

REVIEW

COMFORT WOMEN OF THE EMPIRE

제국의 위안부: 식민지 지배와 기억의 투쟁
帝國の慰安婦 植民地支配と記憶の闘い

by Yu-ha Park

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Yu-ha Park's book titled "Comfort Women of the Empire"¹ revisits the issue of the 'comfort women,'²—Korean women who were forced into sexual slavery by Imperial Japan during World War II. Since its initial publication in 2013, the book has drawn much public attention, largely because the author introduced a different and shocking viewpoint towards the issue of comfort women. In 2014, nine comfort women and the House of Sharing - home for the living comfort women - filed a civil lawsuit against Yu-ha Park for defamation. In November 2015, Park was criminally prosecuted for defamation. Nonetheless, both civil, and criminal disputes over the controversial book "Comfort Women of the Empire" are still on-going.

Yu-ha Park states that 'comfort women' are often regarded as tragic victims. According to her, "such a sanitized, uniform image of Korean comfort women did not fully explain who they were."³ Park aims to question the traditional image

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¹ The original Korea title of the book is 제국의 위안부: 식민지 지배와 기억의 투쟁; its Japanese translation is 帝國の慰安婦: 植民地支配と 記憶の 闘い. The book is only available in Korean and Japanese.

² Comfort women are also referred to as Japanese wartime sexual slavery victims, but in this writing, the reviewer would like to use the term 'comfort women' since the author in her writing uses the term 'comfort women' in addressing the sexual slavery victims.

³ Sang-hun Choe, *Disputing Korean Narrative on 'Comfort Women,' a Professor Draws Fierce Backlash*, N. Y. TIMES, Dec. 18, 2015, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/19/world/asia/south-korea-comfort-women-park-yu-ha.html?_r=0 (last visited on Oct. 30, 2016).

of comfort women through her approach. She says, this is the best way to fully understand the issue of comfort women.

In Chapter I, Park conducts a detailed and extensive research on documents concerning testimonies by comfort women. According to the author, unlike our traditional ‘prejudice,’ not every comfort woman was forcefully taken by the Japanese authorities to serve as military sexual slaves. As a matter of fact, Korean women were sometimes forced or lured into sexual slavery by Korean locals who were responsible for supplying females for prostitution businesses. Every comfort woman was treated differently, depending on where she was stationed, and the kind of soldiers she interacted with. According to the author, a comfort woman was taken to serve as a sexual slave with a complicated mixture of factors, including her location, and the people she worked for, making every woman’s narrative different. Hence, the author claims that it is impossible to standardize or unify stories that were shared by comfort women, because this simplification will eliminate differences in the many narratives by these women, thereby creating a ‘new’ version of the story that people want to hear.

In Chapter II, the author tries to review the way in which widespread image of comfort women was first created and how this very image has found sustenance over the years. In this chapter, Park mentions the role played by the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, in formulating the popular comfort women image. In particular, she claims that the way that the organization explains and promotes the comfort women issue, which is both intentionally and unintentionally focused on victimizing the comfort women and stirring South Korean animosity towards Japan, standardizes the image of comfort women, while eliminating variations that existed in individual narratives. “This somewhat uniform image of comfort women,” according to Park, has spread across media platforms including novels, dramas, and comics, influencing the way contemporaries view the comfort women issue. The author maintains, “It is important to understand the ‘complexity’ that revolves around the issue of comfort women.” The author refers to the then social hierarchical structure, that forced women into a situation where they were deprived of their dignity, and forced to please soldiers sexually. According to Park, “patriarchy, imperialism and poverty ultimately left Korean females vulnerable.”

In Chapter III, Park reviews the comfort women issue of the post-World War II era; discussing the Treaty on Basic Relations signed between Korea and Japan of 1965, which indirectly addresses the comfort women issue. Park then examines the Korean Constitutional Court’s ruling on August 30, 2011, which urged the Korean