

Special Feature

The Korean Women's Movement of  
Japanese Military "Comfort Women":  
Navigating between Nationalism and  
Feminism

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## Introduction

Since the issue of Japanese military “comfort women” publicly emerged in the late 1980s, it has traveled the world, crossing the boundaries of nation, race, class, gender, culture, and language. Vacillating between varied dichotomies, the body of “comfort women” has been recurrently constructed. Japanese and Korean governments, activists, scholars, journalists, and the media, as main commentators, have been engaged in discursively constructing the issues, truths, histories, and even personal narratives of “comfort women.” Meanwhile, important questions have been raised concerning imperialism, colonialism, nationalism, militarism, and patriarchy in relation to war crimes, sexual violence and slavery, an unresolved colonial history, nationalized victimization, and state-regulated prostitution. The dominant discourse, however, with differing emphases, continues to change due to partial understatement and partisan interests. As Laura Hyun-yi Kang (2003) properly pointed out, “the matter of Korean ‘comfort women’ poses multiple problems—of nomination, of identification, of representation, and of knowledge production. Who can know and then, in turn, account adequately for both the historical event and its multiple subjects?” (25). Similarly, Sara Soh (2008) challenges us to take a critical stance in understanding the complicated truth regarding the history of Japanese military “comfort women.”

Existing feminist literature has examined this phenomenon in relation to the fundamental inquiry of nation-state positionality, the meaning of history, the relationship between gender and nation, and as an unmarked subject speaking about or for Japanese military “comfort women” (Chung 1999, 2003; Kang 2010; Kim 1994; Kim 2008; Park 2013; Stetz and Oh 2001; Yang 1997, 1998, 2001, 2006). Despite abundant discussion, mostly focused on investigating “a historical truth,” only a few have fully addressed legal and/or political perspectives, historical responsibility and legacies, and the trajectory of activism in relation to “comfort women” (Chung 2001; Kang 2005; Lee 2010; Soh 2008). Discussions on how the women’s movement has navigated ongoing conflicts or negotiations with nationalism are particularly rare. Even in the

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discussions, some scholars depict the Korean movement as a simply "nationalist one" (J. Kim 2006; Yamashita 2011) or understand that "[t]he domestic public discourse in South Korea on the "comfort women" issue has been built [on] around two major orientations: one feminist and one nationalist" (Varga 2009, 292).

This paper's purpose is to explore the multifaceted aspects of the Korean women's movement of Japanese military "comfort women" (hereafter the "comfort women movement") from a postcolonial feminist perspective. This perspective, which simultaneously pursues the fight against androcentric nationalism and colonialism, is necessary to understand the issue of "comfort women" as a past event that is continuously reconstituted by the hegemonic power relationships surrounding South Korea's present postcolonial setting. Specifically, I will analyze the ways in which the movement's activism and its dominant principles shifted within the context of an expanding political space brought on by ongoing negotiations and/or conflict with legacies of Imperial Japan and androcentric nationalism. Based on ethnographic research, over ten years of participant observation as an insider-outsider of the movement, and in-depth interviews, I will critically interrogate the relationship between the women's movement and nationalistic aspiration as mapping the way in which "comfort women" have transformed in the progress of the movement.

I believe that any attempt to represent the historical "reality" of "comfort women" as perfectly distinct from colonial and postcolonial historicity is haunted by ghosts that shed light on the other side of that "reality." According to Avery Gordon (1997), "[the] ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course" (8). Therefore, this paper's ultimate goal is not to unearth "a historical truth" nor to represent the palpable experiences of "comfort women," but to discuss the broader discursive conditions to reshape this phenomenon as a national and international subject. In the process, how these ghosts are known/unknown and finally incarnated into a social figure will be addressed.

## Invisibility and Visibility: Keeping Silence and Signifying Practices

Several feminist scholars collaborating with activists from the Korean women's movement first publicized the issue of "comfort women" (*wianbu*) in the late 1980s. This led to establishment of the Jeongdaehyeop (Han-guk Jeongsindae Munje Daechaek Hyeobuihoe which is the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Sexual Slavery (hereafter the Korean Council) in 1990. For almost half a century, however, silence has been a common feature of both Japanese and Korean nation-states. Why had Korean society remained officially ignorant? Why and how was the silence broken?

Why the existence and experiences of "comfort women" have been dismissed and forgotten can be explained in various ways. First, state undesirability and international power dynamics, which are deeply connected to the problem of post-war readjustment in the Far East, should be considered. Tammy Kim (2006) argues, "[e]xternal geopolitical factors at the end of the war meant that less was demanded of Japan than Germany in terms of criminal and economic accountability" (225). The "Tokyo Tribunal," procedurally similar to the Nuremberg Tribunal,<sup>1</sup> failed to try Emperor Hirohito (226), which suggests that the United States cannot avoid the responsibility for the unsettled colonial legacy and common silence regarding "comfort women." Against emerging communist confrontation in East Asia—including the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea—the U.S. government wanted Japan to be a strong bulwark of democratic alliance during the Cold War (Chung 1995, 180). The U.S., anxious to maintain its presence and continued hegemony in East Asia, "decided to [help] build its former enemy into an economic powerhouse and competitor" (T. Kim 2006, 226).

Such decisions reflect Korea's incomplete decolonization. After Japan's defeat in 1945, the U.S. declared the establishment of a free and independent Korean nation, and changed Japanese colonial system to meet Korean national interests. It progressed superficially in South Korea with the introduction of American

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1. The Nuremberg Trials were a series of military tribunals held by the Allied Forces of World War II between November 20, 1945 and October 1, 1946. They were most notable for the prosecution of prominent members of the political, military, and economic leadership of Nazi Germany.

democratic ideals and policies. Inevitably, this transplanted liberal democracy, which was based on Japanese colonial systems and infrastructures and utilized colonial, social, and human capital, had many defects. The U.S. occupation of Korea retained imperial, colonial, and military attributes; the principles of liberty and democracy coincided with American—not Korean—national interests. Moreover, the United States' ignorance of the local people's desires resulted in a fixation on national divisions that eventually caused the Korean War, which was predictably accompanied by intensive militarization and the neo-colonial condition (Lee 2006).

Secondly, South Korea's national issues should not be dismissed. An unsettling colonial history and legacy, the U.S. military occupation, national division, the Korean War, and continued national poverty caused the Korean government's inability to raise the issue of "comfort women." Moreover, humiliating negotiations with its former enemy seemed inevitable to achieve the nation's prior goal of economic growth and security at the expense of its people. During Park Jeong-Hee's military dictatorship, the regime tried to rebuild the country's relationship with Japan and signed the 1965 Korea-Japan Accord. Essentially, "Korea gave up the right of its citizens to sue the Japanese government for civil damages," which came in the form of reconstruction funding (Kim 2006, 226) which means "economic development grants and loans" from the U.S.

The patriarchal sexual culture of the postcolonial era was interlocked with ethnocentric nationalism and served as an important hidden backdrop for the long period of silence within South Korea. Because Confucian cultural norms were still deeply entrenched in Korean society, unmarried women sexually abused by foreigners were labeled as "defiled" (Yamashita 2012, 215). The defiled daughter or wife brought shame to her family. Accordingly, former "comfort women" could not return home or had to hide their experiences even from their kin. Additionally, for Korean people as a nation, a "comfort woman" symbolized the helplessness and impotence of Korean men who could not protect their own women, families, and nation from their Japanese enemy. Young Korean virgins, collectively raped by Japan, the colonizer, symbolized the lost nation, lost sovereignty, lost motherland, and consequently lost national pride. This historic and traumatic memory, which is deeply embedded in the nation's subconsciousness, has long haunted Korean society and resulted in survivors' lifelong suffering.

Thirdly, in addition to “fascistic paternalism” and “masculinist sexism” (Soh 2008, 31), other domestic factors in postwar Japan hindered the “comfort women” issue from being uncovered. As several scholars pointed out, “a defensive posture of nationalism and a long militaristic history have made Japan ‘an extraordinary example of forgetting, suppression, or denial by significant and influential groups in the population’” (T. Kim 2006, 226). Instead of a sense of responsibility and guilt about wartime aggression, Japanese people carry feelings of victimhood in relation to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as grievance regarding national defeat, which were fostered by the Japanese government to reconstruct national identity (226). Consequently, Japan has tried to compensate its nationals financially and emotionally for war victimization, while ignoring victims from other nations (Chung 1995, 181). The pervasive ethos of victimhood has foreclosed the possibility of a “new beginning” in the post-Cold War constellation (Izumi 2011, 486), not to mention the resolution of issues related to “comfort women.”

Despite a long history of ignorance—except sporadic disclosures, scattered publications, and media coverage—interior and exterior driving forces have finally given the ghost of “comfort women” a social and political shape. This issue was first raised in South Korea in April 1987 during a small seminar on “International Tourism Gisaeng” held by Korean Church Women United (Han-guk Gyohoe Yeoseong Yeonhapheo, hereafter KCWU). This organization had been concerned about sexual exploitation since the 1970s when the Korean government promoted international tourism focused on female sexual services. This was particularly targeted at male Japanese tourists and euphemistically called “*gisaeng* tourism.”<sup>2</sup> Professor Yun Jeong-ok of the Department of English at Ewha Womans University, a lone researcher of the “comfort women” issue, was invited to talk. Barely escaping forced draft into Volunteer Corps

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2. In 1973, KCWU organized protests against Japanese sex tourism and presented the issue at the first Japan-Korea Church Conference in Seoul (Kim 1987, 142), during which they issued a “Statement Responding to the Tourism Policy” to President Park Jeong-Hee and the Minister of Health and Social Welfare (KCWU 1984, 55). In December 1973, several demonstrations at Ewha Womans University and other universities were held to demand that the government correct the policy. Ewha students also staged a protest against “sex tourism” at Kimpo Airport near Seoul, the only international airport in South Korea (55). Despite several limits, the protests were significant in that progressive women gathered en masse to rally against the exploitation of women’s bodies to serve national interests.

(Jeongsindae)<sup>3</sup> thanks to her class status when she was a freshman at Ewha Womans University, Professor Yun has suffered guilt regarding the women of her generation who could not return to their hometowns after "their service." Motivated by her experience, she personally located relevant documents and survivors (Interview with Yun Jeong-ok, December 2012). Shocked by Yun's talk of a "hidden story" within colonial history, the KCWU established the Research Committee on the Jeongsindae Issue under the Committee on Church and Society, to support her research (Interview with Yun Young-ae, secretary of KCWU, July 2012).<sup>4</sup> In 1988, right before Seoul's 1988 Olympic Games, they organized an international symposium on Jeju Island titled "Women and Sex Tourism Culture," during which Yun presented "the Japanese military sexual slavery issue" to international and national participants. A strong sense of awakening rapidly spread among the Korean women's movement and organizations because of democratization in 1987 (Soh 2008, 372-73).

Led by Korean Church Women United, the Korean Council (Jeongdaehyeop) was established in 1990 as an umbrella organization composed of thirty-seven women's organizations. Due to the Korean Council's rigorous activism and Kim Hak-soon, one of the first women to speak out publicly in August 1991 about her experience as a "comfort woman," the issue finally drew international attention.<sup>5</sup> The ongoing Wednesday Demonstration, which began in January 1992, reached its record 1,100th gathering in November 13, 2013. The Korean Council's report on "comfort women," submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) in 1992, is often cited as pivotal in internationally publicizing this issue (Kang 2003, 48). In November 1991 and January 1992, official documents supporting charges against Japan were unearthed (in the U.S. and Japan, respectively) and publicized by scholars including Yoshimi Yoshiake (2002). The so-called era of survivors was ushered

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3. At that time, most Koreans confused Volunteer Corps (Jeongsindae) with "Comfort Women" (*wianbu*) which means Japanese military sexual slavery. However, due to progressed research and activism, Korean people realized the difference between the two entities in 1990s.

4. Therefore, it is not surprising that two founding representatives of the Korean Council and longtime friends, Yun Jeong-ok and Lee Hyo-jae, were the age-mates of former "comfort women."

5. In December 1991, Kim Hak-soon, along with two other former "comfort women," filed a suit against the Japanese government in Tokyo District Court, garnering huge international interest on the issue.

in with a series of international public meetings, survivor hearings, scholarly publications, and international reports, including the “Radhika Coomaraswamy Report” in 1996 and the “Gay J. McDougall Report” in 1998 (both UN special rapporteurs on violence against women, its causes and consequences). This seemingly shifted the paradigmatic story of “comfort women” and the issue became characterized as “military sexual slavery” and by “rape camps” respectively.

Obviously, the professed success of internationalizing the “comfort women” issue would not have been possible without Korean activists’ sincere devotion to victim-survivors and their endless effort to solve the “problem.” It should be remembered, however, that increased international awareness on gender inequality and violence against women has contributed to problematizing Japanese sexual slavery on an international level. As Sally E. Merry (2006) observed, since the 1980s “the relevance of human rights for the campaign against violence toward women has taken on new importance as human rights have become the major global approach to social justice” (2). Since the 1990s, gender violence as a human rights violation has become the centerpiece of women’s rights worldwide. Many suggest that what occurred between March 1, 1992 and December 14, 1995 during the Bosnian War was a turning point for the international women’s movement. The war was characterized by bitter fighting, the indiscriminate shelling of cities and towns, ethnic cleansing, and systematic mass rapes led mostly by Serbian and, to a lesser extent, Croat forces. International media coverage of mass rape as a war strategy contributed to internationalizing the issue of “comfort women.” People began to see it as a global issue of systematic sexual violence against women in situations of armed conflicts (Soh 2008, 41).

In addition to the two previously mentioned favorable international factors and Korean women’s rigorous activism—without considering the complex relationship between female and androcentric civic organizations and their conflicting perspectives on gender and nation, feminism and nationalism—it is difficult to fully understand why the ghost of “comfort women” has at last appeared on the historical stage. Women’s movements are neither homogenous nor static. Rather, they are characterized “as fluid and amorphous, diverse and fragmented, sporadic, issue-oriented, and autonomous with several streams of ideological thought and varying strategies” (Bystydzienski and Sekhon 1999, 11). They undergo continuous transformation in response to the diverse needs



of women, communities, or the nation. In addition, women's subjectivity is not stable or fixed; instead, it is constantly reconstituted through discourse on gender, sexuality, class, and nationhood, which is informed by changes in social, cultural, and political climate. To comprehensively understand the "comfort women's" movement, it is therefore important to retrace the multiple context and multifaceted aspects that specifically relate its unfolding within the new dynamics of a post-democratized Korean society.

### **Feminist Aspirations against Gendered Nationalism: Questioning the Nation, Revisiting Transnationalism, and Reconstructing Identities**

In the 1980s, South Korea was fraught with aspirations of forming an effective resistance against its military dictatorships, a desire for democratization, and massive popular protests accompanied by recurrent clashes between protesters and riot police, of which the June Uprising of 1987 is exemplary.<sup>6</sup> It is considered an "important turning point in Korea's democratization" driven by a "dynamic expansion, revitalization, and eventual outburst of civil society" (Choi 2000, 24). Women's collective identity during this decade, in contrast to that of the 1970s or 1990s, is characterized by the experience of waging street demonstrations and protests, forming independent organizations, and building coalitions with men, other groups, and active political party members.

From its onset, the "comfort women" movement was organized and led by politically inspired female activists and students, not to mention churchwomen who had played a pivotal role in the Korean democratization movement. Even

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6. When President Chun handpicked General Roh Tae-woo as his successor in April 1987, students, religious groups, labor unions, and opposition politicians waged a series of massive demonstrations throughout May and June demanding a direct electoral system. They successfully obtained a presidential election, which eventually caused the military dictatorship's collapse. This is the citizen-initiated "Great Struggle for Democratization," which is generally called the "June Uprising of 1987." (For further discussion about the June Uprising, please refer to Choi 2000; Lee 2006.) It is significant that the June Uprising, initiated by the burgeoning civil society, emerged from periods of resistance in the 1960s and 1970s, enabling a grand democratic alliance among diverse groups longing for domestic democratization and reunification. Korean people therefore remember 1987 as an "important turning point in Korea's democratization process" (Choi 2000, 27).

though they did not identify themselves as feminists, nor bluntly challenge the androcentric culture embedded in the progressive movement, many of them were inwardly questioning the pervasive hegemonic gender ideology and ethnocentric nationalism of male activists and movement organizations.<sup>7</sup> They were frustrated by the continual messages they received from male activists suggesting “you must be patient until the prior national goals of democratization, independence from imperialism, and national unification are achieved” (Interview with Yun Mee-Hayng, December 2012). Yun Mee-Hyang, a current Korean Council representative once actively engaged in both the democratization and the “comfort women’s” movements, painfully recalled how “[i]n those days, we were all supposed to be nationalists—at least in public.” While female nationalists continued to “struggle to resolve one demand at a time or with one in the foreground, others in the background,” they “never lost the vision and relevant practices for social changes [for women]” (Yuval-Davis 2001, 136). One particular historical incident of sexual violence provided the momentum for women nationalists to put forth their inner struggles.

The Korean women’s collective uprising against gender violence was triggered amid this political atmosphere by “the Sexual Torture Incident at the Bucheon Police Station” in 1986, wherein a twenty-two-year old college student was imprisoned because she allegedly camouflaged her employment as a laborer. After being sexually abused by an investigator, Moon Gwi-dong, Kwon In-Sook courageously came out to the public. Despite her official appeal to “see the incident as an issue of class and labor not as that of gender” (Cho 1996, 148-49), the issue contributed to a rise in feminist consciousness among female students and women activists. This new, widespread awakening regarding women and sensitivity to gender violence enabled Korean female activists to see “comfort women” as victims of sexual violence and their issues as representative of all women.

Paradoxically, Korean women activists and feminists also witnessed how Korean nationalists, newly arrived on the official scene, appropriated the issue of “comfort women.” Male nationalistic aspirations, which coincided with Korea’s anti-American sentiment of the early 1990s, were immersed in constructing the paradigmatic figure of “comfort women” that became dominant in public

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7. See Lee 2011, regarding the relationship between women activists and male organizations.

discourse. As Ann McClintock (1996) indicates, nationalism is a historical practice and contested system of cultural representation. Historically, nations have only amounted to the sanctioned institutionalization of gender differences, through which women's access to rights and resources have been restricted; symbolically, gender differences serve to define the limits of national differences and power between men (260-61). Though nationalism has typically emerged from masculine memory, humiliation, and hope—excluding women's experiences for its purposes—it spontaneously needs a catalyst to fuel national sentiment. Hence, nationalism as a gendered discourse cannot be understood without a theory on gender power (261).

Masking the truth, due to ignorance, neglect, and defeatism, brings shame on our people. Furthermore, that girls were recruited to *Chōngsindae* from elementary school is a matter of our *national pride*, prior to the question of *compensation*. Therefore, we should disclose the *truth* with our own hands this time. (Editorial in *Dong-A Ilbo*, January 16, 1992; Yang 1998, 128; emphasis added)

The comfort women issue is not *that pleasant in its nature*. In the wake of an apology from the Japanese government, why don't we close this *shameful historical phase* with our own responsibility for financial compensation? (Editorial in *Chosun Ilbo*, August 5, 1993; emphasis added)

While the Japanese government rejected the historical existence of "comfort women" by denying its legal responsibility or looked down upon them as "voluntary prostitutes," activists in various social movements, mass media, and intellectual communities mobilized a unified national sentiment against Japan's *immorality*, utilizing the dichotomous divisions of "us vs. them," "comrade vs. enemy," "victim vs. offender," and "good vs. bad." "To disclose one truth," "thorough apology," "compensation," "national pride/shame," "our chaste girls forcibly drafted to sexual slavery," and "innocent victims" were the most commonly employed phrases in South Korean media editorials and activist articles. It is understandable how such strategic discourse originated in response to Japan's "denial" of responsibility, lack of official apology and compensation to survivors, and its conceptualization of "comfort women" as "mere voluntary

prostitutes”<sup>8</sup> or even “defiled *Josaen-pi*” which is a derogatory Japanese term for vagina.

It was embarrassing, however, that the contradictory terms “national shame” and “national pride” became entangled on the surface of Korean society, which reflects existing mixed feelings toward Japanese “comfort women.” As Yang (1997) indicated, such a nationalistic focus gives too much agency to Japan by ceding authority to Japanese historians to tell the “truth.” It also reveals how a political dimension, such as the Korean government’s economic concerns, operates in discourse. It is more problematic that “comfort women” should symbolically remain the *exploited sexual slaves and victims* of the Japanese empire, without agency to control their own lives. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) simply termed such stereotypical representation as the “problematic process of access to an image of totality” (51). The experiences of colonized Korean women were trivialized and exploited as the material or background of androcentric national conversations. As a result, “the [Japanese] military comfort women issue [is] no longer between Korean women and Japanese men, but between Korean men and Japanese men” (Yang 1998, 131). In this sense, androcentric nationalist discourse, which made the existence of “comfort women” hyper-visible, was neither about nor for women, their position neither subject nor object.

As such, the allegory of “comfort women” (*wianbu*) is arbitrarily utilized in accordance with national interests, leading to the politics of inclusion and exclusion that constitute a nation’s history. “Comfort women’s” experiences, voices, or bodies—utilized to represent national shame and then hidden from official national history—became visible only when they were needed to mobilize feelings of national unity against Japanese imperialism and to recover Korea’s national pride (*minjogui jajonsim*).

Moreover, the abrupt change in the public’s awareness of “comfort women” actually rendered them invisible. According to Gordon (1997), “hyper-visibility is a persistent alibi for the mechanisms that render one invisible” (17). Korea’s patriarchy is complicit with Japanese colonialism in creating this collective hyper-visible image of “forced victims of the Japanese.” As a result,

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8. Japanese conservative politicians have argued, “‘Comfort women’ were [voluntary] prostitutes working under state-regulated prostitution, who earned money by selling sex, and [that] they were not forced ‘sexual slaves’” (Uesugi 1997; Kimura 2008, 17).

only the archetype of "comfort women" remains, while the real experiences of these women, which are determined by ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality in the context of Korea's colonization, are erased.

In the process of reproducing multiple cultural versions of the "comfort women" issue, many feminists inside and outside Korea have criticized Korean and Japanese nationalistic paradigms, which have affected the transnational mode of knowledge production. Since the mid-1990s, Korean feminists, confronted with Korean and Japanese nationalism, have sought to produce alternative narratives about "comfort women" from feminist perspectives. Examining the complex relationship between women and nations, as well as feminism and nationalism, Chung (1999) argues that issues related to Japanese military sexual slavery relate not only to women but also to the nation and that both are rooted in the colonial context of women's dual oppression by patriarchy and national relations. On the other hand, Yang (1997) criticizes the masculine and Japanese-centered focus in representations of Korean "comfort women's" issues, and suggests the articulation of viewpoints from counter-positionality, exploring the possibility of collective and personal memories as alternative subjects of analysis and history. While differentiating the Bosnian War's "collective rape" from the case of Korean "comfort women," Yang argues that the practice of using "comfort women" should be understood as one of the genocidal aspects of Japanese imperial projects.<sup>9</sup> Slogans such as the "Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" and "one body and one family under the Japanese emperor would not be effective without preexisting patriarchal social practices in Korea" (63-65). She therefore asks that the "comfort women" issue be relocated "at the intersection of state, race, class, and gender contradiction" (61). In another article, Yang (2001) pointed out that the survivors' agony and suffering were mainly caused by the postcolonial patriarchal nation-state. Conversely, Korean-American feminist Laura Hyun-yi Kang (2003) problematizes contemporary transnational dynamics by positioning the United States as the central and enabling locus in which different modes and methods

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9. Yang argues that the project was "an apparatus designed to protect Japanese women from the threat of rape by military personnel" as well as to protect Japanese soldiers from venereal disease (63). Furthermore, by destroying Korean women's virginity, the destruction and restatement of Korean identity was simultaneously possible. In the process, Korean women's bodies were treated "as military supply, a resource to enable the Japanese victory" (65).

of representation and adjudication on the subject of “comfort women” occur.

The tendency toward this type of critique is not new. At the beginning of the movement, co-founder Lee Hyo-jae, while requesting Korean and Japanese responsibility, clarified that the “comfort women” issue is a symbol of unsettled colonialism and war crimes against humanity (Lee 1992, 8). Colonial history and current mechanisms of visibility and invisibility, based on the understanding that the “comfort women” issue is a consequence of “a complex system of permission and prohibition, punctuated alternately by apparitions and hysterical blindness” (Gordon 1997, 17), have been the objects of intensive feminist inquiry in South Korea.

In reality, as Lee (1992) pointed out, the Korean Council was founded upon interest in women’s suffering and harm caused by colonial suppression and national division, paying attention to the commonality between *gisaeng* tourism and “comfort women” (10-11). The idea that female sexuality is inseparable from issues of nationhood was a primary principle of the organization. Accordingly, Korean Council activists have long raised questions about ethnic nationalism, militaristic sexual culture, colonial legacy, and sexual violence. They clearly conceive that Korean patriarchy and androcentric nationalism was intentionally or unintentionally complicit in reproducing and reconstructing “comfort women,” while criticizing the major role that Japanese imperial state institutions played in conducting, concealing, and normalizing the violence committed against “comfort women” in colonized Korea. Shared experiences of commitment to struggle against an incompetent patriarchal government enabled a collective shift in women’s identities toward becoming “feminist activists,” which redirected the movement’s focus toward transnational gender issues (e.g., women and war crime, the state exploitation of women’s sexuality, etc.). Since the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japanese Sexual Slavery was held in Tokyo in December 2000, activist sensitivity to differences in gender, race, ethnicity, and language has increased, coinciding with growing social awareness of human rights.<sup>10</sup> Recognizing the “impossibility”

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10. In South Korea, since 2000, violence against women and other human rights violations are considered serious psychological and physical injuries that are deeply embedded in daily life and constructed by various ideologies related to gender, sexuality, class, and nationhood. Therefore, progressive people, including feminists, have come to understand that prevention requires a social transformation of community, family, and national systems.

of international solidarity based solely on gender and the dilemma of going beyond a limited national framework, the Korean Council began expanding its extensive network of victims of wartime sexual assault to all human rights organizations in various parts of the world that fight against violence (The Korea Council 2007).

Korean Council activists' endeavors to embrace the idea of women's rights as human rights led to the establishment of the "War and Women's Human Rights Center" in July 2001. The "Women's Coalition for Survivors of U.S. Camptown Prostitution" was formed in 2010 by various women's organizations that were concerned with military prostitutes or were involved in the peace movement. The Korean Council then founded the "War and Women's Human Rights Museum" in May 2012. In addition to emphasizing historical remembrance, education for future generations, and the resolution of issues related to "comfort women," the museum initiated the "Butterfly Fund" to realize the dream of some survivors to share similar experiences with other women. On International Women's Day in March 2012, two comfort station survivors, Gil Won-ok and Kim Bok-dong, established the fund to support victims of sexual violence in other countries.

We have established the "Butterfly Fund," which financially aids victims of sexual violence from the Congo and Vietnam wars and their families. The dream of the "Butterfly Fund" is to change war to peace and give hope to the victims of wartime sexual violence through support and solidarity. The fluttering butterfly stirs its wings with all its power to fly high free from discrimination, subjugation, and violence. Our dream is that *halmeonis*,<sup>11</sup> "Comfort Women," and all other women will spread their wings wide and fly freely like the butterfly. Through this fund's activities, the Korean Council wants to stop violence against women in armed conflicts, promote a firm solidarity among us and our friends, set history right, heal the wounds of the victims, and uphold truth and justice. (The Korean Council 2013; author's translation)

This groundbreaking idea would not have been possible had the identities of "comfort women" not changed during the movement's deployment. Through

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11. *Halmeoni* means grandma in Korean—a fictive kinship term.

engagement in activism that has reached beyond nationality, race, gender, and language, “comfort women”—once invisible “ghosts,” helpless victims, and sexual slaves—have gradually raised consciousness regarding gender, nationhood, and the recognition that “there was/is always a system in society that makes a certain group of people suffer” (Kimura 2008, 18). As Maki Kimura (2008) observed, “many Korean ‘comfort women’ have realized that the nation-state with which they identified, and which they regarded as their protector, can itself become oppressive to non-nationals.”

Likewise, Kim Bok-dong said:

It still hurts to remember the past and tell the painful stories of my experience in public. Every night, I cannot sleep well because I am haunted by my horrible experiences....By presenting my testimony, I regain my sense of self and feel supported and connected with other women....By attending seminars around the world, talking about my experiences, and meeting various people, I have come to recognize that there are many people who suffered like I did. Though I have many supporters, including the *Jeongdaehyeop* and ordinary people of all ages, nationalities, and genders, many do not have anyone to help them...Please do the right thing, not just for me but also for other women who have suffered from violence and severe discrimination the world over, as well as the next generation. (Interview with Kim Bok-dong, July 2013; author’s translation)

By listening to the experiences of others, “comfort women” recognize their shared agony, pain, and past as women. By narrating their own stories, they begin to heal and feel connected to others and society. As Kimura (2008) properly pointed out that “the ‘Comfort Women’s’ testimonies should not be read dimensionally in the light of ‘truth’ and ‘falsity,’ but should rather be considered as the site of their subject-formation. By narrating their traumatic experiences, victims can acquire a unified sense of self that has long been fragmented by shame and pain” (14-15). As Song Sin-do (2009) confidently stated, “I am not an absolute victim, but instead I have a victimized experience like other women” (from video clip, *My Heart Is Not Broken Yet*). Consequently, they have become “more communicative so as not to be as seen only as ‘victims’ of sexual violence” (Kimura 2008, 18).

Consciousness is not fixed or transparent, nor is it acquired all at once. Discursive boundaries in the construction of identity always change with



historical conditions. According to Stuart Hall (1996), "identity is a process, identity is split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the Other to oneself" (345). *Halmeoni*, once a defiled girl in the colonized Korean territory, now identifies herself as a human rights activist troubling our colonized consciousness by asking for social justice for other wartime victims and future generations. The fact that *halmeonis* are able to speak out once they have become elderly women may signify that social, cultural, and political conditions are at last favorable for subalterns to speak each other. Due to women's resistance and revisions made to the androcentric historical narrative, the authentic voices of "comfort women" can be finally heard. Now, *halmeonis* begin to rewrite not just an alternative national history, but also peaceful *world* histories.

## Conclusion

This paper explored multifaceted aspects of the women's movement in relation to Japanese military "comfort women" by retracing the trajectories of its activism and the shifting conditions under which the multilayered images of survivors have been discursively reconstructed. Particularly, I explored how Korean feminists and activists have navigated through ideological conflicts and negotiations between woman and nation, as well as feminism and nationalism.

The "comfort women" movement, which has persisted through Korea's dynamic political transition from dictatorship to democracy and state nationalism to globalization, is an example of postcolonial feminist practice. From the outset, the movement has questioned the colonial legacies and androcentric nationalism that doubly oppress colonized women. Above all, it has problematized the way in which the elision of "I" represented in repetitive national narratives, actually insists that subaltern "comfort women" cannot speak for themselves. In such a re-represented/unrepresented form of "comfort women," a subject position of master knowledge is reproduced and maintained. Women activists have enthusiastically interrogated "our" right to speak for what and for whom, as well as what effects are produced in listeners, and "what effects get stored away to be released in the future" (Cho 2008, 49). Throughout the rigorous endeavor of rewriting history from the alternative perspectives of "comfort women," the movement has revealed that speaking from the

enunciative subject position is to speak from a place of privilege, which has been the most important contribution to our society. That “comfort women” are speaking out now in the progress of the movement exposes the impossibility of nationalism without competitive performativity.

According to Gordon (1997), “[b]eing haunted draws us affectively... into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition” (8). Now both Koreans and Japanese need to take responsibility to produce a new space that can offer insight about our past in the present with a transformative recognition of this “ghost,” since “to give form to the haunted spaces marked by trauma creates openings for trauma’s productive possibilities” (48). We have already encountered many truths. Seeking “only true picture” does not matter anymore. As Hayashi (2008) rightly indicated, “the comfort women issue and other questions of Japan’s war responsibilities are not only problems to be settled for the sake of victims of a war long past, but also issues closely related to Japan’s future” (131) and our future of humanity.

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the multifaceted aspects of the Korean women's movement of Japanese military "comfort women" from a postcolonial feminist perspective. Based on ethnographic research, over ten years of participant observation as an insider-outsider of the movement, and in-depth interviews, this paper analyzes the ways in which the movement's activism and its dominant principles shifted within the context of an expanding political space brought on by ongoing negotiations and/or conflict with legacies of Imperial Japan and androcentric nationalism. From the outset, the "comfort women" movement questioned the colonial legacies and androcentric nationalism that doubly oppress colonized women. It has problematized the way in which the elision of "I" represented in repetitive national narratives, actually insists that subaltern "comfort women" cannot speak for themselves. I argue that the most important movement contribution is to lead "comfort women" to speaking out, which exposes the impossibility of nationalism without competitive performativity. Therefore, what we need to do, rather than insisting that the movement is a simple "nationalist one," is to take responsibility to produce a new space that can offer insight about our past in the present with a transformative recognition of "comfort women."

**Keywords:** Japanese military comfort women, women's movement, feminism, nationalism