Imperial Japan's Comfort Women from Korea: History & Politics of Silence-Breaking

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The Journal of Northeast Asian History
Volume 7, Number 1 (Summer 2010), 5-39

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This study inquires into two questions. First, why was there such a long silence in South Korea over the issue of Korean comfort women (KCW) who had been sexually exploited by imperial Japan's military? And second, what changes have occurred both in and outside South Korea that allowed for the silence-breaking in 1991 and the rise of the comfort women movement? Three arguments are made. First, South Korea's particular historical, political and social situations (e.g., nation-building, political culture, rapid industrialization, and repressive political system) contextualized silence about the KCW issue. Within this peculiar context, no one acted as agents of interest articulation, both within and outside the formal political institutions of South Korea and in civil society, who would have advocated for the victims' rights or welfare. Second, the orientation of the South Korean women's movement itself which lacked women-centered or women-specific political activism has contributed to the silence on the KCW issues. Third, South Korea's democratization movement, and the global feminist movement linked with international human rights regime were instrumental in breaking the silence as well as the development of the comfort women movement.

Keywords: Comfort Women, Korean Comfort Women, Korean Women's Movement, Korean Women NGOs, Women and Korea's Democratization, Global Feminism, Women's Human Rights

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I. Introduction

On August 14, 1991, Kim Hak-Sun [김학순] (then a 67-year-old Korean woman, who died in 1997) at a press conference revealed that she was forced to provide sexual services to Japanese soldiers at comfort stations in China in 1941. Kim's testimony certainly illuminated public debate on Japan's military comfort women (MCW or comfort women)[1] in Korea (both south and north), Japan, and other countries in Asia (the Philippines, Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, and Indonesia), where victims were sexually enslaved by imperial Japan's military during the 1930s and 1940s. In South Korea alone, 234 women have since identified and registered themselves with the government as victims of this systematic sexual violence (87 victims are still alive, with the death toll reaching

[1] I often use the term "MCW" or "comfort women" with quotation marks, simply to use these terms as pronouns in compliance with historical naming, and in an attempt to familiarize the issue to a wider audience in society. However, these terms devised by Japan's imperial army are unjustly andro-centric and highly sexist. I conceptually perceive these terms as Japan's wartime military sexual slavery. Refer to Yoon (Summer 1996, pp. 86-94) & Chung Chin-Sung (1997, pp. 220-222). In my previous works elsewhere, I used to use quotation marks for "MCW" or "comfort women" or "Korean comfort women" (or "KCW"), but they will be removed in this article only for editorial purpose (to avoid repetitive quotation marks).

147 as of January 2010). Studies on South Korean comfort women victims (hereafter refer to Korean comfort women or KCW) note that Kim's 1991 testimony was the official landmark in breaking a half-century-long silence on the WW II-era hidden secret of the comfort women.

Looking back, however, older generations in Korea (both south and north) knew about young girls/women being taken for use by Japan's military during the war time, although the specific living situations that these women might have experienced were far from the public knowledge. Those Korean women were better known in Korea (undivided) as *jungshindae* [정신대, Women's Voluntary Labor Corps].[2] In Japan, they were euphemistically called ianfu (comfort women) or *jukun ianfu* (military comfort women), and recent publications more frequently refer them to as MCW or comfort women, although U.N. documentation and women's groups use such terms as "military sexual slaves," forced into "military sexual slavery" in "rape centers" or "rape camps" (Coomaraswamy, 1996; McDougall, 1998; The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, 2000 & 2005). No documents exist telling the exact number of comfort women. But historians roughly estimate the size ranging between 50,000 and 200,000 or more of whom, researchers generally agree, young Korean women sex-trafficked beginning from around 1932 constitute the majority.[3] Korean women who were under Japan's colonial control (1910-1945) became the major victims. Given the sheer size and the

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[2] In general and in most cases, the jungshindae were workers assigned to various defense industries during wartime by the Japanese colonial government and they should not be mixed with comfort women. In some cases, jungshindae workers apparently were transferred to comfort women.

[3] Most Korean females were young, aged 17-20. Some were "drafted" as young as twelve years old, although their exact sexual function in the Japanese military has yet to be confirmed; others were up to 40 years of age during the escalation of the war in the 1940s when the demand exceeded the supply. Much smaller numbers of women from other Asian regions (Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand, and the Netherlands) were also forced to serve as comfort women. Recent studies in China claim that there may be as many as 200,000 Chinese additional comfort women.

duration of this sexual exploitation system that involved the Japanese military, it seems likely that older generations in Japan also knew about this abusive system. As a matter of fact, publications about the comfort women (books, soldier's diaries, and films) became available in Japan as early as 1947,[4] more coming out in the 1970s of which some were translated into the Korean language mostly in the 1980s. Surviving KCW victims' stories also became known in Japan in 1972 when Bae Bong-Gi [배봉기] revealed her miserable life in Okinawa's "red roof tiled house" comfort station (Kawada, translated by Hahn, 1992). Much before Kim Hak-Sun's public testimony, in South Korea in 1982, another KCW survivor, Noh Su-Bok [노수복] (then residing in Thailand) revealed her personal trauma and tragic stories in local media. Noh's disclosure of her past identity as a comfort woman must have been the first public testimony made in South Korea. Noh's breaking news evoked sympathy as well as anti-Japan nationalist anger. None of these developments prior to the early 1990s, however, created momentum leading to any investigation by historians, scholars, the Korean government, or women's groups in the civil sector. Nor were there any remedies sought by the Korean government or civil society. Public outcries for investigation by both the Korean and Japanese governments of the KCW issue, and development of public support system for these victims had to wait until Kim Hak-Sun's testimony in 1991. Why was there such a long time gap?

This study inquires into two questions. First, why was there such a long silence over the KCW issues? And second, what changes have occurred both in and outside South Korea that allowed for the silence-breaking in 1991 and the rise of the comfort women advocacy movement (the comfort women movement)? The comfort women movement, initiated in South Korea, includes the activities of the following:

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[4] Tamura Taijiro's publication of *Shunpuden* [A Prostitute's Story] (1947), which later was made into a movie. Refer to Ueno & Yamamoto (2004, pp. ix-x).

searching for and identifying comfort women victims; conducting oral research documentation and archival research; pressing the Japanese government and victims' home government to investigate and pay compensation (i.e., reparation); appealing to international human rights organizations (the U.N. ILO, etc.); filing legal actions in the court system; forming cooperation with global feminist groups; developing welfare programs for the victims, etc. Three arguments will be made in this study. First, South Korea's particular historical, political and social situations (e.g., nation-building, political culture, rapid industrialization, and repressive political system) contextualized the silence about the KCW issue. Within this peculiar context, no one acted as agents of interest articulation, both within and outside the formal political institutions of South Korea and in civil society, who would have advocated for the victims' rights or welfare. Second, the orientation of the South Korean women's movement itself which lacked women-centered or women-specific political activism has contributed to the silence of the KCW issues. Third, South Korea's democratization movement, and the global feminist movement linked with international human rights regime were instrumental in breaking the silence as well as the development of the comfort women movement. Before getting into discussions of these issues, presented in the below is a brief review of whether the silence about KCW is unique when compared with other cases of war atrocities and sexual violence against women.

II. The Comfort Women Case from a Comparative Perspective

The comfort women case in essence has four issue components that have been, from the comparative and historical perspectives, largely unreported. These components are war atrocity, gender issue, sexual violence against women, and race—all important social and political issues only marginally debated in the public forum. Especially, the issues

of war atrocities, women in war, and women's rape victimization have suffered from historical silence. The suppression of stories of war atrocities is not uncommon. Modern history confirms it is not automatic that memories of war atrocities are remembered by the populace or become a popular academic research topic by scholars immediately after war ended. The Nazi's Holocaust stories, for example, had to suffer for decades from denials or from a dearth of public awareness. The Nanking massacre in China by Imperial Japan still suffers from denials in Japan.[5] The surge of Holocaust studies did not occur until the 1970s when there have been more Holocaust awareness to be constructed as a certain historical incident, and more resource became available (Baumel, 1998; Stern, 1993; Rosenbaum, 1996; Novick, 1999). Even then, gendered war atrocities received a different treatment. Memories or experiences of Jewish women in the mainstream Holocaust studies were hardly visible until the early 1980s due to lack of topic (gender) awareness and source availability (Baumel, 1998, p. 50). Furthermore, there was resistance to research on gender issues both by the "Holocaust establishment" (e.g., academic literature, Holocaust memorials and museums) and by the Holocaust survivors as well, for the gender analysis may distract public attention from the Nazi's crimes against Jews as a race (Ofer & Weitzman, 1998, Introduction). The silence or invisibility of sexual violence against women (e.g., rapes, prostitution, pornography, and other types of sexual assaults) both in the civilian sector and in wartime have been common across historical times, cultures, or regions on the globe. Due to the particular nature of violence that touches victim's privacy and shame, sexual violence stories have long been suppressed to be kept silenced by the patriarchal social cultures across countries and societies. Underreporting of sexual violence crimes against women in the civilian society has been a well-known fact even in nowadays. Since rapes in war

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[5] Iris Chang's bestseller book, *The Rape of Nanking* (1997), was not welcomed in Japan.

or in armed conflicts have been routinely used as a powerful tool to keep the conquered under control and terrorized, people tend to perceive them only as unfortunate byproducts of war. Social establishment (e.g., journalists, historians, government, etc.) either ignored women's rape victimization in war or put little weight on this issue as a worthy agenda. When in the early 1970s the world heard about over 200,000 Bengali women raped by Pakistani soldiers during the Bangladeshi's independence, the Bengali women's victimization was the first case that the issue of rape in war received international attention. In breaking this rape news and the development of victim care, increasing feminist awareness by the Western and local women was crucial. Significantly, however, the Bangladesh government's political motivations (e.g., independence, international sympathy, and more foreign aids) also played an important role (Brownmiller, 1975, pp. 78-87; Copelon, 1995, p.197). Even though rape in military conflict is known to the public, the failure to connect the wartime rape to the women's human rights violation has been common. During the Yugoslav civil war, the world did not hear much about the gendered nature of ethnic cleansing or "genocidal rapes" for a while (Copelon, 1995). It was not until in the early 1990s that the massive scale of rape (between 20,000 and 50,000 women were estimated as rape victims) was documented by some British women war correspondents. Frequency and severity of rapes and other types of sexual violence against women during military or civil conflicts in many regions in Africa (e.g., Rwanda, Sudan, South Africa, etc.) led people to perceive these sexual violence even in peace time as "both a cultural and a statistical norm" (Turshen & Twagiramariya, 1998).

Given such silences over war atrocities, gender issues and wartime rapes, the half-century-long silence about the KCW stories may not be considered unique or unprecedented in modern history. As yet, the KCW case is significant in the comparative studies of war atrocities, gender analysis of history, and the wartime rapes of women. The KCW case identifies the particular or parochial situations of South Korea that should

be factored in understanding the silence-keeping as well as silence-breaking. What particularities which are unique to South Korea have kept the comfort women stories silenced, and then allowed the silence broken when Japan and other victim countries were still silent? How did networking with global feminists and the rise of global human rights regimes affect this silence-breaking? These questions need to be closely examined.

III. Historical Context: Post-Colonialism, Cold War Politics & the Absence of Interest Articulation

South Korea's postwar situation was chaotic wherein no public debate on Japan's war crimes occurred in the political community. Beginning with liberation from Japan's colonialism (1945), the Korean peninsula was partitioned into north and south (1945) followed by the establishment of two separate political entities both in 1948: the Republic of Korea (the ROK or South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (the DPRK or North Korea). The arrival of the cold war, the Korean War (1950-53) and the post-Korean War situation all contributed to a great deal of social unrest, economic hardship and political instability. During the 1940s-1950s, nation-building and national defense were the most immediate and important "fundamental policies"[6] in South Korea's polity, for reasons of political stability and economic survival. Within this politico-economic context, such issues as the plight of women who

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[6] The fundamental policy refers to "a set of priorities and directions, themselves grounded in basic societal values, ideology and the basic elements of our economic and societal system…which play a significant role in shaping public policies" (Dolbeare, 1974).

were enslaved as KCW or other Korean victims of colonialism[7] failed to attract attention from the society or political leadership to be developed as a political agenda.

In domestic politics during the 1940s-1950s, communist insurgencies as well as political factionalism were threatening South Korea's political stability, thus anti-communist nation-building through institutionalization of political, social, and economic infrastructure was the immediate concern. During this nation-building, social leadership and the administrative vacuum left by Japan's colonial government were filled by local elites who were anti-communists holding conservative political views. Many of them were colonial-era Korean collaborators who later continued to assume leading roles in every corner of South Korean society such as politics, economics, education, military, the so-called "women's community [여성계, *yoseong gye*],"[8] literature, and so forth (Kim, Lee & Chung, 1993). Within this power structure, the National Assembly's investigation of the colonial-era "pro-Japan" anti-Korean activities (The Special Committee to Punish Anti-National Acts during the Japanese Colonial Period, 1948.9-1949.9) failed, particularly opposed by police who were central in the post-war power elites (Kim, Lee & Chung, 1993, p. 25). During the first President Syngman Rhee's tenure, the South Korean government negotiated with Japan a few times over colonial compensation, but Rhee's strong anti-Japan posture and the

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7 During Japan's colonial period, 7.5 million Koreans (estimation) were drafted for Japan's war efforts and many males were sent (as forced laborers or soldiers) to foreign countries (Japan, China, Russia, Pacific islands, and other regions). Among them, one million are estimated to have died while in forced service. The South Korean government did not begin to investigate the colonial era forced laborers or the military draft issue until 1994. In academic circles, a joint symposium on the Korean forced laborers by Japan attended by both Korean and Japanese scholars was held in 1992 for the first time. Refer to the *Hankuk Ilbo* (1994, December 22; 1992, February 28).

8 The "yoseong gye" refers to women's groups, organizations which advocate the rights and welfare of women. In local politics, the "yoseong gye" functions as a distinctive social group in political representation: A few seats in the National Assembly or in the Cabinet would be reserved for those "yoseong gye" leaders.

somewhat "emotional" demand for compensation ($3.6 billion representing 100 million dollars a year for 36 years of colonial suffering) bore no fruit (Pai, 1991, p. 143). Even if the Rhee government had settled with Japan on compensation money, it is unlikely that it would ever have reached the KCW victims whose very identity was as yet surfaced in South Korean society.

No outside formal institutions played any role either in bringing justice for those victims. The southern part of the Korean peninsula during 1945-1948 was under the direct control of the U.S. Military Government in Korea. Numerous documents indicate that the U.S. had known of Imperial Japan's comfort women issue as early as 1942 (Pang, 1992). The U.S. military documents from 1944 on, in particular, specifically deal with "Japanese Army Brothels," and "Korean comfort girls" issues, such as detailed information about the recruitment process by Japanese, comfort girls' living/working conditions, and their relationship with the Japanese military.[9] During the first landing of the U.S. troops in Okinawa (where a large number of KCW were found) in the Spring of 1945, the U.S. military captured large quantities of pornographic photos of Japanese soldiers and young "oriental" women who must have been "comfort girls" abandoned by the defeated Japanese forces stationed at the headquarters of the Japanese Army at Shuri Castle near Naha.[10] Yet the U.S did not investigate the comfort women issue.

International human right regime was also absent. The International Military Tribunal for the Far East (the Tokyo war crimes trials, 1946-48)

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[9] Refer to Inter-Ministerial Working Group on the Comfort Women Issue, Republic of Korea, July 1992 & the United States Office of War Information Psychological Warfare Team Attached to U.S. Army Forces India-Burma Theater, APO 689 report, 1944.

[10] Schubert, former Professor of Political Science at University of Hawaii at Manoa served as a 1st Lieutenant cryptanalyst 10th Army HQ during the Okinawa campaign during early April and mid-December, 1945. The author interviewed him and received this "statement" in March 1992 in Honolulu, Hawaii.

didn't include the comfort women issue at all.[11] Korea, as a non-Allied member country, was not even allowed to participate in the Tokyo war crimes trials, nor were any other Japanese war crimes against Koreans brought to the court for trial (Park, 1994). The Tokyo war crimes trials failed to bring justice to many victims of Imperial Japan's militarism. In the postwar power distribution, the West captured the world's attention whereas things in Asia were marginalized (Hosoya et al., 1986, p. 7). While the comfort women issue involving Korean and other Asian victims was not raised at the Tokyo war crimes trials, however, Dutch comfort women victims in Indonesia were tried at the Allies at the Batavia (Jakarta) Court in 1948 and materially compensated. Japanese soldiers involved in this sexual violence against Dutch women were tried and punished, some by execution (Hicks, 1994, pp. 168-169). In contrast, Korean "comfort girls" were perceived by the US military interrogation team as no more than prostitutes or professional camp followers for Japanese troops.[12] Further, the onset of cold war politics shifted U.S. policy toward Japan from political and economic sanctions to re-building Japan for strategic balance of power in East Asia. The U.S. occupation forces in Japan kept Japan's emperor system, although stripped of political power, thus legitimately allowing Japanese emperor to escape from war crimes responsibilities. Certainly, cold war strategy outweighed the war trials during the U.S. military government polity in South Korea.

Abolishment of legalized prostitution (the "*gongchang*" system in 1947), and criminalization of sex trafficking in girls/women for prostitution (in 1946) were major landmark achievements in regulating prostitution in the post-war South Korea. In the 1950s, there emerged new types of prostitution in the private sector (e.g., regional development

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[11] Some studies are under way to investigate the coverage of the MCW during the Tokyo war crimes trials, but full information on this issue is not as yet available.

[12] The United States Office of War Information Psychological Warfare team Attached to U.S. Army Forces India-Burma Theater APO 689 report, 1944.

of red-light districts where prostitutes got clustered into a certain region) and in the U.S. military base areas, serving servicemen, but these new prostitution areas were by and large left alone without policy intervention. Culturally, the social clock for public debate on female sexuality or "dirty" and "shameful" prostitution or rape stories was not as yet ready. Nor did historians, academicians, or other intellectuals investigate such "private," women's sexual exploitation issues as areas of research focus. The comfort women were omitted in history books on East Asia and WW II, written by Koreans, Japanese, and other nationals as well, either deliberately or out of genuine ignorance of them.[13] Given the particular postwar political situations of the Korean peninsula with two competing ideological camps (capitalist democracy vis-à-vis communism), and nation-building, the academic orientation of Korean history has until very recently focused on the left-right clashes of Korea's nationalist movement and stories of heroes during independence movement whereas colonial victims' issues received little attention. Analysis on elites or leadership received primary attention while colonial-era underclass victims' issues have been largely ignored. Korean history books, including the history of Korean women published in South Korea failed to mention of the KCW case (Kim Yung-Chung, 1976 & Chung, 1986). Hardly any academic investigations of this issue were attempted by historians in Korea (Kang, 1997, pp. 3-4). Social science studies have never discussed the KCW issue before the 1990s. Realism captured attention as a dominant paradigm of international relations analysis that focused on "high" politics issues such as military capabilities and national security. Within this academic orientation, such "low" politics issues as women's issues or war atrocities (e.g., war rapes) were not considered legitimate issues for primary research. Only after the collapse of the cold war system paralleled with the emergence of globalization,

[13] One exception is Inenaga (1978).

did new research inclusive of gender politics become widely available in social science studies, and global feminist NGO activism was energized. In sum, silence keeping took place within this peculiar South Korean context that lacked consciousness to perceive the KCW issue as a social issue of concern. No advocacy groups or institutional development were available.

IV. Silence Continues: The ROK-Japan Basic Treaty on Colonial Compensation Omits the KCW

South Korean polity in the 1960s and 1970s was characterized by the Park Chung-Hee [박정희] government's (1961-1979) military rule and bureaucratic-authoritarianism wherein interest group activities were limited. During the Park regime, economic development and national defense were primary twin goals of the nation that were considered symbiotic each other. Beginning in 1962, a series of national economic development plans were launched which resulted in the South Korean "miracle economy." A success in industrialization was vitally important for the Park regime not only to save people from hunger, poverty, and potential North Korea's aggressions, but also to solve his regime's political legitimacy problem (Park's seizure of power through a military *coup d'etat*).

Worthy of note is the signing of the 1965 ROK-Japan Basic Treaty (diplomatic normalization treaty) that the Park government, after four years negotiations, has finally settled on. The Treaty was latently to finance Park's ambitious industrialization plans. One of the Treaty items focuses on the "Claims" issue (Article 2, Section 1, "Properties and Claims Rights") about Japan's compensation of colonialism in monetary terms, which was the focal point of controversy dragging out the Treaty negotiations for years. In particular, the controversy was over the amount

of compensation[14] in addition to two countries' perceptional difference towards benefits/losses of the colonial rule. South Korea's "claims" was mostly on property rights (i.e., bond holdings, postal money orders, land holdings, stocks, unpaid wages, forced savings, etc.) rather than on compensation for individual victims, and the KCW issue was not even included in the negotiation agenda at all.[15] Even though KCW was included, it would not make any difference anyway, for the "claims" had to be factually documented to be considered valid, and the "claims" didn't mean reparations to be paid to victims. The amount of the "claims" settled between the two countries was more a political decision than a legal settlement (Pai, 1991, p. 141),[16] and the normalization with Japan was the Park regime's urgent task to implement industrialization projects with Japan's capital and technology.[17] Over the disposal of the "Claims" money, the South Korean government had a free hand and released the compensation money to draftees who had died while in service (300,000 *won* each) until 1972. The KCW victims were not included at all. No one in the government raised the KCW issue. In the civilian sector too, KCW was not an agenda. Opposing the Treaty, there was a large-scale organized, nationalist protest movement in South Korea

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14 The amount fluctuated over time. Nonetheless, South Korea's demand under Park was at least $500 million whereas Japan proposed between $50-70 million. Refer to Pai (1991, pp. 143-146, p.161 & p. 168).

15 Ibid., and my interview with Pai Ei Whan [배의환] on August 3, 1992 in Honolulu, Hawaii . Pai, South Korea's negotiation team leader with the ambassadorial rank between 1961-1965 (just before the Treaty was formally signed) recalled that he had never heard about "KCW." South Korea's former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kim Yong-Shik [김용식] also stated that there were insufficient considerations over the "claims" issue during the ROK-Japan Treaty, for a political settlement was a more urgent task. This is confirmed during the Roh Moo-Hyun [노무현] government (2003-2008) when the treaty documents was declassified and allowed public viewing in 2005. Refer to Lee Chang-Hee [이장희] (2006, p. 295).

16 South Korea's Roh Moo-Hyun government also clarified that it was a political settlement, and thus legal actions by victims as individuals are still valid. Refer to Northeast Asian History Foundation (2006, p. 91-93) and the Office of the Prime Minister, ROK (2006).

17 The Japanese government was also under pressure from its business community which saw South Korea as a profitable market for its economic activities. Pai (op. cit., p. 206).

(e.g., students' demonstrations, media columns, protests from civilians and anti-Japan groups, etc.) that halted the Treaty negotiations. As yet, the KCW issue was not linked to the protest movement, including those protests on women's college/university campuses, or led by the women's organizations. Up to the mid 1960s, KCW as victims of colonialism was nonexistent in formal records. They were simply referred to as "military commodities" in the Japan's wartime military when they were shipped around to battle fields (Sekiguchi, 1990). Surviving KCW victims themselves did not come forward to contest their claims of compensation money except one survivor, Whang Kum-Joo [황금주]. Whang, who survived her five-year comfort woman life, claims that she talked with South Korea's then First Lady, Yook Young-Soo [육영수], in 1966 to inquire into her eligibility to collect the colonial- era compensation money allocated for war veterans and other draftees, but her informal claim was immediately suppressed.[18] As the KCW victims were hiding their identity from a "shameful" past and were under extreme poverty, these survivors were in desperate need of assistance from civil sector advocacy groups for their rights, especially in the absence of the government's inclusion of the "Claims" benefits. No advocacy groups, including women's organizations, were available in the mid 1960s. Without interest articulation agents, it was as if KCW had never even existed. The KCW issue was completely left out in the Treaty as well as the "Claims" benefits.

V. Forced To Be Off from the Public Agenda: Industrialization and Political Economy of Sex

South Korea in the 1970s witnessed the so-called "industrial model" of prostitution involving Japanese males' "sex tours" or the *gisaeng*

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[18] Interview data with the author on September 14, 1994. For further details, refer to Yoon (2001a, Ch. 12, pp. 170-171).

gwangwang [기생관광][19] that became a social concern voiced particularly by local church/intellectual women's groups such as The Korean Church Women United (The KCWU, 1988). However, South Korean women's activism against "sex tours" was also forced to retreat from public debate by the authoritarian government's pressure for industrialization goals. Park's ambitious industrialization plans were a big setback from democracy's point of view (e.g., declaration of martial law, emergency measures, national security laws, etc.), and forced citizens to retreat from democratic ideals (e.g., civil rights and civil liberties). The public inputs in policy processes were limited. Civil sector interest group politics involving issues of civil rights or civil liberties such as labor or human rights issues were suppressed with harsh sanctions. The ambiguous "national security" laws or "anti-communism" laws were sometimes used as oppressive tools to control political opponents or block civil rights and civil liberties. The *yushin* [유신, revitalization] system installed in 1972 further limited pressure group politics.

The 1950-1970s witnessed the South Korean government support and even encourage prostitution through various policy measures, as well as develop social infrastructures for security and economic reasons (SBS, 2006; KWDI, 1998, pp. 41-45). In the earlier years, for example, the government's policy concerns were on: providing U.S. servicemen with a client-friendly entertainment environment (e.g., establishment of clean physical facilities for servicemen in the U.S. military base areas; regulating local prostitutes in the base area for regular health check-up for venereal disease free bodies); and keeping the servicemen already on South Korean soil from vacationing on R & R at Okinawa military base areas. Such policy was seen as important, for military prostitution geared

[19] A "gisaeng" is a female entertainer educated in arts and musical performance in traditional Korea, often providing sexual services, an equivalent of the Japanese geisha. In contemporary meaning, it is often equated to high-class prostitutes. This term is sometimes Romanized as "kisaeng" before mid 2005.

toward U.S. soldiers was an important source of U.S. dollars, and for national security reasons as well, particularly when the Nixon Doctrine decided to withdraw U.S. soldiers from South Korea. Kim Gi-Jo [김기조], former committee member of the ROK and the U.S. Joint Commission [한미합동 위원회, *Han-Mi Hapdong Wiwonwhoi*], recalls that around 1957-58, South Korea's total international trade per annum was about ten million U.S. dollars, of which the earnings from the U.S. military base area entertainment sector (e.g., prostitution) was about five million dollars or about 50% of the trade each year. And in 1964, military prostitutes in the U.S. base areas earned $9.73 million, equivalent to about 10% of the total trade earnings (SBS, 2006). In order to maintain military prostitution, the government provided these entertainment women in the U.S. military base areas with special education programs to politically socialize them as the nation's "patriots" (SBS, 2006). Similar educational programs were also provided to prostitutes serving "sex tour" males from Japan in the 1970s.

A survey of Japanese tourists in Korea notes that Japanese tourists accounted for 41% of the total tourists visiting South Korea in 1971, 73.5% in 1972, and 80% in 1973, and 70% of them were males who thought the "*gisaeng party*" was the most impressive (Lee Hyun Sook, 1992, pp. 82-83). Witnessing these new social phenomena, some women intellectuals and women leaders of the Christian church conducted fact-finding field trips in local hotels, and concluded that the sex tourism as well as the *jungshindae* (referring to comfort women) was violations of women's human rights. They also concluded a connection between the KCW tragedy under Imperial Japan and the new "industrial model" of prostitution, both commonly serving Japanese males: "The Japanese tourists joined with the *gisaeng gwangwang* for sex are descendants of the colonial era militarists who hunted for *jungshindae*" (Lee Hyun Sook, 1992, p. 84). They also built coalitions with concerned Japanese women. Korean church women's activism against *gisaeng gwangwang* spread in public education and political agenda-building in the early

1970s. However, their activism was forced to retreat by state power (Lee Hyun Sook, 1992, pp. 92-93). Discussions on women's human rights in sex tourism were considered so radical as to challenge the stability of the nation by hampering economic growth. The promotion of sex tourism was an important tool for earning hard currency:

> In 1972 when ...Park Chung Hee declared martial law, ...he simultaneously adopted a policy of intensively promoting tourism as a source of foreign exchange to replace that previously acquired through participation of Korean troops in the Vietnam War. …The Japanese made up the majority of all tourists for the first time, and in 1973 income from tourism reached US$270 million. Foreign exchange earnings at the height of the Vietnam War in 1968 were only, by contrast, US$150 million (Hicks, 1994, p.174).

Women's campaign against sex-tourism was seen as an anti-government movement, thus subject to sanction. The Park government feared that it may deteriorate South Korea's economic relationship with Japan and jeopardize the successful accomplishment of the *yushin* projects of industrialization. Japan had by this time become a major source of technology, raw and semi-processed industrial materials, and capital investment in South Korea's export processing zones. The arrest of woman activist leader Lee Oo-Chung [이우정] (a former professor and later a National Assembly member), in particular, by the Korean CIA under the 1974 Presidential Emergency Measures (Number 4) had a tremendous chilling effect. Together with this incident and the continued oppressive *yushin* system, public discussion of the sex-tourism issue disappeared. Given South Korea's andro-centric political culture, "*gisaeng* tourism" was not seen by many South Koreans as a violation of women's human rights. It was not uncommon for local politicians, business men, and other social elites in the 1970s to use *yojeong* [요정], a high class restaurant with gisaeng for political bargaining, business deals,

and social networking—commonly known as *yojeong jungchi* [요정 정치], *yojeong* politics]. The view held by a South Korean former Minister of Education, Min Kwan-Shik [민관식], in his speech in Japan in 1973 may have been shared by many local elites:

> Korean women are sacrificing their bodies in order for economic construction and for [~~obtaining~~] foreign currencies. Particularly, a large number of Korean *gisaeng* and hostess [hostesses] who came to Japan and sell their bodies day and night are wonderful patriotic endeavors [endeavorers] (Lee Hyun-Sook, 1992, p. 89).

The tourism bureau in the City Government of Seoul even provided educational programs for women in the tourist industry in addition to medical check up for venereal disease, and issued licenses as well as ID cards. Included in the educational curriculum was an emphasis on the importance of *gisaeng*'s to national economic growth by selling their bodies to foreigners, which is not prostitution but a patriotic endeavor, and so on. Remarkably, those lectures were given by social leaders and college professors, and women activists noticed it a great resemblance to the colonial-era *jungshindae* education (or indoctrination) (Lee Hyun-Sook, 1992, p. 89) or the U.S. military base area's state-organized special education for women in military prostitution.

In the 1950s, earnings from military prostitution with U.S. service men were a major source of foreign currency in South Korea. Thus while those in military prostitution were socially/culturally downgraded (much harsher than prostitutes dealing the local males) and their human rights were not protected by the government, their economic contributions were highly welcomed. A similar situation occurred in the 1970s to fuel South Korea's hyper economic growth. While the economic growth and national defense setting the parameters of the local polity, the authoritarian political system suppressing civil society, combined with male culture so pervasive in South Korea's political context, there was no

room for public debate of KCW or sex tourism. Korean women by and large held indifferent attitudes toward prostitution or sexual violence against women in the 1950s or 1960s. Their attitude changed in the 1970s, perceiving the sex-tour as a social evil against women and began to raise the issue in connection with KCW. But the authoritarian political system didn't allow them to break the KCW silence.

VI. Democratization & Women's Movement

The orientation of the women's movement itself is also partly responsible for the failure of KCW issue raising. During the first half of the twentieth century, patriotism for national independence occupied the center stage of women's movement. In the postwar era, women's activism focused on narrow issues such as anti-communism education within a strong anti-communist ideological framework, and women's organizations often became the object of political mobilization (e.g., anti-communism rallies). Women's organizations in South Korea grew out of this unique context of pro-government and anti-communism, receiving financial aid from the government. Women's activism in the 1960s was "conservative" and often government "guided" (e.g., sponsorship), or subject of mass mobilization while lacking social consciousness or political awareness regarding women's own social status or rights. Its weak organizational structure (i.e., funding) allowed the leadership to be co-opted by the government, which made it difficult to raise political rights or other social reform agendas (Lee Hyo-Jae, 1989) such as protecting women from sexual violence, particularly given South Korea's authoritarian political system and male-centered political culture (e.g., sex tours or *yojeong* politics). The tradition of objectifying women and mobilizing them for the government's purposes carried into later years, in the 1970s and 1980s, with significant implications for gender politics in South Korea. Women became the major subjects of political mobilization in the New Community Movement (the *saemaul* [새마을] movement originally

started as a rural modernization campaign), in government-organized anti-communism rallies, and in election campaigns by political parties. (Many of the women mobilized were paid per diem.) The 1970s and 1980s also witnessed "radical" elements being added to women's activism with some progressive agendas. But these "radical" women were preoccupied with larger and broader social goals of democratization, Korea's reunification, labor issues, instead of promoting women-centered or women-specific issues. Nationalism outweighed gender, and both conservative and radical women in South Korea failed to appreciate the importance of the connection between KCW and human rights.

The comfort women issue requires an understanding of women's human rights, and the linkage between state power and the sexual violence against women. The South Korean women's movement in earlier years lacked this understanding (Yoon, 2007 & 2001b). Furthermore, it tended to conceptualize sexual violence against women only in personal terms. Two incidents are worthy to note which helped women's groups and the society to change these perceptions and thus contributed to the exposure of KCW in later years: the Kwon In-Sook [권인숙] sex-torture case (1986) and the international seminar (1988) held in South Korea on "Women and Tourism" organized by the KCWU. Kwon, a college student activist involved in labor movement at a factory, revealed that she was sexually assaulted by police while she was being interrogated for "anti-government" activism. With a help of her defense team, made up with 166 human rights lawyers (the largest defense team ever formed in South Korea's judicial history as of the 1980s) and feminist groups, the victim was released from jail, and the police perpetrator was imprisoned. This case was monumental in several aspects. It challenged the state power which used sexual assault or "sex-torture" (e.g., forced kissing, fondling, stripping, rape, etc.) as a control tool mostly against females during police investigations, reportedly since the late 1970s. Issue-wise, with wide media coverage, the case has also raised female sexuality (a taboo issue for public debate) as a new legitimate political agenda to be debated in the

public. And from the women's movement perspective, it has also helped women's organizations to build coalitions with other civic organizations or to develop a united front on women-specific issues. Clearly, such a gender-specific control mechanism that surfaced in Kwon's case angered the public and raised public awareness about the relationship among state, sex, and gender. Women's activism in sexuality issues as well as growing public awareness has certainly helped to reveal Imperial Japan's infamous wartime KCW and other types of sexual violence against women with some positive results in the years to come. Another landmark event was the "Women and Tourism" seminar, at which once suppressed, socially taboo and intellectually neglected issues for academic research such as prostitution and the KCW issues became public, resulting in limited but somewhat positive political rewards to the comfort women survivors. The sex tourism was articulated at this gathering as a structural problem of South Korean society, making a clear connection between state power and sex tourism, which they called "*neo-jungshindae*":

> *Gisaeng* tourism is not the moral problem of individual women but an issue which arises from the Korean economic structure due to its dependency on imperialistic countries such as Japan and the U.S.A... For the sake of our national pride and the lives of persons directly involved, *gisaeng* tourism, long promoted by the Korean government, must be stopped immediately. The government has focused on tourism development in order to earn foreign exchange, but in fact such a policy has driven countless numbers of Korean women into prostitution. We Korean women, who experienced the humiliation of "*jungshindae*," the forced mobilization of young women to fulfill the sexual demands of the Japanese imperial army in the 1930s-1940s, must reject *gisaeng* tourism, which is a kind of "neo-*jungshindae*" (The Korean Church Women United, 1988, p.100).

The Kwon and tourism conference cases, however, could have remained as sporadic incidences not necessarily linked with the comfort women movement if women's leadership and women NGOs' organizational development had been absent. Even though some South Korean women desired to engage in the comfort women movement, it would have been difficult without South Korea's democratic opening in the late 1980s that allowed civil society activism on such issues. In addition, without the deepening of global feminism and the expansion of international human rights regime concerned with sexual violence issues, the effectiveness of the KCW issue raising could have been limited. This issue will be discussed shortly.

In the disclosure of the KCW, a few feminist scholars and small-scale women's NGO activism played crucial roles while South Korea's historians and other established social or academic organizations were virtually silent or non-involved. Beginning with a series of fact-finding researches by a few dedicated and enthusiastic women (e.g., professors, women's organization leaders and activists, etc.) followed by victim advocacy grass roots activism, women made the difference. Passionate and pioneering works by Yun Chung-Ok [윤정옥] (professor) played a seminal role in KCW investigation and advocacy activism. Yun, who as a student in her youth had witnessed early signs of the *jungshindae* draft, began collecting data on KCW that included a field research trip to Japan as early as 1980. A report based on numerous field trip expeditions to the *jungshindae* sites (Japan's main island and Okinawa) by Yun and other KCWU members at the 1988 tourism seminar marked the beginning of the KCW investigation. This research further articulated the socio-political dimensions of rape in the military.

Both protests of the Kwon case and anti-sex tourism were initiated by women's small-scale grassroots, NGO activism opening a brand new chapter in South Korea's polity to regulate/protect sexual violence against women. A loose organizational structure of the KCW investigation began to develop in May 1988, when a number of local

women's groups (the KCWU, The Korean Women's Associations United, the University Women Student Association) issued a joint public statement requesting then President Roh Tae Woo [노태우] raise the KCW issues to Japan during his forthcoming state visit to Japan. Soon after, the *jungshindae* research unit was created within the KCWU (July 1988). In July 1990, the Korean Research Group of Women Drafted for Military Sex Slavery by Japan (The Korean Research Group) was formed as an independent organization, followed by the creation of the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Sexual Service by Japan (한국정신대문제대책협의회, The Korean Council) in November 1990 as an umbrella organization of various South Korean women's organizations. Since then more study and activist groups have been formed both in and out of South Korea, of which the Korean Council has been the central organization, as a clearing house with historical documents, activism, historical fact-finding research, international-networking, legal actions, and advocacy for victims' welfare. Kim Hak-Sun's 1991 public testimony occurred during this early formative state of South Korean women's NGO activism.

VII. Global Feminism and International Human Rights Regime

In the successful KCW exposure, global alliance building with feminist NGOs, particularly on women's human rights organizations in the West, and the use of the U.N. system were effective tools. From the outset, South Korean women's activism developed collaborative working relationships with women's NGO groups in Japan and other Asian victim countries. For example, the hot-lines were set up both in South Korea and Japan to solicit testimonies from comfort women victims, war veterans and from the public. Collaboration continued with Japanese

women's groups[20] in search for archival documents, pressing both the governments of South Korea and Japan to conduct investigations of comfort women victimization, restoration of victim's dignity, and demanding reparations.[21] Support from Japan's political community (e.g., Japan's Socialist Party Diet members, Motooka Shoji and Shimiz Smiko) and the discovery of Japan's war documentation on comfort women in late 1991 and early 1992, in particular by a history professor Yoshimi Yoshiaki, were a huge help (Yoshimi, 2000).[22] In 1992, the first Asian Women's joint meeting on comfort women was held in Korea attended by delegations from Asian victim countries and from Japan (The First Asian Conference for Solidarity on the Women Drafted for Sexual Services by Japan), and that continued to the eighth meeting in 2007. Early meetings of the Asian women at the Solidarity Conferences helped victim countries' information sharing, feminist solidarity, publicity, and strategizing the comfort women issues against Japanese government.

In the visibility of wartime rapes or civilian sector mass rape cases, however, geopolitical factors (e.g., whether the rape victims are white or European women) mattered in the recent history, receiving differential international media coverage. It is not uncommon that many mass rape stories in Asia, Latin America or Africa went unreported, underreported, or marginalized as short memory incidents (Copelon, 1995, p. 198). The

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[20] Although both South Korean and Japanese women's groups worked closely together, there were also differences in perceiving the issues of comfort women and war reparations. Refer to Chung Chin Sung [정진성] (1997, pp. 243-244).

[21] In South Korea, the first government report on the MCW was published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ROK, Fact-Finding of the Military Comfort Women During the Japanese Colonial Rule – A Mid-term Report (July 1992, Seoul). The Japanese government first published reports on July 6, 1992 and on August 4, 1993.

[22] Yoshimi Yoshiaki's finding of Japanese military documents in the Library of Japanese Ministry of Defense in January 1992 is regarded as the most critical piece of documentation that led to the Japanese government's acknowledgement of its involvement in the establishment of comfort stations: "On the issue of wartime 'comfort women' of 4 August 1993 by the Japanese Cabinet Councilors' Office on External Affairs and in a statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary on the same date (E/CN.4/1996/137, annex 1)."

newly breaking comfort women stories could have faced the same treatment as a regionally contained issue of Asia: wartime rapes by Japanese soldiers targeting mostly Asian women. Worse, the rape of comfort women is a half-century-old issue that could have experienced limited publicity and international exposure. However, three global situational incidents/contexts facilitated the effective exposure of the comfort women as international news, which pressured Japan for war responsibilities: Rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina by Serbs in Europe; global feminists' women's human rights movement; and the development of U.N. systems for women's rights. By the time the comfort women stories were broken out in the early 1990s, civil war rapes in the former Yugoslavia (mostly against Bosnian-Muslim women by Serbs) also leaked out. Dissemination of these two juxtaposing war rape stories in Asia and in Europe captured the world's attention. There was a great synergy effect. These rape stories had not only alarmed feminists across the globe but also accelerated global feminists to organize themselves to articulate the meanings of international human rights inclusive of protection of women in various life situations. They also pressured governments and international organizations (e.g., the U.N.) to eliminate gender based violence through institution-building or other policy actions (Macki, 2000). The women's human rights movement that had already started in the mid 1980s by global feminist scholars and NGOs as well helped out effectively in raising these two mass rape cases as violations of women's human rights. The women's human rights movement is an outcome of women's long frustrations over the interpretation of human rights, and over the "mainstream" human rights bodies that either ignored or marginalized women's issues (Charlesworth, 1994). International debate on human rights are postwar phenomena as the U.N. Charter clearly addresses the importance of human rights as an essential issue of the new world order. However, the meanings of human rights have been interpreted as rights mostly in the public spheres (e.g., political rights, protection from torture, etc.) whereas those considered as issues in the

private spheres (e.g., social, cultural issues) were largely ignored. Such gender-specific issues as wartime rape was interpreted as a private sphere activity, thus either ignored or excluded from the protection from international human rights norms or laws. Global feminists, mostly in the West, challenged this interpretation and practice through the women's human rights movement. In facilitating this movement, the U.N. played important roles. Beginning from the early 1970s, the U.N. opened its doors to NGOs to attend, as observers, U.N. conferences of government officials. Such invitation has certainly allowed women NGOs to participate in, monitor, or evaluate government actions on various issues concerned with women's rights and welfare. The years 1975-1985 was the U.N. declared Decade for Women, during which time more global data on women and frequent gatherings of women became available. When the U.N. announced its World Conference on Human Rights in 1993 in Vienna, Australia, women's human rights scholars, advocates and NGO groups had years of data gathering on women and prepared themselves to present sexual violence issues, among others (e.g., female infanticide, malnutrition of girls, sex-trafficking, etc.). Particularly under the leadership of the Center for Women's Global Leadership directed by Charlotte Bunch at Rutgers University in the U.S., the Women's Leadership Institutes and the Global Campaigns for Women's Human Rights were launched with various programs to prepare the Vienna human rights conference. The U.N. Women's human rights advocates "seized" the 1993 U.N. Human Rights Conference, and the KCW testimony was one of the major contributing factors for the U.N. to re-define the concept of human rights inclusive of rape in armed conflicts as a violation of women's human rights (Colar, 1992). Since this U.N. Human Rights conference in Vienna, in particular, there has been increasing international attention on the "comfort women" issue. At the 1995 NGO Forum, held in conjunction with the Fourth U.N. World Conference on Women in China, the comfort women issue was recognized as one of the most significant findings of the NGO Forum

(Forum '95). In 1995, a Special Rapporteur, Radhika Coomaraswarmy from Sri Lanka, was dispatched by the U.N. Commission on Human Rights to investigate the comfort women case. The U.N. Human Rights Commission also began to investigate the comfort women issue as its formal agenda in 1996 based on the Coomaraswarmy's Report (1996). In addition, Gay J. McDougall (as Special Rapporteur of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities) further investigated the comfort women issue with a report that clearly defines the Japanese government's responsibility (McDougall, 1998). At the center of the Korean women's international comfort women movement is Lee Hyo-Jae [이효재], a sociology professor, who from the formative years of the KCW activism worked closely with Yun Chung-Ok and women's research and advocacy groups (e.g., the Korean Research Group and the Korean Council). South Korea's modern history should credit Lee, together with the pioneering works of Yun Chung-Ok, for her contribution to internationalizing the KCW issue as a high profile global issue on women's human rights. Pressures from the international community were a driving force that made the Japanese government create the Asian Women's Fund in July 1995 and raise funds in the private sectors to support comfort women victims financially and to provide them with other welfare measures (e.g., medical services.), although many of the surviving victims in South Korea rejected receiving such "sympathy money." Success of such international coalition building has also pressured the South Korean government in historical fact-finding studies, as well as the development of welfare policies for KCW survivors since 1993.

Ⅷ. Summary & Conclusion

This study began with two feminist curiosity questions: why there was a prolong silence over the KCW issue although it was a well-known

wartime issue; and how, by whom, and under what situational changes the issue was raised in the public forum. Several points are made. First, the silence over wartime rapes has been a universal phenomenon. Because women have a weak power base in social structure, rape was not considered as an important political issue that needs societal or governmental attention. Rape tended to be perceived as unfortunate victims' personal issues in the private spheres. Patriarchal political culture reinforced the marginality of female body politics such as rape. When gender and race are intertwined, race tends to get more attention (e.g., Nazi's Holocaust, and the ethnic cleansing vs. rape in former Yugoslavia). In consideration of these perspectives, the silence over KCW may not be unique. Why did then the comfort women issue break out in South Korea while the silence was still continuing in Japan or in other victim countries? Inquiry into this question contributes to the literature of comparative studies on the issue of women and rape. Second, South Korea's unique political environment worked against comfort women issue-raising. Within the unique contexts of post colonialism, the partition of the nation and nation-building, the Korean War and postwar security, political culture, industrialization, and authoritarian political system, the comfort women friendly environment was grossly lacking. Issue-wise, the colonial-era sufferings didn't get any priority in social agenda but were tabled for larger social goals (e.g., nation-building, security or industrialization). Within this particular environment, leadership or agents of interest articulation in the advocacy of the victims' rights were missing. Third, in South Korea's political culture, KCW was long assumed as an unfortunate individual problem, thus allowing no public responsibilities. Nor did a male-oriented political culture, political economy of security (e.g., military base prostitution) or industrialization (e.g., sex-tours) show any sensitivity to women's sexual exploitation. Fourth, KCW did not receive attention from the women's movement until the late 1980s and early 1990s when women began to separate women-specific issues (e.g., sexual violence against women) from larger social reform agenda and

organize themselves to promote women-centered, women-specific issues. In defining KCW as a gender-specific, class-based, and women's human right issue, women's leadership and small-scale social activism played crucial roles without much help from the established. The KCW victim themselves were powerless. In bringing their issue to the public they relied heavily on institutions or political tools for interest articulation (e.g., the KCWU, the Korean Council, Professors Yun & Lee, and the media to a certain extent). Until the late 1980s and early 1990s, no such tools were available. Such women's social activism was only possible when South Korea was transforming from an authoritarian political system into democracy. Furthermore, conceptualizing KCW as more than an insult to Korean nationalism against Japan took a long time. South Korea's particular colonial and post-WW II situations put nationalism to out-weigh gender consideration. And fifth, South Korean women NGOs' coalition building within a global feminist network, particularly focused on women's human rights, and the use of the U.N. system additionally helped pressure both the South Korean and Japanese governments into formally investigating the issue and develop some welfare measures for surviving victims.

In sum, South Korea's political system change into democratic opening, women's NGO activism and leadership that emerged as KCW interest articulation agents, global feminist networking, as well as established institutional support by the U.N. system have all contributed to the breaking of this dark and suppressed war history of the comfort women. The comfort women issues are far from settlement, in both legal and political terms. The status quo seems to be the official positions preferred by both the South Korean and Japanese governments. History book controversies still abound. The death toll of the surviving victims will increase in coming months and years. Despite the retarded progress on restoring victims' dignity and reparations, South Korean women's tireless comfort women advocacy activism clearly marked a new chapter in South Korea's modern history book.

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