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National Bodies: The 'Comfort Women' Discourse and its Controversies in South Korea

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Abstract

This article examines how the nationalist discourse crystallising around the 'comfort women' issue (women abducted to function as sexual slaves for the Japanese Imperial Army during the Pacific War) in South Korea has eventually rendered individual victims' needs and preferences irrelevant to a larger narrative of an unforgivable offence to national sovereignty. The narrative, constructed socially with the active participation of the Korean government(s), has also linked together past grievances felt towards both Japan and the USA (their people as well as their governments) – albeit the latter appears only covertly, and on a more symbolic level its presence is indicative of the general public mood. What have been lost in the discourse are the very victims of military sexual slavery, whose fate and wellbeing has no longer been the subject of any social interest.

Introduction

The 'comfort women' issue received considerable attention in South Korea, and seemed to gain momentum in the 1990s. However, the public outrage that it brought about has since abated, and the whole matter appears to have sunk to a level of relative unimportance (it looks as if little headway has been made, and precious few are following any developments on this issue). This generally apathetic attitude is all the more surprising compared to the general uproar generated in 2008 by the Japanese prime minister's repeated denials of the Japanese government's involvement in setting up 'comfort stations', or the renewed frantic reaction of the Korean public to an ill-conceived artistic photography project of 2004, in which the famous actress, Lee Seung Yeon, posed as a 'comfort woman', surrounded by men dressed in Japanese Second World War military uniforms. Participating in the project is widely held to have damaged irreparably the reputation and future career prospects of the young actress. Both the Korean government and the public in general have been very quick in condemning every move from Japan that could be perceived in any way to damage Korean national pride; ministerial visits to the Yasukuni Shrine and the textbook controversies are the two most prominent and recurring issues.[1]

In contrast to these, it is curious to see how such a major 'misdeed' as the case of the military 'comfort women' has been relegated into an undercurrent of secondary importance among contemporary social issues. Has the movement undertaking the representation and promotion of the issue failed?

Certainly, nationalist sentiments are not the only ingredients constituting the rich texture behind the 'comfort women' issue; the discourse is being conducted around various problematic and intricately intertwined notions of colonialism, nationalism, race, gender and class, Confucian tradition and patriarchal values, the problem of agency, the state and individuals, the question of human rights, etc. Accordingly, the ideological orientations behind the movement are varied, sometimes overlapping, sometimes contradictory; we can distinguish primarily human rights, feminist and nationalist streams.[2] Each of these orientations present their own cluster of problems: from a human rights perspective, the particular feminist side of the problem is pushed to the background; feminists must cope with the problem of agency (or rather the absence of it) and the consequent interpretation of the phenomenon as victimization; meanwhile for nationalists, the very existence of surviving 'comfort women', defying the traditional female virtue of chastity, proves somewhat embarrassing and shameful. It is thus no wonder that there is considerable variety in the (often contradictory) goals that participants in the debate try to attain: while human rights activists' main focus is on the (Japanese) state's legal responsibility to individuals, those with feminist and nationalist sensitivities alternate between the importance of legal and moral responsibility, and the proper extent and methods of reparation. Moreover, because of their intrinsically wider range of attention to the issue, groups and individuals with a more feminist orientation tend have a more extended approach, also bringing up the question of patriarchal values in general, as well as the specific responsibility of the Allied forces, of Korean individuals and of the Korean government.

This is not to claim that there would be clearly identifiable groups with goals corresponding to any single one of the above approaches; quite on the contrary, in most cases the various strands appear in a curious amalgam, with nationalism serving as the overarching ideology that has appropriated the achievements of the other two approaches, thus monopolising the public discourse about the 'comfort women' and setting the parameters of the debate – with rather regrettable results.

This, to a large extent, is also the result of the absence and/or relative underdevelopment of independent civil movements with clearly articulated, specific orientations. The reasons for this reach back to South Korea's recent economic-social-political development: from 1961 to 1988 (the decades in which the struggles of various civil rights and feminist movements culminated in major victories in the Western world), South Korean society was under the iron-fist rule of an authoritarian government. In the repressive political environment, organising dissent groups entailed considerable risks; as a result, the representation of various social groups and their grievances was typically taken up by religious organizations. Although not entirely immune to the regime's heavy-handed measures, these organisations enjoyed some degree of autonomy, which they could exploit in their efforts to help those in need across a variety of issues (Koo 1993; Ogle 1990; Wells 1995).

This context had important implications for those concerned with women's roles and status in society. First of all, such issues tended to be subsumed to narrower labour issues, a more general criticism of the regime and demands for democratisation, as well as to assertions of national independence. On the other hand, the primary involvement of religious groups ensured that the gender issues addressed would be limited to those of a more conservative nature, dealing primarily with women's education, maternity, household responsibilities, etc. This conservatism was also reinforced by the wide social acceptance of the Confucian tradition that has survived in particularly strong forms in South Korea.[3] As a result, one cannot speak of a feminist movement at all in South Korea before the 1980s, let alone distinguish various orientations within such a movement; the emergence of associations focusing primarily on women's issues is a relatively recent development (Moon 2002).[4]

In view of this background, it should be clear why I talk about feminist, human rights or nationalist orientations, approaches and strands rather than groups, and why 'feminism' is used as an umbrella term referring to issues pertaining to women's roles and status in society in general. In such an ideologically nebulous context, the overbearing presence of nationalism as an overarching and unifying social discourse appears almost natural.[5]

In this article, I argue that the prevalent nationalist ideology has shifted the focus from the concrete issue to a wider and more symbolic level of national suffering, and thus has hindered (if not halted) the progress of the movement, even though the nationalist orientation and the human rights approach have helped gain wide recognition of the issue on national and international levels, respectively. At the same time, the fundamental tensions of the movement call into question the idea of a 'collective identity' as negotiated socially. If anything, the 'comfort women' issue only proves that the interests and orientations behind a social movement are varied, possibly contradictory, and their 'negotiation' does not necessarily bring about a compromise acceptable to all the parties involved.

A Brief History

The term 'comfort woman' is a direct translation of the Japanese *jūgunianfu* or *ianfu*, a euphemism for young women (ranging from their early teens to their early twenties, mostly from lower-class families) drafted, deceived, sold or abducted to serve as military sex slaves in brothels for the Japanese Army during the Pacific War. As such, the term does not at all reflect the horrendous reality of these women, and would seem inadequate in a feminist account in particular. Nevertheless, all related literature has continued to keep it in use (although in quotation marks, to indicate this inadequacy), probably also as a way to reflect on the cynicism of the term itself.[6] Because precise official documentation has not been retrieved,[7] there are only estimates on the number of women mass-raped and forced into prostitution; these range between 50,000 and 300,000, 80% of whom are believed to have been Korean (e.g. Hicks 1995; Kwon 1994; Schmidt 2000). The focus of this article is only on the Korean 'comfort women' and the social discourse built around them in South Korea, although it is important to note that numerous other south- and north-east Asian women shared similar fates.

‘Comfort stations’ for the Japanese Army were established on occupied territories to ‘enhance the morale’ of the soldiers and provide ‘amenities for sexual recreation’ as well as to prevent the random rape of indigenous women in the same territories. This latter became an imminent concern after the ‘Rape of Nanking’, i.e. the Nanking (Nanjing) Massacre of 1937,[8] which badly damaged the Japanese Imperial Army’s reputation internationally. It is particularly ironic that, according to the official justification, systematic rape of women from other occupied territories was instituted in order to avoid random rape. Most of the ‘comfort women’ did not survive the war. Some were lined up at the front line to ‘relieve’ the retreating soldiers, i.e. serve as live protective shields, others were killed, yet others abandoned. Among those left behind, many died of (venereal) diseases caught during their enslavement and many others killed themselves, fearing their shameful return home (Choi 2000; Hicks 1995). After the war only one tribunal, that in Batavia (Jakarta) in 1948, dealt with the ‘comfort women’ issue, charging and convicting several officers for their involvement in forced prostitution, which they recognised as a war crime. The recognised victims were 35 Dutch women, i.e. white, educated Westerners, which is indicative of the Allied attitude to the case. However, the very same trial ignored the sufferings of Indonesian women, let alone ‘comfort women’ from other countries. Moreover, at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal of 1946 there was no mention of ‘military comfort women’, even though the American intelligence allegedly gathered sufficient data for the conviction of those responsible (Soh 2001).

The silence thus created lasted for a long time. In the 1965 Basic Treaty between Japan and Korea, which was supposed to normalise relations between the two countries and settle the question of war reparations, there was no mention of the ‘comfort women’ issue, let alone compensation for the individual victims. Yet the Japanese government has frequently hidden behind the treaty, claiming they have already settled the issue. Ironically, the Korean government also appears to be obliged by the same treaty not to seek financial reparations, and under the same pretext tries to avoid addressing the issue directly. Aside from the obvious economic interests at stake, it may do so out of the conviction that, given its delicate nature, the ‘comfort women’ issue is not a proper topic of public discussion (see Oh 2001).

The ‘comfort women’ issue finally gained public attention in 1988, when at a conference organised by the Korean Church Women United on sex tourism Yun Chung-Ok presented the findings of her research on this topic (Kwon 1994). Immediately, requests for a public disclosure of the related facts started pouring towards both the Japanese and Korean governments. For the better advancement of the issue, the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (hereinafter Korean Council) was formed with the participation of 37 women’s organisations in November 1990. These organisations show a rather wide and varied range in regard to the issues they represent: they have been involved ‘in [the] human rights movement for supporting women workers having been exploited since the 1970s, [the] democratisation and national reunification movement and [the] peace movement' ('Activities of the Korean Council . . .' 2002:2).

The first Japanese reactions were a complete denial of the charges, citing incomplete evidence, claiming the phenomenon sporadic, or labelling it simply as 'licensed prostitution'; in other words, the Japanese government did not deny the existence of 'comfort stations' (although individual officials and scholars did), but refused to take direct responsibility (Schmidt 2000). This prompted the first public disclosure of her story by a former 'comfort woman', Kim Hak-sun, in August 1991. This was followed by a formal lawsuit filed against the Japanese government by three former 'comfort women', demanding an official apology, financial reparations, a thorough investigation of the issue, the erection of a monument and the correction of history textbooks (Soh 2001; Watanabe 1994).

In January 1992 a Japanese historian, Yoshiaki Yoshimi, published the findings of his research on wartime documents, which clearly attested to the active involvement of the Japanese government in planning and establishing the military 'comfort station' system (Soh 2001; Watanabe 1994; Yoshimi 1995). In the wake of these findings, the Japanese government was obliged to acknowledge at least moral responsibility, offer apologies, conduct further research into the issue and seek some method of compensation for the victims. It contributed to the establishment of the Asian Women's Fund (AWF), a nominally private organisation with the primary aim of addressing contemporary issues related to women's honour and dignity, as well as to pay off 'atonement money' to the former 'comfort women'. However, the most common criticism against the Fund is that it only assists the Japanese government to evade legal responsibility altogether, and partly even moral responsibility, too: although the government is financially responsible for its operation, the Fund is authorised as a non-profit organisation – a designation that places the Fund in Habermas' 'public sphere', distanced from the government. In fact, it is supported by a combination of both publicly raised donations and government subsidies (Soh 2001). The Japanese prime minister has expressed his apologies on several occasions, in letters to the individual victims, as well as on ministerial visits to South Korea (Oh 2001; Soh 2001; Watanabe 1994). The most commonly levelled criticism against these apologies has been that they are only 'personal', or 'not sincere'.[9] [The former charge results partly from a translation error in the official letters accompanying the 'atonement payments' delivered to some of the survivors of wartime Japanese sexual slavery (Oh 2001; *cf.* Soh 2001).]

Dissatisfied with the efforts of the Japanese government, the Korean Council has continued to pursue its original goals, and has launched various activities such as weekly demonstrations in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, initiating solidarity meetings with other organisations in Asia as well as other parts of the world, putting pressure on the Japanese government through the UN Human Rights Commission, organising World Conferences and even an International Tribunal on War Crimes, while also conducting nationwide fundraising campaigns to provide for the former 'comfort women's basic needs. [For more details see the homepage of the Korean Council ('Activities of the Korean Council . . .' 2002).] Although these activities have continued steadily since their inception, they have attracted gradually less and less public attention as the novelty of the issue has worn off, and as a virtual impasse has developed on the official front.

Feminism versus Nationalism

The domestic public discourse in South Korea on the 'comfort women' issue has been built around two major orientations: one feminist and one nationalist.[10] That the two have been intertwined from the very start should come as no surprise: as noted earlier, the civil groups forming the Korean Council have varied ideological orientations themselves (which is rather typical of South Korean civil movements in general). Lack of specialisation thus resulted in the simultaneous representation of both ideologies, which were often conflicting, proving rather unfortunate for the former 'comfort women' themselves. The very surfacing of the issue has also contributed to this inter-relatedness: as mentioned earlier, the system of military prostitution institutionalised by the Japanese during the Second World War first became public at a conference organised on sex tourism, in itself heavily laden with nationalist sentiments.[11]

Thus, from the start, the nationalist tone has been dominant in the discourse. This proved to be fortunate in terms of social mobilization: the public in general identified quickly with the issue, as reflected in the success of the two fundraising campaigns and in the general public outrage against the 2004 photography project described earlier. Strictly feminist issues, such as the abolition of the family head (*hoju*) system or the overall improvement of career options for women, have not enjoyed such uniform support from all layers of society. However, this initial advantage quickly turned against the immediate interests of the former 'comfort women', and, as individuals, they were in a way left alone with their own problems.

Why this happened can be better understood if we first try to identify the differing interests behind the movement. From the point of view of the former 'comfort women', there were certainly economic gains to be expected; these women, disadvantaged in various ways,[12] have lived in particularly poor circumstances, and could hope for some financial compensation to improve their living standard. More importantly, they hoped to regain their lost dignity and reclaim a past that they have not had, i.e. to acquire an identity that they have been denied. That the latter has been a more important rationale for their campaign rather than economic gain is underlined by the fact that, by the time the 'comfort women' issue gained public attention, these women had reached their 70s and 80s – an age at which they could no longer expect much enjoyment from any financial reparation, nearing the end of a life spent in disgrace, secrecy and poverty.[13]

Here it is important to look at the timing of the disclosure. The 'comfort women' issue actually surfaced in Japanese society as early as the 1960s. Hicks (1995) gives details of how the Japanese journalist Senda Kako, prompted by a wartime photograph he encountered in 1962, dug out the story and continued publishing articles in 'relative obscurity' (Hicks 1995:16). Nevertheless, in South Korea it took 25 more years for the story to break news. The reasons can all be related to the democratic opening of the country, which provided the opportunity for the movement: during the authoritarian regime, all social movements were (quite naturally) directed primarily against the political-social repression that the regime created. On the other hand, it was only in a generally more open and optimistic atmosphere that the survivors could have any hope of having an alternative identity accepted – one that went directly against the traditional norms and values of female chastity promoted by their society and the government alike.[14] Thirdly, having lived in isolation and general disgrace (often self-hatred), it was the mushrooming of civil organisations brought about by the democratisation process that could provide these women with the organisational background necessary to promote their case.

Still, even in this generally more accepting and open social mood, it required considerable courage for the former 'comfort women' to disclose their long-hidden shameful past – the risks have been high. The primary impetus was given by the outright denial by the Japanese government of the existence of these women; they were denied their most basic human characteristic, their very existence. However, personal reasons also contributed to their coming out: as Kim Hak-sun stated, because all her family had died by then, she had no fear of bringing shame on them (Watanabe 1994). That shame could be a real concern is shown by the fact that some former 'comfort women' who made their stories public have indeed been shunned by their friends and families.

It is in this framework of norms and values that it becomes clear how quickly the shift occurred between reclaiming these women's personal past and the nation's dignity. Identifying with 'ethically fallen women' would be hard for most[15] – but identifying with the sufferings of the nation at the hands of a colonial-imperial power has been readily available to all. So it happened that soon in the nationalist discourse the personal tragedy was elevated to a symbolic level, to represent the sufferings of an entire nation. Precisely here lies the inner contradiction of the nationalist discourse: while the 'comfort women', oppressed and fragile, offer an imminent symbol of a similarly defenceless nation battered by the storms of history,[16] their very existence proves an embarrassing counterpoint to the female ideal promoted by the very same nationalist vein. They can serve as beacons to highlight the moral inferiority of the Japanese, but as individuals, 'fallen women', they are seen as shameful reminders of their immoral past.[17] On the other hand, their sacrifice may contribute to the nation's struggle to reclaim a glorious identity of which a horrendous colonial domination robbed them. The Japanese, in their zeal to justify their rule and expansion, had done their best to emasculate and belittle the Korean nation, culture and history, depicting them as inherently inferior and thus unable to set out on the path towards modernisation if left to themselves.

The Nationalist Discourse

It should come as no surprise that, from the very beginning, the nationalist undertone of the public discourse on the 'comfort women' issue has dominated; in this light, the case of 'comfort women' represents the colonial-imperial system in a clear way. The Japanese, as a colonial power, have used and desecrated the bodies of Korean (and other Asian) women to demonstrate and perpetuate their rule over their colonies. In this interpretation, following the pattern of the discourse on military prostitution, the shift between nation/ethnicity and gender turns individual sufferings into collective victimisation, thus homogenising the nation into a single unified entity (*cf.* Kim Hyun Sook 1998).

Yet another embarrassing aspect remains: the total lack of heroism. A nation already emasculated, humiliated and ridiculed by its violator in words and deeds needs to prove it has been capable of fighting. In this respect, it should come as no surprise that one of the first 'comfort women' whose story was publicised was Shim Mija, who could demonstrate some sign of patriotism. She was taken away by the local police as a schoolgirl because she was embroidering morning glories (a symbol of Korea; the country has been widely known as 'the Land of the Morning Calm') instead of cherry blossoms (Japan's national flower) on shirts to be sent to soldiers on the front, thus rebelling against the Japanese occupation in a symbolic way. At the police station she was tortured and raped, and then sent to a military camp to serve as a 'comfort woman' for six years (Watanabe 1994).

However, even this simple story attests to how the nationalist fervour to prove the moral superiority of Koreans in the face of Japanese brutality actually shapes history to present a more suitable image. It is evident from the story of each 'comfort woman' that their coercion, deception and abduction involved local inhabitants, who chose the girls and arranged for their transportation: local police, village notables, schoolteachers, etc. These individuals – although not always knowingly – assisted the 'slave hunt' (*cf.* Choi 2000; Yang 1998), yet none of them are ever mentioned in relation to the war crime, and their responsibility is never taken into account.[18] Taking them into consideration would tarnish the otherwise simple binary opposition so characteristic of nationalist discourses: the Other, i.e. 'bad, immoral, colonial-imperial Japan' versus Us, i.e. 'helpless, innocent victims'.[19]

There is yet further evidence of how nationalism mutes certain participants of the discourse, as well as veiling particular details. As mentioned previously, Senda Kako has been publishing articles on the issue since the 1960s in 'relative obscurity' (Hicks 1995:16; Yang 1998); in 1992 it took only two days for Yoshiaki Yoshimi to find information on the active participation of the Japanese government in the establishment of 'comfort stations'. Both of these incidents suggest that data have been abundant and easily accessible (albeit not complete). Moreover, it could have been obtained easily within Korean society as well: records of *Chŏngsindae* recruits (Volunteer Women's Corps)[20] have been readily available in several elementary schools, and after the first such records were made public it was the Korean government itself who ordered the schools not to disclose any more records, so as not to 'violate the rights of former *Chŏngsindae* women' (Yang 1998:128). The Korean government also rejected the erection of a monument commemorating drafted women, citing 'the lack of sufficient land for the monument and impairment to the landscape around the Memorial Building' (Yang 1998:128). Bonnie B.C. Oh testifies that even as late as 1996, 'some Korean officials in Washington attempted to dissuade us from staging the "The 'Comfort Women' of World War II: Legacy and Lessons" conference at Georgetown

University' (Oh 2001:24). As noted earlier, apart from the clear attempt to evade the question of Koreans' responsibility in the events and the obvious economic interests at stake, the whole issue has been judged as not quite fit for public discussion given its '(im)moral character', which works against the traditional female ideal still upheld, largely, as part of the nationalist canon.[21]

A further evidence of active government participation in shaping the discourse was witnessed at the 2000 Tokyo Women's Tribunal: a focus on the illegal colonisation of Korea by Japan underpinned the entire presentation of the case by the joint North and South Korean prosecution team (Dudden 2001:598–99). Obviously, what has been done to the sovereignty of the entire nation had to gain clear priority over individual sufferings. In this sense, it was also symbolic that the North and South Korean delegation were working together, physically re-enacting a national unity long lost, and at the same time providing another example of linking up anti-colonial and anti-imperial sentiments directed against both Japan and the USA.[22]

Another feature of the nationalist discourse has been that it has attempted to draw a direct parallel between the 'comfort women' issue and military prostitution around the US military bases in South Korea. The parallel between the two seems self-evident by virtue of the simple fact that, in both cases, the discourse is centred on the international sexual exploitation of Korean women, mostly with a humble background. Yet, as Katherine H. S. Moon (1998) readily points out, the analogy is not entirely accurate. In the latter case, there is a clear additional factor, that of choice (however limited), i.e. agency present – the 'comfort women' could not afford this 'luxury'. However, the fact that the two phenomena are still discussed in parallel frequently should not be surprising; their simultaneous emergence (here I am referring again to the fact that the 'comfort women' issue first gained public attention in Korea at a conference on sex tourism) can be in large part attributed to the fact that Korean nationalism itself centres on anti-Japanese as well as anti-American sentiments, the two often intertwined intricately.[23]

The AWF Payments

The contradictions of the nationalist discourse present themselves most clearly in the controversies around the AWF atonement payments. The Korean Council has rejected these payments, claiming they 'excluded the important elements, such as official apology and legal compensation', moreover accusing the Japanese government of having

> [. . .] used every means to convince [the 'comfort women'] to take the money. Meanwhile, the Japanese government advertised that the national fund was the best compensation available, prepared by Japanese government and people. Also, Japan tried to make a self-image that Japan is a charitable nation having nothing to do with the war crime. To convince the victims to take the money, they used inappropriate and illegal methods which dishonored the grandmothers. ('Activities of the Korean Council . . .' 2002:9)

What these ‘inappropriate and illegal methods’ were has never been specified. Further telling details from the Korean Council’s condemnation read: ‘[the payment] was carried out in the interests of Japan regardless of the will of victims, both the individuals *and nations*’; they also criticised the Fund for ‘neither [. . .] reflecting the cause of failure of their fund project, nor [. . .] trying to make an apology and compensation *in the right ways* that are requested by the victims. Rather, they are mentioning *medical and welfare projects*, which do not care about what the victims really want for compensation, to make up for their failure’ (‘Activities of the Korean Council . . .’ 2002:9, emphasis added). The first added emphasis is the most telling about what lies beneath: the discourse has been not so much about the individual victims as about the nation they have been transformed to represent.

The second emphasised expression confirms the sentimentalising tendency of the victimisation project that the Korean government has undertaken in relation to the issue. Yang (1998) aptly details how Japanese official apologies usually offered on ministerial visits have been carefully analysed in terms of their depth and sincerity. These analyses would most commonly reiterate the necessity of a ‘sincere’ apology – a demand that cannot readily be attended to, given the inherent vagueness and obscurity of what a ‘sincere’ apology would amount to. As mentioned earlier, the AWF accompanied their payments with letters of apology from the prime minister of Japan, although with a translation error that could provide good grounds for criticism. Nevertheless, faults will always be found with whatever apology and compensation is made; it is simply dictated by the logic of the nationalist discourse.

The third italicised part highlights the irony that a movement initiated for women’s rights would complain about the initiation of welfare projects aimed at helping the victims as well as improving the situation of (particularly victimised) women. This, again, reveals that the wellbeing of individuals has been of secondary importance; the project has long shifted its focus onto a symbolic level, i.e. that of the nation. What is even more significant is the fact that the Korean government has been actively involved in the matter. Soh (2001:4) describes the nature of this involvement as follows:

> In December 1992, the Korean Council conducted a nationwide fund-raising drive to help the survivors. In March, 1993, South Korean President Kim Young Sam announced that Seoul would not seek material compensation from Japan for former ‘comfort women’, but he urged Tokyo to investigate the issue thoroughly and make public the truth. Kim’s policy was designed to stake out a position of ‘moral superiority’ for Korea in forging a new relationship with Japan in the future. The Korean government passed a special bill granting each former comfort woman a one-time payment of five million won (approximately US$6,250) plus an additional monthly sum. Between 1996 and 1997 there were two further Korean fund-raising campaigns in order to counter the temptation of the survivors to accept money from the Japanese Asian Women’s Fund. During this period, seven Korean survivors accepted AWF money, causing outrage and sharp

> criticism among Korean activists. In April 1998, at the request of the Korean Council, the Kim Dae Jung government approved the payment of a further 31.5 million won in support money to about 140 survivors, who were required to pledge not to accept AWF money.

Furthermore, a member of the Japanese Fund, Usuki Keiko, was denied entry to South Korea in 1997 for her role in the Fund's atonement payments. The seven survivors who did accept the payment were subjected to severe criticism by their fellow survivors and by movement leaders, were publicly condemned, and were excluded from receiving any of the money raised in Korea. Leaders of a social movement, the Citizens' Coalition for the Resolution of the Forced Recruitment of Comfort Women by the Japanese Military, even went as far as to start negotiations with the government about the possibility of discontinuing monthly welfare stipends to AWF payees that were otherwise provided by the government to each survivor (Soh 1998).

Several more former 'comfort women' would have been interested in accepting the Japanese offer; however, because of the financial and moral pressure exerted on their fellow victims, they were eventually forced to decline it and give an explicit pledge not to accept money from the AWF (Soh 1998). The handling of the issue makes it crystal clear that individual victims no longer exist for the movement; as Yang (1998:130) notes, the discourse is 'neither for nor about' the 'comfort women' any more – they have been denied voice to represent themselves. In this respect, it is worth noting again the official wording of the national fundraising campaign: 'in order to maintain the honour of the survivors and *the pride of the nation*' (cited in Soh 1998:5; emphasis added).

The nationalist message is even clearer in a reader's letter to the Seoul daily, *Tong-A Ilbo*, cited by Yang (1998:131): 'why should we forgive the Japanese people, who abused the dignity of Korean women?'. Indeed, because the battle has been waged on symbolic grounds, no concrete measure can ever be satisfactory, no settlement is possible. This is not to suggest that the Japanese government has gone out of their way to take responsibility and compensate fully for their wartime atrocities; they have clearly evaded all legal responsibility and have tried to disguise their meagre reparations under a seemingly civilian charitable cover. (The atonement payment offered has been nowhere near the sum of $40,000 specified in the International Commission of Jurists' report; see Choi 2000:110.) With this, the Japanese government has been doing a favour for Korean nationalists, who eagerly exploit it by publicly advertising this new evidence of the wickedness of the Japanese, thus perpetuating the old symbolic conflict. However, it is pitiful that fellow Koreans fall victim to this rivalry; they are thus victimised for the third time,[24] and deprived of the agency they took on when they bravely stepped forward to share their stories with the world.

What is most worrying about this nationalist attitude is the complete disregard of the preferences of the individual victims, their right to free choice, agency and personal autonomy. Indeed, the 'collective identity' generated through the civil movements and the public discourse has in the end repressed the voice of those it was supposed to represent. In fact, instead of creating an alternative identity, it is the mainstream (nationalist) identity that has come to dominate the movement, thus relegating the individual victims' interests while elevating them on a higher, symbolic level. On this level, they continue to exert a significant influence on society (it is enough to think of the photography incident), while their immediate interests, such as acceptable living conditions and regular health care, still remain a problem.

In addition, the nationalist discourse, just as it creates an imagined, homogenised community of the Korean nation with a unison voice, also projects the same image to the Other, thus disguising the polemic discourse that the 'comfort women' issue has generated in Japan (for Japanese responses see Schmidt 2000; Soh 2001; Watanabe 1994). It creates the image that all Japanese are brutal aggressors, collectively responsible for the war-crime atrocities of the preceding generation, which they are busy hiding from the international public.

Conclusion

If it was necessary to answer the question of whether the movement behind the 'comfort women' issue has been successful or not, it would be troublesome to come up with a clear, unambiguous response. In terms of the nationalist goals, it certainly has: it did succeed in strengthening the symbolic and imagined bond between fellow Koreans (although it has been rather strong anyway), as well as in vilifying the Japanese people and government further (although they have been sufficiently vilified anyway). It also mobilised supporters for feminist concerns, but in this respect the success has been comparatively small – strictly feminist issues have remained the concern of a relatively small group. It has not achieved any progress in terms of Japan's legal responsibility. Nevertheless, this issue has not been central to the entire movement, which has waged its war on more symbolic levels and has allowed international organisations to focus on the broader human-rights aspect. Indeed, it has been a success in itself that such organisations have been drawn into the case at all. However, given the age of the former 'comfort women' and the prevalence of the nationalist discourse in Korean society, not much more can be expected of the movement at this point. It would be the task of a combined feminist and human-rights perspective to break out of this predominant nationalist discourse and address other underlying factors, such as questions of power and gender, individual responsibility, human dignity, patriarchal values, female roles, values and behaviour, as well as social expectations. They will, sadly, be a little too late for the individual women concerned.

Appendix

(1) Goals and orientations behind the 'comfort women' issue.

Orientation	**Focus**	**Problem**	**Contribution**
Human rights	Legal responsibility (of Japan) Responsibility of Allied forces State versus individual Legal concepts	Lack of feminist concerns	International awareness Evolving jurisdiction on war crimes
Nationalist	Japan's responsibility (legal, moral) Responsibility of Allied forces	Traditional ideal of female chastity Lack of heroism	Mobilisation of support groups nationwide
Feminist	Japan's responsibility Individuals' and the state's responsibility in Korea Korean society's (and in a larger sense all masculinist societies') responsibility	Lack of agency Victimisation	Mobilisation of support groups Promotion of women's issues on national and international levels Direct and indirect aid to former 'comfort women'

(2) Professed goals of the Korean Council.

1. Release materials relating to the Japanese military sexual slavery and reveal the real scale of the problem.
2. Admit that the Japanese military sexual slavery system is a war crime.
3. Make an official apology for the Japanese military sexual slavery system to the victims.
4. Bring the perpetrators of the Japanese military sexual slavery system to justice and punish them.
5. Build a historical museum and a monument for the victims of Japanese military sexual slavery.
6. Make legal compensation to the victims of Japanese military sexual slavery.
7. Record the Japanese military sexual slavery system in history textbooks and provide education on this subject.

Source: 'Activities of the Korean Council for Solving the Issue of the Korean Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan' (2002). http://www.aplconference.ca/koreancouncilreport.htm

Notes

[1] The Yasukuni shrine, dating from the late 19th century, served to commemorate Japan's war dead, and as such has been a major symbol of the Japanese imperial project (particularly because among the thousands enshrined there, several are listed as A-class war criminals). Since the end of the Second World War, the shrine has functioned as a private religious organisation. 'Private' ministerial visits to the shrine have generated widespread protests in Asian countries that were once victims of Japan's military aggression. The phrase 'textbook controversies' refers to repeated (and often successful) attempts by extremist-revisionist groups in Japan to get high-school textbooks that remain silent on Japanese atrocities before and during the Second World War not only published but also officially endorsed.

[2] It is interesting to note that different action groups in Japan also show a similar diversity in their orientation, focusing on the colonial-imperial, sexist or a combination of both aspects of wartime sexual slavery. However, in the Korean case, these orientations do not necessarily delineate different social movement groups – in most cases, there is a combination of all three ideologies, one typically dominant over the others.

[3] In Korea, traditional norms and morals have been prescribed by Sung Neo-Confucianism, which achieved the status of state orthodoxy in pre-modern Korea. According to its tenets, women are perpetually relegated to a secondary role, following male figures of the family throughout their lives: first, their father; next, their husband; and finally, their son. One of the five basic relationships (of which only one, that between friends, is based on equality) that create the foundation of social order is that between husband and wife, the latter in an explicitly subordinated position. That is, a woman's primary social role is to become a wife and mother, of possibly sons (failure to bear a son is sufficient ground for abandoning a wife); outside these roles, there is no room for her in the social order. Accordingly, a woman's primary virtues are loyalty and devotion to the male figures in her life, and chastity. The special importance of the latter is particularly clear in two traditional social customs: the ban on the remarriage of widows (as one cannot serve two husbands), and the practice of having women carry around a small dagger; unlike Japanese samurai wives, who received the same weapon on their wedding so that they could use it to protect themselves in case of an attack, Korean women were supposed to use it to kill themselves in the same situation rather than let their supreme virtue be violated. Certainly, there has been a considerable loosening of these strict norms in contemporary Korea; yet, many of the traditional ideas about a woman's virtues and social role have survived with little change.

[4] Moon's study is a good summary on the development of women's associations and movements from the 1980s to recent years as well on the difficulties they face in terms of organisation and membership. For very much the same reasons, broader human rights concerns have been left mostly for international organisations to deal with.

[5] Nationalism has had a very strong presence in Korean history since at least the start of the twentieth century, amplified by the experience of Japanese colonialism, the presence of foreign military governments after liberation, national division and rapid economic development.

[6] Even more telling is the term the soldiers used among themselves for the girls at their disposal: P ('*p*'*i*') together with the nationality, which can possibly be traced back to the vulgar Chinese word for vagina (Hicks 1994).

[7] As the end of the Second World War was approaching, official documents in Japan were being destroyed by the tons, which is why it is particularly difficult to clearly implicate the war-time government in the systematic large-scale organisation of 'comfort stations'.

[8] The victorious Japanese troops, on entering the city, embarked upon indiscriminate slaughter and rape of the civilian population. The exact number of victims is not known;

estimates generally run between 30,000 (the Japanese claim) and 300,000. It was the first time that the wanton brutality of 'Westernised-civilised' Japan shocked the world.

[9] It is interesting to note the bias in nationalist reactions to the term 'private' in relation to the Japanese prime minister; as the chief governmental figure, he is denied this right to 'privacy' when the discourse is about his visits to the Yasukuni shrine. However, when it comes to his apologies, it suddenly becomes not only possible but imperative to separate his personality into private and public, and see his act only in terms of his role as a private person.

[10] The human rights issues have gained more attention with the expansion of the issue to the international stage.

[11] Ironically, prostitution-related issues had been Janus-faced for a rather long time: while civil groups repeatedly protested the symbolic humiliation of the Korean nation through sex tourism organised for Japanese businessmen, the Korean government showed no scruples in using 'women's bodies for sex as means of national promotion' (Kwon 1994:2). In the 1970s licensed prostitutes had to undergo an ideological orientation, in which university professors stressed to them the importance of their work in earning precious foreign currency for the nation's economic development – a clear, and absurd, mirror of the Japanese orientation that drafted women received in the 1940s (for more details, see Moon 1997).

[12] Not only did they generally come from the poorest families, they were mostly uneducated too, and their shameful experiences prevented many of them from getting married; many of those who did were unable to bear children, because their ovum had been badly damaged in the repeated rapes. Thus, they have been deprived of the only respectable social role open to girls of their age – that of a mother. This, on the other hand, also meant for them the complete lack of care for their old age: in Korean society, this has up to now been the primary task of the eldest (male) child in the family.

[13] The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery, organised in Tokyo in 2000, was intended to redress this aspect; bearing only moral authority in the absence of sanctioned legal recognition, the Tribunal was largely symbolic, and aimed at restoring the victims' dignity, their right to retell and thus reclaim their own past. For a participant's account of the Tribunal, see Dudden (2001).

[14] As Chatterjee (1986) points out, in colonial and post-colonial societies the imperative of modernisation necessitates a split between the outer material domain, in which the West (or, in the Korean case, Japan) has shown its 'superiority', and the inner domain, in which the essential marks of cultural identity are to be found. While successful adaptation of the outer domain may be widely accepted as a key to financial stability and security, in parallel, a greater awareness is aroused to preserve the distinct spiritual realm. The interplay between these two forces produces a national culture, which, although apparently modern, retains its unique national characteristics; these characteristics are commonly derived from an imagined ideal past that brings back some sense of order and community. However, the inner domain has traditionally been reserved for women; hence, traditional norms and morals are primarily preserved through the perpetuation of traditional female roles and virtues. In the case of Korea, these traditional norms and values were those prescribed in Sung Neo-Confucianism – see note 3.

[15] It has only been the feminists asking the more basic question of why these women should be ashamed of their past at all. But this goes against the widely accepted social norms, thus attacking very deep foundations of society, as well as bringing up the idea of a more collective responsibility for muting for so long the victims of Japanese military prostitution – no wonder it makes many feel very uncomfortable.

[16] The parallel between women and nation, their sacrifice and sufferings, has been a recurring theme in Korean artistic genres, literature and cinema alike.

[17] So it happens that nationalists start to think – to borrow Anderson's words – only of 'the representative body, not the personal life' (Anderson 1991:32).

[18] At least not in the public discourse; in the personal accounts of individual victims, these 'compatriots' feature rather prominently.

[19] Dudden complains of the same at the Tokyo Women's Tribunal (Dudden 2001:599).

[20] While some volunteers recruited through the organisation were indeed sent for factory work in support of the war effort at times, most of them ended up in 'comfort stations'.

[21] Seungsook Moon (1998) discusses how – with the 'historical mission of national restoration' through education – the subject of national ethics was created for the high-school curricula, selecting elements of Korean history, traditional thinking, ethics and images of a 'desirable' Korean (Moon 1998: 38–40). These images, when they concern women, are still mostly built around traditional Neo-Confucian virtues, roles and behaviours (Kim *et al*. 1993).

[22] Korean division was the result of a military decision reached by two young American colonels, Dean Rusk and Charles H. Bonesteel, on the night of 10th–11th August 1945. See Cumings (2005:186–192).

[23] This does not at all mean that anti-Japanese and anti-American feelings emerged together; the latter is usually considered as a relatively recent phenomenon, clearly detectable since the Kwangju Uprising of 1980. What connects them is the anti-colonial and anti-imperial aspects.

[24] The second has to do with the traditional values that nationalism promotes, which muted them for decades.

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