

Comfort Women: A Tragedy Posed as a Controversy

A Senior Thesis

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Completion of the Humanities Honors Program, and Campus Wide Collegiate Program

University of California, Irvine

Spring 2022

## **ABSTRACT**

Comfort women were sex slaves forcibly taken and used by the Japanese imperial army during WW2. These women were often poor and uneducated. These women were taken from many places across Asia, however, I specifically will focus on Korean comfort women. Comfort women were women who were used as sex slaves by the Japanese army. This is where the controversy starts. Japan refuses to state they were sex slaves but rather prostitutes. This is the controversy when engaging in discussion about comfort women. I am studying why it is considered a controversy versus a tragedy. Other works focus on the tragedy of comfort women, why it happened or what allowed it to happen. However, it does not focus on why on an international-scale we allowed people and a whole nation, Japan, to deny that these women were sex slaves. Finding translations, government documents, and first hand testimonies were important in understanding the reason why this tragedy is posed as a controversy. After researching, it was discovered that due to colonization, sexism, language, racism, and the historical circumstances around Korea after the second world war ended is what allowed these women's lives to be contested. The hope is to broaden the understanding of these women's experiences and how Japan was not the only offender in failing them and hurting them.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP), School of Humanities for the Summer Undergraduate Research Program (SURP) grant and the Humanities Honors grant which allowed me the opportunity to conduct research by funding me.

Next I would like to thank both Professor Nancy McLoughlin and Professor Patricia Seed in guiding me on my research and writing.

Professor Mcloughlin I would like to thank you for your flexibility and understanding. I know that I was not the easiest to work with and due to circumstances of my own, I was often behind leaving you in worry. I had partly finished this thesis because you lit a fire under my rear end when you suggested that this may be too much for me. At the time, you were correct. I had put this thesis at the back burner but you reminded me of what was important to me. This conversation allowed me to get my thesis back into the focus and finish.

Professor Seed, I would like to thank you for your empathy that you had with me. Our conversations were often a little side tracked, a bit scattered, and one of us not quite making it to a zoom meeting granted me an environment in which I was conducive in working. I am also thankful for your mentorship and all the advice you gave to me both to my thesis and in life. You allowed me to grow creatively in my writing and taught me to work to my strengths rather than a traditional route. Eventually, I hope to be as great a mentor as you in my future.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends who have supported me throughout this entire process. They not only often read my thesis but also listened to my anxiety ridden concerns about my thesis for an entire year. Not only do their eyes must be tired but also their ears. Nonetheless, they encouraged me to finish what I had started. They knew of a greater

strength in me than what I had even known. This thesis is as much theirs as it is mine, especially after hearing about it for so long.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2022, the men and women who experienced World War II are increasingly dwindling. Within this generation were war criminals, veterans, heroes, victims and survivors. In the Western World, we often focus on the survivors and the war in Europe, and forget about the war in the Pacific. The war in the Pacific was long for many nations, including Korea which was occupied and colonized by Japan for 35 years. Under the Japanese occupation a group of survivors became known as comfort women. These women were left without voices for decades and labeled willing prostitutes, while in reality these women were sex slaves. However in the years following the war, their life stories became an international dispute without resolution.

The international community has been debating whether or not they deserved justice, whether these women's words were truthful. How do these women prove that their story is not a controversy but their actual life? While seeking justice, their memories were cut up, put under a microscope, and examined. And when it was determined that these women deserved justice—the controversy then changed. How can a person argue against the following statement:

“They would beat and slap me around. I still hurt a lot now. That is how I lost my hearing. They would beat me— because I did not want to do it— Fucking,<sup>1</sup>” as described by Song Shin Do.

How can that statement cause a controversy? Where is the justice? Is justice simply an apology? Or an international recognition that they suffered? Or is compensation?

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<sup>1</sup> Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Woman. Directed by Dai Sil Kim-Gibson. Center for Asian American Media, 1999. <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/silence-broken-korean-comfort-woman-2>.

These women have failed to receive an apology. No justice was given to them. But why? Their heart-rending stories tell the reality of war. And yet, somehow their stories have become part of a public debate.

Yet, my question remains why have these women remained at the center of a controversy? How can one debate the life experience and memory of another human being and group of people? And why is it that these women are one of the few whose treatment is still debated while other survivors of sex— slavery and abuse during war seemingly have received justice or were at least recognized to have suffered?

A controversy should be something debatable and a great deal of international public opinion has reacted as though these women's stories were untrue.

War trials, such as the Nuremberg Trial, have been used to show which nation was ethically and morally wrong. They have not been used to show who won and lost the battlefield. The victor would have moral superiority, which in some ways, was more important than military strategic superiority. Timothy Brooks describes the courtroom as,

“ Delphic sites of natural judgment reaffirming fundamental community values but arenas of debate in which different narratives compete for the court's approbation. This is not to say that matters of substance fade from scrutiny; but courtroom verdicts depend as much on the quality of story that can be told to explain the facts entered in evidence as on the facts themselves. In war crimes trials, victors and losers alike are called on to narrate their different histories of a conflict. The prosecution seeks to demonstrate that the losers lost not merely because they were defeated on the battlefield but because their cause was unjust and their means illegal.<sup>2</sup>”

But this controversy has no true courtroom or jury or judge. If it did, would it truly be a controversy so great that it could capture international attention? Comfort women, especially Korean comfort women, have continued to be on a figurative trial for 30 years. Their courtroom lies within the publications and social media of the world, and their jury are the eyes and ears of

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<sup>2</sup> Brook, Timothy. “The Tokyo Judgment and the Rape of Nanking.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (2001): 673–700. doi:10.2307/2700106.

citizens of other countries. But by being considered an object of controversy, it creates a sense of worry that one may be supporting the wrong side and hurting those who have suffered.

So where does such a controversy start for this tragedy? The controversy of those who identify as Korean Comfort Women stems from the colonization, racism, sexism and historical circumstances that Korea has experienced at the hands of their colonizers.

## **BASIC WWII HISTORY OF KOREA**

On August 22, 1910, Japan annexed Korea into their nation. This annexation — or in other words colonization — lasted until 1945. In this time period Japan created policies to “assimilate” Korea into Japan. Unfortunately, this “assimilation” would eventually result in the oppression of Koreans for 35 years until their liberation in 1945.

At the start of the annexation, Japan tried to promote the idea that Koreans and Japanese were one in the same. Through the idea that Koreans and the Japanese shared blood relations. The Japanese editorial *Taiyo* published in November 1910 stated that “Korean blood flowed through the family of many Japanese nobles [including] the imperial family.”<sup>3</sup> By reinforcing the idea that Koreans and the Japanese were one people, it was easier for the Japanese to justify colonizing Korea. The belief of being one people furthered the idea that Japan was a big brother helping their little brother. Furthermore, the “one people” idea eliminated the conversation that Japan was actually colonizing and invading Korea because how can you be invaded by your own people? Nonetheless, Japanese leaders believed they were “integrating” Korea. This “integration,” however, came at the cost of identity.

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<sup>3</sup> CAPRIO, MARK E. “INTRODUCTION: COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION DECISIONS.” In *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945*, 5. University of Washington Press, 2009. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvcwnv6v.4>.

From 1910-1919, Japan used a military policy, known as Budan Seniji. Budan Seniji is described as a time when “teachers even wore uniforms and carried swords.”<sup>4</sup> Japan’s rulers focused on gaining political control of Korea from the top down and the government-general exercised an authoritative control on Korea. Nonetheless, at this initial point of time many Koreans still welcomed Japan because Japan promoted the idea of free schooling and modernization.<sup>5</sup> Many Koreans thought Japan was helpful and wanted to better Korea. However, the Bundan Seniji period ended right after the March 1st movement.

The March 1st, 1919 movement was an anti-colonial struggle led by students and the public masses; influenced by Wilson’s 14 points: natural “self-determination.” This movement surprised the Japanese because many Koreans had initially welcomed them. In response to the protest, the Japanese shifted from the Bundan Seniji to a cultural rule, known as the Bunka Seiji rule.

The most widely known part of the Bunka Seiji is the *naisen ittai*. *Naisen ittai* literally means Japan and Korea as one body and is the ideology that governed this cultural policy. The policy mandated attendance at Shinto shrines and prohibited other religious beliefs. Schools were required to teach only in Japanese (Korean was eventually banned from official use and all publications), Koreans were drafted into the Imperial Japanese Army, and lastly, the use of Japanese names/surnames became a requirement. The Bunka Seiji is not a list of rules to follow but rather an ideology for Koreans to strive to become Japanese. The goal of the Bunka Seiji was to persuade Koreans to believe the idea that the Japanese and Koreans were ethnically the same

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<sup>4</sup> Cumings, Bruce. "Korea, A Unique Colony: Last to Be Colonized and First to Revolt." *The Asian Pacific Journal*, 2nd ser., 19, no. 21 (November 01, 2021): 2. Accessed December 09, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> CAPRIO, MARK E. “INTRODUCTION: COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION DECISIONS.” In *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945*, 4. University of Washington Press, 2009. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvcwnv6v.4>.

but that Korea needed Japan because they needed to be modernized. This idea was verbalized by the colonial administrator of the time, Nitobe Inazō, who explained:

“I count myself among the best and truest friends of Koreans. I like them.... I think they are capable people who can be trained to a large measure of self- government, for which the present is a period of tutelage. Let them study what we are doing in Korea, and this I say not to justify the many mistakes committed by our militaristic administration, nor to boast of some of our achievements. In all humility, but with a firm conviction that Japan is a steward on whom devolves the gigantic task of the uplifting of the Far East, I cannot think that the young Korea is yet capable of governing itself.”<sup>6</sup>

It is through this quote that we understand the Japanese thought of Koreans as younger brothers who needed guidance to become like them and they compared Koreans to children who were incapable of doing well by themselves. Nonetheless, Koreans persevered during this time and often in subtle ways rebelled against the system. This includes keeping Korean names, writing letters in Korean and many other ways. Be that as it may, it was the United States who ended the occupation of Korea and the entire war in the Pacific by the dropping of the atomic bomb.

After the war, the United States helped to “free” Korea and investigated many war crimes Japan had committed within Asia. However, the United States was more concerned about their own political relations and issues with Japan rather than with the overall victims within Korea. In a sudden turn, the United States actually obstructed justice within the Pacific rather than help the victims of the war.

## **POST WAR INVESTIGATIONS**

The military officer in charge of the post war investigations was General MacArthur, who was declared the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) during his time in Japan at the end of the war. In his newly appointed position he was tasked with several things, including

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Stefan Tanaka, *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 248.

the punishment of Japanese war criminals. But the major war crimes focused in the trial were the crimes against the European Allied nations rather than crimes the Japanese committed across the continent of Asia such as the raping of Nanking.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the United States federal government committee, the State-War Navy Coordinating Committee (SWNCC), wanted MacArthur to form a major tribunal that identified war criminals who fell under either: 1. Crime against Peace 2. War crimes or 3. Crimes against Humanity.<sup>8</sup> These categories were taken directly from Article 6 of the Nuremberg Charter and now included in the Tokyo Charter.<sup>9</sup> But the influence of the Nuremberg Charter only extended to words on a document, as General MacArthur refused to prosecute Emperor Hirohito.

The Allied powers wanted Emperor Hirohito persecuted but General MacArthur believed that this would only worsen the relationship between the United States and Japan as well as lead Japan to become communist. General MacArthur chose to try to change the perception of the Emperor from a “deity to a benficient secular monarch” amongst the people of Japan.<sup>10</sup> His concerns for the future government of Japan, only denied justice to those who suffered at the hands of Emperor Hirohito’s leadership to receive no justice as they did not get to see him face trial. Their suffering did not stop as MacArthur continued to push his boundaries of power by changing the definitions of the Tokyo Charter. One of these minute but impacting details was the change from “heads of state” to “high officials” because this allowed MacArthur to exclude the Emperor from being tried.<sup>11</sup> High officials did not need to include the head of the state, which was the Emperor. This small word change allowed for a big loop hole.

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<sup>7</sup> GUILLEMIN, JEANNE. “MacARTHUR IN JAPAN: ‘PUNISH THE WAR CRIMINALS.’” In *Hidden Atrocities: Japanese Germ Warfare and American Obstruction of Justice at the Tokyo Trial*, 38-39. Columbia University Press, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/guil18352.5>.

<sup>8</sup> Inbid., 40

<sup>9</sup> Inbid., 40

<sup>10</sup> Inbid., 50

<sup>11</sup>Inbid., 52

General MacArthur's power was unnerving as was his inability to listen to the needs of the citizens who suffered at the hands of Japan in non-European countries long before the United States intervention in the war led to long term rivalries between Japan and the other nations. At the actual tribunal in Tokyo, he only allowed English and Japanese to be the two official languages for the translations of official courts and documents.<sup>12</sup> This decision left the other countries on their own to figure out what was happening and limited who could speak for their nation and how the prosecution would go. Ergo, Koreans had little to no voice in these trials and no one was held responsible for the 35 year colonization period Japan exerted over Korea. Due to international silence, Korea was simply left alone to suffer and struggle with the trauma left by Japan. The only looks Korea would receive at the time after the trial would be from the power hungry nations that wanted to use Korea to spread and footmark their own government beliefs. At the same time, Korea was figuring out their own national identity after thirty five years of colonization from Japan. Thus we did not see Korea at the Tokyo Tribunals.

Despite the trials happening in Japan, the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) soon started to turn their attention to Korea as a way to expand their spheres of influence. The United States in particular had adopted a containment policy known as the Truman Doctrine. This containment policy regarded the perceived threat of the Soviets within Asia and the spread of communism.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, the United States had a strong hold over the next few decades in Korea to ensure democracy within the nation.

In 1948 when the Republic of Korea was formally created, Syngman Rhee was elected by the United Nations (UN) to lead Korea. This was allowed as they had a strong influence over

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<sup>12</sup>Inbid., 52

<sup>13</sup>"Chapter 24: Containment and the Truman Doctrine." Teaching American History. September 10, 2021. Accessed December 10, 2021.  
<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/chapter-24-containment-and-the-truman-doctrine/>.

Korea after the war and the rebuilding of a nation. The UN was a small group and although the “Soviets could veto Security Council resolutions, the United States dominated the General Assembly.<sup>14</sup>” As a result, the voice of the Korean people was completely silenced by the two larger nation-states who wanted control in the area.

In Korea they have an old proverb stating that “A shrimp’s back breaks in a fight among whales.” This saying often refers to Korea being a nation that other nations have used as a proxy for contest over control and power whether it be Soviets vs USA or Japan vs China. Korea always suffered at the hands of these larger nations which one can see through how President Rhee was “elected.” Any Korean voice was completely lost to the newly founded superpowers of the time who wanted a larger sphere of influence. However, an election with unheard voices is no election at all and many people were strongly opposed to President Rhee because he was the agenda of foreigners rather than voted in by the popularity of the entire nation. People were outraged and soon a clear division between a communist and anti-communist party began to arise in Korea. The American-Soviet rivalry manifested itself within another nation.

Due to the American-Soviet rivalry, Korea was split at the infamous 38th parallel as a way to settle the issues. This temporary resolve was ill-fated because on July 25, 1950 the Korean war started when North Korea attacked South Korea.<sup>15</sup> After many battles, both sides came to an armistice to “end the war.” The war never ended, as soldiers continued to stay at the DMZ line armed to include American troops to this day. The influence of foreign powers took away Korea’s sovereignty. Neither side was free of the international politics of the time and this continues to be the case today.

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<sup>14</sup> Cumings, Bruce. *The Korean War: A History*. New York, USA: Random House Publishing Group, 2011. 112-113.

<sup>15</sup> Park, Hong-Kyu. “American Involvement in the Korean War.” *The History Teacher* 16, no. 2 (1983): 251. <https://doi.org/10.2307/493313>.

President Rhee stayed in power until 1960 with the help of the United States. President Rhee had a focus on military power and turned a blind eye to the poor economic situation of Korea at the time. This led to many Koreans feeling even more disgruntled with the president. After a student revolt, President Rhee retired. The following year, 1961, Park Chun Hee led a coup of the government which succeeded Rhee and he became the next president.<sup>16</sup> Park Chun Hee focused on the economy in Korea. Under his rule, Korea accelerated in becoming a “modern” nation and establishing a booming economy.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, the influence of America within South Korea only grew stronger after the Korean Civil War. Park Chun Hee’s modernization was characterized by Western attributes and characteristics influenced by America. Park Chun Hee’s rule is often deemed by Korean scholars as a developmental dictatorship because he was in power until his assassination in 1979.<sup>18</sup>

Korea has not been free of world influence since 1910. Whether it be Japan, the Soviets or the United States, foreign nations continued to use Korea as a means of political power. Its own civil war was seemingly a proxy war for the larger superpowers of the time. It is due to such history that it must be understood that Korea remained a colonized space. The definition of the term ‘colonize’ is as follows: “to take control of a people or area especially as an extension of state power.<sup>19</sup>” The United States used the unstable state of Korea after the Pacific war as a way to gain control and influence in the Asian region. In addition to controlling the first election, the United States tried to control the narrative and mindset in Korea on what is a “modern” government.

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<sup>16</sup> Chaudhuri, Sudip. “Government and Economic Development in South Korea, 1961-79.” *Social Scientist* 24, no. 11/12 (1996): 18-25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3520100>.

<sup>17</sup> *Inbid.*, 24

<sup>18</sup> Eckert, Carter J. *Park Chung Hee and Modern Korea: The Roots of Militarism 1866-1945*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> "Colonize Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster. Accessed December 10, 2021. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/colonize>.

As a result, many Korean voices were lost and those listened to had their stories changed by the United States. This distortion appears especially within the documentation written by the Americans from the end of World War II. One of the most important examples is Report No. 49 on Korean comfort women. Report No. 49 is a military document that contains interrogations of comfort women. The report described these women as prostitutes and “camp followers,” when they were sex slaves for the Japanese military. This report includes many misunderstandings and mistranslations. Part of the fault lies with its timing as the report itself was done in 1944 during the midst of the war. It described how many of these women were young, poor and uneducated, and how the Japanese propagated that they needed “comfort service.”<sup>20</sup> However, the report stated that comfort services included “helping the wounded in hospitals, rolling bandages and generally making the soldiers happy.”<sup>21</sup> Nowhere in the report did it state that sex work was in the job description and yet they describe these women as willing prostitutes. Those writing this report obviously put their own biases within the report which caused a greater misunderstanding, forcing these women to stay silent because after the war both Japan and America had deemed them willing sex workers rather than sex slaves who suffered at the hands of the Japanese. The report had such an impact because both America and Japan were recognized as great powers in the international community. The United States specifically being a power that has a permanent seat at the UN. In contrast, Korea was a newly founded nation who was seen as weak and had little power or voice in the same way that Japan and the United States did.

Omitted in the documentation of the United States Army Report No. 49 is the actual advertisement for comfort women. It clearly shows the *absence* of a description referencing sex

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<sup>20</sup> "Report No. 49: Japanese Prisoners of War Interrogation on Prostitution." Report No. 49: Japanese Prisoners of War Interrogation on Prostitution: La Segunda Guerra Mundial. Accessed December 10, 2021. <http://www.exordio.com/1939-1945/codex/Documentos/report-49-USA-orig.html>.

<sup>21</sup>Inbid.

work. If these women were *willing* prostitutes then why did the Japanese government not include that in the description when recruiting? For example, in the actual advertisement produced by the Japanese newspaper, Keijo, on July 26, 1944, “Many Comfort Women Wanted. Ages: 17-23, Destination: zz Military Unit, Monthly Income: More than 300 Yen, loan up to 3000 Yen possible, Interview from 8AM to 10PM, Contact Imai Agency by phone.”<sup>22</sup> The description never indicated what the job of a comfort woman consisted of. Furthermore, it promised an immediate loan which would attract the attention of those who were in unfortunate situations and needed immediate money.

But how could any of these women be participants or willing when many were uneducated or could not even write? One survivor stated she could not even write her name.<sup>23</sup> Yet, they were people who could sign work contracts and read the recruiting papers?

But the people who controlled these narratives were the colonizers. No actual survivor would tell her story until the later 20th century. Japanese stories and the Americans “who saved them,” composed the narrative. These American interrogations had little understanding of the type of colonization Japan had inflicted upon Korea. Furthermore, the Americans tried to wrap up the Tokyo trials quickly and at the same time ensure democracy in Korea. Thus, the stories of these women became less important.

When news about the comfort women first came out in 1991, there was also a book by Yoshida that spoke of how 205 women were forcibly kidnapped from Jeju island. But this book and the story in it was found to be fabricated and discredited.<sup>24</sup> However, one book being fabricated or discredited does not change the many stories of women coming out and telling of

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<sup>22</sup> Mera, Kōichi. *Comfort Women Not "sex Slaves": Rectifying the Myriad of Perspectives*. Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Woman. Directed by Dai Sil Kim-Gibson. Center for Asian American Media, 1999. <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/silence-broken-korean-comfort-woman-2>.

<sup>24</sup> Mera, Koichi. *Comfort Women Not "Sex Slaves": Rectifying the Myriad of Perspectives*. Xlibris, 2015.

the brutalization they faced at the hands of the Japanese imperial army. The power in numbers of women coming forward with the scars on their body is much more credible than this book.

## MASSACRES

Nonetheless, the lack of European documentation meant that these women suffered a different fate compared to the women who were raped in Nanking.

The Raping of Nanking is a tragic historical event that occurred in Nanking, China on December 13, 1937 during the second Sino-Japanese war. This event was one that has rippled the relations between China and Japan ever since.<sup>25</sup> The event lasted for six weeks in which the Japanese raped and murdered many people. During the International Military Tribunals, Japan's estimate came to about 200,000 while the Chinese came to about 300,000. But due to the lack of documentation on the victims because Japan destroyed many of them after the loss of the war, the true number may never be known.<sup>26</sup> But unlike the recruitment of comfort women in Korea, the Raping of Nanking happened under the gaze of the Western audience to include diplomats, journalists and other nationalists.<sup>27</sup> This would prove to be a determining factor in the tribunals that would follow because there would now be a third party to count as a "witness" to such horrific events and to be able to defend that the Raping of Nanking did in fact happen.

The Americans who documented the Nanking rapes fell into a few groups such as foreign diplomats, military personnel, journalists, those who worked in missionaries, churches and civilians simply there to aid. However, many of these people were in a safe zone that was neutral during the time. It is here that many documents were written and they captured the atrocities of

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<sup>25</sup> Kai Chen & R. Gerald Hughes (2018) Witnesses to a war crime: the Nanjing Massacre – the British and US reports, *Intelligence and National Security*, 33:7, 1092-1097, DOI: [10.1080/02684527.2018.1492889](https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2018.1492889)

<sup>26</sup> *Inbid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Documents on the Rape of Nanking* / Edited by Timothy Brook. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

men being killed and women suffering due to rape. One woman, Minnie Vautrin wrote in her diary on December 17, 1937 in her diary that a group of Chinese women told her how the Japanese would rape girls as young as 12 and up to the age of 60.<sup>28</sup> She describes the cries coming from the “women being led out” of the Ginling Girls’ College as the Japanese soldiers selected women. In a later entry, she describes how they would rape young boys if they were unable to find the young girls.<sup>29</sup>

In the post war trials, these stories by the foreign witnesses would have a heavy weight on the Tokyo trials, which had seemingly become a “second-rate show,” overshadowed by the rising Cold War situation in the world, especially as the trials “dragged on for two and a half years.”<sup>30</sup> The American and foreign testimonies, alongside the Chinese created enough evidence to convict two Japanese leaders for “allowing” the Raping of Nanking to occur.<sup>31</sup> This would solidify that the atrocity did indeed happen, and create an international negative sentiment against those who denied it.

By comparison, the Tokyo trials never touched upon the occupation of Korea nor the sex crimes against comfort women. Crimes were to be investigated but those investigations never continued, at least not for those who were not of European descent. The handling of the comfort women and Korea during post war trials were likely caused by Social Darwinism to some extent. Japan was being recognized as a superpower and China had some respect as a nation by the international community. Korea, however, was simply a blimp on the map; a place that was used more as a tool for other countries rather than standing as a powerful nation on its own. Thus, the countries that were respected and seen as powerful got to receive closure and justice, and begin

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<sup>28</sup> Minnie Vautrin’s Diary (Dec. 17, 1937).

<sup>29</sup> Inbid., February 7, 1938.

<sup>30</sup> Brook, Timothy. “The Tokyo Judgment and the Rape of Nanking.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (2001): 673–700. doi:10.2307/2700106.

<sup>31</sup> Inbid., 677.

on their healing. They were superior. They were of course super powers. The trials and the justice benefited were all for those who were the strongest, biggest, most populated and not for the weak and mute. At least China had fought back. Korea was seen as inferior and needed another power to “help” it grow.

## **WHO ARE THE COMFORT WOMEN?**

In World War II, many women suffered at the hands of others. War is always accompanied with violence and often includes sexual crimes against women. However, in the Sino-Japanese war, sex crimes were institutionalized under Japanese rule in other nations. The Japanese military recruited women from other nations to be their *inafu* or in English, comfort women. The women were often poor, uneducated women who were taken advantage of. They were women who the Japanese said “signed contracts” but in reality were tricked or sold into sex slavery for the Japanese military. Women who felt powerless.

Kim Hak Soon, a survivor, describes the experience as being treated like military supplies. She describes, “We [comfort women] were shipped, and transported and they [the Japanese soldiers] did whatever they liked to us. We were their play things.”<sup>32</sup> Comfort women were treated as less than human, only tools for pleasure. Unfortunately, the amount of comfort women the Japanese Army had was innumerable as they were seemingly replaceable at the time. The Japanese military took anyone, “they even took 12 year olds”<sup>33</sup> states Bae Jok Goon, another survivor. But these women did not blame themselves, they instead stated “our country

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<sup>32</sup> Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Woman. Directed by Dai Sil Kim-Gibson. Center for Asian American Media, 1999. <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/silence-broken-korean-comfort-woman-2>.

<sup>33</sup> Inbid.

was powerless.”<sup>34</sup> Their country was weak and colonized. Their voices could not be heard in a nation that was not theirs at the time.

As discussed previously the one body idea convinced the Korean people they were ethically the same as the Japanese and this was used as a recruiting tactic against these women, often coercing them into being comfort women. The one body idea had been so thoroughly ingrained that many Koreans were being taught to believe that this was also their war. One survivor described how an old lady came to her and told how she should go to China and serve her country. The old lady told her that she would earn money. But when the survivor asked what she was going to do, the lady simply stated “you will know when you get there.”<sup>35</sup> In other cases, they were told how they would eat and live well, but never told what they were going to do. The women were only told that it would “help their country.” Help their country how? Many of these women could not read, let alone write their own name.<sup>36</sup> And yet they were sold to colonizers.

In contrast, Tokuda Masarori, a Japanese soldier at the time, described that these women were not sex slaves or forced to work in any way. He stated “that women would earn more pay in the imperial army than in their own hometown. There were many applications to work the front lines of the war.”<sup>37</sup> But these women were fed lies and had no voice for themselves. Many had no idea what they had signed up for as they state in their testimonials. Money? The only money they had was to be used at the military compound because they could not leave. However, survivor Hwang Keum Ju states “What money? Inside the military compound there is no use for money. Nowhere to run. Nothing to buy. No one to give money to. Money was not an issue.”<sup>38</sup> Yet, those who preach that these women lived lavish lives and were well compensated, are wrong. It did not

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<sup>34</sup> Inbid.

<sup>35</sup> Inbid., 16:14

<sup>36</sup> Inbid., 5:10

<sup>37</sup> Inbid., 10:10

<sup>38</sup> Inbid., 21:42-22:10

matter to any extent if they were paid well. Because even if they were paid a million dollars, if there is no use to it then it is just paper with color. The compensation of money is only used as an argument by those lacking the actual knowledge of what happened and not realizing that the money was useless.

Furthermore, they describe comfort women as willing participants but completely disregard that some of those who were being used as comfort women were children. One woman, Chung Seo Woon, describes how she had her first period on the ship she was assigned to and how when she had received her *first* period, she was soon after taken to a military hospital. She said, at what we would now call the gynecologist office, “whatever they did-- my belly felt pulled and torn apart. The pain I felt then. I can’t tell you.”<sup>39</sup> She states after that her period stopped three days later and that was the only period she had in her whole life. How could she be willing to do something and not even have the ability to know what was happening to her and her body? The deniers talked about consent and that they were willing but they barely knew what was going to happen to them or no idea at all. They took her before she even had her first period, and she was a child. A child. How can a child consent? And yet, they were considered willing prostitutes. They are treated as if they had the full picture. These people had their language ripped from them in schools, they were poor, they were often uneducated, they were adults, and they were children. They were women under a system that took advantage of them.

### **Why the silence?**

Comfort women only came to light in 1991 when Kim Hak-Sun, at age 67, came out with a public testimony of her experiences. Her story was published in the Asahi Newspaper which was

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<sup>39</sup> Inbid., 19:20

highly trusted at the time. Her story was that she was sold into being a comfort woman by her own mother and taken to the comfort women station by her father.<sup>40</sup> It was a story that shocked the nation in 1991. However, her story is often hard to find outside of Korea as it is not translated. In a rare video she describes her experience of her interaction with a Japanese soldier which sums up what many women experienced: ““He [Unknown Japanese military officer] said to me, “If you listen to me carefully, you will be comfortable and if you rebel against me you will die here””<sup>41</sup>. Her story challenged the previous mainstream narrative that these women were willing by giving horrific details about what she had experienced.

Little did Kim-Hak Sun know that her speech would create a movement that has lasted for over thirty years in the fight to receive justice from Japan. The Japanese government continued to deny and spread false information against comfort women.<sup>42</sup> Creating a fight that is represented by the continuous and timely protest that has happened every Wednesday since 1992 in front of the Japanese embassy. A fight for Japan to take responsibility.

So why the silence? Historically in Korea, victims of rape were honored if they killed themselves, a belief that became popular in World War II. Many Korean women would commit suicide to avoid being raped or after being raped by the Japanese.<sup>43</sup> Thus, we can understand the precedent that women who were violated and did not die were shamed and blamed for their assault. This mindset forced many comfort women into hiding to avoid shame and being ostracized. In the traditional Korean values, “a women's sexuality was rigidly controlled by

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<sup>40</sup> Mera, Kōichi. *Comfort Women Not "sex Slaves": Rectifying the Myriad of Perspectives*. Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> "YouTube." EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE FOUNDATION. Accessed December 10, 2021. <http://www.e4sjf.org/youtube.html>. The first public testimony about the Comfort Women from Kim hak-soon (1924-1997) in 1991

<sup>42</sup> “General Timeline of the Japanese Military ‘Comfort Women’ System.” *Friendly Korea*, 2012, [korea.prkorea.com/wordpress/english/2012/10/26/general-timeline-of-the-japanese-military-comfort-women-syste/](http://korea.prkorea.com/wordpress/english/2012/10/26/general-timeline-of-the-japanese-military-comfort-women-syste/).

<sup>43</sup> Soh, Chunghee Sarah. “The Korean ‘Comfort Women’: Movement for Redress.” *Asian Survey*, vol. 36, no. 12, 1996, pp. 1226–1240., [www.jstor.org/stable/264557](http://www.jstor.org/stable/264557)

standards of virginity/chastity,”<sup>44</sup> instigating feelings of shame, and causing comfort women to keep their voices silent for 46 years. At the same time, it did not help that America did not recognize the sufferings these women faced and instead considered them willing participants, as Report No. 49 stated.

Furthermore, the shame that weighed heavily on these women’s shoulders was not only that of sex but the shame they felt in their own participation of the atrocities in the war. In an interview Bae Jok Gank explains,

“I was in Jinsung, China. They [Japanese soldiers] brought lots of Chinese killed everyday. When killing them, they would bring out the Chinese villagers and us women. They would have the Chinese on one side and the women on the soldiers. The Chinese would blindfolded and tied up and they would order the women to kill them. To stab them with a knife. If they failed, they would have to do it again. The blade had to come out the back. If we did it they said yosh.”<sup>45</sup>

Her story exemplifies that these women were not just tortured physically or sexually but also mentally. They were forced to participate in the war and kill those who they did not want to. They are forced to live with the guilt of crimes they did not want to commit. They had no choice. By speaking their truth, they would have to reveal the horrors they were ultimately a part of. They would have to show their most vulnerable state, in which others could judge them in the same way as they judged the Japanese soldiers who tortured their souls. They could be seen as criminals instead of the complex victims and survivors that they are. These women took no joy in killing, but they had to in order to survive. Understandably, they lived in fear and shame of coming out, because not all of their stories were as pure as society wanted them to be.

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<sup>44</sup> Inbid., 1129

<sup>45</sup> Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Woman. Directed by Dai Sil Kim-Gibson. Center for Asian American Media, 1999. <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/silence-broken-korean-comfort-woman-2>.

## CONTROVERSY

However, if such an atrocity could happen, why was it so hard to believe that women were collected to be sex slaves? It was only hard to believe that *Asian* women were forced to sex slaves. . Comfort women, although mainly of Pacific and Asian descent, also included those who were of European descent. That the women in Korea were willing but the Australian and Dutch were not compared to the comfort women who were of Asian descent being dismissed, “CPT James Gowing Godwin, an investigator for war crimes in the Pacific and who worked under the Australian government, did not proceed with investigation for Korean comfort women and deferred it for further investigation but never did. However, he did immediately give compensation and consideration to those of that were sex slaves who were Dutch and British.”<sup>46</sup> Consequently, he showed that the international community had acknowledged the atrocities that happened to these women to some extent but chose to ignore Asians deliberately.

Furthermore, the lack of documentation can be attributed to the fact that the Japanese destroyed many documents after losing the war and what they kept supported their own narrative. Thus, we do not have any actual numbers of how many were sex slaves, how long they worked, and what happened. Most of the evidence that we have are the testimonies of women coming out themselves and stating what they experienced. And unfortunately, those who remain in denial argue that these women waited too long to tell their story.

So why did they wait? They waited because their country was completely rebuilding itself and the women within Korea as a nation state had little to no voice for decades. Even in their own culture they were expected to kill themselves if they were raped. As a result, many of these women felt a deep sense of shame and survivors’ guilt for living. It took decades to not

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<sup>46</sup> Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Woman. Directed by Dai Sil Kim-Gibson. Center for Asian American Media, 1999. <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/silence-broken-korean-comfort-woman-2>.

only have the strength to come out but also for Korea and the international community to be ready to listen to these women's stories. Korea went through a civil war and two dictatorships before the first testimony reached international ears. It was simple to come forward, and there might be consequences in a society that was not always supportive. Nor was society focused on the crimes against women in essentially any part of the world. It was something that seemed to be buried deep and an implied truth. War was about death not rape. Crimes focused on experiments and torture. Not rape. Women and their experiences were almost second rate to none.

Additionally, in the post war trials the nations such as the Soviet Union, the United States, Australia, and other nations that took part in the Tokyo Trials had already shown that they had no care for Korea and its people and how they suffered. Korea was only an afterthought and a tool in the Cold War, it was not a nation. Korea and its people were simply a tool. This is emphasized by the lack of prosecution against Japan for the occupation of Korea and how the United States and the Soviet used Korea's civil war as an expansion for their own ideologies. Consequently, these women waited and waited. Suffering in silence.

This silence, however, gave strength to the ideas that Japan propagated about these women, which was that they were prostitutes. They had to break down these stories and belief in numbers and proof. These were brutalized and dehumanized women. They are women owed an apology. Their experiences should not be debated.

One of the debates coming from the American colonizers is shown by an veteran named Michael Yon was doing research in 2014 into comfort women and conducted an interview in which he stated the following:

“What commander, during a time of war with multiple nations, when Japanese soldiers are starving would dedicate resources to kidnap, transport, guard, and feed 200,000 sex slaves? These allegations don't make sense. An inadvertent self-insult by Koreans is that Korean men would allow 200,000 of their women to be kidnapped, yet

Korean men did not raise a finger in resistance and actually helped. This indicates that Korean men at the time were cowards and criminals. Didi Koreans intend to imply this?"<sup>47</sup>

Although this may look like a well put together idea, it is not. First of all, war does not make sense. An example are the Kamikaze pilots who would commit suicide for their nation believing their emperor was a God. How does this make any more sense than women being brutally raped for the pleasure of men? Secondly, he argues that the Japanese would not dedicate resources for these women but the Japanese never denied the existence of these women. The Japanese only stated that they were not sex slaves but rather willing prostitutes. Nonetheless, if we entertain his idea that the Japanese would not dedicate resources to these women, he was right.

Survivor Hwang Keum Du describes how she ate human flesh. "I think I am the only one who has come forward who has eaten human flesh. I was eating stew and went to ask the chef for more food and he hit me hard with a soup ladle and said 'don't you know what this is?'"<sup>48</sup> Her testimony illustrates that the Japanese did not give them any resources; rather, they gave them what was there. There was no care for these women at all. Furthermore, these women were replaceable. If they disobeyed the five rules' they would die. They would take girls and shoot them to use as examples for the new girls.<sup>49</sup> These women were trained by fear and lived in it. They were replaceable and the only way to get replaced was to die. So, did the Japanese delegate any resources to these women? No, because they did not have to. Whether or not these women lived or died had no meaning to the Japanese army or government. The women were simply toys to enjoy when not on the front line. They were forced to have sex with the Japanese military men from sun up to sun down. Comfort women were often poor and uneducated, consequently

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<sup>47</sup> Mera, Koichi. *Comfort Women Not "Sex Slaves": Rectifying the Myriad of Perspectives*. Xlibris, 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Woman. Directed by Dai Sil Kim-Gibson. Center for Asian American Media, 1999. <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/silence-broken-korean-comfort-woman-2>.

<sup>49</sup> Inbid., 27:00-29:18

making it easier for the Japanese to label them as prostitutes and willing participants rather than sex slaves at the end of the war.<sup>50</sup> The brutalization made these women submissive and willing. It took away these women's advocacy and autonomy.

Yet, none of this describes how they suffered in reality, and the actual treatment that they experienced as comfort women trying to survive. Survivor Yun Doo Ri describes, "I was beaten and my bones were broken. Blood got in and pus filled it. The pain was so bad I felt like dying. I crawled and pleaded 'the pain is killing me' They looked at me and said nothing was wrong. So I just collapsed. Then I went to the army hospital. They (She gestured) that they took this big chunk of flesh. The bastards may be treated once maybe twice but no more."<sup>51</sup>

Her story illustrates the lack of compassion the Japanese showed these women. If a woman eating human flesh is not enough then what about how they were unwilling to let Yun Doo Ri go to the hospital? None of these women had any resources used on their behalf at all. The stories and scars of these women are telling of that.

In a contrast to the women's stories, Yon tries to focus on the men dismissing the words of the survivors. Yon continues to state that the Korean men were weak and cowardly. His statement disregards many circumstances of the time in which he is talking about. The first one most notably being that this was a time of colonization and war. These men were terrified because going against the Japanese and their laws meant death for you and possibly your family. Secondly, many of the women who were sold or recruited were poor and their family needed the money, which often was not useful or never sent but the promises of it meant that their family could eat. These people were poor and only wanted to survive. That is not cowardly. He also

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<sup>50</sup> Hayashi, Hirofumi. "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*, vol. 617, 2008, pp. 123–132. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/25098017](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25098017).

<sup>51</sup> *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Woman*. Directed by Dai Sil Kim-Gibson. Center for Asian American Media, 1999. <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/silence-broken-korean-comfort-woman-2>.

calls these men criminals. These men were simply struggling to live in an oppressive state. The criminal during this time was Japan, who was forcibly occupying and colonizing Korea and other places in the Pacific. Korean men were victims and survivors. In no way, were they criminals. Lastly, he gives no autonomy to women. He questions why Korean men would “allow” for such an atrocity to happen. His choice of word allow implies that these women were something to be owned in the first place, as if these women were objects who were incapable of fighting, which many did try to do. He also puts it as if there was a way to stop the Japanese from taking these women without heavy consequences. Yon’s lack of thought is incredibly insensitive from someone who supposedly has done a lot of research in the area. But his idea captures what many people argue when stating that comfort women were prostitutes or that they are completely made up.

Even more surprising is that this interview took place after the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal that took place in 2000 which was to consider Japan’s responsibility and the individual leadership of sex crimes and rape against women within the 1930s to 1940s in the Pacific Asia region.<sup>52</sup> The tribunal was organized by Violence Against Women in War-Network Japan (VAWW-NET Japan). Its purpose was to gather testimony from victims, and then to try groups and individuals for rape or sexual slavery. The trials determined that Emperor Hirohito was guilty of the crime during the Hague Judgment. The Hague Judgment is a convention that puts on trials in which a new judgment can be determined, however, the judgment from this convention is only enforced in the 49 countries who are a part of it. Below is the final statement from the Hague Judgment or also known as the final judgment that took place on December 4, 2001:

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<sup>52</sup> Chinkin, Christine M. “Women’s International Tribunal on Japanese Military Sexual Slavery.” *American Journal of International Law* 95, no. 2 (2001): 335–41. doi:10.2307/2661399.

“The crimes committed against these survivors remain one of the greatest unacknowledged and unremedied injustices of the Second World War. There are no museums, no graves for the unknown “comfort woman,” no education of future generations, and there have been no judgment days for the victims of Japan’s military sexual slavery and the rampant sexual violence and brutality that characterized its aggressive war. Accordingly, through this judgment, this Tribunal intends to honor all the women victimized by the Japanese military sexual slavery system. The judges recognize the great fortitude and dignity of the survivors who have toiled to survive and reconstruct their shattered lives and who have faced down fear and shame to tell their stories to the world and testify before us. Many of the women who have come forward to fight for justice have died as unsung heroes. While the names inscribed in history’s page have been, at best, those of the men who commit the crimes or who prosecute them, rather than the women who suffer them, this judgment bears the names of the survivors who took the stand to tell their stories, and thereby, for four days at least, put wrong on the scaffold and truth on the throne.”<sup>53</sup>

With this heavy speech, one would think that the “controversy” would be over, but it was not. Although these trials held international weight in the Western world, Japan still refused to acknowledge that these women were sex slaves. Unfortunately, the international community could do nothing because the trials had no legal weight and were simply considered a form of social justice rather than a legal one. There were no consequences, and although Emperor Hirohito was found guilty, he had died in 1989. Ergo, even if the determination could hold weight, no one could truly be convicted and burden the consequence within this world.

Nevertheless, Japan refused to admit any of these crimes. Part of the reasons they refused to admit to any of these crimes is due to the fact that Japan, at least up until 2014, did not confer and conform to the definition of ‘slave’ from the Slaves Treaty from 1926.<sup>54</sup> The generally accepted legal definition of slavery is provided by “Article 1(1) of the 1926 League of Nations Slavery Convention, which reads: ‘slavery is the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.’”<sup>55</sup> This definition created a broad stroke to allow for slavery to change and still fit under this definition. Japan’s refusal to acknowledge such a definition in 2014 gave credit to the comfort women and discredited deniers

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<sup>53</sup> “Exploring the 'Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on the Trial of Japan's Military Sexual Slavery in 2000' through the Archives.” *KYEOL*, Research Institute on Japanese Military and Sexual Slavery, 7 Feb. 2022, <https://www.kyeol.kr/en/node/243>.

<sup>54</sup> Mera, Koichi. *Comfort Women Not "Sex Slaves": Rectifying the Myriad of Perspectives*. Xlibris, 2015.

<sup>55</sup> Allain, Jean, and Robin Hickey. “PROPERTY AND THE DEFINITION OF SLAVERY.” *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2012): 915–38. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23279811>.

of these women being sex slaves, as much of the international community accepts this definition as generally true. This definition could even interpret Korea as a whole being under the guise of slavery, as these people were forced to give up their culture, names and identity due the laws and regulations Japan emplaced. Thus, the description that “Korean men are cowardly” by Yon would once again be proven to be incorrect.

Yet, the only cowards are the people who could not take responsibility for their actions. Japan refused to take responsibility as a nation and government for the atrocities of the women's ad instead blamed the ‘individual recruiters.’ The push for such a statement and lack of empathy came from right winged politicians in Japan.

The Kono Statement was issued August 4, 1993 by the discourse of Chief Cabinet secretary Yohei Kono of Japan in accordance with announcing the result of the comfort women relation survey.<sup>56</sup> In it states the following:

“As a result of the 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.”<sup>57</sup>

It is in this statement that the Japanese government recognized that comfort women existed and were even mistreated and forced/coerced into being comfort women. In spite of all that, the statement is one of high contention that fuels the debate of comfort women and who is responsible. The Kono Statement, although recognizing the mistreatment of these women, also fails to have the Japanese government take responsibility. Instead the Japanese government shifts

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<sup>56</sup> “Kono Statement English Translation (고노 담화 영어 전문) - 학술연구 자료실.” KOPOLITICS, April 9, 2018. <https://kopolitics.com/academic/2084>.

<sup>57</sup>Inbid.

the blame to personal recruiters. It also tries to keep a seemingly ambiguous sense of responsibility of the Japanese military stating that they were “directly or indirectly” involved in the establishment and the management of these comfort women. This is almost an entirely dismissive statement, because how can the Japanese military be indirectly involved in such an establishment meant for their own pleasure? There is no “or,” they were both directly *and* indirectly involved for the whole process. Comfort women were no secret to anyone, the only argument is whether these women suffered and if they were willing participants. This statement only created a stronger discord between the Japanese government and the women who suffered.

Moreover, in 1994 those who identified as comfort women were offered a sum of money from the Asian’s Women Fund (AWF) created by the Japanese government.<sup>58</sup> It was to assist poor women in Asia. Japan tried to pressure comfort women to take the money. However, it was a private fund and not a state one, which would allow Japan to not take on legal responsibility for comfort women. This fund tried to take advantage of these poor women and their poverty once again to continue to silence them. One survivor stated, “If we recieved money from a private fund, we become prostitutes. I want to die as a daughter of Korea.”<sup>59</sup> This is the sentiment many of the survivors have. A private fund would mean that these women are in agreement with Japan’s statement and would take away their voice. By taking the money, they felt as though they would become what they said they were not for decades, *prostitutes*. These women want to die with honor and be remembered as such, and to do so they will not suffer and be misled again.

Fast forward to 2015, the Japanese government and the Korean government went to renew their “1965 Treaty of Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea (hereafter

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<sup>58</sup> “General Timeline of the Japanese Military ‘Comfort Women’ System.” *Friendly Korea*, 2012, [korea.prkorea.com/wordpress/english/2012/10/26/general-timeline-of-the-japanese-military-comfort-women-system/](http://korea.prkorea.com/wordpress/english/2012/10/26/general-timeline-of-the-japanese-military-comfort-women-system/).

<sup>59</sup> *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Woman*. Directed by Dai Sil Kim-Gibson. Center for Asian American Media, 1999. <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/silence-broken-korean-comfort-woman-2>.

South Korea). Both nations have engaged broadly in bilateral trade, student exchanges, and common enterprises in science and environmental monitoring.”<sup>60</sup> 2015 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the treaty, and at this time Japan and South Korea signed the historic agreement to end the comfort women issue “finally and irreversibly.”<sup>61</sup> Within this agreement was a formal apology from the Japanese government towards the comfort women. The Korean government’s acceptance of the apology without regard for comfort women and their demand that Japan be held accountable under the International Court of Justice.<sup>62</sup> The Korean government took away their [comfort women’s] choice by accepting the Japanese apology in the renewal of the 1965 treaty. Moreover, Japan’s apology seems to be politically motivated by the United States to ease tension between the two countries. Nonetheless, the apology came with a reparation of 8.3 million dollars, but in return Japan demanded the removal of a comfort women memorial statue erected in front of the Japanese embassy and demanded for all criticism to cease.<sup>63</sup> The notion behind the removal of the memorial statue, a demand within the official apology, outwardly makes the issue and history disappear, such as the old saying goes “out of sight out of mind.” I believe this reinforces the narrative that women are not “to be heard,” therefore dismissing their history and sufferings. While Japan stated that this would be the end of the issue, no efforts were made to prosecute the Japanese recruiters who were identified as being solely responsible for the abuse suffered by these women.

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<sup>60</sup> Le, Tom Phuong. “Negotiating in Good Faith: Overcoming Legitimacy Problems in the Japan-South Korea Reconciliation Process.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 78, no. 3 (2019): 621–44. doi:10.1017/S0021911819000664.

<sup>61</sup> *Inbid.*, 622.

<sup>62</sup> HYE-RIM, KWON. “Former 'Comfort Woman' Demands Issue Be Taken to International Court.” Korea JoongAng Daily. 구독신청, February 16, 2021. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2021/02/16/national/diplomacy/comfort-women-japan-court/20210216173900278.html>.

<sup>63</sup> Tolbert, David. “Japan's Apology for Forcing South Korean Women into Sexual Slavery Falls Short.” *HuffPost*, HuffPost, 7 Dec. 2017, [www.huffpost.com/entry/japans-apology-to-south-k\\_b\\_9111566](http://www.huffpost.com/entry/japans-apology-to-south-k_b_9111566).

This apology completely changed the comfort women “controversy.” What sat first was a controversy over if these women were willing participants or not, now it has become an issue of whether Japan has successfully apologized and compensated these women. According to the 2018 Genron NPO Japan-South Korea Joint Public Opinion Poll, the tensions between Korea and Japan were high based on the occupation of Korea by Japan. “With 69.3 percent of Japanese respondents citing “South Korea continues to criticize Japan on historical issues,” and 70 percent of Korean respondents citing “Japan has not properly reflected on its history of invading South Korea”<sup>64</sup> as the source of their animosity.”<sup>65</sup> With Japan feeling apology fatigue and no compromise found within the last 30 years, the ongoing issue with comfort women has become an increasingly background topic.

This has made a very delicate political and social relationship between Japan and Korea as no solution seems to be forthcoming. Japan seemingly felt as if it had given a significant solution while the women who suffered felt insulted and the people felt insulted for them.

Yet, Japan will never be able to do enough for Korea. There will never be a solution to the historical atrocities and the colonization that Korea suffered at the hands of the Japanese imperial government. The reason for that is because the international community never had Japan face any consequence during the time of historical justice at the International Trials. Nor did the international community find anyone at fault for the colonization of Korea. And the United States seemingly only cared about its own relations with Japan and how they wanted the trials handled. Korea never found the justice that other nation states found in these trials. Nor did

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<sup>64</sup> GENRON NPO. 2017. “The 5th Japan-South Korea Joint Public Opinion Poll.” July 20. [http://www.genron-npo.net/en/opinion\\_polls/archives/5363.html](http://www.genron-npo.net/en/opinion_polls/archives/5363.html) (accessed July 22, 2017). ———. 2018. “The 6th Japan-South Korea Joint Public Opinion Poll.” June 18. [http://www.genron-npo.net/en/opinion\\_polls/archives/5436.html](http://www.genron-npo.net/en/opinion_polls/archives/5436.html) (accessed July 13, 2018).

<sup>65</sup> Le, Tom Phuong. “Negotiating in Good Faith: Overcoming Legitimacy Problems in the Japan-South Korea Reconciliation Process.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 78, no. 3 (2019): 621–44. doi:10.1017/S0021911819000664.

the Korean people have time to mourn or focus on the trauma its own people faced as they quickly went from being colonized to war to modernization. Needless to say, the majority of Korea has never been able to heal from its past wounds that the Japanese inflicted. Subsequently, when these women came out with their story in 1991, these women were looked at with not only horror and pity, but also as a way to receive justice by Japan. At the same time, this was the first time that the international community truly cared about Korea and respected them enough to give them a seat to speak and to be listened to. It only took 50 years after World War II. Even if Japan took full responsibility and gave compensation without any demands, there would still be an issue because no one could be held responsible. The generation from the World War II era, which consisted of both the victim and the perpetrator in this scenario, has become increasingly sparse as they soon lie with what they have sown--- in death. The easiest man to blame, Emperor Hirohito, has already died, and even holding him accountable at this point seems for naught. It is not like he suffered much in his lifetime as McArthur ensured his safety by tweaking the definitions as previously stated from the trials post World War II. So they will never be able to see the punishment on the one man who deserves it the most.

Yet, the controversy of justice and what its solution may be was contested between the living survivors of the time. In May of 2020, Lee Yong-soo, a 92-year-old veteran protestor said she would stop protesting because that it will only keep producing hatred between both nations, and that the only way to solve this problem is by teaching the younger generations, especially the Japanese youth. Her new solution is ideal, but in Japan as previously mentioned they only are “taught there was a war.” For example, a female college student at the University of Tokyo described how they are taught about the war in Japan. They are simply taught there was a war but “not the details about it.... We focus more on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and because we had a

bad ending and lost the war, we do not feel guilty.”<sup>66</sup> The lack of education and understanding for these women who suffered comes from the lack of education and the propaganda spewed by the older generation who are nationalist and served for their country in the war.

By the same token in 2019 in Nagoya, Japan a museum which had a statue for comfort women was shut down for safety and criticism. However it reopened 2 months later in the argument of freedom of expression., “Nagoya Mayor Takashi Kawamura criticized the event as ‘outrageous,’ saying ‘it’s hijacking public opinion in the name of freedom of expression,’ after visiting the exhibition.”<sup>67</sup> This demonstrates that Japan has no intention of teaching the younger generation what it has to offer and continuously rejects the truth of what happened to these women. It is easier to turn a blind eye when you no longer have to face any responsibility for them.

Furthermore, Lee Yong-Soo came out with her testimony in 2020 of the funds, that were to help comfort women from support groups, were being misused by those in the support group. In consequence a right winged group called the Freedom Union began rallying at the same spot that the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance have been protesting for almost 30 years.<sup>68</sup> Every Wednesday this council protests in front of the Japanese embassy on their behalf and with former comfort women. This group used the scandal that was outed by Lee Young-Soo to secure the spot and used it to call comfort women degrading names and demanded for the council to be scrapped.<sup>69</sup> This further demonstrates that people will choose to stay ignorant. This

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<sup>66</sup> Inbid., 12:15-12:40

<sup>67</sup> kyodo. “Controversial Art Exhibition Featuring 'Comfort Woman' Statue Reopens in Nagoya.” *The Japan Times*, 8 Oct. 2019, [www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/10/08/national/controversial-art-exhibition-comfort-woman-statue-nagoya-south-korea/](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/10/08/national/controversial-art-exhibition-comfort-woman-statue-nagoya-south-korea/).

<sup>68</sup> Chung, Esther. “‘Comfort Women’ Activists Try to Stop Far-Right Counter-Rallies.” *Korea JoongAng Daily*. 구독신청, January 5, 2022.

<https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2022/01/05/national/socialAffairs/korea-comfort-women-japan/20220105175937747.html>.

<sup>69</sup> Inbid.

has become such an issue, that Lee Young-Soo completely changed her mind about letting the situation go and has called for “the Korean government to bring the issue of forced sexual slavery by Japan to the International Court of Justice (ICJ).”<sup>70</sup> This has now become seemingly her death wish as the survivor is 92 years old, and she simply wants to see her justice before her eyes and feel it in her heart before it beats its last beat.

## CONCLUSION

The controversy of Korean comfort women never had a trial which held any significant consequence to Japan. But the comforted women and those who supported them, went through a war and a trial in the international public in the most figurative way. A quote by Timothy Brooks begins the introduction of this paper:

“In war crimes trials, victors and losers alike are called on to narrate their different histories of a conflict. The prosecution seeks to demonstrate that the losers lost not merely because they were defeated on the battlefield but because their cause was unjust and their means illegal.”<sup>71</sup>

The winner? One could say that based off Brooks’ idea that the winner would be Korea because Japan was proven at least in the eyes of most of the world to have raped and brutalized these women. The imperial Japanese army are now seen similarly as monsters with the atrocities they committed upon these women.

Yet, is there even a winner? These women have no justice. No one was laid responsible. They were poor all their lives and now only a few remain. They likely will never receive the justice they want within their own life span. Japan? They simply had to move on. Although the

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<sup>70</sup> HYE-RIM, KWON. “Former 'Comfort Woman' Demands Issue Be Taken to International Court.” Korea JoongAng Daily. 구독신청, February 16, 2021.

<sup>71</sup> Brook, Timothy. “The Tokyo Judgment and the Rape of Nanking.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (2001): 673–700. doi:10.2307/2700106.

comfort women “issue” may be “dragging on” in their own opinion, it does not stop them from having a political relationship with Korea and other nation states. And while the international community has condemned Japan for its actions against these women, there were no actual consequences held against Japan. Nonetheless, Japan still faces negative publicity for how they continue to handle this ongoing issue.

Furthermore, comfort women were only allowed to be a source of controversy because of the racism, misunderstanding, and the colonization of Korea by more highly placed nations that were in the international community after WWII. The US and European allies had more power in the post-war trials after World War II, choosing who got justice and when. This would continue to be the case as Korean comfort women would look to the international Western community for ways to seek justice for themselves. Furthermore, the Korean government would turn a blind eye to the wants of the comfort women and accept Japan’s apology. These women were at the bottom of their own fight, their voices the weakest among the weak. They had to use the power of others to gain recognition for their injustices. They reflected on Korea's similar state after World War II and how others would shape and voice their opinions on Korea as a power.

One of the reasons we likely only pay attention to this issue now is because Korea is actually recognized as a nation worthy of being allied with. It is a nation leading in education, innovation, and invention. One can compare this with Taiwan, which was also occupied by Japan, or the Philippines, which are never really spoken about. Nor are the comfort women from these areas. This is because they are seen as inferior. The Social Darwinism of politics and political relations have allowed for these injustices to be treated as if they were debatable.

And the biggest controversy remains, who is responsible? In my opinion there is a fitting answer. As previously stated, survivor Hwang Keum Du described how they [the Japanese

Soldiers] would kill the older comfort women as a way to instill fear in the new ones. She stated how they threatened if they did not follow their rules, they would die like the women previously before them. Yet, their rules? Their rules that these women had to follow directly answer the biggest question of who is responsible for the atrocities for these women. The rules follow below as stated from Hwang Keum Du:

“The five rules one must follow:

1. The order of Emperor Hirohito
2. The order of the Japanese Government
3. The order of this army headquarters
4. The rules of this place
5. My order.”<sup>72</sup>

Hence, they admittedly told these women who was responsible. It was not simply the personal fault of recruiters as stated in the Kono statement.

The following were at fault:

1. Emperor Hirohito
2. The Japanese Government
3. The Army Headquarters
4. The Army Unit
5. The personal fault of the Japanese Military Personnel.

These people were responsible. And yet, the continued lack of injustice could similarly be extended to include the Western world and particularly include General McArthur and Captain Godwin who knew of these women and ignored them during post-war tribunals. These

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<sup>72</sup> Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Woman. Directed by Dai Sil Kim-Gibson. Center for Asian American Media, 1999. <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/silence-broken-korean-comfort-woman-2>.

people and the personnel who knew and allowed such injustice are similarly responsible for the hurt these women experience as much as those who committed the crimes and continue to deny their stories.

Their stories, their words, were simply a controversy for those to dodge blame and guilt. The tragedies these women faced were nothing but an open secret. If there was no denial that these women likely suffered or existed, then was their controversy whether or not they were willing? Their controversy was if they had justice? When hearing their stories and looking at their history, I hope that we as a group determine that there is no such controversy. The brutalization of these women and their nation created a submission that forced them to participate. They were sex slaves. They were sex slaves who will never get the justice they deserve.

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