

Korean “Comfort” Women: Their Testimony and Place in Twenty First Century Historical Memory

Ireland Wright

The Second World War was fought from 1939 to 1945. During this period, different areas of the world were ravaged by violence, especially of the gendered kind. The Japanese Empire used multi-layered violence to ensure the subjugation of all conquered territories during the war, as well as to repair the damaged image of the Imperial Army.¹ The Japanese military’s use of “comfort” women during the Second World War was a clear case of gendered violence used against other nations such as Korea and China. The denial of their trauma and very existence, by the Japanese Government specifically, shows how different perspectives from the Second World War are being de-legitimized by modern regimes, with the intent to support a specific propagandized narrative.

“Comfort Women,” as many were called, were women from colonized territories forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army on major army, navy, and marine bases. These women were forced to provide sexual services to Japanese officers and soldiers, during the Second World War in particular.² A mass system of military brothels was thus created, with women from conquered territories such as China, Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines “recruited” for these “comfort” stations.³ Eighty to ninety percent of these women came from Korea. Korean women were ideal individuals to “recruit,” forced more often than not, into the “comfort women” system. The Japanese imperial rule over colonized territories increased the vulnerability of occupied nations, including Korea, thus deceiving women with the promise of well-paid jobs as factory workers, in part of the larger *Chongsindae* or “voluntary labour service corps.”⁴ The *Chongsindae*, under the Japanese government’s “legal” grounds, was originally a systematic mobilization of both Korean men and women; the government sent Korean labourers back to Japan and other parts of Asia.⁵

¹ Ohron Myader and R. A. Davidson, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women’: Geographies of Displacement, Violence and Memory in the Asia-Pacific and Beyond,” (USA: Routledge Press, 2020), 3.

² Annemarie Luck, “No Comfort in the Truth.” (Tokyo: *Sage Journals*, April 2018), 19.

³ Chung Hyun-Kyung, “Your Comfort versus My Death?: Korean Comfort Women,” In *War’s Dirty Secret*, ed., Anne Barstow, (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 16.

⁴ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 6.

⁵ Edward Wang, “The study of “comfort women”: Revealing a hidden past—introduction,” *Taylor and Francis Online* (Dec 2019), 2.

Of course, this blanket term, which involved the mass enslavement of Korean labourers, was used as a disguise for the mass coercion of *wianbu*, or “comfort” women.⁶ As a result, “comfort” women were put through extreme trauma, including being raped multiple times a day for months, even years, while also witnessing brutal acts of violence against fellow “comfort” women. Forced abortions involving rat poison or sticks, as well as torture by impalement, were only a few of the terrible punishments.⁷ These women were forced to abandon their homes, families, and all sense of familiarity, as even speaking one's native language was punishable.⁸

The phrase “comfort” women itself is in fact a translation into English from the Japanese word 慰安婦, meaning “a woman who gives ease and consolation.”⁹ However, it is obvious it refers to women forced into military prostitution who accompanied the Japanese Army. The name “comfort women” itself acts as a means of denying acknowledgement of the displacement and sexual violence many women face in this militarized prostitution system; many use the phrase in quotations in order to recognize the contradictory nature of inflicting violence on the innocent whilst evoking an untrue sense of consolation through the name.¹⁰ The following paper does the same in order to recognize the significance and weight of the term “comfort women.”

What needs to be thoroughly established is the why; why did Japan conduct such diabolical crimes during the Second World War? “Comfort” women were deemed necessary for sexual release amongst Japanese soldiers, as rape was considered most “disturbing,” as well as causing extreme hostility amongst occupied territories.¹¹ Perhaps military security was also considered as “comfort” women were placed in the vicinity of military bases in order to prevent the spread of army secrets amongst local brothels and populations.¹² This excuse was seen especially during the China-Japanese War; when in fact it was Japanese soldiers engaging in killing, stealing, rape, and antagonizing local communities.¹³ This reasoning can be seen used especially after the events now deemed the “Rape of Nanjing.” In 1931, Japanese forces

⁶ Donald Clark, “*Korea Briefing, 1992.*” (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2019), Chapter 5.

⁷ Nora Okja Keller, “Comfort Women” (New York: Viking Publishing, 1997), 22.

⁸ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 6.

⁹ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 2.

¹⁰ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 2.

¹¹ Hyun-Kyung, “‘Your Comfort versus My Death,’” 18.

¹² Hyun-Kyung, “‘Your Comfort versus My Death,’” 18.

¹³ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 6.

entered the territory of Manchuria; the army established “comfort” stations throughout China and Southeast Asia during this campaign.¹⁴ These “red-light” districts were not the same as the later forced recruitment and militarized system in the later 1940s, but the motivation behind both was similar.¹⁵ However, Japan’s Central China Area Army looted, massacred, arsoned, and raped over long periods. Later in the year 1937, Japanese troops murdered between 100,000 and 300,000 people, and raped approximately 20,000 women in the city of Nanjing alone.¹⁶ Following these events, international states showed outright disdain for the actions of the Japanese Army, which led to Emperor Hirohito acting. Thus, the Japanese Imperial Army sought to institute the “comfort women” system, as a means of restoring Japan’s polished image through the use of an established sexual outlet.¹⁷ Even with the already established licensed system of prostitution existing in Japan, a result of the Meiji Restoration of 1868,¹⁸ the “comfort women” system was created and combined with the modern organization with the objective of controlling female bodies to “curb sexually-transmitted diseases.”¹⁹

Though military reasons were used to justify the use of “comfort” women, such as decreasing sexually transmitted diseases amongst Japanese soldiers or increasing “recreation” for those seeking vacations, the decision to use “comfort” women was very much based on ideology. Much of the Japanese Government and Army’s actions were based on factors regarding the state of the nation, class relationships, and attitudes on gender.²⁰ With the Emperor as the source of absolute power, obedience was seen as necessary in Japanese hierarchical society. Thus, men in their patriarchal positions chose to vent anger on women specifically with incredible acts of violence. This especially occurred against colonized women.²¹ Through the creation of such a patriarchal society, class and gender combined into ideologies that place women in the imperial hierarchy. This was seen as educating females in such a way to become “mothers of Japan, the mothers of militarization, the mothers of

¹⁴ Christine Kim, “The Comfort Women System: Sexual Slavery during World War II,” *Scholarly and Creative Work from DePaul University*, (April 2017), 21.

¹⁵ Kim, “Sexual Slavery during World War II,” 21.

¹⁶ Kim, “Sexual Slavery during World War II,” 21.

¹⁷ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 5.

¹⁸ Kim, “Sexual Slavery during World War II,” 14.

¹⁹ Kim, “Sexual Slavery during World War II,” 23.

²⁰ Hyun-Kyung, “Your Comfort versus My Death,” 19.

²¹ Hyun-Kyung, “Your Comfort versus My Death,” 20.

warriors, the mothers of a healthy nation, the mothers of the Japanization of Asia, etc.”²² Lower-class women were given the “ideology of comfort,” which proclaimed them to be necessary members of the emperor nation.²³

Thus, women of lower classes or colonized territories were automatically forced into an ideological category of workers required to fulfill all services towards the Japanese Empire. Especially Korean women, or “Chosun” women, who had been raised under the Confucian ideology of chastity, were forced to conform to another way of life that was morally foreign to their way of life.²⁴ Kamikaze pilots forced Korean “comfort” women to commit suicide before the pilots left to bomb enemy armies and their deaths were considered a “patriotic sacrifice for the emperor’s altar; the rape of Korean women by Japanese soldiers was considered holy, patriotic sex at the emperor’s temple, which was the military base.”²⁵ The Japanese asserted their supposed divine right and authority to do what they pleased to not only colonized peoples, but “comfort” women specifically. Accompanied by an assimilation program predominantly for Koreans, “comfort” women were also forced to give up their own identities; the “Pledge of the Imperial” forced individuals to recite phrases such as “We are the subjects of the Great Japanese Empire” and “We are fully loyal to the Emperor.”²⁶ Koreans were forced to change their name into Japanese, as well worship the Emperor and attend Shinto shrine ceremonies, in order to create a new national identity in the process.²⁷ The use of thousands of young women as sex slaves, from Korea, China, and other territories, was an attempt to impose control. Force and destruction were methods used to make these women barren, unable to create families and communities on their own terms; it was the most effective way of humiliating and attempting to destroy the Korean people.²⁸

The Korean women who survived the “comfort” system have suffered long-lasting emotional, psychological, and physical scars as a result of the violent torture, punishment and abuse each had been put through.²⁹ As a result of the sexual abuse, many “comfort” women

²² Hyun-Kyung, “Your Comfort versus My Death,” 20.

²³ Hyun-Kyung, “Your Comfort versus My Death,” 20.

²⁴ Katrina Maynes, “Korean Perceptions of Chastity, Gender Roles, and Libido; From Kisaengs to the Twenty First Century” *Grand Valley Journal of History* 1, no. 1, (2012): 3.

²⁵ Hyun-Kyung, “Your Comfort versus My Death,” 19.

²⁶ Soon-Yong Pak and Keumjoong Hwang, “Assimilation and segregation of imperial subjects: “educating” the colonized during the 1910–1945 Japanese colonial rule of Korea,” (*Paedagogica Historica* 47 no. 3, (June 2011), 391.

²⁷ Pak and Hwang, “Assimilation and segregation of imperial subjects,” 391.

²⁸ Hyun-Kyung, “Your Comfort versus My Death,” 20.

²⁹ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 6.

became sterile; involuntary medical experiments committed with the intent to prevent pregnancies and treat sexually transmitted diseases also contributed to infertility.³⁰ A factor heavily contributing to the silence of “comfort” women was the embarrassment many felt on their return home, driving their moral compass to stay quiet about the atrocities they experienced.³¹ In post-war era Korea, authoritarian regimes held government for decades leading up to the 1980s; only after the dictatorships of Park Chung-hee, and later Chun Doo-hwan in 1987, were alternative voices, such as comfort women, able to rejoin the social order of their communities, and regain the ability to use their voice.³² During this period, former Korean “comfort” women began to share their stories. The most ground-breaking testimony came from former “comfort” woman Kim Hak-sun’s publicly televised interview in 1991. She spoke of her experience, “Around 300 soldiers could take a break from duty once every three days. Each woman had to serve an average of three to four soldiers on regular days, and seven to eight soldiers after battles.”³³ In light of acts of sexual violence committed against women during the Bosnian wars and Rwandan civil war around the same time as her interview, there was a movement, especially supported by the United Nations, to promote and recognize women’s rights as human rights.³⁴

With these opinions come again the prominent societal belief in countries with a patriarchal base in Confucian ideals, like Japan, Korea, and China. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, accompanied by obedience by women towards men.³⁵ It has been stated that “comfort women” survivors have experienced “humiliation and isolation from their families and society as a whole,” showing that some lives, especially “comfort” women, are less important than others.³⁶ Female chastity is also at the heart of this issue, resulting in a resistance to share experiences of a sexual nature publicly; a cultural morality had influenced “comfort” women into silence, placing guilt and burden on them for events which they had no control over.³⁷ As years pass, “comfort” system survivors grow older. Thanks to the bravery of Kim Hak-sun, a former “comfort” woman who spoke out using her own name

³⁰ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 7.

³¹ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 7.

³² Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 9.

³³ Luck, “No Comfort in the Truth,” 19.

³⁴ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 9.

³⁵ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 8.

³⁶ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 8.

³⁷ Jungmin Seo, “Politics of Memory in Korea and China: Remembering the Comfort Women and the Nanjing Massacre,” (University of Manoa, 2008), 374.

about her experience in August of 1991, many others have come forward.³⁸ In 2016, the South Korean government documented approximately 239 women registered as victims of sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army; nine are now aged between 88 and 102.³⁹ Many have begun to lose their memories, as well as some suffering from dementia, making interviews and story-telling out of the question. The many testimonies each individual has given are vital for the sustainment of memories.⁴⁰

It is interesting when observing this post-war period that “comfort” women were made into symbols of the Korean nation, while their own government has turned a blind eye to the fact Korean collaborators aided in the recruiting of “comfort” women with the Japanese.⁴¹ Through the use of historical narrative, Korean nationalist discourse has laid sole responsibility on Japan. A Korean non-governmental organization, the Institute for Research in Collaborationist Activities, published a list containing 3,000 names of Korean collaborators, referencing the names of political, educational, and business leaders or their related family members.⁴² Acknowledging collaboration itself could destroy the notion of the Other, or “Us versus Them” mentality which is very much pushed by the South Korean government to this day.⁴³

Though talks between each country have continued to deteriorate, despite an initially positive reception, attention and activism surrounding the issue of “comfort” women have come to light. Memorial sites around the world have brought public attention and refocused conversations on the victims themselves, not bilateral relations or international politics.⁴⁴ They are a physical representation in the social memory of modern generations and offer incontestable truths.⁴⁵ Many memorials have been constructed throughout South Korea, as well as Australia, Germany, the Philippines, Taipei, and China.⁴⁶ Many have also been constructed throughout the United States, in Brookhaven, Georgia, Nassau County, New

³⁸ Kan Kimura, “The Burden of the Past” (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018): 104.

³⁹ Luck, “No Comfort in the Truth,” 20.

⁴⁰ Aiko Ogoshi and Kiyoko Shimizu, “Japanese Women Who Stand with Comfort Women,” (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 26.

⁴¹ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 11.

⁴² Kim Rahn, “List of Japanese Collaborators Released.” (The Korea Times, April 2008).

⁴³ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 11.

⁴⁴ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 15.

⁴⁵ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 15.

⁴⁶ Rangsook Yoon, “Erecting the ‘Comfort Women’ Memorials: From Seoul to San Francisco,” (University of South Africa, 2018), 74.

York, and Glendale, California.⁴⁷ In December 2011, a memorial was constructed outside the Japanese Embassy in Seoul; the Japanese Government has repeatedly asked for its demolition.⁴⁸ Japanese women have come to understand and support activists on the issue of Japanese “comfort” systems. These women recognize the ignorance of parents and grandparents, who have tried to erase their actions.⁴⁹ Acknowledging ignorance which caused many assaults and deaths, and accepting the responsibility of financial compensation for each victim is a welcome start to a long road to reconciliation.⁵⁰ These women oppose the Asian Women’s Fund as well, the non-governmental enterprise created by the Japanese government in 1995;⁵¹ the fund itself was the government’s attempt at providing “atonement money” to “comfort” survivors without taking legal responsibility for crimes committed by their predecessors.⁵² Japanese women created an organization called the Citizens’ Fund to Realize Postwar Compensation (“Citizens’ Fund,” hereafter) in August 1995 to counter the government.⁵³

“Comfort women” and their testimony have led to a rise in Japanese nationalism. Earlier apologies from the government have caused nationalists to push back. They seek to portray the Army as a success, depicted as an “anti-Western” entity during the Second World War from 1939 to 1945; they downplay the acts of violence, especially towards “comfort” women.⁵⁴ An anti-apology campaign by right-wing nationalists argues that “comfort” women did not enter service against their will, and that the Japanese army was not involved.⁵⁵ In nationalist narratives, “comfort” women are looked upon as prostitutes, and therefore should not be trusted.⁵⁶ Due to continuous pressure, there has been, and still is, a clear downplaying of responsibility for the atrocities conducted by the Japanese state. This is especially done by former Prime Minister Abe, specifically in regards to his grandfather Kishi Nobusuke, a class-A war crimes suspect.⁵⁷ As a result, mainstream high school textbooks that did mention

⁴⁷ Yoon, “Erecting the “Comfort Women” Memorials,” 75.

⁴⁸ Yoon, “Erecting the “Comfort Women” Memorials,” 70.

⁴⁹ Ogoshi and Shimizu, “Japanese Women Who Stand with Comfort Women,” 26.

⁵⁰ Ogoshi and Shimizu, “Japanese Women Who Stand with Comfort Women,” 27.

⁵¹ Chunghee Sarah Soh, “Japan’s National/Asian Women’s Fund for “Comfort Women.”” (University of British Columbia, Summer 2003), 217.

⁵² Ogoshi and Shimizu, “Japanese Women Who Stand with Comfort Women,” 27.

⁵³ Soh, “Japan’s National/Asian Women’s Fund,” 217.

⁵⁴ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 12.

⁵⁵ Wang, “Revealing a hidden past,” 2.

⁵⁶ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 12.

⁵⁷ Luck, “No Comfort in the Truth,” 20.

“comfort” women are gone, and replaced with versions that sanitize any Japanese culpability. Further, the Japanese Government both refuses to officially compensate “comfort” system victims with official funds and take legal responsibility for their crimes.⁵⁸

Now it has become a large issue to identify who is to blame, and how certain governments are reacting to activism and testimony regarding the “comfort” system, and the women affected by it. The topic of forced recruitment of Korean women as “comfort” women by the Japanese Empire especially during the period of the Second World War was first raised after an official state visit by then South Korean President Roh Tae Woo in June of 1990, at Japan's National Diet.⁵⁹ Since then, for the past twenty years, a sort of “apology diplomacy” has arisen. Former President Kiichi Miyazawa’s visit to South Korea in 1992 attempted to use the strategy of apologizing profusely in order to prevent an attack from the South Korean Government.⁶⁰ A statement provided by Chief Cabinet Secretary Koichi Kato, on January 13, 1992, acknowledged Japanese involvement in the “comfort” women system, but revealed they had not found documents related to coercive recruitment.⁶¹ The 1993 Kono Statement, written by then chief cabinet secretary Yohei Kono, “in many cases their recruitment, transfer, control, etc., were conducted generally against their will, through coaxing, coercion etc.”⁶² He acknowledged the role, both direct and indirect, that the Japanese took in managing “comfort” stations and the forced recruitment and captivation women faced inside them.⁶³ A statement by former Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama in August of 1995 focuses on the peace Japan has achieved, and on the 50th anniversary of the war’s end seems to deflect their own action by emphasizing the country’s devastation by the atomic bomb.⁶⁴ In the early 2000s, similar sentiments were also stated by then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.⁶⁵ Apologies by the Japanese government all present one common theme; they are all abstract and do not focus on specific incidents or victims.⁶⁶

⁵⁸ Wang, “Revealing a hidden past,” 2.

⁵⁹ Chunghee Sarah Soh, “The Korean ‘Comfort Women’: Movement for Redress,” (*University of California Press* 36, no. 12, (December 1996), 209.

⁶⁰ Kimura, “The Burden of the Past,” 114.

⁶¹ Kimura, “The Burden of the Past,” 122.

⁶² Hirofumi Hayashi, “Disputes in Japan over the Japanese Military “Comfort Women” System and Its Perception in History,” *American Academy of Political and Social Science* 617, (May 2008), 124.

⁶³ Myader, “Remembering the ‘Comfort Women,’” 10.

⁶⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the war's end” (Tokyo: August 15, 1995).

⁶⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Statement by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi” (Tokyo: August 15, 2005).

⁶⁶ Kimura, “The Burden of the Past,” 123.

Today, the Japanese government, specifically one of the country's most recent Prime Ministers, Shinzo Abe, has defended the actions of the Imperial Army in recent years.⁶⁷ Abe has repeatedly denied the Imperial military's responsibility for coercing women into the "comfort" system. He stated that coercion should be defined as "government authorities breaking into private homes and taking women like kidnappers" and stated that "it is a fact that no evidence has been found to support coercion as initially defined."⁶⁸ Private agents were deemed the coercers, not the military. Under Prime Minister Abe, more nationalist narratives in relation to Imperial Japan have come to prominence.⁶⁹ Further, in 2015, at a joint press occasion, foreign ministers of Japan and the Republic of Korea provided statements saying "The Government of the ROK values the GOJ's announcement and efforts made by the Government of Japan in the lead-up to the issuance of the announcement and confirms, together with the GOJ, that the issue is resolved finally and irreversibly with this announcement."⁷⁰ South Korea since then has called for a reconsideration of this agreement, saying it did not meet the needs of "comfort" system victims and the victims themselves were sidelined from negotiations, much to the disdain of the Japanese government.⁷¹

When looking at the current political climate of the east, especially South Korean-Japanese relations, it is quite obvious that the Japanese Government supports a certain "sanitized" view of the history of the Second World War in the Pacific, displacing emphasis on their responsibility and deflecting blame. Seen through the stripping of textbooks, "apology diplomacy," and overall rejection of accepting fault, Japan has focused – and continues to focus – on creating a narrative where the Imperial Japanese government, throne, and army have done no wrong. The pushing of such a conservative narrative is proof of Japan's willingness to create a historical narrative that coincides with honour and peace, values that are important to the Japanese state. They are attempting to create a specific framework of collective memory, one on which each person's individual memory lies.⁷² To question the foundation of modern Japanese society would destroy the state's legitimacy. The Emperor is

⁶⁷ Hayashi, "Disputes in Japan over the Japanese Military," 123.

⁶⁸ Hayashi, "Disputes in Japan over the Japanese Military," 123.

⁶⁹ Luck, "No Comfort in the Truth," 20.

⁷⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Announcement by Foreign Ministers of Japan and the Republic of Korea at the Joint Press Occasion" (Tokyo: December 28, 2015).

⁷¹ Luck, "No Comfort in the Truth," 21.

⁷² Maurice Halbwachs, "On Collective Memory" (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 264.

situated as a continuous symbol for the country of Japan and its imperial system; they are an individual who is partially responsible for Japan's involvement in the Second World War. The country's position on the plight of "comfort" survivors is less likely to change.⁷³ The issue of "comfort" women would create a snowball effect and initiate a "picking apart" of Japanese history entirely if the Japanese accepted legal responsibility for it. The Japanese government and its representatives wish to merge history and the Imperial narrative to form selective historical memories, ones which erase the tragedy of the "comfort system" altogether.⁷⁴

Ultimately, the issue of "comfort" women and the system that Imperial Japan implemented continues to this day. The Japanese government's perspective on these events fails to form clear ideas on their war responsibility and would rather present themselves as victims.⁷⁵ The narrative of "comfort" system survivors is one of the largest from the Second World War that Japan chooses to both intentionally and unintentionally delegitimize. Whether it be Japan or any state who was at one time involved with the "comfort system," perpetrators, victims, or those who fall into a grey area, need to recognize their culpability. The issue surrounding "comfort" women should be heard and acknowledged, and the question of who is in control of shaping their memory, and the memories of events that involve them, need to be considered.⁷⁶

⁷³ Hayato, Nakayama, "Japanese Activists who Support Redress for "Comfort Women": Why and How Do They Address the "Comfort Women" Issue?" (*The University of Manitoba*, 2013), 103.

⁷⁴ Halbwachs, "On Collective Memory," 264.

⁷⁵ Luck, "No Comfort in the Truth," 21.

⁷⁶ Myader, "Remembering the 'Comfort Women,'" 18.

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Yoon, Rangsook. "Erecting the 'Comfort Women' Memorials: From Seoul to San Francisco." *De Arte* 52, no. 2, 2018.