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The Legacy of Comfort Women: Historical Trauma and Memory Politics

“If the comfort women issue is resolved, the world will be a more peaceful place.”

— *Grandma Lee, Surviving Comfort Woman*

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Yet, the issue remains unresolved. A quote I often use to analyze complex issues is: “History is written by the victors.” This perspective reminds me that what we consider the “whole truth” may be incomplete. While World War II ended in victory for the Allied powers, it does not erase what occurred during that period—or before and after. Though the Allies prevailed, history textbooks often omit crucial events and nuanced perspectives, particularly regarding the shifting political and cultural dynamics of the countries involved, many of which are still recovering nearly 80 years later.

One such sensitive topic is the issue of comfort women, primarily affecting South Korea, Japan, and other Asian countries. This cruel chapter of militarized sexual slavery remains a deeply painful and under-discussed aspect of Asia’s history. My research goes beyond historical inquiry; it is a quest to understand the complex legacy of trauma, resilience, and the ongoing struggles for justice that shape East Asia today. I seek to examine the intricate politics, conflicting historical interpretations, and the struggle for reconciliation. Through visits, interviews, and observations, I aim to capture the human cost of this history and the ways it influences current geopolitics, educational narratives, and public memory.

My journey began in Japan. At the Yushukan Museum, located at the Yasukuni Shrine, I observed a controversial, selective wartime narrative that minimizes accountability for human rights abuses, including the comfort women system. The museum’s silence on this issue highlighted a national tendency toward historical revisionism, making me curious about South Korea’s portrayal in its own museums. In contrast, the Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM) presented an unfiltered look at Japan’s military sexual slavery system, centering survivor stories and advocacy efforts. WAM’s extensive documentation underscored the Japanese state’s knowledge of these atrocities, though political denial has persisted even today. WAM’s focus on survivor testimonies and archival evidence reveals the pain and resilience of these women, illustrating the profound disconnect in Japan’s historical narrative.

I was unable to interview Japanese citizens about the educational curriculum on comfort women, but I did speak with two historians from the Research Institute on Japanese Military

Sexual Slavery (RIMSS). They noted that, while many Japanese civilians support reparations, their government remains unyielding. One of the main points of my research was to compare the educational curriculums of Japan, South Korea, and the United States. As an American, I remember learning about wartime atrocities, including the comfort women, but only briefly, with much emphasis on the Rape of Nanking. Japan's curriculum, however, often portrays comfort women as voluntary sex workers, framing the issue as one of paid prostitution rather than coercion. In South Korea, education on comfort women narratives didn't begin until the 1990s when the first comfort woman, Kim Hak-sun, came forward. Even then, the topic is sometimes sidestepped, focusing instead on nationalistic identity. South Korean education includes comfort women narratives but often frames them in a way that fosters resentment toward Japan, rather than a comprehensive understanding that acknowledges the support from many Japanese civilians and activists.

In South Korea, my experiences were extensive and emotionally charged. At the Korean War Museum in Seoul, I explored exhibits detailing Korea's wartime suffering, providing broader context even though it was not specifically focused on comfort women. Attending the Comfort Women Protest on Remembrance Day in Seoul was one of the most powerful parts of my journey. The protest brought together activists and supporters calling for justice and accountability through speeches, songs, and rallying cries. As an American, my presence sparked curiosity, underscoring the importance of spreading historical awareness internationally. On the same day, I had the pleasure of attending the Memorial Day Ceremony, where haunting presentations and performances reflected on the experience of South Korea and its survivors, the Comfort Women. Despite my limited understanding of the Korean language, the emotions transcended the barrier of language. Furthermore, Meeting Halmeoni Lee, a comfort woman survivor, was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Her story of resilience and forgiveness deeply affected me; she expressed hope for peace, finding symbolic actions by Japan sufficient for her own closure, even in the absence of a formal apology. Her hands grasped mine, and the electric experience of shared hope between youth and a seasoned veteran is something that can never be forgotten. She is easily one of the strongest individuals I've ever had the pleasure of talking with.

My original goal was to compare and contrast conflicting memory politics between Japan and South Korea. As expected, I found this journey emotionally challenging. At the Heum Museum on Military Sexual Slavery by Japan in Daegu, I explored the local impacts of the comfort women system. The wonderful curator, Martin, provided regional insights, showing me personal artifacts of survivors. These possessions, including paintings, engravings, and documents, brought a sentimental, humanizing layer to all the history I had absorbed. Similarly, at Gwangju's House of Sharing, I saw community efforts to support survivors, including therapeutic programs and historical preservation initiatives. These experiences allowed me to put faces and names to the history, underscoring the ongoing impact and the resilience of these survivors. Although I visited a plethora of locations, these were of the most significant impact.

One of the most challenging parts of my research has been confronting the general disinterest among South Koreans. Many feel they already know enough about this history and prefer not to engage further, especially as the issue remains politically charged. This contrasts with the dedication of academics and activists, whose work is often disregarded by the public. Most public discourse on comfort women focuses through a cultural or media lens rather than a historical one, diluting the story's significance.

Today, I am on exchange at Korea University—one of South Korea's most prestigious institutions. Here, I've met students from various backgrounds—Korean, Japanese, American, and others—and have had the chance to discuss their perspectives on the comfort women issue. Most Korean students shared a general awareness but limited knowledge beyond Japan's wartime atrocities. A Japanese student in political science expressed discomfort, acknowledging the lack of government responsibility but expressing hope for future accountability. Meanwhile, my American friend, researching on a similar historical grant, was advised by her supervisor to avoid the comfort women topic due to its "complexity" for a thesis. These responses alone emphasize the need for greater public understanding of this history.

In presenting this research, my goal is to honor the voices of survivors like Grandma Lee, who embody both the pain of past atrocities and the resilience needed to seek peace. Their stories reflect a profound desire for justice that transcends national borders. Understanding the comfort women system is essential not only for East Asian relations but also for addressing global issues of historical trauma, memory, and healing. In a world today where human rights are being increasingly ignored, it is imperative that we actively work to prevent atrocities like these from being committed again. To amplify awareness in the United States, I hope to create educational resources and initiatives to illuminate this chapter of history for American students and citizens. For example, I plan to introduce materials on comfort women to my local high school, where teachers often seek students' input on additional topics but may lack resources to address complex historical issues comprehensively.

While spreading awareness internationally and nationally is an ambitious goal at my stage of life, even starting locally can bring comfort to survivors and honor the memories of those who have passed. Through these efforts, I hope to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on justice and reconciliation for comfort women and their descendants. Each conversation or educational effort brings this history closer to a broader understanding, adding vital pieces that may one day foster true reconciliation.