

The Origins of the US Army's Korean Comfort Women

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Chapter 2. From Rape to Prostitution

The "necessary evil" of prostitution

The US Army stockpiled condoms in order to protect its men from STDs. Whenever it rained you could see condoms flowing everywhere. Children filled them up with water and played with them. At my uncle's house condoms could be procured cheaply so he cut them into long, thin strips with a razor to make rubber strings and set up a business of sewing them into the ankle part of socks. Condoms had once seemed to us like the incarnation of sexual vice, but we learned to stop worrying about that.

Why is it that comfort women appeared on the battlefield? Things like Confucian morality vanish in a time of war when people are concerned only with their own survival, but this is not easy for people who have never experienced war to understand. To be blunt, I saw with my own eyes and I know that even the greatest outrages like sexual assault will be tolerated in those circumstances. Actually, I suppose that was pretty much the same experience for all the other villagers. That is the reason why we forgave those among us who became communist and we warmly accepted into our village women who had been prostitutes. This is the most important life lesson that I learned from the war.

Even the sex crimes of some soldiers become momentarily understandable if we assume that they are on the battlefield. The question which I want to pose to the reader is, "What would you be capable of if your life was at risk every day." During and after an intense, bloody battle, it seemed as if the soldiers had gone insane. What I saw was reminiscent of Oliver Stone's film, *Platoon*.

When the US Army came to our village there was an explosion of sexual violence, and when prostitutes flocked to the village, we welcomed them in the way that I described earlier. The prostitutes were the village's saviors. We had the real fear that, without them, all of the women in the village might become the target of sexual assault. In other words, we invited the prostitutes in as a means of self-defense, and that is how we became a "prostitution village".

To ward off sexual assaults by violent soldiers, the villagers slackened their rigid traditions of Confucian sexual morality and accepted prostitution. Once we had justified this to ourselves, we even turned it into a source of revenue. The villagers supported the prostitutes, even though they were outsiders, while viewing prostitution as a necessary evil

in order to protect the chastity of their own family members and relatives. The prostitutes kept the village sexually safe, and the fact that we could also make a profit by renting rooms to them was just an added bonus. With that it took no time at all for us to make the transformation to "prostitution village". Furthermore, this was not purely a phenomenon of my own home village. Rather, the same thing spread to all the areas around where troops were stationed and a sort of *de facto* licensed prostitution system developed.

Nevertheless, sexual violence and prostitution do exist outside of war. These things continued after the war ended and prostitution still exists in South Korea today, so much so that the country has even been called a "prostitution paradise". According to a report by the Supreme Prosecutors' Office of the Republic of Korea and the Korean Women's Development Institute, "There are one million women engaged in prostitution" in South Korea. No law has achieved any significant steps towards eliminating prostitution, not the Prostitution Prevention Law, which mandates up to one year in prison or else a fine of up to three million won for both the prostitute and the client, nor the Juvenile Protection Act, which mandates up to one year in prison for paying for sexual services from a minor. What is the reason that prostitution became so widespread in South Korea, in direct contradiction to Korean society's veneration of chastity and its strict, rigidly enforced concept of sexual morality which even includes the Confucian principle that boys and girls over the age of seven sit separately from one another? Actually it is precisely because South Koreans insist so strongly on their thoroughly Confucian concept of sexual purity that we need prostitutes as a defensive barrier to protect the chastity of ordinary women in the case of an increase in sexual assaults.

I wrote this book based on my experiences of war and my ponderings on the essence of human nature, and I don't believe that its contents can be rebutted by those who have never lived through a war. It makes no sense for the postwar generation to judge the killings and rapes that took place in a time of war. The only thing we can pass judgment on now is the ultimate crime of war itself, which changes human nature and is the root cause of evil behavior. It is not a matter of trying the crimes that took place amidst the chaos of war, but rather it is a matter of trying the country which started the war.

The so-called "comfort women problem"

Neither I nor the many other scholars who had done field surveys throughout South Korea had ever heard of the so-called "comfort women". And yet, the issue found its way into Japanese-language media and then became a political problem and human rights issue within South Korea. I realized early on that this had been caused by the false testimony of Yoshida Seiji and misreporting published in the Japanese newspaper *Asahi Shimbun*.

Certain South Koreans have offered a variety of explanations for why the comfort women problem did not emerge until fifty years after the end of the war. They say that the Japanese colonial government burned documents in order to hide the truth, that the United States glossed over Japanese war crimes during the occupation period, or that former comfort women were too ashamed to return to Korea. The women, they say, were shunned as sexual

deviants for having been violated by men from a different country, but that was not the only reason why Korea's political leaders and intellectuals tried to turn the comfort women problem into a social issue.

Just when the comfort women were on the verge of being buried in the pages of history, women's rights organizations raised the issue, declaring that "The shame of the comfort women is the shame of all Koreans", but the South Korean mass media showed no interest in the essence of the problem and only wanted to stir up hatred against Japan. The comfort women were transformed into victims of crimes against the Korean people, and now that they had the noble mission of promoting nationalist feelings, the women themselves began to come forward. In other words, a new discourse had been created claiming that the taking of the virginity of Korean women by Japanese troops was not only a rape of the women themselves, but also a rape of the whole nation of Korea. It was at that time that Korean President Kim Dae-jung officially asked for "clarification of the historical and moral responsibility of the Japanese government" in relation to the comfort women problem.

There is no clear difference between the way that comfort women were recruited by the Japanese Army and the way that they were recruited by the US Army. However, the comfort women system administered by Japan is considered a product of Japanese colonial rule, whereas the US Army liberated Korea from Japanese rule and came to South Korea as an ally during the Korean War. Therefore, the way Koreans feel about the two systems is quite different. If people merely point out that Korea was doing the same sort of thing, without first understanding this important distinction, then no path to compromise on the matter will ever be found.

Photo Caption: A statue of a comfort women in front of the Japanese embassy in South Korea.

Of course, if South Koreans exploit the comfort women problem in the diplomatic arena, it will boomerang back to them in the form of the US Army's own comfort women problem. If a statue is built in memory of the comfort women of the Japanese Army, there will be some people who will pipe up and ask for another statue beside it in memory of the comfort women of the US Army. The immature diplomatic actions of South Korea need to stop immediately. In order to ensure that the contentious comfort women issue will not stoke mutual hatred, both Korea and Japan must listen with sincerity to what the other side has to say.

Sexual violence by the US Army and Korea-American relations

Could it be that sexual violence is an inevitable part of war? Conflicts in Yugoslavia and Russia have also been characterized by sexual violence, so why are we only discussing the "comfort women" of wartime Japan? People have said that the comfort women of wartime Japan were unique in that they were part of a state approved system. However, the root of the problem is sexual violence by soldiers, not the question of **the** military approved system. To me the bigger issue is why we have completely ignored the clearly criminal acts of the

UN Army. I am referring to the cruel sexual assaults perpetrated by American soldiers during the Korean War.

The Chinese Army was very gentlemanly, but I know that the men of the US Army and the South Korean Army attacked women in our village. And yet, when I tell that to my fellow Koreans today, no one believes me. Still, at the very least all the people who lived in my village back then do know what happened. In the face of the undeniable truth that my village experienced firsthand, Koreans prefer to turn a deaf ear.

After the war, the government of President Park Chung-hee tried to preserve Confucian sexual morality while at the same time pursuing a policy of tolerating prostitution. My own hometown had been one of the originators of this scheme, and soon the US Army's comfort women spread throughout the country and became part of the official policy of both the United States and South Korea. These comfort women were deemed by the Korean government to be patriots who were ensuring the safety of the Korean Peninsula by satisfying the sexual urges of American servicemen. This demonstrates that, even though these women were despised under time-honored Confucian ideas, they were treasured by the Korean government because of their role as earners of foreign currency.

In Korea the female entertainers known as *kisaeng* are looked down on as "whores" (*galbo*), and comfort women servicing American soldiers are called "Western whores". However, they are also known as "Western princesses". In other words, the way Koreans describe the prostitutes involves a dichotomy of viewing them as both "whores" and "princesses". These prostitutes spearheaded the modernization of the nation through their earning of foreign currency, and thus became patriotic women. The South Korean government gathered up women who had left their farms or who were unemployed, called them "patriots", and trained them to be comfort women.

Although the sex trade was outlawed through the Prostitution Prevention Law of 1961, the very next year in 1962 the South Korean government designated 104 sites across Korea as being "special districts". These were government-approved red-light districts outside the purview of anti-prostitution laws. Because they loved their native land of Korea, women prostituted themselves for foreign currency so that Korea's development as a capitalist economy would continue, and thus in some quarters prostitution was called an act of patriotism.

South Korea made a point of not strongly criticizing the US Army's use of prostitutes after the war. In other words, there would be plenty of prostitutes for the soldiers and few legal restrictions. Because of this, prostitution and rape involving American soldiers never became a big social or political issue. During the war the US Army had been the benevolent savior of Korea, and the ongoing presence of US troops in Korea was a symbol of America's pledge to defend the Korean Peninsula. In other words, Koreans sacrificed the thing they had cherished as life itself, their chastity, to the ones who were defending their lives. Certainly, the UN and US Armies did protect South Korea from the North Koreans,

and one can't deny that they contributed in a major way to the democratization and liberalization of Korea. According to administrative agreements between South Korea and the United States, American soldiers were not to be tried in South Korea if they injured or killed a Korean citizen, and even human rights violations by the US Army were rarely a matter for concern in Korean society. The point of this policy was to maintain friendly US-Korea relations and the government's economic policies.

Today, in Korea there are 28,000 American soldiers occupying ninety-six different locations across the country. These places have been described as hotbeds of immoral sexual practices, venereal disease, drug addicts, and social vice, but they have all been hospitably sponsored by the government of South Korea. When it came to prostitution and sexual violence by the US Army such things were always ignored not only by the South Korean government, but even by Korean nationalists and feminists.

Nonetheless, as national consciousness and ideas of human rights became more prevalent in South Korea, a form of anti-Americanism critical of sexual violence by the US Army did begin to arise. The Korean novel, *Land of Excrement*, declared that, "South Korea is a land smeared with the excrement of American imperialism." Its author Nam Jeong-hyeon (1933-) wrote that, "America's criminal occupation of South Korea is not only not fading away, but in fact is taking deeper root." In 1965 he was charged and convicted of abetting communism.

Clearly, South Korea's attitudes and policies towards rape and the use of prostitutes by the army of a foreign country will vary depending on its relationship with the country involved. The number of Korean prostitutes who have served the US Army in the forty years since the end of the war has been roughly estimated at between 250,000 to 300,000.

The scholar Katharine HS Moon noticed that American soldiers stationed in Korea paid for prostitutes even more than American soldiers stationed in Japan, and she attributes that situation to diplomatic relations between the USA and South Korea.

Moon notes that the role played by prostitutes at US Army bases in satisfying the sexual urges of American soldiers and raising their morale was viewed as an act of patriotism in support of the South Korean government's defense of the Korean Peninsula. The existence of prostitution and venereal disease at army bases was seen in principle as America's problem and not as a problem that the South Korean government needed to crack down on. According to Moon, the prostitutes of the US Army worked voluntarily, in contrast with the comfort women of the Japanese ruled period who were pressed into service forcibly and systematically.¹

¹ Editor's note: Unfortunately, Moon's statement is completely false. The comfort women who worked in the Japanese military comfort station were volunteers or looking to make money. This can be verified through various sources, such as comfort women recruitment advertisements in Seoul's top-rated

However, this situation changed suddenly in October of 1992 when Yun Geum-i, an employee at a US Army clubhouse, was murdered by American soldier Kenneth Markle. Her mangled corpse was found soon after, covered with laundry detergent in an apparent attempt to cover up her fresh wounds. This shocking crime became a focal point for a new anti-American movement launched by women's rights organizations. The women living near US Army bases were portrayed as being the victims of sex crimes by Korean feminists, who in turn joined forces with Christian groups to create substantial social furor. One feminist group sent a petition to then-President Bill Clinton which read, "American forces stationed in Korea commit over 2,000 crimes every year. In order to resolve this crisis at its roots we ask you to take action to eliminate these crimes, including by amending administrative agreements between South Korea and the United States."

A half century after US troops were first stationed in South Korea, the case of Yun Geum-i had finally become the catalyst that pushed the nation beyond silent protest. Amidst an explosion of popular outrage, the Joint Action Committee for the Yun Geum-i Murder Case was founded. However, there was a need for a permanent organization and so, just before the first anniversary of Yun's death, various associations, including women's rights organizations, constituted the Headquarters for the Campaign to Eliminate Criminal Acts by US Soldiers in Korea. Then on October 25, 1998 the Democratic Women's Association of South Korea sought to keep the memory of the incident alive by holding a "memorial service for the victims of crimes by US servicemen to mourn Yun Geum-i on the sixth anniversary of her death".

In this manner, the tide turned against the United States and public criticism of the US Army began to appear. The undercurrent of sexual morality and chastity inherited from ages past had not faded in Korea, and due to the rise of new social movements in feminism, Christianity, and human rights, the Korean people seemed to have rediscovered their traditional ideas about sex. And yet in spite of all this, the status of the Korean-US military relationship remained unchanged since the time of the Korean War. The city of Dongducheon, where America's 2nd Division is stationed, continues to be a veritable red-light district. If you go out to the railway at night you can see prostitutes lined up all along the track.

Around this same time, a Korean prostitute was murdered by an American soldier, and her fellow sex workers carried her body through the streets in a march of protest. Nevertheless, the South Korean government did not treat this as a major scandal like a similar case which occurred in Okinawa, Japan. The situation seems reminiscent of Japan in the immediate aftermath of World War II. The mentalities of the occupying soldiers, the government, and

newspapers. Korean brothel dealers placed the advertisements. If the comfort women were, in fact, forced into service, then there would have been no need for advertisements.

the people were perhaps the same in Japan back then as in Korea now. There were plenty of reports of sexual assaults on women by American soldiers during the postwar occupation of Japan, but neither the Japanese government nor the Japanese people made a big deal out of it. Only recently, following incidents of sexual violence by US soldiers stationed in Okinawa, are the people and government of Japan finally started to take this up as a serious problem.

Koreans should now cease pretending that problems relating to sexual violence and war are exclusively Japanese. They must properly acknowledge that these are problems even Koreans themselves are guilty of. Korea's narrow-minded views on this subject are the products of the South Korean people's poor understanding of issues relating to human rights as well as their government's scrupulous maintenance of the benefits it receives from the UN Army's protection. Koreans need to look at the issue from a broader perspective.

For instance, South Korean soldiers participated in the Vietnam War and were said to have raped many Vietnamese women. It is also a fact that there are many children in Vietnam today, known as *Lai Dai Han*, the fathers of whom were South Korean soldiers who impregnated Vietnamese women during the war. However, this issue is rarely broached within Korea.

Sex and war

Wartime sexual violence is not simply a matter of soldiers gratifying their sexual desires. It has been said that the objective of rape in war is to humiliate and bring shame on not only the women themselves, but also their husbands and families and even their country. Consequently, racial animosity can result in sexual assaults against women of an enemy country. For example, the French Army raped many women during the Algerian War in order to make Algerian men lose face. It is also believed that between 30,000 and 50,000 Croatian and Muslim women were systematically raped by the Serbian Army in Bosnia, and sources testify that one in every one hundred women became pregnant through rape. In Bosnia, in particular, there was even one case of Serbian soldiers raping a pregnant Bosnian woman, ripping open her belly, and nailing her unborn child to a tree.²

In addition, sexual violence occurred during the Spanish conquest of Mexico, the German Peasants' War, the Seven Years' War, and World War II. The US Army raped women during the Korean War and the Vietnam War, and even in Asia the South Korean Army is guilty of sexual violence against Vietnamese women, the Japanese Army against Korean and Chinese women, and the Indonesian Army also against Chinese women. I remember even sexual violence perpetrated by the army of South Korea against its own people.

² Editor's Note: Similar kinds of wild stories have circulated in every war of the 20th century—of babies being nailed to trees or babies being bayoneted by “depraved and vile” enemy soldiers. Such claims tend to sensationalize war and belittle the real horrors of war.

Even when military discipline was scrupulously maintained, soldiers still raped many women. During the Vietnam War women were raped on the battlefield while up to 500,000 Vietnamese women became prostitutes, and in Indonesia, ethnic Chinese Indonesians were the targets of sexual violence by the Indonesian Army. One can conclude from these facts that wartime sexual violence arises from racial and ethnic hatred.

Concerning the cruel deeds perpetrated by the American and South Korean Armies during the Vietnam War, South Korean novelist An Jeong-hyo wrote the book *White Badge* based on his own war-time experiences. The book and the movie based on it depict a man who becomes psychotic due to his experiences with rape and murder during the Vietnam War and ultimately commits suicide. In other words, An says that war can unhinge men's minds.

Oliver Stone's movie, *Platoon*, likewise raises questions about insanity, war, and the slaughter of fellow human beings in a world gone mad. Stone tells the story of a young man straight out of college who goes to fight in the Vietnam War and grows as a human being through his experiences, but the film depicts a world enveloped in a horrifying madness where American soldiers show no hesitation in smashing in the heads of Vietnamese civilians. Through this film Stone asks questions such as, "Is this really what war is like?" and "What is the meaning of peace?" In the real Vietnam War there were cases of American soldiers shoving sticks into women's vaginas and then killing them. Madness and war are also themes of director Francis Ford Coppola's masterpiece *Apocalypse Now*. In this film as well, Coppola shows how murder and rape take place in the background of a bigger form of violence called "war" and "invasion".

Even so, the Korean War was a somewhat different situation. UN soldiers did not really have a reason to view the women they were raping as belonging to an enemy nation. Indeed, most sexual violence was directed at South Korean women, who were theoretically on their side. Perhaps this can only be explained as the madness of war. The right to defend oneself and conduct operations in times and states of war are military concepts incomparable with peacetime conduct. On the front lines of the battlefield, there are no police or even military police with the power to maintain public order, and so soldiers are effectively free to do as they please. In such a situation, soldiers can cast off the shackles of their own humanity and drop to the level of animals. This state may not be one of sanity or madness, but rather of something in between. Thus, acts like rape and murder, whether undertaken impulsively or systematically, are likely to happen, and this is why many have argued that sexual violence is an inevitable part of war.

Despite all this, it is not true that all armies engage in sexual violence in times of war. As I already mentioned, I know from my own experience that the Chinese Army did no harm to women during the Korean War, which might have been related to the Chinese Army's policies towards sexual control. I have heard that the Chinese Army did not rape Japanese women at the end of World War II as well. As I have suggested, this case does present a glimmer of hope that a war can be fought without the loss of one's own sanity.

