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4 Reframing the “Comfort Women” Issue: New Representations of an Old War Crime

The end of 2016 marked several important anniversaries for the so-called “comfort women” issue – that is, the subject of Asian women who were used by the Imperial Japanese Army as military sex slaves. Twenty-five years earlier, in August 1991, what George Hicks later called “a turning point” occurred, when an elderly Korean woman, Kim Hak Sun (1924–1997), “announced her willingness to testify publicly about her experiences as a comfort woman, raising the issue to the level of formal legal action.”¹ She told of being imprisoned in “comfort stations” for sexual exploitation during the Second World War and, with other girls, being shipped across China to be used by Japanese soldiers near the frontlines of battle.² With her testimony, as well as that of other survivors who soon began to come forward, “groups in both Korea and Japan . . . prepared a lawsuit” against Japan, demanding compensation for the irreparable damage they suffered to their bodies and minds.³ As Bonnie B. C. Oh reports, this led to a formal request from the government of the Republic of Korea for Japan “to conduct an investigation into the ‘comfort women’ system.”⁴

But there is also another anniversary to consider. The end of 2016 marked one year since the surprise announcement of an agreement between the governments of President Park Geun-hye of the Republic of Korea – who would wind up being impeached in 2017 – and of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō of Japan that supposedly would put to rest a dispute between the two nations over what the Japanese military did in Asia more over seventy years ago, as well as what it still owes to those who were harmed by the “comfort system.” As revealed to the public on 28 December 2016 by the foreign ministers of both nations, this

1 George Hicks, *The Comfort Women: Japan’s Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 188.

2 *Ibid.*, 189.

3 *Ibid.*, 190.

4 Bonnie B. C. Oh, “The Japanese Imperial System and the Korean ‘Comfort Women’ of World War II,” in *Legacies of the Comfort Women of World War II*, eds. Margaret Stetz and Bonnie B. C. Oh (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), 16.

alleged “breakthrough” involved promises of “Tokyo apologizing and agreeing to pay \$8.3 million into a fund for remaining victims.”⁵

From the perspective of more than a quarter-century later, it is clear that the testimony of Kim Hak Sun did prove tremendously important in giving greater visibility and political impetus to the movements for official apologies and redress to the “comfort system” survivors, who were forcibly confined to military brothels during the Second World War by the Imperial Japanese Army, raped, and in many cases beaten or otherwise abused for periods ranging from months to years. The hopes, nonetheless, for legal redress came to nothing, for the lawsuits initiated in a number of countries eventually failed. No one responsible for designing, implementing, or administering the “comfort system,” which trafficked thousands of military sex slaves across Asia by land and sea, has ever been prosecuted or punished.

Similarly, from the distance of more than one year after the agreement between the Republic of Korea and Japan, it is obvious that what was meant to resolve the “comfort women” question did not accomplish what those who drafted it may have hoped. As Justin McCurry reported in the British newspaper, the *Guardian*, on 26 January 2016, Prime Minister Abe extended an apology “to all of the women who underwent immeasurable and painful experiences and suffered incalculable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.”⁶ At the same time, as this reporter pointed out, “Tokyo also acknowledged that its wartime military authorities had played a role in the women’s sexual enslavement, but avoided any admission of legal responsibility”; thus, the simultaneous announcement that the Japanese government would contribute to a South Korean fund, to be established in aid of the aged survivors, could not be interpreted as payment of reparations, but instead was offered as “a humanitarian gesture.”⁷

This agreement was immediately condemned by a number of organizations supporting the survivors and denounced by the survivors themselves, who expressed their fury over not having been consulted about the terms of the pact, and who rejected any money, unless it was paid directly to them by the

5 Anna Fifield, “South Korea, Japan Reach Settlement on Wartime Korean Sex Slaves,” *Washington Post*, December 28, 2015. Accessed March 24, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/south-korea-japan-reach-settlement-on-wartime-korean-sex-slaves/2015/12/28/e0578237-0a00-4f10-8491-1d85e72890b3_story.html?utm_term=.12cf25a06234.

6 Justin McCurry, “Former Sex Slaves Reject Japan and South Korea’s ‘Comfort Women’ Accord,” *Guardian*, January 26, 2016. Accessed March 24, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/26/former-sex-slaves-reject-japan-south-koreas-comfort-women-accord>

7 Ibid.

Japanese government – not through a fund under the auspices of the Korean government – as compensation for the crimes to which they had been subjected. Meanwhile, the agreement certainly has led to no equivalent arrangements between Japan and any of the other nations in which “comfort stations” were established, including the Philippines, China, Taiwan, and Indonesia. The aging survivors there, too, still call for and await official apologies and reparations from the Japanese government.

At the present moment, matters are really no further along, in terms of legal or political solutions, than they had been in 1991 when Kim Hak Sun came forward. Comfort women survivors and supporters remain at loggerheads with the government of Japan. Even in matters regarding education and historical memory, nothing has been decided, for the bilateral pact between South Korea and Japan made no mention of the so-called textbook controversies. It did not require the story of the “comfort system” to be incorporated into state-approved textbooks in Japan, or to be presented in educational settings there as an example of forcible sexual enslavement, rather than as voluntary prostitution by well-paid sex workers – which is the way it has been framed and thus dismissed by some Japanese nationalist factions and still is being described publicly by certain segments of the Japanese political right.

The December 2015 agreement with Korea also failed to forbid Japanese officials from interfering with how the issue would be taught in *other* nations, as they had in fact tried to do earlier the same year. As Martin Fackler had reported in the *New York Times* on 25 January 2015, representatives from the “Japanese Consulate-General in New York had met with McGraw-Hill officials . . . to demand revisions” to a textbook issued by the American firm – “a high school history textbook published by McGraw-Hill Education” – that contained the following sentence: “The Japanese Army forcibly recruited, conscripted and dragooned as many as 200,000 women aged 14 to 20 to serve in military brothels.”⁸ Indeed, so personally incensed was Prime Minister Abe about the circulation of that statement in American classrooms that he had denounced the textbook at a meeting of the Diet, Japan’s Parliament.⁹ But under the pact made in December 2015 between Korea and Japan, such attempts at intervening in foreign education and at pressuring foreign publishing businesses evidently still could go on unhindered. While the two-nation agreement, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, was intended to ensure that both the

⁸ Martin Fackler, “U. S. Textbook Skews History, Prime Minister of Japan Says,” *New York Times*, January 29, 2015. Accessed March 24, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/30/world/asia/japans-premier-disputes-us-textbooks-portrayal-of-comfort-women.html?_r=0

⁹ Ibid.

Republic of Korea and Japan would “refrain from accusing or criticizing each other regarding this issue in the international community, including at the United Nations,”¹⁰ nothing in it prevented the Japanese government from attempting to censor unwelcome comments in print anywhere about the “comfort system,” or from trying to control and sanitize Japan’s image in history, whether at home or abroad.

And yet, it would be wrong to imagine that no significant developments have occurred in the past quarter of a century, where the “comfort women” issue is concerned. Although movement in the quest for justice through legal channels may have been negligible, progress in the sphere of *representation* has been enormous. When it comes to the cultural work that is being done around this topic, there is reason for real optimism, for important changes have been happening – changes of the sort that are influencing public opinion globally today, and that promise to have a lasting impact in the future.

One of those changes – the reframing of the historical situation to bring greater attention to the role in it that was played by age – has been especially significant. In her deliberately inflammatory polemic, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (2008), C. Sarah Soh has (in one of her few non-controversial statements) pointed to a shift in nomenclature, which took place around the time that Kim Hak Sun came forward to give her testimony and jumpstarted the movement for redress, both in the Republic of Korea and around the world:

Since the issue was internationalized, “comfort women” has become the standard English translation of the Japanese euphemism *ianfu*. Previously, however, Dutch- and English-speaking soldiers and writers alike had translated the term as “comfort girls” . . . “Comfort women” may generally sound more respectful than “comfort girls,” although the latter is more accurate in the cases of many teenage *ianfu*.¹¹

Many international scholars and activists who, in the 1990s, first encountered the stories of this war crime did indeed hear and write about it as an example of *sexual violence against women* – a phrase that correctly singles out gender as the primary defining factor for who was targeted for the “comfort system,” although other factors, such as ethnicity and working-class status, were equally

10 *Wall Street Journal* Staff, “Japan Real Time: Full Text: Japan-South Korea Statement on ‘Comfort Women,’” *Wall Street Journal*, December 28, 2015. Accessed March 24, 2017. <http://blogs.wsj.com/japanrealttime/2015/12/28/full-text-japan-south-korea-statement-on-comfort-women/>

11 C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 69.

crucial components in the selection process.¹² Using the term “comfort women” and linking it, either implicitly or explicitly, to the broader topic of sexual violence against women – that is, to a long history and a wide variety of assaults and abuses, whether organized or not – was a politically sound decision. It encouraged feminists and human rights activists to see the subject of captive Asians raped in military brothels as part of a larger pattern and to advocate on behalf of the survivors who were, at that point, certainly women – elderly ones, in fact – and who were living with the physical and mental consequences of having been subjected, fifty years earlier, to numerous daily rapes; to beatings; to near-starvation; to sexually transmitted diseases and to the crude medical treatment of them; and to forced abortions.

But the term “sexual violence against women” papers over a brutal reality. As Radhika Sanghani noted in the British newspaper the *Telegraph* on 29 December 2015, when reporting on the agreement between South Korea and Japan, the “majority” of those who were “forced to become slaves to the Japanese military and subjected to horrific cruelty” had “barely hit puberty.” They were between “13 and 16” years old, although “some [were] as young as 10 when they were taken to ‘comfort stations.’”¹³

That so many “comfort women” were actually *children* has been affirmed in statements by numerous survivors, as well as by historians such as Yuki Tanaka.¹⁴ How did this important fact get lost? As the Japanese historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki reminded readers in his 1995 study *Comfort Women*, which was translated into English and published in the U.S. in 2000, “at the time when military comfort stations were beginning to be built, even in Japan, people were defined as minors until they reached the age of twenty-one.”¹⁵ Moreover, in 1910, Japan had been a signatory to the International Convention for the Suppression of White Slave Traffic,” which stipulated, in one of its provisions, that “Whoever, in order to gratify the passions of another person, has

12 For more about these intersecting categories of identity in the selection of victims of the “comfort system,” see Margaret D. Stetz and Bonnie B. C. Oh, “Introduction,” in *Legacies of the Comfort Women of World War II*, eds. Margaret Stetz and Bonnie B. C. Oh (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), xi–xiv.

13 Radhika Sanghani, “The Horrific Story of Korea’s ‘Comfort Women’ – Forced to Be Sex Slaves During World War Two,” *Telegraph*, December 29, 2015. Accessed March 24, 2017. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/the-horrific-story-of-koreas-comfort-women—forced-to-be-sex-sl/>

14 See, for instance, Yuki Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution During World War II and the US Occupation* (London: Routledge, 2002), 46 and 49.

15 Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*, trans. Suzanne O’Brien (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 157.

procured, enticed, or led away, even with her consent, a woman or girl under age for immoral purposes, shall be punished, notwithstanding that the various acts constituting the offence may have been committed in different countries.”¹⁶

Thus, we have a situation in which those considered minors under Japanese law were used in military brothels and were also trafficked; yet no one was prosecuted. How were Japanese nationalist deniers able to ignore this fact and, over the last few decades, shift the focus of debate, arguing that “comfort stations” were sites of voluntary sex work where adult women allegedly chose of their own free will to become paid prostitutes? Did the use of phrases such as “sexual violence against women,” or even of the broader term “violence against women and girls,” which has also been employed, play into the hands of those deniers, by obscuring the record of “under age” sex traffic – indeed, of enslaving children?

More than twenty-five years ago, when Kim Hak Sun and other survivors came forward publicly, the initial response, especially of those sympathetic to the movement for apologies and redress, was to focus on their age at the time of giving their testimony and joining class action lawsuits. Many commentators, therefore, emphasized that these were elderly women, a number of whom were in poor health – suffering from ailments that, in some cases, dated back to their wartime abuse. Their advancing age was the impetus for arguing that their legal claims should be settled rapidly, before their deaths. Indeed, Kim Hak Sun died in 1997. We can see this laudable effort to imprint on public consciousness the image of elderly women, fighting in vain for justice, in important statements such as Dai Sil Kim-Gibson’s 1997 article in the journal *Positions*, “They Are Our Grandmas.” There, Kim-Gibson encouraged readers to identify with them as exemplars of determination, pursuing their just cause regardless of age and debility: “I am proud that they are my grandmothers, Koreans, women, female warriors.”¹⁷ The unintended result of such powerful rhetoric, however, was to associate the “comfort system,” in the global imagination, with *women* – especially with the elderly ones speaking out against it – and to mask the issue of child sexual exploitation.

This same effect has also been reinforced by more recent projects, such as the 2010 volume *Comfort Women*, issued in the Netherlands, which records an exhibition of photographs by Jan Banning, with text by Hilde Janssen, of “comfort system” survivors from Indonesia. These images are stunning close-ups – full-page

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁷ Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, “They Are Our Grandmas,” *Positions* 5, no. 1 (1997): 274.

portraits of the wrinkled, aged faces of eighteen subjects looking straight into the camera lens. The first sentence of the Dutch publisher’s bilingual back-cover copy announces, in English, “Raping women seems to be a normal byproduct of wars.”¹⁸ Only from the final eight pages, set in small type, of this more than eighty-page-long book, do readers learn that one so-called “comfort woman” after another was raped and enslaved as a minor. For example, one was “Recruited as [an] 11-year-old girl, transported to Borneo under pretext of available work and forced into prostitution for three years in a military brothel.”¹⁹

A short biographical entry for “Kasinem” from Central Java begins, “At age 13, Kasinem was summoned by the village chief and forced into prostitution by the Japanese in a military brothel in Solo. She received the Japanese name ‘Kanakanu’ and had to service three or four men every day . . . [in] the brothel, where another 30 women were kept.”²⁰ The conflation, in this latter instance, of a thirteen-year-old girl with “another 30 women” underlines the problem. To make visible the faces of the survivors from the former Dutch East Indies as they are now, still bearing witness and still demanding justice, is a powerful political act. Yet it also turns the audience’s gaze – quite literally, given the primacy of the photographic images – away from the words, which appear almost as an afterthought, that reveal the experiences of underage girls, who were subjected to the kind of sexual violation and exploitation forbidden by an agreement ratified by the Japanese government fully thirty years before the war in the Pacific.

Notwithstanding the emphasis of this Dutch project on, as its very title suggests, *Comfort Women*, a change in representation is now occurring. With new language and, what is more, with new visual images, this shift rightly brings to public attention the “comfort system” as a site of child sexual abuse and sex trafficking. In doing so, it both implicitly and explicitly rebuts the claims of deniers, who continue to insist that this was an undertaking in which Asian “women” exercised free choice and agency to become paid prostitutes. As the International Convention for the Suppression of White Slave Traffic made clear, where the subject is a “girl under age,” matters of so-called “consent” are irrelevant. Those who designed, ran, or otherwise maintained the “comfort system” were guilty of criminal violations of this Convention. As the plans for and administration of this system went to the highest levels of the Imperial Army and

¹⁸ Anon., “Back Cover Text,” of Jan Banning and Hilde Janssen, *Comfort Women/Troost Meisjes* (Utrecht: Ipsa Facto/Seltmann, 2010).

¹⁹ Jan Banning and Hilde Janssen, *Comfort Women/Troost Meisjes* (Utrecht: Ipsa Facto/Seltmann, 2010), 86.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

of the Japanese government, so, too, the responsibility went all the way to the top.

Before this change in representation could happen on an international scale, moving the focus from *women* as the victims of Japanese military sexual violence to a growing acknowledgment that this was often a crime against *girls*, a more general critical consciousness had to emerge about the importance of girlhood as a distinct category, especially in wartime. We can locate the beginnings of this evolution a decade ago with the Second International Policy Conference on the African Child, held in Addis Ababa in May 2006. The theme of this conference, sponsored by the African Child Policy Forum, was “Violence Against Girls in Africa.” Out of this forum came a report published by the International Committee of the Red Cross, *Violence Against Girls in Africa during Armed Conflicts and Crises*, which looked at the particular ways in which girls are vulnerable to being targeted and harmed, including through sexual violence. Its principal author, Florence Tercier Holst-Roness, asserted that “Humanitarian organizations should therefore pay greater attention to children, especially girls, in armed conflicts and local and national authorities should adopt specific measures to protect them.”²¹

Interest in what happens to girls in wartime did not end there, nor was it confined to an African context. In her 2010 study *Nimo’s War, Emma’s War: Making Feminist Sense of the Iraq War*, Cynthia Enloe, the prominent political scientist and feminist theorist, devoted an entire chapter to the experiences of adolescent Iraqi girls during the U. S. invasion and occupation, as well as during its equally violent aftermath. As she wrote, “In the last decade we have learned to pay a lot more attention to girls in war . . . [and] to beware of lumping girls and boys together as ‘children’ when we are trying to understand how wars are launched, how wars are waged, and how wars sputter to their often inconclusive ends.”²² During wartime, “peacetime inequalities” are exacerbated; “That is, when war breaks out, it does not start from an ungendered childhood blank slate.”²³ Enloe reminds readers, “Girls are more likely than boys to be internationally trafficked”; they are also “more likely than boys and men to be the wartime targets of sexual assaults.”²⁴ What happens to a girl

21 Florence Tercier Holst-Roness, *Violence Against Girls in Africa during Armed Conflicts and Crises* (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2006) 7. Accessed March 24, 2017. <https://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/report/violence-girls-conference-110506.htm>

22 Cynthia Enloe, *Nimo’s War, Emma’s War: Making Feminist Sense of the Iraq War* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 83.

23 *Ibid.*, 84.

24 *Ibid.*

matters, not only to her individually but, if she survives, to a nation as whole: “her memories and her lessons,” based on these experiences of violence, “are likely to influence her adult efforts to shape her country’s future,” for she is a “dynamic, complicated” participant in history.²⁵ In other words, the damage done to a girl will blight her homeland’s prospects.

Not long after the release of Enloe’s book, the African American pop singer, Beyoncé, had a huge international hit with her 2011 song, “Run the World (Girls).” No one should discount the importance of Beyoncé as a cultural barometer, reflecting major developments in the social climate that also affect political action. In the accompanying music video, Beyoncé led an all-female and unarmed group of dancers, who confronted male soldiers in uniform, as the lyrics celebrated the power of girls. The video was the creation of the Austrian-born Francis Lawrence, who went on to direct three of the four film adaptations of Suzanne Collins’s dystopic *Hunger Games* novels,²⁶ featuring a sixteen-year-old female protagonist forced to act as a gladiator-figure for a television audience that wishes to see children in mortal combat against one another. The success of the *Hunger Games* series, too, as both fiction and film from 2008 through 2015 tapped into a growing interest in the roles that girls occupy in war, whether as victims or as combatants. Simultaneously, the real-life plight of the Chibok schoolgirls, who were kidnapped by Boko Haram militants in Nigeria in 2014, became an international *cause célèbre* through the “Bring Back Our Girls” movement. Meanwhile in the U.S., the experiences of Liberian girl soldiers in 2003 inspired Danai Gurira to write her play *Eclipsed*, which opened on Broadway to enormous acclaim in 2015 with Lupita Nyong’o as the star. With this background of attention over the past decade to the fates of girls in armed conflict, we can begin to understand why the experiences of *girls as girls* within the “comfort system” have increasingly come to the fore as a subject for representation.

As these new images of World War II-era Asian girl victims and/or survivors circulate in a variety of media, they are altering how transnational audiences envision and conceive of this particular set of war crimes. Among the examples of works that have been changing the public’s understanding is a 2012 novel, published by Amazon Digital Services and sold as a Kindle book, by an American journalist, Roger Rudick. Titling his novel *Story of a Comfort Girl*, Rudick claims to have based this project on the firsthand accounts of survivors

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

²⁶ Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York: Scholastic, 2008); *Catching Fire* (New York: Scholastic, 2009); *Mockingjay* (New York: Scholastic, 2010).

collected by the “Council for Korean Comfort Women’s Issues”²⁷ (which is Rudick’s rendering of the name of an actual organization, the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan). Indeed, Rudick’s fictional protagonist, named “Ji In-Sil,” a seventy-year-old survivor, begins her first-person narration by saying that she has been inspired to share her history after seeing Kim Hak Sun testify on Korean television. The novel is, therefore, a blend of fact and imagination – as one would expect, with any work of historical fiction. Readers who know the published compilations of testimonies, such as *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*, edited by Keith Howard, or Sangmie Choi Shellstede’s *Comfort Women Speak: Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military*,²⁸ will recognize many of the details and situations, although these have been fleshed out and reshaped to make the narrative arc suspenseful and to allow various events to be assigned credibly to a single character.

Most significant, however, is that the central character is indeed a “comfort girl” – not a “comfort woman,” meaning an autonomous adult, with the legal capacity to make decisions for herself. She is only sixteen-years-old and living in Chinju, Korea, with her father up until the time when she and another adolescent are driven away and then forced aboard a ship by Japanese soldiers, who transport them along with other Korean girls to a military brothel in a location described only as “an island someplace off the coast of China.”²⁹ There, she is first raped by an officer and then used, month after month, by ordinary soldiers who pay in tickets. Her only recourse is to engage in small acts of defiance, many of which result in violent retaliation:

If a soldier said, take off your clothes, I would take off only one item of clothing and make him ask again. If a soldier said “lie down,” I did, but with my back to him, so he would then have to turn me over. One cruel soldier, named Honda, would slap me when I resisted like that. He would say: “don’t make me ask for everything!” Then he would hit my body and face. But it was worth the stings, to know he was perturbed by my actions. The more he complained, threatened, and hit, the more determined I became not to serve him easily. If a soldier asked for tea, I spat in it when he wasn’t looking. Sometimes I would take a handful of sand and, after they were asleep, put a little in their shorts. Or

²⁷ Roger Rudick, “Prologue,” *Story of a Comfort Girl* (Kindle edition, 2012), n.p.

²⁸ See Keith Howard, ed., *True Stories of the Korean Comfort women: Testimonies Compiled by the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan and the Research Association on the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan* (London: Cassell, 1995) and Sangmie Choi Shellstede, ed., *Comfort Women Speak: Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 2000).

²⁹ Rudick, *Story of a Comfort Girl*, ch.4.

some salt. If a soldier asked us to pleasure him, we always looked into his eyes with such fury.³⁰

Unlike her one close companion among the girls who are confined to this brothel, the protagonist survives to see the end of the war. When American forces bomb the Japanese military encampment, the soldiers abandon it, leaving the prisoners of the “comfort station” behind to fend for themselves. Eventually, Ji In-Sil is found by American soldiers who, however, have no interest in hearing about what was done to her or to the other girls. When she is at last able to return to Korea, she discovers that her beloved father was murdered, his property was confiscated and sold, and she is both literally and figuratively homeless. All that remains is “the pain of rape”:

It has been nearly 50 years since I left the comfort station. Yet every morning I wake up and I feel as if part of me is still there. I am always afraid. Always with that sickening feeling that my time, my body, my breath—nothing at all is my own. Anything that I have or that I am can be taken away. There is no line that can not [sic!] be crossed. No place where there is sanctity. Never have I known true peace since then.³¹

It is impossible to say whether Roger Rudick means us to regard this irreparable trauma as compounded by the young age at which the protagonist was subjected to the inhumanity of the “comfort system.” Nonetheless, readers are left with the sense of a life that was, in effect, ended before it began, followed by fifty years of suffering – not only *in* silence, but *because* of silence, as there was no one, until 1991, willing to listen to what had happened to a mere girl.

Drawing upon and fictionalizing many of the same testimonies as Rudick, the South Korean screenwriter and director Cho Junglae [a.k.a. Cho Jung-rae] has also put the issue of age squarely before the public in a film that was released commercially in 2016. In an interview conducted with Amy Qin of the *New York Times*, Cho has said that some of his research was done through conversations with the group of elderly survivors now living together at the House of Sharing, located in the province surrounding Seoul, to whom “he had become close . . . through his time volunteering” there.³²

The resulting film, which has been given the English-language title of *Spirits’ Homecoming*, begins in Korea in the year 1991, as an aging woman

³⁰ Ibid., ch.6.

³¹ Ibid., ch.27.

³² Amy Qin, “From Cho Junglae, A Film on Japanese Wartime Brothels,” *New York Times*, March 24, 2015. Accessed March 24, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/25/movies/from-cho-junglae-a-film-on-japanese-wartime-brothels.html?_r=0

working as a seamstress watches Kim Hak Sun testifying on television, even as the audience watches along with her. After this, the next images are dramatizations of the past, which place us in the year 1943 and in the rural countryside of Gochang, Korea. It is an idyllic pastoral world, and the cinematography romanticizes the landscape as green, lush, and unspoiled in a way that recalls the opening shots of Oliver Stone's 1993 *Heaven and Earth There*, a film set in wartime Vietnam, where such images also serve as a prelude to scenes involving the violent rapes and physical abuse by soldiers of a very young girl.

In these initial scenes from *Spirits' Homecoming*, the director emphasizes the representation of Jung-Min, the protagonist, as just on the verge of adolescence in 1943, but still as unmistakably a child. We see her and her friends playing hide-and-seek. She and two other girls quarrel over a bet that ends with her stripping them of the good luck charms that their mothers have sewn for them. She is chastised by her mother, who beats her with a switch and says threateningly, "Nothing will work out for you, and you will never get married."³³ But juxtaposed with this mother-daughter conflict is the loving, harmonious relationship of Jung-Min with her father, who calls her his "little puppy," and who gives her a piggy-back ride home through the verdant landscape. (Again, this is a relationship that seems to echo the bond between Le Ly and her adoring father in Stone's *Heaven and Earth*.)

Cho's final nostalgic image of a lost paradise, and of lost youth, has Jung-Min strolling down the road toward her home, while butterflies flutter around her. On the soundtrack, we hear a female voice plaintively singing the folk song "Arirang," which has long been identified with Korea's cultural heritage. Then, as Jung-Min's house comes into view, both she and the spectator see her parents kneeling on the ground, begging a group of soldiers not to take away their daughter. "Oh, what will become of a young child like you?" wails her mother, as she frantically prepares Jung Min to leave with the soldiers, and gives her a good luck charm made of fabric, insisting that keeping it with her will make her safe.

Throughout the rest of the film, viewers move frequently and abruptly between the years 1943 and 1991. In further scenes from 1991, another young girl becomes the focal point – a girl who was both subjected to violence and a witness to murder. Raped in her own home by an intruder, she then watched as he stabbed her father, who managed to kill the rapist, too, before dying. This traumatized girl, who has not spoken since, is brought by her mother to live with a woman *shaman*. There, she manifests her own shamanistic powers, as

33 Cho Junglae, director, *Spirits' Homecoming* (2016; Seoul, JO Entertainment).

someone who can see the dead and channel their words to the living. At the film’s conclusion, she will become the medium through which to reunite the spirit of the dead Jung-Min, killed by a Japanese soldier, with her friend, Young-Hee – who survived the “comfort system” – and thus bring peace to the latter. The elderly woman first seen watching the real-life televised testimony of Kim Hak Sun turns out to be Young-Hee, with whom Jung-Min was sent to a “comfort station” in Jilin, China, just over the border from Korea.

Most of the events that take place in 1943 in the “comfort station” are unrelievedly terrifying, and the viewers’ horror is exacerbated by the director’s emphasis on the age of the girls who are subjected to such brutality. We become spectators to the first assault, by the drunken commander of this military encampment, as he gloats over his prize – “A fourteen-year-old virgin. Nice.” When she tries to escape, he punches her repeatedly in the face until she is unconscious, then strips and rapes her. The camera soars above the cubicles of the “comfort station” and, in a panning shot, reveals similar beatings and rapes in every one of them.

Among the organizing themes of *Spirits’ Homecoming*, moreover, is the disposal of these girls when, because of physical illness or mental breakdowns, they become useless to the “comfort system” – at which point they are driven away in a truck and shot to death, their corpses burned in a pit filled with bodies clad in the Japanese kimonos that they must wear in the brothel. Using the image of these murdered girls’ spirits as butterflies, Cho will end the film with panoramic views of the Korean countryside, covered with large white wings fluttering, as clouds of butterflies are drawn toward their homes, while “Arirang” once again plays on the soundtrack. The final scene is a fantasy sequence that returns Jung-Min to her idyllic youth and to the arms of her parents, who are in the midst of preparing a feast outdoors. Then the camera rises to the mountain, which is covered in greenery, before the fade out.

Spirits’ Homecoming is an incendiary work. While Cho creates a wrenching scene of the elderly Young-Hee confronting callous Korean bureaucrats, when she goes to a government office in 1991 to register officially as a “comfort system” survivor, much of the film’s punch derives from the director’s unsparing focus on the sexual torture of very young girls by the Japanese military. In this fictionalized version of a “comfort station,” there is certainly no depiction of a Korean who is anything but an underage minor. Here, cinematic representation stands as a deliberate political challenge and, in particular, as a rebuke to the Japanese national revisionists, who continue to insist on the “comfort system” as having been built on prostitution by adult women, who were allegedly able to choose their own way of earning a livelihood.

Cho's film, which has enjoyed considerable commercial success in Korea and has been screened around the U.S. on a variety of college and university campuses, has been winning, as the saying goes, both hearts and minds. In the sphere of representation, as opposed to that of international tribunals, a victor is emerging. At the same time, the two-nation pact between Japan and the Republic of Korea appears to be in limbo. With the remaining survivors of the "comfort system" accepting neither Prime Minister Abe's version of an apology, nor the offer of money to be funneled through a foundation set up by the Korean government, it is hard to imagine what actions can or will go forward.

Perhaps more interesting, however, is the uncertain fate of another provision of the agreement – one that was a most surprising inclusion from the start. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported, when printing the full text of the original announcement released by the foreign ministers of both nations,

The Government of the ROK acknowledges the fact that the Government of Japan is concerned about the statue built in front of the Embassy of Japan in Seoul from the viewpoint of preventing any disturbance of the peace of the mission or impairment of its dignity, and will strive to solve this issue in an appropriate manner through taking measures such as consulting with related organizations about possible ways of addressing this issue.³⁴

This is very puzzling. The statue in question that has so "concerned" the Japanese government was installed in 2011 by the same activist group, the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, that for two-and-a-half decades has spearheaded the famous "Wednesday demonstrations" – weekly protests since 1992 by survivors and their supporters in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. Why would Prime Minister Abe's government focus exclusively on a mere statue as the chief problem? Why would it not demand an end to the Wednesday demonstrations instead? What is it about this 51-inch-tall inanimate bronze object alone, created by a Korean artist, Kim Unseong, that could make the sight of it such a flashpoint, such an irritant to the Japanese government, and such a bone of contention between nations?

Meant to memorialize the "comfort women," and positioned in a chair facing the Embassy of Japan as an emblem of their unsatisfied quest for justice, its subject is not, in fact, a woman at all. It is instead an image of a young girl wearing the clothes of a schoolgirl – barefoot, with short hair and hands folded, silently and impassively seated next to a second chair that is empty. There is nothing to indicate that the girl is suffering or has been injured in any way. But what is plain, nonetheless, is that she is a very young girl, an *underage* girl,

³⁴ *Wall Street Journal* Staff, "Japan-South Korea Statement on 'Comfort Women.'"

and thus an accusation in visual form of perhaps the worst war crime of all – i.e., child rape – as well as a reminder of the many violations of the 1910 International Convention for the Suppression of White Slave Traffic, throughout the “comfort system.” There is no ambiguity to this message in material form. Like the film *Spirits’ Homecoming*, the statue that looks across at the Embassy of Japan, and thus forces those inside the Embassy to stare back at it, embodies an important change in the terms of representation.

Whether Korean, Filipina, Indonesian, Chinese, or Taiwanese, the survivors of the “comfort system” almost surely will never get their wish for redress, for Japan will not admit legal responsibility or pay direct compensation. But there are other ways in which the victims and the survivors of the “comfort system” may see justice done. Even now, large segments of the population, especially younger people in the West, are still unaware of this history. In Fall 2016, when I taught the memoir *Comfort Woman* by Maria Rosa Henson,³⁵ the wrenching first-person account of a Filipina who was forced into a Japanese military brothel at age fifteen, an Asian American undergraduate at the University of Delaware wrote the following in an unpublished essay: “It is hard to believe that I have never learned about this issue until recently, in this class . . . I am greatly disturbed by the fact that this important part of history is left out of our textbooks.”³⁶ That lack of exposure will change.

Today, writers are creating novels about young girls in the “comfort system”; directors and screenwriters are making films about them; and copies of the statue that overlooks the Japanese Embassy in Seoul are proliferating and being exhibited everywhere from Sydney, Australia, to Washington, DC.³⁷ International outrage, generated by recognizing that the sexual exploitation of underage girls was endemic to the “comfort system,” is spreading. All over the globe, the sound of butterfly wings beating the air is rising. The spirits are coming home.

³⁵ Maria Rosa Henson, *Comfort Woman: A Filipina’s Story of Prostitution and Slavery Under the Japanese Military* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

³⁶ Judy Yang, “A History That Occurred,” November 17, 2016, 6–7.

³⁷ See, for instance, Danuta Kozaki, Nicole Chettle, and Staff, “Sydney ‘Comfort Women’ Statue Sparks Dispute Between Korean and Japanese Activists,” ABC News (Australian Broadcasting Corporation), August 1, 2016, accessed March 24, 2017. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-01/wwii-comfort-women-memorial-sparks-dispute-in-sydney/7676310>; and Armando Trull, “Statue on National Mall Honors Korean World War II Comfort Women,” WAMU American University Radio, December 8, 2016. Accessed March 24, 2017. <http://wamu.org/story/16/12/08/statue-national-mall-remembers-korean-world-war-ii-comfort-women/>

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