

**BREAKING THE SILENCE: A DETAILED LOOK AT
THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF KOREAN FEMINISM
AND THE “COMFORT WOMEN” ISSUE**

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Introduction

“Since I had left at the age of 14 and came back at age 21 it was 8 years they said...How could I have told them about my experiences? As a woman, I had things done to me that were unfathomable. So I couldn’t say anything to anybody.”¹ Kim Bok-Dong recalls the moment she was reunited with her family after eight years of living as a “comfort woman”² in an interview with Stephen Park from *Asian Boss*. She could not tell anybody about her experiences, out of fear of judgement and thus kept silent for nearly fifty years. During World War Two, Japan set up so-called “comfort stations” throughout occupied areas. These stations were inhabited by young women, abducted from their homes and forced to provide sexual acts for Japanese soldiers fighting in the war. An estimate of 70,000 up to 200,000 women in total were forced to become “comfort women”, of which about eighty percent were Korean.³ Of this eighty percent, only thirty percent were recorded to have survived the war, which means that less than one in three Korean “comfort women” survived.⁴ The surviving “comfort women” were left to their own devices to find a way back home, and once they made it, integrating back in society was difficult. Korean society was bound by rigid norms and values, that were remnants of a Confucian moral code dating back to the Yi Dynasty starting in 1392, a code that was strict especially when it came to the purity of women. Unmarried women were to maintain their virginity and widows were to remain chaste. Women who lost their chastity, regardless of the circumstances, were judged as impure and were

¹ Asian Boss, *Life As A “Comfort Woman”: Story of Kim Bok-Dong*, (Asian Boss, 27 October 2018), https://youtu.be/qsT97ax_Xb0, accessed on Nov. 29, 2019.

² Throughout this thesis the phrase “comfort women” will be within quotation marks, as it is a euphemistic term.

³ Chunghee Sarah Soh, “The Korean ‘Comfort Women’: Movement for Redress,” *Asian Survey*, 36 (1996): 12, 1227.

⁴ Kirsten Orreill, “Who are the Ianfu (Comfort Women)?” *New Voices*, 2 (2008): 1, 151.

often times ostracized by their families.⁵ After returning from a place of sexual violence, former “comfort women” did not see themselves as victims, but felt responsible for any loss of honour their families might suffer if their stories were made public, and thus maintained their silence and remained burdened by their trauma. Only after the first victim, Kim Hak-Soon, convinced by Korean feminists, came forward with her story in 1991, did other “comfort women” dare to do the same. The testimonies of former “comfort women” were very important in raising more supporters for the protests against Japanese war crimes and also brought Korean women’s movements more to the forefront of society. These organisations tackling women’s issues in Korea, cannot be compared to Western feminist organisations. Korean feminism did not rise out of a need for equality between the sexes, but it rather focussed on bettering Korea as a nation through the participation of women in nationalist, democratic and human rights movements. The “comfort women” issue was a cause that fit the agenda of Korean women’s organisations well, as it was both an issue specific to women, but it also fit within a nationalist, anti-Japanese narrative, thus making it a cause all Korean people could get behind. The interdependence of both the “comfort women” issue and Korean feminist organisations, lies at the core of this thesis, as it seems that one could not exist without the other. The main question thus guiding this thesis is: What has been the precise connection between the “comfort women” issue and Korean feminism that started in the early 1990s?

To answer this question, it is necessary to define and expand on the terms “comfort women” and Korean feminism, which will be done in Chapters I and II. Chapter III will be dedicated to primary sources that stand particularly close to both terms, which will be analysed to further understand the interdependency between

⁵ Soh, “The Korean ‘Comfort Women’: Movement for Redress”, 1229.

Korean feminism and the “comfort women” issue, eventually hopefully answering the research question.

The subject matter of this thesis can be connected to ongoing research and debates concerning Korea versus Japan relations. Although the focus in this thesis will not be put on this struggle specifically, it still adds to the discourse on this matter. Another field of discourse that this thesis will add to is that of women’s history, as it tackles the rise of Korean feminism and the influence it holds today, in its protest for “comfort women” specifically. There has been a lot of research on the “comfort women” issue, and on Korean feminism, but there has not been any research developing the specific connection between these two subjects, which this thesis will try to do. Some texts used like those by Toshiyuki Tanaka, Kirsten Orreill, Pyong Gap Min, Chunghee Sarah Soh and Alice Yun Chai explain the “comfort women” issue specifically concerning Korean women, as opposed to women from other parts of Japan’s colonial territory (the first and last one relating it to the experience of Japanese women as well), also going into the hardships faced when coming back to Korea without being able to deal with the issue out loud. Other texts used focus more on feminism in Korea and how the movement developed, examples are those by Eunkang Koh, Bonnie B. Oh, Seung-A Kim, Kyungja Jung, Yung-Hee Kim, Young-Hee Shim and Marian Lief Palley, the first of which focussing specifically on Confucianism and its connection to gender relations in Korea, which seems to be a big reason for the long period of silence initially maintained by the former “comfort women”. The primary sources analysed in chapter III, both show a deep connection with either sides of the analysis, whilst also having one foot into the other one’s territory. The website of the *Korean Council*, an organisation dedicated to solving the “comfort women” issue will be used to analyse how a women’s organisation is influenced by “comfort women”. An

interview with former “comfort woman” Kim Bok-Dong from the Youtube channel *Asian Boss* will be used to analyse how “comfort women” were influenced by Korean feminism. Both show the connection between “comfort women” and Korean feminism and will thus help us understand how exactly the two became so dependent on one another, a phenomenon which started in the early 1990s.⁶

Chapter I: “Comfort Women”

The rise of “comfort stations”

Japan fought a war over Korea with China during the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, and after winning, the Japanese continued to slowly gain more ground in Asia, particularly threatening China during the second Sino-Japanese War of the 1930s.⁷ It is within this context that we see the first appearance of a “comfort station” located in Shanghai.⁸ It was set up by Okamura Yasuji, the deputy chief of staff of the Shanghai Expeditionary Army, as a response to his soldiers raping many Chinese women during the Shanghai incident of January 1932.⁹ He established military brothels and recruited Chinese women to work there as a way to prevent further rape and keep the Chinese public at ease.¹⁰ The adoption of an entire system of “comfort stations” happened after the Nanking massacre of 1937.¹¹ Japanese authorities realised that in order to control the

⁶ Since I am not advanced at reading Korean nor Japanese, the sources used for this thesis will be restricted to translations or English texts. However, special attention has been paid to select sources that were written by Korean or Japanese authors, to have more qualified sources that stand closer to the phenomenon studied.

⁷ Samuel S. Kim, *The Two Koreas and the Great Powers*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

⁸ Toshiyuki Tanaka, *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 94.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

growing anti-Japanese sentiment as a result of the murder and rape of around 260,000 civilians, they had to control their soldiers' actions better.¹² Thus started the widespread use of "comfort stations" as places where Japanese soldiers could have sex with women, without the Japanese facing backlash, because it all happened in a carefully orchestrated manner: away from the public and using women that had no choice but to obey.¹³ Up to as many as 200,000 women – Burmese, Dutch, Indians, Indonesians, Filipina, Vietnamese, Chinese, Eurasians, Japanese, Taiwanese, Pacific Islanders and Koreans – were forced to work in these "comfort stations" all over the Japanese war zones, with Koreans making up the largest group at eighty percent.¹⁴ The locations of the stations followed the movements of Japanese forces, meaning that they were everywhere, both in cities and in the most remote areas.¹⁵ Precise numbers are unknown because the Japanese destroyed or hid many documents pertaining information on "comfort stations" at the end of the war.¹⁶ As the Second World War progressed, and Japan's role as a major player grew bigger, the drafting of Koreans became more widespread, "[a]lmost six million Koreans were drafted as soldiers and/or forced laborers throughout the war, representing approximately 20% of Korea's population."¹⁷ The recruitment of women was made legal in 1942, but was often done on the basis of so-called voluntary participation.¹⁸ Promises of factory work abroad, which was most effective on girls from impoverished families, would often lead to work as a "comfort woman" in a

¹² Iris Chang, *Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust Of World War II*, (Basic Books, 2009), 4 & 6.

¹³ Orreill, "Who are the Ianfu (Comfort Women)?", 134.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁷ Soh, "The Korean 'Comfort Women': Movement for Redress", 1228.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

faraway country.¹⁹ The recruitment of “comfort women” was not always done through voluntary participation, often times, girls were abducted by force.²⁰

Why Koreans?

There are a few reasons why Korean women were more often mobilized for Japanese military sexual slavery than other women. First, After becoming a protectorate of Japan during the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905, Korea became a more formal colony of Japan in 1910, they were thus under Japanese rule during its many conflicts with China and the Second World War.²¹ This meant that many Koreans were forced to support the Japanese war effort, as was stated in the National General Mobilization Law, passed in 1938.²² This law gave the Japanese bureaucracy full authority to conscript workers for war industries, also applying to the colonial territories.²³ Thus, in a sense, the eventual victimization of many Korean women as “comfort women” was partly due to the fact that Korea was one of Japan’s colonies.²⁴ Secondly, “Korea’s cultural and spatial proximity to Japan made its women more susceptible than women from other Japanese colonies”.²⁵ Some researchers and Korean activists state that it was more than just proximity, but that Japan specifically targeted Korean women out of racial prejudice, however this cannot be confirmed nor denied.²⁶ A third reason why Korean women were often chosen as “comfort women” was the fact that, as opposed to Japanese prostitutes, they were plentiful, young, and void of sexual diseases that could contaminate the

¹⁹ Min, “Korean ‘Comfort Women’: The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender and Class”, 951.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Orreill, “Who are the Ianfu (Comfort Women)?”, 132.

²² Japan History Lab, *Quality of Life Under the National Mobilization Law (1938)*, <http://japanhistorylab.ca/content/quality-life-under-national-mobilization-law-1938>, accessed on Dec. 5, 2019.

²³ Orreill, “Who are the Ianfu (Comfort Women)?”, 132.

²⁴ Pyong Gap Min, “Korean ‘Comfort Women’: The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender and Class,” *Gender & Society*, 17 (2003): 6, 944.

²⁵ Orreill, “Who are the Ianfu (Comfort Women)?”, 132.

²⁶ Tanaka, *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II*, 96.

soldiers.²⁷ The number of Japanese prostitutes required to serve the army was more than could be supplied from the Japanese people, add to this the fact that Japanese prostitutes were often older and infected with sexual diseases and the conclusion was drawn that they were not capable to serve a large number of Japanese soldiers.²⁸ Korean women were deemed more suitable for the task.²⁹ Strong patriarchal customs present in Korean society ensured that women did not have sex before marriage, resulting in a large group of healthy women that Japan could force into sex slavery.³⁰ This does not mean that there were no Japanese “comfort women”, but they were often paid prostitutes serving the higher officers, whilst Korean “comfort women” served the regular soldiers.³¹

The experience of being a “comfort woman”

After a long journey, a commissioned “comfort women” would arrive at a “comfort station”, where she was registered by an officer and given either a number or a Japanese name.³² Then the woman faced a physical examination, if passed, she would be raped by a high ranking officer, after which she was ready to serve the regular soldiers.³³ “Comfort women” served from ten up till thirty men a day under agonizing conditions.³⁴ “They were regularly subjected to torture, beating, burning, and sometimes stabbing. Some women died of venereal disease in military brothels, while other women committed suicide.”³⁵ Many women thought of escaping the “comfort stations”, but their compounds were always heavily patrolled, so chances of escaping were slim, add to this the fact that many women did not know anything about the countries they were

²⁷ Orreill, “Who are the Ianfu (Comfort Women)?”, 133.

²⁸ Ibid., 131.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 133.

³¹ Tanaka, *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II*, 97.

³² Orreill, “Who are the Ianfu (Comfort Women)?”, 138.

³³ Ibid., 139.

³⁴ Min, “Korean ‘Comfort Women’: The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender and Class”, 941.

³⁵ Ibid.

stationed in and the idea of a successful escape was all the more unattainable.³⁶ Most women gave up on physical escape and resorted to narcotics to mentally escape instead.³⁷

Japan surrendered in August 1945, marking a victory for the allied forces and indicating the end of the Second World War.³⁸ This meant that the “comfort stations” were stopped and depending on where a woman was stationed, could lead to different outcomes. In some cases, the Japanese soldiers would kill the “comfort women” at their stations to ensure no one would find out about the things they had done to these women.³⁹ “The opinion that the women would be an embarrassment to Japan if left alive and that they would be an encumbrance to evacuate with the retreating Japanese troops often led to the conclusion to dispose of them.”⁴⁰ The majority of the former “comfort women” were not killed and often simply woke up to find their Japanese captors had disappeared, left to their own devices.⁴¹ A considerable number of women was sent back to their homelands, especially if they were stationed in China or in the more stable areas of Southeast Asia.⁴² Women who were stationed in more unstable areas, often settled where they were left behind, or they had to find a way home by themselves.⁴³

The women who did make it back to their homelands still had a hard time. They were dealing with immense physical and mental pain from their experiences as “comfort women” and were not able to deal with those scars publicly, because of the strong

³⁶ Orreill, “Who are the Ianfu (Comfort Women)?”, 140.

³⁷ Ibid., 141.

³⁸ Martin Gilbert, *The Second world War: A Complete History*, (Newburyport: Rosetta Books, 2014), 297g.

³⁹ Orreill, “Who are the Ianfu (Comfort Women)?”, 142.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 143.

⁴² Ibid., 142.

⁴³ Ibid.

patriarchal standards about female purity present in Korean society.⁴⁴ “Many women believed the revelation of their past would bring shame on their family and at a great emotional strain to themselves went to any lengths to keep their past hidden.”⁴⁵ Their experiences during the war had made it impossible for them to return to a normal life or start a family and thus they did not have any chance at a normal future.⁴⁶

However, something changed during the early 1990s. After fifty years of silence, Kim Hak-Soon testified on the fourteenth of August 1991 about her experience as a “comfort woman”.⁴⁷ The organization that helped her on the road to coming forward was the *Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Sexual Slavery by Japan* (henceforth *Korean Council*), established in November 1990 by a coalition of thirty-six Korean women’s organizations.⁴⁸ It was this organization’s goal to take action against the Japanese government, and make them admit guilt for the war crimes they committed during the Second World War.⁴⁹ This organization has helped more than two hundred former “comfort women” come forward with their stories, which in turn has helped their cause gain a broader audience. The “comfort women” issue has become as big as it is today, due to the women’s groups campaign to turn the issue into a greater one over human rights, “[t]heir push for feminist scholarly research into the Ianfu (“comfort women”) issue and general intensification of it helped change societal attitudes in Korea, preparing the way for former Ianfu to make public their stories.”⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Min, “Korean ‘Comfort Women’: The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender and Class”, 948.

⁴⁵ Orreill, “Who are the Ianfu (Comfort Women)?”, 144.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴⁷ Min, “Korean ‘Comfort Women’: The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender and Class”, 941.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Orreill, “Who are the Ianfu (Comfort Women)?”, 147.

Chapter II: Korean Feminism

“Feminism, the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes. Although largely originating in the West, feminism is manifested worldwide and is represented by various institutions committed to activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests.”⁵¹

The subjugation of Korean women

A good place to start when explaining the history of Korean feminism would be the early reigns of the Yi dynasty, as Bonnie B. Oh describes that as the time in which the “systematic subjugation of women” started.⁵² During this era which lasted 500 years, from around 1392 until 1910, Confucianism was adopted as the state ideology, marking the start of what many credit as the reason for Korea’s patriarchal society.⁵³ Within Confucian thought, the family is held as the core of society, within this family, hierarchies are involved, with males at the top and the elders demanding respect.⁵⁴ Women were to devote their lives to the family, receiving education at a young age on how to behave and uphold chastity in order to be a good wife and mother.⁵⁵ Confucianism made it so that women were dependent on men during all phases of life, when unmarried to their fathers, once married to their husbands and when widowed to their sons.⁵⁶ Thus, the concept of woman as a subject had no place in Confucianism.”⁵⁷

⁵¹ Laura Brunel and Elinor Burket, *Feminism*, (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019),

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism/The-fourth-wave-of-feminism>, accessed on Dec. 7, 2019.

⁵² Bonnie B. Oh, “From Three Obediences to Patriotism and Nationalism: Women’s Status in Korea Up To 1945,” *Korea Journal*, 22 (1982): 7, 39.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Seung-A Kim, “Feminism and Music Therapy in Korea” in *Feminist Perspectives in Music Therapy*, ed. Susan Hadley (Dallas: Barcelona Publishers, 2007), 135.

⁵⁵ Marian Lief Palley, “Women’s Status in South Korea: Tradition and Change,” *Asian Survey*, 30 (1990): 12, 1140.

⁵⁶ Young-Hee Shim, “Feminism and the Discourse of Sexuality in Korea: Continuities and Changes,” *Human Studies*, 24 (2001): 1, 135.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

The fluctuation of Korean feminism

Things started to change around the end of the nineteenth century, women had already started to receive education through the coming of Christianity to Korea, but Korea becoming a colony of Japan boosted the education of women even more.⁵⁸ The Korean public realised that in order for them not to lose sight of Korean culture, every person needed to be educated in the traditions and customs of the country, even women.⁵⁹ Educational programs were set up and aimed at creating wise mothers and good wives, a rhetoric solely driven by a nation-centred ideology and not focussed on the furthering of women's positions in society.⁶⁰ "Women's empowerment through education is relevant insofar as it is aimed at the empowerment of 'others' – in this case, the country."⁶¹ Thus, one could say that Korean feminism enjoyed its first wave at the end of the nineteenth century under the guise of nationalism, a tactic that would become very familiar to the movement in the future.⁶² The first women's organisations were started around this time, and although some were created with female oriented goals in mind, most were very nationalistic in spirit.⁶³

Once Japan's colonial power over Korea strengthened, nationalist groups were made illegal, but non-political groups such as the women's movement were encouraged by the Japanese, to keep the masses occupied and at ease.⁶⁴ This had the opposite effect, Koreans clutched onto their Confucian traditions and disregarded actions taken by

⁵⁸ Oh, "From Three Obediences to Patriotism and Nationalism: Women's Status in Korea Up To 1945", 42.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶⁰ Yung-Hee Kim, "Under the Mandate of Nationalism: Development of Feminist Enterprises in Modern Korea, 1860-1910," *Journal of Women's History*, 7 (1995): 4, 127.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Kyungja Jung, "Practicing Feminism in South Korea: The Issue of Sexual Violence and the Women's Movement," *Hecate*, 29 (2003): 2, 263.

⁶³ Oh, "From Three Obediences to Patriotism and Nationalism: Women's Status in Korea Up To 1945", 45.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

organisations supported by the Japanese.⁶⁵ Thus, any progress made by Korean women's organisations was lost. The women's groups that had a more nationalistic agenda, although illegal, did manage to survive in Korean society, but they constantly risked losing legitimacy due to Korea's regression back to traditional moral codes.⁶⁶ However, these groups made big strides when on the first of March, 1919, over a million people took to the streets of Korea to protest Japanese rule.⁶⁷ The number of women participating in this movement compared to men, seemed relatively small at first: about one woman participated for every forty men, however most of the women involved were teachers or students, showing that they were at the forefront of the nationalist movement and not just mere followers.⁶⁸ This occasion was a catalyst for the Korean women's movement, as women's groups gained recognition for their contributions to the nation by their male peers, women were seen as active participants in society.⁶⁹

However, all progress was lost in the 1930s, when Japan reinstated Confucianism to tighten control over Korea.⁷⁰ It would take Korean feminism a very long time to recover, even after Japan's control over Korea ended with World War II.⁷¹ The period from 1945 until the 1990s when the "comfort women" issue was made public was a calm time for Korean feminism, some of the bigger changes will be named.

During the 1960s and 1970s, women were mobilised as cheap labour suppliers to keep up with the rapidly growing economic changes that were happening in Korea.⁷²

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 48.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 52.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Jung, "Practicing Feminism in South Korea: The Issue of Sexual Violence and the Women's Movement", 264.

Women's organisations started to tackle workers issues.⁷³ Of the fifty-seven women's groups that existed during this time, only five also represented women's causes and only two of those were somewhat effective: the *Christian Academy* and the *Women's Association of Korean Churches*.⁷⁴ Their "Social Education for Women" program helped educate women and eventually produced some of the most fervent activists, some of whom are still active today.⁷⁵

In 1975, the United Nations proclaimed that year the International Women's Year, which boosted the thinking about women's issues around the world, and the women's movement in Korea was no exception.⁷⁶ However, Korean society looked down on feminism, and regarded it as "Western culture" which was not applicable to the Korean way of life and thus feminists in Korea were disregarded if they focussed on too specifically feminine issues.⁷⁷ This did not stop a group of women from founding the first Department of Women's Studies at Ewha Women's University in 1977, marking the start of a centre for feminist theory and activism.⁷⁸

In the first half of the 1980s, Korea was repressed by a military regime, which pushed the women's movement to tie itself to yet another bigger societal issue: the movement for democracy.⁷⁹ However, an unexpected tragic event managed to connect this fight for democracy to a feminist issue: the sexual assault of a female student activist by the police in 1986.⁸⁰ The general public was outraged that officials tried to cover the event up by saying that the girl and her lawyer were making false accusations, and united to

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 263.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 265.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 261.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 265.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 266.

⁸⁰ Kim, "Feminism and Music Therapy in Korea", 134.

fight for justice against the military regime.⁸¹ Although most people viewed it as a general human rights issue, connected to their fight for democracy, it was an important step for Korean feminism, as it helped the founding of organisations such as the *The women's Sexual Violence Relief Center* and *The Sexual Assault Center* during the 1990s.⁸² These organisations helped spread awareness and promote openness about sexual violence incidents, issues Korean society had never properly dealt with before.

After the June 1987 mass people's struggle, the transformation of Korea into a democracy had successfully started.⁸³ Women were granted more freedom to raise gender specific issues and the *Korea's Women's Associations United (KWAU)* was established in 1987.⁸⁴ Since the 1990s, this organization has become focussed on women's issues such as sexuality and family law reform.⁸⁵ Women started to separate their own issues from the nationalist, workers and democratic movements and realised that in order to truly tackle their own struggles, they needed to be united in their efforts.⁸⁶ Protests by women's organizations became more widespread and public than ever before during the 1990s.

The "comfort women" issue and Korean feminism today

A major issue that united Korean people behind a feminist cause was that of the "comfort women" in the early 1990s. The issue was first revealed to the public in a seminar by professor Youn Chung-ok of Ewha Women's University.⁸⁷ The story of the "comfort women" caused uproar amongst feminist organisations, eventually bringing

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 135.

⁸³ Jung, "Practicing Feminism in South Korea: The Issue of Sexual Violence and the Women's Movement", 267.

⁸⁴ Kim, *Feminism and Music Therapy in Korea*, 132.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Jung, "Practicing Feminism in South Korea: The Issue of Sexual Violence and the Women's Movement", 267.

⁸⁷ Soh, "The Korean 'Comfort Women': Movement for Redress", 1232.

thirty-six of them together who then founded the *Korean Council*.⁸⁸ Kim Hak-Soon dared to come forward with her story in 1991 after she was urged on by women's organisations, specifically the *Korean Council* and she was followed by many victims who all became activists in the fight against sexual violence and Japan's denial of the accusations.⁸⁹ Not just feminists, but Korean society in general united over the "comfort women" issue, because it was not just an occurrence of sexual violence against women, but it was a crime against human rights by Japan, a nationalist cause that all people could get behind and thus a perfect cause for Korean feminism that had the habit of tying its issues to other causes.⁹⁰

Today, it is undeniable that Korean women still hold an inferior position in society compared to men, as old traditions still linger in everyday life. Women in Korea have always willingly left their own issues on the backburner whilst fighting for bigger societal issues, this was the only way for them to gain legitimacy in a society that despised Western feminism's individualism.⁹¹ However, we can see that Korean women today are slowly embracing things more in line with Western feminism, such as choosing to remain single, living by themselves, pursuing their own careers or education, thus breaking with a lot of Korean Confucian traditions.⁹² Whilst older generations in Korea are still quite reluctant to accept feminist ideas, the general society has become a lot more open to feminist thought, and thus social relations have become a lot more equal in Korea.⁹³ Modern Korean women often do not accept the traditional Confucian codes they have to follow, rules their own mothers still followed, this shows

⁸⁸ Min, "Korean 'Comfort Women': The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender and Class", 941.

⁸⁹ Kim, "Feminism and Music Therapy in Korea", 135.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Alice Yun Chai, "Asian-Pacific Feminist Coalition Politics: The Chongshindae/Jugunianfu ('Comfort Women') Movement," *Korean Studies*, 17 (1993): 1, 84.

⁹² Kim, "Feminism and Music Therapy in Korea", 137.

⁹³ Ibid.

us that change is quite recent.⁹⁴ Although feminism has not been adopted by everyone in Korea as enthusiastically, “gender equality is one of the premises on which democracy in Korea today is based”, and thus change is on the horizon.⁹⁵

Chapter III: Finding the order of influence

In the previous chapters, we saw that former “comfort women” gathered courage to tell their stories with the help of Korean women’s organisations, and that the “comfort women” issue became a major cause for Korean feminism even gaining support from the general public normally not interested in women’s issues. To narrow this relationship down even further, two primary sources will be analysed: the website of the *Korean Council* and an interview with former “comfort woman” Kim Bok-Dong. These sources stand very close to the subjects studied and can thus provide a closer look into the connection between Korean feminism and the “comfort women” issue if analysed correctly.

Since the primary sources that are going to be covered stand so close to the subjects central in this thesis, it is important to be aware of the downsides of using them through source criticism. The first source is the website of a protest movement: the *Korean Council*. They want to get justice from Japan for the crimes they committed during World War II, and thus their website is designed to attract potential supporters to their cause. The depictions of “comfort women” that are going to be analysed are thus shaped by this motive of trying to get people to join the cause, but since this is an important aspect in answering the central research question, it is in this case useful for the

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Eunkang Koh, “Gender Issues and Confucian Scriptures: Is Confucianism Incompatible with Gender Equality in South Korea?” *Bulletin of SOAS*, 71 (2008): 2,360.

analysis. The second source is an interview, meaning that there are immediately some red flags when it comes to taking the information at face value. The questions chosen to ask during an interview, might reflect a certain agenda held by the interviewer. The answers given might be contaminated by the unreliability of memory or out of choice by the interviewee to leave out or alter some information knowingly. With these things in mind, it is time to start analysing the sources.

The Korean council and its heroic portrayal of “Comfort women”

The first source that will be analysed is the website of the *Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan* (or *Korean Council*). This is an organization that is dedicated to solving the “comfort women” issue, or rather, getting reconciliation for its victims and preventing anything like this from ever happening again. The *Korean Council* was created by a coalition of thirty-six feminist organizations that realized that this issue needed to be fought by all women, making it one of the biggest women’s organizations in Korea. To preface this analysis, it is important to note that translations provided by *Google Translate* will be used throughout this section.

The website of the *Korean Council* is well-made and well-organized, they provide a possible new supporter, or someone interested in the movement with all the backstory necessary and with all the means to donate or support their cause in any way. On the homepage of the website, there is a slide show detailing upcoming events, a picture gallery showing photos of recent gatherings, two message boards and a petition to solve Japanese military slavery, that 2,099,265 people have signed.⁹⁶ At the top of the page,

⁹⁶ 일본군 성 노예제 문제 해결을위한 정의 기억 연대 [The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan], <http://womenandwar.net/kr/>, accessed on Dec. 14, 2019.

there are six main tabs, which translate to: “Japanese military slavery”, “Group Introduction”, “Activity Introduction”, “Sponsorship Participation”, “News” and “English”.⁹⁷ Each tab has different subheadings connected to its theme, the main ones looked at for this analysis are the subheading “Victims cry”⁹⁸ under “Japanese military Slavery” and “What is Japanese military sexual slavery system?”⁹⁹ under the tab “English”.

Under the subheading “Victims cry”, the website shows pictures of ten former “comfort women” supported by short paragraphs explaining their stories.¹⁰⁰ The first thing to be analysed is the fact that the *Korean Council* chose to use pictures in which the women are visibly protesting, whether they are holding a microphone, present at a protest or behind a table at a press conference, they are visibly vocal for the cause.¹⁰¹ The former “comfort women” are not portrayed as victims without agency, but as survivors with a voice, showing that after years of silence, these women are now fighting against sexual violence. The choice to picture these women as activists, might be explained by the fact that this organisation works together with “comfort women”, it would be disrespectful to portray such loyal activists as mere victims, when they are so much more. This way of portraying the former “comfort women” is also useful in pulling new supporters to the cause, it is not a matter of pitying the victims, but instead standing with them in the fight to solve Japan’s history of sexual violence. This is a clear example of a feminist

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ 일본군 성 노예제 문제 해결을위한 정의 기억 연대 [The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan], <http://womenandwar.net/kr/testimony/>, accessed on Jan. 4, 2020.

⁹⁹ 일본군 성 노예제 문제 해결을위한 정의 기억 연대 [The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan], <http://womenandwar.net/kr/what-is-japanese-military-sexual-slavery-system/>, accessed on Jan. 4, 2020.

¹⁰⁰ 정의 기억 연대 [Korean Council], <http://womenandwar.net/kr/testimony/>, accessed on Dec. 16, 2019.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

organisation employing the help of “comfort women” to make their cause more impactful to the public.

The second part of this page up for analysis comes in the short pieces of text accompanying the photos. Each of these texts can be separated into two parts, first the *Korean Council* provides a more informative description of the life of a former “comfort woman” and after that follow some quotes uttered by the woman in question herself.¹⁰²

In the information section on former “comfort woman” Gil Won-Ok, it is emphasized that she was an active participant in the anti-Japanese sexual slavery movement, after she came forward as a “comfort woman” in 1998.¹⁰³ Once again, the website of the *Korean Council* emphasizes the importance of “comfort women” as activists and how they are an important and active part of the movement. However, the quotes by Gil Won-Ok herself show how, initially she was not this fervent activist at all. Gil did not want to tell her story to the public, but she was urged to consider it by her daughter-in-law.¹⁰⁴ After they visited a Wednesday Demonstration, Gil realised that it was not her who should be ashamed, but the Japanese government.¹⁰⁵ Thus, inspired by the protest movement, she dared to come out with her story. Without women’s organisations such as the *Korean Council* paving the way for former “comfort women”, it is very likely that a lot of them would have remained silent. Gil’s testimony also emphasizes the fact that Korean society is changing when it comes to feminism, whilst she was still held back by old Confucian customs, her daughter-in-law pushed her to fight for justice. In the case of Gil Won-Ok’s portrayal on the website, there is the

¹⁰² Ibid., accessed on Dec. 18, 2019.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

contradiction of her as an important part of the movement, and her being totally reliant on the movement.

The information on former “comfort woman” Kim Bok-Dong is more cohesive, both the text written by the website and her quotes are all within the theme of her as an activist. The information by the *Korean Council* talks about how she took a part in setting up the butterfly fund and the peace fund to support victims of sexual violence and how she always participated in the weekly protests.¹⁰⁶ Kim’s own quotes also show her passionate hatred of Japan’s treatment of the issue in the years after the war.¹⁰⁷ Here her portrayal is in line with what the *Korean Council* wants to get across to its website visitors: the fact that together with the former “comfort women”, they are fighting for a resolution, which would be impossible to do without them.

The quotes by former “comfort women” are all very different, some show specifically the activist sides of the women, other quotes highlight the struggles of life back in Korea, and some describe the things they went through under the Japanese.¹⁰⁸ The quotes thus do not necessarily reflect any specific agenda the *Korean Council* might have, but rather aim to provide a broad spectrum of opinions that might be shared by all “comfort women” or serve to show the individuality of the women. The information supplied by the website however, always frames the women as heroes, once again showing that the *Korean Council* uses the idea of “comfort women” as heroes rather than victims to get their point across.

Under the subheading “What is Japanese military sexual slavery system”, the website provides an English language explanation for what the entire “comfort women” issue entails. In this third section up, the *Korean Council* once again presses the fact that

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

without the bravery of former “comfort women” coming forward, they would not be able to fight for a better world.¹⁰⁹ “Survivors transformed into women’s rights and peace activists who demanded the restoration of their dignity and human rights, and the achievement of a peaceful world where no more person is victimized.”¹¹⁰ Here the website directly states that the “comfort women” were the main driving force behind their organisation, without them the movement would not have gotten anywhere.

Overall, the website of the *Korean Council* credits the “comfort women” for their growth as an organisation. This is visible through the portrayal of “comfort women” as heroes, fighting alongside the people to end the issue. However, the quotes by former “comfort women” themselves do not necessarily reflect this image, as some women credit the organisation for helping them come forward. After analysing the website of the *Korean Council*, the connection between the “comfort women” issue and Korean feminism seems to be more influenced by the “comfort women”, but perhaps looking at a different source will change this balance.

Kim Bok-Dong’s recollections and truth behind breaking the silence

The second primary source analysed to better understand the connection between the “comfort women” issue and Korean feminism, is an interview with Kim Bok-Dong, a former “comfort woman”. Inspired by other “comfort women” and the Korean women’s movement, she told her story and became an active member of the feminist community, specifically focussing on issues of sexual violence and human rights.

¹⁰⁹ 정의 기억 연대 [Korean Council], <http://womenandwar.net/kr/what-is-japanese-military-sexual-slavery-system/>, accessed on Dec. 16, 2019.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

On October 27th, 2018, three months before she passed away, Kim Bok-Dong did an interview with the Youtube channel *Asian Boss*.¹¹¹ The video is titled “Life As A ‘Comfort Woman’: Story of Kim Bok-Dong” and has over three million views as of January 2020.¹¹² *Asian Boss* is a channel on Youtube, led by Stephen Park, that focusses on Asian topics, they report on news, cultural trends and social issues that their viewers might be interested in.¹¹³ Park starts off the video by explaining that *Asian Boss* has never shied away from doing tough interviews, and that after many requests by their audience and months of searching, they have finally found a former “comfort woman”, willing to tell her story.¹¹⁴ Once the actual interview starts, the video is solely in Korean. The subtitles provided by *Asian Boss* will be used to analyse the things they say. In total, Park asks around twenty questions, which become more detailed as the interview progresses. Initially, the questions asked are more general, such as “How old are you?” and “What did they make you do?”, or they are solely asked for clarification such as “By force do you mean, coming to your house and taking you away?” or “So it was continuous”.¹¹⁵ Park is mostly letting Kim talk, whilst nodding to show that he is listening and empathizing. Halfway through the video, the questions start to contain more context, showing where the interviewer wants the answers to go, examples are “After you went through all that suffering when did you get the courage to tell your story publicly?” and “Japan claims that you were paid prostitutes and that you weren’t victims, but went to make money. There are those who say that. How do you respond to these claims?”¹¹⁶ Here Park changes the mood of the video and interview from a more

¹¹¹ Asian Boss, *Life As A “Comfort Woman”: Story of Kim Bok-Dong*, (Asian Boss, 27 October 2018), https://youtu.be/qsT97ax_Xb0, accessed on Dec. 19, 2019.

¹¹² Ibid., accessed on Jan. 4, 2020.

¹¹³ Asian Boss, <https://www.youtube.com/user/askasianboss/about>, accessed on Jan. 4, 2020.

¹¹⁴ Asian Boss, *Life As A “Comfort Woman”: Story of Kim Bok-Dong*, https://youtu.be/qsT97ax_Xb0, accessed on Dec. 19, 2019.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

informative tone to a more passionate one, he wants Kim to become angry about the change she is fighting for in the world, and thus he uses more guiding questions. Park ends the video on his own, directly to camera, thanking Kim for giving this interview and urging his viewers to share her story and spread awareness of this issue.

Let us look at the answers Kim gave in the interview and analyse those within the context of Korean feminism and the “comfort women” issue. When Kim starts talking about how she ended up as a “comfort woman”, she first refers to how the Japanese could do whatever they wanted to the Koreans, they conscripted young men to fight as “student soldiers”, and they took Korean girls by force to work as “comfort women”.¹¹⁷ By stating how the Japanese forced all Koreans, not just women, to do whatever they wanted, Kim immediately shows her stance in the entire issue. She is a human rights activist first and foremost, who wants an apology from Japan for the crimes they committed against all humans during the war. This shows that she is deeply involved in the Korean version of feminism: although she is fighting against an issue that solely happened to women, she ties it to a bigger cause such as the general ignorance of human rights by Japan during the war.

Then Kim goes into how she was forced to become a “comfort woman”. A recruiter came to her family’s home, threatening the family that they would lose everything if they did not comply in having Kim work in a factory producing clothing for the Japanese soldiers.¹¹⁸ Her mother reluctantly agreed once the man promised that she would be returned to her family when she reached marriable age.¹¹⁹ This section emphasizes some of the aspects we have found in traditional Korean society, those

¹¹⁷ Ibid., accessed on Dec. 23, 2019.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

rooted in Confucianism. Although no would not have been an answer, Kim's mother agrees to send her daughter to a factory, once the recruiter promises to return her at a marriable age. This shows us that Korean society valued women to the extent of their ability to get married and start a family. Thus, at a young age Kim experienced her worth as a woman in Korean society, and after her experiences as a "comfort woman", she knew she could not fit this mould anymore.

Kim Bok-Dong was twenty-one years old when she finally returned to her family back in Korea and she found herself unable to tell her story. "How could I have told them about my experiences? As a woman, I had things done to me that were unfathomable."¹²⁰ The word "unfathomable" indicates that she did not think her family would understand or sympathize with what had happened to her and thus she decided not to tell them. Korean society at the end of World War II still held notions of chastity and virginity in very high regard, in case of rape the victim was often blamed instead of the assailant and thus many "comfort women", such as Kim did not want to tell their stories, for fear of being blamed and bringing shame to their families. However, keeping this secret was not easy, because Kim was twenty-one and thus fit for marriage. When her mother kept pushing for her to get married, Kim told her everything: "given all the abuse done to my body, I didn't want to screw up another man's life. It should just be my problem."¹²¹ This shows us that the reason to refrain from marriage was rooted in the Korean Confucian tradition of placing the family, in this case the potential husband, above oneself. A woman's wellbeing was less important than remaining silent and keeping society peaceful.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

The next part of the video is where chronologically, the “comfort women” issue and Korean feminism start to overlap, the early 1990s. Kim Bok-Dong first came out publicly as a “comfort woman” when she was in her sixties, inspired to tell her story in the hopes of resolving the issue if she told the truth.¹²² Seeing as she came forward in 1992, a year after Kim Hak-Soon’s public statement, it is safe to presume that that must have been a factor inspiring Kim to come forward. Here Korean feminism influenced Kim Bok-Dong, but she also became a major activist thus influencing feminism. Kim would not be quiet anymore: “Whenever I speak about this issue, they try to silence me.”¹²³ She was a very passionate activist in the issue between former “comfort women” and the Japanese government and an avid human rights activist in general, thus showing that she was a major part in the women’s movement. When talking about the wrongdoings by the Japanese government (and the Korean government as well), Kim often uses the words “us” and “we” when referring to who is angry and who opposes them.¹²⁴ Whilst this could refer to other “comfort women”, it is very likely that Kim means organisations she is affiliated with (like the *Korean Council*) who are fighting for a fair resolution of the “comfort women” issue, thus showing just how connected she is to female activism.

Kim’s answer to the question “Is there anything that you regret up to this point?”, is a determining factor in showing the connection between the “comfort women” issue and Korean feminism.¹²⁵ She answers “Had I known this issue would drag out for so long, I wouldn’t have come forward. If no one knew, then I could’ve just lived quietly.”¹²⁶ If this is a sentiment shared by more former Korean “comfort women”, then it is proof that

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

without the interference of the women's movement in Korea, the issue would have never become public, because the victims would have taken their secret to the grave. Traditionally, Korean women were so bound by societal rules of seeing the family before the individual, and chastity, that they would have never dared to tell the public their past out of fear of misunderstanding and heavy judgement. Only the slight possibility of a public apology by Japan, an idea made possible by the ferocity of Korean women's organizations and feminist scholars, pushed former "comfort women" to come out. Here we see that without Korean feminism, it is very likely that the story of "comfort women" would have never gone public, or at least not from the source of actual victims.

The interview ends with Kim emotionally stating that it is very hard for her to talk about this, followed by Stephen Park's address to his followers to share this video and spread awareness about the "comfort women".¹²⁷ The video is made to make the viewer feel pity for these "comfort women", as Kim is portrayed as a heartbroken victim who is spending her final months fighting a never ending battle against Japan. This is a very different message from that of the *Korean Council*, which depicts former "comfort women" as powerful activists, who are more than just victims.

Both sources show a different order of influence, the *Korean Council* credits "comfort women" as the reason why women's organisations have a relatively large following today, whereas the *Asian Boss* interview has Kim Bok-Dong stating that she would rather have remained silent, but she did not because she believed in the possibility of change planted in her head by Korean feminists. Looking at the history of Korean feminism, we can see that it experienced a slow rise that only came to fruition in the

¹²⁷ Ibid., accessed on Jan. 4, 2020.

early 1990s, around the time when the first “comfort woman” told the public her story. One could thus say that these two run very closely together and must have a similar background. However, the fact that former “comfort women”, held back by traditional Korean society, did not want to disturb the peace with their pasts, but only did so when urged forward by women’s organisations, tells us that the connection between the “comfort women” issue and Korean feminism is impossible without first acknowledging women’s organisations.

Conclusion

During Japan’s colonial dominance over Korea, especially during World War II, many Korean men and women were coerced to work in Japanese factories, the army or in “comfort stations”. Thousands of Korean girls were forced to become sex slaves for the Japanese army, making up about eighty percent of all women who met this fate in total. Reasons for why so many Korean girls were taken, range from them being in close (cultural) proximity to Japan, their existence within a Japanese colony, Japanese racism towards Koreans, or most likely the fact that Korean tradition required girls to remain abstinent until marriage. This last factor made Korean girls specifically suited to become “comfort women” as they were free from any venereal diseases, thus keeping the army healthy in the process. These “comfort women” were spread out into many different “comfort stations” all over Japan’s war territory, remaining in close proximity to the soldiers to serve them whenever the men pleased. When the war ended, some women were killed, others were abandoned, and some were repatriated to their home countries. However, returning to Korean society with its strong Confucian norms and values was very hard for former “comfort women”. They could not talk about their

hardships, because they would be misunderstood, blamed or ostracized by their families and society in general, and thus a long period of silence ensued. The saviour of these former “comfort women” came in the form of Korean feminism. Very different from Western feminism, Korean feminism developed alongside other protest movements fighting for nationalism, worker’s rights, democracy and human rights in general, instead of solely for the rights of women. This gave them more credibility in a society that was sceptical towards Western feminism, and thus made it possible for Korean feminism to have a slow and steady growth as a movement. Once professor Youn Chung-ok of Ehwa University gave a seminar about “comfort women”, a coalition of thirty-six women’s organisations formed the *Korean Council*. They rallied behind an issue that was both specific to women, but also fit within nationalist, anti-Japanese sentiments and general human rights issues, making it a cause typical for Korean feminism. In 1991, convinced by women’s organisations, Kim Hak-Soon came out to the public as a “comfort woman”, making her the first Korean woman to do so. In the months and years following Kim’s testimony, many other former “comfort women” shared their stories and gained more public following helping women’s organisations such as the *Korean Council* grow. An analysis of the *Korean Council*’s website shows just how dedicated they are to solving the issue. By employing the stories and images of “comfort women” and portraying them as survivors rather than victims, they try to gather the public’s support and work towards ending the issue. They credit the “comfort women” for their success as an organisation, as their fervent protesting and bravery is the only reason for the women’s movement’s success. The interview with former “comfort woman” Kim Bok-Dong, on the Youtube channel *Asian Boss*, shows us a different interaction between “comfort women” and Korean feminism. Without the support and resolve of feminist organisations in Korea giving her hope, Kim and other

“comfort women” would very likely have taken their secret to the grave, just to live peaceful lives within traditional Korean society. As a conclusion to my research question: What has been the precise connection between the “comfort women” issue and Korean feminism that started in the early 1990s? The answer is on a spectrum: When looking from a Korean feminist viewpoint, they often credit “comfort women” for making their issue more public, their bravery was necessary for Korean society to see this issue as important and real. However, from a “comfort women” perspective, it becomes apparent that without the support and belief in a resolution provided by women’s organizations, the “comfort women” would have remained silent and thus a resolution would have been impossible. The “comfort women” issue would not have come forward without the help of Korean feminists, but the issue also made Korean feminism into what it is today. Korean feminism needs the “comfort women” issue to legitimize itself, as it makes the public side with a semi-feminist cause also tied to lingering nationalist sentiments and human rights issues. However, Korean feminism would probably still exist today without the “comfort women” issue, whereas the “comfort women” issue would possibly have remained a secret, making Korean feminism more crucial in the balance between the two than the “comfort women” issue.

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