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Korean 'Comfort Women' of WWII: Cultural Trauma and Formation of National Identity (2021)

Rachel Adamek
Seattle University

Seattle University

Korean 'Comfort Women' of WWII: Cultural Trauma and Formation of National Identity

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Rachel Adamek

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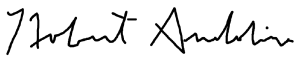

Dr. Robert Andolina, Instructor

Dr. Enyu Zhang, Reader

Abstract

For centuries, the peoples of the Korean Peninsula and the island of Japan have had a turbulent history; one of conflict and occupation, cultural and economic trade, and much more. However, many would agree that the most definable moment for current South Korean and Japanese relations is the Japanese Annexation and Occupation of Joseon Korea from 1910-1945. Japanese rule consisted of atrocities and war crimes, economic exploitation, erasure of Korean culture, and military sexual slavery; the victims referred to as ‘comfort women’. Japanese forced sexual slavery not only affected relations between the island and peninsula, but it also deeply affected Korean culture through means of trauma, and most recently, the search for justice.

Cultural trauma is a relatively new concept in the social sciences and has been explored and expanded upon by scholar Jeffrey C. Alexander. Studies have been done to examine trauma in decedents of comfort women survivors and have just begun to examine the history of comfort women’s role in contributing to national identity. However, to what extent and in what ways cultural trauma continues to persist in contemporary South Korea is unknown. To fully understand the magnitude of such trauma is incredibly important in understanding how cultural trauma works, and the ways in which it will persist and affect the future whether culturally, politically, or economically. For this reason, I studied the cultural trauma and national identity of the Korean 'comfort women' of WWII narrative to find out to what extent such history resonates with young Korean adults and is affecting their social and political perspectives towards Japan and its government. This study has shown that among all participants, the narrative of the comfort women plays a strong role in their sense of national identity. However, the presence of cultural trauma was limited to female participants, demonstrating that cultural trauma can be gendered and should be investigated further.

Introduction

For centuries, the peoples of the Korean Peninsula and the island of Japan have had a turbulent history; one of conflict and occupation, cultural and economic trade, and much more. However, many would agree that the most definable moment for current South Korean and Japanese relations is the Japanese Annexation and Occupation of Joseon Korea from 1910-1945. Japanese rule consisted of atrocities and war crimes, economic exploitation, erasure of Korean culture, as well as the focus of my research, military sexual slavery. In this study, I will be addressing the following questions:

1. Why is cultural trauma present in young Korean adults that are not direct descendants of comfort women survivors?
2. What narrative of the comfort women is being spread, and what are its underlying tones and implications?
3. How has this narrative affected participants' perspectives towards the Japanese government, and their sense of national identity as South Korean citizens?

This study has shown that among all participants, the narrative of the comfort women plays a strong role in their sense of national identity. The current comfort women narrative meets all theoretical criteria for being a effective vehicle for cultural trauma. However, the presence of cultural trauma was limited to female participants, demonstrating that cultural trauma can be gendered and should be investigated further. This thesis may be of interest to South Korean and Japanese policymakers, comfort women activists, scholars of history and anthropology, and the wider public as well. The findings from this study can support those seeking justice for the comfort women and demonstrate that the consequences of sexual slavery in Korea were not

isolated and are still present among today's and future generations, even after the remaining comfort women survivors pass away.

Literature Review

As other scholars have done, I am adopting two main perspectives when studying the history and experience of the comfort women and their movement of support; one of feminism and one of intersectionality (Min, 2003). From an intersectional analysis, it is important to recognize that a one-sided emphasis on Japanese colonialism and gender hierarchy as the main factor leading to the comfort women system will "misrepresent the feminist issue and misinterpret the comfort women’s experiences, and cannot fully explain their suffering” (Min, p. 938). Instead, it is an intersection of colonialism, sexism, racism, classism, and capitalist imperialism that will provide a holistic understanding of their true experiences (Min, 2003; Jun, 2019; Soh, 2008). Through this understanding, one must acknowledge the rendering of the Korean comfort women as "other"; especially through the lens of their colonized/postcolonial and patriarchal society. In my research, I will be attentive to the theoretical and methodological criticisms concerning the marginalization and representation of the “other”. I also want to acknowledge my identity as a white woman from the United States, that I have grown an academic environment based on western epistemology, and that the history, experience, and solidarity of comfort women survivors is one that I will never be able to fully experience or understand.

Cultural trauma, a relatively new and emerging concept in the social sciences, is well defined by Dr. Jeffrey C. Alexander, in his chapter of *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. It can be defined as a trauma that "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness,

marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander, 2004, p. 1). Acknowledging that every experience of trauma is different and though such effects have not been fully explored, their existence is a certainty. Such trauma can travel with a collectivity/culture through time, as narratives and attitudes are passed down, reconstructed, and reinterpreted. This diffusion plays a large part "in the course of defining national identity; national histories are constructed around injuries that cry out for revenge" (p. 8). The construction of such histories is incredibly important to examine; there is often a gap between "event and representation" (p. 11). The process of trauma storytelling "a complex and multivalent symbolic process that is contingent, contested, and sometimes highly polarizing" (p. 12).

Essential to my study and the wider discussion around cultural trauma is the emphasis and analysis of the specific ways in which such narratives are developed and shared. The pre-existing cultural understandings and contexts held by various (racial, ethnic, class, gender, etc.) groups and institutions result in multiple and varied interpretations of an event (Alexander, 2007, p. 3). "Social resources such as power, status, and money vitally affect, but do not by themselves determine" the influence of a narrative (p. 3). The most important factor in a specific interpretation to succeeding and becoming the dominant narrative of an event, Alexander highlights, is how effectively the interpretation is made and how it resonates with the broader collectivity. Such a process for an effective narrative and vehicle of cultural trauma includes 5 key elements and criteria. An effective narrative, according to Alexander "begins with defining, symbolizing, and dramatizing what "happened", and includes the establishment of the victims' identities, the perpetrators' identities, and finally, proposing a solution appropriate to the mentioned facts.

In a text published only a few years later titled *Remembrance of Things Past: China, the “Nanking Massacre” and Chinese Identity,* Dr. Alexander and his colleague Rui Gao explore how the narrative of the Nanking Massacre was constructed, fostered, and evolved by various groups, using the analytical method just mentioned. Immediately following Nanking Massacre, Western media took immediate action and broadcasted the news of this event globally. Alexander and Gao explain that these publications, having been written by and interpreted by a Western audience, were deeply informed by the existing cultural structures in 1937 (Alexander and Gao, p. 5). Such structures included the dualistic, Eurocentric division between “West” versus “East”. For Western observers, “the massacre was seen against the backdrop of Japan’s polluted rising sun, the shocking birth of an industrial japan, its early victories over China and Russia, its occupation of Manchuria and Korea, its militarization from the 1920s onward, all of which were constructed as an unprecedented, and unjustified, Eastern challenge to the West” (p. 5). Though the empathy for the Chinese victims and the ethical outrage fueled a great deal of the West’s urgent coverage of the Nanking Massacre, it was the Japanese threat to Western hegemony that spiked the need to raise awareness and condemn this horrendous event. In the west, after its initial coverage and discussions over hegemony, the Nanking Massacre quickly faded from view.

What was missing from the narration of the Nanking Massacre and was found in that of Pearl Harbor was the sense of collective identity and belonging. "When Americans themselves became the object of "Japanese perfidy”", the event was labeled a "day of infamy" and one that would live forever; "and it was, in fact, consecrated by the American people for the next fifty years" (p. 6). Though both the attack on Pearl Harbor and the Nanking Massacre were both tragedies, the death of hundreds of Americans in Hawaii "represents a mere asterisk in the

history of human perfidy, a blip compared to the truly horrendous massacres in Nanking that had occurred only slightly more than four years before" (p. 6). Alexander and Gao, through the comparison of how these two events were perceived in the U.S., strongly demonstrate that "it is collective identity that matters in the construction of trauma, and the scope of this identity depends on identifying with a putative trauma's victims" (p. 6). The large geographic, cultural, and political differences between the American and Chinese populations played a large role in perception.

Alexander’s theory is not without its criticisms, which I will highlight briefly and state why I will continue to use his framework of cultural trauma in my investigation. Sociologist Dr. Brian Steensland highlights that the structure and language of the book *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* seems to restrict the relationship between the traumatic event itself and the collective trauma and identity shared thereafter. Steensland calls Alexander's framework an "unapologetically social constructionist orientation to argue that events, even those on the scale of the 9/11 attacks, are not inherently traumatic", and that instead, it is exclusively narratives and "cultural templates through which they are experienced render them so" (Steensland, 2005, p. 1776). The risk that Steensland identifies with this framework is that it recategorizes and recharacterizes many historical tragedies, and "brackets the significance of other sources of subjective experience (p. 1777). Strictly following this completely non-essentialist, constructivist framework, events such as slavery in the United States and the Holocaust are not seen as traumatic for those who lived through them, seemingly delegitimizing their experiences. It is only after the creation of an African American identity during Reconstruction and the post-war narration of assault on the Jewish community that trauma was brought into existence. While this concern is valid, one must recognize the differentiation that Alexander is making between the

traumas of and after a tragic event. It is indisputable and beyond doubt that individuals experiencing and witnessing major crises develop trauma in deep, irreversible ways, and Alexander is not contesting this. Rather, from my interpretation of his work, mentions of the word 'trauma' almost exclusively refer to cultural trauma; the very nature of this concept calls for its origination to begin post-tragedy. The trauma of the events themselves provides the foundation for the narrative, and it is what parts of that foundation and how they are interpreted and relayed are the basis for cultural trauma. It is not devalued or delegitimated in the discourse of cultural trauma, rather such initial, event-specific trauma is different from the subject been explored.

Sociologist and Anthropologist Dr. Ben-Yehuda, in his review of the same text, introduces an issue with the definition of cultural trauma, in that it is a concept "so broadly defined that it includes too much and becomes a useless buzzword" (Ben-Yehuda, 2005, p. 1849). Respectfully, I disagree and would say that the broadness of cultural trauma's definition is one of its strengths. The newness of the concept necessitates room for nuance as it is increasingly being applied and analyzed to events globally and throughout history. It must also account for the many and diverse ways narratives are shaped and spread, especially in the context of decolonizing academia and de-centering absolutist western epistemologies.

In addition to Alexander’s theory of cultural trauma, I will also be drawing on the concept of genealogy as conceived by Michel Foucault. Through his essays such as *Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History*, and *Discipline and Punishment*, Foucault draws upon Nietzschean perspectives on historical studies and methods to create his very own genealogical approach to create a ‘history of the present’, or the use of “history as a means of critical engagement with the present” (Garland, 2014, p. 368). Foucault went into detail on this topic during his 1976 lectures

at the Collège de France titled *Society Must Be Defended*. He describes genealogy in his own terms, as “ a coupling together of scholarly erudition and local memories, which allows us to constitute a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that concept in contemporary tactics” (Foucault, p. 8). By studying both historical records of the comfort women situation, as well as working with South Korean individuals on the topic, I hope to channel this genealogical method in my own work and to carry out its intent “to problematize the present by revealing the power relations upon which it depends and the contingent processes that have brought it into being (Garland, p. 371).

Historical Context

Thanks to the work of historians and the many testimonial narratives of comfort women survivors, researchers have been able to better understand who these women were and are, and the experiences they were put through. Even though the Japanese had signed multiple international treaties in 1925 banning the traffic of women and girls, a provision allowed signatories not to apply the laws in their own colonies (Soh, 2008, p. 21). The term ‘comfort women’ was created as a euphemism by the Japanese government for the women forcefully mobilized into military sexual slavery. These women originated from diverse backgrounds – most from the Korean peninsula, as well as Chinese, Filipino, Taiwanese, and Dutch women among others (Kim, 2014). Due to Japan's colonial economic policy and class system, many young girls from jobless or landless families were made particularly vulnerable to forced mobilization (Min, 2003). By means of kidnapping, deceptive economic incentives, and volunteer opportunities, the Japanese military is estimated to have sexually exploited between 20,000 to 400,000 young women (Soh, 2008). Placed at ‘comfort stations’ around Japan’s span

of colonial rule, life for these women was miserable; characterized by beating, torture, and rape from as many as 30-40 Japanese soldiers per day (Lee, 2016).

For almost 50 years following the war, comfort women survivors had to live in prolonged suffering and silence - these women were essentially ‘othered’. The inability to vocalize their experiences and demand for justice was caused by an intersection of fundamental political, economic, social, and cultural power relations of the time (Soh, 2008). Prevalent were “strong patriarchal traditions and strong sexual double standards” (Min, 2003, p. 948)[1], including the stigmatization of *yullak yosong;* ‘defiled’ and ‘ethically fallen’ women (Soh, 2008). Survivors who belonged to lower-class families lacked funds and political power to push for justice, and even those from middle- or upper- class backgrounds remained silenced by the stigmatization of sex workers. Not only this, but the transitional politics of post-occupation South Korea contributed greatly to the reifying of the social stigmatization of sex labor in general. After the Korean War ended in 1953, hundreds of thousands of Korean women became involved in a state-controlled (though eventually privatized) prostitution industry in towns known as kijich’on, or American military ‘camp towns’ (Soh, 2008) The South Korean government set surveillance and control measures over these women and their bodies, in order to please the U.S. soldiers’ sexual appetites. Through the eyes of the states, these women had the ‘honor’ of not only satisfying these appetites, but also of being “patriots designated and actively enlisted by their national government to help promote U.S.-R.O.K security alliances (Moon, 1998, p. 143). However, the kijich’on women gained no respect for their work. From the viewpoint of the Korean National Assembly, South Korea’s unicameral legislature which was male-dominated from 1948-1989, the state-mandated sexual labor industry was “necessary and positive for national security and

[1] It is important to note that due to the lack of accessibility of information from North Korea, the term 'Korea' from this point onwards refers to the Republic of Korea (South Korea).

economic growth, respectively” (Soh, 2008, p. 224). They continued to be seen as defiled and soiled, reinforcing the gender and sex work stigmas even as kijich’on camps were seen as a part of essential foreign policy to foster national security and economic growth (Soh, 2008). Over the four decades of the American presence in Korean it is estimated that there were 250,000 to 300,000 kijich’on prostitutes, and as of the mid ‘90s, ninety-six kijich’on communities were supported by about 27,000 American troops. Though contemporary media focuses on the atrocities Japan has committed upon Korean women, the fact that the Korean military created and operated its own comfort women system has received little public attention. Future researchers may be interested in studying to what extent this is known to the Korean public, and if and how it is taught.

Given the predominance of “patriarchal customs emphasizing women's chastity, marriage, and childbearing/childrearing in Korea at that time", comfort women survivors faced extreme hardships; unable to stay in their parental homes because of the pressure to wed, higher rates of infertility and venereal diseases, and difficulty to survive economically (Min, 2003, p. 949). These factors, in addition to the presence of kijich’on camps, made it so that it wasn’t until the early 1990s that the comfort women issue was brought into the public eye; when survivors came forward with their stories, aided by Korean feminist leaders (Min, 2003; Lee, 2016).

The first surviving comfort woman to bring her story to the public was Japanese advocate Mihara Yoshie (1921-1993), in a 1986 radio interview for TBS in Japan; more than five years before Kim Hak-Sun came forward in South Korea (Soh, 2008). Discussing her experiences, she expresses her frustration about the years of silence:

> Not once, not one word! The deaths of numerous young women who served as ianfu[2], or purveyors of sex, have never been consoled [mourned] in the forty years since the end of the war. I feel like saying [to my fellow Japanese], you idiots [bakayarō], really!" (p. 197).

Korean comfort women survivors eventually followed after the South Korean government's transition to the Sixth Republic, a reformed and reconstituted government led by Roh Tae-Woo (노태우). Under the leadership of Roh, military power was extricated, and civilian supremacy reasserted (The Sixth Republic, n.d.). This included the development of the Democratic Liberal party, expansions of freedom of press, improved foreign relations, and recognition of university autonomy (Bedeski, 1994). Such reforms may have played a role in the emergence of Korean voices in the early 90's, once the Sixth Republic was firmly set into place.

1990 marked the establishment of the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (Korean council), a non-profit organization created to advocate for the rights of surviving comfort women, to call upon Japan to take responsibility and provide reparations, and to prevent wartime sexual violence (Korean Council, n.d.) One of the most notable activities of the Korean Council is known globally as the Wednesday Demonstration, a protest that has been held at noon each Wednesday in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul since January 8, 1992, when Japanese Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa visited Seoul. Since then, the group has had almost 1,500 organized protests. However, in the early days of the protests before its popularity grew, activists were met with some hostility by the Korean public; lingering effects of the deeply engrained patriarchal values in Korean society. In a radio discussion on

[2] *Ianfu* means comfort women in Japanese, pronounced similarly to 의안부, the Korean term for comfort women.

KBS world radio in 2014, head of the Korean Council, Yun Mi-Hyang (윤미향) described the initial resistance; “even office workers scoffed at us for advertising the shameful past. So women would sometimes hide their faces behind the signs or sunglasses”(KBS World Radio, para. 11). The movement eventually gained popularity as members of the public started to join, and as more and more comfort women survivors came out and shared their stories. 29 years later, people from all over Korea, young and old, have come to show their support. Ms. Yun happily remarks on the Wednesday demonstrations’ growth:

> “Now the younger generation joins the old ladies to sing of peace and tell the ladies how proud they are for speaking out, bringing smiles to the ladies’ faces. Now the former comfort women don’t wear sunglasses or hide their faces behind signs. They think of themselves as peace advocates or human rights activists. They’re here as history teachers for future generations” ”(KBS World Radio, 2014, para. 13)

The comfort women survivors’ memories soon spread transnationally; multiple monuments and memorials remembering these women have been constructed around the world in places such as the United States and Australia, highlighting the augmenting amount of international support for the women (Kim, 2014).

Since then, there has been a consistent and strong demand for recompense for victims, the release of all documents and materials relating to the issue, and a sincere apology from the Japanese government, for which they have responded vaguely (ECOSOC, 1996, p. 21). In 1992, for example, at the beginning of the justice movement, Japanese Chief Secretary Kono “issued a vaguely worded statement admitting the country’s involvement in the comfort system but *not* its legal responsibility”, in response to damning archival documents published by historian Yoshimi the year before (Jun, 2019). Shortly thereafter, resolutions calling for a formal apology were

passed by various nation-states and international organizations such as the United States (2007 H. Res. 121), the European Parliament (P6_TA(2007)0632), and the United Nations (UN) passed resolutions calling for an apology. In 1996, the UN published findings of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy from her mission to the Korean peninsula and Japan to observe, analyze, and report on the issue of wartime sexual slavery. In this report, the arguments of defense from the government of Japan are well articulated; that “the Geneva conventions of 12 August 1949 and other instruments of international law did not exist during the period of the Second World War and, therefore, the Government is not responsible for violating international humanitarian law” (UNHRC, 1996, p. 23). The Japanese government also “takes the firm stand that all claims have been settled under bilateral treaties”, such as the San Francisco Peace Treaty, “and that Japan is not legally bound to pay compensation to individual victims” (UNHRC, 1996, p. 24). However, after close analysis of international policy, these arguments are proven invalid. Ms. Coomaraswamy’s conclusive findings are expressed succinctly:

> "The special rapporteur is absolutely convinced that most of the women kept at comfort stations were taken against their will, that the Japanese Imperial Army initiated, regulated, and controlled the vast network of comfort stations, and that the Government of Japan is responsible for the comfort stations. In addition, the Government of Japan should be prepared to assume responsibility for what this implies under international law" (UNHRC, 1996, p. 22).

The most recent official attempt of reconciliation from the Japanese government took place in late 2015 when Prime Minister Abe expressed his "most sincere apologies and remorse", granting comfort women survivors $8.3 million for compensation and care (Jun, 2019). In their

official report, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA) states that this agreement “confirms that this issue is resolved finally and irreversibly”, and that the South Korean and Japanese governments will “refrain from accusing or criticizing each other regarding this issue in the international community, including at the United Nations” (MOFA, 2015, para. 4). The Korean public and many civil society organizations such as the Korean Council deemed this agreement insufficient due to its indirect and vague apology and the fact that comfort women survivors nor their supporters had been involved in the creation of the agreement (Jun, 2019; Ward, 2016). Shortly after his administration was established, South Korean President Moon-Jae-In (문재인) commented on the 2015 agreement, saying that “the reality is the majority of our people cannot emotionally accept the comfort women agreement”. Human rights experts at the UN stated reflected such worries, that the agreement “falls short of meeting the demands of survivors” (OHCHR, 2016, para. 6). It was highly recommended that Japan implement the recommendations made by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and revise the original agreement, changes including the recognition of the right of survivors to take part in remedy discourse, to provide further compensation and rehabilitative services, and to create an "unequivocal official apology recognizing full responsibility" (OHCHR, 2016, para 14). Since the 2015 agreement, tensions between the two nations have remained high. In addition to the comfort women situation, tensions between South Korea and Japan have also been heightened due to the ongoing Japanese-South Korea Liancourt Rocks[3] dispute and the trade that began around 2019, which many perceive to be partly a manifestation

[3] The Liancourt Rocks are a small group of islets in the Sea of Japan, known as Dokdo (독도) in Korean and Takeshima (竹島) in Japanese, whose ownership has long been disputed.

of historical grievances caused by the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula (Maizland, 2019).

Relations between the two nations recently experienced a development on January 8th, 2021, when a Korean court ruled that the Japanese government should compensate 12 out of the 16 remaining comfort women survivors registered with the Korean government 100 million won ($91,000) each (Choe, 2021). In a surprising reverse of their position following the 2015 agreement, the Korean Ministry of Affairs (still under the Moon Jae-In administration) responded to the court ruling, saying "we respect the court's judgement", while also noting that "the comfort women agreement in December 2015 was an official agreement between the two governments", and should be followed through by both parties (HanKook Ilbo, 2021). Public opinion of the sudden renewal of the agreement has yet to be gauged and it has yet to be determined such a renewal actually will take place. Leif-Eric Easly, professor of international studies at Ewha Women's University commented that this ruling may actually worsen Korean-Japanese relations. He expects that Japan will deem the ruling “an escalation in a pattern of weaponizing history and breaking international agreements” (Choe, 2021). This is extremely important to watch in the upcoming months, may have a large impact on the results of my study.

All of these factors combined the call for Japan to take responsibility for its actions is louder than ever. Many fear that in the near future, the Japanese government will dismiss the issue entirely, as there are fewer and fewer living comfort women survivors, and the women will not get the justice that they deserve.

Contemporary Discussion

Though there have not been many studies conducted that have focused on the comfort women problem's effects on the attitudes of the Korean public, the few that have been conducted provide glimpses into just how strong the transmission and diffusion of the trauma can be. It is clear that trauma has been passed through the survivors directly; a 2019 study conducted by multiple Korean universities assessed and interviewed direct descendants of comfort women survivors to assess the transgenerational transmission of trauma. These participants showed similar hyperarousal symptoms to their mothers when exposed to stimuli associated with comfort women. Additionally, almost all participants suffered from at least one psychiatric disorder such as major depressive disorder, panic disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder among others; telling signs of trauma transmission (Lee, 2019). Another study also demonstrates how trauma affects not only direct descendants of survivors, but also affects a national identity and culture as a whole. In a 2019 study led by Hana Jun of Indiana University, Korean primary school students were assessed on their affective historical empathy and national identity based on their understanding of comfort women. It was found that these children found strong personal and emotional connections with comfort women as “Koreans”; one of the most notable quotes from one child saying, “I think the comfort women are us” (Jun, 2019, p. 16). During the interviews, the children referred to these women as “our nation’s grandmothers” suffering from what “’we’ and ‘they’” did as nations, and also identified “themselves as future citizens of their nation” (p. 17). From observing these students, it is clear that the history and experiences of the 'comfort women' have become strongly engrained into Korean national identity. In her research publication, Jun importantly notes that it must be studied *how* these children came to develop such strong feelings of connection, whether from family narrative, school curricula, Korean media outlets, and more. The findings from these studies are incredibly important to my research

and the discourse of comfort women, in that they demonstrate that "the repercussion of the comfort women trauma is not confined to the victims themselves, and it would not be over even inf all the remaining survivors pass away" (Lee, 2019, p. 253).

Research Design and Methods

To answer my research question, I have conducted exploratory and applied research using mostly primary research and using secondary research as a foundation for my work and analysis, as summarized in the literature review above. This research is exploratory in that there are few existing frameworks and theories surrounding the cultural trauma of comfort women. I aimed to identify its impacts and predictive power. It is applied in that its findings may contribute to future discussions and agreements between the Korean government, activists, survivors, and the Japanese government.

Having solicited IRB approval through Seattle University, starting in early April I began to recruit participants for a survey; 5-10 young Korean adults of all genders residing in Seoul and Busan, the two highest-populated cities in the country. Ideally, I would have interacted with those in rural areas as well, but due to time and accessibility constraints, I have focused on urban areas where the public voice is more condensed. The selected participants are direct descendants of comfort women survivors, as such research has already been conducted and has demonstrated the transmission of trauma in this population (Lee, 2019). My participant age group consisted of those 18-25 years old, international age (not Korean age)[4]. To select and contact participants, I used the connections I have with young men and women in Seoul and Busan, who have already

[4] In this system known as lunar age or East Asian age reckoning, system people are born at the age of one, and age one year add the beginning of the Lunar year (or the Gregorian calendar year, common in South Korea), rather than their anniversary of birth. It is common for someone’s age to be one to two years older than in the international age system.

consented and willed their efforts. I requested that they seek out others who may be interested in participating as well, ideally reaching a more diverse sample in terms of socioeconomic status, education level, etc. I am aware that this selection method may have limited my research and introduced selection bias; in that my ability to randomize participants is very limited, and that they may only be from certain social groups and may not reflect the entire target population.

After contact and completion of consent forms, each participant was sent a survey about their background and experiences with the narrative of comfort women. The survey questions were presented in both English and Korean, and participants had the choice of responding in the language of their choice. I used two particular platforms to communicate with participants; Kakaotalk and Google. Kakaotalk is the main application used in South Korea for texting, calling, and video chatting, so it provides the most accessibility for connections and communications outside of the survey themselves. Consent forms were sent and received by email, and the survey was conducted using Google Forms.

When translating these questions to ask in the surveys and focus groups, I worked closely with native Korean speakers to make sure that the language is as neutral, clear, and professional as possible. During the process of translating and analyzing survey responses, a Korean-English speaker was present in order to ensure clear communication with participant and assist with the interpretation and accuracy of statements and ideas that are outside my Korean language abilities. All information collected is confidential. I have collected direct identifiers of the participants (name of participant, age, and location), but I will not use this information in any written report or oral presentation. After the study, I will erase all identifiers from my interview notes. There was no sensitive information collected; and participants were fully aware that they were under no obligation to answer all questions.

Researching with a Feminist framework, I prioritized the use of topic guidelines rather than narrowly defined questions to identify and evaluate nuances of social phenomena and gender relations (Beetham, 2007). Taking an intersectional approach, I framed my questions and direct conversation under the knowledge that “colonization, gender, and class were inseparably toed together to make the lives of Korean comfort women extremely miserable” (Min, 940). In the survey, I asked questions related to how the history of comfort women was portrayed by the government, media, schools, and families and how it has been carried with them, their experience with their gender and such history, their perspective of the Japanese government and if, when, how, and why it has changed. Additionally, I asked participants to gauge their perceived importance of the issue, currently and looking towards the future. The questions as they appear in the survey can be found in Appendix A.

I analyzed participants’ responses and searched for trends and indicators in their answers (such as political participation, education, and views on gender relations) as it relates to the transmission of trauma and formation of national identity, to determine to what extent has the comfort women situation become intertwined with the individual and the group. I examined the use and tone of language in responses, and if their linguistic choice indicates a sense of “us” and “them”, as well as other patterns that I may not foresee. I applied my findings to Alexander’s theory of cultural trauma, examining the ways in which the participant’s sentiments towards and narratives of comfort women demonstrate the presence of cultural trauma and the criteria needed for an effective narrative. Collected responses were used to synthesize a potentially shared perspective of young Korean adults on the comfort women issue, how and if it translates to an effect on their sense of national identity and their attitudes towards Japan.

Evidence and Analysis

Evidently in all of the participant's responses, a consistent narrative of the comfort women's experiences was present. According to participants, each first learned about the comfort women issue around the age of 13, through lessons and government-issued textbooks at school as well as through the media (internet news, tv broadcasts, and movies). A narrative focusing on national identity dominated their study collective narrative and language used by the participants makes distinct Alexander's 5 criteria for an effective narrative of cultural trauma. When examining narrative, one must examine the nature of the pain, the nature of the victim, the relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience, and the attribution of responsibility (Alexander, p. 13-15).

The first (1) criterion, stating the nature of the pain, was consistent in all responses. When asked to describe the history and experiences of comfort women, all participants showed a thorough and accurate understanding of the nature of Japan's military sexual slavery system, including not only forced recruitment, but also voluntary recruitment under the guise of an employment opportunity. Participant's emphasized the physical and emotional violence inflicted upon the comfort women, describing it using terms repeatedly such as "inhuman" and "cruel", among others. Some participants included the silence of comfort women survivors after the colonial era, noting the role of deeply embedded patriarchal roles and values in Korean society. However, no respondents mentioned the impact of kijich'on camps, and the presence of a South Korean state-mandated prostitution industry. Because respondents participated in an online survey, I was unable to ask follow-up questions regarding their awareness of this part of Korean history. It appears that this history has been kept outside of the narrative, in that though it is an

important part of gender relations in South Korea, it may hinder its effectiveness as a tool of fostering a sense Korean solidarity and community around the comfort women issue.

Participants showed no variation when identifying the perpetrator (2), of the comfort women system as Japan, specifically the Japanese government. The majority of participants made sure to make this distinction clear; often using the term ‘Japanese government’ instead of merely ‘Japan’ to avoid any risk of generalization. “Koreans generally have anti-Japanese sentiment. So do I”, a participant stated, “but I don’t think it’s right to hate or despise the entire Japanese people”. Nonetheless, the use of “us” vs “them” was present throughout all responses, consistent with the similar findings in Jun’s study of primary Korean school students (Jun, 2019). In their response to a question regarding their view of Japan’s past reparational efforts, one participant explained that, “We don’t want monetary things, we don’t want huge rewards. We just need them to truly understand our hearts and give a true apology about trampling out lives”. This language demonstrates that in relation to the comfort women issue, the Korean public in addition to comfort women survivors feels directly victimized and deserving of proper amends by the Japanese government.

In addition to a clear identification of the perpetrator, all participants identified the victims (3) as Koreans, not only referring to the comfort women themselves but the people of Korea in general. Participants did not, however, acknowledge the multiple and diverse origins of comfort women (Taiwan, Philippines, etc.). This reflects yet another finding found in Jun’s study. Though Jun’s participants were aware that there were non-Korean comfort women, when asked to select photos to explain comfort women in a mock international conference, none decided to use the photo of a Dutch comfort women survivor. This decision, described by one participant, was made in order to “focus on our national victims. The reason we do this now is to

provide an apology and reflection to our national victims first, and then, to others…” (p. 12). In addition, participants indicate any active interest in learning more about non-Korean comfort women.

The omission of kijich’on camps as well as comfort women of other nationalities in participants’ narratives solidifies the victim and perpetrators identity; popular narratives including such parts of history may not have been as effective due to the ambiguity of these identities; the victims being women all over East Asia and the Pacific Islands, the perpetrators being the Korean government and the American military in addition to the Japanese government. The demand for justice would be exponentially more complex and difficult if recompense is demanded from multiple nations, including Korea itself. The multiplicity and ambiguity of the perpetrator’s identity it would also make it harder to form an understanding of ‘us vs them’, critical in narratives of cultural trauma. In addition, such a narrative would not play as strong of a role in the formation of national identity, if comfort women of other nationalities were to be included. The omission of these many women from the mainstream South Korean narrative frames the comfort women issue as a national and ethnic issue; making it easier for Koreans to identify with victims and to share in their pain while forming a sense of solidarity and opposition towards the Japanese government. Some participants’ briefly mentioned the “other issues not yet resolved between Japan and South Korea”, alluding to things such as the trade dispute and disagreements on the handling of North Korea. One participant noted, that as a Korean citizen, “I feel like I’m not being respected”

All participants demonstrated that the narrative of the comfort women plays a solidifying role in their identity of South Korean citizens, and that it is a national issue founded upon irreversible harm. However, there was a significant disconnect between the men’s and women’s

responses regarding their personal experiences with the comfort women history, and their ability to identity with the victims (4). Gender identity played a significant role in the connection between the respondents and comfort women survivors. In questions throughout the survey, female participants expressed stronger sentiments and a higher sense of importance towards than male participants. When asked about her relationship to the comfort women victims, a female participant stated that, “I am heartbroken. Maybe if I were born in those days, it would have happened to me too”. In response to a later question, the participant explained that “I understand the pain of the comfort women as a woman”. Another woman participant noted “how women can be treated with insult for a long time in a sexual way”. The ability to relate to the dangers and oppression that women during the Japanese occupation faced and those that women in Korea today have to face is instrumental in the development and effectiveness of empathy. This may foster a more accurate and intense understanding of pain and struggle the comfort women had to face than male respondents, who, on the broad basis of gender identity, would not be able to the same degree. This fact was acknowledged by one of the male participants, where he stated that “I can’t sympathize with everyone, but I feel a lot of sadness and respect [for the comfort women]”.

Both male and female participants identified the comfort woman issue as one of great importance. However, tonal differences indicate a higher perception of importance among women than men. “It’s a part of [Korean] history”, a female participant noted, ”and there are so many things that haven’t been fully resolved yet”. Another stated that the history of the comfort women is “an indelible pain and [source of] anger for the people of Korea”. However, a male participant described the comfort women issue as “a problem that even Koreans are not interested in very deeply”. It appears that gender identity has an effect on not only the

relationship to victims, but also on participants gauge of the comfort women issue as a social and political issue.

Finally, responses indicated a common proposed solution (5) to the comfort women issue. Responses from all 8 participants confirmed that the young generation views Japan’s past attempts for reconciliation inadequate, and that a proper apology is most called for. Respondents described these past attempts as “insincere” and “shameless”, one participant explaining that even after a past apology, “there is always absurd remarks or abusive language that reverses it. Eventually it comes down to feeling like they are joking”. In response to the monetary reparations that Japan has made, the shared sentiment between participants was that “”special” or “financial compensation can never be accepted as an apology”. Rather, participants demand something that is “not material”. They ask for a “true apology”, one that is “more sincere”.

The narrative of the comfort women, as told by the young Korean adults that participated in this study, meets all of Alexanders criteria for an effective narrative to house and to carry cultural trauma. However. The ability of female respondents to identify more strongly with comfort women victims suggests that cultural trauma is more or solely present among young Korean women. Cultural trauma may still be present among young Korean men, though to a lesser extent. National identity may be a stronger driving force of the interest and participation of men in the comfort women history and movement.

Conclusion

The results of my study have confirmed my thesis that the trauma of the comfort women is not isolated to the victims themselves, nor solely their descendants; that it resonates and has become intertwined with the much of the Korean public through cultural trauma, particularly

with young Korean women. Participant’s responses have illuminated a clear narrative through which comfort women history is told; meeting Alexanders’ five requirements for an effective narrative in spreading national identity and cultural trauma. The completion of these criteria was done by the omission of various historical factors and events, such as the presence of kijich’on camps and the diverse national backgrounds of comfort women in the wider military sexual slavery system, in order to create a clearer sense of perpetrator, victim, and the traumatic event itself. Though the narrative of the comfort women plays a large role in creating a sense of national identity for both Korean men and women, it appears that the transmission of cultural trauma is limited to the women, due to their ability as women to more closely relate to the identities and gendered experiences of comfort women victims. This result calls for the further study of the relationship between gender identity and cultural trauma.

Ideally, this study would have had a greater number of participants from all over Korea, including rural areas to prevent selection bias and to better reflect the South Korean narrative of the comfort women history. This study would also be improved by adding opportunity for follow-up questions from the researcher to the participants, whether through survey or interview form, to explore areas of nuance and to ask questions that the researcher was unable to predict before publishing the initial survey.

These conclusions can be used and applied to future conversations and agreement-making between the two nations, giving the negotiating parties a better sense of the lasting effects of the comfort women situation, as well as the ability to provide a more precise, truthful, and holistic agreement. Reconciliation of such atrocities must involve "self-reflexivity, acknowledgment, redistributive justice, corrective mechanisms, and a final movement of forgiving"; and of these, I aim to contribute to acknowledgment and redistributive justice (Kim,

2014). Additionally, this study can also be used as an indicator to better predict South Korean-Japanese relations. The participants, being young adults have or are finishing their education, are entering the workforce, and have the ability to fully engage in societal and political affairs. They are an emerging and influential population that will be key in the future relations between the two countries as it relates to comfort women. Participants’ responses have indicated political relations between Japan and South Korea will remain tense for the foreseeable future, and that the nations may experience more gridlock in creating an agreement of reparations that the South Korean government and public will accept. Moreover, I hope my research will aid in motivating an appropriate response from Japan, for “the act of remembering affirms a society’s positive identity in the world of globalizing memory and human rights discourse” (Kim, 2014). Lastly, I hope to positively contribute to such discourse, as well as discussions around the transmission of memories, and reconciliation. I hope to provide an example or framework for those studying narratives of cultural trauma and national identity, and those fighting for the justice of those whose memories have been long ignored or denied.

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APPENDIX A

Google Forms Anonymous Survey Questions

Please answer each question below as thoroughly as possible based on your experience with the ‘comfort women’ history. You may skip any question on this survey and may request to be removed from this study at any time.

1. What is your age? (International Age)

   ___ (Fill in)

2. What is your gender identification?

__ Man

__Woman

__Non-Binary

__Prefer to self-describe, below

_____(Fill in)

__Prefer not to say

3. In your own words, describe the ‘comfort women’ and their experiences during the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula.

_____ (Fill in)

4. How old were you when you first learned about the ‘comfort women’ history?

_____ (Fill in)

5. Through what channels did you learn about the ‘comfort women’? For example, school textbooks, news broadcasts, interpersonal dialogue, etc.).

_____ (Fill in)

5.a For each applicable: what messages did you feel were trying to be communicated to you?

_____ (Fill in)

6. What terms do you commonly refer to the women as? (e.g., ‘comfort women’, ‘sexual slavery victims’, etc. What do others use?

   _____ (Fill in)

7. When you think about the ‘comfort women’ and what they went through, what kind of thoughts come to mind?

   _____ (Fill in)

8. In what ways if any do you believe the ‘comfort women’ history has impacted your:

   I. Outlook on life

   II. Gender experience

   III. Identity as a South Korean citizen

   _____ (Fill in for each)

9. How would you describe the current political relationship between South Korea and Japan in general?

   _____ (Fill in)

   a. In relation to the comfort women issue?

      _____ (Fill in)

10. Has learning about and discussing the ‘comfort women’ effected your view of the Japanese government?

    _____ (Fill in)

11. Do you feel Japan has offered adequate reparations to the comfort women survivors? If so, why, and if not, what do you think should be done?

    _____ (Fill in)

12. Have you participated in ‘comfort women’ activism? (e.g. Wednesday protests, sharing news online, donating to organizations, etc.)

13. Do you think the comfort women issue is important? Will it be important in the future? Why or why not?

    _____ (Fill in)

14. Is there anything else you’d like to mention?

    _____ (Fill in)