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Beyond Force: Korea, Nonviolent Coercion, and the Promotion of the Comfort Women System

“They had taken everything away from me: my youth, my self-esteem, my dignity, my freedom, my possessions, and my family.”¹ These haunting words from Lee Yong Soo, a former Korean “comfort woman,”² echo the profound suffering endured by countless other comfort women—their numbers estimated to range between 100,000 to 200,000—from 1932 to 1945.³ The comfort women system was organized and operated by the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II, and it forcibly recruited young women from occupied territories, primarily Korea, to serve in a system of nonconsensual sexual slavery for Japanese soldiers. Women were subjected to not only sexual exploitation, but also physical abuse and psychological torment in the network of brothels euphemistically named comfort stations. Japan's colonial rule over Korea, spanning 35 years, laid the foundation for the atrocities against Korean women during this period by impoverishing Korean families and intensifying their susceptibility to exploitation. Aided by a pre-existing culture of obedience, the Japanese government maintained strict command over both Japanese and Korean society, dictating people’s beliefs, access to information, and capacity to protest. With this immense power, the Japanese state created a highly formalized organization: the comfort women system. Although Japan’s reign ended in 1945, the legacy of the comfort

¹ Yong Soo Lee, “Protecting the Human Rights Of Comfort Women” (Hearing of the Asia, the Pacific, and the Global Environment Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, 2007).

² The author acknowledges that the Japanese military-coined term “comfort women,” a euphemism for women who provided nonconsensual sexual services to the Japanese Imperial Army and lived under conditions of sexual slavery, masks the severity of the crime. Moving forward, the term will not be in quotation marks because in modern culture and literature, people recognize that the meaning behind comfort women is a system of sexual slavery.

³ Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women* (Mid-Prairie Books, 1999), 40.

women system is long lasting; it continues in the form of tense Japan-Korea relations, but more importantly, the legacy is visible in the scars of former comfort women who were subjected to abuse and terror. Given the stakes, it is critical that we understand all of the causes of this system. The use of violence and physical force are readily apparent in examining the creation of the comfort women system. But despite the prevalence of physical coercion in establishing and normalizing the comfort women system during World War II, nonviolent coercion in the form of socioeconomic conditions, state control of media and education, and legal deception were equally significant in promoting the comfort women system and in silencing women after the war.

It is reasonable that scholars have focused so intently on violent coercion in the establishment of the comfort women system in Japan.⁴ Violence played a crucial role in the recruitment, containment, and psychological control of comfort women. Japanese recruiters, government officials often aided by the police, pursued single girls under the official pretense of *Kunro Jungshindae* (Voluntarily Committing Body Corps for Labor), part of a human resource mobilization by Japan for military purposes.⁵ Kim Bok Sun, a former Korean comfort woman, recounted her experience: "They grabbed me by force and I was dragged out of our yard."⁶ This forceful recruitment was utilized to meet quotas and was not uncommon, with Japanese soldiers often raiding Korean villages to kidnap women for service in comfort stations and, according to the summary findings of a 1993 Japanese report that collated documents from the Japanese state and former comfort women,

⁴ Carmen M. Argibay, "Sexual Slavery and the Comfort Women of World War II" (Berkeley Law Scholarship Repository, 2003); Yong-Shik Lee, Natsu T. Saito & Jonathon Todres, *The Fallacy of Contract in Sexual Slavery: A Response to Ramseyer's "Contracting for Sex in the Pacific War"* (Michigan Journal of International Law, 2021).

⁵ Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women* (Mid-Prairie Books, 1999), 40-41.

⁶ *Ibid*, 43.

“recruiters resorted in many cases to coaxing and intimidating these women to be recruited against their own will.”⁷ The violence extended to the comfort stations, where women underwent both physical and emotional suffering at the hands of Japanese soldiers and officials. Hwang Keum Ju, another former Korean comfort woman, detailed the extent of the brutality, recalling how many women were “beaten to death, sometimes shot to death or rotted to death with venereal disease, not to speak of suicides” and that they were “beaten every day.”⁸ Dehumanization coupled with the regularity of violence impacted comfort women psychologically; Hwang explained there was “no time for feelings.”⁹ Restraining the comfort women emotionally as well as physically through violence undoubtedly contributed to the system’s continuation and normalization. But because so much academic attention has been paid to the significance of violence in the comfort women system, this paper seeks to highlight other forces. Underlying trends, conditions, and attitudes in 1930s and 1940s Japan enabled this system as much as physical coercion did.

In comparison to the overt violence often associated with the comfort women system, nonviolent coercion can be overlooked due to its subtlety and indirect nature. Socioeconomic factors—a form of nonviolent coercion—like Korea’s colonial status and the patriarchal family structure allowed the comfort women system to proliferate with minimal opposition. Japan’s colonization of Korea from 1910 to 1945 granted Japan the unique ability to take advantage of Korea’s resources. In fact, Japan controlled all of Korea’s natural resources and its fishery and forestry, as well as most industries and commercial markets.¹⁰

⁷ Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women* (Mid-Prairie Books, 1999), 41. Larry Niksch, *Japanese Military’s “Comfort Women” System* (Congressional Research Service, 2007), 10.

⁸ Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women* (Mid-Prairie Books, 1999), 25-27.

⁹ *Ibid*, 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 37.

More specifically, Japanese traders collected a large part of or even all of the Korean farmers' crops at harvest time after routinely loaning them money to buy seed and other items.¹¹ This exploitation exacerbated the already extreme hardship of the farmers while simultaneously harming the Korean economy. Japanese recruiters capitalized on the prevailing socioeconomic difficulties by targeting young girls from families significantly in debt to Japanese-sanctioned financial institutions. The Korean women at Myitkyina, Burma, testified that "recruiters told them that volunteering to work at hospitals was a way to pay off their families' debts."¹² Additionally, the Korean patriarchal family structure hindered women's ability to challenge their families' decisions to send them away or inquire about the location or nature of their new work, let alone question the existence of the comfort women system. The societal pressure to fulfill their duty as daughters, support their families, or contribute to their brothers' education compelled many of these young women to be willing to work.¹³ According to Hwang Keum Ju, a former Korean comfort woman, "women at that time were not expressive."¹⁴ Furthermore, the Japanese state actively suppressed the local culture, banning newspapers published in Korean, requiring the study of the Japanese language in all public schools, and even mandating Koreans to change their family and personal names to Japanese under Ordinance No. 20 of 1939.¹⁵ By destroying Korean identity and weakening a sense of collective resistance, Korea was left vulnerable to coercion and manipulation. Thus, a prewar society with a culture of male prerogative combined with an impoverished Korean countryside contributed to the relative ease with

¹¹ Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women* (Mid-Prairie Books, 1999), 33.

¹² Larry Nicksch, *Japanese Military's "Comfort Women" System* (Congressional Research Service, 2007), 11.

¹³ Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women* (Mid-Prairie Books, 1999), 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 36.

which women were coerced into sexual slavery and the lack of public resistance to the comfort women system.

The Japanese state further employed nonviolent coercion through strict control of the media and education, inculcating ideas that aligned with the state's and discouraging intellectual curiosity; thus, the existence of the comfort women system was made obscure or was accepted as a necessary evil of war. To comprehend the feasibility of mass indoctrination within Japanese society, it is crucial to recognize the influence of extreme patriotism and the normalization of sacrifice. Fervent loyalty to the emperor was ingrained in the Japanese populace, with willingness to give one's life for one's nation honored as both an ideal and a norm.¹⁶ Such normalization of sacrifice not only fostered a prewar culture of obedience, but also contributed to the perception that the comfort women were simply fulfilling their duty during the war. The Japanese government also utilized this environment of control for both censorship and overt propaganda in the media during wartime. The Cabinet Information Bureau, a powerful agency staffed by military men on active duty, restricted newspapers and magazines from publishing articles with anti-war or anti-military opinions that appeared to reduce civilian support for the military, views of foreign newspapers, and any slandering of Japan's policies.¹⁷ By portraying their decisions positively in the media, a form of information that uniquely reaches a broad audience and molds cultural norms, the Japanese government was able to garner mass support from the public, regardless of the information's accuracy. Another powerful tool used by the Japanese government was the public education system. After 1904, the national

¹⁶ "Asia For Educators," *Japan's Quest for Power and World War II in Asia* (Columbia University).

¹⁷ Saburo Ienaga, *The Pacific War : World War II and the Japanese, 1931-1945* (New York : Pantheon Books, 1978), 100.

governmental Ministry of Education took charge of compiling all elementary-school texts.¹⁸ For example, all elementary schools in Saitama Prefecture were informed to stress war and patriotism in every subject.¹⁹ Japanese authorities even required emperor-centered patriotic rituals in school, like venerating the imperial photograph on the opening day each year.²⁰ With this glorification of the emperor and state, questioning the government's choices, let alone knowing of or recognizing the immorality of institutions like the comfort women system was unlikely. The lack of vocalized doubt, especially towards authority, was amplified because formal education for most individuals in prewar Japan ended with elementary school, meaning impressionable children would carry on these beliefs to adulthood.²¹ Thus, by stifling intellectual inquiry and instilling beliefs aligned with the state's interests, the Japanese government shaped public perception and compliance with their actions regarding the comfort women system. The combination of controlling culture in Japan and command of information channels, along with the flawed notion that sexual violence is inevitable during war, effectively minimized pushback and perpetuated the comfort women system.

In addition to controlling the media and education, the Japanese government meticulously organized legal stratagems like labor drafts and comfort station rules that legitimized the comfort women system. Mass rape in wartime requires significant planning, and Japan's comfort women system was not an exception.²² Comfort stations were set up by explicit order of the military, with the Imperial army and navy directing the procurement of

¹⁸ Saburo Ienaga, *The Pacific War : World War II and the Japanese, 1931-1945* (New York : Pantheon Books, 1978), 20.

¹⁹ Ibid, 23.

²⁰ Ibid, 21.

²¹ Ibid, 20.

²² Joanna Bourke, "A Global History of Sexual Violence" (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 159.

women, some through private contractors.²³ Indeed, Hwang Keum Ju, a former Korean comfort woman, described how her family received a notice called Kunro Jungshindae, an official labor draft, to go work in a factory.²⁴ Numerous women who went under this voluntary work system were made sex slaves for Japanese soldiers at the comfort houses, contrary to what the notice promised.²⁵ The draft's sanctioning by the Japanese government instilled the order with a sense of authenticity, convincing girls like Hwang to believe they were contributing to the war effort. Hwang further detailed that "the military provided the accommodations and posted detailed regulations for soldiers, traders and women. 'Comfort House Regulations' specified who could visit, the schedule, fees, and rules regarding disease prevention."²⁶ Moreover, the Japanese military took identification of comfort women, selection of proper recruiters, norms for hygiene, and enforcement of temperance seriously.²⁷ These thorough regulations depicted the comfort women system as a well-organized establishment with responsible leaders, order, and structure. The official nature of the system prevented panic or suspicion amongst those who were aware of its existence, like soldiers, and instead increased credibility. Not only were the soldiers allowed to believe that their violent treatment of comfort women was permitted, but they were also able to subconsciously justify their actions, placing the responsibility on the higher-ups who managed and established the system. Consequently, with a veneer of legality and lack of retaliation, the comfort women system was maintained.

²³ Onozawa Akane, *Denying the Comfort Women* (Routledge, 2019), 75.

²⁴ Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women* (Mid-Prairie Books, 1999), 18.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 38.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 50.

²⁷ Kyu-hyun Jo, "For the Sake of Providing Comfort to All Imperial Soldiers Progressing on Every Front": An Analysis of Regulations on the Establishment and Management of a Japanese Panopticon Over "Comfort Women" (International Journal of Korean History, 2023).

In the post-war era, silence surrounding the comfort women issue was perpetuated by nonviolent pressures, including the stigma attached to sexual violence, the Korean state's insistence that the nation move forward, and Japan's reluctance to acknowledge its historical responsibility. To understand all the factors contributing to the longevity of the silence, it is of course important to mention the role of psychological trauma—suffering that can remain for years or decades after an assault—in potentially deterring victims from coming forward. However, trauma is often used as an excuse by those responsible for hearing and acting upon survivors' testimonies. Leaders point to the difficulty of revisiting upsetting experiences to explain away women's silence after the war. Instead, the primary catalyst for the continuation of silence lies in the external obstacles that victims who were ready to share their experience faced. A barrier applicable to not only former comfort women, but victims to sexual abuse across the world in the past two centuries, is the hesitancy in reporting because of the likelihood of publicity, retaliation, and discrimination.²⁸ In fact, silence is encouraged in many cultures, where victims face humiliation due to assumptions that only shameless women talk publicly about sexual matters.²⁹ Unfortunately, this was true for many former comfort women in post-war Korea who found themselves discarded by their own communities as a result of conservative societal values and of the negative stereotypes tied to sexual subjects.³⁰ It took over four decades of silence for one former Korean comfort woman, Kim Hak Soon, to give a public testimony and demand an official apology from Japan in 1991.³¹ Was four decades of silence

²⁸ Joanna Bourke, *A Global History of Sexual Violence* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 150.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 151.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 153-154.

³¹ Rin Ushiyama, *'Comfort women must fall'? Japanese governmental responses to 'comfort women' statues around the world* (Memory Studies, 2021).

truly necessary for the stories of comfort women to become a public conversation? Long before Kim went public, Hwang Keum Ju, the woman who talked about Kunro Jungshindae, tried to report about the Korean comfort women. She told the then-First Lady her story and about the many women who served Japanese soldiers, and she asked “why the Korean government did not do something for us.” The First Lady responded, “Please don’t ever repeat this story... Korea and Japan have already signed a treaty to take care of the matters concerning the two countries during the colonial period... Korea needs to move forward.”³² Pressure from the Korean state to move on stemmed from the unstable status of post-war Korea; Korea and Japan had signed the 1965 Treaty that established basic diplomatic relations between the two countries. Discussing the comfort women issue would bring back tension and disrupt the uncertain peace. Also, the unstable socioeconomic position of post-war Korea amplified the often already-deprived former comfort women, further hindering them from speaking out.³³ Even after Kim Hak Soon and other victims’ testimonies, the comfort women were not fully acknowledged. Instead, by the late twentieth century, the comfort women issue became not only deeply politicized in Korean public discourse, but also a source of diplomatic tension between Japan and Korea. The Japanese government made concerted efforts to stop the installation of, or demand the removal of, memorials dedicated to comfort women.³⁴ This diplomatic discord diverted focus away from survivors’ main goal of receiving recognition from the Japanese government. Ultimately, the silencing of comfort women both before and after publicly speaking out can be attributed to coercion of a nonviolent nature: the societal shame

³² Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women* (Mid-Prairie Books, 1999), 20-21.

³³ Rin Ushiyama, *‘Comfort women must fall’? Japanese governmental responses to ‘comfort women’ statues around the world* (Memory Studies, 2021).

³⁴ Ibid.

associated with sexual violence, and the Korean and Japanese state's urge to leave the past in the past.

"I must stand up for myself and the others... I was robbed of my youth, and I want [Shinzo Abe] to apologize before I die."³⁵ Lee Yong Soo's wish for the former prime minister of Japan to acknowledge her suffering encapsulates not only the unyielding spirit of resilience, but also the long-lasting pain many of the women subjected to sexual slavery by the Japanese military during World War II experienced. Given the immense physical and emotional anguish the comfort women endured during and after the war, it is critical we gain a holistic view of the causes of the complex comfort women system. While physical coercion undoubtedly played a prominent role in advancing the system, the equally influential nonviolent coercion, like Korea's poor socioeconomic status, the Japanese government's strategic manipulation of media and education, and its legal tactics, sustained the system and suppressed women after the war. The Japanese government's role was substantial. Their colonization of Korea impoverished families and increased vulnerability to exploitation. Their authoritative control over both Japanese and Korean cultures shaped perspectives, controlled flows of information, and quelled dissent. Their purposeful organization of the comfort women system legitimized it and lessened backlash. But their apology remains inadequate, especially given the severity of the war crime. Victims continue to await proper reparations, such as a formal apology, legal compensation, a thorough investigation, and recognition of the atrocities they suffered in memorials and Japanese textbooks.³⁶ Many former comfort women like Lee Yong Soo have campaigned to

³⁵ Pamela Constable, *70 years later, a Korean 'comfort woman' demands apology from Japan* (The Washington Post, 2015).

³⁶ Beverly Milner (Lee) Bisland, Jimin Kim, and Sunghee Shin, *Teaching about the Comfort Women during World War II and the Use of Personal Stories of the Victims* (Association for Asian Studies, 2019).

expose the abuses, demanded Japanese atonement, and testified before commissions and legislatures.³⁷ Studying this issue can not only help bring justice to comfort women, but it might shed light on, or even help to prevent, similar violations of human rights in other countries and time periods. Wartime sexual violence—as well as the silencing of victims after—is a pattern. But it does not have to be.

³⁷ Pamela Constable, *70 years later, a Korean 'comfort woman' demands apology from Japan* (The Washington Post, 2015).

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