

Inquiring of Park Yu-ha, the Counsel of the Empire

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1. Background

The content of this book contains criticism on the book *Comfort Women of the Empire* (Puriwaipari, 2013) by Park Yu-ha. However, at the time when *Comfort Women of the Empire* was first published, the book did not gain much attention from the scholars or civic groups who were concerned about “comfort women” issue. It was in 2015 when the *Comfort Women of the Empire* became the center of controversy following several incidents. In June 2014, nine “comfort women” victims sued Park Yu-ha for defamation charges and sought a court injunction to ban its sales, sparking the controversy.

On November 26, 2015, a group of 54 writers and scholars from Japan and the United States issued a statement criticizing South Korean prosecutors for “suppressing the freedom of scholarship and press based on a particular historical view.” On December 2, 2015, 194 Korean intellectuals issued a statement saying that “the thought of making a scholar’s argument a subject of judicial judgment is way too anachronistic,” and expressed concern about suppression of freedom of scholarship and expression. Yet, on that very day, on December 2, 60 “comfort women” researchers and activists also issued a statement saying that *Comfort*

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Women of the Empire distressed victims with a narrative that lacks sufficient academic support and that they are concerned about dealing with the “*Comfort Women of the Empire* incident” only based on the concept of freedom of scholarship and expression. As many domestic and overseas intellectuals released both sympathetic or protesting statements, House of Sharing, a home for living comfort women, issued a statement on December 3, 2015, to explain the background for the indictment. Through the statement, House of Sharing said that the living comfort women were outraged by the depiction of them as “voluntary prostitutes” and expressions such as “waged in the war with Japanese soldiers as comrades for the victory of Japan.”

Ever since the lawsuit was initiated, various depictions and expressions of comfort women in the book *Comfort Women of the Empire* (especially expressions such as “voluntary prostitution” and “comrade-like relationship”) became widely known throughout Korean society and those expressions conflicted with common knowledge and emotions that were prevalent in Korean society and fueled a controversy. This debate heated up as Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s move toward historical revisionism such as reviewing “Kono Statement” (1993) was reported in Korea. The controversy reached its peak when Korean and Japanese governments finalized a mutually agreed “final and irreversible resolution” which excluded intentions of the victims.

Inquiring of Park Yu-ha, the Council of the Empire is a collection of criticisms on Park which were released through various medias since “comfort women” halmonis filed the lawsuit in June 2015. The book with the subtitle, “Lies of the Empire and the Truth of Comfort Women” compiles the logic of criticism and materials of 19 scholars, writers, and activists from both home and abroad who define Park Yu-ha as the “council of the Empire.” Naturally, through this book, scholars of law, history, and literature and activists from multiple fields approaches the essence of Japanese military’s “comfort women” issue via multilateral analysis. Unsurprisingly, the title of this book “inquire of Park Yu-ha” is not only aimed at Park herself, but rather is close to critical questioning to Park, Korean intellectuals who advocates Park, and even to liberal intellectuals and Japanese right-wing nationalists. In this review, rather than to deep dive into the details of

the books, the reviewer will recapitulate the essential issues of *Comfort Women of the Empire* and *Inquiring of Park Yu-ha, the Counsel of the Empire* first, then add the impression of the books.

2. “Comfort Women of the Empire” vs. “Council of the Empire”

In *Comfort Women of the Empire*, Park firmly denies legal responsibility of the Japanese government for its colonial rule. Since the lead to press state responsibility of the Japanese government is coercion of comfort women, she asserts a theory in which private recruiters were the main culprit. To deny legal responsibility of Japan, Park especially emphasizes Korean recruiters who were deeply involved in coercing women. It means that the main culprit behind comfort women issue is not the Japanese government but Korean recruiters. Therefore, Park argues that because Japanese government or military did not commit state crime as they were not systematically involved in the coercion of women or operation of comfort stations, Japanese government is not liable.

In this context, one can understand why Park did not use terms that were used in comfort women related literature such as “Japanese military comfort women” or “Korean comfort women” but rather used “comfort women of the Empire.” Park intentionally coined the term “comfort women of the Empire” to avoid using the term “Japanese military comfort women” which exposes legal responsibility of the Japanese Empire. “Comfort women of the Empire” signifies the meaning that just like “Japanese comfort women,” “Korean comfort women” is also a member of the Japanese Empire. Therefore, Park argues because “Korean comfort women” were subjects of the Japanese empire, they were intrinsically different from Chinese or South East Asian women who belonged to enemy countries. Based on such recognition, Park Yu-ha does not separate oral data of “Korean comfort women” and “Japanese comfort women” but combine those two to assert her point of view. The gist of her opinion lies in the argument that “Korean comfort women” as the “comfort women of the Empire” acted patriotically based on a “comrade-like relationship” with the Japanese military.

Park argues that the nature of comfort women were patriots who helped Japan in waging a war and comfort women themselves accepted their role as patriots. That is to say, that the government demanded comfort women to provide emotional consolation to soldiers and comfort women found pride in serving their nation and that pride played the role of providing their psychological exit. Furthermore, she argues that “Korean comfort women” were patriots and formed a “comrade-like relationship” with Japanese soldiers. As the members of the Empire, and because comfort women and soldiers were comrades, “Korean comfort women” were able to cherish the memory of love and peace with Japanese soldiers unlike comfort women from China or South East Asia.

Authors of the book *Inquiring of Park Yu-ha, the Counsel of the Empire* named Park as the “Counsel of the Empire” because Park is defending the Japanese Empire and Japanese soldiers. One author of the book criticizes Park by claiming that Professor Park does not deal with invasion and war from the perspective of suppressed women or people who were stripped of their sovereignty but as a counsel of the Empire with the view of the Empire. (362) In other words, Park is looking at the colonial rule not from the position of victims of the colony, but from the eyes of the Empire, from the perspective of a perpetrator.

In the supplement to this book, one can find court’s written judgment on the ban on sales of Park’s book from February 2015 and 34 sentences that were deleted from the book. The sentences that the court ordered deletion are commonly about “defending the Empire.” That is, “Japanese military comfort women” are patriotic women from the colony, formed “comrade-like relationship” with Japanese military, and they were not coerced to the battlefield but voluntarily became comfort women for money or were conned into becoming comfort women by recruiters. Even though Park claims that her views are different from that of the Japanese right-wing nationalists, but those deleted sentences are not so much different from the claims of the Japanese right-wing nationalists. It is because key catchphrases related to “comfort women” used by such right-wing nationalists are “sex slaves do not exist,” “forced recruitment did not happen,” “military comfort women were voluntary prostitutes.”

3. Violence in the Name of Reconciliation

Park Yu-ha explains the reason for writing *Comfort Women of the Empire* in the preface. She quotes a passage from her book *For Reconciliation* which was published in 2005. “Why do we keep on failing in solving the comfort women issue for more than ten years? When Japan is unchanging despite criticisms from neighboring countries, the reason behind the failure may be in the content and format of criticism.” Park points out that the reason for not being able to solve comfort women issue should be found not only in Japan but also in Korea.

She claims that she wrote the book to truly solve comfort women issue and to achieve reconciliation of Korean and Japan by doing so. However, she seeks the solution not in Japan’s self-reflection or apology, but in Korea’s nationalistic sentiment. According to Park’s assertion, Korea’s baseless mistrust toward Japan is the culprit behind discord between Korea and Japan, and the cause of that distrust lies in excessive nationalism of Korea. Such assertion resonates with Japan’s historical revisionism which first appeared in the late 1990s to deny the Nanjing Massacre and comfort women along with other colonial rule and war crimes and to revise post-war history. Japanese intellectuals praise *Comfort Women of the Empire* not because this book is superb in its quality but because the arguments of the book perfectly suit their desire. In other words, “This book was widely praised in the Japanese media because Park Yu-ha carefully sensed the desire of Japanese intellectuals and appealed to two types of historical revisionism which are the denial of pre-war responsibility of the Empire of Japan and revision of post-war history.” (428)

However, rather than solving the issue of comfort women, Park’s diagnosis and the solution brought about confusion among Korean and foreign scholars. Notably, a Korean-Japanese scholar Suh Kyung-Sik defined Park Yu-ha’s argument as “the violence in the name of reconciliation (Dolbegae, 2011).” He protested that victims seek accountability of colonial rule and compensation not because they are confined in nationalism but because of actual damage and pain they have suffered, and even if victims are confined in nationalism, the cause of nationalism lies in the perpetrators. His argument is a protest to the absurd idea that victims are the

ones that obtrude reconciliation of Korea and Japan. That is, calling reasonable compensation request for damages and pain anti-Japanese nationalism that interfere with reconciliation is “the violence in the name of reconciliation.” In fact, Park strongly emphasizes reconciliation in both Korea and Japan because of her strong conviction that Japanese government is not liable. Because if the liability is recognized, the only way forward is for the perpetrator to seek forgiveness and to compensate whereas victims have no other option but to accept them.

Another problem is that her concept of reconciliation is that the reconciliation is an alliance between only South Korea and Japan, North Korea not included, and moreover, it is an alliance with Abe administration, which continues to be more conservative than before. As a matter of fact, East Asian policy of the US to curb China’s emergence is an invisible hand behind “final and irreversible resolution” of comfort women issue which was announced on December 28, 2015. It is a well-known fact that the US urged Korea and Japan to solve quickly comfort women issue which was an obstacle between the relationship of two countries. Park Yu-ha is neglecting the fact that Korean-Japanese reconciliation is linked to a stronger military alliance for the blockade of North Korea and containing China.

4. Task of Resolving Colonialism

In an exactly opposite way from Park’s opinion on the matter, one need to ask why “comfort women” issue has not been solved in a way that victims demanded for a long time. The reviewer believes that “comfort women” issue may bring about an opportunity for us to change our recognition toward colonialism. Because the weakest point in *Comfort Women of the Empire* is its lacking of critical mind on colonialism.

Park accepts colonial law positivism which means that colonial laws were effective at the time. She severely criticizes patriarchal order of Chōsun in which daughters and sisters were sacrificed but omits criticism on colonialism. The ground for her argument lies in her understanding of coercion. Since coercion conducted according to the colonial law of the Empire is a legal act of the

government on its citizens, Park thinks that compensation cannot be sought for coercion. Park argues that the operation of comfort stations by the Japanese Empire was legal, and since violence and kidnapping were activities of individuals who violated the law of Japan, it is “Korean recruiters” who must be liable for their activities. This argument is a clear example of Park’s lack of critical mind on colonialism.

Colonialism is a crime against humanity as much as slavery since it forcibly determines the fate of a nationality regardless of their intention. There is an international consensus on the idea that slavery is a crime against civilization and culture which must not exist in the human societies; however, there is no consensus on colonial rule yet. The reasons are deeply related to the fact that leading nations of today’s world once owned colonies in the past. Japan and other nations that once ruled colonies in the past did not properly apologize and compensate.

However, liquidation of negative vestiges of colonial rule is sought after in many different aspects such as a new economic order to solve North-South divide, demanding compensation for atrocities committed by colonial rulers, liquidation of colonialism in colonial ruler nations and liquidation of the anti-people legacy of colonialism. Problems of colonialism are not confined to nationalistic issues as they include suppression and discrimination against the colony, coercion against the weak, and violation of human rights, and should be regarded as a violation of universal justice. Liquidation of colonial vestiges should be approached from the perspective of universal human right or humanitarianism or be reinterpreted from a postcolonial perspective.