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# Victim Silencing, Sexual Violence Culture, Social Healing: Inherited Collective Trauma of World War II South Korean Military “Comfort Women”

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## Background

- World War II Japanese military “comfort women” refer to estimated 200,000 women who were coercively recruited by the Japanese imperial army during WWII under the banner of Chongsindae (“Voluntary” Labor Service Corps) – 80% of whom were Korean women (Ward and Lay 256).
- From the end of WWII to 2019, the South Korean Government has not reached a final consensus for the reconciliation of former South Korean comfort women.
- The last indicative action regarding the issue of comfort women was in 2018, when Minister of Foreign Affairs Kang Kyung-wha announced the South Korean government’s formal rejection of the Korean-Japanese 2015 bilateral deal as a “true” resolution of the issue of Japanese wartime sexual slavery (Kim, par. 8).
- Kang expressed the Korean government’s call for new efforts that restores the “honor and dignity of victims and heals the wounds in their hearts,” suggesting that the trauma of former comfort women has yet to be healed and requires present action (Kim, 9).
- This study investigates the role of sociopolitical silencing, characterized by institutional patriarchy and ineffective government involvement, and propose a new victim-centered reconciliation approach through the role of the Korean government.

## South Korean Government and Sociopolitical Silencing

- After WWII, South Korean comfort women returned to a monolithic Confucianism Korea that looked upon their slavery with deep shame and humiliation.
- Such depth of shame lends itself to an underlying cycle of “defeat, psychological humiliation or shame, and resultant quest for revenge,” prevalent in groups with military defeats (Harkavy, 354).
- The case of Harkavy’s “revenge motif” for South Korean comfort women is most directly aimed at the South Korean government.
- Reconciliation efforts on behalf of the “comfort women” have repeatedly left out victim voice, as seen in the 1965 Treaty of Basic Relations and 2015 Agreement.
- Without a reconciliation of the collective trauma, a compulsion and need for social healing will continue to play a part in contemporary affairs, including Korean rape culture, patriarchal Confucianism, and sexual violence legislations.

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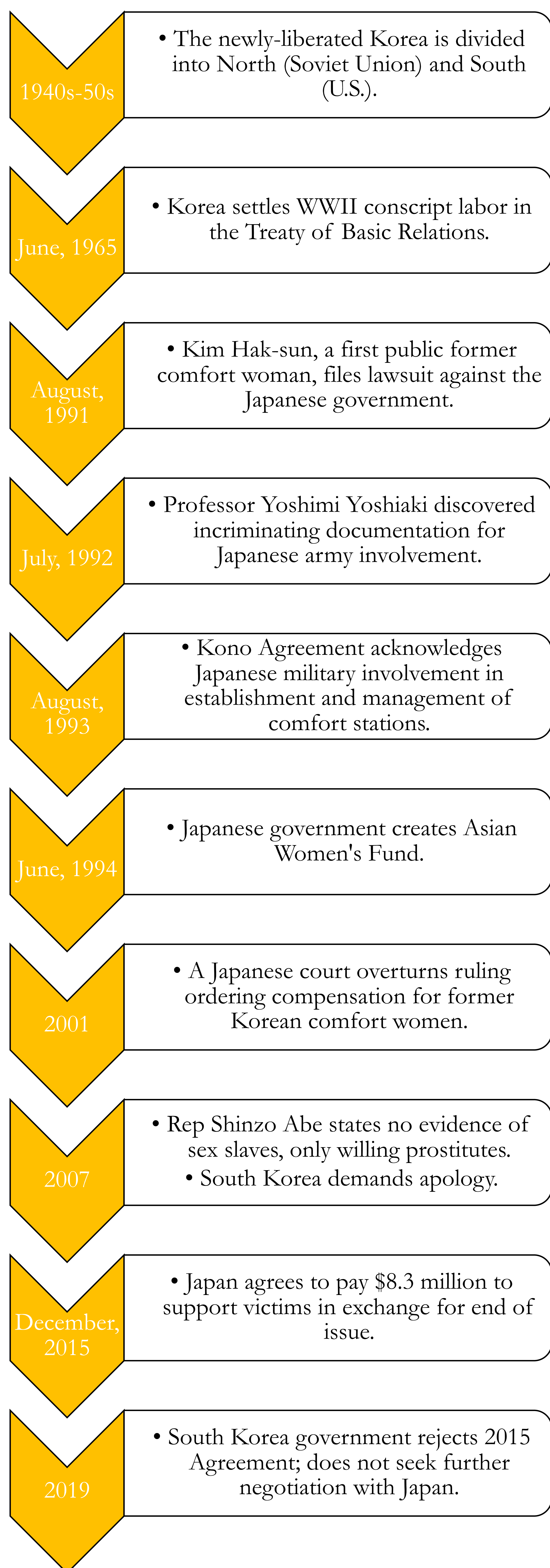
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## Timeline



## Notable Events

### 1965 Normalization Treaty

- Settled WWII Korean conscript labor for \$500 million in Japanese economic aid and loans
- Used as part of a national economic strategy without addressing the victims of the military sexual slavery
- Successfully stifled the formation of any conversation regarding the issue of former comfort women

### 1994 Asian Women’s Fund

- Contained \$40 million from the Government of Japan and \$5 million in private donations
- Faced heavy criticism from both countries: Japanese conservative party objected to compensation and South Korea claimed no mention of redress and lack of sincerity in AWF’s use of private funding.
- Only seven South Korean women accepted
- Dissolved in 2007

### 2015 “Final and Irreversible” Agreement

- Secretly finalized between South Korean President Park Geun-hye and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe
- Met with mass public outcry, prompting a formal rejection by the Korean Council and weekly Wednesday Protests

### Current South Korean Government Stance

- As of late 2019, the South Korean government holds a complex and indecisive stance on the topic of comfort women, articulating a need for social healing yet refraining from further negotiations with the Japanese government.
- Thus, the essence of the South Korean government’s next reconciliation approach must take a domestic approach that creates solidarity and resilience within the country, with intercontinental support and guidance.



Figure 1: Birns, Jack. 1944. The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images. *History.com*. Photograph. 2019.  
*A Nationalist officer guarding women prisoners said to be “comfort girls” used by the Communists, 1948.*



Figure 2: Birns, Jack. 1944. The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images. *History.com*. Photograph. 2019.  
*A photo that was found after Allied troops captured the city of Tencbong from the Japanese on Sept. 7, 1944. The photo shows a Japanese soldier posing with Korean comfort women. The pregnant woman on the right of the photo is Park Young-shim (provided by the Seoul City government).*

## An Agenda for Action

Formal organizations, state-directed influences, and interorganizational networks are the three structural conditions necessary in this study’s proposal of a victim-centered approach.

### Official Database for Victim Testimonies

- Victims and their testimonies, with public sympathy and validation, serve as a basis for "empowerment and strength-based approaches" (Androff 39).
- Social psychology theory assumes that knowledge and the validation of that knowledge promotes forgiveness and, later, reconciliation (Gibson 201).
- South Korea's plan for reconciliation must formally establish a database or collection of testimonies of the registered sexual military survivors
- Such database would allow former comfort women to establish validation and a means of healing

### Government Partnership with Organizations

- Cooperation of independent organizations and the government promotes activism platform and creates solidarity
- Previous U.S. government partnership with the Japanese-American internment camp redress allowed for repeal of discriminatory laws, a National Museum, and clinical trauma treatment programs (Nagata et al. 41)
- Similar to the Japanese American movement, the South Korean government should endorse and fund women's organizations, such as the Korean Council and sexual violence organizations.

### Sexual Violence Education

- Another aspect of social healing is trauma training.
- 2006 study of teaching traumatic history in Germany found education to correlate with students' ability to recognize and deconstruct stereotypes (Carrington and Short, 79)
- Trauma education regarding the issue of "comfort women" involves sexual violence of women, stigmatization of victimhood, and rape myths
- Coupled with the history of former Korean comfort women, implementation of sexual violence education programs will challenge the collective trauma of WWII and provide reconstruction of perception.

The coordination of these structural sub-components will allow for the government’s focus to shift from nationalistic goals to human and women’s rights endeavors. The national resources, international guidance, and practical framing must be considered before exploring the implementation.

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