

Wings of Resistance— The Metamorphosis of ‘Comfort Women’ in the Pursuit of Justice

Introduction

The identity of a ‘Comfort Woman’— being victims of Japanese military sexual slavery— has undergone fundamental stages of metamorphosis.¹ Some victims of sexual slavery will oscillate between silence and remaining resilient in the face of uncertainty. For example, Kim Hak Soon is the first public declarant, lifting the veil of silence for all ‘Comfort Women’ while there are other ‘Comfort Women’, like Lee Yong Soo, who were greatly impacted by Kim Hak Soon’s testimony.² Not only do ‘Comfort Women’ victims have to battle with the sociological repercussions that women often face for speaking up, but their words were often dismissed on a global scale. With less than 10 ‘Comfort Women’ alive in the South Korean registry today, the story and the truth of ‘Comfort Women’ is stifled by a world that will not open hearts to a movement that persists even in the 21st century.³ The identity of a ‘Comfort Women’ shifts from ‘victim’ to ‘survivor’ to ‘activist’ purely as a necessity to survive and adapt to an environment that doesn’t spread awareness of the anthropological shock that sexual war crimes hold.⁴ This paper will analyze how the experiences of trauma that ‘Comfort Women’ hold will propel grassroots mobilizations on an international scale, imitating Beck’s “Three-Stage Model of Metamorphosis” of transforming from a caterpillar to a cocoon to a butterfly.

Her Story

The unfinished story, of the trans-national feminist movement of women affected by sexual slavery war crimes, begins with one of the many 200,000 victims (with estimates peaking at nearly 500,000 victims).⁵ In 1928, a 15-year-old girl named Lee Yong Soo from Daegu, South Korea encounters a soldier with his face obscured like a veil of shadows clutching onto another helpless girl who was calling for help— it was a soldier from the Japanese military abducting the next ‘comfort woman’ for the many military brothels, or known as “comfort stations” across Japan, Korea, China, and more. Lee Yong Soo was abducted to the Japanese military “comfort stations” in Taiwan where she was demanded to have sex with more than 40 soldiers per day until the end of the war.⁶ After the public release of Kim Hak Soon’s testimony, Lee Yong Soo felt inspired to speak up and take part in the Comfort Women Movement.

¹Shim, Young-Hee. 2017. “Metamorphosis of the Korean ‘Comfort Women’: How Did *Han* 恨 Turn into the Cosmopolitan Morality?” *Development and Society* 46, no. 2 : 251–78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/90013929>.

²Sang-hun, Choe. “Overlooked No More: Kim Hak-Soon, Who Broke the Silence for ‘Comfort Women.’” *The New York Times*, October 21, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/21/obituaries/kim-hak-soon-overlooked.html>.

³Ko, Byung-Chan. “Another Death Leaves Only 9 Surviving Korean ‘Comfort Women.’” *Hankyoreh*, May 3, 2023. https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1090418.html.

⁴Lee, Hyunsuk. 2022. “Themes of the ‘Comfort Women’ and ‘We’ in K. Min’s Herstory.” *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies* 28 (1): 131–42. doi:10.1080/12259276.2021.2025324.

⁵Dudden, Alexis. “A Guide to Understanding the History of the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue.” *United States Institute of Peace*, September 16, 2022. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/guide-understanding-history-comfort-women-issue>.

⁶Reuters. “Japanese Army Demanded One ‘Comfort Woman’ for Every 70 Soldiers, Documents Show.” *South China Morning Post*, December 7, 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/3041074/japanese-army-demanded-one-comfort-woman-every-70-soldiers>.

As a pivotal pioneer for the Comfort Women Movement, she pours a lifetime of commitment to the Wednesday Demonstrations where she demands that the Japanese Government and its right-winged political leaders meet the demands of the ‘Comfort Women’. According to Comfort Women Action for Redress and Education, the time on the clock continues to tick away for the remaining victims, as their 7 demands to the Japanese Government for a resolution on this war crime have not been met yet.⁷ The 7 demands are admitting that the military sexual slavery system is a war crime, disclosing the official documents held by the Japanese government, delivering an official and genuine apology, paying legal reparations to the remaining survivors, punishing the military soldiers that had engaged in the military sexual slavery system, educating the public on the truth of ‘Comfort Women’, and finally commemorating and memorializing the lives of ‘Comfort Women’.

My meeting with now 95-year-old Grandma Lee Yong Soo— or as she would be called Halmoni— was an experience that is too complex to put into words alone. Walking through Daegu Station after our meeting, I felt my heart tug and tried to imagine Grandma Lee’s screams of uncertainty and agony on a suffocating train that was fading away from Daegu Station and making its trek towards Taiwan where she and the other victims would eventually be stationed.

Grandma Lee Yong Soo is publicly known as a ‘Comfort Women’ which is an euphemism that refers to women and young girls who were forcibly drafted, through abduction or deception, into “comfort stations” by the Imperial Armed Japanese Forces during 1932 to 1945.⁵ The term ‘Comfort Women’ not only undergoes shifting perceptions over decades but also holds varying symbolic interpretations to different diasporas of communities. Not only are ‘Comfort Women’ living proof of war crimes and violations against human rights, but they are also a symbol of persisting social constructions based on gender-based patriarchy.

The journey of Grandma Lee greatly aligns with Beck’s “Three Stages of Metamorphosis” (note that credit should also be given to I Ching as well), which is the idea that a butterfly will lay eggs that turn into caterpillars that go into a cocoon and turn into a butterfly.⁶ Grandma Lee’s story is not just about her transition between laying down her trepidations and passing her torches to the next generation. It is about how she, too, has been forced to adapt to an environment where she was encouraged to stay silent. Grandma Lee may not ever be truly free from the torment that she feels as a victim, even if (and hopefully so) there is a resolution to the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery.

To fully understand Beck's theory on metamorphosis, it’s essential to understand that it is the hegemonic powers that will attempt to act in their strategic interests.⁷ As we can see in the presence of the Wednesday Demonstration, the fight for Yoon Lee Geum in Bosan Camptown, and grassroots mobilizations within the US and throughout the world, we see how these clear

examples of institutional metamorphosis positively impact the Comfort Women Movement. This paper will attempt to analyze the presence of Beck's Theory on Metamorphosis on the strength of collective action and grassroots mobilizations in the Comfort Women Movement, and how utilizing the institutional metamorphosis is essential to meet the demands of the 'Comfort Women' and to understand socio-anthropologically how hegemonic powers, or imperialistic militaries, can generate shifts in the broader movement for 'Comfort Women'.

The Butterfly's Flight at the Wednesday Demonstrations

During my research trip to South Korea, I went to the 1658th Chapter of the Wednesday Demonstration. The Wednesday Demonstration, according to the Women's Rights Institute of Korea, is when survivors and activists gather to "protest the Japanese Government's denial of the Japanese military sexual slavery issue".⁸

When I coincidentally bumped into Jimin Kim from the Korean Council, she kindly explained to me that for the past 30 years (since January 8, 1992), there has been great strife between the 'Comfort Women' survivors and extreme political right-wingers who believe that the call for retribution was artificial and that 'Comfort Women' didn't get abducted by force, rather they volunteered to follow the Japanese military. I asked one of the protesters in the political right-wing extremist group what their initiative and organization's mission were in which they answered, "[Our mission is] To prove that the Comfort Women Movement is a fraud. The 'Comfort Women' are not coerced, thus it cannot be considered slavery and the actions of the 'Comfort Women' were voluntary, thus it cannot be categorized as prostitution."

This holocaust-like denialism from political right-wing extremists generates a cycle of hateful blame towards the 'Comfort Women'.⁹ As I walked further down towards the site of the demonstration, in front of the Embassy of Japan, I noticed the crux of the crowd— the Korean Council— vouching for the demands of the 'Comfort Women' (with the crux age group of the protestors being high schoolers). Despite the agitation that counter-protests may produce, including policemen scattered densely around the street to maintain peace between the different protestors, I noticed that from the Korean Council many people were singing and laughing. The survivors' and victims' involvement with the Wednesday Demonstration as well as the creation of the "Butterfly Fund" are all catalysts of social catharsis or an identity shift from 'victim' to 'human rights activists'. Certainly, it's their lives that are living proof of metamorphosis because of their fortitude and tenacity to collective activism.

⁷CARE. "7 Demands by the Victims to the Japanese Government." *Comfort Women Action for Redress and Education*, June 16, 2021. <https://comfortwomenaction.org/2020/07/16/7-demands-by-the-victims-to-japanese-government/>.

⁸Sohn, Sung. "'Comfort Women' History and Issues." Education for Social Justice Foundation. <https://www.e4sjf.org/comfort-women-history-and-issues.html>.

^{9,10}Han, Sang-Jin. 2019. "Ulrich Beck and the Metamorphosis of the Korean Peninsula." *Journal of Asian Sociology* 48, no. 1 (2019): 1–24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26658341>.

¹¹The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan. 1992. "Wednesday Demonstration for Resolution of the Issue of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan" *Women's Rights Human Institute of Korea*. <https://kyeol.kr/sites/default/files/resources/M-9.pdf>

¹²Dudden, Alexis. "A Guide to Understanding the History of the 'Comfort Women' Issue." *United States Institute of Peace*, September 16, 2022. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/guide-understanding-history-comfort-women-issue>.

How The Murder of Yoon Geum Lee Triggers Beck's "Cosmopolitan Sympathy"

In the 1950s, the Korean War led thousands of American soldiers to settle in nearly 100 camp towns for the US military scattered across Korea (primarily clustered around Paju-si) where these soldiers would carry out sexual exploitation against Korean women through Circular No.9 which instructed troops to “mingle with women through the lowest form of prostitution”.¹³

I had the immense privilege to visit a Camptown in the depths of Bosan, a town interwoven with scattered neon Las Vegas signs and American slogans on the walls of desolate buildings, which were all pieces of evidence of an “insulated Americanized town”.¹⁴ As I passed by an STD Control Center established for the US military, I learned that the South Korean government forced women to enter the facility regularly, facing punishment if they did not finish or skip the treatment sessions of penicillin dose injections, which often shocked and even killed women. In fact, Keun Joo Pae from the *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* states, “There are generally two types of Western princesses: the registered and the unregistered (streetwalkers). The first group has official sanction to sell their flesh... While the registered prostitutes are controlled by the police, streetwalkers (unregistered women) are subject to legal punishment. VD checkups aim to control the bodies of Western princesses and ensure the health of American soldiers, not the health of the women”.¹⁵

We met up with a tour guide to learn about the dark history of Camptown Bosan which included the murder of Yoon Geum Lee, known as one of the many “Western princesses” in the eyes of the American military who was sexually exploited and murdered on October 28, 1992 by Keneth Lee Markel. We see the growing presence of Beck’s “cosmopolitan sympathy” just based on how quickly the murder of Yoon Geum Lee became a nationally broadcasted issue, where within a rapid 5 days, there’s a protest passionately asking for the government to pay attention to US military sexual slavery against women. This paradigm realignment in human attitude toward humanitarian justice and norms shifts the direction of grassroots mobilizations towards collective empathy towards marginalized groups subjected to sexual exploitation. Ultimately, the unhesitating mobilization of protests following Yoon Geum Lee’s death lays the foundational groundwork for international Comfort Women grassroots movements.

¹³Stephens, Alice, and Yuri Doolan. “The First Amerasians: Mixed Race Koreans from Camptowns to America.” *Korean Quarterly*, Summer 2024. <https://www.koreanquarterly.org/tag/camptowns/>.

¹⁴Hwang, Taijin. 2023. “Re-membering” South Korea’s Militarized Landscapes in Pax Americana: Post-Cold War US Military Camps, Camptowns, and Former Camptown Women” *International Journal of Korean History*, 28(2): 181-218. <https://doi.org/10.22372/ijkh.2023.28.2.181>.

¹⁵ Pae, Keun-joo Christine. “Western Princesses—A Missing Story: A Christian Feminist Ethical Analysis of U.S. Military Prostitution in South Korea.” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 29, no. 2 (2009): 121–39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23562801>.

The “Butterfly Fund” and Its International Impacts

Another vital principle behind Beck’s metamorphosis theory is that the greater the violation and damage done against humanitarian norms and rights, the stronger the collective force for solidarity is.¹⁶ This is why agencies that promote these aspects of social change, particularly within the women’s rights movement, are critical. For example, within the US we see the involvement of KACE (Korean American Civic Empowerment) to help pass House Resolution 121 also known as the Comfort Women Resolution in 2007.¹⁷ Sponsored by Japanese-American, Congressman Mike Honda, House Resolution 121 expresses that the Japanese Government should acknowledge and formally apologize for the Japanese militaries’ sexual slavery system.¹⁸ It can be said that this seismic shift is the result of institutional metamorphosis.

Ironically, this theory of metamorphosis is akin to how Kim Bok Dong and Gil Won-Ok have created the “Butterfly Fund”.¹⁹ Established on March 8, 2012, on International Women’s Day, Kim Bok Dong and Gil Won-Ok pledged to utilize its funds (that they receive in legal reparations from the Japanese Government) to be used in solidarity for war-time sexual violence victims, particularly those committed by Korean Soldiers during the Vietnam War, survivors in DR Congo, Uganda, and Palestine.²⁰ For example, these funds will be allocated to help those in Uganda, where 20 years of conflict between the government and Lord’s Resistance Army has resulted in abducted victims of at least 30,000 individuals being subjected to sexual slavery.²¹ The ‘butterfly’ represents the hope passed down from one generation to the next, that all women, including those affected by military sexual slavery war crimes, will one day be able to soar with freedom away from the discrimination and oppression that have historically silenced women.

Conclusion

The enduring struggles and continuing journey of ‘Comfort Women’ encompasses a shifting of identities, one that strongly mirrors Beck’s “Three-Stage Model of Metamorphosis”. From victimhood to survivor to activist, it’s the mechanisms of institutional metamorphosis (or agents of grassroots mobilizations) that propel a global humanitarian movement. The Wednesday Demonstration, creation of the “Butterfly Fund”, and all the social movements seen on a local and international degree exemplify the strength of collective action and international solidarity for justice not just for ‘Comfort Women’, but for women throughout the world. The steadfastness and unyielding determination of ‘Comfort Women’ don’t make them sole victims, it transforms them into social activists. Just as how the metamorphosis of a butterfly is infinitely cyclical, ‘Comfort Women’ demonstrates that hope can be carried through generations. *‘Comfort Women’ aren’t victims: they break binaries of socially constructed identities and continue to undergo metamorphosis, just like how a butterfly spreads its wings.*

¹⁶ Gilleard, Chris, and Paul Higgs. "Globalization and the Value of Ulrich Beck’s Concept of ‘Cosmopolitanisation’ in Orienting a New Sociology of Later Life", *Journal of Global Ageing*, 1 (2024): 138-158, <https://doi.org/10.1332/29767202Y2024D000000005>.

¹⁷ KACE. “General Support.” *Korean American Civic Engagement*, May 31, 2023. <https://kace.org/general-support/>.

¹⁸ Congressional Research Service. “House Resolution 121.” *Congress.gov*. <https://www.congress.gov/bills/110th-congress/house-resolution/121>.

¹⁹ Shim, Young-Hee. 2017. “Metamorphosis of the Korean ‘Comfort Women’: How Did *Han* 恨 Turn into the Cosmopolitan Morality?” *Development and Society* 46, no. 2 : 251–78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/90013929>.

²⁰ Drury, Flora. “Obituary: Kim Bok-Dong, the South Korean ‘Comfort Woman.’” *BBC News*, February 3, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47042684>.

²¹ The Korean Council. “Stepping on The Present and Moving Towards the Future” *War and Women’s Human Rights Museum*. <https://www.womenandwarmuseum.net/94>.