

## Comfort Women: Systems of Domination Revealed

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I can't live with this bitterness  
 Give me back my youth  
 Apologize and make reparation,  
 Japan, apologize and make reparation for  
 Taking us and trampling on us  
 Mother, father, can you hear  
 Your daughter crying  
 Now my Korean brothers and sisters help me along<sup>1</sup>

Episodes of pain and injustice fill humanity's recorded past, and the above lyrics encapsulate the heartache felt by one of history's victims, Yi Yang-su. A former comfort woman, Yi laments the loss of her youth and demands of her former oppressors the impossible task of returning stolen time and stolen innocence. Yi is not alone in her pain. Scholars estimate that approximately 200,000 women shared in Yi's fate and were conscripted to serve as sex-slaves for the Japanese military during World War II. Of these slaves, the majority hailed from Korea.<sup>2</sup> Simple explanations do injustice to Yi's anguish, and the designation of comfort women as merely the victims of Japanese military aggression ignores the vast web of oppression spun by ingrained systems of domination. War can not explain comfort women. Imperial, patriarchal, economic, and racial domination lie at the root of the systematic capture and sexual enslavement of Korean women by the Japanese government, and, unfortunately, the subsequent demand for reparations has the effect of clouding the intricate power relations at play, thus, marginalizing comfort women as merely war causalities and subjects of unrestrained Japanese libidos. World War II is over, but the culprit behind Yi's lost youth lives on in the form of unequal power systems.

A note on terminology is in order. Chin Sung Chung points out that the label "military sexual slavery" is oftentimes associated, or confused, with the Korean term *chōngshindae* (the Japanese *teishintai*) which refers to

the Women's Voluntary Corps for Labor (also referred to as the Women's Voluntary Corps). The Women's Voluntary Corps was set up by the Japanese government to enlist women for work in war time industries. However, the boundaries of *chōngshindae* were ambiguous and allowed for the transfer of women "war laborers" to various parts of the Japanese Empire to serve as sex slaves.<sup>3</sup> The problem with using the term *chōngshindae* lies in the fact that it can also refer to women who worked for the Japanese military in non-sex-related roles. However, Chunghee Sarah Soh states, "One might suggest that the Korean practice of using the term *Chōngshindae* to refer to comfort women is a considerate euphemism to avoid the negative symbolism of the word *wianbu*."<sup>4</sup> *Wianbu*, Soh explains, refers to the Korean word that implies images of "following" the Japanese army in a voluntary manner. *Wianbu* is the equivalent to the Japanese *ianfu* which probably led to the English translation of military *comfort women*.<sup>5</sup>

In Yang's words, the use of the term comfort women "is obviously itself a travesty."<sup>6</sup> The term comfort women fails to convey the sexual exploitation and slavery Korean women were forced to endure at the hands of the Japanese. Chung opts for the use of "military sexual slave/slavery", the term used by both the UN and the Korean Council.<sup>7</sup> However, as Kazuko Watanabe points out, comfort women "remains the way they are most commonly referred to"<sup>8</sup> and, despite the obvious "tragedy" of the term, this essay will here after employ the label comfort woman/women when referring to military sex-slaves "employed" by the Japanese Army during the 1930s and 1940s. This term is chosen due to its common usage among scholars and its ability to differentiate between sexual servants recruited by Japan in the mid-twentieth century and the vast pool of exploited women throughout the ages.

The next few paragraphs briefly outline the historical narrative of comfort women. "I am telling my story so that they will feel humiliated. It's true: I am an avenger of the dead."<sup>9</sup> Fifty years after her horrendous ordeal Mrs. Maria Rosa Henson, a native Pilipino, broke years of silence regarding Japan's practice of sexual enslavement during the 1930s and 1940s. Since Henson's revelation, many more victims have come forward to tell similar stories, initiating criticism towards the Japanese government and demands for recompense.

<sup>3</sup> Chin Sung Chung, "The Origin and Development of the Military Sexual Slavery Problem in Imperial Japan," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 5 (Spring 97): 220-221.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Hyun Yi Kang, "Conjuring 'Comfort Women': Mediated Affiliations and Disciplined Subjects in Korean/American Transnationality," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6 (2003): 45.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

<sup>7</sup> Chin Sung Chung, "The Origin and Development," 222.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Hyun Yi Kang, "Conjuring Comfort Women." 46.

<sup>9</sup> *New York Times*, 12 November 1996.

<sup>1</sup> Hyun Sook Kim, "History and Memory: The 'Comfort Women' Controversy," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 5 (Spring 2007): 98.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Seaton, "Reporting the 'Comfort Women' Issue, 1991-1992: Japan's Contested War Memories in the National Press," *Japanese Studies* 26 (May 2006): 99. The exact number and nationality of the 'comfort women' is contested. For instance, Hayashi Hirofumi argues that most women in China and South East Asia were recruited locally. However, most scholars would raise issue with Hirofumi's conclusions and maintain the prominence of Koreans in Japan's systematic sexual slavery. For more information see Hayashi Hirofumi, "Japanese Comfort Women in Southeast Asia," *Japan Forum* 10 (September 1998).

Japanese buying/thieving of women's flesh did not begin with the advent of comfort women. Diaries and military documents during the Russo-Japanese war reveal the popularity of brothels among the Japanese military during the early twentieth century. Japanese soldiers' high demand for sexual commodities continued into the Shanghai War, the Manchurian conflict, and World War II. The pre-1937 brothels, although employing military physicians, were generally privately run.<sup>10</sup> During the escalating war with China and the subsequent Second World War, the Japanese government took a more direct hand in the organization and operation of brothels or "comfort stations." There was logic behind their depravity. The Japanese government, in the wake of the widespread murder, rape, and rampant destruction of Nanking by Japan's military, argued that comfort stations allowed soldiers to release their pent up sexual aggressions in a controlled environment. Incidents such as the rape of Nanking, the Japanese government believed, would cause backlash and public outcry, but the systematic and covert recruitment of women as sex-slaves could go unnoticed. Comfort stations were also seen as necessary to reduce the spread of infectious diseases<sup>11</sup> among Japanese soldiers.<sup>12</sup> One must be careful not to blame the sexual exploitation of comfort women solely on the horrors of war and thus create a simplistic "war equals atrocities" equation. The unequal power-relations the comfort women experienced are much more complex and deserve more in depth treatment.

The extent of the Japanese government's involvement in running comfort stations is hotly disputed. After former comfort women came forward and shared their dark experiences, Japanese officials reluctantly apologized for military mistreatment of women. In 1992, Koichi Kato, the Chief Cabinet Secretary of Japan, stated, "I would like to express the sincere apology and remorse of the Government of Japan to all those...who underwent indescribable pain and suffering as comfort women."<sup>13</sup> Although offering an apology, Mr. Kato refused to admit government responsibility. Mr. Kato went on to state, "We did our best. Such problems, unthinkable in a time of peace, occurred in the midst of a war in which behavior often defied common sense."<sup>14</sup> Mr. Kato evades government responsibility and relegates the pain inflicted upon the comfort women as merely an unfortunate result of hysterical war fever.

<sup>10</sup> Chin Sung Chung, "The Origin and Development," 223.

<sup>11</sup> Just as the previous non-government managed brothels, the government comfort stations employed medical doctors who continually checked the sex workers for venereal diseases. Also, the fear of the spread of venereal disease among the Japanese military led the government to target young unmarried girls for sexual exploitation in comfort stations. See Laura Hein, "Savage Irony: The Imaginative Power of the 'Military Comfort Women' in the 1990s," *Gender & History* 11 (July 1999): 338.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> *The New York Times*, 7 July 1992.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Scholars and eyewitness accounts point to a government/military hand in the operation of comfort stations. Chung exposes official military involvement in comfort station implementation by pointing to government documents and direct military orders dealing with comfort women. Most telling is a meeting in 1938 between the Japanese Ministry of the Army, Ministry of the Navy, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs at which the government took direct control over brothels employed for military use.<sup>15</sup> In 1992, Seiji Yoshida, a former Japanese soldier, revealed the extent of government involvement in both the capture of women and the managing of comfort stations. Mr. Yoshida stated that "we would use 5 to 10 trucks, and sweep the villages, choosing two or three young women from each who would be suitable...the screaming was terrible, but that was my routine throughout 1943 and 1944. It was just like kidnapping. It may be the worst abuse of human rights in Asia in this century."<sup>16</sup> The Japanese government has subsequently admitted to its involvement in the operation of comfort stations, but the issue is still sidestepped by the current Japanese regime and reparations are refused.<sup>17</sup> Adding insult to injury, Japanese government officials pay respect to fallen Japanese soldiers, including class A war criminals, at the Yasukuni Shrine, a shrine set up by the imperial Shinto state.<sup>18</sup> During a 2007 hearing before the U.S. House of Representatives, Representative Michael Honda stated that,

Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei issued a statement of admission and apology in 1992. Prime Minister Koizumi also issued an apology in the year 2001. However, in 2006, Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Shimomuro Hakubun, as well as Japan's largest circulating newspaper, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, specifically challenged the validity of the Kono Statement and has led to the belief that Japan is attempting to revise its history.<sup>19</sup>

During the same hearing, former comfort woman Jan Ruff O'Herne stated that "When I was in Japan...I was invited to talk at high schools and colleges about what happened during the war. Not one of those students knew about the horrific atrocity that the Japanese committed during World War II."<sup>20</sup> The students' lack of knowledge about their country's past

<sup>15</sup> Chin Sung Chung, "The Origin and Development," 224.

<sup>16</sup> *The New York Times*, 8 August 1992.

<sup>17</sup> *The New York Times*, 8 August 1993.

<sup>18</sup> Yayori Matsui, "Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery: Memory, Identity, and Society," *East Asia: An International Quarterly* 19 (Winter 2001): 128.

<sup>19</sup> House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Protecting the Human Rights of Comfort Women: H.R.121*, 110<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 2007, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 26.

mistakes reveals Japan's reluctance to face up to its history and make known the horrors of comfort women to its citizens and the wider world.

"I fought them the first day...but they beat me so badly."<sup>21</sup> These words, spoken by a former Korean comfort woman, express the feelings of helplessness and frustration that accompanied the lives of Japan's sex-slaves. One Korean woman claimed to have served up to fifty Japanese soldiers per day for seven days a week, a statistic not uncommon among comfort women.<sup>22</sup> The torture these women were forced to endure was not limited to acts of sexual degradation. One survivor recalled, "I was beaten by a baton, tied to a tree and hung; I was also thrown into a frozen river."<sup>23</sup> Forced abortions were performed during the occasion of pregnancy, women suffered severe beatings, and one survivor was tattooed on her lips and tongue after an unsuccessful escape attempt.<sup>24</sup> The pain did not die after freedom from the comfort stations, and one woman stated, "I could not erase those horrible images from my mind. How can they ignore me like this after trampling down on an ignorant, weak teen-ager to suffer for the rest of my life?"<sup>25</sup>

Hyunah Yang points out the tendency of social discourse to explain comfort women as merely another consequence of Japanese aggression and argues that comfort women are primarily viewed from a masculine "positionality" and "this interpretation of the issue...accepts masculinist assumptions in taking for granted women as sexual objects whose purpose is to foster men's psychological security."<sup>26</sup> Comfort women, therefore, take on the role of subject rather than an agent or player in history's performance and are demoted to mere "facts" used to prove an historical occurrence.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Western racism or "orientalism" comes into play when equating comfort women with "war casualties." This line of reasoning paints the Japanese people as degenerate beasts, thus, fostering feelings of Western superiority and Asian "otherness". The remainder of this paper argues against the simplistic "war equal atrocities" explanation for comfort women that Yang rails against.

Systems of domination resulted in the exploitation of comfort women, and these systems need exposing. Imperialism is one such domination system. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Japan recognized its need to "keep up" with the West in order to protect itself from foreign colonizers and maintain its legitimacy as a power to be reckoned with. One avenue towards power and legitimacy lay in the

<sup>21</sup> *The New York Times*, 10 September 1995.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Yayori Matsui, "Women's International War Crimes," 123.

<sup>24</sup> Alexis Dudden, "We Came to Tell the Truth," *Critical Asian Studies* 33 (December 2001): 595.

<sup>25</sup> *The New York Times*, 10 September 1995.

<sup>26</sup> Hyunah Yang, "Revisiting the Issue of Korean 'Military Comfort Women': The Question of Truth and Positionality," *Positionas: East Asia Cultures Critique* 5 (Spring 97): 52.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-54.

acquisition of colonies, and Japan cast its eyes westward towards Korea. Japan's lust for colonies resulted in war between the island nation and Russia over the Korean sphere of influence. Japan defeated Russia, and the 1905 Portsmouth Treaty, presided over by President Theodore Roosevelt, awarded Korea to Japan as a protectorate. Despite protests by a Korean delegation to the Second International Conference on Peace at The Hague, Korea's subservient status was upheld, and the Korean delegates were not even considered legitimate representatives of their own country, which no longer existed as a separate nation.<sup>28</sup>

Japan created unequal power relationships with its colonized people, and Korea was no exception. Understanding Western imperialism is paramount in any discussion of Japanese imperialism, for Japan based much of its colonial ideology on that of the West. Western powers oftentimes legitimized their "right" to dominate foreign peoples due to the "uncivilized" nature of indigenous populations. Conquering natives came with the added perks of exploiting "unused" and "uncultivated" land and resources, and such resources included the human variety. Alexis Dudden reveals the influence the West had on Japanese colonization practices and ideology. According to Dudden, Kuroda Kyotaka, Japan's Vice Minister of Colonization, was sent to the United States in 1870 to learn the tricks of the colonization trade. When colonizing Hokkaido, the Japanese used stories of the United States' acquisition of land from Native Americans as both a model and justification for Japanese expansion. Furthermore, US Secretary of Agriculture Horace Grant played an integral role in Japanese northern expansion by serving as Japan's Commissioner and Adviser to the Bureau of Colonial Affairs. Capron stated that "the people and government of Japan are in earnest about this great work and aim to a higher type of civilization than any other of the eastern nations, and are more capable of its attainment."<sup>29</sup>

Western ideological influence did not end with Japanese expansion into Hokkaido and continued to play a pivotal role in Japanese imperialism. Japan's appointed professor of colonial studies, Nitobe Inazo, stated that the Koreans "have absolutely no will to work. The men squat in their white clothes smoking on their long pipes and dream of the past, never thinking of the present nor hoping for the future."<sup>30</sup> Nitobe's rhetoric is filled with classic Western colonial notions of civilized vs. uncivilized. Furthermore, Nitobe considered colonization as a step toward modernization and progress, terms associated with the West, and stated that "our nation has become more of a Great Power (due to the annexation of Korea as an official colony) than many European countries, and you all [speaking to his

<sup>28</sup> Alexis Dudden, "Japanese Colonial Control in International Terms," *Japanese Studies* 25 (May 2005): 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-11.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

pupils] have also become much more important. Japan of a month ago and Japan of today are completely different.”<sup>31</sup>

Due to “uncivilized” Korea’s subservient role to “civilized” Japan, Japan manipulated the Korean people and treated them as both less than Japanese and less than human. Yang points out that Japanese imperialism was based upon a patriarchal household in which the Emperor of Japan served as the head of the home while the colonized functioned at the bottom rung of the hierarchy.<sup>32</sup> Patriarchy demands strict obedience to authority, and the Japanese Emperor used his authority to demand that his subjects, including women, participate in the expansion and continuation of the glorious Japanese Empire. Japanese women could fulfill their duty by producing children who could then serve as soldiers or leaders, but the Korean women, being of inferior stock, served the Japanese by sacrificing their bodies on the altar of sexual exploitation.<sup>33</sup> Domination manifested itself in the form of Japanese imperialism, and Japanese imperialism helped to spawn the horrendous practice of military sexual slavery.

At this time, a pause is appropriate. There lies a danger in attributing too much responsibility to the West for Japan’s colonial actions. This type of argument ignores larger intertwined power structures and resorts to a “blame game.” Forces of subjugation and domination were at the heart of Japanese imperialism, and to relegate Japan’s colonial ambition to a simple cause effect equation ignores the deeper ingrained ideologies of inequality that continue to plague people all around the world.

Issues of race played a part in the subjugation of comfort women. Although not accounting for the entire population, up to ninety percent of comfort women were Korean.<sup>34</sup> The Japanese government encouraged their women to reproduce and kicked off the slogan “Bear [children] and Increase [the population].”<sup>35</sup> The role of motherhood was honored and anti-abortion laws became stricter. Korean comfort women, on the other hand, were administered forced abortions. After cutting out an unborn child from the womb of a comfort woman, a Japanese soldier stated, “We don’t need the *Chōsenjin’s* [a derogatory term for Korean] baby.”<sup>36</sup> Former comfort woman Hwang Kūmju recalled that “those who fell pregnant were injected with ‘No. 606.’ They began to feel chilly, their bodies swelled, and they started to discharge blood. They were then taken to the hospital to have an abortion. After this had happened three to four times, they became barren.”<sup>37</sup> Korean women were not valued as persons, and, as Yang writes

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 14–16.

<sup>32</sup> Hyunah Yang, “Revisiting the Issue,” 64.

<sup>33</sup> Chin Sung Chung, “The Origin and Development,” 230–231.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 226. This figure is not universally accepted by all scholars, but a general consensus maintains that at least a majority of the comfort women were Korean.

<sup>35</sup> Hyunah Yang, “Revisiting the Issue,” 64.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Howard, Keith, editor., *True Stores of the Korean Comfort Women*, (New York: Cassell, 1995), 74.

so eloquently, “the body of the comfort woman could consequently be considered merely as a site, a ‘sanitary toilet,’ for the disposition of Japanese sexual needs....”<sup>38</sup> Japanese imperialism based much of its legitimacy on unequal race ideologies, and those ideologies manifested themselves in the selection of Koreans for work at comfort stations.

Japan denied Korean women personhood. Based on racial attitudes of Japanese supremacy and Korean degeneracy, Korean society and people were deemed inferior, and the Japanese initiated a campaign of assimilation on the Korean peninsula. The Japanese suppressed Korean language, gave Koreans Japanese surnames, and forced Shinto religion upon the Korean people.<sup>39</sup> Japan attempted to reshape the Koreans into their own image, destroying their cultural identity and relegating them to second-class members of Japan’s patriarchal family. Oppression based on ideologies of race superiority raised its ugly head and contributed to the domination of Korean women as sex slaves.

Economic oppression inflicted upon the Korean people through the unequal power structure of imperialism mingled with patriarchal ideology and racism creating a web of domination. Japan emerged out of the nineteenth century a capitalist imperial state that treated its colonies, including Korea, as avenues of capital expansion. Japan imposed a harsh economic climate upon Korea by acquisitioning prime Korean land, forcing Korean farmers to produce crops mainly for importation to Japan, and restricting industrial trade to Japan only. The Korean economy tumbled, causing up to 48 percent of the rural population to endure famine conditions and up to 12.9 percent of urban dwellers to live in poverty.<sup>40</sup>

The economic oppression caused by Japan’s imperialism forced many Korean women to join “Japanese work force groups” that turned out to be comfort stations in disguise. Kim Tōkchin was one such Korean woman who’s attempt at escaping Korea’s bleak, economic realities resulted in service to Japan as a comfort woman. Kim’s father cultivated tobacco, a government-monopoly crop, and was beaten to death for the crime of “stealing” some of his tobacco leaves for personal use. The loss of Kim’s father devastated the family economically, and they spiraled deeper into poverty. Kim, inundated with tales of women who had profited by working abroad, decided to take a job at what she believed to be a factory in Japan. Kim stated that “In those days people were rather simple, and I, having had no education, didn’t know anything of the world. All I knew – all I thought I knew – was that I was going to work in a factory to earn money. I never dreamed this could involve danger.”<sup>41</sup> A few days after Kim’s “escape from poverty,” she was raped by a Japanese officer who informed her that she would have to get used to this kind of work and assured her that after a few

<sup>38</sup> Hyunah Yang, “Revisiting the Issue,” 64–65.

<sup>39</sup> Chin Sung Chung, “The Origin and Development,” 231.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Howard, Keith, *True Stores of the Korean Comfort Women*, 43.

times she “would not feel so much pain.”<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, the pain never stopped for Kim, and years after her internment at a comfort station she stated that “the gifts of my days as a comfort women still trouble me. I have bladder infections, womb disease, a restless of mind and many other ailments.”<sup>43</sup> Because of the economic oppression inflicted on the Koreans by the Japanese, Kim left Korea in search of a more affluent life, but instead of finding financial opportunities, she found herself caught in one of history’s most destructive and extensive systems of human sex-trafficking.

Patriarchy created an atmosphere of oppression for Korean women and instructed the Korean female to “follow the way of her father before marriage, acquiesce to her husband’s opinions in her marriage and then, after his death, obey her son.”<sup>44</sup> Mun P’il-gi’s story of becoming a comfort woman reveals the deep seated patriarchy living in Korea’s society. Mun, who attempted to obtain an education, stated that “My father, however, was adamantly opposed to the idea of a girl studying, saying that educated girls turn into ‘foxes.’”<sup>45</sup> Although managing to enroll in school behind her father’s back, Mun stated that “My father found out within a week that I was attending school and burned all my books. His anger did not subside with that. He beat me up severely and threw me out of the house.”<sup>46</sup> Mun, seeing no other way to escape her father’s patriarchal control, accepted an offer by a Japanese recruitment agent to take a job where she could “both earn money and study.”<sup>47</sup> Mun was subsequently taken to Manchuria where she was forced to serve as a comfort woman for Japanese soldiers. Patriarchy was not confined to the poor and down trodden of Korea, as Yi Sang-ok’s story reveals. Yi’s family was not poor by contemporary standards and could even afford to hire “a *mosum* [farmhand] and a wet nurse.”<sup>48</sup> Despite her family’s financial ability to send her to school, Yi’s brother “objected to it, saying it was useless to educate a girl.”<sup>49</sup> Yi fled her repressive family situation and ended up taking a job at a “factory”; a “factory” that turned out to be a comfort station.

The hold patriarchy had upon Korean women did not end with their release from sexual enslavement. Korean society held women’s chastity and sexual purity on a pedestal,<sup>50</sup> and once their “purity” was removed, Korean comfort women lost a large part of who they were and what they believed

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>44</sup> Insook Kwon, “The New Women’s Movement in 1920s Korea: Rethinking the Relationship Between Imperialism and Women,” *Gender & History* 10 (November 1998): 391.

<sup>45</sup> C. Sarah Soh, “Aspiring to Craft Modern Gendered Selves ‘Comfort Women’ and *Chōngsindae* in Late Colonial Korea,” *Critical Asian Studies* 36 (June 2004): 187.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 189

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Insook Kwon, “The New Women’s Movement in 1920s Korea,” 390-392.

to be most important.<sup>51</sup> Song Sin-do stated that “I did not want to return home where nobody would welcome me back.”<sup>52</sup> One comfort woman was discouraged to speak out about her ordeal and was told that “you would only bring trouble on your family and your children will be traumatized.”<sup>53</sup>

Not only did Korean comfort women lose their “purity,” many also lost their ability to bear children, and in a patriarchal society that prized women’s fertility, a barren woman was second-rate at best and valueless at worst. The importance that Korean culture placed on child-bearing was so strong that Yi Yōngsuk, after serving over four years as a comfort woman, lamented that “It was bad enough that I had to suffer what I did. But it is worse that I was made barren because of this ordeal. I am bitter when I think of this... We are finished, and our bodies are useless after so much abuse.”<sup>54</sup> Oh Omok’s bareness resulted in the dissolvent of her marriage, which in turn robbed from her the economic means for survival. Omok stated that “My only wish is to be able to live without worry about rent. And I still feel resentful that I haven’t been able to have children because of what happened almost 50 years ago.”<sup>55</sup>

The abuses wrought by Japanese men on their Korean sex-slaves left many comfort women with a distaste for men and marriage long after their liberation from the comfort station. Yi Yongsu stated, “I couldn’t dare think of getting married. How could I dream of marriage?... I basically dislike men.”<sup>56</sup> Mun P’iligi echoed Yi’s sentiments when she stated, “I had no intention of getting married. I couldn’t bear the thought of becoming someone’s wife, not with my past as a comfort woman to haunt me.”<sup>57</sup> With the shame of bareness and the stigma of carrying a venereal disease lurking over them, a large number of former comfort women shied away from marriage and lived their lives as poverty-stricken, social outcasts in a society in which a woman’s worth was measured by the patriarchal standards of marriage, purity, and child-bearing. Those who chose to get married oftentimes did not find their lot in life any better. Kim Haksun lamented that “When he [Kim’s Husband] was drunk and aggressive, because he knew that I had been a comfort woman, he would insult me with words that had cut me to the heart... My life seemed to be wretched.”<sup>58</sup> The fact that fifty years transpired before comfort women spoke out about their mistreatment reveals the feeling of shame and humility these surviving comfort women felt about their past. In their past, they played the part of

<sup>51</sup> Hyunah Yang, “Revisiting the Issue,” 65.

<sup>52</sup> C. Sarah Soh, “Aspiring to Craft Modern Gendered Selves,” 192.

<sup>53</sup> Howard, Keith, *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*, 49.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 39.

the innocent victim, yet many of their peers, friends, and family members viewed them as the guilty perpetrators of their own destinies.

“What now” questions regarding surviving comfort women lay heavy on the hearts of human rights advocates and government bodies. One remedy put forth by those advocating for former comfort women is the giving of reparations by the Japanese government, and one form of reparation that oftentimes takes center stage in the media and public discourse is the monetary type. Arguments supporting monetary reparations cloud the true criminals, i.e. systems of oppression and domination and relegate comfort women to the margins by insisting that they be viewed merely as war wounds that need bandaging. Demands for monetary reparations inadvertently suggests that throwing money at these former victims will bring “closure” to their pain and humiliation. Yōngsuk stated that “It doesn’t matter whether we receive compensation or not. After all, what could we do with money, with so few years left before we die.”<sup>59</sup> As Representative Honda stated,

I do not believe any amount of money can atone for what these women suffered and...I do not believe the Japanese Government or its citizens should suggest that a monetary payment can right a moral wrong...What is relevant is that Japan acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility for its Imperial Armed Force’s coercion of young women into sexual slavery...<sup>60</sup>

Japan needs to take responsibility for its actions, but it is not enough that Japan alone apologizes and takes all of the blame. The root causes behind comfort women lay in various systems of domination, including imperialism, patriarchy, economic oppression, and racism. As shown by this essay, the evils that plagued, and continue to plague, comfort women were not solely inflicted by the Japanese, and other perpetrators must stand up and be accounted for.

A fund was set up to provide monetary compensation for former comfort women called the Asian Women’s Fund. However, it was a privately funded trust, and the money collected into the trust “came from private enterprises and private business. It did not come from the government.”<sup>61</sup> Of the 50,000 to 200,000 comfort women, only approximately 285 women have taken advantage of the Asian Women’s Fund. Many factors have contributed to the low number of women receiving compensation from the Asian Women’s Fund, but one reason for the fund’s failure, according to former comfort woman Jan Ruff O’Herne, is

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<sup>59</sup>Yōngsuk’s attitude does not represent that of all surviving comfort women. Many survivors have led in the fight for government reparations, monetary and otherwise. *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>60</sup> House Committee, *Protecting the Human Rights of Comfort Women*, 3.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

that “the fund was an insult to the comfort women, and they, including myself, refused to accept it.”<sup>62</sup> The fact that money was available to surviving comfort women but rejected by them speaks for the inadequacy of monetary compensation. Many former comfort women want more. They want to their plights acknowledged and for the world to know their stories.

It is hard to imagine monetary reparations creating any real closure for the sexual objectification these women endured. The real solution to the comfort women issue is the exposure of unfair power relationships. Humanity must realize the vast interconnectedness between all of society’s parts, be they home societies or those abroad, and end oppressive power structures. Sickness is not cured by treating the symptoms, and “putting an end” to the comfort women issue by covering it with monetary reparations ignores the viruses of inequality that infect the world. Reparations *are* in order, but they should be reparations of change that recognize and attempt to destroy systems that dominate, oppress, and create inequality amongst the brothers and sister of mankind. They must also be reparations of acknowledgment. As stated by Representative Honda,

Civilized society cannot allow history to be revised or denied under any circumstances. Regardless of what bearing this, or any other issue, may have...civilized society has a moral obligation to remember, to give voice to those who have suffered, to pay living tribute to victims past and present, to defend human rights and human dignity. Otherwise we run the risk of another Holocaust or, in this case, young women being forced into sexual slavery.<sup>63</sup>

We must remember and give voice to the oppressed of society’s past and present, lest we forget our wrongs and repeat them.

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-26.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.