

*The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan*, by C. Sarah Soh. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. 384 pp., US\$ 30.00, ISBN: 9780226767772 (paperback)

The so-called comfort women issue has caused intense and prolonged controversies between concerned parties as well as the governments of South Korea and Japan. It could hardly be more politicized between the two countries. The issue had not been settled until December 2015 when the foreign ministers of Korea and Japan announced their agreement. Both sides seem to have made compromises to reach a “final and irreversible resolution” of the issue. The settlement is yet to be fully implemented as of February 2016. One of the major controversies revolves around competing views on the recruitment of comfort women and their lives at a comfort station. One camp argues that Imperial Japan’s colonial government and its military forced young Korean women into military sex slavery while the other camp insists that those women were *de facto* prostitutes serving Japanese soldiers. The former include those who have been involved in the redress movement for comfort women survivors in South Korea and Japan, and the latter are right-leaning conservatives in Japan.

A South Korea-born scholar, C. Sarah Soh, the author of *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan*, goes beyond these competing views, and presents more nuanced and diverse perspectives to rethink about the issue. Soh sees it primarily as women’s human rights issue for both countries as well as international community. Her approach can be more controversial in South Korea than in Japan because she demonstrates the complexity of the issue by showing diverse personal experiences of Korean comfort women. The author, however, does not exempt the Japanese government from its responsibility for organizing the military comfort system or its colonialism. She instead presents structural factors that victimized Korean women under Japan’s colonial rule. Those factors include colonialism, militarism, capitalism, patriarchy, and masculine sexist culture. Yet, all of those do not originate only from Imperial Japan as an entity or Japanese culture as milieu. The author argues that Korean patriarchal culture, Koreans’ reactions to Imperial Japan’s colonial rule, and emerging capitalist economy also contributed to the victimization of Korean women. As a result, the author is critical not only of right-leaning conservatives in Japan, but

the redress movement activists who tend to disregard Koreans' roles in the formation of the comfort system.

The book is divided into two parts: Part 1 under the heading of "Gender and Structural Violence," (Chapter 1 to 3) and Part 2 of "Public Sex and Women's Labor" (Chapter 4 to 6). In Part 1, the author challenges the paradigmatic story of Korean comfort women presented by the redress movement activists with ethno-nationalistic tendency. In doing so, she introduces diverse life stories of former comfort women and different types of comfort stations or facilities. In Part 2, Soh analyzes how the comfort women issue was memorialized in postcolonial Korea and postwar Japan. Her analysis encourages us to understand the significance of the issue by going beyond the established boundaries of ethnic nationalisms of both South Korea and Japan.

Chapter 1, "From Multiple Symbolic Representations to the Paradigmatic Story," diagnoses underlying ideologies from which different interpretations of comfort women originate. Fascistic paternalism and masculinist sexism justify Imperial Japan's organization of the comfort system. The provision of sexual services to its military personnel was framed as a gift from the emperor *albeit* at the sacrifice of colonized women. Comfort facilities were to satisfy bodily desire of the emperor's warriors, and comfort women were to appease them. Feminist humanitarianism is against such act of paternalistic state and masculine culture, and calls it the system of sexual slavery. Regardless of monetary compensation, the women were forced to have sex against their will. It makes them the victims of wartime rape and war crimes. In the meantime, underlying ethnic nationalism both in Korean and Japanese people either embrace or deny the comfort women's victimhood. For the Koreans, comfort women were their fellow victims of Imperial Japan's colonialism. For the Japanese, on the other hand, they were trafficked and hired by private contractors. This exempts the state from direct responsibility for the women's victimization. Nonetheless, Imperial Japan's comfort system is known as sexual slavery in today's world. The paradigmatic story goes that Japanese soldiers dragged out young Korean women from their homes and forced them to become comfort women at the battlefield. Chōngsindae or Women's Volunteer Labor Corps, set up by Imperial Japan, was the venue for such force recruitment; however, Soh strongly doubts the use of Women's Volunteer Labor Corps for that.

In Chapter 2, "Korean Survivors' Testimonial Narratives," the author challenges the paradigmatic story by sharing the life stories of the former

comfort women based on her interviews and preexisting testimonies. The narratives include the stories of young women who wanted to be educated and economically independent. Some suffered from poverty, and others struggled with their male family members who did not want them to work and study at school. They took a risk, but were deceived by the agents and others, and ended up at comfort facilities. This chapter also sheds light on the former comfort women who kept distance from activists by showing how the paradigmatic story was constructed by the Korean Council of Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan and its followers.

Chapter 3, “Japan’s Military Comfort System as History,” analyzes the comfort facilities as a system and points out the existence of both commercial and criminal sexual activities. Soh points out three different categories of comfort stations: concessionary, paramilitary, and criminal. Concessionary facilities were managed by civilian contractors—mostly Japanese and Koreans who were seeking profits. In this first category, there were cases where the women could leave when their debts were paid off or at the intervention of military officers. Paramilitary comfort facilities were organized by the military. And criminal comfort facilities were built during the last stage of the wars. Soldiers in the warfront literally abducted local women, raped and enslaved them. Militarism, capitalism, and masculinist sexism worked together to produce these different types of facilities. This chapter also stresses the involvement of military and police personnel in the recruitment process with the collaboration of local Koreans. This aspect is supported by the statistical analysis of survivors’ testimonies provided by the Korean Council and the ROK government.

Chapter 4, “Postwar/Postcolonial Memories of the Comfort Women,” examines fictional and nonfictional works on comfort women in popular culture as well as in textbooks in postcolonial Korea and in postwar Japan. The chapter shows that many works had already appeared especially in Japan even before the emergence of the comfort women redress movement in the 1990s. Notable works include those by two Japanese, Senda Kako and Yoshida Seiji, and a Korean resident in Japan, Kim Il-myŏn. These works appeared before the 1990s, however, did not attract much attention at the government level in the two states. Soh stresses that the conservative male leaders of Korea and Japan disregarded them as a public agenda.

Chapter 5, “Private Memories of Public Sex,” further illustrates the complexity of life experiences of Korean comfort women by introducing

intimate relationships developed with Japanese military officers and others. One received marriage proposals from a Japanese businessman and a military officer, but married a Korean owner of the comfort facility where she labored. There were also the cases where the Korean comfort women fell in love with Japanese military officers and soldiers. Soh reveals the multilayered complexity and personal truths of the former Korean comfort women in their own words. The author does not deny the fact that former comfort women suffered from traumatic experiences and were denigrated by their family members and others because of their past as comfort women.

Chapter 6, “Public Sex and the State,” goes beyond the wartime comfort women issue between South Korea and Japan by focusing on how the state exploited women for public sex or sexual labor outside the marriage. Korean women were victimized by the Mongols, the Chinese, and the Japanese in their respective historical milieu since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Korean officials were a part of the exploitation from time to time. In post-WWII era, Korean women were again exploited by the new and independent Korean state for its own military and US military personnel. The exploitation continued for mainly Japanese men in the name of *Kisaeng* tourism. In the US occupied Japan, the Japanese authorities established comfort facilities and exploited Japanese women for military personnel of the Allied forces as well.

The author insists in the epilogue that “The ultimate goals are to transform the prevailing culture of public sex (rooted in the customary practice of male sex-rights) and to ameliorate women’s ongoing social penalization under the continued structural violence” (p. 235). Soh calls for holding not only Japan but also South Korea and international community—the US and other nations in the Allied forces responsible for their exploitation of women’s body.

This book is a worthwhile reading for those who are interested in the topics of comfort women and sexual exploitation of women, and Imperial Japan’s colonization of Korea. It should be noted again that the author does not intend to exempt Japan from taking responsibility for Imperial Japan’s organization of the comfort system. She instead urges the international community to comprehend a larger picture of structural violence in order to exploit women for public sex.