“Comfort Women”:
Korean, Chinese, and Filipina Survivors and their Portrayals in the Media

By
Taylor Runquist
Western Illinois University
During the Second World War, the Japanese imperial army used women from various countries, including Korea, China, Philippines, and Japan as “comfort women.”¹ The justification for the use of “comfort women” was they would serve the sexual needs of Japanese soldiers to keep the soldiers from raping the women of the occupied countries and to prevent the soldiers from being overly violent because of their sexual needs.² Seven decades after the end of the war, the number of survivors from this wartime sexual slavery is dwindling. The documentaries, interviews, and memoirs that record the cruelties they endured are useful sources to those studying World War II and the Asia-Pacific War, in particular. Violence against women has been declared as a human rights violation and continues to be a major issue for women in situations of armed conflict today.

Scholars have examined the atrocities that the Japanese imperial army had committed in Asia, and the Rape of Nanjing received substantial media and scholarly attention.³ In Japan, a controversy arose in the 1980s about how to characterize Japanese aggression in history textbooks; for example, the Ministry of Education suggested the word “advancement” be used instead of “aggression.”⁴ The leftists, progressive historians, and grassroots campaigns and feminists


² Kugami Naoko, Comfort Women: Historical, Political, Legal, and Moral Perspectives (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 2016), 6-15.


activists wanted those atrocities to be included in the textbooks and the atrocities be taught in schools, whereas the rightists, among other individuals and groups, wanted this chapter downplayed or erased from the Japanese public memory. However, it was not until the 1990s that scholars paid considerable attention to the issue of comfort women. Historian Jordan Sand identified sexism as a major factor behind the belated attention given to the history of comfort women. Sand suggested that violence against women is more likely to be ignored or covered up because of male-dominated fields not bringing this issue to light. This paper examines comfort women’s experiences in order to shine a light on how they were treated, through their own words, and how the media portrayed their stories. Here, the term media refers not just to documentaries and films, but also memoirs.

Official records, particularly records of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, provide evidence of the rape of women and girls in Nanjing. The Rape of Nanjing, or the Nanjing Massacre, was a six-week siege in 1937 of the Chinese capital city of Nanjing. According to the International Military Tribunal, “Soldiers went through the streets indiscriminately killing Chinese men, women and children without apparent provocation or excuse until in places the streets and alleys were littered with the bodies of their victims.” Although the official number of deaths is debated between China and Japan, according to the People’s Republic of China, the death toll is 300,000. Based on the records of the International Military Tribunal, during the first month of

---

8 Kate Merkel-Hess and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, “Nanjing by the Numbers: A New Report on the 1937-1938 Massacre Doesn’t Settle the Contested Issue of How Many People
Japanese occupation of Nanjing, approximately 20,000 Chinese women were raped, including “girls of tender years and older women.” These rapes resulted from “many cases of abnormal and sadistic behaviour” by the Japanese soldiers. According to Katherine Williams, military officers encouraged such acts in order to boost the troop’s morale. Aside from the records of the International Military Tribunal, diaries, and correspondence of Americans and Europeans (e.g., Minnie Vautrin and John Rabe) who stayed in Nanjing provide evidence of the brutalities committed against women as well as men.

The first comfort station in China predated the Rape of Nanjing; it was established in Shanghai in 1932. Comfort stations would increase in number in various parts of Asia during the war. Contemporary thinking was that by providing soldiers with comfort stations where they could have their sexual needs met, the soldiers would not rape the women from the countries they were fighting in. More importantly, the comfort stations were a way to prevent the spread of venereal diseases among soldiers. Although there were medical doctors who examined the women, infections and diseases were common, as were unwanted pregnancies, miscarriages, and abortions. The conditions that those women were forced to live in were often cramped, and photos from comfort stations show that the women lived in small, dirty spaces. Maria Rosa Luna-

______________________


9 International Military Tribunal for the Far East, Chapter VIII.

10 International Military Tribunal for the Far East, Chapter VIII.


Henson, a “comfort woman” from the Philippines, described her room at the first comfort station she was taken to as being small and had a curtain instead of a door.\textsuperscript{16}

Accounts of Filipinos and Koreans suggest that punishment was a common experience among those used as sex slaves. According to Henson, they were punished if the soldiers were not satisfied, if a soldier ejaculated early, or if the woman did something that the man did not like.\textsuperscript{17} The women could be kicked, stabbed, and beaten for these offenses.\textsuperscript{18} They could be punished for defying Japanese authorities. A Korean woman, Oksun Jeong, related how fifteen girls were tortured and killed on a nail board when they refused to raise their hand when asked if they could handle a hundred men in a night. The girls were stripped and tied to a nail board before being grabbed by their hair and rolling them on it. After rolling the women on the nail board, their heads were cut off, even though the women were already dead. This public punishment was a warning to the other women to always obey the Japanese authorities.\textsuperscript{19} Abortions were common at the comfort stations and sexually transmitted diseases were rampant. Some healthcare was provided for the women, but it was mostly to prevent the spread of diseases to the soldiers.\textsuperscript{20}

While there were similarities in these women’s experiences of wartime sexual slavery, there were also differences in how the Korean, Chinese, and Filipino women in this study recalled their experiences. These differences may be attributed to a number of factors, including colonialism, religion, ethnicity, and class. It is also important to keep in mind that the case studies

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Henson, \textit{Comfort Woman}, 39-40.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Henson, \textit{Comfort Woman}, 39-41.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Oksun Jeong, interview by Dakashi Ito, \textit{Sorrowful Homecoming}, (Korea Center for Investigative Journalism, 2016) \url{https://justice4comfortwomenuk.wordpress.com/2017/01/02/sorrowful-homecoming-with-english-subtitles/}
\end{itemize}
in this paper are not necessarily representative of the experiences of women from the aforementioned countries. Still, their stories provide a window into how women from Asia experienced wartime sexual slavery, and how colonialism, class, and ethnicity, among other factors, influenced women’s experiences and memories of what happened.\textsuperscript{21} In this section of my paper, I draw on documentary films and memoirs to further examine women’s experiences and memories of the comfort women system.

The documentary \textit{Sorrowful Homecoming} contains interviews with several Korean women who were used as sex slaves. The documentary was produced by “Team Witness” and released by the Korea Center for Investigative Journalism (Newstapa), which seeks to point out social and political wrongs.\textsuperscript{22} The interviews were recorded by Dakashi Ito, a Japanese journalist, starting in 1999 until 2015. Released in March 2016, the film was originally produced in Korean but later featured English subtitles and dubs by volunteers.\textsuperscript{23} This documentary was created for the general public and those who are interested in learning about the comfort women’s experiences. It seeks to raise public awareness of the Japanese imperial army’s use of Korean women as sex slaves and it emphasized the dwindling number of comfort women who are alive. According to an undated survey conducted in North Korea, which was shown in \textit{Sorrowful Homecoming}, there were two hundred-eighteen victim survivors of the comfort women system living in North Korea; they were from the lower classes and worked as housekeepers, nannies, and factory workers in colonial

\textsuperscript{21} Pyong Gap Min, “Comfort Women”: The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class,” \textit{Gender and Society} 17, no. 6 (Dec. 2003): 942-943.
\textsuperscript{22} “About [Korea Center for Investigative Journalism],” 2020, https://kcij.org/
\textsuperscript{23} “Sorrowful Homecoming Part 2,” (Korea Center for Investigative Journalism, 2016), https://justice4comfortwomenuk.wordpress.com/2017/01/02/sorrowful-homecoming-with-english-subtitles/
Korea.\(^\text{24}\) Whereas, in South Korea, according to Elizabeth Shim’s report on March 3, 2020, there were eighteen comfort women still alive.\(^\text{25}\)

In *Sorrowful Homecoming*, the Korean women shared their experiences and recalled the social stigma associated with wartime sexual slavery, which discouraged many of them from sharing their story. The interviews were filled with emotion, mostly anger and sadness. To document the sexual violence the Japanese army committed against them, many of the women who were interviewed showed the scars left on their bodies. For example, Park Youngsim was seventeen years old and, in her words, still “a child” when she was forcibly brought to a comfort station in Nanjing, China. Because she disobeyed a Japanese soldier, the soldier cut her stomach, leaving Park with a fifty-centimeter scar in her stomach.\(^\text{26}\) Here, oral history and women’s bodies serve as evidence against denials of the comfort women system or efforts to downplay the gender-based violence against women.\(^\text{27}\) A common theme throughout these interviews is that the Japanese soldiers committed those atrocities and the women who died in the comfort stations need to be remembered.\(^\text{28}\)

\(^{24}\) “Sorrowful Homecoming Part 2,” (Korea Center for Investigative Journalism, 2016).


\(^{26}\) Park Youngsim, interview by Dakashi Ito, *Sorrowful Homecoming* (Korea Center for Investigative Journalism, 2016) [https://justice4comfortwomenuk.wordpress.com/2017/01/02/sorrowful-homecoming-with-english-subtitles/](https://justice4comfortwomenuk.wordpress.com/2017/01/02/sorrowful-homecoming-with-english-subtitles/)


\(^{28}\) Kim Youngsook, interview by Dakashi Ito, *Sorrowful Homecoming* (Korea Center for Investigative Journalism, 2016) [https://justice4comfortwomenuk.wordpress.com/2017/01/02/sorrowful-homecoming-with-english-subtitles/](https://justice4comfortwomenuk.wordpress.com/2017/01/02/sorrowful-homecoming-with-english-subtitles/)
Kim Youngsook was one of the women that Dakashi Ito interviewed in *Sorrowful Homecoming*. Kim was only thirteen when she was kidnapped by the Japanese police. Kim was a virgin; she was given to a Japanese military officer when she arrived at a comfort station in an unnamed location. Kim recalled that the officer took out a pocket knife and cut her open; she told the interviewer that “you have to see to believe” the amount of torture that she had experienced. A soldier twisted her knee so badly that it broke and then he stabbed her other knee, forcing Kim to walk with a cane. She has scars from stab wounds going from her shoulders all the way down to her buttocks. Kim blamed the Japanese military for all the pain she faced in her life: they “ruined her liver and body.” Throughout the interview, Kim was angry and strongly resented the Japanese soldiers.

Although the issue of comfort women in China has received substantial scholarly and media attention only in recent decades, an estimated 200,000 Chinese women were used as sex slaves by the Japanese imperial army. *Thirty-Two* is a documentary about Wei Shaolan, a former Chinese comfort woman and her son; this documentary was directed by Guo Ke. The film was released in 2012 and got its name from the number “comfort women” in China who were alive at the time. Wei Shaolan was twenty-four when she and her baby were captured by a Japanese soldier and sent to Maling, a Japanese camp. At the camp, the women who were captured alongside Wei were locked in a room where “five or six devils each time, taking turns on two or three girls . . .

---

29 Kim Youngsook, interview by Dakashi Ito, *Sorrowful Homecoming*.
30 Kim Youngsook, interview by Dakashi Ito, *Sorrowful Homecoming*.
31 See, for example, Peipei Qiu, Su Zhiliang, and Chen Lifej, *Chinese Comfort Women: Testimonies from Imperial Japan’s Sex Slaves* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
would come in and rape us.” The word “devil” is used to refer to the Japanese soldiers. Although Wei was able to escape and find her way back home, she faced animosity when she got there. Wei’s husband rejected her, despite her mother-in-law telling Wei’s husband that it was not Wei’s fault. Wei became pregnant while at the comfort station; the child, Luo Shanxue, faced malice from many of the villagers because he was part Japanese. In Thirty-Two, Luo recalled his time with the other children and how they bullied him; although he tried to date some women, he was considered “unmarriageable” because he was part Japanese. Luo’s mother Wei Shaolan tried to cope with the hardships that she faced. Wei threw herself into raising her son and attempted to stay as positive as she could by seeing the beauty in the world, despite not having much. Throughout the interview, Wei sounded sad about her wartime experience but she tried to be positive about the rest of her life. Her son, in contrast, had difficulty in dealing with how he had been treated throughout his life and did not care to keep living.

Wei Shaolan’s story suggests that despite escaping from the Japanese army, she still had to heal from the experience and deal with the challenges posed by her husband's rejection and the community’s attitude toward her son. In directing Thirty-Two, Guo Ke’s goal was to have one of the remaining comfort women in China tell her story. Thirty-Two and Guo Ke’s second documentary called Twenty-Two drew attention to the dwindling number of Chinese comfort women who were still alive. Moreover, Thirty-Two offered a different approach to the comfort women’s stories. Unlike Sorrowful Homecomings, this documentary focused less on the physical scars and more on telling the stories of the atrocities committed against the women, albeit Thirty-Two.

33 Thirty-Two, directed by Guo Ke (Stealth Media Films, 2013) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRxO_MitId0
34 Thirty-Two https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRxO_MitId0
35 Thirty-Two https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRxO_MitId0
Two also showed what happened after the camps and the social stigma that Wei Shaolan and her child experienced.\textsuperscript{36}

Maria Rosa Luna-Henson, called Lola (Grandmother) Rosa, recounts being a comfort woman from April 1943 until January 1944 in her memoir \textit{Comfort Woman: A Filipina’s Story of Prostitution and Slavery Under the Japanese Military} published in 1999. Henson was fifteen years old when she was taken by Japanese soldiers. Henson recalled that she was not close to the other girls who were taken along with her, and they were often prevented from talking with each other.\textsuperscript{37} They were given little food; they were raped by an estimated thirty men in a night, and they could not get treatment when injured or sick, despite a Japanese doctor coming to check on the women for sexually transmitted diseases.\textsuperscript{38} After Henson escaped and returned to her family home, she was in such poor condition that she had to be nursed back to health. In her memoir, which was published five decades after the end of the war, Henson did not explicitly express anger about her experience as a comfort woman. However, she was still in pain and expressed her fear of Japanese soldiers.\textsuperscript{39} Throughout her memoir, Henson included sketches of what she was experiencing so that the reader can visualize her sadness and pain.\textsuperscript{40} These sketches serve as “photographic evidence” of Henson’s experience.

The lives of these women were negatively impacted by wartime sexual slavery, but there were differences in how these women recounted their experience. The way the interviews, documentary films, and memoir portrayed women’s experiences, in part, reflect the differences in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{37} Henson, \textit{Comfort Woman}, 38.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Henson, \textit{Comfort Woman}, 37-48.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Henson, \textit{Comfort Woman}, 58-60.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Henson, \textit{Comfort Woman}, 35-60.
\end{itemize}
women’s coping mechanisms and strategies for survival. Guo Ke’s documentary *Thirty-Two* starts with a serene scene and a poem about hope and moving forward. This poem dovetails with the theme of Wei’s story as presented in the film. Although being a comfort woman had negative repercussions on her relationship with her husband, Wei strove to adopt a positive attitude in her life. In contrast, the “Team Witness’s” documentary *Sorrowful Homecoming* highlights the atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers against Korean women and does not sugarcoat them in any way. *Sorrowful Homecoming* showed the scars left on the bodies of those Korean women and the anger that they continue to feel towards the Japanese soldiers. By using a combination of sketches and storytelling, Maria Rosa Henson uses her memoir to convey how the violence committed against her at such a young age changed her life for the worse.

Certain developments both in the past and the present can help explain the tone of *Sorrowful Homecoming* and other materials analyzed in this paper. Korean women experienced multiple levels of oppression as sex slaves and Japan’s colonial subjects. There were denials and efforts to downplay the comfort women issue; the latter and other issues related to Japan’s colonial rule in Korea remain controversial to this day. Japan formally occupied Korea from 1910 until 1945, and eighty percent of the comfort women were from Korea. Of the Korean comfort women, thirty-four percent were coerced to go with the Japanese through the promise of jobs, and others were sold by their families because of debt or were recruited as war-time workers who would later

---

41 *Thirty-Two* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRxO_MitId0
42 *Sorrowful Homecoming*, https://justice4comfortwomenuk.wordpress.com/2017/01/02/sorrowful-homecoming-with-english-subtitles/
43 Henson, *Comfort Woman*, 35-60.
become comfort women. If the women returned home, they had many medical problems because of the sexual abuse they suffered. After the war, none of the Korean women were sent back to their homes by the Japanese government; they were left to find their own way home. Only twenty-three percent of Korean comfort women survived the war. The Japanese colonial government implemented other policies, including changing Korean names to Japanese names, that were opposed by the Korean people. These policies created animosity towards the Japanese authorities, which is expressed by Korean survivors of the comfort station.

In the Philippines, Japan set up a government by elite Filipinos who served under Japanese officials until the end of Japanese occupation in 1945. The Japanese occupation of the Philippines was opposed by many Filipinos, including those who, like in Korea, went underground and adopted guerrilla warfare against the Japanese forces. The wounds from forced sexual slavery and other forms of violence committed against the Filipinos still linger today, despite Japan’s role

---

as a major aid donor to the Philippines.\textsuperscript{53} It is worth noting that the Asian Women’s Fund (AWF) was established in 1994 – the 50th anniversary of the end of the war – to express Japan’s remorse and apologies for the comfort women system. The government and people of Japan worked together to address the sexual violence and helped pay survivors for the abuse.\textsuperscript{54} In 1994, Maria Rosa Luna-Henson was one of the three Filipino women who decided to accept compensation from the AWF and the letters of apology.\textsuperscript{55} Grant K. Goodman noted that “in seven years only 266 individuals in South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and the Netherlands have taken money from the fund.”\textsuperscript{56} Although Henson explained that her Christian faith helped her to forgive her abusers, she still wanted justice before her death.

Despite widespread knowledge of the comfort women system in the early postwar period in Japan and its former occupied territories, the movement for redress for the victims did not gain momentum in East and Southeast Asia until the 1970s.\textsuperscript{57} During the 1990s, this movement against militarized sexual violence spread globally by making connections with other international movements and political campaigns.\textsuperscript{58} As Vera Mackie and Sharon Crozier-De Rosa noted in their study of the international movement to commemorate the survivors of militarized sexual abuse,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{53} See, for example, Mariejo S. Ramos, “PH comfort women: Statues removed but pain remains,” \textit{Philippine Daily Inquirer}, Feb. 24, 2019 \url{https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1089317/ph-comfort-women-statues-removed-but-pain-remains}
\item \textsuperscript{54} “Establishment of the AW Fund, and the basic nature of its project,” Asian Women’s Fund, awf.or.jp/e2/foundation.html
\item \textsuperscript{57} Vera Mackie and Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, “Remembering the Grandmothers: The International Movement to Commemorate the Survivors of Militarized Sexual Abuse in the Asia-Pacific War,” \textit{The Asia-Pacific Journal} 17, issue 4, no. 1 (February 15, 2019). \url{https://apjjf.org/2019/04/MackieCrozierDeRosa.html}
\item \textsuperscript{58} Mackie and Crozier-De Rosa, “Remembering the Grandmothers.”
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
the movement has pushed for advances in international law as well as dedicated memorial sites for survivors of wartime sexual violence. Many of the survivors were involved in these movements, particularly Korean survivor Kim Hak Sun, who held a press conference in 1991 to discuss her experience with systematized sexual violence.\(^9\) By sharing their stories, they are guaranteeing that their wartime experiences will not be forgotten.

With China’s rise as an economic powerhouse in recent decades, atrocities committed by the Japanese imperial army have become highly charged and contested issues, impacting bilateral relations between the two countries.\(^{60}\) In recent years, representations of the Nanjing Massacre in Chinese films no longer focus only on Chinese victimization; Chinese resistance has emerged as an important theme in some of the films on the Nanjing Massacre. Similarly, the theme of Chinese resilience is evident in *Thirty-Two*.

As shown in this paper, there were similarities in “comfort women’s” experience of sexual slavery during the Second World War. The case studies suggest that the differences in the ways Korean, Filipino, and Chinese women recalled and presented their experiences in interviews, memoirs, and documentary films may be attributed to various factors, including the differences in women’s coping mechanisms and survival strategies, as well as the specific experiences of each country and engagement with Japan before, during, and after the end of the Second World War.

\(^{59}\) Mackie and Crozier-De Rosa, “Remembering the Grandmothers.”

Bibliography

Primary


Thirty-Two. Directed by Guo Ke. Steal Media Films, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRxO_MitId0

Secondary


“Establishment of the AW Fund, and the basic nature of its projects.” Asian Women’s Fund. April 20, 2019. awf.or.jp/e2/foundation.html


