Nationalized Victimhood Narratives and the Appropriation of Traumatic Experience: South Korea & the “Comfort Women” Question

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Puzzle & Question

- Puzzle: Conventional knowledge assumes that normative interpretations of “national” history are fixed in the national consciousness because they contribute to the foundation of the national identity, while critical interpretations are rejected. These narratives appear to juxtapose one another, and are promoted by different social actors competing with one another.

- Question: What makes a particular interpretation of historical narrative normatively accepted? Who “owns” narrative? Are they really fixed?
Key Terms

- “comfort women” / いあんふ(慰安婦)
- “victim-survivor” or “survivor-victim”
- victimhood narrative
- lived experience
Historical Context (I): Colonization of Korea

- 1st (Qing) Sino-Japanese War (1894) & the Russo-Japanese War (1904)
- 1905 Eulsa Treaty (11/17)
- 1907 Japan–Korea Treaty (07/24)
- 1910 Annexation Treaty (08/22)
- 01/3/1919, Demonstration & Massacre
  - Declaration of Independence
  - In reaction to the sudden death of deposed King Gojong
- 15/08/1945, Japanese Surrender
  Independence of Korea
Historical Context (II): Imperial Japanese Colonial Policies/Narrative/Structure

- Nissen-dosoron (日鮮同祖論)
  - Korean “Backwardness”
  - Korea & Japan “United”
- Banning of the Korean Language
- Restriction of Cultural Rites/Rituals
- Destruction of Cultural Artifacts
- Enforced Labor
- “Killing” Games of Off-Duty Soldiers
- Yangban Immunity → Chaebŏl
- Unit 731 Medical Experiments
- Indifference Towards American Christian Missionaries
Historical Context (III): Rise of Ethnic Korean Nationalism (민족/民族)

- 1919, Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea Established in Exile in Shanghai, China
- Ethnohistorian, Shin Ch’aeho
  - Self-exiled in Harbin, China
  - Self-Determination
  - Use of “Han” to define “Koreanness”
- Ch’oe Namseon
  - Used Shin Ch’aeho’s “Han” writings in political messaging
“Comfort Women” (I): Sexual Slavery During WWII & the Korean War
“Han” is a Korean cultural trope, often described as untranslatable. This expression refers to the emotions of an entire people who struggle, persistently, with unresolved resentment due to past injustices while simultaneously feeling helplessly overwhelmed by awareness of it, where even the recognition of the pain by the actors who caused it won’t produce any cathartic outcome. Awareness of one’s own “Han” is described as a disease, and affects several generations. Extends to mental, physical, and psychological ailments.

*Not to be confused with 한(韓) or 한(漢), which are homophones.
“Comfort Women” (II): Silence

- Confucian standards of moral womanhood: 삼종지도 (三從之道), 남존여비 (男尊女卑), 현모양처 (賢母良妻)
- Culture of shame prevented victim-survivors from coming forward if they managed to return to Korea.
- Due to the association of “comfort,” many of the victim-survivors were ostracized by Korean society as “collaborators with the Japanese.”
- The beginning of the Korean War almost directly after the end of World War II, meant that there was no space for victim-survivors to process previous trauma.
- Violence against women in Asia was never publicly recognized at the military tribunal conducted by the Allied forces after World War II.
- When South Korean-Japanese diplomatic relations were renormalized in 1965, “comfort women” weren’t a discussing point.
- Official records in Japan are still concealed, and records that remained in Korea were intentionally destroyed during Park Chunghee’s administration.
- The passage of time, coupled with “Han,” also contributed to the silence of women.
“Comfort Women” (III): Awareness Education at Ewha (Late 1980s)

- As a graduate student at Ewha in the early 80s, Professor Yun Chung’ok of Women and Gender Studies wanted to pursue research on issues related to rape trauma syndrome in Korean society.
- Biguni (from Sanskrit: Bhikṣuṇī), or Buddhist Nuns, had a reputation of providing services for victims of rape in Korea where at the time no such services existed.
“Comfort Women” (IV): Ongoing Controversy

- **Japanese Claims**
  - Any sex work that occurred was consensual.
  - 10,000-20,000 girls were “employed.”
  - No evidence of coerced recruitment or kidnapping of victim-survivors, nor of human trafficking.
  - No children were involved.
  - Sex workers were treated humanely, were necessary for soldiers to “have a rest” from the realities of war.

- **South Korean Claims**
  - Forced prostitution.
  - 100,000-200,000+ girls were coercively recruited and/or kidnapped.
  - Victim-survivors range from 11 - 34 years old.
  - Victim-survivors were subjected to beatings, unwanted pregnancies, forced abortions.
“Comfort Women” (V): Apologies & Compensation

- In 1951, the South Korean government demanded compensation for forced labor and military service. In 1965, Japan agreed to provide the South Korean government with $800 million in aid in a low-interest loan package for over the course of 10 years. None of this considered including victim-survivors, no individual received money.
- In 1994, 61 Korean victim-survivors who had publicly come forward were offered compensation (¥5 million) by a publicly founded but privately owned fund. The proposition was rejected by most, but accepted by a few. The money was transferred to the South Korean government, but those who accepted it have not received their funds.
- In 1998, the Supreme Court of Japan ruled that the Japanese government must compensate each victim-survivor the equivalent of 2,300 USD, estimated from what would have been their wage as sex workers. This was completely rejected.
“Comfort Women” (VI): Recent Developments in the Dispute

- On March 1, 2007, Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, in response to demands for an apology, stated that there was no evidence that sex slavery ever occurred but issued an apology to “Korean women who have made claims that they experienced hardship.”
- March 27, 2007, the Japanese Diet (Parliament) issued their own apology acknowledging sex slavery.
- The Japanese Diet is (still) currently reconsidering retracting the apology.
On December 28, 2015, PM Abe and President Park Geun-hye reached a formal agreement where Japan would compensate the South Korean government with ¥1 billion / ₩9.7 billion / $8.3 million.

**Conditions:**
- Money will only be distributed if the South Korean government ceases to discuss the dispute.
- South Korea must remove all memorializations honoring victim-survivors, in particular: the one that was erected across from the Japanese Embassy in Seoul from the private funds of the Wednesday Demonstration Collective.

*Note: The news was amidst massive protests against the President starting in November, where attendance was around 80,000+.*
Wednesday Demonstration Collective & The House of Sharing

- Last surviving victim-survivors (46 as of 2016) who continue to remain in the public eye live together in “The House of Sharing,” a space donated to them by Buddhist organizations.
- These women formed a grassroots activist collective in 1992.
- Since January 8, 1992, victim-survivors, with the support of women’s organizations, socio-civic groups, and Christian+Buddhist groups have demonstrated outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul, South Korea every single Wednesday.
- The victim-survivors of Korea have since also participated in other civil demonstrations in Korea.
- The victim-survivors also voice their support for similar endeavors in the Burma, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan, Indonesia, and East Timor.
Approaches: Benedict Anderson, Imagined Community

- Members of a group who call themselves a nation will likely never meet or get to know each other personally, but perceive themselves as being a single entity.
- Limitless + Boundless
- Inherited “Han”? 
Approaches: Duncan Bell, Mythspace

- Distinguishing History + Myth + Memory
- Political entrepreneurs create nationalized narratives, they do not exist naturally.
- The mythspace is never fixed, it can be renegotiated and reconstructed constantly.
- The nationalized narrative created in the mythspace is almost always self-aggrandizing.
Approaches: Dipesh Chakrabarty, Artifice of History

- Chakrabarty’s India
- Who speaks for “Korean” pasts?
- The Korean nation has subcommunities, with separate levels of access to powerful elites.
- Korean history articulates itself as constructed by tales of the trauma of Japanese and American imperialism and colonialism.
Approaches: Henri Tajfel & John Turner, Positive Distinctiveness

- “…people's desire to see their own groups as better than other groups can lead to intergroup bias…social identity theory, which argues that people's motivation to obtain positive self-esteem from their group memberships is one driving-force behind in-group bias…” [E. R. Smith/D.M.Mackie, Social Psychology (2007) p. 205 and p. 491]

- Victimhood Narratives, the Appropriation and Nationalization of “Han” to cultivate positive distinctiveness.
Approaches: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Subaltern

- Subaltern: An individual who is systematically, or culturally denied or prevented from possessing the means to have a voice in their society for the purpose of effecting change. These systems place them outside of hegemonic structures of power that were instituted by colonial legacies.

- Theft of Testimony and the Korean Political Elite
Approaches: Jonathan Sisson, Satisfaction of Justice

- Human Rights and International Law Standards for dealing with the past require consent from the victimized and acknowledgment of the perpetrator of the crime.
- All parties must be consciously involved.
- The right to reparation cannot be achieved without consent.
- Wednesday Demonstration Collective’s demands for Museum Memorials and Education Programs.