

## Parallel Discourses on the Korean Comfort Women

by

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Over the course of the past decade, the debate over the comfort women has changed dramatically and fundamentally. What was once an issue between a small number of Korean women and the Japanese government exploded into an international human rights issue that has drawn in participants from a wide range of national, cultural, intellectual, ideological, and social backgrounds. In the process, the issues surrounding the comfort women have become part of larger agendas, frequently losing their cultural, national, and historical designations. This is not necessarily a negative development, but it does mean that the ground of debate has shifted. The United Nations and its various commissions have played an important role in this process. In 1992, the United Nations Human Rights Commission's Subcommission for the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities referred to the comfort women system as "a crime against humanity that violated the rights of Asian women and the international agreement prohibiting forced labor that Japan signed in 1932." In February 1996, the UN again condemned Japan over the comfort women system. Radhika Coomaraswamy, the UN's special investigator, "concluded that Japan must admit its legal responsibility, identify and punish those responsible for the sex slavery during the war, compensate the victims, apologize to the survivors in writing, and teach its students this hidden chapter in Japanese history." One aspect of the way in which discourses have emerged inside and outside Asia is the way in which the story of the comfort women has changed since it became an international human rights issue, and then how that internationalized perspective has made its way back into Korea and Japan, in turn affecting discourses on the comfort women in the very countries in which the debate began.

The details of the historical and contemporary experiences of the comfort women will continue to emerge, though time is running out for the women themselves to tell their own stories or to enjoy the benefits of any compensation or legal recognition. What we are concerned with here, however, are questions of representation and interpretation. Matters of responsibility and compensation are important, but even more fundamental is the question of *who gets to speak*, and with what authority: in the interest of human rights, on behalf of one or another state, as

representatives of the Korean or Japanese nation, or on behalf of the former comfort women themselves. Within Korea and Japan, the question can be restated with greater specificity. It is the question of whose story?indeed, whose truth?will be validated by becoming part of the collective national history, and how that will affect the understanding of the past, the present, and the relationship between the two. Even though the UN' s attention to the comfort women has brought some measure of global notoriety to the problem, there is no certainty that discussions about sexuality and rape can gain legitimacy within conservative Korea society itself, even in the face of testimony by surviving comfort women.

A further issue concerns the politics surrounding the representation of comfort women. On the simplest level this is a terminological matter. But terminological matters are rarely simple; words do count and should be used as precisely as possible. Words reflect meaning and assumption, whether chosen carefully or carelessly. Terminological issues have been mentioned briefly above, but even as seemingly straightforward a term as “compensation” eludes precise use until there is some resolution not only to the question of who is responsible, but who was violated as well. In other words, even if the Japanese government were to agree to official compensation, to whom would it be given? Individuals? Organizations? Governments?

Even larger than the issue of terminology, however, is this: What is changed?what is lost or gained?as the experiences of the comfort women become matters not just of public knowledge, but of public discussion? This is an issue that is not often addressed by the principal discussants themselves. Nevertheless, as Japan and Korea both continue to come to terms with their histories and try to fit legacies of colonialism, imperialism, war, domination, and collaboration into reconstructed images of past and present, the issue of comfort women has the potential to remain a contested area as memory, ideology, identity, and expediency vie for analytical energy and public attention.

Beginning in 2000, a controversy of a type that has plagued Japan' s relations with its neighbors for years flared hotly again. The issue, involving as it did the revision of Japanese history textbooks, directly addressed questions of the ownership of history. Many Koreans, officials and private citizens alike, incensed at what they viewed as a watered-down and inaccurate account of Japanese aggression on the peninsula, called again on Japan to take responsibility for colonial and wartime excesses, including the institution of the comfort women system. Numerous protests

were made when these demands fell on largely unresponsive ears. In March 2001, at the conclusion of a “Symposium for the Establishment of Proper Relations Between Korea and Japan,” fifteen South Korean scholarly societies signed a joint declaration condemning Japanese textbooks’ treatment of Japan’ s actions in neighboring countries, and calling on Japanese authorities to correct objectionable passages. The absence of any discussion of comfort women in the textbooks was specifically cited by the Korean groups. And according to at least one high official of the Korean committee preparing to co-host the 2002 World Cup with Japan, the textbook controversy threatened to undermine cooperation between the two countries in the final months leading up to this highly-publicized international event.

The national specificities that inform the comfort women debate in East Asia, however, have unavoidably become diluted as the debate has become internationalized. But as the issue becomes international and public, can it continue at the same time to bear the burden of representing the specific national issues that often animate the debate within Asia? The problems raised in the last ten years do not resolve easily into categories, either conceptual or national, but there are certain concepts or analytical categories that have come to inform the global discourse on comfort women: women, *Korean* women, women as property of men, “national” violation (as opposed to personal), submission, coercion, volition, exchange, compensation, guilt and responsibility, and human rights. Fundamental to all of these ways of looking at the problem, and to the entire issue of comfort women whether discussed in Korea, in Japan, in the West, or elsewhere, is one basic question: Who was violated? Specific, individual Koreans? Korean women as a group? Women generally? A nation? Humankind? The answer to this question makes an enormous difference, perhaps *all* the difference, in the way in which issues surrounding the comfort women are discussed, understood, and represented.

Within Korea, the dominant conceptual language in which most discussions of the colonial past are conducted is that of nationalism. It is the nation that is wounded. Debates about the experiences and current circumstances of the comfort women certainly partake of this strong tendency. It comes through perhaps most noticeably in the repeated demands for an apology from Japan. In the West, however, the language is a different one. There it is more likely to be individual women who are seen as having been violated. The national question takes a secondary position, if any place is found for it at all. As the issue has moved from national

particularities to international generalities, human rights and legal perspectives have become increasingly prominent. As Flinders University law professor Ustinia Dolgopol (one of the investigators for the International Commission of Jurists) has written: “The behaviour of the [Japanese] Government raises serious questions about its commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights, particularly the right to equality.” But this also highlights how dramatically different are the discourses on comfort women in Korea and the West. They are not contradictory?they do not address (or in some cases even acknowledge) the basic ideas of the others enough to be seen as contradicting them. Rather, the discourses are parallel, occurring simultaneously but essentially bypassing one another.

And why is this? Discussion, representation, and activism regarding the comfort women in the West are embedded in?indeed, only make sense in terms of?a particular set of assumptions, ideologies, and histories. These include:

--human rights as non-culturally specific;

--international law as a universally applicable embodiment of reason and justice;

--a western feminism that has developed over a longer time and with a different degree of social receptivity than in either Japan or Korea;

--the very important fact that there were relatively few Western victims of organized military sexual slavery in the Pacific region.

The ways in which the comfort women are discussed in the West tend to assume the universality, or at least the universal comprehensibility, of the analytical categories within which the discussion is framed. The problem is that these categories are usually assumed, rather than argued for. As a result, universalized frames of reference emerge which ignore the specific historical facts that energize the issue in Korea and Japan. By contrast, discussion, representation, and activism regarding the comfort women in Korea are embedded in cultural and historical specificities (including a century of rocky relations characterized by domination, competition, and resentment) that find little or no resonance in the West.

So whose stories are they? Once a handful of former comfort women chose to make their horrifying story public, did they relinquish control over

the meaning of their experiences? The “meaning” of any experience, of course, is always subject to negotiation, negation, appropriation, and interpretation, even if that experience is known only to the individual who experienced it, and who then reviews it years later. This constant re-negotiation with the past is even more a part of the meaning of experience when stories become available for public use. That, indeed, is what has happened with the comfort women. Now that something of their experiences has become known, those experiences have in the process become mobilized, but in a way that makes them available for multiple constituencies. A concern for human rights tends to universalize the experiences of the comfort women, even as a nationalist lens tends to particularize them. Both of these tendencies result in skewed, partial views of the comfort women. As we have suggested here, they have been used to support causes and grievances that are local and international, historical and contemporary, particular and universal. This raises questions not only about the meaning of the experiences, but about their ownership as well. Perhaps such skewing and questions regarding ownership are inevitable with experiences that seem simultaneously to fit easily into available, greedy categories, and to defy full understanding because of their sheer, inexpressible horror.

In order to understand discourses on the Korean comfort women, one must be aware of both the universal and particular issues involved, and something of the analytical complexities that arise in the movement between universal and particular categories. In the end, to understand such interpretive malleability we must do with a category like comfort women what Rogers Brubaker suggested for the category “nation” : we must understand the category’s practical uses, “the ways it can come to structure perception, to inform thought and experience, to organize discourse and political action.” Since any people’s view of its past profoundly affects the vision of its future, success in fashioning a useful conception of historical events plays a large role in determining visions of present reality and future prospects. This suggests some of the stakes involved in the issue of comfort women for Korea. History, it has been said, “is not the past. The past is always a created ideology with a purpose.” But the fact that the stakes may be higher for Koreans as they fashion a view of their own past is not to say that outside have the luxury of an unburdened view. Historical events cast their net widely, enmeshing both participants and observers. Indeed, as Adorno put it, “the detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant.” In creating one particular past, we run the risk of excluding other pasts that are at least as valid for people with a different stake in the question at hand.