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The Dark Legacy of Imperial Japan's Military Sexual Slavery: A
Study on the Condition of Comfort Women

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Introduction

History presents us with an overwhelming array of topics, many of which are seen through an Eurocentric lens that often lacks the intersectionality needed to understand the experiences of marginalized groups. In particular, the experiences of women of color in armed conflicts have been reduced to mere footnotes, their suffering overshadowed by the grand narratives of war, alongside internal and international politics.

Too frequently, the plight of women in war is described using sterile, repetitive terms like “rape,” “torture,” and “kidnapping,” which—while undeniably horrific—do little to capture the gravity and complexity of their experiences. These words fail to convey the lifelong psychological and social wounds inflicted upon these women and minimize their resilience and survival. The urgency to break this pattern is at the heart of my thesis.

In this work, my goal is to give a voice to those women who have been systematically silenced by history and society, particularly women of color. These victims were subjected to atrocities that were not only brutal but stigmatized. Their legacies are in danger of being forgotten, or worse, simplified into narratives that disregard the depth of their humanity. This thesis aims to shed light on these stories and remind the reader that we must ensure these women’s stories, pain, and resilience are not erased from the historical record.

My inspiration for this project was ignited when I encountered the story of Comfort Women through the South Korean TV series “Tomorrow” (2022). In Episode 13, the tragic

fate of a Comfort Woman was revealed through a friend who had unknowingly sent her to what she thought was factory work, only to have her endure unimaginable suffering at the hands of the Japanese military. What stood out most was not just the immense physical and emotional trauma she faced, but the ostracization she experienced after her experience. The deep-rooted societal stigma surrounding sex work, regardless of consent or coercion, worsens the injustice these women face, adding another layer of cruelty to their suffering.

One of the most disturbing aspects of this discourse is the continued use of the word “comfort” when referring to these victims. The term itself feels detached from the truth of their lived experience, implying that they provided “comfort” to soldiers. In reality, they were brutally violated, their dignity stripped away, often coerced or deceived into sexual slavery. To call them “Comfort Women” is to euphemize their trauma, sanitizing the brutal reality of their experiences and diminishing the gravity of their victimization.

Moreover, the use of the word “women” is equally problematic. The majority of those who were forced into service in these Comfort Stations were not women in the legal or biological sense—they were often girls, many of them younger than eighteen. Referring to them as “women” further distorts the narrative, obscuring the youth and vulnerability of those subjected to these atrocities. This language is emblematic of a larger issue: how we, as a society, are often complicit in downplaying the suffering of women and girls in conflict, especially those marginalized by race, ethnicity, or class.

This study is not only a compilation of oral and empiricist history but also incorporates a psychological and humanitarian analysis of both the victims and their perpetrators. My

background in political science has provided a framework that allows me to approach this subject with a critical lens. By examining the issue of Comfort Women through both historical and humanitarian perspectives, I hope to contribute to a growing body of research that seeks to restore dignity to these women, ensuring their stories are not only heard but understood in all their complexity.

Chapter 1: Historical Context

The Comfort Women system established by the Japanese Imperial Army cannot be fully understood without exploring the historical and political conditions that enabled such a phenomenon. This chapter offers a comprehensive examination of the key factors that led to the creation of Comfort Stations, focusing on Japan's expansionist ambitions and the militaristic ideology that permeated its military ranks. Central to this narrative is the Manchurian Incident, a critical turning point that set the stage for Japan's aggressive military campaigns across Asia.

By analyzing the relationship between military factionalism and Japan's socio-political environment in the early 20th century, this chapter sheds light on how systemic violence and sexual exploitation became ingrained practices.

1.1 The Manchurian Incident and Army Factionalism

During the early 20th century, Japan slowly established its power and control over the entirety of East Asia, which was constantly at war from the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 until the end of World War II in 1945.

The start of Japan's expansionist policies took place in Manchuria, control of which was relinquished by Russia in 1905 and by China in 1915 thanks to an agreement between the three.¹ The rail network in southern Manchuria was gained after defeating Russia in the war in 1905, which gave Japanese troops the right to station and protect the nation's interests

¹ Sandra Wilson, *The Manchurian Crisis and Japanese Society, 1931-33*, 15.

within the region. The South Manchurian Railway Company was finally established in 1906 with a budget of 200 million yen², therefore becoming the largest Japanese firm and consequently acting as an instrument of political power. The region was important to both Japan and China for the exportation of the soya bean, which was exported to Japan as a fertilizer and fodder, and to Europe as a raw material useful for the manufacturing of vegetable oil. By 1927, the majority of the world's soya supply came from Manchuria, which became vital for the economic well-being of Japan.

The speed with which Japan gained economic footing made the country gain momentum, thanks to which it was possible to announce a policy declaring the Japanese right to intervene in the affairs of Manchuria and Mongolia. In fear of losing said momentum, a group of Kwantung Army Officers was sent to assassinate the Manchurian warlord Chang Tso-lin in the summer of 1928. What Japan failed to predict was how Chang Hsueh-Liang, Chang Tso-lin's successor, would fly the Nationalist flag in Manchuria by the end of the year.³ Chinese nationalism now posed a threat that Japan could not ignore since it caused labor strikes against Japanese firms and the disruption of the railway stations that permitted Japan's rise in economic status. Regardless of the persistent anti-Japanese boycott that took place in 1928, the Japanese residents in Manchuria formed the Manchurian Youth League, which was a pressure group solely dedicated to the defense of Japanese interests and rights in Manchuria.⁴ Nobody supported the use of military force to take control of the region, if

² Sandra Wilson, 15.

³ Sandra Wilson, 17.

⁴ Sandra Wilson, 17.

not the army since the ideal way to deal with it at the time was international cooperation. Matter of fact, what we now remember as the Manchurian Incident was instigated by the very members of the Kwantung Army in September 1931⁵, which was in the views of the majority of the Japanese army.

In July 1931, a conflict broke out between Chinese and Korean farmers over irrigation rights in Wanpaoshan.⁶ The Chinese police backed the first, while the Japanese police backed the second. The Korean farmers eventually prevailed with the help of the Japanese police force. Such conflict caused an uproar in Korea, where anti-Chinese riots immediately broke out, fueled by the Japanese extremist propaganda. The League of Nations Commission of Inquiry set up an investigation on the Manchurian Incident, which was encountered in two different ways by the two parties: Japanese observers saw this as an opportunity to bring forth evidence on the Chinese infringement of Japan's legitimate rights in Manchuria, while the Chinese started an anti-Japanese boycott in Shanghai.⁷ The already tense climate was further worsened by the murder of Captain Nakamura Shintarō by Chinese officials who rightfully believed him to be a spy. The Captain's death was made public in mid-August, making any attempt at diplomatic resolution futile as it gave the military and ultra-nationalists in Japan the excuse to use violence as a means to solve the Manchurian issue. The Nakamura case made the Japanese population significantly more willing to accept any forcible solution concerning all Manchuria-related issues.⁸ This

⁵ W. G. Beasley, *The Modern History of Japan*, 244.

⁶ Sandra Wilson, *The Manchurian Crisis and Japanese Society, 1931-33*, 18.

⁷ Sandra Wilson, 19.

⁸ Sandra Wilson, 19.

tension inevitably peaked in the Mukden Incident, which consisted of the railway explosion made by Japanese officials but blamed on Chinese dissidents. Japan's Imperial Military extremists responded to the scenario by completely invading Manchuria, therefore creating the puppet state of *Manchiukuo* six months later.

Following the invasion of Manchuria, the escalation of aggression within the Imperial Japanese Army ultimately culminated in the May 15 incident, marked by a noticeable shift towards increased violence and a heightened sense of arrogance among its tanks. The May 15 incident was an attempted military coup in the Empire of Japan on May 15, 1932, launched by the Japanese Imperial Navy with the aid of the Japanese Imperial Army.⁹ The Prime Minister's (Inukai Tsuyoshi) assassination led to a trial, which gave the perpetrators extremely light sentences thanks to the Japanese population's support, further feeding into the already rising power of Japanese militarism.

There was an undoubted need to restore discipline within the extremist parts of the military forces, which would have been possible with the help of higher-ranking generals. Starting any form of dialogue with the army revealed itself to be complicated since there were two focal points to the matter, the first being the acceptance of the Manchurian expansion, and the second being the hierarchy within military forces. As far as the second point is concerned, change in the power that higher-ups had on lower-ranking officials was imperative since the latter desired much more freedom than the one they had at the time. The result of applying such measures would be controlling the army at the cost of

⁹ W. G. Beasley, *The Modern History of Japan*, 247.

concessions, which were still proven to be severely arduous because of the diverging opinion among military commanders.

The prominent divide within the Japanese Army, known as factionalism, delineated the Imperial Army into the Tōsei-ha faction and the Kōdō-ha faction; Generals Araki and Mazaki were heads of the Kōdō group, while Generals Nagata, Tōjō, and Umezu were heads of the Tōsei faction.¹⁰

The first faction followed the principles of *kokutai*¹¹, which targeted the construction of a new Japanese culture, which was to be created after a thorough analysis of Western cultures to then apply Japanese national polity as a basis. As far as the Tōsei officers were concerned, they expressed keen interest in ideas similar to those present in Nazi Germany. The rivalry between the two reached its peak on the abortive rebellion done in February 1936 by the younger members of the Kōdō-ha faction, against War Minister Hayashi, who was abundantly supportive of the Tōsei-ha. All the assassination attempts performed in the 1930s were linked to the enmity present within the Imperial Army's factions. The process and birth of army factionalism could be summarized in four main themes: the hierarchy within the Imperial Army, the Chōshū clique's legacy and its leadership within the military scene, the transformation and professionalization of officer corps, and finally the continuous race to adapt to the growth of warfare, which undoubtedly leads to the need to develop new strategies. If we were to take these themes into account, we would have to

¹⁰ James B. Crowley, “Japanese Army Factionalism in the Early 1930’s,” 309–10.

¹¹ Olga Yazovskaya, “CONCEPT OF KOKUTAI AS NATIONAL ESSENCE IN THE FOUNDATION OF JAPAN’S IMPERIAL SUBJECTNESS IN LATE XIX — FIRST HALF OF XX CENTURY.”

divide the factions into four types: the radical young officers, the Seigun-ha, the Tōsei-ha, and the Kōdō-ha.

When it comes to regular officer corps, they diverged into those who attended the Military Academy and those who graduated from the War College. Each one of these two education systems provided two different sets of students, which would eventually take part in either one of the two main factions of the Imperial Army. The graduates of the Military Academy distinguished themselves from the ones coming from the War College based on their education, which consisted of thorough schooling regarding the principles of *kokutai*. The result of such an intense indoctrination was the creation of the *Kokutai genri* faction, consisting of an organization of officers who used fear as a tool to successfully create the Shōwa renovation.¹² Given that this specific faction was extremely prone to the use of violence to achieve their goal, it comes as no surprise that members of such a group were involved in the assassinations happening in 1932 and the February 1936 incident.

Nevertheless, there was no proof discovered connecting the youths of the *Kokutai genri-ha* with the senior associates of the Kōdō-ha before the summer of 1935. As far as the War College is concerned, the competition for its entrance was remarkably intense. Not only was the admission characterized by competition among the students, but such an attitude persisted through the selection of graduates since officers were chosen based on the recommendations of commanding officers and the passing of an entrance examination, along with their academic records.¹³ Regardless of the role that merit and performance had

¹² James B. Crowley, "Japanese Army Factionalism in the Early 1930's," 312.

¹³ James B. Crowley, 312.

within the selection process, the historical legacy connected to the officers from the Chōsū region prevailed and had a lasting impact on power dynamics within the Imperial Army.

The demise of the Chōsū domination officially started with the appointment of General Ugaki as War Minister. By 1930, the War Ministry and the General Staff were employed with officers chosen predominantly based on their academic performance at the War College and endorsements from their commanding officers. War Minister Ugaki also started a program that would guarantee the mechanization of the Army, emphasizing the use of tanks, airplanes, and communication. He also reorganized the War Ministry in a way that could include the creation of a Bureau of Equipment and Supplies, so that he could implement his mechanization program successfully, and assigned Colonel Nagata Tetsuzan as its head.

Given Colonel Nagata's background in the study of the German General Staff, he was thoroughly convinced that the complete mobilization of Japanese men and resources was essential to conclude any prospect of war successfully.¹⁴ This new organizational plan was met with clear opposition by those who were devoted to the now obsolete concept of “mass tactics”. Such resistance to the implementation of a new technique, along with the already present anti-Chōsū hostility, created a tense climate that General Araki quickly perceived. General Araki was viewed as a defender of traditional values across the nation, quickly becoming a figure worth admiring for junior officers and one worth respecting for the Central Headquarters staff.

¹⁴ James B. Crowley, 313–14.

The clear support that General Araki was experiencing, inevitably resulted in the start of his career as the first War Minister without Chōsū affiliation, in December 1931. It was widely known that he harbored a strong feeling of rancor against anybody who was part of the Chōsū dynasty, his hatred being so strong that he reassigned every Chōsū general present in the Central Headquarters to the field.¹⁵ The extreme measure that Minister Araki applied, caused severe unrest within the Central Headquarters, which also made bitter feelings ferment among Chōsū officers.

Regardless of the rise in distrust about the War Minister's choices, he continued his rhetoric on the wonders of the Imperial Way, while focusing his attention on a potential war with the Soviet Union, therefore coining the concept of “Crisis of 1936”.¹⁶ If we were to point out his main goals, we would list only two, those being the defense of Kōdō values as a convinced patriot and his focus on the destruction of the Soviet Union. Both of his objectives raised the worry that the Central Headquarters already harbored since his eager defense of Kōdō values served as fuel for the younger officers' constant ferment and since the “1936 Crisis” implemented new economic and industrial plans more challenging than what it already was. United by the growing unrest, the neutral Generals along with the Chōsū leaders of the Seigun-ha attacked the War Minister until he was forced to resign in January 1934, therefore becoming an active member of the Supreme War Council.¹⁷

¹⁵ James B. Crowley, 314–15.

¹⁶ James B. Crowley, 314.

¹⁷ James B. Crowley, 316.

Hayashi Senjūrō succeeded Araki as the new War Minister. He proceeded to act quickly to change the projects his predecessor had already started and his first course of action consisted in the abandonment of the theory of an early Soviet War, while programming to start diplomatic negotiations with the Soviet Union.¹⁸ After having dealt with the pressing matter of a potential conflict, he transferred General Yamaoka to the Bureau of Equipment and Supplies while appointing the Chief of the Bureau of Military Affairs to Nagata Tetsuzan. Minister Araki switched his focus from a possible outer conflict to the already present discrepancies within the country, he specifically wanted to program the exploitation of Manchuria and Mongolia, as well as programming agricultural districts during wartime.¹⁹ What he wanted to achieve was a total integration of Manchurian resources into the Japanese economy so that Japan could finally build the powerful military establishment it needed.

There were pressing matters in terms of demographic pressure, along with the inner clash between government officials and military forces. Three were the possible solutions to such a widely spread problem, the first being emigration, which was immediately dismissed because of the hostile relationships with other countries that made it impossible to move Japanese citizens to any other country that wasn't part of Japan. The second option that was considered was the conquest of international markets since it could have alleviated pressure that was exercised by the rising demography, this was also easily ruled out because of the customs barrier that was exercised by foreign countries but mainly by the US. The third and

¹⁸ James B. Crowley, 316.

¹⁹ James B. Crowley, 316.

only foreseeable solution was territorial expansion, which also made it permissible to justify the expansion projects towards Korea, China, and Manchuria²⁰, regardless of how these countries were supposed to become potential allies in case of a future conflict with the West, which they blatantly refused.

Prime Minister Konoe announced through a speech, which was aired, in November 1938 the creation of a “New Order” in East Asia, which was meant to unite Japan, China, and Mancukuo under one ruling, therefore creating Japanese bases over the entire new continent, while making sure that the participation and communication between police forces were completely monitored by Japan. Any thought of slowly and cautiously proceeding with the Chinese conquest proved itself hard to achieve since, at the end of 1936, Chiang Kai-shek made a pact with Chinese communists to sue Japan. The additional factor that made the Chinese conquest plan come to a halt was the major influence that the Tōsei-ha faction had on the majority of the Japanese population when it came to conquering Chinese territory. The product of both factors was the absolute conviction that such a mission could be achieved by 1937.

July 7, 1937, marked the start of the “Eight-year War of Resistance”, which is commonly known as the “Marco Polo Bridge Incident”.²¹ This conflict also triggered the newborn cooperation between the Chinese Communist Party and the Guomindang, a partnership that was nurtured after December 1936 because of the Xi’an Incident.

²⁰ James B. Crowley, 317.

²¹ W. G. Beasley, *The Modern History of Japan*, 263.

The Second Sino-Japanese War broke the already fragile relationship between China and Japan. Despite numerous attempts at appeasing both sides, the main issues surrounding the recognition of Manchukuo and the lack of trust between the two sides often rendered any progress that could be made impossible.

The creation of Manchukuo sparked continuous controversies, which is the reason behind China's reluctance to recognize the puppet state since it was viewed as a violation of Chinese sovereignty. Moreover, the worsening cooperation among Great Powers, particularly between Japan and the United States, intensified animosity.

Ultimately, the failure to reach a consensus on the Manchukuo dilemma fueled the already existing hostilities and the inevitable start of the Second Sino-Japanese War. At this point, the Chinese government was forced to retreat to Chungking, which deeply influenced the Japanese general public in their conviction of eradicating Chinese power as much as possible.²² Despite the compromise that Chiang Kai-shek proposed, Japanese forces irremovably maintained their stance on continuing said conflict, so much so that a naval block was issued on the entire Chinese coast, along with the bombardment of Chinese cities. The entirety of these aimed attacks resulted in a complete international isolation of the Chinese nation.

The subsequent attacks did, however, cause an inevitable economic fatigue, which resulted in a change of strategy in fear of a possible nearing conflict with Russian forces. Said

²² W. G. Beasley, 263–64.

strategy consisted of a precise focus on political strategies aiming to isolate China as much as possible, starting from attacking its capital at the time: Nanjing.

1.2 The Nanjing Massacre

The escalating tensions between the two nations culminated in the Nanjing massacre. On July 7, 1937, Japanese troops began advancing towards southern China, with the capture of the Chinese capital of Nanjing being a primary objective for the Japanese Imperial Army. The Japanese strategy involved first seizing Shanghai, which was set in motion on August 9, 1937, when two Japanese officers attempted to enter the Shanghai-Hongqiao Airport by car. Their attempt was blocked by Chinese officers, who were subsequently killed. In retaliation, Chinese guards killed the Japanese officers, providing the Japanese military with a pretext to attack Zhabei in Shanghai. The battle for Shanghai lasted three months due to the determined resistance of the Chinese Army but ultimately ended in a Japanese victory and the subsequent siege of Nanjing.

The Chinese Nationalist Government retreated from Nanjing, leaving behind a poorly coordinated defense force, mainly consisting of local officers who were easily beaten. On December 9, the city of Nanjing fell under Japanese control, leading to the arrest and killing of innocent civilians and non-Chinese refugees. The Imperial Army perpetrated numerous atrocities that would come to light after the Second World War, resulting in mass murder and a death toll exceeding 300,000 victims.²³

²³ Wang Qin, *An Illustrated History of The Nanjing Massacre Compiled by The Memorial Hall of The Victims in The Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders*, 54.

The event, historically known as the “Rape of Nanjing” involved the widespread sexual violence committed by the Japanese Army during the massacre. The brutal use of women's bodies to assert dominance shocked foreign observers, who likened the Japanese soldiers to beasts. Estimates suggest that between 20,000 and 80,000 cases of rape occurred in Nanjing, with victims ranging from infants to the elderly, including pregnant women. The scale and indiscriminate nature of these atrocities marked one of the darkest chapters in wartime history.²⁴

Japanese soldiers systematically looted nearly every building within Nanjing, taking anything of value they could carry. Those structures that were not accessible or fully plundered were set on fire, including properties owned by foreign nationals. Over 100,000 corpses were left scattered both inside and outside the city. To eliminate evidence of their crimes, the Japanese forces disposed of many of these bodies by throwing them into the Yangtze River. The remaining corpses were dealt with by various charitable organizations. Among these were the *World Red Swastika Society's Nanjing* branch, which buried 43,123 bodies, the *China Red Cross Nanjing* branch, which buried 22,371 bodies, the *Chongshantang*, responsible for burying 112,267 bodies, and the *Tongshantang*, which interred more than 7,000 bodies. Additionally, a Muslim organization buried approximately 400 bodies. These efforts underscore the scale of the massacre and the devastation inflicted upon the population.²⁵

²⁴ Wang Qin, 85.

²⁵ Wang Qin, 100.

In November 1937, foreigners in Nanjing decided to follow the example of the Refugee Zone in Shanghai to establish an international rescue organization and call it “The International Committee for Nanjing Safety Zone”. The Committee elected Mr. John Rabe from the Siemens Corporation of Germany chairman, General Secretary Hang Liwu, and American Deputy Secretary George Fitch.²⁶ The Refugee Zone occupied an area of around 3.68 square kilometers, which had 25 refugee shelters. In February, the International Committee for Nanjing Safety Zone was renamed the Nanjing International Relief Committee. At the same time, the International Committee and the Refugee Zone were dissolved and the last refugee centers were closed in May 1938.

1.3 Japan’s Turmoil Before World War II

The fighting in Shanghai during the Second Sino-Japanese War was unexpectedly prolonged and intense. Negotiations for peace were initiated by German Ambassador, Oskar P. Trautmann, to China, who aimed to mediate a peaceful resolution between the two countries and restrain the Soviet Union. Initially, the Chinese government and military were receptive to the negotiations, but as the war situation shifted in Japan’s favor, their stance became more demanding. The hope to force Chiang Kai-shek's surrender by capturing the Chinese capital of Nanjing further complicated the peace efforts.²⁷

Within the Japanese army, there was a division of opinions. While the general staff office hoped for the success of the peace negotiations to avoid an unnecessarily prolonged war,

²⁶ Wang Qin, 114.

²⁷ Kitaoka Shinichi, “The Political History of Modern Japan: Foreign Relations and Domestic Politics,” 272.

Prime Minister Konoe and Foreign Minister Hirota were more aligned with the anti-peace faction. This led to the termination of peace efforts in January 1938 with the 1st Konoe Statement, in which Japan declared it would no longer negotiate with the Kuomintang government.²⁸ Consequently, both the army and the political leadership of Japan played a significant role in the escalation of the conflict because of their involvement.

The Konoe Cabinet also marked a vital moment in domestic Japanese politics since it embraced plans for expanding the country's industrial capacity, which required complete control over the provision of goods, especially after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. This led to the establishment of the Planning Board, made by influential economic bureaucrats, which prioritized military demand over civilian needs.²⁹ The government also expanded its economic control by passing laws such as the National Mobilization Law and the Electricity Management Law³⁰, despite opposition from established political parties.

The Social Masses Party, a pro-government faction that rose to prominence during Konoe's tenure, mirrored the evolving political environment of the time. However, internal discord was evident within the party, exemplified by the expulsion of Nishio Suehiro from the Diet in 1938 following his controversial speech endorsing the National Mobilization Law. This

²⁸ Kitaoka Shinichi, 272.

²⁹ Kitaoka Shinichi, 273.

³⁰ Kitaoka Shinichi, 273.

incident highlighted the parties' frustration at their inability to oppose the new laws and their apprehension towards the growing influence of the Social Masses Party.

Amidst these developments, there were discussions around the formation of a new political party, and Konoe's popularity made established parties cautious about opposing him. In May 1938, Konoe reshuffled his cabinet and made attempts to change his stance on negotiations with the Kuomintang government.³¹ However, these moves faced opposition from both the army and the foreign ministry. The resignation of the foreign minister, Ugaki, in September 1938 indicated the complexities and challenges faced by the Japanese government as the war entered a critical phase.³²

1.4 World War II

After Konoe's resignation, Hiranuma Kiichirō became the Prime Minister during a period of escalating tension with the United States. Following Japan's 1938 declaration of a “new order in East Asia,” America shifted to openly supporting China, with Britain following suit.³³ In July 1939, the United States revoked the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation with Japan, further souring relations. Japan also suffered significant military defeats during the conflict with Soviet forces along the border between the Mongolian People's Republic and

³¹ Kitaoka Shinichi, 275.

³² Kitaoka Shinichi, 276.

³³ Kitaoka Shinichi, 278.

Manchukuo, commonly referred to as the Nomonhan Incident. Despite heavy Soviet losses, these battles symbolized clear defeats for Japan.

One potential diplomatic solution involved promoting the Wang Jingwei scheme in China, which was a loaded choice. An alternative approach involved the reinforcement of the Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany and Italy, which was faced with opposition from the Japanese Navy. However, the scenario changed significantly following the signing of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact in August 1939. In response to the treaty, Hiranuma declared that Europe had produced “a complicated and puzzling phenomenon” before resigning.³⁴

In September 1939, Germany invaded Poland, prompting Britain and France to declare war. The outbreak of World War II presented Japan with a critical opportunity to redirect its foreign policy. Abe Nobuyuki’s cabinet, which succeeded Hiranuma, constituted a move away from the reform-oriented leadership of earlier years.³⁵ Abe’s objective was to restore relations with Britain and the United States, which prompted him to appoint Nomura Kichisaburō, a navy official known for his pro-American stance, as foreign minister. However, the cabinet failed to improve relations with the United States, and the abrogation of the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation went into effect in January 1940. The nationwide unrest worsened with the heightened commodity prices, which inevitably led to the cabinet’s resignation in early 1940.

³⁴ Kitaoka Shinichi, 278.

³⁵ Kitaoka Shinichi, 278.

The Yonai Mitsumasa Cabinet, formed shortly after, was cautious and sought to maintain the status quo. Nonetheless, Japan established the Wang Jingwei government in China successfully in March 1940. The situation in Europe shifted that same year, with Germany's *blitzkrieg* leading to the rapid fall of the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France by June. This sudden collapse of colonial powers in Southeast Asia, combined with the absence of the U.S.-Japan commercial treaty, intensified calls for a southward advance by Japan to secure critical resources. However, opposition within the Yonai government, along with rising public demand for closer alignment with Germany, culminated in the fall of the Yonai Cabinet in July 1940.³⁶ This caused the appointment of Konoe Fumimaro as prime minister.

With the formation of Konoe's second cabinet, his efforts to build a new political party gained momentum. Established parties, wary of being left behind, dissolved and merged into this new movement. Yet, Konoe hesitated when criticized by the right wing, which accused him of attempting to create a shogunate-like entity that would sabotage the Emperor's authority. The *Imperial Rule Assistance Association* (Taisei Yokusankai) was founded in October 1940 but remained ideologically weak despite its large size.³⁷

In foreign affairs, Konoe's cabinet appointed Matsuoka Yōsuke, who was responsible for Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations, as foreign minister.³⁸ Matsuoka, while supported by mid-level reform bureaucrats, prioritized the bond with Germany and Italy, leading to Japan's signing of the Tripartite Pact in September 1940. He then turned to

³⁶ Kitaoka Shinichi, 280.

³⁷ Kitaoka Shinichi, 280.

³⁸ Kitaoka Shinichi, 280.

negotiations with the Soviet Union, which resulted in the Japan-Soviet Neutrality Pact in April 1941. Matsuoka's strategy aimed to use this alliance with Germany and the Soviet Union as leverage in negotiations with the United States.³⁹

In the meantime, Japan occupied northern French Indochina in late 1940, seeking to cut off supply routes to Chiang Kai-shek to then use the power vacuum in Southeast Asia to its advantage. This triggered a strong reaction from the United States, which responded by banning the export of scrap iron to Japan. Although secret negotiations with the United States continued, Matsuoka showed little interest, leading to Konoe's brief resignation in July 1941. Upon forming a new cabinet, Konoe removed Matsuoka to de-escalate the rising tension with the United States and try to restore their rapidly declining relationship.

Despite such efforts, Japan's occupation of southern French Indochina in July 1941 provoked a stern reaction from the United States, which froze Japanese assets and imposed an oil embargo. This unexpectedly harsh reaction worsened U.S.-Japan relations even further. Commentators like Kiyosawa Kiyoshi, despite the increasingly repressive atmosphere in Japan, argued that war with the United States could still be avoided if Japan restrained its ambitions beyond China.⁴⁰ However, Japan had already made moves that extended well beyond China, through its alliance with Germany and occupation of Indochina.

The deteriorating relations escalated even further because of the outbreak of the German-Soviet War in June 1941. Once the Soviet Union joined the war, the United States no longer

³⁹ Kitaoka Shinichi, 280.

⁴⁰ Kitaoka Shinichi, 282.

felt the need to negotiate with Japan. In response, Konoe sought to meet with U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, but his proposal was rejected.⁴¹

In a crucial meeting held in the presence of the Emperor on September 6, 1941, Japan's government decided to prepare for war against the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands by late October. With diplomatic negotiations at a standstill, the 3rd Konoe Cabinet resigned in October 1941, and General Tōjō Hideki became prime minister.⁴² His appointment was intended to hold the military accountable for directing the nation's actions. Japan proposed a final negotiation with the U.S., but its rejection by U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull on November 26, 1941, effectively extinguished any prospects for peace. This rejection, embodied in the Hull Note, demanded Japan's withdrawal from China and Indochina, making war inevitable in the eyes of the majority of Japanese officials.

Japan's decision to engage in total war with the United States and Britain in 1941, despite the already existing tension with the Soviet Union and the protracted conflict in China, was illogical. By 1941, the Japanese Empire could hardly be described as a militarist state, as the nation had become irrevocably divided due to the contrasting views among its officials. Efforts to create a unified national policy failed, as did attempts to empower bureaucratic structures to fill the gaps caused by such fragmentation. Criticism of Konoe's new system as a *Bakufu* underscored the deep-seated political dysfunction that prevented cohesive leadership.

⁴¹ Kitaoka Shinichi, 282.

⁴² Kitaoka Shinichi, 282.

By the end of the war, even prominent critics like Ishibashi Tanzan, who were opposed to military leadership, recognized the need for strong, decisive leadership.⁴³ However, the absence of such figures during the wartime period contributed to Japan's inability to manage its war efforts effectively. The eventual decision to surrender in 1945, made through an extraordinary imperial intervention, only underscored the dysfunction that had plagued the Japanese government in the preceding years.

⁴³ Kitaoka Shinichi, 287.

Chapter 2: Comfort Stations

This chapter delves into Comfort Stations's organizational structure and coordination, shedding light on how these institutions were systematically managed and sustained. It examines the mechanisms by which Comfort Women were recruited and how the Japanese military played an instrumental role in facilitating this process. In addition to exploring recruitment practices, the chapter also provides documentation and evidence that certifies the formation and operation of these Comfort Stations. Furthermore, it investigates the role of sexual education within the stations, focusing on how it was used as a tool for control, discipline, and maintaining the soldiers' physical health.

2.1 Organization and Funding

The building and creation of Comfort Stations run by Military Officials were based on already existing models. The first ever documented Comfort Station dates back to the 1920s, known as *Dai-ichi Salon*⁴⁴, which served Japanese expatriates and was modeled after Japanese establishments.

The official history of the Comfort Women and the Comfort Stations system begins in January 1932 in Shanghai, where commanders of a Japanese marine special unit converted local Japanese businesses into Comfort Stations. Said Comfort Stations included “The *Dai-ichi Salon*”, the “*Inn of the Triple Blessings*”, the “*Little Pine Pavillon*” and the “*Inn of*

⁴⁴ Zhiliang Su, “Reconstructing the History of the ‘Comfort Women’ System: The Fruits of 28 Years of Investigation into the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue in China,” 2.

Eternal Happiness”.⁴⁵ The *Dai-ichi Salon* operated from January 1932 to August 1945, making it the longest-lasting Comfort Station activity to date.

Public opinion regarding the Japanese troops, both within Chinese territory and overseas, was largely negative due to the widespread use of sexual assault and violence as war tactics. This prompted senior officers of the expeditionary force in Shanghai to recruit women from Japan to staff military-supervised brothels. Senior Staff Officer Okabe Naozaburo played a central role in implementing this initiative.

In his diary entry on March 14, 1932, he wrote:

*“Currently, our troops are molesting women all over the place, and news of all sorts of immoral behavior is emerging. In order to solve our soldiers’ sexual issues, we have to actively pursue this kind of approach.”*⁴⁶

After discussing the issue at hand with his superiors, Okamura requested an urgent recruitment of women to form “*Comfort Women Units*” in Shanghai’s occupied zone. The women who were recruited by Japanese authorities were rarely Japanese themselves unless they were professionally known sex workers because they feared soldiers’ reactions should they find one of their relatives working as a Comfort Woman.⁴⁷

The Marco Polo Bridge Incident in the summer of 1937 was the catalyst for the rapid expansion of Comfort Stations, turning what was born as a ‘commercial brothel’ into a system of sexual enslavement of women. Such a system heavily relied on the Japanese

⁴⁵ Zhiliang Su, 5.

⁴⁶ Zhiliang Su, 5.

⁴⁷ Gwyn Campbell and Elizabeth Elbourne, *Sex, Power, and Slavery*.

government's support, under the pretext of prioritizing war above anything else, involving the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs and Justice, as well as the entire police apparatus, local government bodies, and the military itself.⁴⁸ In addition to the parties listed prior, there is undeniable evidence certifying the involvement of the diplomatic corps in supplying Japanese and Korean women to Chinese Comfort Stations, therefore underlining the systematic and indubitable complicity of government officials.

Following the outbreak of total war in 1937, the Shanghai Expeditionary Force and the Army of the Central China Front directly ordered the establishment of Comfort Stations. Such action proves how the Army of the Central China Front was already instructing the Shanghai Expeditionary Force to construct Comfort Stations, before the Japanese occupation of Nanjing. This shows beyond doubt that the female body has always been objectified to the point of becoming merely a means for soldiers to unwind, thus highlighting deeply ingrained societal gender norms.

On March 4, 1938, the Japanese Central Command issued a confidential order (No. 745) to the Chiefs of Staff of the Northern and Central China Armies, regarding the recruitment of Comfort Women and the establishment of Comfort Stations.⁴⁹ It ordered each force to appoint specific workers to recruit women, along with the help of local police forces. On September 19, 1940, the ministry distributed educational materials to every division titled

⁴⁸ Zhiliang Su, "Reconstructing the History of the 'Comfort Women' System: The Fruits of 28 Years of Investigation into the 'Comfort Women' Issue in China," 5.

⁴⁹ Zhiliang Su, 6.

"Methods for Maintaining Troop Morale Based on the Experience of the China Incident."

The materials stated that

*"in dealing with behavior such as plunder, rape, arson, and the killing of captives," it was believed that "sexual comfort stations have an extremely large influence on the spirit [of the troops]," emphasizing that "serious consideration must be given to comfort facilities."*⁵⁰

These materials highlighted that the primary purpose of comfort stations was to maintain military morale and discipline while preventing incidents of rape.

After an inspection in China in 1940, the head of the Army Medical Bureau reported that:

*"Life on the front line in China is generally tough. We must therefore consider the provision of spiritual comfort to troops and officials. I heard a unit commander say that incidents of desertion and violence without any clear cause are rife, demonstrating the need to establish for the troops some sort of spiritual support. A regimental commander demanded the dispatch of "comfort brigades". This is especially necessary for those who have spent three years away from home. They urge the army to take rapid measures."*⁵¹

As far as the funding of Comfort Stations is concerned, two historical documents were found in Jilin certifying how large the investment was. A document from the Manchurian Central Bank, referencing a March 1945 telephone conversation with the Foreign Investment Unit of the bank's Treasury Department, notes the approval by the Kwantung

⁵⁰ Zhiliang Su, 6.

⁵¹ Zhiliang Su, 7.

Army to allocate 252,000 Japanese yen for the purchase of comfort women on behalf of Unit 7990 in Xuzhou. The document goes on to mention three additional transactions: 50,000 yen on November 17, 1944; 150,000 yen on December 16, 1944; and 80,000 yen on January 24, 1945. Altogether, Unit 7990 spent 532,000 yen on "purchasing comfort women" over just four months.⁵²

The use of military funds to create and organize a fully-fledged system of sexual slavery became routine, further emphasizing the crucial role that the Japanese government and its army played in normalizing and transforming Comfort Stations into a systemic and coordinated operation. It is important to note that the funds designated for recruiting comfort women were not used to compensate the women directly, who were provided with barely enough income for basic survival.

Some comfort stations were operated by local Japanese or Korean civilians, while others were managed by Chinese collaborators. Additionally, some comfort stations were originally private brothels that were seized and run by the Japanese military or puppet government authorities. Among the victims of systematic military sexual exploitation, many did not work in official comfort stations; such a phenomenon was mostly prevalent in China. Furthermore, the war criminal Akita Matsuyoshi testified that from February 1940 to May 1941, the Third Squadron of the 43rd Regiment, stationed in Zhang Qiu County, compelled five local women to serve as comfort women, as he stated:

⁵² Zhiliang Su, 7.

*“The fifteen of us [sexually abused] these five Chinese women for a period of one year and five months.”*⁵³

While some Comfort Women quite literally died of shame, a few were even killed and eaten by Japanese troops. Ebato Takeshi, an officer in the Machine Gun Squadron of the 111th Regiment, testified that in Su Ke Village, in Shandong, the army forced one of the women to become an officer’s Comfort Woman. After being stationed in the village for an extended period, food became increasingly scarce, leading the officer to kill and eat her.⁵⁴ Furthermore, he deceived his comrades about the source of the meat, resulting in all of them consuming some while sending the leftovers to Brigade headquarters.

Amidst the responsibilities of military personnel assigned to manage Comfort Stations was tracking the number of officers and soldiers who utilized their services. The Jilin Archives contain documents related to two reports, specifically from February 1938, submitted by Ōki Shigeru, Commander of the Military Police under the Central China Expeditionary Force, to his Army Staff.

*“The document records that in Wuhu the number of comfort women had increased by 84 over the previous period. Amongst 109 comfort women, there were 48 Japanese, 36 Koreans, and 25 Chinese. Meanwhile, the 109 comfort women in Zhenjiang had to serve 15,000 soldiers – a ratio of one woman to 137 men.”*⁵⁵

⁵³ Zhiliang Su, 8.

⁵⁴ Zhiliang Su, 9.

⁵⁵ Zhiliang Su, 10.

2.2 Recruitment and Sexual Stress

One of the most debated aspects is whether the Japanese government coerced the Comfort Women. Kim Hak-sun, one of the first Korean women to file a lawsuit against the Japanese government, testified that her family was so poor that they had to give her up for adoption. Her foster father subsequently sent her to a training school for prostitutes, from which she graduated in 1939 at the age of seventeen. He then took her and another girl by truck, claiming he had found a suitable job for her without specifying what it entailed. The truck traveled across Korea until it arrived at a small village in northern China, where the Japanese Imperial Army was stationed. Upon arrival, Kim was imprisoned and forced to serve between seven and ten men each day.⁵⁶

Another anonymous witness testified that in 1942⁵⁷, she left home and was approached by two men, one Korean and one Japanese, who asked if she was interested in going to Japan to work in a textile factory. Although she was hesitant, she accepted their offer but soon regretted her decision once she boarded the ship. She was forcibly detained and arrived in Rabaul, where she joined a group of about twenty women working as Comfort Women in a church building.

An anonymous Korean victim recounted that a Korean man came to her village with a job offer in Shanghai, providing her with an advance payment of about forty yen, which she willingly accepted.⁵⁸ The man then took her to an inn in a nearby town, where around

⁵⁶ Gwyn Campbell and Elizabeth Elbourne, *Sex, Power, and Slavery*, 393.

⁵⁷ Gwyn Campbell and Elizabeth Elbourne, 393.

⁵⁸ Gwyn Campbell and Elizabeth Elbourne, 394.

fifteen other Korean women had gathered. They were all subsequently taken to Shanghai, where they were driven to a Comfort Station on the outskirts.

This investigation revealed a grand variation of methods used by the Japanese militia to lure and coerce women, which differed when dealing with native Japanese women and non-Japanese women. While the first category of women was handled with caution in fear of triggering Japanese soldiers with possible acquaintances, the second was not handled with as much care. Local Korean government officials, police agents, brothel managers, and human traffickers played the role of recruiters.⁵⁹

With the frequent use of Comfort Stations, many soldiers became addicted to sex to the point that they tried to find relief outside Comfort Stations. Soldiers often approached unknown women when dispatched to areas they occupied, replicating the same violations inflicted on Comfort Women. While in times of peace, sexual assaulters acted in secrecy, they mostly did the exact opposite in war zones, raping women in public as a show of dominance and power over locals.

The use of rape in times of conflict became a widespread and normalized campaign with the goal of abuse and intimidation, to the point that female captives were repeatedly assaulted, mutilated, and murdered. Such practices went unpunished more times than most, as sexual aggressiveness was deemed to be connected to viciousness in the field, and also because of the lack of resistance from the victims' families.

⁵⁹ Gwyn Campbell and Elizabeth Elbourne, 394.

The majority of soldiers who visited Comfort Stations regularly also frequented local prostitutes, increasing the already widely spread STDs. To contain this, senior married soldiers gave their juniors advice on preventive measures while also spreading information contained in Japanese newspapers, which was designed to scare impressionable soldiers away from unregulated sex and not to educate them in any way.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Gwyn Campbell and Elizabeth Elbourne, 298.

Chapter 3: The Aftermath

Incomplete apologies, political maneuvering, and an overall denialism characterize the aftermath of the Comfort Women issue. Japan's formal apologies, like the Kono Statement, have often been criticized for lacking genuine accountability, while efforts such as the Asian Women's Fund have failed to fully address the survivors' needs. This chapter explores these shortcomings, highlighting how political agendas overshadow the real victim's suffering. It also brings forward personal stories, such as Jang Jeom-dol's and Choi Seon-soon's, to illustrate the human cost behind these political debates. Finally, it addresses the importance of confronting epistemic injustice and the need for both acknowledgment and reparations.

3.1 Japan's Apology and Lack of Accountability

As much as NGOs and the media have played a significant role in raising awareness and advocating for former Comfort Women, their actions have also drawn a significant amount of criticism. For instance, the Asian Women's Fund struggled to raise funds for former Comfort Women, with only a little over 300 million yen collected, which was insufficient for their advertising efforts.⁶¹ Activists and media outlets were accused of exploiting the image of Comfort Women to fuel anti-Japanese sentiment, as expressed by former President Roh Tae-woo, who stated that it was the Japanese press that amplified the issue, thus antagonizing Korean people.⁶²

⁶¹ Ikuhiko Hata, *Comfort Women and Sex in the Battle Zone*, 233.

⁶² Ikuhiko Hata, 233.

The Kono Statement (1993) represents a significant change since the Japanese Government officially acknowledged its role in these wartime atrocities. Since then, the Comfort Women issue has remained a contentious subject, influenced by both domestic and international political agendas. The Coomaraswamy Report (1996)⁶³ further served as a turning point as far as sexual slavery and trafficking were concerned, since it tackled the case of a Polish woman who was sexually trafficked against her will. This was submitted to the UN Human Rights Commission and was met with mixed reactions. On the one end, NGOs and foreign NGOs celebrated its approval despite Japanese opposition, on the other end, the Japanese Foreign Ministry interpreted the resolution as a de facto rejection since it merely ‘took note’ of their objection⁶⁴.

The discourse around Comfort Women has been linked to broader discussions of war responsibility and reparations, with some veterans expressing frustration over how the issue is used politically against Japan.⁶⁵

Notably, the controversy was reignited in 2007 when Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made several statements diminishing the Japanese government’s involvement, drawing widespread chastisement. As a result, publications like the Japanese Communist Party’s *Akahata* condemned Abe’s remarks, while international media, including The New York

⁶³ Radhika Coomaraswamy and UN Commission on Human Rights Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences, Radhika Coomaraswamy.”

⁶⁴ Ikuhiko Hata, *Comfort Women and Sex in the Battle Zone*, 233.

⁶⁵ Ikuhiko Hata, 283.

Times⁶⁶ and Korean outlets, expressed strong disapproval. Anticipating Prime Minister Abe's visit to the United States, the members of the House of Representatives submitted Resolution H.R. 121⁶⁷, which censured Japan over the Comfort Women issue. This resolution was passed in July 2007, showcasing the political mobilization around the topic.

Any discourse around Comfort Women is portrayed as politically charged, often overshadowed by real historical facts. Both Japanese and foreign entities engage in political power games regarding the issue, leading to a significant distortion of facts and a focus on political maneuvers rather than reconciliation. There seems to be a recurring dichotomy between the formal, sterile language of apology and the private nature of the violence experienced by these women. The apologies tend to lean on an overall lack of acknowledgment of the specific acts committed against Comfort Women, framing the issue as a historical phenomenon rather than a personal trauma.

The Asian Women's Fund was established in 1995 in response to international criticism regarding Japan's unhurried response to demands for apology and compensation. While the Fund claims to rectify past wrongs and provide monetary compensation, it perpetuates a narrative that frames the issue as a private matter involving women, thus avoiding a clear admission of the historical context, systemic social structures that diminish and discriminate against women, and the responsibility of the Japanese Government.

⁶⁶ Norimitsu Onishi, "Abe Only Partly Successful in Defusing 'comfort Women' Issue."

⁶⁷ Rep. Honda, "H.Res.121 - 110th Congress (2007-2008)."

There are undeniable underlying patriarchal assumptions that contribute to the perception of women as expendable beings when certain categories of women (e.g. older, married, or those with certain backgrounds) are deemed more replaceable than others. This notion plays into the broader discourse of violence and exploitation, suggesting that Comfort Women were used as instruments for male satisfaction and productivity during war times. A focal discrepancy can be detected between how different forms of violence are publicly acknowledged and addressed. It contrasts with how Comfort Women were handled since they have not been given the same amount of public attention, significance, or recognition. Although efforts have been made to redefine this situation in legal and moral terms through apologies, compensation, and legal actions, these actions still fall short. They do not adequately account for the full extent of the documented wrongs or the life-altering trauma experienced by women.

3.2 Stories That Make History

3.2.1 Jang Jeom-dol

In the tormented history created by the voices of Comfort Women, Jang Jeom-dol stands out as a moving testament to resilience.⁶⁸ Born in Chungcheongbuk-do Yeongdong-gun in 1923, Jang's life was irrevocably altered when she was forcibly taken at the age of sixteen to serve as a Comfort Woman.

⁶⁸ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, *Stories That Make History*, 3:229.

Jang Jeom-dol, born in 1923 in Chungcheongbuk-do Yeongdong-gun, was taken from her home in Yeongdeungpo-gu at the young age of sixteen in 1938. She was forcibly dragged into Comfort Station. This abduction was a traumatic event, as she later recounted how her mother desperately tried to stop the soldiers from taking her away, crying out and holding onto them, but to no avail.⁶⁹

Once in the Comfort Station, Jang Jeom-dol was subjected to a life of hardship and abuse. She remembered the conditions vividly, stating that the girls were weighed on a scale, and those who met the desired weight were immediately loaded onto trucks. She recalled being frightened and confused, not understanding the full extent of her situation or where she was being taken.⁷⁰ The soldiers, along with Korean collaborators, treated the girls cruelly, and Jang Jeom-dol described how they would scream and curse at their captors, expressing their frustration and helplessness in a situation they had no control over.⁷¹

During her time at the comfort station, she suffered not only physical abuse but also emotional trauma. Jang Jeom-dol recounted how she was often treated like an object, used for the soldiers' pleasure, which left her feeling dehumanized and ashamed. The Japanese soldiers would come in, and if a girl was not compliant or submissive, she would face severe consequences, including violence.⁷²

⁶⁹ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:230.

⁷⁰ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:231.

⁷¹ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:232.

⁷² Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:236.

After several years of enduring this life, Jang Jeom-dol experienced a significant turning point when she became pregnant multiple times during her captivity, but tragically, her babies did not survive. She spoke of the pain of losing her children, stating.

“The baby died, and I was not able to heal my body. Was there even seaweed soup or anything like that? All I ate was cold water and rice...”⁷³

This loss compounded her suffering and reinforced her feelings of despair.

In 1945, with the liberation of Korea, Jang Jeom-dol returned home with her daughter, who was born in the comfort station. However, her return was not without its challenges since she had to navigate the complex emotional landscape of coming back to a family that had suffered in her absence. Her reunion with her family was filled with tears, as they did not know her fate during the years she was away.⁷⁴ Upon her return, she felt shame and guilt for what had happened to her, and she struggled with reconciling her past with her present life.⁷⁵

Jang Jeom-dol’s life post-liberation was marked by continued hardships and societal stigma. She faced challenges in her relationships, feeling that her past as a Comfort Woman would forever follow her. She once expressed her bitterness towards the Japanese, claiming.

“You come and give us compensation and beg us for forgiveness.”⁷⁶

⁷³ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:234.

⁷⁴ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:239.

⁷⁵ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:240.

⁷⁶ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:231.

This sentiment reflected her deep-seated anger and the unresolved trauma from her experiences. Throughout her life, Jang Jeom-dol fought to reclaim her narrative. She became involved in various movements advocating for the recognition and compensation of Comfort Women, emphasizing that their suffering should be acknowledged and addressed. She believed that speaking out about her experiences was not only a personal catharsis but also a necessary step towards healing for all women who endured similar fates.⁷⁷

In her later years, she resided in Incheon with her adopted nephew, reflecting on her past while continuing to advocate for justice for Comfort Women. Even in her advanced age, she remained outspoken, determined to ensure that her generation's pain would not be forgotten.⁷⁸

3.2.2 Choi Seon-soon

Choi Seon-soon, who is known by the pseudonym Kim Bong-yi, recounts her scarring experiences as a Japanese Military Comfort Woman. Born in Gyeongsangbuk-do Gyeongsan in 1928, she was taken at the age of 16 in 1944 through a draft notice, which she ran away from but was ultimately captured in Jangseong.⁷⁹

Choi describes her childhood as one filled with potential and intelligence, noting.

*“When I was little, people used to call me smart and clever.”*⁸⁰

However, her life took a drastic turn when she was drafted at the age of 16. She lamented

⁷⁷ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:266.

⁷⁸ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:231.

⁷⁹ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:253.

⁸⁰ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:253.

*"I do not know why the tears cause bitterness...The tears do not come."*⁸¹

She was taken by the Japanese military police while she was farming with others in her village and was forced onto a ship to Japan, where she would endure horrific conditions. During her transportation, she recalls

*"We screamed at them, saying, why are you taking us? So, we were beaten."*⁸²

While at the comfort station, her experience was traumatic, as she noted that she was treated "worse than an animal," and described the daily violence and sexual assaults that she and other girls endured.⁸³ Choi struggled with the shame of her situation, expressing a desire to hide her past:

*"Even if it is a long time from now, I do not want my children or grandchildren to know"*⁸⁴

During her time in Japan, she also experienced direct interactions with soldiers, which left lasting scars on her psyche. She stated

*"I have not lived a life that a human being should have lived"*⁸⁵

and expressed resentment towards the circumstances that led to her being taken.

After the war, she came back to Korea but faced difficulties reintegrating into society. She mentioned her struggles with poverty and the stigma attached to her past, saying.

⁸¹ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:253.

⁸² Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:225.

⁸³ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:320.

⁸⁴ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:270.

⁸⁵ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:270.

*“I do not know how to read or write or anything, so all I would end up with is mistreatment.”*⁸⁶

Choi also recounted her relationships and the challenges of raising her children in a society that viewed her with disdain. She expressed that she wanted to be a good mother and protect her children from the judgments she faced, stating,

*“I do not want to claw my way to the top.”*⁸⁷

In her later years, Choi reflected on the emotional toll of her experiences. She expressed a longing for acknowledgment and justice, saying,

*“How can I avenge myself on those bastards?”*⁸⁸

3.3 Social Epistemology

In her study, Seunghyun Song (2021) explores the denial of Japan’s military sexual slavery during World War II and argues that those who deny these atrocities bear moral responsibility for past epistemic injustices. Song introduces the concept of backward-looking epistemic responsibility, emphasizing the obligation of morally responsible agents to make epistemic amends for historical injustices.

Song distinguishes between *State-led denial* and *Individual-led denial*. State-led denial involves the government attempting to minimize or completely negate the historical facts of military sexual slavery to evade any legal responsibilities and therefore maintain a polished

⁸⁶ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:228.

⁸⁷ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:228.

⁸⁸ Frank Jacob and Martin Göllnitz, 3:269.

national reputation.⁸⁹ Individual denial occurs when people, including historians and public figures, deny the injustices to uphold their political beliefs or to maintain a positive societal image.⁹⁰

The article also connects the denial of Japan's military sexual slavery to the broader concept of epistemic injustice, which describes how individuals can be wronged in their capacity as knowers. Two forms of epistemic injustice are highlighted: Testimonial injustice and Hermeneutical injustice. The first form occurs when a speaker's credibility is unjustly deflated due to their social identity⁹¹, which perfectly encapsulates Comfort Women's conditions as they were belittled for their identity as women and former sex workers although in most cases it was the result of coercion. The second form happens when people are unable to interpret or make sense of their social experiences due to an absence of shared understanding or common frameworks.⁹²

In the context of hermeneutical injustice, the case of Shirota Suzuko, a Japanese Comfort Woman, offers an exemplary illustration when analyzing the complex interplay between trauma and political agency. Shirota's experiences, along with her subsequent activism, highlight the multifaceted nature of recovery from trauma, as detailed in the comprehensive study by Sachiyo Tsukamoto (2022).⁹³ This study outlines her journey through different

⁸⁹ Seunghyun Song, "Denial of Japan's Military Sexual Slavery and Responsibility for Epistemic Amends," 5.

⁹⁰ Seunghyun Song, 5.

⁹¹ Seunghyun Song, 6.

⁹² Seunghyun Song, 6.

⁹³ Sachiyo Tsukamoto, *The Politics of Trauma and Integrity*, 51–75.

stages of trauma recovery, emphasizing the establishment of her political agency and the importance of storytelling in reshaping her identity.

Song outlines three conditions that determine when denialists—individuals who reject facts or evidence—should be held accountable for making epistemic reparations or correcting the harm caused by their denial.

First, causality is crucial as the denialist must have directly caused epistemic harm. This means their actions or statements contributed to the spread of misinformation, therefore affecting others' understanding of the truth.

Secondly, autonomy is essential. The denialists should have the capacity to reflect on their own beliefs and contest them. This suggests that individuals are to be held accountable for their views, as they possess the ability to critically assess and revise them, rather than being shaped by external influences.

Lastly, epistemic competence is necessary. The denialist must have access to the relevant knowledge, resources, and evidence needed to grasp the facts. They should inform themselves properly since failing to do so suggests negligence or willful ignorance rather than a mere lack of access.⁹⁴ Song argues that both the Japanese government and individual denialists like Hata Ikuhiko meet these conditions, making them liable for epistemic amends. Hata Ikuhiko is a renowned Japanese historian who argues that the system of Comfort Women for the military was akin to a wartime version of licensed prostitution, which contributed to the denial of Japan's military sexual slavery.⁹⁵ His viewpoints are

⁹⁴ Sachiyo Tsukamoto, 8.

⁹⁵ Sachiyo Tsukamoto, 5.

presented as an example of individual-led denial regarding Japan's military sexual slavery, and he is criticized for negating the experiences of survivors and justifying the existence of the Comfort Women system.⁹⁶

Acknowledgment is proposed as a vital means of making epistemic amends. The process involves recognizing the injustice, admitting it should not have occurred, and committing to change. Song highlights the importance of acknowledgment in addressing epistemic harms but notes that it falls short of addressing other types of harm, such as the need for material reparations.⁹⁷

The article concludes that epistemic injustices are part of the broader violence inflicted by Japan's military sexual slavery. Redressing these injustices requires not only acknowledging but also reparations and more sincere apologies. Song stresses the importance of holding denialists accountable to achieve genuine epistemic justice.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Sachiyo Tsukamoto, 6.

⁹⁷ Sachiyo Tsukamoto, 10.

⁹⁸ Sachiyo Tsukamoto, 11.

Conclusions

This study has highlighted that the Comfort Women issue is not just a historical event, but an enduring narrative that reveals the complex interplay of gender, power, and violence in times of conflict. The systematic nature of this exploitation, orchestrated by the Japanese military and supported by various governmental institutions, underscores a severe violation of human rights that continues to affect survivors and their families even to this present day.

The testimonies of Comfort Women not only expose the horrific brutality of their experiences but also reveal the deep psychological scars that linger long after the war has ended. Personal narratives, such as those of Jang Jeom-dol and Choi Seon-soon, serve as poignant reminders of the resilience of these women, while also highlighting the urgent need for acknowledgment and reparations. The ongoing denial and minimization of these atrocities by certain political entities reflect a broader struggle for justice and recognition that these survivors continue to face.

Furthermore, an analysis of Japan's responses—particularly the Kono Statement and the Asian Women's Fund—illustrates a pattern of incomplete apologies and inadequate reparative measures. These responses often lack the necessary sincerity and fail to address the systemic injustices inflicted upon Comfort Women. Political maneuvering surrounding these issues frequently overshadows the lived experiences of the victims, emphasizing the need for a more holistic understanding that prioritizes the voices of those directly affected.

In addressing epistemic injustice, it becomes evident that acknowledgment and reparative justice must be pursued concurrently. It is more important than ever to confront the past and hold denialists accountable, to create a culture that respects the dignity and humanity of Comfort Women. Only through these efforts can society begin to rectify the historical wrongs committed against them and ensure that the painful legacies of war do not remain silenced.

Ultimately, this thesis advocates for a collective responsibility to remember, recognize, and advocate for the rights of victims of military sexual slavery. This commitment extends beyond mere historical records; as it is an ongoing dedication to human rights and dignity in contemporary discourse. The stories of Comfort Women must not only be preserved but also amplified, serving as a crucial reminder of the atrocities that can occur during wartime and the extraordinary resilience of those who endure them. We must remain vigilant in our efforts to confront these injustices, ensuring that the voices of survivors are not only heard but also honored in our pursuit of a more just and equitable society. By actively engaging with this history, we can work towards a future where such violations are unequivocally condemned and never repeated.

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