KOREA'S COMFORT WOMEN:
PUBLIC REMEMBRANCE AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY
IN POSTCOLONIAL SOUTH KOREA

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Introduction

Prior to the 1990s, there was next to no academic record of Korea’s comfort women. Many scholars have attempted in the last two decades to analyze and preserve the history of military sexual slavery during the first half of the twentieth century. However, a completely objective account will never be written, simply because the way in which it would be recorded, preserved, and eventually presented to its domestic and international patrons would be inevitably and unconsciously influenced by the collective memory of South Koreans and their government.

Despite the extensive scholarship that is now widely available, it is my assertion that public remembrance of Korea’s comfort women, their struggles, and the injustice they faced exists today, unfortunately, only to serve the collective memory determined by the South Korean national government. As discussed by the American archival studies scholar Kenneth E. Foote, the collective memory does not only exist in reference “to beliefs and ideas held in common by many individuals that together produce a sense of social solidarity and community.” This might explain the seemingly independent manner in which the comfort women issue has so far been treated in South Korea; however, Foote also insists that that “many individuals and organizations act collectively to maintain records of the past, even if these records are shaped by the demands of contemporary life.” While the individuals regularly participating in the activism focused on the comfort women issue seem, initially, to be the sole proprietors of solidarity for those affected by military sexual slavery, it is questionable as to whether public remembrance of these women is maintained more accurately or sincerely by South Koreans or their national government. Because of the unavoidable gender issues that are involved in the topic of comfort women, it is difficult to recognize just how much influence these institutions – the network of activists working towards appropriate reparation and the government – have on each other today. Through my preliminary research done in the United States, interviews conducted at various universities in South Korea, and analysis of a public demonstration by South Korean comfort women’s rights activists, I have found that the ways in which history is not only recorded and displayed but also edited depends on cultural context and national motives.

Public Remembrance and the Historical Status of Korean Women

Before discussing the comfort women scholarship that came about in the 1990s and onward and its contribution to the collective memory of South Korea, it is necessary to establish the overall cultural and socio-political mindset that existed before and during the Japanese colonization of the Korean peninsula, specifically in regards to gender and the status of women. By providing this background, the ways in which the survivors of the comfort system were immediately remembered – although not yet by the public but, at least, by foreign institutions such as the U.S. Armed Forces – will be more transparent.

In 1982, Bonnie B. Oh published a notably objective work about the relationship between the feminist and the nationalist movements during the Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945, an era very commonly known as the “enlightenment period” as well as the period of time during which the Japanese licensed prostitution in Korea. Oh writes, “In the late developing countries of Asia, such as Korea and China whose sovereignty was impaired by the encroachment of the expansionist forces of the West and later of Japan, feminism could not take its usual Western form.”

The beginnings of feminism in Korea certainly were different than those in the West, but this is less true in the sense that Korean women, much like their Western counterparts, established their place in society primarily through “education, employment, law, and politics.” However, Korean feminism at this point in history becomes slightly complicated in that the first three of these four categories were also inarguably beneficial to the Japanese colonial government that aimed “to make loyal, obedient subject of all Koreans.”

In fact, it was typical for those women who most strongly embraced the nationalist movement in early twentieth century Korea to simply take on more social and domestic duties in addition to the already strict, feminine “traditional ‘virtues.’” Oh points out that despite the now obvious devastation caused to the status women by the occupation, Korean feminists were really only able to achieve as much as they did because of the surrounding circumstance of Japanese colonialism. Still, it seems that the women who wanted more rights in Korea and advocated for them during this time only acquired more responsibilities and, in reality, received the opposite effect of their presumed liberal, egalitarian goals. While it should be noted that this kind of backlash is not entirely uncommon in women’s history all over the world, the Korean feminist movement in the early twentieth century leans toward failure in its inability to unite women for purposes other than those involving the sovereignty of their colonized nation. For the first Korean feminists, the nationalist movement ultimately took precedence over their causes.

While it could be argued that the legislation of the Japanese did, in fact, allow women individual rights absent from traditional Korean society, this new, presumed autonomy seemingly only gave way to worse oppressions that have been, since they were first recorded in the early 1990s, greatly influencing the collective memory of South Korea. As mentioned above, it is suggested that the Korean-style feminist movement unintentionally supported “Japan’s total war effort” and, therefore, allowed for the sexual exploitation involved in the comfort system. Regardless of the rather shaky framework supporting that assertion, it is much safer to claim that poor choices made by early feminists most definitely contributed to even worse postcolonial conditions. As well documented by Oh, Korean women of the early 1900s were making moves to become more active members of society, yet they were still incredibly restricted by their nation’s traditional culture and prescribed system of gender, and as can be expected, just as soon as the nationalist movement in Japan-controlled Korea “seemed dead,” the causes of Korean women were also “forgotten.” Some scholars suggest that the eagerly assumed, essentialist ideology of

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5 Ibid, pp 37.
6 Ibid, pp 38.
7 Ibid, pp 38.
8 Ibid, pp 38.
9 Ibid, pp 38.
the feminist movement in Korea appeared only to have to open doors for even worse treatment of women – whether it be by the quickly expanding, imperial forces of the Japanese or their own fathers, husbands, and sons. “Women’s suffering under colonialism was not necessarily directly, immediately, or entirely ‘colonial’ in terms of a crude cause-and-effect logic,” writes Sonia Ryang. “Colonial rule came together with sexism and other forms of oppression, incrementally influencing one another, on the one hand, while on the other, some facets of colonial rule brought benefits to women’s lives in the form of more access to education and knowledge.” Much more so than Oh, Ryang insists that Japanese colonization was not the first or the worst thing to happen to the Korean feminist movement, and she strongly believes that public remembrance of Korea’s comfort women is missing socio-political background.

In an article published in 1998, Ryang expresses serious concern for the lack scholarship on the gender issues contributing to the displaced identity of Korea’s former comfort women, but she also indirectly advocates for a more accurate collective memory by means of an informative yet objective public remembrance of each victim’s personal experience. Ryang’s work argues for “a more meaningful use of memories of oppressions, without silencing marginalized the voices in the process.” While Rynag believes that victims of the comfort system should be encouraged to speak out about their individual experiences – and the voices of representative governments as well as other, academic insights should be focusing more on the deeper issues of gender and sexuality and less on the issue of colonization – she insists that many perspectives that would help narrate a more complete story of many women’s experiences during the Japanese occupation are left out. “Many other women told me that they themselves never personally felt discriminated against by the Japanese individuals during the colonial period,” explains Ryang, “At the same time, they stated that the more severe, more immediately threatening violence and oppression they encountered came from their Korean husbands at home.” This work strongly implicates that Korean women must first be given the freedom to discuss their feelings of oppression, past and present, before they can sincerely contribute to any cause for worldwide recognition of and apology for their struggles. Ryang indirectly advocates for an accurate collective memory by means of an informative yet internationally objective public remembrance, which is only possible if certain issues of gender, past and present, are taken into account.

Access to the recorded observations and general standpoints of third-party governments and their military forces – particularly the U.S. Armed Forces that interrogated Japanese POWs as well as the comfort women found in seized camps – may very well provide semi-objective point of view that is particularly interesting when scrutinized next the history of the Korean nationalist and feminist movements. The author of the U.S. Psychological Warfare Team’s Report No. 49 starts by asserting, “A ‘comfort girl’ is nothing more than a prostitute or ‘professional camp follower’ attached to the Japanese Army for the benefit of the soldiers.”

12 Ibid, pp 12.
Already, through of the bluntness of this statement, the reader can presume that the author of this official report is very unfamiliar with the highly organized system of military sexual slavery. This report, which claims it was supposed to practically explain “the conditions under which [comfort women] lived and worked,” also goes attempts to accurately recount the methods used to recruit these women and the average personality type of each woman involved in this sort of systematic, licensed sex work. The report says that the “comfort service” outsourced to various newly acquired territories of the Japanese Empire was “not specified” but unfortunately “assumed to be work connected with visiting the wounded hospitals, rolling bandages, and generally making the soldiers happy.” Another detail made clear in Report No. 49 is that it was only Japanese agents which recruited the twenty women captured and questioned, and in order to induce them into enlisting in the comfort service the Japanese agents promised “plenty of money, an opportunity to pay off family debts, easy work, and the prospect of a new life in a new land, Singapore.” Surely, there is no room for sympathy in an official, U.S. Armed Forces report such as this one; however, it is strange that there is almost the complete opposite of empathy expressed for the most deplorable deceptiveness of these Japanese recruiting agents.

There are also many arbitrary and capricious details included in Report No. 49. Apparently, the typical “comfort girl,” was aged about twenty-five years and was “ignorant,” “uneducated,” “childish,” “selfish,” “egotistical,” and “not pretty … by Japanese or Caucasian standards.” This report further narrates the interrogations of these twenty female POWs and characterizes the average Korean comfort women, “She claims to dislike her ‘profession’ and would rather not talk about it or family.” This report provides a great deal of information such as the open hours of business, the priority schedules that directly reflected military rank of each client, the corrupt politics involved with pay and living conditions, some women’s social interrelations with the soldiers, the average soldier’s proclaimed shame and embarrassment in patronizing a “comfort house,” how the surrounding military situation affected the women’s living conditions, and finally, their retreat and capture. However, despite the plethora of information provided, the details that are the most about telling about the presumably unbiased insight of the U.S. Armed Forces are those involving these women’s standards of living:

They lived in near-luxury in Burma in comparison to other places … they amused themselves by participating in sports events with both officers and men, and attended picnics, entertainments, and social dinners. They had a phono-graph and in the towns they were allowed to go shopping … The girls were allowed the prerogative of refusing a customer … the health of these girls was good. They were all supplied with all types of contraceptives, and often soldiers would bring their own which had been supplied by the army … there were numerous instances of proposals of marriage and in certain cases marriages actually took place.

16 Ibid, par 7.
17 Ibid, par 7.
18 Ibid, par 8, 9, 14, 17 and 19.
This report, which is perhaps not so much biased as it is riddled with misogyny, proves nothing other than the way in which outsiders saw the military sexual slavery implemented and used by the Japanese Imperial Army. If this report is taken as a representation of the collective voice of the U.S. Armed Forces, it seems the soldiers in combat with the Japanese, although not thoroughly educated in the social systems of East Asia accepted what Oh discusses in her work. It appears through this author’s summary of the interrogations, that the U.S. servicemen encountering these women, despite the extremely deceitful and fraudulent ways in which they were recruited and exploited, believed them to be liberated through the small freedoms allowed to them because of their lowly profession as sex workers and in comparison to other Korean women in 1944. If there are many more reports like No. 49, it is no wonder that the injustice of the comfort women was not more ardently addressed before the 1990s.

George Hicks Versus C. Sarah Soh
(Revised preliminary research)

In the acknowledgements of his widely read book, Ernest George Hicks, the Australian economist admits to never hearing of Japan’s use of comfort women until the fifteenth anniversary of Pearl Harbor in 1991. Considering Hicks is usually deemed to be the academic authority on this topic, this confession sounds strange unless the previously discussed, official U.S. Armed Forces report from 1944 is taken into account. The unconcerned, uninterested tone of Report No. 49 can easily serve as an example to the reason why Hicks and other scholars of East Asian history were unfamiliar with comfort women until their personal stories began to make the headlines of international news. Clearly, the public remembrance of comfort women was not yet an issue taken up by the Korean government, and therefore, a collective memory of such war crimes had not yet been created. Because of this, it is no wonder that a foreigner, even one with “a lifetime’s experience in Asia,” was unaware of certain historical details.

After first hearing about the comfort women issue through international media, Hicks did some personal research that led him to the groundbreaking investigative journalism and published research of the Japanese national Kako Senda. In the early 1960s, Senda’s interest in the comfort women was solely inspired by a strange and rare photograph he encountered of two, well-dressed Korean women crossing the Yellow River with luggage above their heads. This photograph is the first of many that document the general history of the comfort system and depict the twenty individuals whose stories Hicks’ shares throughout the rest of the book. Hicks only briefly mentions the initial influence Senda had over his research interest – which was really inspired by the class action trials that were being covered in 1991 – however, the fact that he mentions the enormous impact made by him at the near beginning of the introduction gives the impression that the Japanese journalist’s work inspired the entire scholarly tone of the book.

Hicks attempts to expose and analyze Japanese military sexual slavery from all angles, but sets out to give a general explanation of the comfort system in chapters one through five. Actually, the first half of Hicks’ The Comfort Women expands on many of the categorized details

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20 Ibid, cover.
21 Ibid, pp 15.
in the aforementioned U.S. Armed Forces’ Report No. 49 in that he discusses the most general functions of the military sexual slavery system and the workings of the Japanese Empire at large. Hick also attempts, in chapter 1 of his book to explain by use of worldwide military history reasons why the Japanese Empire and its armed forces seemed to believe that convenience, recreational sex, even if perceived as sexual slavery, was a necessary and completely rational component of imperial expansion. “Mars and Venus have gone hand in hand throughout military history,” Hicks writes, “This image may sit oddly with the conventional heroic picture of fighting men, but … Combat, especially under modern conditions, has been justly described as the most stressful environment possible, apt to produce what one Japanese Army medical officer described as ‘temporary derangement.’” He concludes by stating, “More or less institutionalised means have always been found for catering to this primitive sexual need.” Hicks spends quite a lot of time theoretically defending the actions of the soldiers and, by fault, defending the larger system of essentialized and constructed gender. Admittedly, the way in which Hicks borderline justifies the use of “camp followers,” that is, military sexual slaves, during the trying times of war in this passage seems blantly contradictory when compared to the rest of the book’s content, but he makes it clear immediately afterward that he illustrates this type of thinking only to demonstrate the Japanese rationale.

In chapter 6 Hicks goes a step further than the above U.S. Armed Forces Report and discusses the end of the Second World War through the many ultimate, fatal horrors experienced by the comfort women stationed at military camps that were brutally defeated. In this chapter, which is appropriately titled “The end of a nightmare, the beginning of another,” Hicks also elaborates on the social and cultural misfortune that came to the survivors of the comfort system: “In a society dominated by patriarchal views of chastity and morality, and a lack of openness about sex, the shame of the whole repugnant experience silenced many women.” At this point in his book, Hicks is questioning whether or not public remembrance will ever be possible for the comfort women based on Korean gender roles. Because of the position Korean women were in immediately before the creation of the comfort system, Hicks wonders if “a commemorative monument to suffering endured by countless, nameless, faceless comfort women” could ever exist: “These women suffered an extreme form of the excesses of a still-current male attitude. This regards women as sex objects to be used and discarded, as necessary.” Hicks writes passionately on this subject for several pages. He asserts that the importance placed on virginity and the ability to produce children in Korean society, many of the comfort women become sterile due to their time spent in the comfort service, made returning to a normal life incredibly difficult or emotionally and psychologically impossible. “They had trouble coping with the need to pretend to normalcy,” asserts Hicks, “and to stay silent about their wartime suffering.” Certainly, where the objective Report No. 49 lacks empathy, Hicks’ aim to not also provide several, uncensored stories of former comfort women that continue to live sorrowful lives in personal remembrance of their exploitation but also to allow sympathy for them.

23 Ibid, pp 29.
26 Ibid, pp 167.
27 Ibid, pp 165.
Unsurprisingly, after the repulsive details described in chapter 6, Hicks finishes the last third of *The Comfort Women*, chapters 7 through 10, by focusing on potential political restitution and, more importantly, peace of mind for the former comfort women much in the same style as the first six chapters. In her review of Hicks’ book, Dr. C. Sarah Soh writes, “The author considers the wider ramification of the comfort women system and states that a solution to the continuing exploitations of women involves improving the position of women world-wide.” Without directly saying so, Soh criticizes Hicks’ extremely wide scope and idealistic goals for a better future. Soh says that both Hicks’ overwhelming list of facts and figures in addition to the odd juxtaposition of historical narrative with the “more than twenty” psychologically and emotionally trying testimonies of former comfort women “become rather tedious without some analytic synthesis for the reader.” Soh also states that while Hicks may “be commended for diligently amassing the data for the English-speaking world,” his lengthy, basic fact-filled narrative lacks “a consistent analytical perspective and/or theoretical discussion on the nature of the comfort women problem,” which will most definitely “cause frustration for researchers, students and general readers alike.” Although, Hicks is commonly given credit as the authority of the comfort women, Soh makes very good points in her review. Hicks makes for a worthwhile resource in becoming informed on the situation of former military sex slaves of Korea, but he delivers little more than an introduction. Still, Hicks’ work is also important in this study for its aforementioned simultaneous and very contradictory understanding of and contempt for the sexual needs of the imperial soldier; and, almost ten years after Hicks’ book is released, Soh publishes her own text, which in many ways further critics Hicks’ understanding.

Soh is a Corean-American Institute fellow, an established professor of anthropology at San Francisco State University, and the author of *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan*, the most recently published, widely read scholarship on the comfort system. In her book Soh takes interest in further analyzing the cultural factors, specifically those rooted in gender theory, that are involved in uncovering “the complex truth about both Japan’s military comfort system and the sources of life-long suffering of the Korean victim-survivors.” The most fundamental point of Soh’s work is that the comfort women issue that has actively existed internationally since the 1990s is not about past war between nations and war crimes but, rather, about men and women, gender politics and essentialized roles prescribed in Korean society long before Japanese colonialization. Despite Soh’s focus on reoccurring issues of gender in Korean history, relating her book to collective memory and public remembrance is somewhat daunting. However, assuming that the goal of women’s rights groups advocating for living comfort women is to organize and spread awareness against injustice based presumably on both gender and nationality, Soh points out their misguidance.

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29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
“Although activists and their supporters have successfully publicized the sexual violence and atrocities committed by the Japanese military,” Soh writes in her introduction titled “Gender, Class, Sexuality, and Labor under Japanese Colonialism and Imperialist War,” “the way in which they have framed the story of comfort women as exclusively a Japanese war crimes issue has diverted attention from the sociocultural and historical roots of women’s victimization in Korea, which Japan colonized from 1910 to 1945.”

Seeing as most of her book’s introduction thoroughly discusses the historical status of women rather than the uncovering and preserving of personal accounts of those women affected by the comfort system, it is obvious that Soh fears for inaccurate public remembrance just as much as the said activists do. In her epilogue “Truth, Justice, Reconciliation,” Soh concludes that more historical and cultural details must be included in modern-day analysis of the comfort system in order to preserve an accurate collective memory as well as create and maintain a truthful public remembrance of Korea’s comfort women:

[When] we remember and write about the contested memories of wartime comfort system and the lives of tens of thousands of women who labored there, we must move beyond the political correctness of well-intentioned progressive academics, the litigious courtroom arguments, and the competing discourses of ethnic nationalists and ahistorical memory activists if we are to obtain a fully contextualized understanding of the system and its victims.”

Whether modern Korean women can at this point objectively scrutinize the historical knowledge that has been presented to them and readjust their memory of the comfort women issue in order to serve this goal of accuracy and future gender equality is unclear. Current issues of women’s and human rights in South Korea rarely factor into the discussion of Japanese war crimes.

Because awareness appears to be the only goal of these activists, their cause is often integrated into the wider ambitions of the national government. An unbiased historical reevaluation is necessary, and connections between Korea’s past and present treatment of women must be made in order to allow for social change. While many individuals, in Korea and elsewhere around the globe, have advocated for official acknowledgement by the Japan for its war crimes (specifically, activists demand an official apology from the Japanese government by means of legal reparations for the former comfort women, accountability of individuals involved, accurate portrayal of history in Japanese textbooks, and commemoration specifically in the form of a museum dedicated to the women’s struggles), the public attention that is given to this issue is more beneficial to the national government than its citizens. In fact, the individuals advocating for the above demands in many ways deter national and global awareness from current women’s and human rights issues in Korea, and most importantly, according to Soh, they fall short in seeing the connection between past and present injustices to Korean women and their oppressors.

34 Ibid.
Collective Memory and the Current Status of Korean Women

While studying this topic abroad, I found that the ways in which Korea’s comfort women are publicly remembered in their nation greatly reflects the status of modern Korean women. Specifically, I found that the outlets that they have for social movement are directly reflective of their social status and the support they have from their national government, which controls collective memory. This close relationship of that even the most grassroots-like organizations have with their national government directly affects the outlets in which these women can preserve, or, rather, create public remembrance.

In order to establish the collective memory that currently exists amongst Korean women, I informally interviewed young women of all ages and academic disciplines studying at various universities in Seoul (two of which I have decided to include in this work), the government funded Women’s Human Rights Commission, and the supposedly independently funded Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan. These three sources provided insights and opinions on the comfort women issue that varied in rather subtle ways, but I was most interested in how their collective memory compares to the prominent scholarship that I studied six months prior to my research group’s trip.

Interviews with South Korean university students

Hyeji Joo, Seoul National University

The only student I could get to talk to me at Seoul National University was Hyeji Joo from Seoul. Joo told me that she was a first-year biology major interested in ultimately becoming a medical doctor. When I asked her about the serious prostitution problems I had read about in the Women’s Human Rights Commission’s 2010 Annual Report, she awkwardly replied that “some people” are involved in such activities but they are mostly women from other places, such as the Philippines. Joo also said that most of what she knows about comfort women and prostitution in Korea comes from “rumors and television.” Her understanding, based presumably on what she has heard from friends and on television, is that when the Japanese came to Korea, they used the women in order to be “happy” while away from home. Regardless of this, Joo said she thought that Japan should more sincerely apologize because so many women were affected by their actions. She also said that the real problem is that Japan is not “regretful” for the pain they caused, and that properly educating youth in both Korea and Japan, revealing the truth, is the best way for Korea’s former comfort women to receive reparation. Joo did not hesitate when I asked her she thought modern-day prostitution in South Korea could be related to the comfort system: “It’s not related.” She also strongly disagreed with my suggestion that the American military presence in South Korea could be compared to that of the Japanese in the sense that American troops have been recorded as patrons of South Korean sex workers.

Joo talked with my research colleague and I for quite awhile about her future plans, specifically those that involved marriage. Joo told us not only that she was more focused on her education and professional plans than marriage but also that she would only settle for a husband

36 Hyeji Joo, “Interviews at Seoul National University,” May 18, 2011.
37 Hwayoung Lee, Annual Report 2010 (Women’s Rights Commission of Korea, n.d.)
understanding of the demands of her career. Joo admitted that her parents’ generation would be disappointed by this attitude but she felt she was not alone in her opinions.

Yeon-Jeong Park, Ewha University

When I met Yeon-Jeong Park, she was in a large group selling tickets to the glee club’s upcoming spring performance. I found out she was from Daegu, a city on the southeastern tip of the Korean peninsula (she tried to draw a map for me), and was studying literature at Ewha. Park said that she would like to work within an international organization.

Park told me that most of the knowledge she had acquired about Korea’s comfort women came from her high school textbooks. She also expressed her disappointment that “Koreans are still fighting to get a full apology and payback from the Japanese government.” She quickly wrote in my notebook, “I think that … [the] comfort women phenomenon made [sic] Korean prostitution … more active and professional than before.” We talked about this sentiment more extensively. Park clarified her thoughts. She said, although South Korea has done everything it can to prevent modern-day sex work, Japan’s legalization of it during colonization and its exploitation of women during wartime may have created trans-generational prostitution problem.

Many of the other students I informally interviewed expressed similar personal opinions on current issues of gender and sexuality as the two women above, but their responses did vary when in discussion of prostitution in Seoul and the rest of South Korea. I was told several times that women involved in sex work should be given far less sympathy than former comfort women because while the latter was “forced,” the former simply has more “willingness” to earn money. On the other hand, I was also told that it is usually the family “environment” in which young girls are raised that causes them to participate in prostitution at early ages. While it is interesting that these opinions all reference the Women’s Human Rights Commission’s goal of “eradication of sexual exploitation of women,” these students’ attitudes toward present-day prostitutes reflects the almost the complete opposite sentiment of the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, which writes in its promotional material, “Let us each think of what we can do.” With consideration of both Hicks’ and Soh’s published work, I found that a rather unified – while, perhaps, not entirely accurate – collective memory of Korea’s comfort women exists among female youth in South Korea, and they all seem to agree that public remembrance of comfort system survivors is appropriate. However, it seems that educated women, like those who talked to me, are just starting to make connections between the relatively recent past and present conditions of Korean women.

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38 Yeon Jeong Park et al., “Interviews at Ewha University”, May 18, 2011.
39 Ibid.
After an awkward, impromptu meeting with the Women’s Human Rights Commission, they suggested that I set up an interview with the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan. Immediately after contacting the organization via email, my research group and I were invited to attend and, perhaps, even partake in their upcoming Wednesday Demonstration during which they protest the mistreatment of the comfort women issue by the Japanese government. I was, of course, extremely excited to finally see the hard protest I had been reading about in action. I felt grateful for the opportunity to observe.

As I found out, the Korean Council demonstrates the comfort women cause every week in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. When my group and I arrived at the demonstration, we were all very surprised to find not only comfort women supports on the street but also a very outspoken advocate for Korean ownership of Dokdo, a small island located between the middle Korean peninsula and the lower Japanese archipelago. One of my research colleagues was studying this island and approached the man with great interest. In response to our interest in his cause, he offered to buy us lunch. Meanwhile, the various observations and dedication involved in the Korean Council’s Wednesday Demonstration were about to finish. With endless pages of historical scholarship and Korean comfort women discourse fresh in my mind, this was not the type of demonstration I had pictured. The women there did not strike me as radical feminists, and the most the men did was chant from the provided script. There were also many children present. It was much more like a ceremony than a protest, but I was still impressed by the turnout. I was not so impressed – in fact, I was a little uncomfortable – with the other demonstrators that were seemingly trying to piggyback on the Korean Council’s cause. The presence of the Dokdo advocate, while entertaining, made me feel like I was at an anti-Japanese demonstration rather than one supporting a specific cause for women’s and human rights. While I was grateful for his friendly demeanor, and his generosity, the Dokdo advocate’s public argument over land belittled the Korean Council’s purposes and caused the entire demonstration to appear petty.

After the demonstration we briefly met up with the Korean Council representative I was supposed to interview later that day. We finalized our plan to meet, and my research advisor confirmed that we had made arrangements with a translator. When my research group arrived at the organization’s headquarters, we were all seated in a back room and instructed to watch a film produced by the organization in 2008 before even talking with the representative we met earlier that day. The film included many abbreviated testimonials of both living and recently deceased Korean comfort women, and I recognized many of their names and statements from my preliminary studies of the comfort women issue while in the United States. From my interview with the organization’s representative, I gained limited insight into the issue. When looking over my notes, it seemed that most of her answers to my questions came right from the promotional material she provided at the end of our meeting. In fact, she even pointed out certain details in one of the booklets we received during our interview. Because they were the most problematic of the details presented, perhaps, I found the Korean Council’s two specific goals to be especially interesting to my research. These were, first, the recovery the human rights of comfort women, living and deceased, and secondly, to assure that such sexually-based atrocities never occurred again.

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42 Personal photographs of the event available online, http://www.flickr.com/photos/theamandalk/
again in the world. Seeing as though the Korean Council is seemingly run by volunteers and primarily funded by private donations rather than government funds, I had a hard time imaging their cause going further than the sidewalk in front of the Japanese embassy.

**Conclusion**

As Foote concludes in his work briefly mentioned in my introduction, “[Archival and cultural] research can yield insight into the relationship of societies to their archives so that the concept of memory is not overlooked – or forgotten – in archival theory.” Based on my personal experiences in South Korea with both women’s rights activists and university students and in consideration of the research I conducted in the United States, it is apparent that the comfort women issue only continues to be supported, ultimately, for the benefit of the nation. Although many activists have been directly advocating for the rights of specific individuals victimized by the comfort system of the Japanese Imperial Army, their once very popular cause currently seems at times to be forgotten by the national government, and therefore, forgotten by South Koreans. At other times, the issue is simply integrated into the larger anti-Japanese sentiment of the nation. While much as been done to shed light on the injustices that occurred in colonial Korea, public remembrance of the comfort women issue appears to rely on the aims of the South Korean government, which obviously controls the collective memory of its citizens. This, of course, does not mean that South Koreans do not think for themselves on such issues – this is obvious from my interviews with university students in Seoul – but I believe that they are, because of their notably strong “relationship” with their preserved and exhibited history, advised as to what they should think about the colonial period by their public, nationally funded museums and memorials. As I stated above, the ways in which history is not only recorded and displayed also edited in postcolonial South Korea but depends on current cultural norms and, most importantly, national motives.

Due to all of the above discussions and observations, I must conclude that at the present time, Korea’s surviving comfort women and the many activists who are diligently working towards a lasting public remembrance of them will only receive their demands when they benefit the collective memory established and maintained by the nation.

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44 Ibid, pp 46.
Narrative Report A (as requested by ASIANetwork)

The impact of this research on my career plans

If nothing else, this research has confirmed my interest in archives and museum studies, specifically in special collections based on East Asian history, language and culture. While applying for this research fellowship, I knew that, one way or another, I was going to soon enroll in a library and information science program; however, I was overwhelmed by the career possibilities that the MLIS offered. During my research group’s trip, I emailed the last application requirement to my graduate school of choice, my personal statement. The research had seemingly given me a second wind, a sense of academic purpose. Shortly after we returned to the States, I was accepted. This experience gave me insight into my options as an overly committed interdisciplinary scholar and a future librarian (or archivist, or curator). Although my research group’s trip to South Korea occurred after my undergraduate graduation, I feel like it provided clarity and encouragement toward my future. It confirmed that my postgraduate and career choice was not just significant to me but important to the rest of the world. My research on Korea’s comfort women, public remembrance and collective memory in South Korea gave me the confidence to explain in the aforementioned personal statement, “I am an academic at heart, a journalist by name and a librarian in training.”

The professional development prompted by this research

During the fellowship to South Korea, I met many scholars of Korean history, explored many institutions that presumably preserve it, and saw many, many citizens that routinely patronize it. While I had some onsite research and interviewing experience going into this trip, my interpersonal and organizational skills were tested and honed, and I learned quite a bit just about the prescribed process and ethical conduct of academic grants and research. Prior to leaving the country, I was prompted by my educational institution to complete two basic training modules on research matter pertaining to our grant. Before my CITI (Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative) training, I had no idea how peer-reviewed scholarship came to be. I used it extensively, of course, in my undergraduate work, but I never asked about the process in which it becomes “reviewed” and published. Now, I know where this type of scholarship comes from and want to be involved in both the creation and management of it.

My changed view of the world prompted by this research

This research fellowship confirmed that, as presumably impartial outsiders, foreigners might sometimes conduct the best, or most viable, research in historical and other cultural studies. Based on my recent experience, this is because they do not share the collective memory of the area in which they are studying. I used to feel that there was no way I could study foreign culture without having complete command over its language. Honestly, a lack proficient skill with modern Japanese is what ultimately deterred me from pursuing a postgraduate degree in comparative literature. However, I better understand, now, the benefit of clearly defined objectivity in cultural studies. My research experience in South Korea allowed me to regain confidence in my academic interest in East Asian studies. Being reminded of the difference between subjectivity and objectivity during this fellowship really refreshed my view of the world.
All of this, of course, causes me to question my own objectivity in analyzing the culture in which I was born, raised and educated. My research group’s recent trip to South Korea was not my first experience studying abroad – I studied at the Nagoya University of Foreign Studies in Japan from March to July in 2008 – but this feeling of stepping outside one’s culture and seemingly unavoidable bias into another collective consciousness is one of the main aspects that this study and my previous trip has in common. I thoroughly enjoy this feeling, and I appreciated the opportunity to experience it again in May 2011.

Narrative Report B (as requested by ASAINetwork)

Initially, while researching this topic in the United States, I intended to discover and analyze the ways in which the Korean understanding of the comfort women issue currently differs from that of the international community.

After traveling to South Korea this past May, I have deducted that while the general consensus amongst young, educated Korean citizens is that Japan is very much at fault for the suffering of the comfort women, the connection between past and present issues in women’s and human rights is not often directly made. While the voices of Korea’s comfort women were clearly heard twenty years ago, as time goes on, their cause is gradually being integrated into the larger anti-Japanese sentiment of the South Korean government without the knowledge or consent of those who have dedicated themselves specifically to the comfort women issue.

If more academic research on this topic or issue was done with the concepts of nationalism, public remembrance and collective memory in mind, I think that many current women’s rights issues in South Korea, such as gender inequality and prostitution, may receive more attention. In addition to this, I believe that looking more closely at the comfort women issue from a different perspective or a less obvious discipline – say, archival or museum studies – would also be of great benefit to the cause
Bibliography


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