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

MiJin Cho

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/uresposters

© The Author(s)

Downloaded from

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Research Posters by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.
Victim Silencing, Sexual Violence Culture, Social Healing: Inherited Collective Trauma of World War II South Korean Military “Comfort Women”

Mijin Cho, Professor Mary Boyes
Honors College, Virginia Commonwealth University

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 "Voluntary" Labor Service Corps. – 80% of whom were Korean women (Kwon and Lay 256).
- From the end of WWII to 2019, the South Korean Government has not reached a final conciliation 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 South 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 victim voice, as seen in the 1965 Treaty of Basic Relations and 2015 Agreement.
- Without a reconciliation of the collective trauma, a complicity and need for social healing will continue to play a part in contemporary affairs, including Korean rape culture, patriarchal Confucianism, and sexual violence legislations.

Timeline

- 1945–50s
  - The newly-liberated Korea is divided into North (Soviet Union) and South (U.S.).
- June 1965
  - Korea settles WWII conscript labor in the Treaty of Basic Relations.
- March 1991
  - Kim Hak-sun, a first public former comfort woman, files lawsuit against the Japanese government.
- March 1993
  - Professor Yoshimi Yoshiaki discovers incriminating documentation for Japanese army involvement.
- November 1994
  - Kono Agreement acknowledges Japanese military involvement in establishment and management of comfort stations.
- June 1995
  - Japanese government creates Asian Women’s Fund.
- December 2015
- January 2017
  - Rep Shinzo Abe states no evidence of sex slaves, only willing prostitutes.
- May 2019
  - South Korea government rejects 2015 Agreement; does not seek further negotiation with Japan.

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; prompt 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 inescapable 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.

An Agenda for Action

- Another aspect of social healing is training workshops.
- 2006 study of teaching traumatic history in Germany found education to correlate with students’ ability to recognize and deconstruct stereotypes (Catterson 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 be considered before exploring the implementation.

Works Cited

- Cho, MiJin, and Professor Mary Boyes. Honors College for providing me the HONORS 150 Rhetoric Writing Class.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Mary Boyes for her continuous mentorship and guidance throughout the research process and the Virginia Commonwealth University Honors College for providing me the HONORS 150 Rhetoric Writing Class.