

KOREAN COMFORT WOMEN

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Whenever I think of the events of the past or talk about them, I get headaches and am unable to sleep for many nights. Even if I cry aloud, I don't think I can feel relieved. My anger has become a kind of disease. It shoots through me, and even in the depths of winter, I can only sleep with my door open.¹

The plight of the comfort woman is of vital importance in discussing sexual violence in Asia. Brought to attention almost five decades after the end of World War II, the story of comfort women is a sad reflection of women's rights in Asia. The extent of Japanese-inflicted destruction and atrocities in Southeast Asia need not and cannot be repeated within the scope of this essay. However, it is integral to examine the issue of comfort women within the context of World War II, prior Japanese settlement of Korea and the Greater Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere.

Indeed, the concerns involved in the comfort women issue stir up the question of military prostitution, transforming into one of sexual slavery based on race, class and ultimately, gender. While one cannot precisely determine the number of women forced into "voluntary" labor corps, the numbers range from 80,000 to almost 200,000 women, approximately eighty percent of whom were Korean.² With the sheer velocity of women subjugated into these corps, it is no wonder that there was both controversy and hesitancy on the part of the Japanese government to admit guilt. Accordingly, repatriations and even formal apologies from the Japanese government have been withheld, an issue that has created much antagonism with neighboring Asian countries. Indeed, the view taken throughout Asia is that unless and until Japan seeks responsibility for all its atrocities, including sexual crimes against women in what were then its colonies, Japan will continue to lose its credibility.

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¹ Yi Sangok, "I Came Home, But Lost My Family," in Keith Howard, *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Woman* (London: Biddles Ltd., 1995), 132.

² Chunghee Sarah Soh, "The Korean Comfort Woman," *Asian Survey* 36 no. 12 (December 1996), 1228.

The purpose of this paper is to deepen understanding of the complex issues surrounding comfort women by concentrating on who these women were, why Koreans were a vast majority and why women were used for comfort.

Who Were The Comfort Women?

While official military documents on the recruitment and retention of comfort women during World War II have long since been destroyed, much research on the issue has hinged on the testimonies of aging comfort women hailing from Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Perhaps one of the most disturbing features of this phenomenon is the serious and systematic involvement of the Japanese military in the testimonies of comfort women. Indeed, to prevent public criticism of atrocities, such as the Rape of Nanjing, where Japanese soldiers raped and murdered tens of thousands of Chinese women, and to combat the spread of venereal disease, Japanese military leadership called for the institution of military comfort stations.

Nationalities, age, class, marital status and methods of recruitment do not seem incredibly varied among surviving women's testimonies. It is generally accepted that eighty to ninety percent of comfort women were Korean, primarily because Korea was a colony of Japan and because Koreans were considered racially inferior. Health documents by Aso Tetsuo, a former military surgeon stationed at a comfort station in Shanghai in 1939, illustrates that most comfort women were in fact Korean.³ Another important factor in this issue is the relative youth of many women and girls recruited as comfort women. While the legal age for prostitution in Japan was eighteen and for Korea seventeen,⁴ there appears to have been no age restrictions for comfort women. Some were reported to have been as young as eleven. Indeed, Howard states that considerably younger girls were preferred by the Japanese soldiers because Japanese women that were recruited likely had been prostitutes before the war. Yet another interesting perspective is how most of the comfort women came from poor farming communities, with very little, if any, formal education. As such, the Japanese government has been duly criticized as it appeared that the government systematically took comfort women

³ Aso Tetsuo, *Karyubyō Sekkyokuteki Yoboho* [Positive Methods to Prevent Venereal Disease] (26 June 1939); Cited in Keith Howard, *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*, (London: Biddles Ltd., 1995), 16.

⁴ Yamasida Yongae, *Han'guk Kundae Kongchi'ang Chedo Shilshi-e Kwanhan Yon'gu* [A Study on the System of State Regulated Prostitution in Modern Korea], (MA dissertation, Seoul: Ewha Women's University, 1991); Cited in Howard, *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*, 17.

from the poorer classes, with no real voice, in order to minimize public criticism of such practices.

Why Were So Many Comfort Women Korean?

According to Pyong Gap Min, the victimization of Korean comfort women had three major components: first, their forced recruitment into sexual slavery; second, their suffering inside comfort stations and finally, their decades-long silence.⁵ In 1905, Korea became a protectorate of Japan, and by 1910 Korea was annexed by Japan. This simultaneously ended diplomatic ties with other countries, remaining this way until Japan's defeat in 1945. In the end, Korea exported not only rice, other agricultural products, minerals and laborers, but also thousands of young, unmarried Korean women to satisfy the Japanese war machine.

Min adds that colonial power and racial prejudice intertwined with gender relations in this mobilization of Korean women to Japanese military brothels.⁶ Indeed, for sheer convenience, it was considerably easier to draft and transport Korean women for sexual service because of Japan's imperial dominance. Varying methods of recruitment were used, such as abduction, coercion and false promises of employment. As colonial subjects, the Korean people were governed exclusively by Japanese officials and military police. At the same time, with so much agricultural produce being shipped to the Japanese motherland, many rural communities were willing to let their daughters go abroad for more lucrative employment.⁷ The issue of racial prejudice is also highlighted in the fact that the only military tribunal after the war concerning sexual abuse of comfort women took place in Jakarta, Indonesia in 1948, wherein thirty-five Dutch women were repatriated.⁸

Various testimonies from aging comfort women state that it was their powerlessness as young girls in a colonized state to be the reason for their mistreatment. Park Ok-Sun, for example, expressed her anger at the Korean government, saying:

We were taken to the military brothel by the Japanese military mainly because our country, colonized by Japan, was not strong enough to protect us. Therefore, this is

⁵ Pyong Gap Min, "Korean 'Comfort Women': The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender and Class," *Gender & Society* 17 no. 6 (December 2003), 942.

⁶ Min, "The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class," 944.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 945.

⁸ Jan Ruff-O'Herne, "The Forgotten Ones," Interview by Caroline Jones (ABC, 20 August 2001) *Australian Story*; Accessed September 2005 at http://www.abc.net.au/austory/archives/2001/AusStoryArchive2001Idx_Thursday30August2001.htm.

not our individual problem, but our nation's problem. Until the Japanese government resolves the *Jungshindae*⁹ issue, it cannot have normal relations with Korea. The Korean government should put pressure on the Japanese government to acknowledge the crime and compensate the victims.¹⁰

Why Were Women Used For Comfort?

Wartime exploitation of women for sexual services has been part of wartime tradition for a long period of time, even before Japanese institution of comfort women. Indeed, in the context of combat and uniform, battlefields have been described as one of the most stressful environments, as 'temporary derangements' as one Japanese Army medical officer has said.¹¹ While not condoning the blatant abuse of women for sexual services during wartime, more or less institutionalized means of catering to this sexual need have been found for various armies in history. The Roman Empire, for example, had a comfort system similar to that of the Japanese. A proponent of institutionalized slavery, the Romans instituted a system wherein captive females were made slaves for military brothels attached to every Roman garrison or campaigning army.¹² During the 16th century, the Spanish Duke of Alva's army, when invading the Netherlands with the Armada, was followed by '400 mounted whores and 800 on foot.'¹³ The British Empire was by no means immune to this phenomenon. With a prostitutes' quarter attached to each cantonment,¹⁴ military prostitution was at first an official policy, later to be rescinded in favor of a more fluid policy based on voluntary participation.

In feudal Japan, prostitution was quite open, making infamous the pleasure districts of Kyoto, Osaka and Tokyo. Indeed, Edo (as Tokyo was then called) was epitomized as 'the nightless city.'¹⁵ Accordingly, sexual superstitions, a dominant feature of culture, pervaded the military along with death and suffering superstitions. Advocating the belief that sex before going into battle worked as a charm against injury, the Japanese ritualized the practice of visiting comfort women, especially before a unit was to leave for the front.

⁹ Korean term for military sexual slavery.

¹⁰ Min, "The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class," 945.

¹¹ George Hicks, *The Comfort Women: Japan's Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War*, (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1994), 28.

¹² *Ibid.*, 29.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ A distinct settlement of the Indian Army.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

Amulets would be made with the pubic hair of comfort women, or from something taken from them. Kim Il Myon, although critical of Japanese militarism, highlights the plight of the armed forces, saying, "To soldiers in the frontline, ever surrounded by the sound of guns, wrapped in smoke stinking of death and not knowing when death come... a visit to a comfort station was no doubt the only form of relief. It was the only kind of individual act in which one was 'liberated'.... It was their 'oasis.'"¹⁶

The Decades Long Silence and the Movement for Redress

Although factors such as the destruction of official documents and the understandable reluctance of surviving comfort women to bring up memories of the past contributed to the five-decade long silence, another factor is also quite important. Indeed, the cultural legacy of a patriarchal society is a major player in this silence. Soh states that in the traditional Korean patriarchy, sexual freedom for men was enthusiastically encouraged, whereas women's sexuality was rigidly controlled.¹⁷ As such, comfort women returning from the enclaves of Japanese military brothels were often ostracized by family and friends, a huge detriment in a society where family kinship is integral to one's place in the society. At the same time, it is interesting to note that one of the Dutch women in Indonesia was deemed unfit to be a nun because she had been forced to be a comfort woman.¹⁸

Within this cultural legacy, it is not surprising to note that many comfort women actually committed suicide, or were adamant about keeping their shame to themselves, at least until 1991, when Kim Hak-Sun came forward to testify her life as a comfort woman.¹⁹ So all encompassing was this silence that the international community came to hear about militarized sexual slavery only when a class action suit was filed against the Japanese government, demanding compensation for this gross violation of human rights, and primarily, women's rights. Perhaps the most contentious issue in both South Korea and Japan involving comfort women has been the official role and responsibility of the Japanese government during this time period. Indeed, Japan did not admit its involvement in the recruitment, management and supervision of comfort stations until mid-1992.²⁰

¹⁶ Kim Il Myon, *The Emperor's Forces and Korean Comfort Women*, (Tokyo: San-ichi Shobo, 1976), 33.

¹⁷ Soh, "The Korean Comfort Woman," 1229.

¹⁸ O'Herne, "The Forgotten Ones"; Accessed September 2005 at http://www.abc.net.au/austory/archives/2001/AusStoryArchive2001Idx_Thursday30August2001.htm.

¹⁹ Soh, "The Korean Comfort Woman," 1230.

²⁰ Ibid., 1234.

While the movement for redress and compensation cannot fit within the scope of this paper, it is highly interesting to note that the debate on comfort women has come at a time when women's rights are slowly but surely gaining momentum in the patriarchal societies of Asia, creating not only an awareness of women's rights but also one of true pan-Asianism. Whereas nationalism has at times played a detrimental role in the movement for redress, feminist activists have been able to forge international coalitions across Japan, Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand to help bring this movement to the forefront. In 1995, for example, the Asian Women's Solidarity Forum held its conference in Seoul, adopting a resolution to denounce the intention to forego responsibility by allowing Japan to pay indemnities from nongovernmental funds.²¹ Yet another example is the vast representation of these countries at the U.N World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995,²² as well as various war crime mock-trials spearheaded by many feminist organizations in Japan and Korea.

Conclusion

While it has taken five decades to interrupt the silence, it has also taken the rise of feminism among Asian women to bring the comfort women to the forefront of women's rights. There is a substantive link between wartime exploitation of women and patriarchal societies, as Asian politics and governments are still overwhelmingly dominated by males. But then again, fate is never destiny. Indeed, the Korean comfort women movement for redress can be seen as a victory for feminist political activism. It is integral to see this issue as part of the universal moral issue of human rights, along with sex tourism in various parts of Asia and rape during wars, such as in Yugoslavia, Bosnia, and more recently, Liberia.

Alongside infamous atrocities, it is unlikely that this issue of comfort women will be easily forgotten. Until and unless Japan completely announces its responsibility for the institution of comfort women, it will continue to lose its credibility as a major advocate of human rights. At the same time, it is integral to note that while Japan created a systematic institution for militarized prostitution, the Allies also failed to address the concerns of comfort women at the end of the war. While addressing this issue will never bring back lost years, it must be emphasized that continuous work in the fields of feminism and humanitarianism is required in order to promote global egalitarianism and prevent the spread of various forms of violence against women. The need to address global issues relating to women is not just good politics; it is a fundamental right.

²¹ Ibid., 1237.

²² Ibid.