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THE KOREAN “COMFORT WOMEN”

Movement for Redress

Chunghee Sarah Soh

On February 6, 1996, the United Nations pronounced its conclusive condemnation of Japan for forcing tens of thousands of women—referred to as “comfort women”—into sexual slavery for Japan’s imperial troops during World War Two. In her report to the U.N. Human Rights Commission, Radhika Coomaraswamy, the U.N. special investigator into violence against women, concluded that Japan must admit its legal responsibility, identify and punish those responsible for the sex slavery during the war, compensate the victims, apologize to the survivors in writing, and teach its students this hidden chapter in Japanese history.¹ It is notable that the U.N. recommendations resemble so closely the demands that the Chōngdaehyōp (Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan [KCWS]) has made consistently since its inception in 1990.²

The issues involved in the “comfort women” problem, one may suggest, transcend the realm of “militarized prostitution” into that of “sexual slavery” based on gender, class, ethnicity, and the state. Coerced sexual labor, that is, sexual slavery, was inflicted primarily upon lower class young females of colonial Korea by imperial Japan during the Pacific War, but Japanese women and women of other occupied territories such as Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Burma, and Thailand were also used as “comfort women.” There is no way to determine precisely how many women were forced to serve in

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1. *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 7, 1996; *Han'guk Ilbo*, February 8, 1996.

2. Chōngdaehyōp is a Korean acronym for the Chōngsindae munje taech'aek hyōpūhoe (the KCWS).

this way but estimates range from 70,000 to 200,000, about 80% of whom were Korean.³

It is important to note at the outset that the majority of the former Korean “military comfort women” (*chonggun wianbu* in Korean, *jugun ianfu* in Japanese) were systematically and often coercively recruited by the Japanese forces under the banner of Chōngsindae (“Voluntary” Labor Service Corps). They were not camp-following prostitutes, as the euphemistic phrase “military comfort women” might suggest. In this article, I use the terms “military comfort women” and “comfort women” interchangeably to follow the conventional usage, and the quotation marks surrounding these terms are maintained throughout the text in order to underline the hidden nature of sexual slavery in the euphemistic phrase “comfort women.”

The purpose of this article is to deepen understanding of the complex issues involved in resolving the “comfort women” problem by concentrating on the evolution and impact of the Korean “comfort women” movement for redress. The focus is on the Korean case because Korean women constituted the great majority of the violated women and because the efforts of women leaders and former “comfort women” in South Korea were essential in bringing this issue to the attention of the international community.⁴ An analytical perspective that considers the intersections of gender, class, ethnicity, sexual culture, and the role of the state will provide the key to understanding not only the phenomenon of the “military comfort women” itself, but also the unfolding of the recent public debate on the issue and the domestic and international processes involved in resolving it.

Chōngsindae, the “Voluntary” Labor Service Corps

The institution of military “comfort stations,” where sexual needs of Japanese soldiers were met under the supervision of the state, was in place by early 1932 at the latest. It existed in Japan and abroad wherever Japanese troops were stationed until the end of the Pacific War in 1945.⁵ In view of the fact that prostitution was licensed and actively regulated by the state in imperial Japan, the provision of “comfort women” for the military may be seen as an

3. *Han'guk Ilbo* (Hawaii edition), August 26, 1992.

4. Materials obtained in 1992 from Lee Hyo-chae, co-chair of the KCWS, formed the initial source of data for this work. Additional data were gathered from a survey of the literature and media reports and in interviews conducted during two trips to South Korea in 1995 with former “comfort women” and with leaders of the KCWS seeking reparations on their behalf.

5. Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Jugun ianfu Shiryōshu* [Collection of reference materials on military comfort women] (Tokyo: Ōtsuki Shoten, 1992); “Documenting the Truth: The Japanese Government and the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Boston, Massachusetts, March 1994.

instance of state control over soldiers' sexual behavior.⁶ Since Korea was under Japanese colonial rule from 1910 to 1945, Japan chose to use Korean women as sex laborers while urging Japanese women to marry young and bear many children to fulfill "the national mission of motherhood."⁷

Japan began drafting Korean women in full force from around 1937 when its army invaded China and the soldiers raped and murdered tens of thousands of Chinese women in Nanjing. At that time, the Japanese army had "comfort women" from Japan, who were mainly former professional prostitutes and some of whom had venereal diseases. In order to combat the spread of disease and prevent sexual crimes by Japanese soldiers against the women of occupied territories, the military leadership suggested that the government recruit unmarried young women from colonial Korea (presumed to be virgins and therefore free of sexually transmitted disease) as "comfort women" for the Japanese army. Japan also began an active assimilation program for Koreans in 1937, which included the "Pledge of the Imperial Subjects," hoisting of the Japanese national flag, worship of the emperor, and attendance at Shinto ceremonies. Other policies followed, requiring changing of Korean names into Japanese and creating a new national identity for the colonized Koreans. The government thus established the legal grounds for mobilizing Koreans into its imperialist war and in 1939 began to enforce the all-out systematic mobilization of Koreans of both sexes for the war effort as members of the Chōngsindae (lit., voluntarily submitting-body). Tokyo sent Korean laborers to Japan, Sakhalin, and many parts of Asia. In fact, the existence of sizable Korean communities in China, the former Soviet Union, and Japan is a vivid legacy of Japanese colonial rule.

As the Sino-Japanese War escalated into the Pacific War in 1941, the drafting of Korean laborers became more organized and compulsory. Almost six million Koreans were drafted as soldiers and/or forced laborers throughout the war, representing approximately 20% of Korea's population. It is important to note that although the drafting of women was made legal by 1942, female recruitment was nominally carried out on the basis of "voluntary" participation. This is why the Japanese government persistently denied until 1993 any coercion in the recruitment of Korean women into the Yōja Chōngsindae (Women's Voluntary Labor Service Corps). Although some women in the Chōngsindae volunteered to work in factories and hospitals, many were recruited with false promises of good compensation for their labor in these facilities and then sent to the military comfort stations. Other women were

6. See Sheldon Garon, "The World's Oldest Debate? Prostitution and the State in Imperial Japan, 1900-1945," *American Historical Review*, 98:3 (1993), pp. 710-32.

7. Miho Ogino, "Abortion and Women's Reproductive Rights: The State of Japanese Women, 1945-1991," in *Women of Japan and Korea: Continuity and Change*, Joyce Gelb and Marian Lief Palley, eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), p. 71.

coerced into joining the Labor Service Corps, and still others were simply abducted. Even school girls between the ages of 12 and 14 from Cholla Province were conscripted as sex slaves.⁸

Thus, the term *Chöngsindae* has come to mean “military comfort women” in the minds of the general public in Korea because most of these women were conscripted under the banner of that organization. South Koreans today generally refer to the surviving “comfort women” as *Chöngsindae halmöni* (grandmothers), while the official reference term is *Ilbonkun wianbu* (comfort women for the Japanese troops). The activities of the KCWS to date have concentrated on the issues of “military comfort women” to the discontent of those men and women who were conscripted into forced labor at various war-related industries.

Sexual Culture and the Political Economy of Sex

Although factors such as the lack of documentary evidence and the reluctance of surviving “comfort women” to reveal their past may be offered to explain the long silence over the issue of sexual slavery within Korean society, I suggest a major factor at the heart of the matter is the cultural legacy of a patriarchal society, which has maintained double standards for sexual behavior for men and women. In the traditional Korean patriarchy, the sexual culture condoned, if not encouraged sexual freedom for men (infidelity if married), while women’s sexuality was rigidly controlled by standards of virginity/chastity. Unmarried women had to maintain their virginity until marriage and widows were expected to be chaste. Regardless of the individual circumstances, women who lost their chastity were considered sullied, made to feel ashamed, and likely to be ostracized even by their own families. (Even a Christian church deemed a Dutch woman unfit to be a nun because she had been forced to serve as a “comfort woman.”)

In this cultural context, many women committed suicide after being raped or in order to avoid being raped during the two Japanese invasions of Korea during the Chosön Dynasty in the late 16th century. Their deaths were recognized as honorable deeds of virtuous women (*yöillyö*). It is remarkable that after the Japanese retreated and King Sönjo conferred awards on outstanding loyal subjects (*ch’ungsin*), filial sons (*hyoja*), and virtuous women (*yöillyö*), the number of women exceeded by nearly five times the combined number of

8. Study by the Korean National History Compilation Committee, reported in *Korea Times* (Los Angeles edition), June 15, 1992.

the two male categories receiving the royal commendation.⁹ In recent years, young male criminals in South Korea have taken advantage of this traditional view by raping women in front of members of their families in order to ensure that the robbery would not be reported to police. The media refers to these raping robbers as “family-destroying criminals” (*kajöng p’agoebȫm*) because of the shattering impact of their behavior on the viability of the family; the raped woman is now sullied in the eyes of her husband, herself, and other members of the family, which may eventually break up under the psychological strain.

In the sexual mores of the Korean patriarchal family, then, it is understandable that the survivors of sexual slavery wished to conceal and forget their tragic past lives as “comfort women,” if only to avoid the shame they would bring to their families. Some of these women actually committed suicide, and the aging survivors were resigned to keeping their deep *han* (resentment and anger) to themselves—until 1991 when Kim Hak-sun came forth to testify to her life as a “comfort woman.” The majority of Korean “military comfort women” seemed to have come from poor families in rural farming areas and had little formal education; even if they had wanted to redress the injustice done to them, they had little means to right the wrongs they suffered. Customarily, it is women of poor families who are the first to be exploited to satisfy the presumably uncontrollable sexual appetites of men with wealth, weapon, or power. It is no surprise, therefore, that the Japanese imperial forces targeted women of poor, rural families in their “slave hunt” expeditions.¹⁰

When women activists finally raised the issues of the Chöngsindae, the initial response of the South Korean government was to ignore them. The ostensible reason for the government’s silence was the lack of documentary evidence on which to press charges against Japan, since the Japanese government had destroyed most of the records relating to “comfort women.” Besides, the 1965 normalization treaty between South Korea and Japan, which did not include any debate on the issues of the Chöngsindae, foreclosed the Korean government from making any further claims for reparations for damages incurred during the colonial period. Nonetheless, the way the South Korean government handled the demands of women activists on the issue of “military comfort women” can be understood by considering not only the patriarchal culture context of androcentric sexism but also by traditional elitist attitudes in dealing with social injustice inflicted upon the poor and the

9. Interview with Chung Sei-hwa, president of the Korea Women’s Development Institute, August 29, 1995; Kim Ok-gil et al., *Han’guk yösöngsa* [History of Korean women] (Seoul: Ewha Womans University, 1972), p. 401.

10. See, for example, Yoshida Seiji, *Watashi no Senso Hanzai: Chosenjin Kyosei Renko* [My war crimes: The forced draft of Koreans] (Tokyo: San’ichi Shobo, 1983).

powerless in Korean society. Opinions expressed by a former Korean ambassador to Japan illustrate the point. He was reported in the media as stating that the investigation of the Chŏngsindae issue was “unimportant” and questioning the veracity of statements by these women from poor families in rural areas. The adverse response was such that he had to visit the KCWS to explain the “misunderstanding” of his statements.¹¹

Moreover, economic development policies of the South Korean government since the early 1960s have included the exploitation of young women not only as cheap laborers at manufacturing companies but also as sex workers in international tourism. To help earn foreign currency, the government has condoned, if not openly promoted the commoditization of sex by using young women as *kisaeng* (professional female entertainers) for foreign male visitors. The *kisaeng* party became so popular among male Japanese tourists that a national women’s organization in Japan sent a letter of protest to the Korean tourism association in 1973.¹² In addition, the continued presence of U.S. troops in South Korea has unequivocally contributed to the creation and maintenance of the localized sex industry around military bases. Ironically, the media still use the word *wianbu* (“comfort women”) to refer to the women who cater to the sexual desires of American troops. The sexual violence against contemporary Korean “comfort women” by American soldiers has been reported in the Korean mass media from time to time,¹³ but the unequal terms in the Status of the Forces Agreement (SOFA) and the low social status of the women involved in sex crimes committed by the U.S. military have combined to help the criminals get away unpunished. The exploitation of women’s sexuality as a commodity prospers under the political economy of transnational capitalism in contemporary South Korean patriarchy.

The Chŏngsindae Movement

The only war crimes trials against sexual slavery that have been held involved a small number of interned Dutch women in Indonesia in 1948, and those trials ignored the same ordeals suffered by Indonesian women. For more than four decades after the Pacific War, none of the affected nations in

11. *Han’guk Ilbo*, January 12, 1993.

12. See Han’guk Kyŏhoe Yŏsŏng Yŏnhaphoe [Korean church women united], *Kisaeng Kwan’guang* [Tourism] (Seoul: Author, 1983); Matsui Yayori, “Why I Oppose Kisaeng Tours,” originally published in Japanese in 1974 and excerpted in *International Feminism: Networking Against Female Sexual Slavery*, K. Barry, C. Bunch, and S. Castley, eds. (New York: International Women’s Tribune Center, 1984), pp. 64–72.

13. See Lee Jin-sook, “The Murder of Yoon Geum Yi,” *Korea Report*, 1993, pp. 16–17, for a recent and most cruel case involving the killing of a prostitute (Yoon Geum Yi) by an American G.I. (Kenneth Markle). The murder helped trigger the formation of the grass-roots movement, National Campaign for the Eradication of Crimes by U.S. Troops in Korea, in 1993.

Asia officially raised issues concerning the wartime sexual abuse of their women by the Japanese military. The unfolding of the Korean Chǒngsindae movement for redress suggests that feminist political activism has been essential to raising the public consciousness about the problem of “military comfort women.” Although books on the Chǒngsindae have been published in Japan since the 1970s,¹⁴ the politicization of the issue by feminists and by Christian women in both South Korea and Japan began in the late 1980s.

Feminist Political Activism for Redress

In April 1988 the Korean Church Women United (Han’guk Kyohoe Yǒsǒng Yǒnhap) sponsored the International Conference on Women and Tourism on the island of Chejudo in South Korea. It was there that Yun Chung-Ok of Ewha Womans University first presented her research on the Chǒngsindae issue, which helped the participants from Korea and Japan see the underlying connection between the issues of the “comfort women” in colonial Korea and the *kisaeng* tourism in contemporary Korea. In January 1989 members of women’s organizations staged a demonstration march in Seoul protesting the government’s plan to send an emissary to the funeral of Emperor Hirohito. They also drafted a letter mentioning the need to address the Chǒngsindae issue. But, it was in the state visit of President Roh Tae Woo to Japan in May 1990 that feminist activists found a major political occasion in which to raise the issues of the suffering of the Korean people during Japanese colonial rule in general and reparations for “comfort women” in particular.

Just before Roh’s visit, South Korean women’s organizations issued a list of demands to be made to the Japanese government, one of which was that Japan investigate the Chǒngsindae issue and apologize for its involvement. Notably, during a state banquet for President Roh, the new Emperor Akihito—as a symbol of the Japanese nation—formally expressed his regrets for the sufferings Japanese colonial rule caused the Korean people. However, when Councillor Motooka of the upper house of the Japanese Diet demanded on June 6, 1990, that government investigate the “military comfort women” issue, the government refused, insisting on its official position of regarding the institution of military “comfort stations” as private enterprise.¹⁵ Korean women’s organizations then sent an official letter to Prime Minister Kaifu prior to his visit to South Korea in October 1990, demanding an admission, an apology, and compensation by his government for the sexual slavery of Korean women. And in November 1990, various women’s organizations

14. For example, Kim Il Myon, *Tenno no Guntai to Chosenjin lanfu* [The emperor’s forces and Korean comfort women] (Tokyo: San’ichi Shobo, 1976).

15. Nishino Rumiko, *Jugun lanfu* [Military comfort women] (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 1992).

joined together to form the Chöngdaehyöp under the leadership of Yun Chung-ok and Lee Hyo-chae.

In August 1991 Kim Hak-sun, a widow in her late sixties, became the first Korean woman to give public testimony to her life as a “comfort woman” for Japanese troops during the Pacific War, and then in December under the sponsorship of the Association of Pacific War Victims and Bereaved Families, a group of Koreans including Kim Hak-sun, filed a lawsuit against the government of Japan for damages incurred during the Pacific War. Other former “comfort women” have initiated separate lawsuits, such as one filed in 1993 by four former members of the Chöngsindae at the Shimonoseki branch of the Yamaguchi District Court, as they were abducted to Shimonoseki from Korea during the war. They demand an official apology and damages of \$2.29 million.¹⁶ Generally, the plaintiffs’ demands include formal apology, compensation, construction of a monument, and the correction of Japanese history textbooks to teach the truth about the “comfort women.”

A major portion of the credit for raising public consciousness about this issue both domestically and internationally belongs to several Korean and Japanese women, including the co-chairs of the Chöngdaehyöp, Yun Chung-ok and Lee Hyo-chae. Lee and Yun were professors at Ewha Womans University where they taught sociology and English literature until their retirements in 1990 and 1991, respectively. Besides their educational and occupational similarities, the two women have much in common in their personal backgrounds. Both are from a Christian family and their fathers were pastors. Neither has ever married.

Yun says that both of her parents came from a family of independence fighters, and that her father, who harbored strong anger over Japanese colonization of Korea, emphasized the importance of women’s enlightenment in reclaiming national sovereignty. “Knowledge is power” was the motto with which she was raised. According to Yun, her father was furious when her elder sister chose to marry instead of continuing with higher education to become a professional. She said her father thought that any fool could get married and that his intelligent daughter should work to achieve something more than that.¹⁷ Yun said that she still has the memory of being forcibly fingerprinted at her school in 1943, after which she withdrew from school for fear of being dragged into the Chöngsindae. When liberation came in 1945, she noted the total lack of mention of the “comfort women” and was perturbed not to find any reference to them in the writings of Korean historians. Around 1980, after reading about “military comfort women” in a book writ-

16. *Korea Times*, January 6, 1993.

17. Interview with Yun Chong-ok, January 7, 1995.

ten by a Japanese about forced laborers during the Pacific War, Yun Chung-ok began her research on the issue.

Also growing up as a daughter of a Christian pastor, Lee was educated in the United States.¹⁸ She earned a master's degree in sociology and went on to become one of the leading sociologists in Korea. Lee also has long been known as an activist scholar; she was fired from her faculty position at Ewha Womans University (but later reinstated) for her active involvement in the democracy movement during the period of political oppression under the Park regime in the 1970s.

Learning of Yun's research on the "comfort women," Lee suggested that Yun present her findings at the International Conference on Women and Tourism, and since the establishment of the Chŏngdae-hyŏp in 1990, the two women have worked tirelessly with a small number of researchers (some of them Lee's former students) and dedicated staff members. Yun directs research and follows developments in the compensation dispute with the Japanese government while Lee oversees the task of bringing the matter to the attention of the larger international community. The Korean National Christian Church recognized their efforts by giving both Yun and Lee a Human Rights Award in December 1994. It is noteworthy that Korean leadership in bringing the "comfort women" issue to public attention has come from elderly Christian women who have personally challenged conventional female lifestyles of women and successfully withstood the pressures of the traditional gender-role ideology. The small cramped office of the Chŏngdae-hyŏp, which operates on a "shoestring budget" based mostly on private donations, illustrates the financial and sociopolitical difficulties of a social minority involved in contesting patriarchal states with feminist visions for a more just society.

*From a Bilateral Compensation Dispute to an
International Human Rights Issue*

A major issue in the public debate in both South Korea and Japan involving the "military comfort women" has been the official role and responsibility of the government of Japan. The Japanese state did not admit its involvement in the management and supervision of the "comfort stations" until mid-1992, several months after the publication by Professor Yoshimi of his discovery of official documents confirming the state's heavy involvement in the "comfort women" system. Seeing that neither the Korean nor Japanese governments were responding positively to efforts to resolve the problem, Lee Hyo-chae, as a co-chair of the KCWS submitted a petition to the U.N. Human Rights Commission, dated March 4, 1992, requesting that the Commission investi-

18. Interview with Lee Hyo-chae, August 23, 1995.

gate Japanese atrocities committed against Korean women during World War Two, and help pressure the Japanese government to pay reparations to individual women who have filed suit. The UNHRC responded by placing the issue on the official agenda for its August 1992 meeting in Geneva, where delegates from the Chŏngdaehyŏp and one former "military comfort woman" testified. Due in part to the lobbying efforts of feminist and humanitarian activists, the UNHCR's Subcommission for the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities called the Japanese "military comfort women" system "a crime against humanity that violated the human rights of Asian women and the international agreement prohibiting forced labor that Japan signed in 1932."¹⁹

Even after admitting the state's involvement, however, Tokyo still denied until 1993 that any coercion was exercised by the state in the recruitment of Korean "comfort women" and denied any possibility of material compensation to the survivors by Japan.²⁰ Generally speaking, the male-dominated elite discourse as represented by the government officials, intellectuals, and opinion leaders of both countries seemed to regard the "comfort women" problem primarily as an economic compensation issue, with scant attention paid to the violations of human rights of these women. The public debate on the issue in Korea and Japan has been discordant and shifting since Kim Hak-sun's public testimony in 1991. Yun Chung-ok said that even feminist activists in Japan do not agree with the Korean demand to punish those who were responsible for the sexual abuse of "comfort women." At the weekly Wednesday noon demonstration in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul, which began in January 1992, I observed a small group of elderly former "comfort women," the Chŏngdaehyŏp staff members, and several other supporters shout in unison slogans such as "Apologize!," "Punish!," and "Compensate!" Some former soldiers in Japan rationalized the atrocity as a natural part of warfare, and pointed out that everybody had suffered during the war.²¹ Other Japanese charged the Koreans with trying to make money out of the colonial past to which some humiliated Koreans responded by suggesting that the Korean people forgo any demand for material compensation from Japan over the "comfort women" issue and that as fellow citizens, they offer financial support to the survivors.²² It was an emotional, reactive move to help preserve the self-respect and national pride of Koreans.

A nationwide fund-raising drive thus began in South Korea in December 1992, and by the following June 200 million wŏn (about US\$250,000) had

19. Alice Y. Chai, "Asian-Pacific Feminist Coalition Politics: The Chŏngsindae/Jugunianfu ('Comfort Women') Movement," *Korean Studies*, no. 17 (1993), pp. 67-91.

20. *Han'guk Ilbo*, July 7, 1992, August 4, 1992.

21. Nishino, *Jugunianfu*.

22. *Han'guk Ilbo*, February 12, 1992; *Chosun Ilbo*, July 5, 8, 1992.

been raised, one-fifth of the original goal according to Yun Chung-ok. Buddhist monks and believers also started raising money in 1992 to help build the House of Sharing (*Nanum-üi chip*) for the survivors.²³ In January 1995 seven former "comfort women" were living together in the temporary, rented House of Sharing in Seoul. To the disappointment and concern of the activists and litigants, this eventually became the official position of the new Kim Young Sam administration as well. The president announced in March 1993 that the government would seek no material compensation from Japan for former "military comfort women" but would insist that the government of Japan thoroughly investigate the matter to uncover the truth and make a comprehensive, formal apology. Kim seemed to believe that his new policy would stake out a position of "moral superiority" for South Korea in forging a new relationship with Japan in the future. The legislature swiftly passed a special act to support the former "comfort women," and the government disbursed a sum of five million wŏn (approximately US\$6,250) to each survivor in August 1993, and announced it would pay additional monthly support (250,000 wŏn in 1995). Many Koreans seemed to feel that their government has taken care of the problem well. A middle-aged taxi driver in Seoul, for example, told me that Koreans should be more future-oriented rather than digging up the colonial past such as the "comfort women" issue, and that Koreans should expend their energy in catching up with Japan.

Tokyo seemed to regard President Kim's position as a friendly gesture, and by the summer of 1993, following a direct hearing session in Seoul with former "military comfort women," Japan finally recognized coercion in its recruitment of "comfort women" and their transportation to "comfort stations." It also admitted that it had violated international humanitarian laws by persecuting Korean women.²⁴ In November 1994 the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) recommended that the Japanese government pay, "as a purely interim measure," US\$40,000 to each survivor.²⁵ Within a week after the ICJ statement a group of 105 lawyers (37 Koreans and 68 Japanese) released a statement that proclaimed the responsibility of the Japanese government to compensate the former "military comfort women" based on inter-

23. Committee for the Construction of the Nanum-üi chip, *"Nanum-üi chip Charyöjip* [Collection of reference materials] (Seoul: Author, 1993).

24. Takagi Ken'ichi, "The War Compensation Issue of Japan: Its Development and Assignments," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Boston, Massachusetts, March 1994.

25. Ustina Dolgopol and Snehal Paranjape, *Comfort Women: An Unfinished Ordeal* (Geneva, Switzerland: International Commission of Jurists, 1994), p. 105. The ICJ, a nongovernmental organization headquartered in Geneva, is composed of distinguished jurists from around the world who work toward full observance of the provisions in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

national laws.²⁶ The official Japanese response to the mounting pressure from the international community was to deal with the compensation issue at the non-governmental level. By December 1994, Tokyo had drawn up a compensation plan that called for raising non-government funds to pay a lump sum to each survivor. The Chŏngdaehyŏp rejected this proposal, demanding that the *government* of Japan, as perpetrator of the crime, pay the compensation.

In contrast to the adversarial nationalistic undertone in the discussions between the governments, feminist activists and members of nongovernmental organizations in South Korea were able to forge an international coalition with their counterparts in Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Thailand to help reclaim the human rights of former "military comfort women." The Asian Women's Solidarity Forum, for instance, held its third conference in Seoul in 1995, and adopted a resolution denouncing the plan to sidestep responsibility for war crimes by Japan by paying from nongovernmental funds. In response, Japan revised its plan to establish the Asian Women's Fund (Zaidanhojin Josei no tame no Asia Heiwa Kokumin Kikin) to compensate former "comfort women" and be used in connection with issues such as violence against women.²⁷ Although the fund relies mostly on voluntary donations, the Japanese government also contributes funds to be used for medical and welfare care of former "comfort women" under the revised plan. At the U.N. World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995, the Japanese government delegation remained silent over the "comfort women" compensation issue, in contrast to the active participation of Japanese representatives in the International Symposium on Violence Against Women in War and Armed Conflict.²⁸

Statements by both Japanese Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro and Japanese government spokesman Kajiyama Siroku in response to the latest U.N. recommendations indicate that the U.N. demands may not change Japan's basic position of disclaiming any legal responsibility for the sexual abuses.²⁹ After meeting with Hashimoto in May 1996, Miki Mutsuko, the widow of a former prime minister and one of the most prominent proponents of the Asian Women's Fund, resigned from the panel of backers of the Fund, stating that Hashimoto's ideas were too different from hers. It is still not certain whether Prime Minister Hashimoto will honor a pledge by his predecessor, Murayama Tomiichi, to write a letter of apology to each of the former "comfort women."

26. *Han'guk Ilbo*, November 29, 1994.

27. "Today's Japan," TV news show aired on channel 32, San Francisco, June 15, 1995; pamphlet published by Asian Women's Fund, supplied by Glenda Roberts.

28. *Chosun Ilbo*, September 14, 1995.

29. *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 7, 1996; *Han'guk Ilbo*, February 8, 1996.

Conclusion

Professor Yun Chung-ok of the KCWS stated during our interview in 1995 that the achievements of the Chǒngsindae movement have surpassed her wildest dream. Indeed, the Korean “comfort women” movement for redress may be regarded as a notable victory in feminist political activism. Its remarkable success in making the “military comfort women” problem a universal moral issue of women’s human rights is owed in part to the dramatic transformations in national and international political structures over the past several years. These transformations include the collapse of the Cold War world order in the international community and the democracy movement of the late 1980s in the Republic of Korea, which resulted in the restoration of civilian government in 1993. For Japan, the issue of “military comfort women” turned into an unexpected political embarrassment, damaging its national “face” in the international community. Tokyo tried to exercise pressure against the U.N. investigations, and officials worked hard—and successfully—to prevent the general assembly meeting of the U.N. Human Rights Commission in Geneva in April 1996 from adopting a resolution on the “comfort women” issue.³⁰

The sexual exploitation of women has been a common concomitant to the military activities of many nations and the provision of local women by colonial military services for the sexual needs of soldiers is not unknown. Nonetheless, what is unprecedented about the system of “comfort women” for Japanese troops in the Pacific War is that it was a systematic, long-term institutionalization of female sexual slavery, and that these women were mostly colonial subjects from poor families who were coercively drafted by a state power. This is vastly different from random rape incidents perpetrated by individual soldiers during warfare or from the recent rape case of a school girl by American soldiers in Okinawa. One may also point out here that prostitution, by definition, includes payment for sexual union, and implies a certain degree of choice. It is notable that police ordinances of imperial Japan permitted licensed prostitutes the freedom to cease their trade even if the proprietor did not countersign their applications.³¹

In contrast, slavery carries the notion of the social outcast, a person as property, and compulsory labor. Testimonies of former “comfort women” reveal that most had been forced into compulsory sexual labor, and were under virtual house arrest in army “comfort stations,” despised as colonial subjects, and depersonalized as the common property of the soldiers who

30. *Han’guk Ilbo*, December 13, 1992, June 12, 1996.

31. Garon, “World’s Oldest Debate,” p. 711.

called them their “sanitary public toilets.”³² Many of them received no payment for their sexual labor. Therefore, feminists and human rights activists have argued that the lives of Korean “military comfort women” should be conceived of as *sexual slavery*, enforced under the direction of the Japanese government, not as prostitution. Until 1993 Japan maintained its position that these women engaged in prostitution voluntarily, and in May 1994, Japanese Minister of Justice Nagano Shigeto asserted that the Korean “military comfort women” were “public prostitutes.”³³

To the extent that both prostitution and the Japanese institution of military sexual slavery are rooted in the exploitation of women, one may argue that the distinction between prostitutes and “military comfort women” is problematic. But prostitutes do not normally work under the threat of lethal weapons, while testimonies of former “comfort women” abound with instances of physical threats, and some bear scars and disabilities inflicted upon them by their military masters. One of my informants, who was forcibly drafted at the age of 13, has a deep sword scar in her permanently disabled left arm, the price of her refusal to accommodate the sexual demands of a soldier. She also asserted that she was imprisoned for several months for her act of disobedience. Her experiences underline a fundamental difference between “comfort women” as sexual slaves and prostitutes as sex workers: namely, physical violence and the abject lack of autonomy to which sexual slaves are subjected, in contrast to some sense of self-respect and hope as expressed, for example, by women sex workers for the American military in contemporary Korea.³⁴ Thus, it was state power that made the difference in the Japanese institution of sexual slavery and helped sustain the long silence over it in both Japan and South Korea.

The compensation dispute over the “comfort women” issue has strained bilateral relations between the two countries. Ethno-nationalistic sentiments have given rise to a renewed sense of historically rooted mutual hostility and contempt. One may ask at this point whether or not the courts in Japan will concur with the international community in regarding the institution of military sexual slavery as a violation of human rights and order the state to compensate the survivors. A recent Japanese Supreme Court ruling on voting

32. Chôngdaehyöp and Chôngsindae Yön'guhoe, eds., *Kangje-ro kkullyögan chosönin kunwi-anpudül* [Forcibly drafted Korean military comfort women] (Seoul: Hanul, 1993); Watanabe Kazuko, “ Militarism, Colonialism, and the Trafficking of Women: ‘Comfort Women’ Forced into Sexual Labor for Japanese Soldiers,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 26:4 (1994), pp. 3–17; Yun Chung-ok, “Jungshindae—Korean Military ‘Comfort Women,’” unpublished ms., n.d.

33. *Han'guk Ilbo*, May 7, 1994.

34. For life stories of female sex workers in the U.S. military bases in Korea, see Sandra Sturdevant and Brenda Stoltzfus, *Let the Good Times Roll: Prostitution and the U.S. Military in Asia* (New York: New Press, 1992).

rights of long-term resident aliens (most of whom are of Korean ancestry) in local elections offers some hopeful grounds for such a possibility. On the other hand, populist sentiment in Japan, characterized by its victimization from the atomic bombs, seems to oppose any conciliatory gesture, even on the 50th anniversary of the end of World War Two. Recent Japanese publications on the war have included novels depicting a fictionalized Japanese victory, and right wing opposition in the Diet against a proposed resolution to apologize for Japan's war crimes resulted in a watered-down version that pleased no one. These activities reveal the depth of ethno-nationalism on the part of some Japanese in leadership positions, and augur ill for a pro-human rights verdict on the pending "comfort women" lawsuits. It will take years before Japanese courts decide on war compensation suits, and Kim Hak-sun, for one, asserted during our interview that Japan has adopted the tactic of waiting until the death of the aged litigants and that Koreans cannot win in a bilateral deal with superpower Japan. She feels the only hope is pressure from the international community and organizations. The movement leaders in South Korea seemed to share this view; they demand that Japan not be allowed a seat on the U.N. Security Council unless it resolves its wartime crimes, including the sexual abuse of "comfort women."

Regardless of the legal decision on the compensation for "comfort women," the widespread exploitation of female sexuality will continue without revolutionary transformations in the masculinist sexual culture, the political economic system of the transnational capitalist sex industry, and the gender gap in wage income resulting in the feminization of poverty. Continuous work in feminist and humanitarian political activism is needed in order to realize more egalitarian and peaceful gender relations in many contemporary patriarchal societies, and global recognition of the concept of women's human rights—however they may be defined in different cultures—will help curb various forms of violence against women.