

Silence and Social Aftermath of the Korean 'Comfort Women': Focusing on their Life After the Return

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1. The Problem: the Fifty-Years' Silence

The issue of so called "Military Comfort Women" is not only an unprecedented case of systematic violence against women and infringement of human rights and women's rights in the history, but also an unprecedented and shocking case of a collective and systematic violation by none but a state power : the Japanese government and military. More shocking is that the Japanese government kept on denying its involvement until it finally had to concede its involvement recently.

The so-called "military comfort women," the name given to the women forced to become sexual slaves for the pleasure of Japanese troops, remained silent for fifty years before they came forward to testify for the war atrocities they had suffered from. Why did they remain silent so long? why did it take so long before they could talk? What were the trauma they suffered through their lives after the return?

This study attempts to answer these questions by revealing the life of the Korean "Comfort Women" after their return to Korea from the perspective of collective memory. More specifically, it will focus on 1) what were the aftermath immediately after the return? 2) why these women remained silent for the last 50 years, why was it so difficult to tell? 3) what were/are the effects of the silence, and 4) how did they try to resolve the pains due to the silence?

For this purpose I conducted in-depth interviews with six Korean "Comfort Women." I also referred to the testimonies of the cases published in the three volumes of collected testimonies (KCWD, 1993, 1997, 1999), when it was needed. By the way, the total number of those comfort women victims who reported is 199 (including those who acquired citizenship after return to Korea and those who are deceased). Among these, 48 women (including those whose testimonies are published in the three volumes of collected testimonies and not including those who have testified but live in China). The interviews were conducted from March to August, 1999. The characteristics of the interviewees are as shown in <Table 1>.

<Table 1> the Cases

cases	age (year born)	method of draft	place and duration of sex slavery
1	79 (1922)	19(1941), draft	Jilin, China
2	74 (1925)	cheated for employment	Manchu, China
3	73 (1926)	cheated for employment	1 year and 6 months
4	73 (1926)	cheated for employment	Burma, ? years
5	73 (1926)	sold	Hunchun, China, 3 years
6	76 (1923)	cheated for employment	Kainando Island, China, 5 years

2. The Lives After the Return: in Terms of Hometown/Family, Living Conditions, Marriage/Sexuality/Reproduction

These women returned to Korea with such a difficult process. However, return to the home country did not mean that all problems were resolved. Problems as difficult and complicated were waiting for them. Many of them could not or did not return to their hometowns and lived uprooted lives, and their family ties were broken. In this situation they had severe hardship even in surviving, and they could not live a normal life as a woman.

When they returned, where did they go? If we examine the comfort women who "fortunately" could return, the most distinctive characteristic is that most of them did not return to their hometown. Among the six women interviewed, four did not go back to their hometown, and only two returned to their hometown (Table 2). At that time the society was very much a traditional agricultural one, in which the family and hometown was the foundation of living, and it was difficult even to imagine that a young woman live alone in a city which is not her hometown. Despite this situation, many of the women victims did not go back to their hometown.

Why did they not go back to their hometown? First, some did not want to go back, because they did not have close family members there. Second, those whose hometown was in North Korea could not go back even if they wanted to, because most of them arrived at Pusan, southern end of Korea. But the most important thing is that many of them went to some other places, because they did not want to go back to their hometown. Probably they were afraid of encountering someone who might recognize them and their past.

Then what happened to those who returned to their hometown? It was found out that even the two who went back to their hometown did not stay there, but drifted around. Why? Some of them, with their torn body and hurt mind, could not stand their families' pressure to get married who did not know the fact (Case 2). Others were afraid that they might encounter those men whom they had met at the "comfort stations." (case 6) Thus voluntarily or involuntarily these women became "uprooted" people. Their whole network, family ties, friendship, etc., were cut off.

Those who did not go back to their hometown were cut-off from their families, and even most of those who returned to their hometown could not tell their past stories. In such a situation the family could no longer work as the family and provide a supporting tie to them.

However, in the hard times, people probably miss the affection of the family more. One case brought up abandoned children during the Korean War, when it was difficult even a grownup to survive by herself (Case 1). Another case brought up a son of her niece when he was three years old and live with him, relying on him as her son (Case 2). Why would they have done it? In the former case, she might have done so, probably because she was scared to live alone. However, considering how difficult it is to bring up children, considering how much care and love it needs, and considering that she brought up the abandoned children despite all the difficulties and the care taking, we can see how thirsty they are for the love of the families.

In addition to their broken family ties and uprooted lives away from home, another problem was severe hardship even in surviving. Korea in the 1940's was economically in bad condition, and most people's living conditions were terrible, due to the long exploitation of the Japanese colonial rule. Particularly, these comfort women victims were in worst conditions. Those who could not go back to their hometown were miserable like a small boat in the boundless sea. They had to do anything to live on. However, there were very little work they could choose from, since women's socio-economic participation was extremely restricted at that time. The Korean War which broke out in 1950 and continued until 1953 made the situation worse.

They barely survived, mostly engaged in sex-service industries, personal service work such as house-maid, and/or peddling. More specifically, some of them worked as maid at eating houses (case 1, case 2, case 4), worked as maid at drinking houses (taverns) (case 2, case 3, case 5), peddled selling matches, cigarettes, clothes, US goods, etc. (case 1, case 3, case 5), worked as a house maid (case 4, case 5), gathered and sold herbs and medical plants (case 6), and one went into a temple (case 5).

Another painful problem was that they could not live normal life as a woman. At that time women's socio-economic participation was extremely restricted, and it was considered normal that most women get married, give birth to babies, and live on. However, most of these comfort women victims did not (or could not) get married and/or did not (or could not) give birth to babies like other "normal women." It turned out that three of the six interviewees did not get married. And the few who got married did so to unusually old man (case 3), or to a man who had already got married and had a wife (case 4), or to a man whose wife had deceased and had children to take care of (case 6). Two of these gave birth to babies (case 3 and 4).

Thus to these women it was the greatest *han* and torment (pain) not to be able to live like other "normal women" (case 2). One might ask a question whether it is a good

thing to get married in a patriarchal society. However, this question might be relevant to only a few people even today, and totally irrelevant to those women at that time. In short, their intimate relationship, marriage and so on can be considered as "not normal."

Seen in this way their whole life after the return can be considered as aftermath of the "comfort women" experiences.

3. The Effect of the Silence: Immediate and Long-Term Aftermath

As discussed above, in a broad sense their whole life itself after the return can be considered as aftermath of the "comfort women" experiences. In a more narrow sense of the term, however, the aftermath refers to those in terms of physical, mental, and human relations aspects. I will omit the issue of aftermath in terms of human relations aspects, since I have already discussed the cut-off from the family ties, friendship relations, and their impossibility to achieve "normal" intimacy, and normal marital relations.

Physical aftermaths as has been identified in words and with eyes, though they will be more specifically revealed through medical examinations, is as shown in <table 2>. What I would like to mention in this regard is the case 1. Case 1 could have almost died, but barely could survive with an operation on uterus with blood discharging. What is more stunning was that there were seven others besides her in the comfort station who had similar symptoms (they "had a rotten uterus") but could not get out and could do nothing but wait to die. Here I will focus on mental aftermaths and discuss their immediate and long-term aftermaths.

What is the first aftermath immediately after the return? Probably the women victims themselves are not aware of it. But to me it seems to be a fear of coming back to real life from a sort of moratorium. By living a life in a Japanese army base in a foreign country, these women were living in a sort of moratorium which is far away from the social relations and discourses of Korea and where social ethics and value judgments are temporarily suspended. When they realized that they were coming back to their previous lives and relationships, they probably have felt fear and anxiety. Even though the life in the comfort stations was painful and humiliating, there were no family members or friends around who would or could do ethical or value judgments on their lives and behaviors. However, now they had to be conscious of the eyes of the people around themselves, which certainly would give them enormous burden and pains.

<Table 2> Comfort Women's Life after the Return and their Aftermaths

case	the home/family	work and income	intimate relationship	physical aftermaths	mental aftermaths
1	*came to Seoul (the hometown was Buyo but had lived in North Korea) *no parent	*worked as a maid at eating houses and drinking houses (taverns), *peddled selling matches, cigarette, etc.	*not married *brought up 5 children during the Korean War *their registrations were all separated recently	*had an operation on uterus with blood discharging * seven others who were with her died with similar symptoms (they "had a rotten uterus").	(a n o t h e r victim--did not eat, did not talk, but just smoked) *disgust against men, shudder (is horrified) at the mere thought of men
2	*came back to the h o m e t o w n (K y o n g s a n g Province) *had families, but drifted around	*worked as a maid at eating houses and drinking houses	*not married *brought up her sister's grandchild and now lives with him	*her side seared with a hot iron	*had a nightmare *ran out of the home and drifted around not to get married
3	*came to Pusan, (the hometown was Pyongyang, North Korea) * had no brothers and sisters in the South	*worked as a maid at drinking houses, *peddled selling vegetables, breads, etc.	*married when she was 34 with 60 year old man with 4 daughters *gave birth to a daughter	*her shoulder twisted and protruded out due to the kicking *has a bent back *has a hearing problem due to hitting	*disgust against men
4	*came to Incheon (the hometown was Kwangju, Cholla Province) *no parent, but had lived at her uncle's house, has cousins in Kwangju	*worked at an eating house for 10 years and *then worked as a housemaid for 25 years	*lived with a man who later was found to have a wife *gave birth to two daughters	*has a weak bladder and frequency of urination *has a arthritis	
5	*came to Cholwon, Kangwon Province (the hometown was P y o n g c h a n g , Kangwondo) *her parents died early, had two sisters, among whom one died, and the other deaf	*worked as a maid at drinking houses, *peddled, selling clothes, US goods, etc, *worked as a housemaid, *went into a temple	*not married *she had a lover, who had to get married to another woman and committed suicide *gave birth to a daughter, but died when she was 7 months old	*has no single healthy part of the body *had 7 operations *has a hearing problem, her eardrum was destroyed due to the hitting	* c o m m i t t e d suicide six times *always think "why is my fate so rugged and unfortunate?"
6	*came back to hometown, Taegu *had parents and 8 brothers and sisters	*her husband sold scrap iron, *gathered and sold herbs and medical plants	*married to a man who had been already married and had 5 children. *couldn't give birth to a baby due to the 5 children	*was hit by a sword *had gallstones and had an operation due to cholelithiasis	*drifted around because she could not live well *says "my life was destroyed since I had the comfort women

The fact that many women victims could not come back, gave up coming back, or committed suicide in a returning ship, and even after the return could not go back home, and could not tell the truth even after going back to their hometown, etc, demonstrates the intensity of the pains they went through in this very process.

Thus many women probably have decided not to tell their stories, and did not tell even their families but kept silence. In fact, it turned out that none of the six interviewees told anybody until they reported. This can be considered as the stage of having memories but keeping silence.

However, as time passes by with repressed memories and kept silence, these women probably felt lots of repression, which probably made the sediments of *han* keeping on piling up. They probably had decided to keep silence in order to soothe or relieve the mental pains and conflict. On the other hand, they probably could forget little by little in a barely surviving living conditions. This can be considered as the stage of keeping silence and forgetting.

As the silence became longer, it might have been likely that the memories of individual women became blurred. Also the issue of the "comfort women" did not rise up as a social problem, but beginning to disappear from the collective memories.

However, the long silence brought them various forms of aftermath. These can be divided into internal aftermath and external aftermath. The internal aftermath, for example, appeared in the form of dreaming a nightmare and sleepwalking, moving to another place while sleeping without knowing it (case 2), shunning the world and people (case 5), and in an extreme case, attempting a suicide (case 5).

External aftermath appeared mostly in the form of disgust against men (case 1, case 3), distrust toward the human being, and in the phenomena of not taking roots in the hometown but drifting around (case 2, case 6).

In a sense it is a miracle that they could stand the long fifty years silence and could survive without getting mad.

Then what was it that made these women endure through all these pains and torment? In other words, how did they try to solve and how could they solve the torment coming from silence?

Some tried to solve the problem by relying on personal measures such as using alcohol, cigarettes, etc, and getting drunk and crying out (case 3, case 6). Some others relied on personal but more positive measures such as getting acquainted with and talking with neighbors and friends (case 4, case 6), making family relations by bringing up orphans or relative children (case 1, case 2). Still others tried to forget pains by

relying on prayers (case 4) or commitment to religion (case 5), or commitment to work (table 3).

After making the testimonies, many of them found out that making the testimony itself was the mechanism solving the pains. Taking parts in KCWD movements or Wednesday demonstration before the Japanese Embassy also seems to be helpful in solving the problem of pain.

<Table 3> Their Ways of Resolving the Stresses and Pains

measures	negative	positive
personal	smoking, drinking, crying	talking to neighbors and friends
religious	praying	devoting oneself to a religion
social	making testimonies	taking parts in KCWD movements

4. The Context of Silence: The Living Conditions, Cultural, and Linguistic Factors

As mentioned above these women victims remained silent for the last fifty years, despite their great sufferings and torment such as trauma, suicide attempt, etc.. Why was it so difficult to tell? What are the factors which made them keep silence? Though there might be diverse background factors for this, three of them seem to be particularly important. They are: the living conditions, cultural factors, and language and identity factors.

First, it should be pointed out that they had no choice but to remain silent, because they had no opportunity to tell. As mentioned above, most of these women had nobody to tell the story, since they could or did not go back to their hometown, and were cut-off from their families and friends and most of their relationships were cut off (case 1, 3). Others who went back to their hometown and had an opportunity to tell the story, could not tell the story even to their own families due to their chastity ideology (case 2, 6). And some others said their relatives gave them pressure not to tell the story, even when they reported and registered as the comfort women victims at the government (case 4).

Also, the burden of daily living was too heavy for them to even think about it. At that time Korea was just emancipated from the Japanese colonial rule and Korea as a nation-state was not even built. Furthermore, the Korean War which lasted for three years from 1950 to 1953 destroyed even the little left. In this situation institutional support system for these women victims, such as financial support, counseling, etc., at the government level, were unthinkable at that time, and there were no other relief system available.

Particularly, the Korean War, which lasted for three years and brought about a

horrible living conditions of terrible destruction, death, pains, and trauma and another cutoff from their hometown and families, probably had an effect of making their past memories get attenuated and blurred or fade away. This is so because the past pains have a tendency to fade away from the memories when the present pains are too much for them.

Second, even if they had an opportunity to tell, they could not tell even their own families, due to chastity ideology and anti-Japanese sentiments, among others. This was so because the label of the "comfort women" in a patriarchal society was fatal to their lives as women. One of the interviewees said that (even after the reporting) people "looked at her as if they were looking at leper" (case 6). Some others said that they did not tell, since they thought they might be alienated from their significant others such as the families and friends.

Also in Korea at that time, not long after the Japanese colonial rule, anti-Japanese sentiment among the people was strong. And these women, even though they were the victims of the Japanese military, could not tell their stories, since they had fears that they might be accused of having cooperated with the Japanese military.

Third, in addition to chastity ideology and anti-Japanese sentiments, language and identity factors which made them difficult to express their experiences into words can also be considered important. They knew they had been victimized seriously, but they had difficulty in defining this victimization. They were not sure whether it was a rape or a prostitution or something else, and they did not have the right words to describe their experiences. As is now well known, before the word "sexual harrassment" or "wife battering" was found, women who were victimized with these, could not define the victimization as "sexual harrassment" or "wife battering", and thus could not take an appropriate measure according to it. Furthermore, at that time the social atmosphere was such that people were hiding their victimizations and it was not a time for them to come forward and speak.

This difficulty of linguistic expression has a lot to do with their confusion of identity. At first they probably had thought that they were raped, but later they might have thought that they were not different from prostitutes. Sometimes they might have thought that they were Korean victims who had been forcibly drafted under the colonial rule, but other times they might have thought that they were Japanese patriots serving the "Japanese Imperial Army", identifying themselves with the Japanese military, due to the Japanese indoctrination education. Due to this confusion of identity they probably had more difficulty in defining their victimizations. Thus they were more likely to have concealed their identity and kept silence.

There are times you do not express yourself into words even though you know something and have the right words for it. There are other times you cannot express yourself even though you want to express yourself, because you do not have the right

words. Both of these two situations seem to work in the cases of the comfort women. On the one hand, they could not talk about their victimizations even though they knew about it, due to their chastity ideology and anti-Japanese sentiments, etc.. On the other they could not express themselves even though they wanted to, since they did not and could find the right words to describe their experiences. Thus when the KCWD or women's studies developed feminist discourse and advocated their positions, their words began to pour out like the flood (Shim, 1998).

5. Concluding Remarks

This paper dealt with the issue of the life of the comfort women victims after their return to Korea. Particularly, it focused on the following questions: what are the pains and aftermath the fifty years silence has brought to them, why they kept silence so long, how did they come to break the silence and report, and what are the effects of speaking. In summary, it can be said that their whole life after the return can be considered as aftermath of the "comfort women" experiences. Considering the fact that they are still suffering from the aftermath even after the reporting and testimonies, it can certainly be said that this issue of the comfort women victimization is not a problem of the past, but a problem of the present.

The testimonies of the comfort women victims has a strong power of restoring the collective memories and of making historians rewrite history. This power comes from the very fact that they not only suffered from extreme victimization, but also had to keep silence for about fifty years. This is the power of truth, which neither political power nor military force can suppress. This we could see in the testimonies of the comfort women victims.

The fifty years' silence could be broken through a 10 years' efforts of the KCWD and the resulting implementation of government policy toward the comfort women survivors. Through this we can find out that legal institutions and measures are important in restoring collective memories. But it can also be pointed out that civil movement, especially women's movement were essential in doing it.

In order to throw away the old sediments of the 20th century and start the new millenium with a new, clean mind, East Asian NGO's are preparing a Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery in the Year 2000. This tribunal is not to punish those responsible or to restitute for the damages done, but to reveal the truth, that is, to publicize the war atrocities of Japan and form a public opinion so that a similar atrocities would not be repeated. In this sense it can be considered as a symbolic court in order to prevent such atrocities. however, even in this symbolic court legal institutions and apparatus are necessary and mobilized. Thus it can be said that in restoring the collective memories legal institutions as well as public opinion formation are important.