

PATRIARCHY AND THE COMFORT WOMEN

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During World War II, the Japanese government committed an atrocity against women from Korea, China, and the Pacific Islands. The Japanese military kidnapped, falsely recruited, and coerced 200,000 women to serve in brothels for their soldiers. The women ranged in age from 11 to 27, and they came from all the areas Japan occupied, although 80-90% were Korean, which had been colonized by Japan since 1894. They serviced up to 50 men a day with little food, water, or sanitation. The conditions were dangerous, and the soldiers were brutal. Only 25% of the comfort women made it through the war partly because of the Japanese troops killing the comfort women as they retreated.ⁱ These women suffered beyond most people's understanding. How could this happen? How could the Japanese government justify the treatment of these women? Why has nothing been done to help these women achieve peace?

As I thought about the topic of this conference, "Constructing Knowledge Across the Humanities," I decided to examine how the Korean comfort women adopted the cultural and social constructs assigned to them as women and colonial people. I selected Korean women as my focus because of the readily available testimonies in English and because of Korea's colonial history with Japan. I integrated the studies of discourse and psychology along with the study of history to answer my main question, "How did patriarchy influence the way Korean comfort women saw and spoke about themselves?" I will begin with a short discussion of Japanese justifications to indicate how the Japanese government viewed the Korean comfort women. Following that I will turn to the testimonies of the women to examine how they viewed themselves.

Japanese Logic Behind the System of Sex

Before embarking on a study of the discourse of the women, it is useful to look at the way the Japanese saw the women. The Japanese government's view can easily be seen through the justification of the comfort system. The Japanese government justified the comfort system in three ways. First, the Japanese believed that men needed to have sexual intercourse on a regular basis; it was built into their character as a man.ⁱⁱ The Korean historian Hyunah Yang stated,

Fundamental to the invention of this institutionalized rape was a patriarchal understanding of men's and women's sexuality, in which men's desire was inevitable and uncontrollable whereas women were supposed to resolve it.ⁱⁱⁱ

To the Japanese government, the idea that men's sexuality was inevitable justified the forced rape of 200,000 women.

Another popular belief during the WWII era was that sex, and even further rape, boosted soldiers' morale and their aggression levels. In Yuki Tanaka's book *Japan's Comfort Women*, Tanaka refers to a battlefield report that supports this justification.

In his report about particular battlefield problems in China in 1939, Dr. Hayao Takeo, a medical officer and professor in psychiatry, stated that many officers deemed it necessary for their soldiers to rape women in order to stimulate aggression.^{iv}

The Japanese government used male sexuality to stimulate the morale levels in their soldiers. The comfort system was a strategic policy to enhance the military performance of the Empire.

The justifications the Japanese used for the comfort system show that they thought men's sexuality to be important to the Empire. Sexual intercourse was a source of morale for the men, and it was inevitable fact of nature being male. These beliefs

motivate the establishment of the comfort system for two practical reasons: prevention of crimes in occupied areas and control of venereal disease. Gratifying male desires, therefore, became an important realm of governmental policy because it related to the strength of the Empire.

The establishment of the comfort system began in part to reduce the number of civilian rapes in military occupied areas. Government and military officials believed that if the male sex drive were not satisfied, the man would rape in order to satisfy it. Men would rape innocent civilians in their stationed areas, and this would lead to uprisings of the occupied populations. Therefore, the government rationalized that the comfort system decreased the amount of military rapes in occupied areas.^v The increase of the comfort system immediately following the Rape of Nanjing gives support to the existence of this justification.^{vi}

The use of male sexuality as a morale stimulant introduced the logical problem of venereal disease. The soldiers needed their health, but sexuality threatened that health. By providing controlled women, the government assumed the rate of venereal disease would decrease. The rates did not decrease despite the system. This justification also contained patriarchal ideas. The Japanese government believed that diseases originated in women; men could not be blamed. The testimonies of the women indicate that the government medicated the women as the source of venereal disease while the men were not medicated as frequently nor blamed for the spread of venereal disease.

The Ministry of War explicitly states the justifications of the Japanese government in an excerpt from a report on September 19, 1940.

It must be understood that the competence or lack thereof in overseeing {the operation of the comfort system} has the greatest influence on the

promotion of morale, the maintenance of military discipline and the prevention of crimes and sexually transmitted disease.^{vii}

Once the comfort system was established, its high demand forced the Japanese to find a supply of women to fill the sexual ranks. The Japanese identity of Japanese superiority emphasized the use of Korean people. The idea that Japan would lead the other Asian nations to world prominence motivated Japan to colonize Korea and determined how the Japanese viewed the Korean people. I have seen several references to a derogatory term the soldiers called Korean women, *senjing*.^{viii} This term roughly translates to “dirty Korean.” Obviously the Japanese believed the Koreans to be inferior, and this view greatly influenced the establishment of the comfort system. Korea provided a supply of young women to expand the comfort system throughout the Japanese occupied areas.

How the Korean Comfort Women Saw Themselves

Now that we have analyzed the Japanese view of the Korean comfort women, I will move on to the women’s views of themselves. In an analysis of the testimonies of Korean comfort women I found a few general trends about how the women saw themselves. The women realized that the soldiers saw them as less than human. The women did not accept this idea, but they did see themselves as dirty and unworthy of love. The shame they felt restricted them from coping with their experiences as comfort women and diminished their chances for a “normal,” happy life.

Before continuing on the self-images of the women, I wanted to document a tension that appeared within every testimony I read because it helps in understanding the women’s views. Every comfort woman struggled with the tension between the traditional value of chastity and her fate as comfort women. These women came from a culture that

stressed the importance of chastity even more than the importance of life. Committing suicide in order to maintain chastity was an honorable and common occurrence in Confucianized cultures, so it is hard to image the shock these women must have experienced.

Many of the women refer to the first rape and comment that they were virgins before that day. Some women despaired about their fate as comfort women and tried to die because death was a better alternative to the loss of virtue. Kim Sang-hi testified of her fear and confusion over the shock of rape.

I was so scared that I hung onto my long underwear that my mother had sewn for me. I must have fainted right then, because when I came to, my underwear was ripped and stained with fresh blood. I was a virgin until that moment. I screamed in pain.

Soon after that, another soldier opened my door. I thought to myself I am going to die again. So I told him I had to use the toilet. Inside the bathroom, I spotted a glass bottle, opened the cap, smelled disinfectant, and drank the whole bottle. Not long after that, I began to spit blood from my mouth.^{ix}

She was revived, and she remembers thinking, “I didn’t die? I am still here? I can’t go on.”

Korean women developed their identities in relation to their virginity. These women developed a sense of self based on chastity, so when the rapes happened, it shattered their sense of self. Kim Sang-hi’s testimony exemplifies how serious virginity was to these women. She did not say, “I was raped again.” She actually said, “I thought to myself I am going to die again.” The frequent equating of rape to death indicates the devastating effect of the rapes. Rape destroyed these women’s identities just as death destroyed their physical selves.

The testimonies suggest that the women realized how the soldiers viewed them. The Japanese applied terms like *senjing* to Koreans in order to dehumanize them. This dehumanization made inhumane treatment acceptable in the minds of the Japanese. A former comfort woman named Hwang Keum-ju described how the Japanese soldiers treated the women.

Sometimes our bodies would swell up like balloons but the Japanese soldiers did not care. They would line up for sex day after day. They did not care whether the girls were bleeding or what. They would force sex on them.^x

Hwang Keum-ju realized that the soldiers did not think of the comfort women as beautiful women, or else the soldiers would have been concerned with the appearance of the women. The soldiers thought of the women as tools to vent their sexual desires on – animals or even less, inanimate objects.

Although the women did not fully accept the animalistic state the Japanese soldiers constructed for them, they were dehumanized by the act of rape. One woman, Kim Young-shil, actually accepted the idea of inanimacy in order to cope with the ordeal.

I was totally exhausted. I could keep neither my sense of humiliation nor my dignity. I felt like a living corpse. When soldiers came to my room and did it to me one after another, it was done to a lifeless body. Again. And again. And again...^{xi}

In this case, she chose to accept a small part of the construct to try and make it through her experiences as a comfort woman. She thought of herself as a lifeless body because then the rape would not be real to her either. She still maintains her agency; she is not just a victim indoctrinated by the Japanese.

The rape dehumanized the women through shattering their chastity based identity. The testimonies include the women's common consideration of themselves as dirty and

unworthy of love. The experience of being raped day after day caused these women to believe they were somehow unclean.^{xii} Kim Sang-hi, a comfort woman for 10 years of her life, made the comment

I was 24 years old, still a marriageable age. So my parents tried to arrange my marriage, and this was the most painful thing. How could I get married? I had been raped and raped, and my body had been used over and over. My heart was ripped and torn so many times.^{xiii}

Her words suggest an awful sadness, and they show evidence that she sees herself as unclean and incapable of love or marriage. A woman named Kim Soon-duk gives a less emotional statement about marriage, although it is more telling of the extent of this trend.

I met a man and had a son with him, but I never married. I know of no women with the same background as mine who never legally married.^{xiv}

The rape caused the women to see themselves as unchaste and unworthy. In a way they did internalize the construct of *senjing*. They saw themselves as somewhat responsible for the loss of their purity, and therefore, they felt shamed. This shame led them to solitary lives because they believed themselves to be unworthy of human love.

Although rape did have a dehumanizing effect on the comfort women, they did not accept the subhuman construct presented by the Japanese. By speaking out against the Japanese government, the women clearly show that they feel they have been wronged. If the women who survived had accepted the Japanese construct, they would not have felt wronged after the war, and they would not have spoken out. These women would be living out the remainder of their days in peace rather than fighting to make the injustice of their treatment known.

Conclusions

By examining the discourse of the Japanese government and the testimonies of the Korean women, I have drawn several conclusions. Both the male Japanese soldiers and the Korean comfort women accepted previous patriarchal concepts of sexuality.

The Japanese believed that sexuality was a natural and overpowering characteristic of masculinity. The military promoted male sexuality in order to stimulate morale and aggression. They established the comfort system as a means of protecting civilian populations in occupied areas and controlling venereal disease rates of soldiers. Sexuality was a concern for the physical and emotional well being of the soldiers and therefore the state. The Japanese incorporated the patriarchy of colonialism to their logic of the sex system by stigmatizing Koreans as being racial weaker.

The Korean women internalized the patriarchal idea that chastity was a high ideal that specifically related to their identities. Because of the relation between chastity and identity, rape destroyed their sense of self. Involvement in the comfort system inhibited these women from achieving a “normal” life because they felt unchaste, unclean, and unworthy of love. Thus, patriarchy allowed the establishment of a system that institutionalized the rape of Korean women. Patriarchy also enhanced the psychological effects of rape because of the emphasis of chastity.

ⁱ This statistic and the reasons why show up in the following two sources: United Nations, Economic and Social Council. Commission on Human Rights, session 50, Item 6: “Contemporary Forms of Slavery,” Updated 1999, paragraph 7; and United Nations, Economic and Social Council. Commission on Human Rights, session 52, Item 9, January 1996, Paragraph 21.

ⁱⁱ United Nations, Economic and Social Council. Commission on Human Rights, session 50, Item 6: “Contemporary Forms of Slavery,” Updated 1999. Paragraph 7.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hyunah Yang, “Revisiting the Issue of Korean ‘Military Comfort Women’: The Question of Truth and Positionality.” *Positions East Asia Cultures Critique*, vol. 5, num. 1, Spring 1997, p. 65.

^{iv} Yuki Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution during WWII and the US Occupation*. New York: Routledge Publishing, 2002, p. 29.

^v *Ibid*, paragraph 7.

^{vi} The Rape of Nanjing is the name for the massacre that took place when the Japanese military invaded the city of Nanjing in 1937. Soldiers sacked the city, raping, pillaging, torturing, and murdering the local citizens. After this event the Japanese government realized that they needed to discipline their troops and provide another outlet for the soldiers' sexual drives. This massacre becomes one of the reasons for the spread of the comfort system.

^{vii} Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War Two*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, p. 60.

^{viii} Sangmie Choi Schellstede, ed. *Comfort Women Speak: Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military*. New York: Holmes & Meier, 2000, p. 26.

^{ix} This passage comes from the testimony of Kim Sang-hi, page 31 of the source in endnote ix.

^x The testimony of Hwang Keum-ju appears in the collection of testimonies edited by Sangmie Choi Schellstede, *Comfort Women Speak*. For bibliographic information check endnote ix. This quote appears on page 7.

^{xi} Kim Young-shil's testimony appears in *Comfort Women Speak*, see ix. This passage is on page 51.

^{xii} This reaction to rape is common amongst victims of rape even today.

^{xiii} The testimony of Kim Sang-hi appears in *Comfort Women Speak*, see endnote ix. This specific passage comes from page 35.

^{xiv} Kim Soon-duk's testimony appears in *Comfort Women Speak*. This passage is found on page 40.