Contending Narratives on the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue in South Korea and Japan

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Abstract

This research explores contending narratives on the ‘comfort women’ issue in South Korea and Japan. Applying Soh’s categorization of narratives according to the level of nationalism and feminism voices found in narratives, this research explores not only why divergent views among the two national governments, non-governmental organizations, scholars, and public views on the ‘comfort women’ issue emerged but also how they relate to each other. This research also looks at how different narratives are regenerated and communicated through museums, memorial sites, history textbooks, and the Internet and how they affect public perception of the ‘comfort women’ issue. In sum, this research interprets complicated debates surrounding the ‘comfort women’ issue in South Korea and Japan since its introduction to the public in the 1990s, with a particular focus on the ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement signed by the two governments on December 28th, 2015.

Introduction

This research explores divergent and competing narratives on the ‘comfort women’ issue in South Korea and Japan since the World War Two. Narratives range from those presented by the national governments, think-tanks, academic institutions subject to various degrees of government control, newspaper editors and online commentators including narratives formed by governmental bodies and by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in South Korea and Japan.

Narratives surrounding the ‘comfort women’ issue have evolved over time, due to different influences from nationalism and feminism, and have affected how the public in South Korea and Japan receives the issue and possible resolutions. Contending narratives complicate and continue important debates between the two nations on historical responsibilities, colonialism, sexism, and human rights that are present in the ‘comfort women’ issue. Starting from an overview of history of the ‘comfort women’ issue debate, this research will examine nationalism and feminism aspects in different narratives, how they came to be, and how they will affect the ‘comfort women’ issue in the future.

‘Comfort Women’: A Brief Historical Background

‘Comfort women’ is a euphemistic term for women who were forced to serve sexual demands of the Japanese military during the World War Two. Yet the “comfort women” system was in operation well before World War Two, although the war was the peak time of the expansion and use of the system. Some ‘comfort stations,’ the places where women were taken to and were subject to constant physical and sexual violence by the Japanese military, have existed since early 1930s, when Japan invaded China as a part of their Greater East Asia War campaign. In China, the Japanese military committed mass murder and mass rape of Chinese civilians, as best represented by the Nanking Massacre. Killing and raping civilians in China, however, made it more difficult for the Japanese military to gain control over the occupied lands in China. Resistance and hatred made the Japanese military to devise a way to contain its soldiers’ excessive violence. So the ‘comfort women’ were brought in. Instead of raping civilians in occupied lands, soldiers of the Japanese military were now handed tokens and condoms to use at the ‘comfort stations’ where they could pour out their violence on capture women taken from all across Asia, particularly Korea and Taiwan.

The Japanese military explained to the locals that the ‘comfort women’ system was a way to protect civilian women in occupied lands by building military brothels. Military officials searched for some sex laborers in Japan, and offered them money to pay their debt and promised enshrinement in the Yasukuni Shrine as servers of the empire. Still, most ‘comfort women’ were women – especially young girls who could not get married to avoid the ‘virgin draft’ conducted by the Japanese military – from Korea and Taiwan, Japan’s colonies at the time, and civilian women from other occupied lands. Some ‘comfort women’ stayed in their country, while some were sent to different ‘comfort stations’

1 Ueno Chizuko, Wianbuleul dulleossan gieogui jeongchihag 위안부를 둘러싼 기억의 정치학 [Politics of memory surrounding the ‘comfort women’] (Seoul: Hyeonsilmunhwayeongu, 2014), 35.
built across Japan and its occupied lands in Asia. Instead of “protecting” civilians in occupied lands, the ‘comfort women’ system abused women from Japan’s colonies further or women in occupied lands.

It took more than 50 years for survivors of the ‘comfort women’ system to come out. While the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (Tokyo War Crimes Trial) did deal with cases of rape and acknowledged the existence of ‘comfort women’ from China, East Timor, and the Netherlands, and recognized them as a war crime, it did not see how extensively and systematically ‘comfort women’ were gathered, assaulted, abandoned, and silenced. Leaders of the feminist groups in Korea realized and tried to uncover the truth about the ‘comfort women’ system since 1980s, but they had to travel outside Korea to meet survivors. It was only after Kim Hak Sun’s open testimony in 1991 that other survivors in Korea started to have the courage to talk about their experiences and connect with other survivors. Kim Hak Sun and other survivors noted that their fear of being stigmatized as former ‘comfort woman’ was overcome by anger against Japanese politicians who denied the Japanese military’s forced recruitment and abduction of women.

Indeed, former ‘comfort women’ could not share their stories and demand justice to neither the Japanese government nor their own government, due to social stigma and burden that they themselves and their families had to face in a society that thought ‘comfort women’ as women (voluntarily) working in military brothels. Narratives on the ‘comfort women’ issue have diversified overtime, changing the issue itself from a silenced truth to one of the most outspoken issues of human rights. People, both in South Korea and Japan, were aware of the existence of ‘comfort women’ yet no measures were taken to explore the specifics of the ‘comfort women’ system and how it affected the survivors. Some former Japanese soldiers talked about their experiences with the ‘comfort women’ in their memoirs – some in reminiscence of their youthful “romance” during wartime. Yet there were no survivors who dared to talk about their own experiences as victims. The ‘comfort women’ issue truly was a crime without victims, or more precisely, was not even considered a serious crime. Without any information on the severity and extensiveness of the system, the ‘comfort women’ issue was deemed as another casual wartime sexual assault or establishment of military brothels that quenched “natural” desire of the soldiers. Now, the ‘comfort women’ system is deemed as a war crime against women and children and sexual slavery organized by a government that should not, in any cases, be overlooked.

As narratives that look at the ‘comfort women’ system as a war crime and a serious violation of human rights emerged, efforts to learn about ‘comfort women’ and help them redeem their rights were made as well. Different groups, whether they are religious, feminist, or social justice, which echoed with the stories of survivors started to organize demonstrations, welfare projects for survivors, educational projects, and government lobbies to publicize the ‘comfort women’ issue. South Korean and Japanese governments also have acknowledged the issue and made it a topic of discussion in several of its meetings regarding history. On the other hand, people who do not agree with seeing the ‘comfort women’ issue as a war crime or it being taken as a serious topic between the two governments, or the very existence of the ‘comfort women’ system, have worked to silence the issue. The balance among different narratives has made the ‘comfort women’ issue and efforts to solve it a huge debate both within and between South Korea and Japan.

Reception of the Comfort Women Issue: Three Phases

In order to understand how narratives surrounding the ‘comfort women’ issue emerged, it is helpful to review how the issue has been discussed so far. Since the differences among different narratives become clear when they disagree on certain policies or trials to settle the issue, this research focuses on several turning points of the ‘comfort women’ issue to better look at how different narratives interact with each other and have evolved through intense debates on the turning points and how they led to the debate on the ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement signed by the South Korean and Japanese governments in 2015. These turning points divide the timeline of the ‘comfort women’ issue into three phases.  

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3 Jaejung Jung, “Comfort women issue and South Korea – Japan relations” (lecture, Historical Issues and New Korea-Japan
The first phase dates from 1990 to 2007, when the ‘comfort women’ issue was introduced to the larger public and gained support to demand the Japanese government for atonement and compensation. While the need for researches on the ‘comfort women’ issue arose before 1990, lack of survivors who wanted to share their story at the time did not push the research forward. Also, the South Korea-Japan Normalization Treaty signed in 1965, which supposedly settled down the issue of compensation for colonization between the South Korean and Japanese government, did not acknowledge the ‘comfort women’ system as an issue of debate. During the first phase, the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (the Korean Council) was established, Kim Hak Sun made her open testimony, Japanese Prime Minister Kono issued a statement that acknowledged the ‘comfort women’ issue and the Japanese military’s involvement with it, Japanese Prime Minister Murayama acknowledged the ‘comfort women’ issue, and Asia Women’s Fund was established in 1995. This fund, commonly called the Murayama Fund in Japan, was established after the former Prime Minister Murayama’s speech on the 50th anniversary of the end of the war, to compensate for survivors. Yet Asia Women’s Fund failed to gain support from the Korean Council and majority of the survivors in South Korea and was disbanded in 2007. Majority of survivors and support groups opposed the Asia Women’s Fund because it did not acknowledge the Japanese government’s involvement with the ‘comfort women,’ used money donated from the public and not from the government, and did not call it formal compensation but relief money.

The second phase dates from 2011 to 2012, during which the Supreme Court of Korea ruled the South Korean government’s inaction on resolving the ‘comfort women’ issue with the Japanese government and overlooking of survivors as illegal. That ruling combined with survivors and supporters’ continued pleas pressured President Lee to bring up the issue with Prime Minister Noda. There were preparations made for a new agreement between the two leaders: 1) to agree on the South Korea-Japan Summit and announce a joint statement, 2) Japanese Prime Minster shall use the wording ‘admit responsibility’ instead of ‘moral responsibility’, 3) Japan’s ambassador to South Korea will deliver Prime Minister’s apology and atonement money from the Japanese government to survivors, 4) to establish Third South Korea-Japan Joint History Research Project and make a sub-committee dedicated to the ‘comfort women’ issue. The draft for a new agreement was approved by President Lee but was refused by Prime Minister Noda. The agreement was never signed due to the conflict between South Korean and Japanese national governments and the ‘comfort women’ issue was pushed back in the both governments’ agenda list. This period of continued attempts and failures made both governments to avoid discussing the ‘comfort women’ issue, which further frustrated the survivors and support groups. The ‘comfort women’ issue became a type of taboo between the two governments and made any efforts to resolve it more difficult to be discussed in the first place.

The third phase dates from 2013, when President Park Geun-hye and Prime Minister Abe each came to power in South Korea and Japan, to the present. On December 28, 2015, the South Korean and Japanese governments issued an agreement saying they had “finally resolved” the long lasting debate on the ‘comfort women’ issue. Yet the agreement immediately renewed an intense debate on the ‘comfort women’ issue and ways to resolve it. In South Korea, major newspapers and the ministries’ social media accounts praised the South Korean government for finally moving on from a historical issue that has long hampered the relations between South Korea and Japan; other groups argued that the agreement allowed the Japanese government avoid its responsibilities for the atrocities committed by its military during the past century and to make a sincere apology for the victims. Some college students started camping out next to the Girl Statue, which symbolizes ‘comfort women’ survivors of Korea who were taken away at young age and could not find home when they came back due to the South Korean government’s inaction. The agreement required the South Korean government to dismantle the statue because if disturbed the Japanese embassy. In Japan, the agreement led to general acceptance by the

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4 Huge demonstrations were organized as a reaction in South Korea, yet the treaty was signed and the South Korean government received. In Japan, this treaty is considered a formal settlement for Japanese colonization of Korea, yet there are views that the money given to South Korea was only for ‘economic cooperation’ and not for ‘reparation for colonization.’ In South Korea, the treaty also has mixed reviews: that it was necessary for rebuilding the country after the Korean War, and that the treaty gave a way for Japan to excuse itself from historical issues that were not fully discussed in 1965.
public as a settlement of the issue, while support groups opposed it.\(^5\)

This research focuses on the third phase, especially after the ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement, to examine what types of narratives participate in the ‘comfort women’ debate between and within South Korean and Japan. Since narratives change over time and build upon each other, analysis of earlier phases and main topics will be briefly covered. By doing so, this research aims to analyze the most updated version of narratives surrounding the ‘comfort women’ issue.

**Literature Review**

Contending narratives on the ‘comfort women’ issue grew sprang out from political liberalization and development in communication technologies of the last three decades. Kim Hak-Sun made her testimony in 1991, after more than 50 years of silence and four years of democratization of South Korea. During the 1990s, both South Korea and Japan saw dramatic improvement in communication technologies, which led to diverse modes of communication and diverse ideas. Indeed, people were able to express their views on the ‘comfort women’ issue in ways that often conflicted with the interpretation of the national government that has dominated the dialogue for 50 years. This diversification of narratives continues today. Understanding how these different narratives arose and publicize themselves help us see how the public’s perception of ‘comfort women’ issue has changed in South Korea and Japan. Scholars from South Korea, Japan, and abroad have tried to categorize and analyze different narratives on the ‘comfort women’ issue.

Soh suggests the categories of ‘patriarchal fascism,’ ‘masculinist sexism,’ and ‘feminist humanitarianism.’\(^6\) The ‘patriarchal fascism’ refers to a combination of ethnocentric nationalism and a sense of male superiority seen in memorial sites, museums, and history textbooks in South Korea and Japan, which also contributed to building ideas of a “nation” and “citizenship” in each nation.\(^7\) Often this narrative leads to oversimplification of the ‘comfort women’ issue or even denial of it, as in Japan the issue threatens the dominant narrative that the Imperial Japanese Military was protecting the civilians against the Western powers, causing hostility among different parties or between the two nations. Focus on self-determination and ethnocentric nationalism in South Korea’s national museums, memorial sites, and textbooks often disregard non-Korean survivors of the ‘comfort women’ system and lead to Koreans’ hostility against and distrust of Japanese.\(^8\)

The narratives of victimhood in Japan’s history textbooks conflict with accounting victimization of other nations by Japan, pushing the ‘comfort women’ issue to the margins.\(^9\) The ‘patriarchal fascism’ narrative also leads to extremist perspective on the issue, including Japan’s “historical revisionists,” some of whom deny the existence of the ‘comfort women.’\(^10\) Combined with ‘masculinist sexism,’ or a view that objectifies women as a tool for sexual outlet, the ‘patriarchal fascism’ narrative depicts survivors’ sufferings as national loss, shaming survivors and has kept them silent over 50 years.\(^11\) In fact, the “model victim” narrative — that the only survivors worthy of attention and caring

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were those who were virgin girls taken by force and were subject to sexual degradation by the Japanese military — has interfered with the public’s awareness of the long-term and broad physical and psychological damages that survivors suffer.13

Since the 1990s, the rise of ‘feminist humanitarian’ narrative brought a different lens of interpretation to the ‘comfort women’ issue, pointing out how testimonies of the survivors have been fetishized by the gender hierarchy in South Korea and Japan and urges the public to shift its attention to the survivors’ well-being.14 15 While this narrative helped humanizing the survivors and discussed structural oppression within South Korea and Japan that has silenced the survivors after they came back, it remained quite marginal to the dominant nationalism narrative since the public resonated more with the shared suffering as Koreans. Still, such narrative led feminist and human rights campaigns in South Korea and Japan. Often collaborating to cross national borders, different organizations have contributed to transforming the ‘comfort women’ issue from an issue of national interests to a global issue of human rights.16 The Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal, held in collaboration of feminist groups across Asia in 2000, showed how different groups across Asia can discuss the ‘comfort women’ issue as violation of human rights and demand justice together. Although the court and its ruling did not get much media coverage, it was one step towards addressing the ‘comfort women’ issue in solidarity.

**Theoretical Framework**

While Soh’s categorization may help separating the complicated narratives on the ‘comfort women’ issue, ‘patriarchal fascism’ and ‘masculine sexism’ categories overlap. Since focus on the state/nation power has always set men as the default dominator and women as objects and possessions to be dominated, both categories reflect misogyny that goes in hand with nationalism in male-dominated society. In this research, I merge the ‘patriarchal fascism’ and ‘masculine sexism’ as nationalism.

**Nationalism in South Korea**

“Nation” is an invented concept that has supported the unification of different groups into a larger community (or the ruling party at the time) during the 19th century, and nationalism is a rhetorical device for achieving that goal. In the Korean context, the word “nation” itself can be translated into two different words 1) a political community with people, land, and government (gugga); this word is also used to translate “state,” 2) a group of people who share linguistic and cultural characteristics due to living together for a significant period of time (minchok); this word is sometimes used to translate “ethnicity.” The ambiguity of the translated Korean word for nation blurs the distinction between the nation and the people living in it. People often conflate the nation and the people, making it more difficult for people to realize that “nation” is an invented concept by nationalism.

Because of the long-standing division of the Korean peninsula into two competing polities, South Korea and North Korea, South Korean nationalism is particularly complicated. “One form of South Korean nationalism deems North Korea as a threat, while others see North Korea as a partner to achieving a true Korean nation.” Such ambivalent views towards North Korea have influenced South Korea’s government policies, including discussions on the ‘comfort women’ issue. ‘Comfort women’ survivors are from both Koreas, yet South Korea has more interactions – both governmental and civilian – with Japan than does North Korea, and thus its discussions and agreements on the issue reflect this.
complicated relationship between South Korea and Japan. While North Korean government has been adamant in criticizing the Japanese government, South Korean government sometimes gauge the security and economic relationships with Japan.

Takahara suggests dividing South Korean nationalism into three categories: 1) growth-centered statism, 2) resistance nationalism, and 3) individual anxiety nationalism. Growth-centered statism refers to a type of nationalism that completely excludes North Korea from its definition and discussion of the Korean nation. Former South Korean presidents, such as Rhee Sungman and Park Chunghee, used anti-communist and anti-North Korea propaganda that was based on and fed into this type of nationalism. Setting North Korea as an arch enemy of the South Korean people and nation allowed the South Korean government to unify its people under the military rule that prioritizes national security and brands any dissenting voice as that of the “Reds.” This type of nationalism also romanticizes rapid economic growth dictated by the government through dedication (or sacrifice) of the lower class. To foster national strength through rapid economic growth, oligarchies (chaebol) were given extensive power. This type of nationalism is sometimes called ‘rapid growth nationalism.’

Since national security is the very first issue of interest for growth-centered nationalism, consolidating the alliance with the United States and Japan to oppose North Korea and China were often prioritized over discussions of domestic social issues. President Park Chunghee’s signing the normalization treaty with the Japanese government in 1965 before a full discussion of colonization and proper reparations can be interpreted as a way to keep the relationship between South Korea and Japan smooth in order to rebuild South Korean economy as opposed to North Korea.

Resistance nationalism in South Korea is explained as bottom-up movement, or the power that drove South Korean democracy movements, most of which were anti-government at the time. Takahara sees the democracy movements led by students and workers during the 1980s as the epitome of resistance nationalism. In fact, roots of resistance nationalism may be traced back to the Japanese colonial period, when numerous independence movement groups fought for Korean nationalism despite the purge and consistent threat of eliminating the Korean identity by Japan. Resisting power-holders to achieve rights, better condition of living and social justice for the people is the essence of this type of nationalism, and it still runs deep in current social movements in South Korea.

The third type, individual anxiety nationalism, stems from younger generations’ frustration from excessive competition in modern society. Takahara notes that younger generations in both South Korea and Japan are frustrated by failure in economic competition. For them, expressions of nationalism are one way to cope with stress. Examining nationalist jokes made on the Internet in South Korea and Japan, he argues how belittling each other became a trend of humor among young South Koreans and Japanese. Such hobby-like nationalism, Takahara suggests, functions as a stress outlet for young people who blame economic difficulty and frustration with the false promise of the government that their sacrifice will lead to a better national economy on outside. This type of nationalism, therefore, is closely related to the first type of nationalism that focuses solely on nation and its economic growth, for it stems from disappointment from failed promises for a better future.

Takahara’s categorization focuses too much on economic aspect of the issue. Chung Hosuk, the translator of this book, noted that Takahara’s view belittles young South Korean and Chinese’ anti-Japan sentiment as an emotion reaction to individual anxiety and ignores their logical and serious calls for historical responsibility. While making controversial comments on historical issues on the Internet may serve as a stress outlet for some, not everyone uses it for such purpose. In fact, revisionists’ and Net Rights’ view on history requires more than economic difficulty. Denial of the existence of the ‘comfort women’ system and belittling survivors’ efforts to reclaim their dignity is more than an expression of individual failure; they reveal a certain view on history that challenges the evidences and testimonials of survivors to save their nation’s face.

18 Ibid., 171.
19 Ibid., 61.
20 Ibid., 170-171.
21 Ibid., 62.
22 Ibid., 276.
Nationalism in Japan

Nationalism narratives in Japan can be divided into three general forms: 1) victimization and peace education, 2) historical responsibility, 3) Revisionist/Net Right.

After the World War II, historical narratives on the war in Japan have focused on victimization of Japanese civilians during the war. Retellings of air bombings and atomic bomb attacks on Japanese cities continued to educate the public of how horrific wars can be and how much civilians can suffer. Yet focus on victimization of Japan left out the role that the Imperial Japan played in the World War II and colonization of other countries till its fall. Without mentioning how the Japanese government prepared to go on war, how its civilians participated in the war campaign, and how people from other nations suffered through the Japanese colonialism, the dominant post-war narrative in Japan did not encourage deep analysis and debate on historical issues. Moreover, due to strict regulations on students’ political activities, young adults in Japan have lost a medium through which they can debate on historical issues.

Combined with the general atmosphere of suppressing young students’ political expression, the lack of analysis and debate led to general ignorance of the ‘comfort women’ issue. During the 1980s and 1990s, with increased democratization in Japan, emerged voices for historical responsibility. This narrative urged the public to look back on faults that the Imperial Japan committed to the other nations during its war campaigns and demand the Japanese government to take action to apologize and compensate for them. Along with the feminist movements that aimed to change the dominant view on women, historical responsibility narrative invited the ‘comfort women’ issue to public debate. While the narrative succeeded in challenging the dominant narrative of victimization and peace education, adding the ‘comfort women’ issue to the history textbooks, and working with the South Korean support groups, it failed to make the public connect to the issue personally. Young Japanese, who may learned to be sympathetic to the survivors, still thought the issue was that of the past and did not relate to the urge to resolve the issue in their generation. In fact, some people reacted to the narrative, calling it “too self-harming.”

General ignorance of the issue due to victimization narrative and reactions to the historical responsibility narrative came out as what Takahara described as individual anxiety nationalism: the radical attacks on the survivors by the revisionists and Net Rights, who call the ‘comfort women’ issue a fraud, and survivors “voluntary prostitutes.” Historical revisionists, represented by Fujioka Nobukatsu’s claim that Japan should overcome its self-harming view of history, argued that the historical responsibility narrative taught in schools are no more than leftist propaganda and can be overturned. General ignorance from the victimization narrative, reaction to the historical responsibility narrative, and revisionists’ seemingly eye-opening claim combined with the selfish culture of the Internet, Nakanishi explains, led to the emergence of Net Right, a group of young Japanese who make radical and controversial comments on the Internet. This group, while small in real numbers, is formed with very active members who write radical posts repeatedly on the Internet and actually have the audacity to make hate speeches outside the Internet. Huge media coverage of their radical comments makes us think that they are the dominant narrative among young people while they in fact, are small. Still, their frequent appearance on the media makes us believe that radical views are pervasive.

The emergence of Net Right can be also linked with Japanese economic slow-down, which led to further discrimination of outsiders, such as anti-Korean protests and hate speech. As Takahara proposed, nationalist comments made by these young Japanese actually base on feeling of hate and threat towards “outsiders” – most often non-Japanese living in Japan, including Korean Japanese. Their hate speech against minorities in Japan made even the traditional right wingers to criticize them: Kobayashi Yoshinori, a right wing cartoonist, called for Prime Minister Abe to cut his ties with the Net Right immediately, in an interview with the influential newspaper Weekly Asahi.

Indeed, nationalism exists, and it does so in various forms. Although nation itself is an invented

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23 Shintaro Nakanishi, “Ilbongun twianbut munjeleul ihaehagi wihae 일본군 ‘위안부’ 문제를 이해하기 위해 [To understand the Japanese military ‘comfort women’ issue]” in Geudeuleun wae ilbongun wianbuleul gonggyeoghaneunung, 177.
24 Ibid., 178.
25 Ibid., 187.
concept, nationalism has real consequences such as conflicts and wars among different nations. As Kwon writes: “As long as people consider themselves as ‘members’ of the nation (minchok) and keep their loyalty to it, it does not matter whether nation is a substance that exists in reality or an invented concept.” Different types of nationalism lead to different ways of looking at the ‘comfort women’ issue in South Korea and Japan.

**Feminism**

Feminist movements in South Korea coincided with the start of survivors’ open testimonies since 1991. Earlier leaders of the ‘comfort women’ support groups were leaders of the feminist groups who realized the ‘comfort women’ issue’s implication for the oppression of women during the colonial period and beyond. From working on the gender equality issues from social and religious groups, these leaders started focusing on ‘comfort women’ issues to reclaim the survivors’ rights and help them truly come back to their home country. Feminist groups in South Korea and Japan have worked together to make sure that the survivors can overcome the stigma that misogyny in both nations has imposed on them. In fact, most survivors admit that they were afraid to come out as victims because they feared rejection from their family, friends, and community. Some survivors report that they did not or could not get married because they had “history of having relations with other men” and that their husbands abused them or were ashamed because of their past if they got married. In fact, one survivor reports how she lost contact with her older sister when she came out as a victim. Her sister criticized her for talking about her shameful past in public. In such a victim-blaming society, it was crucial for the support groups to establish a support system for the survivors. House of Sharing, a shelter for the survivors, was established for survivors who lost homes after their report or who did not receive enough support from their families to connect with other survivors.

Feminist groups worked to humanize the survivors and focus on the long term effects of the trauma. While the nationalist narrative focused on how “South Korean women were raped by the Japanese men,” which objectified women as something that was taken away, feminist narratives helped people realize the survivors’ suffering owed much to the fact that they were women living in a misogynist society. Focus on individual lives of survivors after-the-fact revealed the double oppression they suffered as Koreans and as women. Since it did not contain empathy toward the victims only to the people who share the national suffering, or collective memory of colonialism, feminist narrative appealed to a broader audience including Japanese who were interested in the women’s right in Japan to be involved with the ‘comfort women’ issue as well.

The feminist narrative had its own limitations as well. In order to defend non-Japanese survivors, who were taken away at younger age through kidnapping, deceit, and draft, from revisionists and Net Right’s attack on them as “voluntary prostitutes,” support groups mistakenly accepted the “virgin/whore” dichotomy. By focusing on the difference between the Japanese survivors who were mostly sex laborers and non-Japanese survivors who were mostly captivated civilians, the feminist narratives contributed to the “model victim” narrative that differentiates victims who are worthy of pity and compensation and those who are not. Separating survivors according to their involvement with the sex labor later made it difficult for the support groups to criticize sex trafficking and its culture that were prevalent during the colonial period as a whole. It also failed to criticize the ‘comfort women’ system as an organized crime that specifically targeted lower, working class women in colonies and occupied lands, who were deceived by false promises of decent workplace and food that

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26 Hyukbeom Kwon 권혁범, Minjogjuuineun joeaginga 민족주의는 죄악인가 [Is nationalism a sin] (Seoul: Saenggaguinamu, 2006), 63.

could support themselves and their families.\textsuperscript{28} In fact, argument from the historical revisionists and Net Right that the ‘comfort women’ survivors cannot demand formal compensation now if they received any money by the soldiers grows out from the failure to see the ‘comfort women’ issue as a systematic violence and oppression.

Contrary to the nationalism narrative, feminism narrative allowed people to cross national borders to support survivors. While nationalism in South Korea focused on the Korean victims and discusses the ‘comfort women’ issue as one of the Japanese government’s attempts to eradicate Korean identity, feminism narratives shed light on victims outside Korea and oppressions that survivors have faced within South Korea as well. Such a shift in perspective allowed support groups in Japan and South Korea to work together. Feminist narratives also challenged the objectification of women as the possession of men of the same nation and encouraged seeing the survivors as human beings whose rights have been violated by men of another nation due to colonialism and by men within their nation due to misogyny and patriarchy.

‘Comfort Women’ Narratives in South Korea and Japan Today

For nationalism narratives, I reviewed history textbooks, visit national museums and memorial sites, and look at official statements and records of talks between South Korea and Japanese governments to see how the ‘comfort women’ issue is framed by two governments. To review history textbooks in South Korea and Japan, I visited public libraries that have history textbooks. I visited War Memorial of Korea and Yushukan War Memorial Museum in Japan, to review their pamphlets to see how the two governments explain the experience of the World War Two and its trails including the ‘comfort women’ issue. To facilitate my collection of official government documents, such as treaties, talks, and resolutions between the two governments, I used search engines available through the Japan’s National Diet Library (http://www.ndl.go.jp/) and the National Assembly Library of Korea (https://www.nanet.go.kr/).

For the feminist narrative, I looked at documents, pamphlets, and programs of different NGOs including The Korean Council and Asia-Japan Women’s Resources Center. I also visited their privately run museums such as War & Women’s Human Rights Museum and Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace to see how they try to publicize the ‘comfort women’ issue through the feminist lens.

To see how these narratives interact, I used scholarly works from South Korea, Japan, and other part of the world, which focus on how different narratives on the ‘comfort women’ issue came to be and how they respond to each other. For example, works of Korean-American scholar Soh, Japanese feminist Chizuko, and American scholar Sand suggested categorization of narratives to clarify different interests involved with the issue, including that of survivors.\textsuperscript{29–30} Scholarly works, government statements, and even textbooks on the ‘comfort women’ issue are rapidly translated and interchanged between South Korea and Japan, leading to diverse responses and galvanizing different narratives within or between the two nations.

I did not interview survivors, since their interviews are well documented as books, documentaries, and other sources that the support groups and scholarly works provide. The focus of this research is how the ‘comfort women’ issue is perceived by different groups and narrated.

Japan

Nationalism

1) Victimization and Peace Education
Yasukuni Shrine

Yasukuni Shrine is located in the middle of skyscrapers in Chiyoda, Tokyo. Its magnificent size awes the visitors who inevitably realize the importance Yasukuni Shrine has in Tokyo and the level of care that Japanese people put in it. Indeed, Yasukuni Shrine is closely related to the imperial family

\textsuperscript{29} Soh, “From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the ‘Comfort Women’.”
\textsuperscript{30} Ueno Chizuko and Jordan Sand, “The Politics of Memory: Nation, Individual and Self.”
of Japan and is frequently visited by high-rank Japanese politicians. Yet visits of the Japanese imperial family and politicians to Yasukuni Shrine never fail to enrage people across Asia, especially from Korea and China, because the shrine worships spirits of the war dead from the World War II, including the ones convicted in the Tokyo Trial, who it claims to have “sacrificed to protect their motherland.”

The pamphlet to Yushukan Museum is aware of the criticisms and addresses them directly:

“Foreigners will understand the nature of Yasukuni Jinja comparing with similar facilities in their countries if they are explained that the shrine is a place for Japanese people to show their appreciation and respect to those who died to protect their mother country, Japan. The difference between Yasukuni Jinja and other foreign memorial institutions for war dead is that the shrine enshrines the spirits of those who died on public duty of protecting their motherland. This difference might be causing misunderstanding. However, the nature of the shrine has its origin in the traditional Japanese way of thinking which is to commemorate the deceased eternally by enshrining them as object of worship. It is not an abnormal institution.”

Still, it states that the shrine is an important part of the Japanese culture and that the spirits enshrined in Yasukuni Shrine are of those who sacrificed themselves to achieve true peace. Such narrative hides the fact that colonial and war campaigns that the Imperial Japan conducted caused long-lasting sufferings to people both outside and in it. It also romanticizes the people who joined the national war efforts, regardless of individual reasons they may had:

“Not only soldiers’ spirits are enshrined here, but also other people are enshrined. There are women’s and school girls’ divinities who were involved in relief operation on battlefields, a great number of students who went to work in factories for the war effort. There also enshrined ordinary Japanese citizens, Taiwanese and Korean people died as Japanese, the people who died during the Siberian detaining, and who were labeled war criminals and executed after having been tried by the Allies.”

While it is possible that Taiwanese and Korean people who joined the Japanese war efforts were forced to do so due to draft policies implemented during the colonial period, the pamphlet does not mention such possibility. Women, school girls, and students who worked in either battlefields or factories may have worried more about making a living than about the war, but the pamphlet disregards it as well. Indeed, the Yasukuni Shrine eliminates the individual stories of the enshrined and only focuses on building its argument that the “sacred war” was possible through collective efforts of the people. Such romanticized narrative on the war and war efforts feeds into the victimization narrative, which argues how Japan as a nation suffered from losing the war that was “justified and supported” by people’s active participation.

Yushukan Museum

Yushukan Museum is located next to the Yasukuni Shrine, and was established in 1882 to “inherit sincerity and records of enshrined deities of Yasukuni Jinja by displaying their important wills and relics.” It is striking how the Yushukan Museum explains the Japanese military’s action in the Great Asia-Pacific War or the World War II as ways to protect Asia from greedy, invading Western powers. For Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars, threats imposed by China and Russia to Chosun independence is explained in detail, while those imposed by Japan is excused as a way to save Chosun from other countries.

The portraits of the Japanese soldiers who died during the war are displayed across several huge walls. Japanese war flag (Rising Sun Flag), which was ordered to be destroyed by the Allies but was kept in secret by a general, is also displayed as symbol of patriotism that did not die away after the Allies’ victory. Yet the museum does not offer an explanation on how the war affected people’s lives.

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Yasukuni Shrine, Yushukan (Tokyo: Yasukuni Shrine).
across Asia. Soldiers who fought for Japan are remembered and commemorated extensively, but how Japan played its role in starting and continuing the war is largely absent. Monument to Dr. Pal, the only judge who insisted that all defendants were not guilty at the Tokyo Tribunal, sits couple steps away from the Yushukan Museum.

At the gift shop, a lot of souvenirs have the Japanese war flag on them. It seems ironical how people who "died to protect the country in hope for peace" can be linked with the sole symbol of Japanese militarism and colonialism. Still, such use of the war flag shows how the museum romanticizes war and colonialism. The museum offers a sympathetic view to the soldiers and their families whose wills to protect their nation perished in “unfortunate turn of the history,” but not on the victims across Asia and other people who had suffered through the violence. Pitying the soldiers and sympathizing with their “nationalism” may teach the audience that the war inflicts sufferings on any parties, but covers up the people on the receiving end of the violence.

2) Historical Responsibility

Historical responsibility narratives urged the Japanese government to look back on its past wrongdoings and take responsibility for them. One significant achievement of this narrative is a series of statements issued by then Primer Ministers of Japan which address the ‘comfort women’ issue. The Kono Statement was the very first statement to mention the ‘comfort women’ issue directly.

The Kono Statement

The Kono Statement (Statement by Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono) announced on August 4, 1993, is celebrated as the first statement in which Japan admitted its involvement with the ‘comfort women.’ By expressing “sincere apologies (心からお詫び)” and a “sense of remorse (反省の気持ち),” this statement has acknowledged the Japanese government’s responsibility on the ‘comfort women’ issue (Kono, 1993a, 1993b).

While being a powerful step in expanding the discussion on the ‘comfort women’ issue in Japan, the Kono Statement was criticized for its shortcomings in South Korea, such as using the term jugun-ianfu (従軍慰安婦) which wrongly suggests that the actions of Japanese military’s sex slaves were voluntary, using vague phrases (“as a result of the study which indicates that comfort stations were operated in extensive areas for long periods, it is apparent that there existed a great number of comfort women.”), lacking clear and specific descriptions about how the ‘comfort women’ system affected the lives of the victims after the fact.

Still, the Kono Statement made the ‘comfort women’ issue be acknowledged as an issue of the government in Japan. It pushed the publishing companies to include explanations on the ‘comfort women’ issue in history textbooks. Till now the Kono Statement is considered the basis on which the ‘comfort women’ issue is discussed in Japan. Japanese politicians often say they “inherit” the Kono Statement or do not, and such agreement with the Kono Statement is a taken as a measure to decide their political leanings. In South Korea, while the Kono Statement is considered incomplete, denying it is considered an act to back out from the least level of acknowledgment of the Japanese government’s responsibility on the ‘comfort women’ issue and thus is criticized.

Although the historical responsibility narrative is increasingly threatened by the revisionists and Net Rights, it still voices its concern on the ‘comfort women’ issue. After the ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement, group of scholars voiced their disagreement through publishing a joint statement on  The Annual of History of Japanese Thought on May 25th to support protests against the South Korean and Japanese governments.35 Criticizing both governments and promising to remain as an ally to the issue, these scholars showed that there are people attending to the issue who will not give in to pressures from radical groups.

3) Historical Revisionists and Net Right

History Textbook Debate

Historical revisionists have argued that Japan needs to get over with its self-harming vie w on history, which stems from the historical responsibility narrative that focuses on how Japan as a nation should address the detrimental effects of colonialism and war. Indeed, for historical revisionists and Net Right, the Kono Statement is often attacked for “falsely” admitting the Japanese government’s responsibility by giving into pressures from international politics and its impact on history education is also rejected. In 1996, when the Ministry of Education announced that all history textbooks in Japan at the time discussed the ‘comfort women’ issue, historical revisionists organized the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (atarashii rekishikyoukasho wo tsukukukai) to publish history textbooks with “positive” view on Japan.36 Indeed, explanations on the ‘comfort women’ have decreased over time. As of 2012, only one of the nine middle school history textbooks in Japan has mention of the ‘comfort women’ issue. The one that does mention, however, only vaguely states that there were some women who were drafted to the battle fields, and does not directly explain the ‘comfort women’ system as sexual slavery.37

The fact that revisionists’ claims are accepted by most of history textbook publishers is depressing and also alarming. Without young students learning about the issue, discussion, let alone resolution of the ‘comfort women’ issue, between South Korea and Japan is impossible. Lack of discussion o the issue will strengthen ignorance and detachment from the ‘comfort women’ issue and other topics of historical responsibilities.

Defaming survivors

Series of Japanese politicians have denied the Japanese government’s responsibilities for the ‘comfort women’ system, some going further to call the survivors “voluntary/ professional prostitutes.” Some opposing to include the ‘comfort women’ issue in history textbooks have said: “The ‘comfort women’ were called “public toilets” among soldiers. It is unnecessary to include history of toilets in our history textbooks.”38 While these defaming comments cause anger and reaction from survivors and supporters in both South Korea and Japan, the politicians who say these comments often remain in power. In fact, Inada Tomomi who has made a series of outraging comments (including “The Nanjing Massacre is a fraud,” “the ‘comfort women’ was legal,” and “The Girl Statue symbolizes wrong perception that the Japanese military forcibly took 200,000 young women and made them into sex slaves.”) is appointed as a Minister of Defense for the Abe government.39

Moreover, defaming survivors are done by not only rightist politicians but also those in other professions. One Japanese graphic artist, Dai Inami, posted an image titled “Sexy Lady” on the Facebook in March 2014. He mocked the Girl Statue by making the girl wear kimono, reveal its chest, and put her hand between her spread legs. His caption reads: “The South Korean government is telling lies to demand Japan.” Even after strong reaction from the Korean netizens when the image was first posted, he posted this image again in May on a website where artists in Japan share their works and then deleted it.40 Such incident shows how the survivors and supporters’ efforts to publicize the ‘comfort women’ issue is demeaned by revisionists and Net Rights and how such defamation is communicated through different media, including the “arts.”

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37 Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace, We answer to all the questions on the Japanese Military ‘Comfort Women’ Issue (Tokyo: WAM, 2015), 66.
Attacking supporters: Takahashi Uemura’s Case

Revisionists and Net Right do not limit their attacks on the survivors and supporters, but expand them to the journalists. Takahashi Uemura, who was a reporter at The Asahi Shimbun back in the 1991, wrote an article on Kim Hak Sun’s testimony. His article helped the public realize that the ‘comfort women’ started to step out of silence. Although there were a few rightists who reacted to his article, such criticism did not lead to any violent attacks against him back then. Yet since 2014, revisionists and Net Right have threatened not only him and his work but also his family for his article on the ‘comfort women.’ He has moved to South Korea due to constant death threats and complaints to the university he worked in Japan.

He did not know that he would talk about the ‘comfort women’ issue for such a long time when he first wrote the article. He did not understand why the Rights would track down such an old article, which was only an informative article that a ‘comfort women’ survivor is giving a testimony in South Korea, and bring it up recently to attack him and his family. As Japanese married to a Korean whose mother (Yang Sun Im) leads the Association for the Pacific War Victims, he thinks that revisionists and Net Right’s radical anti-Korean movements found his personal relationships to South Korea an easy target to attack. He now visits universities and colleges around the world (South Korea, Japan, and the United States) to talk about the ‘comfort women’ issue and radical rightists’ attack on the issue and conducts researches on the youth activism on the issue. He has been called a “traitor” by the attackers, yet he still loves his country and “wants Japan to be a respected nation in Asia.”

Uemura’s case shows how revisionists and Net Rights may have gained bigger voice recently, but still have detrimental effects on lives of people who are involved with the ‘comfort women’ issue. Although Uemura himself did not write that Kim Hak Sun was “forcibly taken,” he still became a target. Radical criticisms and attacks on him show that revisionists and Net Rights try to kill the discussion by attacking survivors, supporters, and whoever voices opinions different from theirs.

Feminism

Scholarly Works

Chizuko aims to engender the nation-state by adapting the concept of nation-state and using gender as a lens to examine it. Chizuko explains how feminism in Japan transformed itself from setting the Japanese women victims of war to admitting their involvement with and responsibility with war. The ‘reflective feminism’ movement in Japan made feminists to look back on the Japanese feminism movements during the wartime. Chizuko points out how feminist groups in Japan considered the Japanese governments’ war projects as revolutionary way to increase women’s involvement in the public sphere. She explains how participating in “serving the nation” filled feminists at the time with “excitement and a sense of responsibility.” For Japanese women, participating in the war project seemed to be a proud, patriotic act. Some Japanese ‘comfort women’ said that they applied to be ‘comfort women’ because they were told that they were going to be enshrined in the Yasukuni Shrine as “servers of the nation.”

Such reflection allows Japanese women to realize how they not only have been oppressed due to militarism but also oppressed other women by joining the war efforts, which in turn allows them to overcome the myth of nation state and expand their feminism narrative to women from other countries.

Women’s Active Museum

Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM) is located in Waseda, Tokyo, near Waseda University. The museum was opened in August 2005 to address women’s rights issues caused by the military sexual assault and crimes. The museum focuses on the ‘comfort women’ issue as an epitome
of violence against women during wartime, and draws from cases in countries across Asia as well as from South Korea.

The museum displays the map of ‘comfort stations’ across Japan and Asia, Japanese middle school textbooks, documents on the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery held in 2000. The documentary of ‘comfort women’ survivors the museum shows to grown tourists casts mostly Korean survivors sharing their stories. The entrance to the museum is filled with 150 portraits of survivors who came out to make their testimonies. The narrator also explains what kind of movements in South Korea are taking place to support the survivors, such as the Wednesday Demonstration and Nanum Ui Jip (“House of Sharing,” a center for survivors in South Korea), and how the museum tries to stay connected with those movements in order to show their solidarity to resolve the issue.

The museum also connects the ‘comfort women’ system to sexual assault committed by the United States military in Japan and other countries that often go unaddressed due to international politics. Such connection helps the Japanese audience realize that the ‘comfort women’ issue is not just a problem of other countries and of the past, but is present now in the Japanese society as well in a different, but similar form. Indeed, the museum focuses on how women’s rights are violated during wartime and how that violence affects women’s lives and the society as whole.

WAM aims to change history into her-story. By offering records on the military sexual assault and crimes, WAM tries to address parts of history that gets erased due to focus on the military, state power, and thus men. Such narrative helps the audience distance themselves from the dominant narrative of glorious, collective nation and see what (or who) was sacrificed or left behind. Thus it builds understanding of and connection to the victims and survivors who have been forgotten and urges the public to remember her-story.

**South Korea**

**Nationalism**

1) Growth-centered statism

When the ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement was announced, the major newspapers in South Korea published articles immediately. While the media views on the agreement varied, some newspapers and news channels welcomed the agreement as “a step towards the future.” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Facebook page even posted some of the articles with positive views on the agreement. Indeed the South Korean government has tried to convince the public to accept the agreement. Yet the South Korean government had to respond to increasing criticism. President Park Geunhye responded to rising criticism by arguing that no agreement can satisfy everyone and urged the public to understand the agreement.

Center for Japanese Studies at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS) of the Korea National Diplomatic Academy (KNDA) hosted an international conference titled “Historical Issues and New Korea-Japan Relations” on June 17, 2016. Although it was titled “historical issues,” the conference focused on the ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement and its effects on the relationship between South Korea and Japan.

Sohn Yul, President of Yonsei University Graduate School of International Studies, acknowledged that the new agreement was “abruptly” concluded under pressures from international politics: the United States’ involvement with the historical issues, stronger focus on the United States-Japan alliance, and South Korea-China relationship. He argued that South Korea should have a “two-track” approach to Japan, in order to avoid negative impacts that historical issue can have on the two nations’ relations in security, economics, and others aspects of collaboration, but still be able to discuss

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these issues without being influenced by the international politics. He went on to deny calling the agreement as an “ultimate and irreversible” resolution to the ‘comfort women’ issue.

“For historical issues are expressed through identity politics, they are bound to be political, and thus are difficult to resolve “ultimately and irreversibly.”“

The fact that a conference organized by the KNDA can show a voice of dissent is surprising, given its direct relationship with the government. It hints that there may be diverse views on the agreement within the government bodies as well. Still the South Korean government has been trying to implement the articles on the agreement – establishing the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation, promising to “handle” the Girl Statue to the Japanese government, and decreasing the explanation on the ‘comfort women’ issue in newly revised sixth grade history textbook – which clashed with survivors, supporters, and students’ protests against it.

The National History Museum of Korea

The National History Museum of Korea offers a broad overview of South Korean history since the Japanese colonial period. Stories of the ‘comfort women’ display occupy a small corner, next to the forced labor stories and other sufferings Koreans had to go through during the colonial period. The video on display shows collection of pictures of survivors taken by the United States Military after the fall of Japan and artworks made by survivors provided by the Korean Council.

While the stories of survivors are treated as those of national agony, they are not emphasized over other struggles of Koreans, and their narration does not focus how the lives of the ‘comfort women’ have been after their return to Korea. On the next floor about industrialization of South Korea, protests and demonstrations led by students and citizens in response to the 1965 Normalization Treaty is briefly explained with a few documents and a picture, without an explanation on its consequences on the victims and survivors of the Japanese colonialism. In fact, the industrialization process is glorified by how hard work of individuals led to a rapid development of South Korea, proudly named the Miracle of Han River. Labor and other social movements, which stemmed from brutal treatment of workers during such rapid development, are also explained later, yet the overall narrative of growth-centered statism dominates the floor. It is interesting how the United States military is portrayed in the overall narratives, particularly during the Korean War. Huge images of Korean running away from North Korean and Chinese militaries and of the United States ship that rescued thousands of those South Korean citizens by giving up on its armory are displayed for the audience to imagine how horrific the Korean War had been.

Since the museum needs to cover all the events after the foundation of the South Korean government, there are limits to which it could dedicate its space to certain events and different narratives surrounding them. Still, the museum does invest a lot on building legitimacy around the military alliance among the United States, Japan, and South Korea through an emphasis on the economic gain that South Korea has enjoyed. Meanwhile South Korea is treated as one government, not as a collective group of individuals with their own stories to tell. Names and faces of individuals who suffered through the Japanese colonialism, survived the Korean War, and led social movements to change South Korea remain unknown and uncovered, in contrast with a collection of portraits of the previous South Korean presidents at the very end of the exhibition. Indeed, the museum fulfils its role to educate two types of South Korean nationalism with more focus on growth-centered statism.

2) Resistance nationalism

Among the survivors and support groups, the ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement is often described as an act of maeguk 매국, which literally means “selling out the country” and means to be a traitor to

47 Yul Sohn, “Hanilgwangye: yeogsaedeul neomeo dongasiasa gongsangeulo” 한일관계: 역사를 넘어 동아시아 공생으로 [Korea-Japan Relations, beyond history and to coexistence of East Asia]” (lecture, Historical Issues and New Korea-Japan Relations Seoul, South Korea, June 17th, 2016).
the nation. The word has a strong connotation with it and calling people *maegukno* 매국노 賣國奴 is one of the harshest ways to offend them in Korean. Koreans use this word particularly when someone is being favorable to Japan and Japanese. In fact, Korean collaborators who enjoyed personal wellbeing by helping out the Japanese government to oppress other Koreans during the colonial period are mostly called *maegukno*.

**Students’ Activism**

Immediately after the agreement, many college students started a sit-in next to the girl statue in front of the Japanese embassy in order to protests against the agreement and prevent moving of the statue by the South Korean government as promised on the agreement. These students established the College Students’ Active Union in March as more members and clubs across different universities and colleges joined in. The College Students’ Active Union has been organizing the sit-in so far despite harsh weather conditions and casual conflicts with the police. In fact, four to five police buses are parked across the street and some officers come over time to time to check on the students: what the students will do on that day, how many of them will sleep over, and at what time they plan to go to bed. Students participating in the sit-in sometimes quarrel with the police officers or detectives who do not allow the use of a parasol on days when the temperature goes well over 90 degrees Fahrenheit. One student who finished talking to a plain-clothes detective who yelled at the students for trying to set up the parasol and argued that such act was a violation of the traffic laws, said she was not afraid of being arrested for she was there for something right and she got used to being tackled by plain-clothes detectives who are “just afraid to admit that they are wrong and try to scare us.”

The College Students’ Active Union also organizes the Saturday Demonstration on their own, in which they voice their opinions that are not necessarily in accordance with the Korean Council’s or those represented in the Wednesday Demonstration. One of the core members mentions how ‘comfort women’ issue should be considered an issue of the Korean people and not just women’s, to focus on the real niche of the problem. She argues that making ‘comfort women’ issue an issue of gender inequality blurs its characteristic as a way of oppression of the Korean people during the Japanese colonization. Also, students try to interpret the politics surrounding the ‘comfort women’ issue in a bigger picture: the military alliance among the United States, Japan, and South Korea competing against China and North Korea. President Obama’s visit to Hiroshima and the United States government’s involvement with historical issues in Asia are considered a tactic to smooth the military alliance between the United States and countries in Asia. Indeed, the students express that the sly manner that the ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement shows how importance of the ‘comfort women’ issue as that of human rights gender based violence and racism (thus national) is ignored due to international politics.

Their pamphlets call the Park Geunhye government *maegukno* and criticize how it works to impress the Abe government by carrying out the agreement. On one of the pamphlets that criticizes deleting or minimizing the explanation on the ‘comfort women’ issue in newly revised history textbook for sixth graders in South Korea, they ask: “Which one is the South Korean history textbook and which one is the Japanese history textbook?” They also ask: “What country is Park Geunhye president of?” Their refutation to the South Korean government shows not only their resistance to the national government’s attempt to lead the public in one direction, but also their connection to the Korean people, their minchok.

**Feminism**

The Korean Council was established in 1990 by Yoon Chungok, a professor at Ehwa Women’s University at the time, who wanted to know what happened to the girls taken by the Japanese military during the colonial period and either never came back or did not talk about what happened. After tracing the girls, she realized how she herself was able to escape the draft for the ‘comfort women’ because she was from an affluent family and how horrific a life those girls of her age had to go through as ‘comfort

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48 Personal communication with the author, July 2nd, 2016.
49 Personal communication with the author, May 28th, 2016.
women’ and as survivors. She felt like she had a responsibility to talk about the girls who had suffered during the colonial period as daughters of a colonized nation and as women of poor families. With 37 feminist and religious groups, the Korean Council was found to explore more about the ‘comfort women’ issue, to support survivors, and to demand formal apology from the Japanese government.

The Korean Council lists seven demands to the Japanese Government: to admit the Japanese military sexual slavery system as a war crime, to disclose official documents, to deliver an official apology, to pay reparations to the victims, to punish those responsible, to record the sexual slavery system in the history textbooks, and to erect a memorial monument and build an archive. In order to meet these demands, the Korean Council has worked extensively with the South Korea government to bring up the issue on its talks with the Japanese government and with different support groups within and abroad South Korea to build a support network for survivors. While the Korean Council has focused on gaining the South Korean government’s attention and support in the ‘comfort women’ issue since its establishment, the ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement changed its relationship with the South Korean government. Yoon Meehyang, representative of the Korean Council, states:

“…the Korean Council has maintained a stance critical against Korean government while sometimes adopted mutually cooperative relationship with it. As an independent organization of [from] the government, we have to attain the substantial goal to settle the Japanese military ‘comfort women’ issue and so have needed some governmental support and cooperation. Ever since last December 28, however, such relationship has broken, and the council has become its adversary.”

Indeed, the ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement served as a turning point to the relationship between the Korean Council and the South Korean government. The Korean Council now focuses on how to bring up the ‘comfort women’ issue back on the tables of the two governments.

The Wednesday Demonstration

The Wednesday Demonstration is the world’s longest-lasting demonstration. It is organized by the Korean Council and other groups who support the survivors. It started on January 8th, 1992, right before then Japanese Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi’s visit to South Korea to demand formal apology from the Japanese government. Since then every Wednesday at noon, survivors of the ‘comfort women’ system, their supporters from different groups, students who are interested in the historical issue or came for school field trips, reporters, and others who want to support them gather in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. Topic or the atmosphere of the demonstration depend on the speakers: students voice their sympathy with the survivors and their concern about resolving the issue, organization leaders voice their concern about gathering support from a larger public and the urgent need for both the Korean and Japanese governments’ efforts. The survivors, who receive the biggest applause from the public and attention from the reporters, not only share their experiences and feelings, but also voice their opinions on how their issue should be resolved. Survivors attending the Wednesday Demonstration have condemned both the South Korean and Japanese governments for signing an agreement without consulting them or the Korean Council first, which should have the most say in the issue.

Such reaction to the ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement is also represented in the Wednesday Demonstration, in which a series of speakers shout out criticisms of the South Korean government and President Park Geunhye as catch phrases during their speech: “No to the maeguk Park government” and “Trash the maeguk-ju kin Agreement immediately” are shouted repeatedly towards the Japanese embassy and the police surrounding the demonstration site.

Foreign tourists, who seem to be on their Seoul trip, stop by to carefully read messages that people left on the wall to criticize the Japanese government and to support survivors, and sometimes leave ones themselves. Japanese tourists stop by to listen to the survivors and take photos of the students.

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50 War & Women’s Human Rights Museum, War & Women’s Human Rights Museum (Seoul).
guarding the Girl Statue. Some tourists end up attending the demonstration regularly, even bringing pickets they made in Korean. Japanese activist groups organize the Wednesday Demonstration once a while, in order to make sure the solidarity among the South Korean and Japanese support groups strengthens and the issue can be publicized in Japan as well through connecting it to civil/human rights issues and as anti-war campaign.

Indeed, for almost 25 years the Wednesday Demonstration has served as a space to publicize and educate the ‘comfort women’ issue. Working together with support groups who work on sexual assault committed by the United States in South Korea and activist groups from Japan as well, the demonstration also served as an anti-war campaign. Yet after the ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement, the frustration with the South Korea government and the anger with the Japanese government have dominated the site.

The War & Women’s Human Rights Museum
The War & Women’s Human Rights Museum, managed by the Korean Council to publicize the facts and testimonies of the issue, serves as a place to voice support for anti-war movements and support programs for ‘comfort women’ and wartime sexual assault survivors. Here, the ‘comfort women’ survivors’ identity as women is emphasized to call for solidarity amongst feminist and humanitarian groups.

In its interactive exhibitions on women’s lives during wartime colonial Korea, the museum urges its audience to focus on the horror and pain that war inflicts on women. While the museum focuses on the stories of the survivors from the ‘comfort women’ system, it also recognizes the universality of sexual assault against women during wars across the world. Last section of the museum introduces survivors of sexual assault across the world where war and violence is rampant. Stories of children and women who currently suffer constant rape and sexual assault by the military urge the audience to sympathize with survivors across the world and support them. The Butterfly Fund organized by the Korean Council and other organizations and its use for survivors of wartime sexual assault is introduced to help the audience to show support in a specific way.

The special exhibition section introduces testimonies of survivors of rape and other forms of sexual assault committed by the South Korean Military during the Vietnam War. Visitors, especially those from Korea, are shown a paradox in which the victimized nation victimizes another in a similar way. While the “uniquely” gruesome organization and management of the ‘comfort women’ system by the Japanese Military are still emphasized, the museum also notes that wartime sexual assault against women by the military across the world is an issue of women’s rights and should be fought against in solidarity.

Conclusion
Disputes between South Korea and Japan regarding apology and compensation for Japan’s colonization never seem to end. While South Korea-Japan Normalization Treaty in 1965 is accepted as a formal compensation by the general public in Japan, the legitimacy of the treaty is increasingly challenged by many South Koreans and other scholars. Different views on the treaty challenge further historical debates between the two nations. Moreover, issues that were not mentioned in the treaty have been brought to the public’s attention over the past 50 years and await the two governments’ attention and action. The ‘comfort women’ issue became a symbolic issue, due to complex ideas present in both nations. First, South Koreans relate their lost nation and its following sufferings to victimized women. The linked metaphors of nation, motherland, and country and their close ties to women have facilitated a strong, emotional response to the issue – the “manly” shame that “their” women were violated in hands of the enemy. Indeed, the ‘comfort women’ issue gained attention as a national issue. Yet feminism narratives offered a closer look on the women, how their lives have been affected due to the gruesome military sexual slavery and how they have suffered as human beings.

Following the newspaper articles and Facebook posts and comments on the ‘comfort women’ issue made me wonder why responses to the ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement differ so much in South Korea. When the agreement was first announced, several major newspaper companies praised the agreement as a step towards the future, which made South Korea finally abandon historical debates
with Japan that compromised cooperation between the two nations. Yet NGOs and students groups that have worked for the ‘comfort women’ issue immediately argued that the agreement did not consider the survivors and therefore rejected it. A few days later, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Facebook page posted an article that praised President Park Geunhye for the agreement, and the post received comments that criticized the ministry for blindly praising the president without hearing voices of dissent. The agreement, indeed, received mixed reviews in South Korea. I was curious whether both arguments – the one that praises the agreement and the other that criticizes it – could fit into nationalistic views. Was President Park Geunhye a “national traitor” as some people criticized, or could this agreement make sense in some other logic that I am not aware of? Such thought made me wonder whether nationalistic views can vary and how such variations could affect the ‘comfort women’ issue. Analysis by Kwon and Takahara on South Korean nationalism helped me understand that different types of nationalism can exist and they can lead to different views on social issues.

Still, understanding different types of nationalism and their logic does not reveal any easy resolution of the ‘comfort women’ debate. There are flaws in nationalism that miss important aspect of the ‘comfort women’ issue. Nationalistic sympathy with the survivors is not enough to defend and support them. Kwon criticizes nationalism for blinding people from seeing the problems inside their own nation (“As nationalism flourishes, classism diminishes”52). Indeed, setting up a common enemy outside the nation helps unite people under the common goal, but hides the issues within the society that should be overcome in order to tackle the problem properly. In case of the ‘comfort women’ issue, the Japanese government and revisionists can easily serve as the common enemy for people who care about the issue. Yet people working for the ‘comfort women’ seem to keep their balanced focus on problems outside the nation and those inside. Instead of criticizing only the Japanese government and the revisionists, the NGOs criticize also the Korean government for not doing their share of duty.

Different NGOs working for the ‘comfort women’ issue have established solidarity with other groups who also care for social issues in South Korea. The Wednesday Demonstration is sometimes held by different labor unions, and people who come to protect the girl statue often go over to the Gwanghwamun Square to support the sit-in for the Sewol ferry disaster. One student emphasizes why it is important to build solidarity with people who work for issues other than the ‘comfort women’:

“It really is like a cogwheel. All the social issues we see are linked with each other, and we need to work on all of them. None of them can go alone; the ‘comfort women’ issue needs support from different groups of people, and they need our support, too.”53

Chizuko argues that feminism should overcome national boundaries.54 Survivors and support groups’ criticizing the South Korean government after ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement is a form of overcoming the national boundaries. Through the realization that the national government can choose prioritize state power over proper resolution of the ‘comfort women’ issue, survivors and support groups are forced to look back on the long accepted definition of nation as minchok and thus innate to the people. Such disillusionment pushes the ‘comfort women’ issue to be addressed beyond the national boundaries between South Korea and Japan, even more than it did before. Kim Seonsil, the director of the museum said that NGOs from Japan has been the best partners to work on the ‘comfort women’ issue. With their different focuses and commitments, NGOs from Japan helped addressing the ‘comfort women’ issue by connecting it to other social issues present in Japan, such as protesting against hate speech and the Japanese government’s amendment to Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution. She is positive that the South Korean government’s lack of cooperation is tough, it made the support groups realize how much solidarity they have amongst themselves, even though they are from different countries.55

52 Hyukbeom Kwon 권혁범, Minjogjuineun joeaginga 민족주의는 좌악인가 [Is nationalism a sin] (Seoul: Saenggaguinamu, 2006), 80.
53 Personal communication with the author, July 2nd, 2016.
54 Ueno Chizuko, Wianbuleul dulleossaeng gieogui jeongchihag 위안부를 둘러싼 기억의 정치학 [Politics of memory surrounding the ‘comfort women’] (Seoul: Hyeonsilmunhwayeongu, 2014), 176.
55 Interview with the author, July 7th, 2016.
Yet there are other challenges supporters of the ‘comfort women’ issue face. Feminist voices, despite the social changes, still remain marginalized in South Korea and Japan. Misogyny and gender equality are the hottest debate topics in South Korea now, sparked by a misogynist’s killing of an unacquainted woman in Gangnam (May 17th, 2016) and following feminist movements to raise awareness about daily discrimination and terror that women in South Korea face. In fact, South Korea ranks 115 out of 145 countries for gender equality on Global Gender Index 2015 published by World Economic Forum. Japan as well, ranks low (101). Women in South Korea and Japan have dismal level of economic and political empowerment compared to their level of education and each nation’s economic power. The discrimination that women face in South Korean and Japanese societies express how women have been treated from the past. While the ‘comfort women’ system worked as a way to discriminate Koreans (and many non-Japanese), it also worked as a way to oppress women. And discussions on the ‘comfort women’ issue will truly account for the sufferings of the survivors only after the acknowledgement of the oppression of women in South Korean and Japan that had shamed and silenced them for so long. Even now, some phrases that support the survivors describe their youth as “flowers” and carries on the narratives that women are to be protected and cared for. While such phrases can appeal to a lot of people, they still commit benevolent sexism and cannot reach a true level of respect that the survivors should receive.

Another obstacle to solving the ‘comfort women’ issue is the difference between age of people who are interested in the issue in South Korea and Japan. In South Korea, the ‘comfort women’ issue is taught in history classes and different movements to publicize the issue are led by young college students. Some teachers organize a field trip to the Wednesday Demonstration or to the Girl Statue to talk about social justice with their students. The Wednesday Demonstration is attended by people of different age, yet students from elementary school, middle school, and high school are the majority. They participate in speeches during the demonstration and sometimes start a student club at their school to discuss about the ‘comfort women’ and other historical issues. The ‘comfort women’ movement in South Korea is indeed filled with a younger vibe. In contrast, Women’s Active Museum in Japan is most visited by older adults, despite its location right next to Waseda University. Lack of young visitors to museums and centers not only happens for those related to the ‘comfort women’ issue, but for others that talk about historical issues in general. The clerk at the Sensai Museum was pleasantly surprised to see me, and explained that it is because not many young people in Japan visit such places. It is questionable if such lack of young Japanese in historical sites comes from their lack of interest in historical issues or from their views on the historical issues as already resolved. Reasons behind Japanese youth’s views and attitudes or views on history will require another volume of research. Still, what is certain is that the age gap of people who are working for the ‘comfort women’ issue in South Korea and Japan differs. As survivors of the ‘comfort women’ system are passing away, the ‘comfort women’ issue and debates on how to resolve it will be passed down to next generation of people. Difference between younger generations’ attitudes towards historical issues in South Korea and Japan could be another challenge to resolving and retelling of the ‘comfort women’ issue. Ideally, resolving the ‘comfort women’ issue should happen before all the survivors pass away. Still, younger generations in South Korea and Japan will take roles in narrating the stories of survivors, the Japanese military, the governments, and others’ voices on the issue.

Nakanishi suggests that young Japanese will feel more connected with the issue and will see it as a problem of the present when they see the ‘comfort women’ issue as an effort to overcome the injustice in the current society, especially when it is connected with the women’s rights issues in Japan. Without addressing misogyny and women’s rights issues within Japan, the ‘comfort women’ issue will remain a topic of international debate that does not necessarily pertain to daily lives. Outraging argument that some ‘comfort women’ survivors were paid and by the soldiers after rape, and thus the system was a legitimate way of employment, will not be made anymore when people realize that such argument treats women as objects and how such mentality continues to justify sexual crimes and sex

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57 Personal communication with the author, June 14th, 2016.
trafficking happening now.

In conclusion, nationalism and feminism narratives used to address the ‘comfort women’ issue succeeded in appealing to different audience of people. However, each narrative had limitations: nationalism narratives only appealed to those who share the same nationality; earlier feminism narrative mistakenly admitted ‘virgin/whore’ dichotomy to defend non-Japanese ‘comfort women’ survivors from criticism from the revisionists and thus disregarded other survivors that do not fit the ‘model victim’ narrative. It would be interesting to see how youths in South Korea and Japan discuss the ‘comfort women’ issue beyond the limitations set by earlier narratives of nationalism and feminism.

After all, historical narratives are ways how experiences and events are remembered throughout different generations. As long as the ‘comfort women’ issue is remembered and remains a topic of discussion, new historical narratives will emerge and hopefully a different solution to the issue as well, as the phrase on a wristband made by the Peace Butterfly Network states: “Your memory makes justice.”
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