

Inconvenient and Uncomfortable: Transcending Japan's Comfort Women Paradigm

Marshall Wordsworth

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“Then, we were also soldiers...”

-Pae Chok-kan, Korean comfort woman.

The Korean nationalists, human rights activists and the mass media characterize Japan's war-time brothel system as a “state-sponsored sexual slavery system involving a systematically organized illegal and immoral military operation.” Much of the details of the Japanese military brothel system, documented by the US military in war-time and post-war prisoner interrogations and captured Japanese documents that showed that these accusations were false, have been in the public realm for some time, yet they have been either downplayed or studiously ignored by Korean nationalists and their allies. Writer Marshall Wordsworth collects the facts and offers his reflection on the World War II Japanese military brothel system. In fact, the current book offers much for reflection, not only on the true nature of the Japanese military brothel system but also on the comfort women's role during the war.

The primary pieces of “evidence” that Korean nationalists use to support what Wordsworth calls their “paradigmatic story” are the narratives of former Korean comfort women, who state that they were dragooned, in the middle of the night or at gunpoint, by Japanese soldiers, to work as Japanese military sex slaves. To naïve listeners, stories of these poor, now elderly women “prove”, in their minds, beyond a doubt, that Japan established a truly evil institution of “state-sponsored sexual slavery”. Indeed, such naiveté combined with the narratives formed the basis of US House Resolution 121, adopted in 2007, in which Congress rebuked Japan for its engagement in wartime “sexual slavery”. Inconvenient to Korean nationalists, however, is that the narratives that were relayed to Congress did not match their previous narratives given years earlier.

One could ask, given that there were also Japanese comfort women, why they were not brought to speak before Congress? Surely, if the activists' goal was to condemn a “systematically organized illegal and immoral” military operation, should not the Japanese, ostensibly victims of their own government, have been invited? Clearly, there were other motives involved and they did not include either condemning brothels or even prostitution.

Wordsworth goes on to expose a major piece of “evidence” wielded by Korean activists in support of their “paradigmatic story”. Yoshida Seiji wrote a “confessional”, claiming to have “forcibly recruited” hundreds, or even thousands, of Korean women on Cheju Island during the war. A book written by a confessed Japanese perpetrator would indeed be convenient ammunition for Korean nationalists. Inconveniently, however,

Wordsworth points out that Yoshida's lies were exposed, not by the Japanese media, but by the Korean media, in 1989. Nonetheless, Yoshida's book continues to be foisted in support of the "paradigmatic story". Not directly addressed in the current book is why, given facts, inconvenient and uncomfortable as they are, institutions such as the US Congress do not acknowledge these facts and make amends. Whatever the reason, the House Resolution of 2007 episode should raise serious concerns as to whether the US Congress is capable of deep reflection and decision-making based on facts rather than emotion.

A key aspect of the Japanese comfort women paradigmatic narrative is the accusation of abduction or forced recruitment. The book points out that the Japanese military did not sanction or organize the abduction of women—the Japanese military warned of unscrupulous private brokers using deception to lure women to work as comfort women. Nonetheless, there are Korean nationalists, human rights activists and others who play the "victim of oppression" card and conflate the comfort women with modern day "sexual slavery". The Korean nationalists' and human rights activists' comparison is on very shaky ground. Koreans in Australia, where prostitution is not illegal, have expressed concern that there are too many Korean prostitutes in Australia.¹ In 2012, it was estimated that about 17% of all prostitutes in Australia were Korean. The Korean government also reported that 50,000 Korean women worked as prostitutes in Japan and another 30,000 worked in the US. These facts raise the question of whether all these Korean women were abducted and forced to become "sex slaves". More likely is that not a few of these women chose to work as prostitutes. Prostitutes in other countries, the majority of whom are foreigners, are able to express choice within the context of their work.² However, one cannot entirely dismiss fact that there is coercion, especially by those who loudly espouse women's rights and justice.³ Perhaps those who are truly interested in human rights should directly address the problem of abduction and forced prostitution without dragging in an already dubious notion that the Japanese comfort women were also "sex slaves".

For Japan, it is indeed inconvenient and uncomfortable that, as the book points out, towards the end of the war, soldiers acted on their own and engaged in criminal behavior—the acts of a few are a blemish on Japan's honor. As Wordsworth points out, one of the goals of the Japanese military brothel system was to "regulate military sexuality and discourage battlefield sex crimes". Japanese soldiers, acting on their own, allegedly raped a confessed communist Filipina guerilla. In the Dutch East Indies Semarang Case, local Japanese Army officers found 24 female European and Indonesian

¹ A standing joke is that prostitutes are Korea's major export: "Campaign starts to kick Korean prostitutes out of Australia," *Korea Times*, August 30, 2012. http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/08/117_118664.html; "South Korean prostitutes head to NZ," *NZ Herald*, December 29, 2015. https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11566927

² "Choice on offer in brothels not consistent with sex trafficking," *The Conversation*, December 20, 2013. <http://theconversation.com/choice-on-offer-in-brothels-not-consistent-with-sex-trafficking-21623>.

³ "North Korean women "forced into sex slavery in China" – report," BBC News, May 20, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48340210>. "The UN's sexual abuse shame," *Unherd*, Feb. 14, 2019. <https://unherd.com/2019/02/the-uns-sexual-abuse-shame/>

prisoners and “forced” them “to engage in prostitution”.⁴ This occurred after military officers were admonished to follow local protocols for establishing military brothels. This operation was halted about two months later by 16th Army Headquarters. Those involved were punished following the war with prison and, for one of them, execution.

Wordsworth emphasizes to readers that these occurred well outside of the Japanese military brothel system. In both the Philippines and Indonesia, standard military brothels did exist, which followed detailed military regulations on business conduct and hygiene. Women were recruited by civilian brokers and were paid for their services.

With respect to individual Japanese soldiers committing criminal acts, Japan should take responsibility. However, blanket statements made by successive Japanese governments, of “sincere apologies and remorse” to all those who “suffered” as “comfort women,” are not at all helpful. In fact, one could argue, as the Korean nationalists have, that “comfort women” include both the victims of random criminal behavior as well as paid prostitutes. Furthermore, Japan’s repeated apologies are looked upon by Korean nationalists as admission that Japan operated an “illegal” and “immoral” “state-sponsored sexual slavery system”. Wordsworth suggests that we “transcend the comfort women paradigm.” Perhaps one way to do this: given Korea’s lack of regard for previous interstate agreements and their public enmity for Japan, Japan should stop groveling before Korea.

One interesting point that Wordsworth raises is the other than sexual services that the comfort women provided—of giving relief “to men who were nostalgic of their homes and to heal mental wounds from combat” through “conversation and interaction.” On their off-hours, the comfort women engaged in social activities with military personnel. Wordsworth cites a number of marriage proposals and actual marriages between comfort women and Japanese soldiers, of “the innumerable human drama between comfort women and the military men who visited them...” The book notes the melancholic memories of the comfort women’s last encounter with favored men who never returned from the front. At the same time, Japanese veterans look back on their experience with comfort women with “nostalgia” and “a certain fondness”. Wordsworth suggests that the “women’s valuable function to the soldiers who sought physical and psychological comfort has been entirely forgotten.” Wordsworth further suggests that the comfort women were more than prostitutes—as indicated by one Korean comfort woman, “we helped the soldiers to fight”; they were soldiers, too.

⁴ What is not mentioned in the current book is that 10 other women were also made to work as comfort women. It appears, however, that these 10 were not coerced but appeared to have volunteered for the job. Some prostitutes were among the women interred as prisoners. Hata, I. (2018). *Comfort Women and Sex in the Battle Zone*. Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books.