

'Comfort Women' and the politics of responsibility

Gyunghee Park

Department of Sociology, UCC

Introduction

Japan's brutal military occupation of Korea from 1910 until the end of the Second World War is generally remembered as a period of grave injustice which has defined a large part of what it means to be Korean. Though the list of crimes is vast, today it seems that one of the most barbaric offences committed at the time was the formation of 'comfort stations' – a euphemistic term used to describe the sexual exploitation of mostly Korean women by the Japanese military and government. After a decisive end to Japan's military conquest of control over the Asia Pacific with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, former 'comfort women' were silenced for over half a century by a deeply systemic sense of shame. Korean patriarchy pressed many survivors to hide their plight or even back into different sectors of the sex industry. However, South Korea's democratization in the late-1980s and the rise of feminist movements and support groups provided platforms for survivors to step forward in the early 1990s, ultimately culminating in the politicization of the 'comfort women' issue.

Nowadays, the majority of Korean expats and nationals may not have experienced colonization or work in the 'comfort stations' first-hand, but they continually cultivate these memories through films, books, museums, and so forth to create and maintain a common identity. Sociologists refer to this as a 'cultural trauma'. This is basically when a group of people undergo a harrowing event so disruptive that it leaves an indelible mark upon their group consciousness. Traumatic events in history can be quite vigorous. As such, it is common for these experiences of group suffering to be carried through generations.

My PhD aims to study how these retrieved memories have come to be shaped by notions of justice and human rights ideals by examining the 'comfort women' redress movement and its international reception. Specifically, my research will examine the trend of official representations of the 'comfort women' memories in South Korea, Japan, and the U.S.

While modern Japanese society has tried to come to grips with their history of violence as well as their own experiences of victimhood (i.e., Hiroshima/Nagasaki), the West seems to exhibit a general sense of amnesia toward the violence in the Far East that coincided with a time revered as the great victory against fascism, the Nazis, and the end of the Holocaust.

Nevertheless, as the early 1990s also ushered in a shifting recognition of gender-based violence in times of conflict as violations of human rights, and rhetoric redefining rape as a weapon of warfare in reaction to the Bosnian 'rape camps' — the international community was primed to start remembering as well. Thus, my research will also address how multiple perspectives and contexts shape the general narrative.

The Asia-Pacific War and the 'comfort stations'

After many years of attempted negotiations with Russia, the United States, and Britain; Japan annexed Korea on 29 August 1910 and began a 35-year military rule over the then unified peninsula. However, Japan's imperial conquest of the Eastern Pacific did not end there as the Asian aggressor continued into mainland China (Shanghai, 1937; Hong Kong, 1941), the Philippines (1941), Guam (1941), Burma (1941), the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) and Dutch Borneo (1942), Singapore (1942), the Solomon Islands (1942), and even the edges of India (1942). What has been known in much of the West as Europe's battle against totalitarianism coincided with the spreading of another brand of barbarism on the other side of the globe. Yet the acknowledgement of what made World War II a *world* war has yet to receive the kind of attention as events like the invasion of Normandy or violence of Auschwitz. In the East, Japanese colonization and the conflict that ensued has been predominantly referred to as the Great Pacific War or the Asia-Pacific War. What's more is that it has been a source of contention for the entire region since.

Also, depictions of violence are often masculinized. In 2011, Gloria Steinem pondered publically why it had taken 65 years to reveal the rape of Jewish women during the Holocaust. She asked, 'Why were they ignored?' and why it took 65 years to recognize that rape is a weapon of war. The unpleasant truth of the matter, however, is that gender-based violence against women has been going on for longer than 65 years. Nevertheless, it was not until the end of 1993 that the UN formally recognized the issue by ratifying the Declaration of the Elimination of Violence against Women, and in 2008 that they formally recognized rape as a 'war tactic'. So, the world's official memories of war still have much to recollect beyond the forgotten battles in faraway lands; they must also work toward remembering the silenced battles that are still prevalent today. The 'comfort women' are a prime example.

Japan's 'comfort stations'

In 1932, the first officially documented 'comfort station' was said to have been established in Shanghai, China. When the Nanking Massacre (a.k.a. Rape of Nanking) in 1937 initiated an onslaught of condemnation from the international community, the Japanese military and government was confronted with the problem of wartime rape perpetrated by

their soldiers. At the time, it was concluded that men's carnal desires were inevitably unstoppable. A formal system that would theoretically eradicate the spread of venereal diseases and mass sexual violence was put forth. Hence, the 'comfort stations' soon spread throughout the occupied territories and the systematic recruitment of women began. Though the first 'comfort stations' employed working prostitutes from Japan, high demands led the government and military to look elsewhere. It is now estimated that up to 90% of 'comfort women' were Korean, and approximations of the number of women coerced into the stations range up to 300,000 (and as low as 27,000 — depending on who or where the information is coming from). Though there are reports of young women being forcibly taken from their homes, there is also evidence that some had joined the 'comfort stations' of their own volition for better living standards, as wartime often coincides with a rise in poverty. Also, the strict patriarchal culture of Korean society also led women to seek opportunities elsewhere, regardless of what they may have entailed. Some survivors recall having to service on average 70 men a day before battles, while others remember being with a few every week for up to three years of the war. While the general story told around the world simplifies the 'clients' as having been Japanese and the 'comfort women' as having been Korean, Japan found women from all their colonies and sometimes the soldiers had been Korean. In the end, many women were murdered, pressed to commit suicide, or left for dead, and years of shame denied them an opportunity to make their struggle public. To date, there are less than 70 registered survivors (from Korea, the Philippines, China, Indonesia, and the Netherlands).

The 'Comfort Women': movement for redress

Remembering and Forgetting: The Complications of Justice

Like individual memories, collective memories are not static. Memories have their own histories, and the relationship we share with them changes profoundly through time as we ourselves change through time. Moreover, not all massive disruptions become traumatic. Because trauma is not solely the result of a group's suffering, but of collective actors 'deciding' to represent social pain as an essential danger to their sense of who they are, where they come from, and where they want to go; the continued existence of memories is a selective process.

Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the memory of the 'comfort stations' began to take hold in regional mainstream discourses, 'comfort women' slowly spread into international consciousness as well. In 1991, Kim Hak-Sun became the first survivor to testify publically against the Japanese government, and was received by a worldwide audience. Koreans were quick to rally behind her, and since most of the 'comfort women' were Korean, South Korea has spearheaded the long-awaited call for justice. Though public sen-

timents in Japan are ambiguous, with some groups being passionately behind the call for redress and others not, many Japanese politicians have generally denied victims' claims or refused to take responsibility, and their apologies have been criticized as 'insincere'. The time also ushered in a shifting recognition of gender-based violence in times of conflict as violations of human rights. As such, the West was in position to start remembering as well — that is, in terms of the many Asian women who had been working in the 'comfort stations'. Japan had forcibly recruited some Dutch women living in Indonesia at the time, and a war time tribunal took place in 1948 on behalf of 35 of these women. Asian women were not considered in the trial. The same was true for the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal in 1946, but in the latter case the 'comfort women' issue was not included at all.

Today, the matter has generally been woven as between the 'comfort women' and the state of Japan, but the memory is much more complex. With evidence of Korean-Japanese and U.S.-Japanese collaboration in the 'comfort systems', justice is more complicated than the common narrative. Moreover, most memory analysis of the 'comfort women' issue has centred on the nationalistic tendencies of the South Korean government and redress movement versus the Japanese nation-state in competition for recognition of their respective 'truths', but there has not been much said for how memories are no longer exclusive. With many ethnically Korean and Japanese people living in the U.S., the interest in the redress movement there has been exceptional to the rest of the Western world — but that is not to say the rest of the world is silent. The 'comfort women' redress movement has harkened the international community to demand apologies from the Japanese government with great vigour, and there have been resolutions adopted in the U.S. Congress, the European Parliament, and the United Nations.

Understanding the narrative using a discourse-historical approach

What is of utmost interest to my study are the terms used to describe the 'comfort women' and how their portrayals are then utilised to pursue justice in their name. In other words, I will examine the grand narrative that has been purveyed by activists, scholars, politicians, and media in Japan, Korea, and the United States with regard to this issue. Using a critical discourse analysis, which is the examination of what and how we speak about different topics, my aim is to compare and contrast the transformations in the memory of 'comfort women' over time. More specifically, I will be using a discourse-historical approach, which is the investigation of the historical and political contexts of texts. This means I will be studying anything from monuments and museums to news media and documentaries made during the period under review (1937 — 2012) about the 'comfort women' while making sure to include the changes of historical and political settings in each country as well.

Generally speaking, the majority of works in this regard have taken a broad view of distinct publics as different because of culture or religion alone, and have ignored the many other

ways in which people see themselves (for instance, by class, morals, or politics). My aim is to fill this gap in research using the aforementioned method, which suits to analyse the multiple layers of meaning embedded in what and how people speak and write about the 'comfort women'.

At present, I have compiled a detailed profile of key dates, actors, and works on the 'comfort women' issue. This has included (inter-)national political and discourses in the press and media; commemoration and apology discourses (i.e., museums, monuments, public demands for apologies and their terms); and documentaries, films, journal articles and books. To supplement my analysis of multiple discourse types, I will conduct interviews with eye witnesses, activists, and expert researchers; thereby adding an ethnographic dimension. Because the voice of former 'comfort women' themselves will form a central component of my examination, making trips to sites of memory production are crucial to my ability to yield accurate research. As such, I will go to Korea to speak with them and document various renditions of 'comfort women' memory at the source of its production, so to speak, and travel to Japan to do archival research. Additionally, I plan on visiting New Jersey and California (U.S.A.) to interview memory carrier groups (i.e., second generation survivors). With large Korean populations in both states, public protests and calls for apologies have been quite strong on either coast of the U.S. Finally, the third year of my thesis will be devoted to the analysis and write-up of my empirical data, and I will assess how struggles amongst competing voices are played out across the period under review (1937-2012).

Conclusion

The world's official memories of war still have much to recollect. In a world where we coexist, we share a history and we share a future. Our understanding of other's suffering is not a matter for the 'guilty', but a matter for us all. Why don't we all know about the 'comfort stations' or rape in times of conflict? Survivors are near the end of their lives, and have waited over 70 years for recognition. Understanding how justice is pursued in their name and how it will be pursued in times ahead is crucial not only to community identity, but more generally to the social life of human rights. Despite the general masculinization of war and our recollections of conflict, women have been the main targets of gender-based violence for as long as humans can remember, even if they chose not to. I intend to show in detail how witness testimonies of trauma can have a transformative impact upon representations of historical self when a society becomes receptive to notions of counter voice and memory.

Gyunghee Park is a first year PhD student in the Department of Sociology and is working under the supervision of Dr. Tracey Skillington. The author would like to give special thanks to Dr. Tracey Skillington, Dr. Patrick O'Mahony, and her critical theory colleagues. Also, thanks to her family, Paul, and Gary, for their support and encouragement.