort women” survivors until 1965, when the Syngman Rhee administration brokered a controversial agreement with the Japanese government under the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea. The treaty stipulated that Japan would pay upfront “US\$300 million in grants, US\$200 million in soft loans and an undertaking to obtain private credit of the order of US\$300 million” on behalf of Koreans who had died performing forced labor for the former Empire of Japan; it was then solely up to the South Korean government to distribute compensation funds to aggrieved families and households.¹⁸¹ However, there were several flaws with this treaty that both the South Korean and Japanese governments used to their advantage.

The first flaw was that once the money was deposited into South Korean treasuries, the Japanese government was completely absolved of financial and legal responsibility from compensation towards Korean war victims. This would later come back to haunt Korean “comfort women” redress and reconciliation movements as the Japanese government would repeatedly claim that it held no legal responsibility to continue to indulge claims as per the terms of the Treaty on Basic Relations.¹⁸²

The second flaw was that the Treaty only covered Koreans residing in the Republic of Korea, and effectively ignored diasporic Koreans that remained in Japan after the war. Therefore,

¹⁸⁰ Yuma Totani, *The Tokyo War Crimes Trial: The Pursuit of Justice in the Wake of World War II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 176.

¹⁸¹ Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 170.

¹⁸² “Further Promotion and Encouragement of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Including the Question of the Programme and Methods of Work of the Commission.” UNITED NATIONS Economic and Social Council: COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS, 28.

laborers, veterans, and “comfort women” survivors of Korean ethnicity residing in Japan were unable to be included under the Treaty or able to naturalize as Japanese citizens, leaving them effectively trapped. Populations of ethnic Koreans living in Japan today, called *zainichi* Koreans, continue to experience this alienation.¹⁸³

The third flaw was the South Korean government’s insistence that it and it alone managed the distribution of finances for the wartime aggrieved. By doing so, the South Korean government had the power to unanimously decide who exactly was a “real” victim of the war, and withhold payments in the general treasury should whatever qualifications were not met of the aggrieved households. In addition, the prevalent attitudes towards Korean women’s status and autonomy placed instances of wartime sexual exploitation as minor or nonissues, which further marginalized “comfort women” survivors hoping for government aid.¹⁸⁴

In 2005, declassified documents released by the South Korean government revealed that the government at the time had actually insisted for a general lump sum payout (as opposed to systematic conciliatory payments) and gained funding for not only all registered families of the deceased, but survivors as well. The documents produced outrage amongst survivors of the war and members of the Association of Pacific War Victims, who demanded proper compensation. Most of the treasury up to that point had been spent on rapidly developing modern infrastructure for economic profit.¹⁸⁵

Yet for all the progress made with the Treaty, there were no mentions or references of the “comfort women”. Nor would there continue to be for the next fifteen years, until Chung-Ok

¹⁸³ Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 171.

¹⁸⁴ Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan*, 168.

¹⁸⁵ Kyong-bok Kwon, "Seoul Demanded \$364 Million for Japan's Victims." *Chosun Ilbo*, January 17, 2005; "Declassified Documents Could Trigger Avalanche of Lawsuits." *Chosun Ilbo*, January 17, 2005.

Yun and the KCWU began drawing public attention to the plight of the “comfort women”. After Kim Hak-Sun’s testimony in 1991, the South Korean government finally established Victim Report Centers across the nation and began conducting independent investigations separate from the KWAU concerning “comfort women” surviving amongst the population. The result was the “Interim Report of the Fact-Finding Investigation on Military Comfort Women under Japanese Imperialism”. The report was also aimed at promoting state relations between South Korea and Japan, rather than addressing the CWI as one that needed grave attention, but was effective in gathering anonymous testimonies as well as identifying key components in the Imperial Japanese military that organized the “comfort” system.¹⁸⁶

In the twenty-first century, the South Korean government pursued several motions to re-address the CWI with Japan. In 2015, President Park Geun-Hye and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (pictured in figure 4) met to discuss renewed terms of financial compensation towards “comfort women” survivors. Abe referenced the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations during his claim of having “finally and irreversibly” resolved the CWI, and agreed to pay out a sum of US\$8.3 million to support funds for survivors. However, this sum was guaranteed only if South Korea did not raise the issue again, and removed a statue memorializing “comfort women” installed in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul.¹⁸⁷

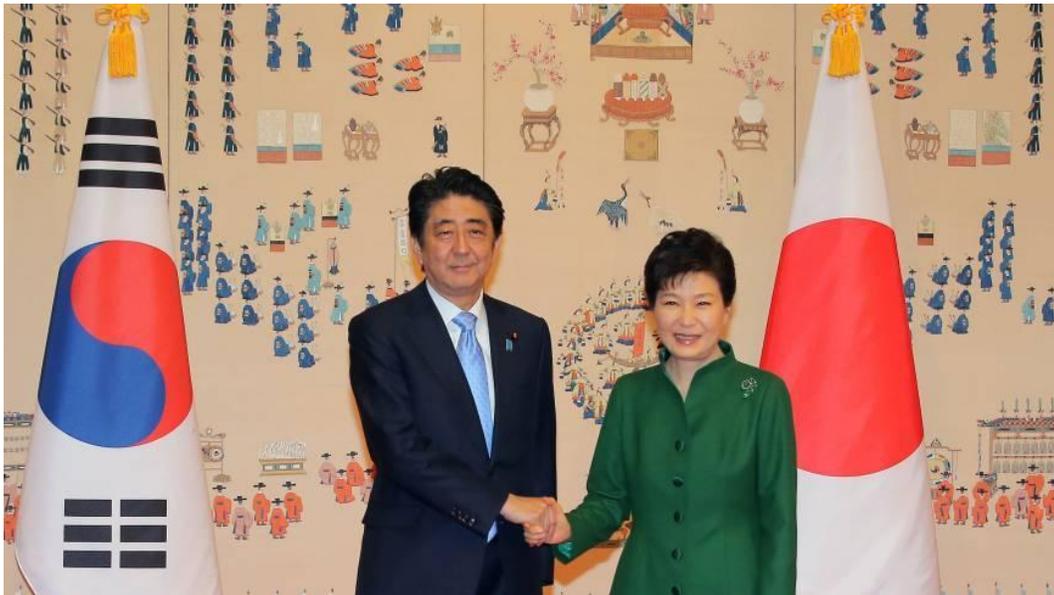
The decision was met with criticism from activists and survivors, who maintained that they were minimally consulted for the negotiations and stressed that genuine displays of apology

¹⁸⁶ Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 228–9.

¹⁸⁷ “Japan-ROK summit telephone call”. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. December 28, 2015.

and regret were the aim of reconciliation, not financial fees or ideological compromise by taking down the statue.¹⁸⁸

Fig. 3.5. “Former South-Korean President Park Geun-Hye (right) meets with former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (left) during the 2015 summit in Seoul.”



Source: Photograph by Reuters, Bloomberg, *The Japan Times*, November 2, 2015, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/11/02/national/abe-park-hold-first-bilateral-talks-since-taking-office/>.

The Park Geun-Hye administration was fraught with self-sabotage towards lasting reconciliation efforts, while simultaneously politically appropriating the CWI as a nationalistic crusade. It now remains to be seen what stance the incoming South Korean government will take with the “comfort women” and Japan, as Park Geun-Hye’s 2015 summit effectively handed the Japanese government a legal waiver to ignore further claims.¹⁸⁹ The words of Kim Hak-Sun summarize what should be the core aim of reconciliation and redress towards “comfort women” of all

¹⁸⁸ “[Editorial] No final resolution without legal responsibility on comfort women issue.” *Hankyoreh*, December 29, 2015. http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_editorial/723940.html.

¹⁸⁹ Yoonjung Seo, “South Korea elects opposition conservative Yoon Suk Yeol to be next president.” *CNN*, March 9, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/09/asia/south-korea-yoon-suk-yeol-election-intl/index.html>.

nationalities: “Would I reveal the undignified past to receive a bit of money? What I want is not some atonement money. I want the Japanese government’s formal reparation and apology.”¹⁹⁰

Conflicting Japanese Memories and Support for Reconciliation

In 1991, Japanese reporter Uemura Takashi published two articles for the *Asahi Shimbun* on Kim Hak-Sun’s recent testimony and the revival in the fight for Korean “comfort women’s” reconciliation. Takashi was attracted to the apparent sensationalism of the topic as a journalist, but also desired to spread awareness of the issue amongst the Japanese public, having conducted his own research into the CWI and Japanese colonial practices against exploited peoples. As a result of his articles, Uemura was harshly criticized by other newspapers, blacklisted from journalism, accused of treason by right-wing nationalists, and ceaselessly harassed to the point where the safety of his own family was at risk.¹⁹¹

The established and state-sanctioned consensus regarding Japan’s contentious past is one that paints Japan as a fantastical warrior force and victim. Imagery of noble *samurai* riding into battle for their lords and the atomic mushroom clouds rising above the wastelands of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are globalized and almost synonymous with Japanese military history. Yet behind this front, Japan’s war memories, especially pertaining to historical injustices it committed, remains highly contested between the oppressed and the oppressor. Philip Seaton argues that Japan’s war memories remain divisive and unresolved because “multiple cultural narratives exist and a truly dominant cultural memory cannot emerge...war memories become an issue of national division rather than national unity.”¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan. “Life of Kim Hak-Sun halmoni.” <https://womenandwar.net/kr/testimonies/>.

¹⁹¹ Takeshi Uemura, “Labeled the reporter who ‘fabricated’ the comfort woman issue: A Rebuttal.” *The Asia Pacific Journal* 13, no. 2 (Jan. 2015): 1, 23, 25.

¹⁹² Philip A. Seaton, *Japan’s Contested War Memories: The ‘memory rifts’ in historical consciousness of World War II* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 15.

Regarding the CWI, Japanese perspectives are polarized between denial from right-wing government spokespersons and repentance from civilians and political activists, with no definable consensus. Imperial Japanese apologists such as former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Ramseyer, and past conservative members of the Japanese Diet (the Japanese national parliament) notoriously and persistently denied the historical accuracy of the CWI, and have expressed that Japan owes little to no compensation to survivors or former colonies.¹⁹³ Meanwhile, Japanese scholars and activists such as Yoshiaki Yoshimi, Kimura Maki, Kazue Muta, and Yamaguchi Tomomi have all produced exemplary research on the CWI and the importance of Japanese public memory and reconciliation. So why is the topic of “comfort women” such a divisive and sensitive issue for the Japanese?

The International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE) and the Nuremberg Trials after the Second World War differed in Allied intent. While the Nuremberg Trials were meant to eliminate any possibility of German and Italian fascist resurgence and cement peace in Europe, the IMTFE sought to ultimately bring back Japan into the fold (albeit with a severe reprimand) in preparation for the upcoming conflicts with the Soviet Union in the Pacific. Thus, the prosecution during the IMTFE was not as meticulous or pervasive with criminal sentencing and condemnation.¹⁹⁴ This was compounded by the fact that Imperial Japanese soldiers had been ordered to destroy as many records and documents as possible to eliminate incriminating evidence before Allied forces moved in.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Jeannie S. Gersen, "Seeking the True Story of the Comfort Women." *The New Yorker*, February 25, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/seeking-the-true-story-of-the-comfort-women-j-mark-ramseyer>.

¹⁹⁴ Ian Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1994), 64–5.

¹⁹⁵ “Japanese Interim Report: An Interim Report to Congress.” National Archives. Last modified March , 2002. <https://www.archives.gov/iwg/reports/japanese-interim-report-march-2002-1.html#foreword>.

Beyond the courtroom, most Japanese civilians had little to no grasp on the crimes committed by their armed forces, and thus remained in the dark concerning atrocities such as the Rape of Nanjing, experimental Unit 731, and the harsh internment of Allied prisoners of war (POWs).¹⁹⁶ This societal ignorance is due largely in part to the Imperial Japanese government's extensive investment into nationalistic rhetoric and propaganda as well as heavy media censorship during the Second World War. Emperor Hirohito was deified as a living god, and the armed forces were an extension of his holy will for all of Asia. To question the actions of the Imperial Japanese military would be to question the will of the reigning god, which was treason and punishable by death.¹⁹⁷ The IMTFE failed to prosecute Emperor Hirohito as a war criminal deserving to answer for his leadership, nor did the trials include any formal action against the annexation and early years of the Japanese occupation of Korea.¹⁹⁸ Thus, when the CWI was raised with later generations, the fundamental framework for educated remembrance and historical accountability that the Japanese public had been spared from would have actually greatly facilitated the spread of awareness on CWIs and Japan's feelings towards the obligation to seek reconciliation with former victims vis-à-vis post-war Germany.

In addition, a major contributing factor to Japan's current fixation on its wartime victimhood are the devastating bombings carried out by Allied air forces over cities. Prior to the use of the atomic bombs, the U.S. Army Air Force (USAAF) under Major General Curtis LeMay carried out extensive firebombing operations over Tokyo, Osaka, and Kobe, reducing cities to

¹⁹⁶ Totani, *The Tokyo War Crimes Trial: The Pursuit of Justice in the Wake of World War II*, 119, 172.

¹⁹⁷ Kenneth J. Ruoff, *Japan's Imperial House in the Postwar Era, 1945–2019* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 44.

¹⁹⁸ Deokhyo Choi, "Defending Colonial 'War Crimes': Korean Debates on Collaboration, War Reparations, and the International Military Tribunal for the Far East," edited by Kerstin von Lingen, *Debating Collaboration and Complicity in War Crimes Trials in Asia, 1945–1956* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 54.

ash and leaving Japanese families that survived destitute.¹⁹⁹ The destruction and tragedy witnessed and experienced by Japanese civilians (as seen in figure 6) defined the paradigms of Second World War memory, and took priority over whatever sufferings the Empire of Japan might have caused outside of the home islands; the problems at home outweighed the problems abroad. James Orr dubs this mentality “atomic victimhood”, wherein “Japan had been defeated in war, stripped of its imperial possessions, occupied and fundamentally reformed in a social and political experiment by its former enemy, and excluded from the United Nations.”²⁰⁰

The defensiveness of the Japanese far-right and conservative critics towards the CWI is at its best, based on this kind of “atomic victimhood” that justifies the prioritization of Japanese historical tragedies above others. In the case of the notorious Yasukuni Shrine, which honors several senior Imperial Japanese officers and statesmen who were convicted as war criminals during the IMTFE, the shrine is just as much a locus of nationalism as it is an expression of this strain of grief and wartime trauma.²⁰¹

A common attitude from Japanese critics and deniers towards the CWI tends along feelings of frustration towards unraveling a past they believe is either fictitious, or should not be uncovered to preserve the dignity of the nation. However, what they fail (or refuse) to understand is that the generational trauma and memory of perpetrators of historical tragedies provides explanations behind action and behavior, but never justifies them.

¹⁹⁹ United States Strategic Bombing Survey, *The Effects of Air Attack On Japanese Urban Economy: Summary Report* (Washington: Urban Areas Division, 1947), 9, 11–12.

²⁰⁰ James J. Orr, *The Victim as Hero: Ideologies of Peace and National Identity in Postwar Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 43.

²⁰¹ Akiko Takenaka, *Yasukuni Shrine: History, Memory, and Japan's Unending Postwar* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 162, 167.

Fig. 3.6. “A Japanese boy stands at attention after having brought the body of his deceased younger brother to a cremation pyre.”



Source: Photograph by Joe O'Donnell, *U.S. Marine Corps*, September 1945, Nagasaki, <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/japanese-boy-standing-attention-brought-dead-younger-brother-cremation-pyre-1945/>.

Japanese scholars who have conducted research on the CWI and reconciliation studies have taken a wildly different approach to preserving and addressing wartime memory. Since the 1950s, communities of sympathetic Japanese have arisen to uncover different aspects of Imperial Japanese oppression on former colonies, including Korea. When Yun Chung-Ok, who had conducted interviews in Japan in 1987 returned a year later to deliver educational lectures on Korean “comfort women”, Japanese religious and feminist organizations such as the Japan Christian Women’s Moral Reform Society, and diasporic Korean-Japanese *zainichi* women stepped forward to lend their support to Yun’s cause. Telephone hotlines across major Japanese

cities were established for survivors and veterans to call in and share testimonies of their war experience.²⁰²

Some of the earliest historical and legal work concerning “comfort women” was completed by Japanese lawyers and historians, who eventually established the Center for Research and Documentation on Japan’s War Responsibility (JWRC) in 1992. The JWRC has independently lobbied for CWI in Japanese courts. In a 2007 address, JWRC officials argued that “a discrediting of the Japanese people as a whole in the eyes of the international community” would occur if Japan continued to deny and delay open negotiations with “comfort women” survivors.²⁰³ Since then, a variety of organizations have been founded in Japan to study and address CWIs and spread awareness to the general public. Controversies continue to persist around censorship and historical erasure in Japanese textbooks concerning war crimes, and researchers such as Yoshimi Yoshiaki seek to combat the Japanese government’s control over public ignorance. Japanese feminists and activists such as Matsui Yayori have also been crucial in the fight to educate the Japanese public on historical violence against women in Japanese society, and have significantly contributed to the Korean and Japanese “comfort women” redress movements while empowering fellow women to demonstrate on the behalf of “comfort women” around the world waiting for reconciliation.²⁰⁴

Thus far, the Japanese governments’ response to the CWI have floundered from promising beginnings. In 1992, Yōhei Kōno, then-Chief Cabinet Secretary of Japan, made international headlines by explicitly admitting for the first time in official record Japan’s

²⁰² Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*, 207, 209.

²⁰³ Center for Research and Documentation on Japan's War Responsibility, “Appeal Concerning Japan's military ‘comfort women’.” Japan Focus. Last modified February 23, 2007. <https://www.archives.gov/iwg/reports/japanese-interim-report-march-2002-1.html#foreword>.

²⁰⁴ Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”*, 210, 212.

involvement in the coercion and exploitation of “comfort women”. In his statement, Kōno admitted that the Imperial Japanese government were directly and indirectly responsible for the recruitment, mobilization, and utilization of the “comfort women”:

As a result of the [December 1991 study] which indicates that comfort stations were operated in extensive areas for long periods, it is apparent that there existed a great number of comfort women. Comfort stations were operated in response to the request of the military authorities of the day. The then Japanese military was, directly or indirectly, involved in the establishment and management of the comfort stations and the transfer of comfort women. The recruitment of the comfort women was conducted mainly by private recruiters who acted in response to the request of the military. The Government study has revealed that in many cases they were recruited against their own will, through coaxing, coercion, etc., and that, at times, administrative/military personnel directly took part in the recruitments. They lived in misery at comfort stations under a coercive atmosphere.

As to the origin of those comfort women who were transferred to the war areas, excluding those from Japan, those from the Korean Peninsula accounted for a large part. The Korean Peninsula was under Japanese rule in those days, and their recruitment, transfer, control, etc., were conducted generally against their will, through coaxing, coercion, etc.²⁰⁵

The statement, which was accepted and approved by the South Korean government, was a hopeful first entry into the reconciliation process. In 2001, then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi released an official apology to Korean “comfort women” survivors and the South Korean government, stating that

[Japan] must not evade the weight of the past, nor should we evade our responsibilities for the future.

I believe that our country, painfully aware of its moral responsibilities, with feelings of apology and remorse, should face up squarely to its past history and accurately convey it to future generations.

Furthermore, Japan also should take an active part in dealing with violence and other forms of injustice to the honor and dignity of women.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Yōhei Kōno, “Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono on the result of the study on the issue of ‘comfort women’.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Last modified August 4, 1993. https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page25e_000343.html. Accessed on October 25, 2021.

²⁰⁶ Junichiro Koizumi, “Letter from Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to the former comfort women.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Last modified January 1, 2001.

Since 2001 however, the successive Japanese governments, which have pursued more conservative and nationalistic motions, have redacted and re-interpreted the Kōno Statement and Koizumi's apology to escape indefinite accountability to suit their agendas. John Dower categorizes the different approaches to Japanese war memory that shape historical narratives and processes of trauma: denial, evocations of moral or immoral equivalence, victim consciousness, binational sanitizing of Japanese war crimes, and popular discourses acknowledging guilt and responsibility.²⁰⁷ Recalling Philip Seaton's arguments on the divisiveness of memory, the Japanese public must seek to move away from approaches that deny and trivialize war crimes, and return to establishing constructive rapport with survivors of Japanese imperialism.

Conclusion

No side is perfect when it comes to memorializing historical tragedy, as there will always exist a degree of cultural bias. The CWI across Asia remains a topic that is at times dangerously intertwined with ethnic and cultural emotion. The subject matter and details of the lives of "comfort women" provoke strong emotional responses for the women who lived through these experiences, and against the perpetrators and supporters who took these women away from any sense of normalcy or peace. It should be noted, however, that attributing emotion and applying agendas to the CWI are two very different concepts. So long as emotion is left outside of discussion and constructive analysis, emotion can be a positive driving force behind memorialization, activism, and civil movements for redress. When it comes to CWIs, agendas

https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/tp/page25e_000352.html#:~:text=As%20Prime%20Minister%20of%20Japan,psychological%20wounds%20as%20comfort%20women. Accessed on October 25, 2021.

²⁰⁷ John W. Dower, *Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering: Japan in the Modern World* (New York: The New Press, 2012) 112.

other than redress and reconciliation pose risks to devaluing or appropriating the trauma of survivors into self-serving campaigns that marginalize survivors and their fallen sisters.

It would profit the South Korean and Japanese governments to learn from their citizens who refuse to conform to nationalistic agendas or be silenced by political bluster. In the near future, closer ties must be established between government and civil redress and reconciliation efforts in order to eliminate misinterpretations and appropriation of the “comfort women” issue: time is running out and soon the last of the Korean “comfort women” survivors will only be a *han*-filled memory.

~Conclusion~

Death, Life, and the Future

The lives and experiences of Korean “comfort women” display at once the limits of human cruelty, perseverance, and hope. As the remaining survivors grow older with each passing day, the responsibility on civil activists and scholars to preserve and share their stories weighs heavier as well; on 17 February of this year, yet another registered Korean “comfort woman” survivor passed away, leaving only twelve alive at the time of this writing.²⁰⁸ Responsibility also falls upon the incumbent South Korean government, which markets itself as a major player in voicing concerns over the CWI in East Asia. The South Korean government must remain accountable for the colonial government’s collaboration towards Korean “comfort women” survivors. At the same time, the failure of the current Japanese government is accentuated in their own inability to address past abuses towards not only women from former colonized peoples, but their own citizens as well.

The CWI is one that spans multiple elements in origin and occurrence, each deserving critical analysis and deconstruction in order to fully understand why this tragedy and its consequences continue to affect modern Pan Asian-Japanese affairs. Cultural factors that facilitated and enabled the oppression of women in Asian cultures, imperialism and colonial practices of control, and politicization of historical memory merge and overlap when viewed through the lens of the “comfort women” and their stories. Former United Nations (UN) Under-Secretary-General Radhika Coomaraswamy, in her 1996 report for the UN Economic and Social Council on the subject of Japanese military sexual slavery, passed several recommendations towards the Japanese government on how to address CWIs relating to Korean women who were

²⁰⁸ “Only 12 “comfort women” victims remain after another passes away.” *Hankyoreh*, February 25, 2022. https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1032618.html. Accessed on February 28, 2022.

exploited during the occupation, such as full disclosure of incriminating documents relating to the organization and management of “comfort” operations, and the identification and punishment of perpetrators involved in the recruitment and institutionalization of “comfort women” during the Second World War.²⁰⁹

Coomaraswamy’s recommendations, as well as ones from other activists, scholars, and “comfort women” survivors, have yet to be fully implemented by the Japanese government today. Discourse between historians and scholars supporting and denying the claims of “comfort women”, the South Korean government’s exploitation of the CWI as a political weapon, and the Japanese far-right’s grip upon their perceived war memories obscures the timeline towards achieving redress and reconciliation. Thus far, Korean “comfort women” survivors have received financial compensation from government funds such as the Asian Women’s Fund (AWF), as well as several apologies from the Japanese government.²¹⁰ The issue with these attempts at redress, however, lies in intent and post-execution. Rather than seeking to maintain and conserve memorialization of the CWI jointly with Korean women’s organizations, the Japanese government desires for CWI activism to permanently end so that they may avoid future obligations to remain accountable for the actions of the Empire of Japan. This avoidance of responsibility on part of the Japanese government serves as a detriment against the “true” reconciliation desired by “comfort women” survivors and activists.

²⁰⁹ Radhika Coomaraswamy, "Report on the mission to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Republic of Korea and Japan on the issue of military sexual slavery in wartime." UNITED NATIONS Economic and Social Council: COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS. Last modified January 4, 1996, 31–2. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/228137?ln=en>. Accessed on September 20, 2021.

²¹⁰ Keiichi Tadaki et al., “Details of Exchanges Between Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) Regarding the Comfort Women Issue – From the Drafting of the Kono Statement to the Asian Women’s Fund.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Last modified June 20, 2014. Accessed on October 25, 2021.

What does “true” reconciliation look like? Possibly the best example can be found in Germany’s attitude and handling of post-war memory, especially concerning Nazism and victims of the Holocaust. Unlike Japan, the German governments have admitted to and taken full responsibility for the past actions of the Third Reich. Former concentration camp guards and key Nazi figures in Germany are still located and tried for their actions during the Second World War, and survivors of the Holocaust receive regular official statements of apology as well as financial compensation.²¹¹ Most importantly, the German public is extensively and objectively educated in the actions committed by the Third Reich, in an effort made by the German government to prevent any semblance of this tragedy via awareness. Japan has routinely denied or changed their stance on war crimes committed by their wartime predecessors. Rather than maintaining a financial compensation network between individual Korean “comfort women” survivors and national treasuries, Japan effectively dumped money into the hands of the South Korean government, hoping to release itself from continuous acknowledgement. History and social studies textbooks in Japanese schools today continue to forge an overarching narrative of Japan as a wartime victim of Western aggression as a national identity, rather than an oppressor and colonizer.

“True” reconciliation involves the end of Japan’s bureaucratic and legal games in order to avoid accountability, and the end of South Korea’s political weaponization. It also includes honest, open dialogues between survivors, former oppressors, and civil leaders who are able to spread awareness in their communities and lead a shift towards acknowledgement and respect.

²¹¹ Kirsten Grieshaber, “Germany expands pensions to more Holocaust survivors.” *CTV News*, October 6, 2021. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/germany-expands-pensions-to-more-holocaust-survivors-1.5612774>. Accessed on March 2, 2022.

It is my hope that as the scholarship supporting the CWI continues to spread throughout international institutions, the injustices experienced by “comfort women” across the world step closer towards indefinite resolution.

Glossary of Foreign Terms

Korean

chinilpa: [친일파] lit. “pro-Japan faction”] A term with derogatory connotations given to Korean collaborators among all social classes during the Japanese occupation. Equivalent to “traitor” or “betrayed”.

cheonmin: [천민] The second-lowest social class of Joseon, composed of butchers, blacksmiths, entertainers, and other general occupations that were deemed unsavory or ignoble by the *yangban*.

Daewongun: [대원군] A title bestowed upon the Prince Internal Prince (akin a regent) of Joseon. Most famously attributed to Yi Ha-Eung, who presided as the *Daewongun* during the unstable years preceding and during the Japanese encroachment on Joseon.

haenyeo: [해녀] lit., “sea woman”] Female divers originating from Jeju Island off the south coast of the Korean peninsula. The heritage of the *haenyeo*, who still dive today, dates back to the earliest days of the Joseon dynasty and possibly further.

halmoni: [할머니] lit., “grandmother”] The Korean word for “grandmother”, but also used to address elderly women in an affectionate manner.

han: [한 恨, lit., “hatred, resentment”] A complex emotional concept within the Korean ethnic identity that is directly linked to intergenerational postcolonial trauma. Feelings of *han* can be compared to grief, sorrow, anger, nostalgia, and hope, sometime even all at once.

hanbok: [한복] A general term for traditional clothing unique to Korea, sown out of cotton, linen, or silk. Several styles of *hanbok* were worn before, during, and after the Joseon period, serving as a visual distinction between classes. Today, *hanbok* retains its cultural importance, but now fulfills a more traditional role in preserving cultural heritage.

hangul: [한글] The Korean alphabetical phonetic writing system, known for its distinctive and unique linguistic structure.

hwanhyangnyeo: [환향녀, lit., “returned woman”] A term attributed to Korean women who were victims of wartime rape or given as tribute to China during the Joseon era.

hwanyangnyeon: [환양녀, lit., “returned whore/bitch”] A derogatory term towards women seen as sexually promiscuous or unchaste.

jungshindae [정신대, lit., “volunteering body corps”] The term given to members of the Korean Women's Volunteering Corps, which was formed by the Imperial Japanese military to supplement the industrial war effort (i.e the manufacture of arms).

kisaeng: [기생] female entertainers and courtesans during the Joseon era who were trained in various formal arts, such as dance, poetry, singing, and painting. *Kisaeng* traditionally catered to the *yangban* and were directly managed by the government of Joseon.

sangmin: [상민] The working class of Joseon, composed of farmers, laborers, and craftsmen. In general, any who did not hold an official title to their name were classified as *sangmin*.

yangban: [양반] The educated elite class of Joseon, ranging from government bureaucrats, scholars, and military officers, who held high authority in Korean society.

Japanese

bushido: [武士道, lit., “the way of the warrior”] An idealistic code of conduct followed by *samurai*, which upheld battlefield valor, honor, and a warrior spirit as a means of self-discipline and control.

chinkoro: A Japanese slur for the Chinese, equivalent to the English “Chink” or “Chinky”.

daimyo: [大名] A feudal lord of Edo Japan, who governed regions throughout Japan under the authority of the *shōgun* and the Japanese Emperor.

dojin: [土人, lit., “earth person”] A term used colloquially by the Japanese to refer to foreigners living in a given area. The term devolved into a slur when Imperial Japanese soldiers began using it derogatorily against occupied and colonized peoples.

ianfu: [慰安婦, lit., “comfort woman”] The Japanese term for “comfort woman”, with direct connotations to the aspect of military prostitution.

karayuki-san: A Japanese colloquial term for a prostitute or courtesan working in a red-light district or the general sex industry.

rōnin: [浪人, lit., “one who has lost their way”] *Samurai* who did not owe any allegiance to a master, feudal lord, or *daimyo*. Usually employed as enforcers and mercenaries, and were considered dishonorable by the Japanese public.

sakoku: [鎖国, lit., “locked country”] The isolationist foreign policy of Edo Japan, which lasted for two-hundred and sixty-four years.

samurai (also *bushi*): [武士] Professional warriors belonging to the nobility and aristocracy in ancient Japan, comparable to European medieval knights in terms of mobilization and execution. *Samurai* served masters such as more senior *samurai*, the *daimyo*, and the Emperor of Japan, and served as commanding officers during wartime.

yūkaku: (遊廓, lit., "pleasure quarters") The residential and business districts set aside for legal red-light and prostitution services in Edo Japan.

zainichi: [在日韓国人, lit., “stay in Japan”] A term exclusively used to distinguish and refer to ethnic Koreans living in permanent residence in Japan, who may either retain their connections to Korea or are fully naturalized into Japanese society.

Appendix

“Japanese Prisoner of War Interrogation Report No. 49.” (United States Office of War Information: Psychological Warfare Team Attached to U.S. Army Forces India-Burma Theater, Record Group 208, *Records of the Office of War Information*, October 1, 1944, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Japanese_Prisoner_of_War_Interrogation_Report_49).

Following are the names of the twenty Korean "comfort girls" and the two Japanese civilians interrogated to obtain the information used in this report. The Korean names are phoneticized.

NAME	AGE	ADDRESS
1. Shin Jyun Nimi	21	Keishonando, Shinshu
2. Kak Yonja	28	“, Sangonpo, Yunni
3. Pen Yonja	26	“, Shinshu
4. Chinga Chunto	21	Keishohokudo, Taikyu
5. Chun Youja	27	Keishonando, Shinshu
6. Kim Nanju	25	Keishohokudo, Taikyu
7. Kim Yonja	19	“, ”
8. Kim Konja	25	Keishonando, Kason
9. Kim Sanni	21	“, Kumboku
10. Kim Kun Sun	22	“, Taikyu
11. Kim Chongi	26	“, Shinshu
12. Pe Kijo	27	“, ”
13. Chun Punyi	21	“, Keisan Gun
14. Koko Sunyi	21	“, Kanyo, Sokiboku
15. Yon Kuji	31	Heiannando, Keijo
16. Opu Ni	20	“, ”
17. Kin Tonhi	20	Keikido, Keijo

18. He Tonyo	21	“ ”
19. Oki Song	20	Keishohokudo, Taikyu
20. Kim Guptogo	21	Zonranando, Koshu

Japanese Civilians;

Kitamura, Tomiko	38	Keikido, Keijo
“, Eibun	41	“ ”

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