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The Comfort Women: Colonialism, War, and Sex (review)

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interesting new insights. It is a pity that a similar piece for the Soviet side is lacking.

In general, the book offers an important collection of Western scholarship comparing the two dictatorships. Contributions of Russian scholars are lacking, although today there are interesting studies from the Russian, the Polish, and, last but not least, the Baltic side (see, for instance, Krupnikow's comparison of German and Soviet rule in Latvia). The editors conclude that there was common ground, for instance in "the common determination to industrialize as rapidly as possible" (p. 345); that there remained deep and lasting differences, from ideology to economy; and that both regimes had an element of inherent self-destructiveness in "the irreconcilable conflict between the arbitrariness of personal despotism and the regulatory order needed by the bureaucratic administration of modern states" (p. 356).

Maybe the positive concept of bureaucracy inherent in this judgment might seem too Weberian to some readers. But the argument is stringently proposed with a lot of materials and is interesting to follow. This is a telling book for the debate on dictatorship in the twentieth century.

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The Comfort Women: Colonialism, War, and Sex. Special issue of *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 5 (spring 1997). Edited by CHUNGMOO CHOI (guest editor). Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press. Pp. xiv + 323. \$12 (individual issue).

On a recent visit to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, I had a momentary struggle with memory as I read the title plaque beneath one of Titian's landmark paintings, *Europa*. I stared at the plaque to make sure I hadn't missed any words. This painting has always been referred to as "The Rape of Europa," I repeatedly reminded myself, and promptly inserted the mental vision of rape back into the canvas.

"From the perspective of the Korean woman, forcibly recruited, with no control over her body or her life but compelled to have intercourse on demand, what the Japanese soldier saw as customary was in fact one in a series of unpardonable rapes" (Hyunah Yang).

A picture may paint a thousand words, but the choice of words and the images, myths, legacies, histories, and identities that the words conjure up give life to the way people view, understand, and accept or

reject the portrayal of art, politics, sex, and violence. What kinds of words matter? How do the meanings of words change depending on who utters them? How do different audiences color speakers' choices of words and their intentions?

The Comfort Women: Colonialism, War, and Sex raises these and other questions in a collective struggle to make sense of the discourses, ideologies, governmental policies, archival documents, personal narratives, and unarticulated silences that helped construct the Japanese military system of sexual slavery during the war in the Pacific and continue to obstruct the honest accounting and resolution of the "comfort women issue." Contributors to this special issue of *Positions*, whose guest editor is Chungmoo Choi, include women and men, academics and activists, poets and artists, residing in South Korea, Japan, Germany, and the United States. Their entries vary from the historical documentation of the political economy of modern prostitution in Japan and Korea (Fujime, pp. 135-70; Song, pp. 171-217), to two survivors' visual representations of the horror and strange environments that confronted them (Kang and Kim, pp. 276-78), to theoretical discussions of the language of apology and reparation (Field, pp. 1-49) and the thorny history of Korean-Japanese relations (Oe and Kim, pp. 285-313). It is an eclectic and creative composite of contemporary perspectives on sexual slavery, artistic reimaginings, and emotional confusions around a violent practice that has long been a part of the near universal, received history of war: women as rape victims and sex workers.

Although the title refers to "comfort women," a term that includes those from many Asian countries and Europe, the contents focus solely on the Japan-Korea nexus of political, sexual, legal, and cultural relations from the nineteenth century to the present. Together, the entries highlight how racism, sexism, and classism, whether embodied formally in colonialism or informally in Korea's contemporary yen-dependent economy, have been at the core of the Japan-Korea relationship. Several entries point out that such dependence is at the root of the South Korean government's refusal to press the Japanese government for reparations on behalf of the survivors. If one accepts this view, Korea's current financial crisis, involving billions of dollars owed to Japanese banks, bodes ill for even a moderate reversal in the two governments' positions. Inequality of power between Japan and Korea and between Asia and the West, as well as the continued privileged status of governments and the West to define and narrate history, justice, and human rights, serves as the context in which the survivors'

own memories and stories remain buried and their current calls for justice remain largely unanswered.

One of the strengths of the collection is the reminder that international influences have significantly shaped the Japanese system of military sexual slavery and the contemporary movement for redress. Fujime specifies that the modern prostitution system in Japan, which served as the basis of the military “comfort system,” reflected the late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century Japanese elites’ will to emulate the Western model of the modern nation-state: “The new Meiji political leadership studied European prostitution regulations by gathering suggestions from Europeans who came to Japan and by collecting information from officially sponsored tours to Europe,” particularly France and Germany (p. 138).

Although this is not mentioned in the volume, the efforts to discipline, control, and regulate women and their bodies as a means to establish law and order and a base for capital accumulation (Song, pp. 171–217) are not just matters of the past. In the early 1970s the South Korean government’s coordination and enforcement of the regulation of Korean sex workers catering to U.S. servicemen served as a way to extend the state’s bureaucratic and social control down to the lowest reaches of society. The U.S. military was instrumental in pressuring the Korean government to take such actions and later praised bureaucrats and officials for establishing order in the once unruly camp towns. (See Katherine H. S. Moon, *Sex among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1997].) Mandatory examinations for sexually transmitted diseases and the regulation of the sex workers’ activities continue to be monitored by Asian governments hosting U.S. bases. The South Korean, Japanese, and U.S. governments’ collusion with current forms of military sex work in turn compromises their positions regarding the “comfort women”; if the governments press for reparations and other forms of accountability, they might themselves ultimately become the targets of moral condemnation and legal action for fostering the abuse of women around U.S. bases in Asia. Such self-interested avoidance by governments of action on behalf of women is not new. After World War II, “German officers also were not tried for rape at Nuremberg, but not because of flaws in evidence. . . . To indict Germans for systematic rape, even of concentration camp victims, while the orgy of Russian rapes of German women at the end of World War II went unremarked, would have invited comparisons the victorious Allies preferred to leave unstated” (Mary Ann Tetreault, “Justice for All:

Wartime Rape and Women's Human Rights," *Global Governance* 3, no. 2 [May–August 1997]: 198).

Several articles, especially Park's piece on reparations, also point out that U.S. strategic interests in the Cold War exempted Japan from ethical and legal obligations for its war crimes. Park contrasts Japan's refusal to reflect seriously on its treatment of other Asians during its militarist days with Germany's efforts to investigate its own past and educate its population "in close consultation with victimized countries" (p. 116). He implies, in short, that the lack of international pressure, from governments and publics, allowed the Japanese to "get away" with their past wrongdoings. Even today, because "the human rights of Asians remain subordinate to those of their Western counterparts" (Park, p. 126), the United Nations and Western nongovernmental organizations cannot be counted on to provide significant aid to Asian victims of war, especially the former "comfort women." He contends that, in contrast, the U.N. and various nongovernmental organizations have been active in addressing war crimes in the former Yugoslavia (p. 126).

But Park neglects to consider one obvious and pressing point: the violence and war crimes in the former Yugoslavia are a matter of here and now. Despite efforts by international organizations, many people believe that the "international community" turned its back on the genocide and rapes that were taking place right before the world's eyes. Further, the U.N. Security Council's decision to include rape as a crime to be prosecuted by the International Tribunal at The Hague does not mean that justice will be achieved for the former rape victims. As of early February 1998 only twenty persons have been indicted for rape as a crime against humanity, with no convictions. Staff members of the sexual crimes unit at The Hague have been waging an uphill battle to investigate and prosecute, while understaffed, underfunded, and wholly dependent on the U.N. members' will to finance their work. At a conference I attended last March entitled "Men, Women, and War," a lawyer from the tribunal urged her audience to go back to their countries, towns, and workplaces, and keep people mindful of the suffering of the rape victims and the work of the tribunal (panel presentation by Nancy Patterson, legal officer, International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, at the conference "Men, Women, and War," held at the University of Ulster, Londonderry, Northern Ireland, 8 March 1997). It is important to remain alert to the fact that whether Asian or "Western," rape victims are easily overlooked, silenced, and forgotten by the media, bureaucracies, and publics. (Even if some Asians believe that the war crimes in the former Yugoslavia are receiving interna-

tional attention because they concern Westerners, it can be argued that the West has not acted soon or boldly enough on behalf of the predominantly Muslim victims of genocide and rape precisely because they were not considered truly part of the West.)

The authors also offer poignant reflections on the fact that each attempt at recognition, apology, solidarity, and truth-bearing extended to the survivors is inevitably characterized by the elusive nature of genuine healing and restoration of peace. Each attempt is potentially rife with missed opportunities, displaced hopes, and newly discovered pain. In evaluating the verbal somersaults of denial, recognition, and apology about the “comfort system” on the part of Japanese prime ministers, Field contemplates the following: “Is the humbling of the state (expenditure of pride) in having to publicly acknowledge wrongdoing sufficient for redemption? Is such redemption compromised if supplemented by material benefit, as in the payment of compensation? In the case of living victims, is the material benefit separable from the dignity? . . . On the part of the apologizer, does the payment of compensation effectively suspend the need for further reflection?” (p. 9). In addition, Yang asserts that in investigating the documentation and institutionalization of the “comfort system,” people tend to overlook the essentially human experiences of the former sex slaves themselves, reducing them to “inevitable consequences of structural, institutional constraints, rather than . . . the primary material through which the issue must be understood” (p. 59). (Despite the shortcomings and oversights inherent in institutional investigation, I believe that such work is imperative to revealing the agents, policies, and structures that were responsible for the establishment and maintenance of the system of sexual slavery. Moreover, irrefutable evidence of institutional—here, governmental—involvement is necessary for legal action as well as moral and political pressure against the Japanese government.) H. Kim similarly warns us that the inclusion of the “comfort women issue” in history textbooks by the Japanese and South Korean governments carries the state’s masculinist-nationalist imprint rather than the “story” that the survivors would want to tell. Kim-Gibson offers the personal counterpart: that the listener (sympathizer) and the teller (survivor) often respectively hear and utter limited, refracted, “memorized” versions of the actual experiences. Each attempt at the truth cannot fully get at the truth(s).

The inclusion of Kim Chi-ha, South Korea’s veteran dissident poet, and Ōe Kenzaburō, the Japanese Nobel laureate, as the “big names” that close the volume is a curious one. The reprint of the 1995 conversation between Ōe and Kim (taken from the South Korean journal

Taehwa) amounts to a free-wheeling exchange about topics as varied as Western versus Eastern humanism, Ōe's numerous publications, and sprinkled references to Rabelais, Habermas, Spinoza, and Blake. It seems simply out of place and detracts from the focus that the other authors so sincerely hold: the women as victims, survivors, narrators, and activists, and the political economy that framed their misery and newfound voice. The volume also would have benefited from the placement of the articles that explain the history and construction of prostitution and the "comfort system" (those by Chung, Fujime, and Song) before the more theoretical articles that address memory, positionality, and language. In particular, reading Park's article on the history of Japanese reparations policies before Field's more theoretical analysis of the language of apology and reparation would benefit readers, especially those who are not familiar with the details.

Finally, the volume forces readers to reflect on the sober realization that the "comfort system" grew out of a certain logic. Fujime demonstrates that the military "comfort system" was an offspring of the modern, regulated system of prostitution in Japan and the state's increased involvement in its political economy, while Song illustrates the already established practice of flesh trafficking in Korea in the 1920s that duped girls and women into prostitution outside of Korea, such that "to be a victim of this trafficking became an ordinary misfortune" (p. 202). In short, precedents were already in place.

Song's research also provides matter for reflection on a question that many have posed: why have Koreans themselves stayed so silent about this history? Song's view that thousands of Koreans were involved in the pre-"comfort women" trafficking (p. 182)—because it was one of the few employment opportunities under colonial rule in which Koreans could "succeed" (p. 183)—causes one to consider that if so many everyday Koreans were living off the prostitution business, their lack of resistance to the "comfort women" system and their silence afterward may not be so difficult to understand. The ways in which everyday citizens participate in and live with systems of sex work and sexual abuse of women, even today, may serve as the progenitors of egregious practices like the "comfort system" and numb people into allowing the history of rape in war to repeat itself over and over again.

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