Revisiting the Issue of Korean “Military Comfort Women”: The Question of Truth and Positionality

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Objective Truth and Marginalization of the Women

In early 1992, when the issue of Korean “military comfort women” was at its highest tide, the South Korean television network MBC-TV broadcast a special series on the anniversary of liberation from Japanese colonial rule (15 August 1945). Because this series, titled The Forgotten War, exemplifies the prevailing way of representing the issue in the South Korean mass media, I will begin this essay by introducing it. The program consists of three parts, the first of which contains interviews of four surviving comfort women living in Korea. The second explores the historical causes of projects such as the military comfort women. For this segment the producers of the program rely heavily on the explanatory framework of a Japanese journalist, Senda Kakō. The final part is devoted to fieldwork in Okinawa and the Micronesian islands that sought to pursue the question of what actually
happened. Above all, the striking simplicity of the way in which the issue is framed calls my attention. This framing is for the most part dictated by Senda Kakô, who associates the invention of the comfort women system exclusively with the Nanjing Massacre: after the Massacre revealed the “madness” of the Japanese military, high-ranking officers were impelled to design something to “soothe” it. The Japanese journalist quickly points to the Korean military comfort women as the solution for this military problem, without explaining how the Nanjing Massacre can be interpreted simply in terms of psychological madness or insecurity on the part of the Japanese military. Nor was an explanation attempted that would bridge the logical gap between this “madness” and the supposed necessity of women providing sexual services. This interpretation of the issue already accepts masculinist assumptions in taking for granted women as sexual objects whose purpose is to foster men’s psychological security. In fact, such male-centered assumptions about sexuality are evident in Japanese military documents, the primary available historical sources on this issue; these documents cite such benefits of the “comforting” facilities as taming the soldiers’ brutality, preventing the rape of indigenous and Japanese women, and minimizing venereal disease. Some fifty years later, the explanations given by the Japanese journalist reproduce these assumptions. In short, in response to the breakdown demonstrated by the Nanjing Massacre, the comfort women project needed to be designed. Korean women, who were members of a colonized people and who were described by the Japanese as “the venereal disease–free,” were chosen to comfort the Japanese soldier’s psyche and enable his pursuit of the war in the Pacific. With this “explanation,” nothing is ambiguous.

In the structure of this narrative, however, the existence of the military comfort women is simply a self-evident consequence of the Japanese military and imperial project. Accordingly, within this structure, the beings and experiences of the women cannot possibly be the focus of the story, but instead are relegated to the margins. The figure telling the authoritative story is that of the Japanese journalist. He explains the issue and his conclusions, based on his own investigation and interpretation and at his own pace, in contrast, the women’s testimony comes only in response to the questions of the TV reporters who in effect initiate it. The journalist’s story, presented with little analysis, is fully covered, whereas the stories of the former
comfort women are frequently interrupted and edited. Not surprisingly, this way of presenting testimony hinders the women from fully and spontaneously narrating their histories. Their testimony cannot but be simple because only a short time is available to them and because their story had already been familiar to the audiences by the time this television series was broadcast.

But another problem, different from the tendency to simplify the issue, relegates these women to the margins: the pursuit of the *objective* truth. By addressing the former comfort women generically, as *halmo* (grandmother), the South Korean TV reporters, mostly males in their twenties and thirties, seem to disregard the historical significance of the women’s identities. Correspondingly, the position occupied by the reporters appears to be that of neutral and detached observers. In interviewing the former comfort women, the Japanese journalist, and the local people, the persistent question is What happened at that time, some fifty years ago? It is important to note that throughout this questioning, the women are treated as “informants” in clarifying an already constructed past, rather than as the main figures in this history. Their testimonies are used to “prove” already established facts in regard to how they were drafted, what they did at the comfort stations, and how those stations were run. Frequently, their testimonies are compared with the historic record in an effort to determine whether they are being truthful. The truth, self-evidently *out there*, somehow has the authority to judge the women. Listening to a song sung by a tearful woman as she recalls her experiences as a comfort woman, a narrator asks how this woman could remember this Japanese military song if she had not been a former comfort woman.

In this way, pursuing the unshakable truth for the most part leads to the trivialization of the women’s testimony. One could reasonably argue that *The Forgotten War* is a mass-media representation, and as such, cannot but follow Korean public interest, so that it is difficult to expect serious analysis. I would like to argue, however, that this way of representing the issue is not confined to mass-media productions but prevails at the level of broader social discourse, which gives inadequate attention to the *political* dimension of truth.
The Pursuit of the Truth and Japanese Hegemony

Since the late 1980s, feminist groups in South Korea have played a critical role in breaking the fifty years' silence on the comfort women issue. In 1990, the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan was founded. As the umbrella for twenty-three feminist organizations in South Korea, it has organized various activities around the issue. Allied with organizations such as the Association for Surviving Families of the Korean Victims of the Pacific War, as well as feminist groups in Japan, Taiwan, Burma, the Philippines, and North Korea, South Korean feminists have been engaged in the issue in several important ways: they have demanded clarification of the issue and compensation for former Korean comfort women from the Japanese government; located and interviewed surviving comfort women in South Korea and China and researched and produced two volumes of testimony;\(^4\) and appealed for international understanding and support from such organizations as the United Nations and the International Commission of Jurists (hereafter ICJ).\(^5\) Under this pressure, the Japanese government produced two separate government reports on the issue, in 1992 and 1993. In the 1992 report, the government for the first time recognized the formal involvement of the Japanese military in the comfort women project; at the same time, it denied the forced nature of their drafting. It also refused to acknowledge the testimonies of the surviving comfort women as evidence that force was used.\(^6\) Thus, the question of force was the most sensitive issue surrounding the project at that time.\(^7\) In July 1993, however, in the second report, the Japanese government recognized somewhat ambiguously the possibility of “forcefulness” in drafting the women.\(^8\)

In the meantime, also in 1993, the new civilian government in South Korea publicly stated that it would not demand any material compensation from the Japanese government. Instead, Korea demanded that the Japanese government take major responsibility for investigating the issue.\(^9\) As of the second report (and up to the present), such basic information as the total number of comfort women and the locations of the comfort stations remain unknown. This demand was publicized at a time when three lawsuits were pending in Japan; they were brought against the Japanese government by
forty-six Korean victims of the Pacific War, including eleven surviving comfort women. On the one hand, Japan has continued to repeat that it will not compensate individual former comfort women at the governmental level, claiming that compensation was made in the form of the $500 million paid to South Korea ($200 million of which was a loan) for damage caused by colonial rule when relations between the two countries were normalized in 1965. Yet on the other hand, public pressure from surviving women and Korean and international organizations has forced the Japanese government to demonstrate some support for the women. Caught in between, the Japanese government initiated a civilian fund-raising effort for the women, tentatively and curiously titling it the Asian Peace and Friendship Fund for Women. Korean and other Asian women’s groups have determined not to receive this civilian charity. However, the controversy over whether to accept this fund continues.

From this brief review, which demonstrates the impact of social and political pressures on the issue’s resolution, one can see that claims have revolved around two agendas vis-à-vis the Japanese government: first, the demand that the Japanese acknowledge responsibility and pay corresponding compensation, and second, the demand for clarification of the truth (the Korean term is chinsang gyumyŏng, literally, “clarification of a truthful picture”). In fact, these two goals are inherently connected because Japanese responsibility cannot be verified without clarification. Thus, it is understandable that chinsang gyumyŏng has received the primary emphasis from the Korean government, social movements, mass media, and the intellectual communities.

The pursuit of the truth, however, presents a dilemma that requires consideration here. The Japanese government is generally regarded as possessing the historical documents detailing its comfort women project, as well as others of its projects in colonized Korea, which had no legally constituted entity to record its own history. It has been claimed, further, that the Japanese government has closed important archives and even, as recently reported, burned relevant documents under military order. As Chin Sung Chung notes, records of military comfort stations were uniformly treated as top secret, and it is doubtful that many of the pertinent documents still exist. Clearly, when the remaining Japanese documents are counted as the pri-
mary source of the historical truth, without an opportunity to open and examine them, even the most elementary research is impossible. But how can the Japanese government be expected to open its documents and prove its own guilt, actions that would be accompanied by enormous economic and symbolic costs? It is doubtful if the Japanese will open the historical record to pursue or allow others’ research of their record. And yet Koreans tend to rely heavily on Japanese documents as they attempt to refigure their history. The dilemma that faces Koreans has another aspect, however: should these documents even be made available, and to what extent can they be considered objective? The relevant official historical record consists of Japanese military and government documents. An exclusive focus on the search for the objective truth leaves no space for raising questions about the viewpoints of the documenting subjects, in this case the Japanese Army, who determined what counted as “facts,” then recorded them. With this dilemma in mind, the belief in the truth, and more to the point the Korean government’s demand for a Japanese investigation into the truth, appear to be extremely naive.

We have seen that the Japanese government recognized the forcefulness of drafting comfort women one year after its earlier denial. Can the truth change in one year? Was this change the result of the Japanese government’s genuine efforts to investigate the issue? What does it suggest when international social pressure can have such an effect on the truth? In short, this tells us that the truth is *produced* within a dynamic political context rather than simply discovered. In this connection, I would like to underline the Korean government’s statement that it would not deal with this issue as a political one by asking the Japanese government for compensation. This statement was in fact itself political. Behind it are political concerns over a huge trade imbalance in Japan’s favor ($79 billion in 1992) and the Korean government’s need for advanced Japanese technology. Even though the Korean government has asserted that past history must be differentiated from such pressing present issues as trade and technology transfer, its policy retains a structure in which the past is used as leverage in dealing with current economic problems. Attention to the economic realities of the Korean-Japanese relationship reveals the power relations in which *chinsang gyumyöng* is sought. In this context of power relations, the belief in a truth
supposedly separate from the political dimension itself becomes in fact political rather than merely naive. When the truth is believed to exist in fixed time and space, the discursive hegemony of Japan, which has controlled the historical sources for this truth, cannot be contested. If intellectual efforts are not made in full consciousness of the politics of this particular truth, Japan’s central position in the construction of the history of the comfort women admits no possibility of intervention. As a result, the viewpoint of the colonizer will continue to prevail in the history of the colonized.

**Which Truth, Whose Truth? A Case of Genocidal Rape**

During the period 1931–1945, the years spanning the war in Manchuria, the Sino-Japanese War, and World War II, the Japanese government built and maintained military comfort stations exclusively for its soldiers and personnel. As noted above, the full scale of the project and the range of nationalities of the comfort women are not yet fully known. Yet available military documents, as well as the testimonies of former Japanese soldiers and the comfort women themselves, make it possible for us to compose an overview, if not a complete picture. Military comfort stations began in the 1930s, with the Japanese invasion of China. It was not until 1937, however, that the comfort stations began to be established broadly and systematically. According to a 1944 report by the U.S. Office of War Information, “the ‘comfort girls’ [were] found wherever it was necessary for the Japanese Army to fight.”17 Japanese soldiers referred to the comfort women as *nigyu-ichi* (29 to 1), a reference to the number of men each woman was expected to service each day; this may also be a reference to the ratio of the number of comfort women needed relative to the number of Japanese soldiers.18 Based on this and other generally accepted calculations that Korean women comprised 80 to 90 percent of the total number of comfort women, many scholars agree on an estimate of eighty thousand to two hundred thousand Korean comfort women.19 How can one possibly explain a project on such a scale? A number of feminist works have explained the military comfort women project as “forced prostitution” in terms of the preexisting Japanese prostitution system.20 A system of nationally registered prostitution had
been in existence in Japan since the Meiji Restoration. The emperor system in the Meiji period can be understood as built upon, or alternatively, as an enlarged form of the institution of the patriarchal family. And legalized prostitution under the emperor system functioned as an apparatus complementary to the patriarchal family—by resolving the sexual needs of male soldiers.

This explanation seems relevant to those aspects of the creation and the management of the project that reflect its ties to established prostitution. According to testimony, the comfort stations were managed in three principal ways: one type was built and run by the Japanese military; a second was built by the military but run by civilians; in the third, an already existing brothel was turned into a comfort station exclusively designated for soldiers and military personnel. Like the second type, this last was typically run by civilians. They collected tickets for sex from the soldiers. They controlled the women and provided their food. Some of the women even incurred debts, which were used as a control device, for such charges as their transportation to the comfort stations and their living expenses. These civilians ran their stations like a business, that is to say, a brothel. In contrast to this type of comfort station, found mostly in urban and populated areas where prostitution already existed, the first type was typically built near the battlefield and in rural areas. In this case, with no third-party civilian managers or pimps, the management of the comfort station and the control of the women were directly in the hands of the military. Regardless of the type, however, as revealed by testimony and military documents, the Japanese military oversaw station management and, through the inspection of the women’s hygiene, security and sanitation. This revelation was critical to uncovering the systematic involvement of the Japanese military in the project, a crucial matter between Korea and Japan.

While the analysis of the issue in terms of the Japanese prostitution illuminates the project’s links to preexisting nonmilitary prostitution, I would like to discuss what it obscures. First, like the uncritical reliance on the “facts” in Japanese documents, the explanation contributes to the marginalization of the comfort women themselves. In this, which I will call the institutional explanation, the women’s existence and experiences are secondary to the external, historically dictated situation that molds them. This is
because the focus falls on aspects that, as we have seen, are already present in the model of the Japanese prostitution system. From this perspective, the experiences and the memories of the women are reduced to inevitable consequences of structural, institutional constraints, rather than serving as the primary material through which the issue must be understood. This reductionism resembles that of the television series discussed above. Like that recourse to the goals and problems facing Japan in its military campaigns, the narrative structure of the history of prostitution in Japan permits no space for the depiction of the women as agents who suffered and yet who actively negotiated with their harsh situation.

Second, to explain the comfort women in terms of prostitution as organized under the Japanese imperial system skews exclusive attention to the latter system. While ostensibly investigating what happened to Korean women, this explanation focuses on Japanese history, specifically the history of prostitution. While consideration of the Japanese prostitution model may problematize Japanese-style patriarchal and imperial social structures, it leaves the project of military comfort women as a specifically colonial project unexplored. Although it is fair to say that the creation of the project would not have been possible without an already flourishing culture of officially sanctioned prostitution in Japan, it is clearly insufficient to consider the existence of eighty thousand to two hundred thousand Korean comfort women simply as a development of domestic Japanese prostitution. How was it possible to forcibly draft the women on such a massive scale, without systematic violence and censorship? Clearly, these are the aspects that “truthful” Japanese military documents cannot illuminate. But the current Japanese prostitution explanation does not distinguish the imperialism implicit in those documents. It tacitly incorporates colonized Korean soil into the Japanese imperial state.

This discussion leads us to the question of positionality. From whose position is the issue/crime of the Korean comfort women viewed? Japanese soldiers, accustomed to legalized prostitution, would have had little difficulty in understanding the military-sponsored intercourse with comfort women as a continuation of Japanese-style prostitution. It is notable in this connection that Japanese military documents treat this issue simply as prostitution around the base; the comfort station is described as a
brothel and the comfort women as prostitutes, with no further specification. These documents record no trace of the interethnic violence involved in every aspect of the project. As is already known, however, the recruiting of Korean comfort women was made possible only by lies, threats, and even kidnapping. Once stationed, the women were forced to have intercourse with Japanese soldiers from ten to thirty and even one hundred times a day. Testimony of both the women and the men themselves confirms that soldiers often formed a line outside the comfort women’s rooms. In such instances, each soldier completed intercourse in three to five minutes. Some of the women lived this way for more than five years, moving from one battlefield to another in the wake of the Japanese military, which established stations in such remote settings as jungles and caves.

Furthermore, although some of the women told of Japanese soldiers occasionally leaving money or food, in most cases women did not receive any form of compensation. Far from being motivated by monetary gain, all of these women had to survive under threats of torture and murder. As a result of the unimaginable frequency of intercourse, most suffered from venereal disease and damage to their reproductive organs. From the perspective of the Korean woman, forcibly recruited, with no control over her body or her life but compelled to have intercourse on demand, what the Japanese soldier saw as customary was in fact one in a series of unpardonable rapes (typically begun, according to the women’s testimonies, by a Japanese officer while being transported to the comfort station). Such is the distance between these two positionalities.

The prostitution model is completely relevant to a third positionality, that of the Japanese women who served as military comfort women, who were for the most part registered prostitutes in Japan. Such analysis also provides insight into an analysis of the relationship of militarism to sexuality and gender. From the viewpoint of the Korean women, however, this analysis leaves the axis of race unexamined or at best secondary. It goes without saying that imperial practice and exploitation were not executed identically in Japan and Korea. Yet, as seen above, when attention is focused exclusively on the Japanese imperial(ist) system, the space of difference between naichī (inland, or Japan) and handō (peninsula, or Korea) quickly shrinks. Moreover, such an explanation holds only the Japanese state
responsible for designing and enacting the coercive prostitution. In this version, the crimes that individual Japanese soldiers committed against comfort women, that is, every intercourse to which an individual Korean woman was forced to submit, are obscured. Thus, the institutional explanation almost imperceptibly cedes the power to uncover what happened *inside* the institution of comfort women “prostitution.” Finally, since the institutionalized prostitution explanation assumes a minimal level of consent between the comfort woman and the Japanese soldier, it softens the effect of what individual Japanese did. It is doubtful, therefore, that the prostitution explanation can avoid reproducing the male- and Japanese-centered viewpoint that has prevailed in the handling of the issue. But the question of viewpoint deserves more attention precisely because it is so critical to the definition of the comfort women system as a crime. For what exactly do the Korean women make their claims against the Japanese government? For what exactly should the Japanese government apologize to the surviving comfort women? But the model of rape also has a limit, if it is not contextualized. One tends to view rape in terms of the persons involved, as an event between individuals. It is necessary, therefore, to examine the rapes of the comfort women in a historical context interwoven with multiple social structures. 

The multifaceted nature of the crime can be traced through the name itself: Korean, military, comfort, women, that is, Korean women who were forcibly drafted for the purpose of “comforting” Japanese military men. At least three social structures are at play in this practice: the Japanese imperialist system at war and the patriarchal social structures of Japan and Korea. Chin Sung Chung has located the comfort woman issue at the intersection of state, race, class, and gender contradictions.²⁹ In this essay, I am focusing principally on only two dimensions: race and gender. Because I believe the Japanese colonial project in Korea must be analyzed in relation to Japanese imperialism, in effect, race and state are imbricated in my analytical framework. Although, as seen below, economic condition and status no doubt facilitated the recruitment of poor women, the impact of class cannot be evaluated without a more complete analysis of the class structure of colonized Korea (where a majority of the population lived in poverty) than is possible here.
Since between eighty thousand and two hundred thousand young Korean women, most between fifteen and nineteen years old, were drafted, and because many of them died either during or after the war, the crime has been described as the genocide of Korean people. I conceive of the crime as a case of genocide not only in terms of uprooting the reproductive capability of young women, but also as an attempt to deplete the Korean ethnic identity. In this connection, I find useful the current analysis of the war in the former Yugoslavia for conceptualizing collective rapes inflicted by one ethnic group on another. According to Renata Salecl, when the Serbs occupied part of Croatia, their aim was not primarily to capture Croatian territory but to destroy the Croatian “fantasy about that territory.” Hence, rather than the land itself, she argues, the systems of meaning attached to it (e.g., religious meaning) and the identity based on it and represented in national myth were the real territory at stake in the war. By torturing Muslims in Bosnia, the Serbs were actually trying to provoke Muslim fundamentalism; simultaneously, their primary aim was to belittle the Muslims’ religious identity. Rape is an especially horrible crime for Muslim women because their religion strictly forbids any sexual contact before and outside marriage. Thus, attacks in the form of rape dismantle the very frame through which the raped woman organizes her identity and her world.

Parallel to this model of individual rape, war is the metaphorical “rape” of the enemy’s motherland. Even though this explanation unself-consciously recirculates the metaphor of woman’s body as motherland, a field of national identity as well as national property, it has the advantage of opening a view into how rape engages both the physical and the symbolic battlefields of war. Understood as a method of torturing and destroying the enemy, rather than as frequent and uncontrollable accidents, rape now shifts its meaning, becoming an efficient and terrible tactic. As Elaine Scarry powerfully argues, if the main purpose of war lies in the quick and effective injuring of the enemy, raping enemy women offers a multi-faceted way of doing this.

Rape, however, should be treated differently from other ways of injuring the enemy. It is a highly *gendered* crime, not only in the sense that females are the usual victims of male rapists, but also in the sense that rape attacks
enemy men by violating their women. In the act of rape, the assertion of male sexuality is very much linked to domination and aggression. In rapes that occur between ethnic and/or religious groups, however, the message becomes more complex. Rape of this kind makes a statement about women’s bodies as the possession of men. By invading women’s bodies, rape attempts to possess the enemy’s property and leaves a rift in the most fundamental ground of the symbolic system that sustains the enemy group’s identity. Rape also has the effect of destroying the woman, viewed as a vessel for (enemy) children, a role for which she is now considered useless. In Bosnia and Herzegovina women were raped until they were made pregnant and not released until their pregnancies approached full term to preclude abortion. But this destruction of the woman is possible because men from both groups, both rapists and the males who are their enemies, participate in the belief that the woman’s body is a field underpinning the family, ethnic group, and/or the nation. Therefore, when men raped women in war, they raped the enemy’s nation.

In the case of the Korean comfort women, however, the war for which Korean women were “violated” was not fought between Japan and Korea. Therefore Koreans, including the Korean comfort women, were not the particular enemy that the Japanese sought to destroy. Analysis of the comfort women issue is complicated by the fact that colonial Korea was part of Imperial Japan, with consequences for the identity of colonial Koreans. Indeed, Koreans’ status as part of the Japanese empire was used as a rationale for Korean women contributing to the war as deishintai (volunteer corps). Yet despite this appeal for participation, the invention of the Korean comfort women project would not have been possible if there had not been a discrete Korean identity. Japanese bureaucrats explained that Korean comfort women were necessary for the protection of the Japanese people. The project was an apparatus designed to protect Japanese women from the threat of rape by military personnel. Virgin Korean girls were, furthermore, the solution protecting Japanese soldiers from venereal disease, which was regarded as one of the factors weakening military morale and effectiveness.

The contrast in gender politics between Japan and Korea precisely marks the genocidal aspect of the project. The testimonies of former comfort women
suggest that their reproductive organs were not counted as such. It is notable in this context that the praise of motherhood prevailed in Japanese society under the slogan “Bear [children] and Increase [the population],” an encouragement to Japanese women to have more children and thus provide future imperial soldiers. Throughout the war, antiabortion laws were strictly observed in Japan. In sharp contrast, Korean survivors have testified that the pregnancy of comfort women was regarded as a state of “venereal disease” and treated with the so-called 606 injection to induce abortion. Even when abortion for comfort women was unavailable or impractical, they were forced to continue having frequent intercourse until the late stages of pregnancy, with the result that few carried their fetuses to full term.\(^{36}\) One former Comfort Woman testified that when a Japanese soldier discovered she was pregnant, he cut her belly with his long knife and took out the fetus, saying, “We don’t need the Chōsenjin’s [a derogatory term for Korean] baby.”\(^{37}\) By enforcing their pregnancies, rape in the former Yugoslavia attacked enemy males by expropriating their women’s reproductive capacity. Although the Japanese rapes were in contrast with this in their elimination of Korean women’s offsprings, the two sexual expropriations shared the aspect of nullifying a different ethnic identity. The Japanese categorization of “Korean” as a valueless race was a significant dimension in building the project.

It furthermore belied the mobilization of imperial subjects, who included Koreans, as one body and one family under the Japanese emperor. As Chungmoo Choi has noted, the embodying of Korea into the national body of Japan simultaneously dismembered the Korean people from that body.\(^{38}\) In this regard, the Korean comfort women project worked as one of a number of Japanese colonial projects in which Korean identity was simultaneously destroyed and restated. As discussed above, by injuring and humiliating the enemy, raping the women who belong to them dismantles the belief system that the enemy, both male and female, cherish. In the Confucian culture of premodern Korean society, women’s chastity was one of the central principles of a sexual norm placed at the deep site regulating the social order. Hence, the foreign men’s destruction of Korean women’s virginity amounts to the act of fooling the norms to which the Korean people attached the fundamental meaning and, ultimately, destroy-
ing their social life. But, unlike the case of rape in the Serbo-Croatian war, colonial Korean women’s bodies were not clearly located in the position of enemy. Since the primary aim in the invention of the comfort women was the successful prosecution of the war, Korean women’s bodies were treated simply as military supply, a resource to enable the Japanese victory. The fact that their bodies did not even count as reproductive vessels had already accomplished degradation of the category of “Korean.” The body of the comfort woman could consequently be considered merely as a site, a “sanitary toilet,” for the disposition of Japanese sexual needs, the tension and neurosis.\(^{39}\) In this function, a woman was raped not just by one soldier but by dozens of men each day—by thousands over the course of years. This was the violence on which the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” was to be built.

Yet as colonial subjects, the women could not openly express their hatred and anger toward the men who raped them. Rather, it was an integral part of being a comfort woman to serve Japanese soldiers with mind as well as body. They bowed when a soldier departed for battle and when he came back.\(^{40}\) Fundamental to the invention of this institutionalized rape was a patriarchal understanding of men’s and women’s sexuality, in which men’s desire was inevitable and uncontrollable whereas women were supposed to resolve it. Furthermore, in every aspect of this crime—its creation, execution, and the disposition of the comfort women after defeat—the preexisting patriarchal social practice in Korea also came into play. In recruiting, women’s lesser membership in the family and Korean society, as the first to sacrifice and the last to be benefitted, helped push young Korean women into the project. According to surviving women’s testimonies, women were motivated by the mistaken belief that they would be earning money by working in factories. The desire to study, an option that was not available to the daughters of poor families, was another important enticement. Finally, some Korean women were even sold to the Japanese by their fathers or husbands. It is fair to say, therefore, that the Korean patriarchal family was not always a shelter to protect women from the economic and social hardships that served as a backdrop for entrapment and recruitment. After they made the almost impossible return to Korea, the fifty years’ interim that these women have had to endure suggests another issue that is related to Korean
patriarchalism. Many of the returning survivors avoided their families, or if they saw them, did not tell them what they had experienced. Virtually all of the testimony that we have reveals that survivors did not believe they could enter normal married life. In her research, Yi Sang-hwa discovered that survivors regarded themselves as unfit for normal marriage for reasons ranging from the loss of chastity to venereal disease to uncertainty about the ability to have children. In this “voluntary” resignation from the normal woman’s life is a self-shaming mechanism that makes the victim apologize for herself. For many women, the most resented and regretted aspect of their lives was not the actual, terrible experiences of their years as comfort women, but the fact that the diseases they had contracted made bearing children impossible. Their desire to produce children and their agony over that loss shows the power of the internalized norm of the “normal” woman and female sexuality. Without familial support, the only social shield in Korean society for old women, former comfort women had to survive in poverty, illness, and isolation. Silencing memory and hiding the past must have deepened and prolonged their wounds. As told in the life stories of the former comfort women themselves, the crimes committed in the course of the project were not confined to the period of their internment in the comfort stations, but have extended throughout their lives.

**Toward an Articulation of the Korean Women’s Positionalities**

The issue of military comfort women has been the subject of international news since the Korean Council submitted it to the U.N. Human Rights Committee. The possible danger in this move is that it may freeze the identity of the former comfort women as international victims, “existential” comfort women. It should be kept in mind that one of the indispensable ingredients in characterizing the category of “Third World women” is their status as the victims of male violence — a monolithic, powerless group prior to any analysis. As such, military comfort women would neatly fit into the stereotyping image of Third World women prevalent in mainstream Western academia and media. But the comfort women issue has the potential to reveal to the international community Western-dominated world history’s (“the” world history’s) neglect of crimes committed by Japanese imperialism
in Asia. Seen from the West-centered positionality/ies, imperial Japan has signified only as the country that was nuclear-bombed and defeated by the United States and its allies, rather than as the country that invaded other Asian countries. The comfort women issue offers a fresh opportunity to reflect on how Asian experiences have been left out of West-centered representations of Japanese imperialism and World War II. This essay has also shown the dangers of addressing such an issue as the comfort women issue, in the name of Western feminism on “other” countries. The issue should not be situated merely as a simply-enclosed example of the intersection of war, militarism, violence, and “Third World women,” but needs to be contextualized in the history of colonialism in East Asia.

In reviewing the prevailing emphasis on the objective truth in the Korean military comfort women issue in South Korea, I have argued that the investigation entails Japanese hegemony in interpretation of as well as fact-finding into the issue. I have also interrogated the skewed attention to the Japanese—sometimes the government and sometimes a vaguely conceived Japanese people—in both chinsang gyumyŏng and repentence/compensation, two of the most important agendas with regard to the issue. As this essay has shown, such a focus gives too much agency to Japan by ceding to Japanese historians the authority to tell the “truth” when the issue from Korean colonial history is addressed. Another serious consequence of this Japanese hegemony is that the experiences of colonized Koreans, specifically the surviving former comfort women, have been trivialized and exploited as mere material for so-called fact-finding. I would like to suggest that the collective and personal memories that some Koreans still retain should be rehabilitated as popular documents of the history of this period. In the field of the public representation of history, such documents can contest supposedly “official”—in this case, Japanese military—documents and interpretation.

But memories are complex cultural products, involving private memories and public representations, past experiences and apprehensions of the present situation. However sincerely narrated, therefore, individual memories cannot but be permeated with the view of an issue prevailing in the society. When there are no alternative views—or positions from which to view—it is difficult to expect that the individual memory can compete with the official one.
This essay has suggested that the viewpoint of a masculine- and Japanese-centered subject position in representing the issue has yet to be fully disclosed. For the revelation of this hidden “speaking subject,” the formation of other competing positionalities is required. Representing the issue from the positionalities of the Korean comfort women opens up an alternative to the dominant viewpoints. However, the viewpoints from the counter-positionalities are not to be assumed, but to be articulated. This essay is an effort at this articulation. Without engaging the question of positionality, contestation with past and current Japanese hegemony regarding the historical truth of colonialism in Korea will not be possible. Until then, history will continue to be written out of uncontested truths, regardless of whether or not the Japanese government apologizes and makes reparations to these women.

Notes

Without the help of the following people, this essay would not have been possible: Hyun Sook Kim has given me continuous support and attention in every phase of writing. Marlene Buchanan and Saloni Mathur read the first draft and gave me valuable comments. I am also appreciative of the assistance of the East Asian Library at Columbia University and the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (hereafter, Korean Council). Chungmoo Choi has been critical in initiating and enabling the completion of this research. Nancy Kool’s copy editing has been invaluable. I thank them all.

1 According to the Korean Council the term, chōnggunwianbu, meaning “comfort women who follow the military,” should be translated as “military sexual slavery by Japan.” In this essay, however, I prefer to use the term “military comfort women,” for its subtle and multiple implications. In South Korea, the term chōngsindae is frequently used to indicate military comfort women, even though the chōngsindae actually consisted of two groups, one used as laborers and the other to accommodate the sexual needs of Japanese soldiers. According to the testimony of surviving former comfort women, however, the women in the first group were routinely transferred to the second. It is also notable that these two groups with seemingly quite different tasks were subsumed into one name. The question of how distinct these groups were is still under investigation.

2 By February 1993 in South Korea, 103 women had identified themselves as surviving former military comfort women. It was reported that there were 123 comfort women alive in North Korea as well. Tonga ilbo, 14 August 1992; Chungang ilbo, 5 February 1993.


* Tonga ilbo, 7 July 1992; Chosŏn ilbo, 7 July 1992.


* Hanguk ilbo, 5 August 1993; Tonga ilbo, 5 August 1993; Chosŏn ilbo, 5 August 1993.

* Chungang ilbo, 13 March 1993; Tonga ilbo, 13 March 1993.

* Tonga ilbo, 6 August 1993.


Regarding Japan's claim to have fully compensated Korea, many legal scholars agree that the treaty did not remove the right of individual victims to claim damages. There is furthermore no statute of limitations on war crimes and crimes against humanity. See Korean Council, *Chŏngsindae munje charyojip*, vol. 4; Korean Council, *The Approach to the Forced Military Comfort Women Issue through International Law* (Seoul: Korean Council, 1993); ICI, *Sexual Slavery and Slavelike Practices in World War II* (Tokyo: ICI, 1995).

* Chungang ilbo, 1 December 1994; Chungang ilbo, 8 April 1995.

* Hanguk ilbo, 1 March 1995; Tonga ilbo, 2 March 1995.


* Tonga ilbo, 7 November 1993; Hangyŏre sinmun, 7 November 1993.

* Quoted in Chung, “The Nature of the Project,” 182.


* Korean Council, *Chŏngsindae munje charyojip*, 3:11–2; Chung, “Nature of the Project.”

the Japanese Emperor System," *Hanguk yǒngghak* 9 (1993): 52–89; Yǒng-suk Sin and Hye-
ran Cho, "*Kunwianbu-ui sillo-e mit t'udǒng-e gwanhan yǒngu*" [The reality and features of mil-
itary comfort women] in *Ch'ongsinsan hajimot'an iljesi-ui munje* [The unresolved problems of Je-

21 Chin Sung Chung, "*Haesǒl: kunwianbu-ui silsang*" [Reality of the military comfort women], in 
Korean Council, *Kangjero kkǔlyógan*, p. 23 (Seoul, Hanul, 1993); Document Center for 
the War Responsibility of Japan, *Chunggumianbu munje-ui yǒksakhakkkhók gyumyǒng* [A his-
torical illumination of the issues of the military comfort women] (Korean Council, Seoul 


Chung, "Nature of the Project," 185.

25 Chung, "Haesǒl," 23–7; also see testimonies in this volume.

26 See testimonies in Korean Council, *Kangjero kkǔlyógan*; Korean Council, *Chunggukkǔro 
kkǔlyógan chosónin wianbudal* [Korean "comfort women" forcefully drafted to China] (Seoul: 
Hanul, 1995); Yi Sang-hwa, "*Kunwianbu gyǒnghóme gwanhan yǒngu*" [A study of the expe-

27 Korean Council, *Kangjero kkǔlyógan*.


29 Chung, "Emperor System, Militarism, and Women," and "Nature of the Project."


31 Renata Salecl, "The Fantasy Structure of War," in *The Spoils of Freedom* (New York: Rout-
ledge, 1994).


33 In effect, the women became a field of contest for male hegemony. In the assault of rape the 
enemy ethnic group, rather than the women themselves, was the target. See Alexandra 
against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 
82–179; and Ruth Seifert, "War and Rape: A Preliminary Analysis," in the same volume.


36 For the Japanese attitude toward Japanese and Korean reproduction respectively see Suzuki, 
"Issue of Military Comfort Women"; Document Center for the War Responsibility, "Histor-
ical Illumination of the Issues"; Chung, "Nature of the Project."

37 Testimony by Kyǒng-sang Yi in Takashi Ito, *Hin otkorum ibemulgo* [White ribbon in the 


43 Chungmoo Choi questioned if Western colonialism has been “privileged” in unmaking statements about the prominent former Japanese colonies. See Choi, “Discourse of Decolonization,” 100.
