

“The Comfort Women” Issue in East Asian Memory

The March 2017 issue of *S/N Korean Humanities* focuses on “comfort women” in East Asian memory. For this special theme, the editorial committee of *S/N Korean Humanities* at Konkuk University’s Institute of Humanities for Unification (IHU) is pleased to present the work of scholars from diverse backgrounds and disciplines, namely Xu Mingzhe (Yanbian University, China), Kim Myung-Hee (Konkuk University, Korea), Kang Seong Eun (Korea University of Japan), and Peipei Qiu (Vassar College, United States), which as a whole add previously unavailable or under-recognized details, perspectives, interpretations, and methodology to the ongoing debate and controversy surrounding the “comfort women” issue in both academic and policy circles. These special feature articles offer an in-depth examination of the historical significance and contemporary relevance the “comfort women” issue as the cruelest manifestation of Japanese colonialism and militarism.

As the editorial committee set out to plan this particular publication around the issue of “comfort women,” we wanted to highlight the works of scholars not well known in the Western or English language scholarship in the field of Korean studies in order to enhance the diversity of the Journal’s geographic coverage. At the same time, we wanted to give special prominence to the imperative of healing the trauma of enforced sexual slavery. In this light, the articles address the importance of healing by employing a thought process centered on the victims themselves. The editorial committee found these works enlightening in broadening the discussion on healing the historical trauma of the Korean people, including “comfort women,” which has been a core research focus of the IHU. Although in some ways, the “comfort women” issue is a uniquely Korean problem, the editorial board thought it would make better sense to situate the contention in the larger East Asian context and perspectives. The wide geographical range of the

special feature articles make this possible.

The first article by Xu Mingzhe focuses on the practical tasks needed to address the plight of “comfort women.” Xu notes that while the existence of the “comfort women” system has been commonly acknowledged, the current Japanese government’s denial of responsibility hampers the resolution of this problem. Xu argues that it is necessary to contemplate again the meaning of the comfort women issue and the significance of resolving the issue. It is important, according to Xu, not to leave imperial Japan’s inhumane activities and crime against humanity in the past and approach the comfort women issue to protect peace and justice and serve it as a warning to Japanese militarism which is currently on the rise.

The second article by Kang Seong Eun provides a rare opportunity to incorporate North Korea’s perspective in the discussion on healing the trauma of “comfort women,” as a tribute to our dedication to promoting integrated Korean studies. A scholar affiliated with the Korea University of Japan, Kang highlights the experience of one victim, Mrs. Pong-ki Pae, whose testimony in 1975 was not well known in South Korea and predated the testimony of Mrs. Hak-sun Kim whose revelation in 1991 is commonly understood as the first such public acknowledgement. Mrs. Pae, a victim of colonialism and war, was effectively silenced, and her experience obfuscated, by the ideological polarity born of the division of the Korean peninsula. In addition to shedding light on the significance of Mrs. Pae’s testimony, Kang introduces the deeply moving encounter between Pok-tong Kim, another victim of Japanese military sexual slavery, and the students of the Korea University of Japan in Tokyo in 2014. The article also stresses the need for Japanese society to rethink its history through a conceptual elaboration of war-dependent democracy. In the midst of the complete, conspicuous unveiling of the propensity of the Japanese right toward historical revisionism, the decline of the left has been intensely pronounced, rendering post-war democracy in Japan utterly impotent. The present conditions of such historical understanding in Japanese society necessitate an intricate re-examination of the understanding of modern Japanese history that has continued to exist until today; the concept of war-dependent democracy serves as an effort toward achieving such an end.

The third article by Kim Myung-Hee addresses the “comfort women” issue by

elaborating on the impact of continued colonialism and politics of denial by focusing on the historical dilemma manifested in the controversy surrounding the controversial book entitled *The Comfort Women of the Empire*. According to Kim, it is necessary to presuppose the recognition that the military “comfort women” issue is not a narrow Korea-Japan relations issue but one related to responsibility for colonial rule and to shared transitional justice in East Asia. Based on such presupposition, Kim introduces some of the debates and arguments within civil society in regard to the historiography of *The Comfort Women of the Empire*, as an example that shows the dilemma of historical self-reflection in East Asia. In the article, Kim critically reviews the problems of the historiography of *The Comfort Women of the Empire*, positioned largely within historical revisionism in East Asia, from the standpoint of Stanley Cohen’s theory on denial. Kim extrapolates theoretical and practical tasks implied by the foregoing discussion, from the perspective of possibility of historical dialogue in East Asia.

The fourth article by Peipei Qiu defines Imperial Japan’s “comfort women” system as was one of the major atrocities against humanity during the Asia-Pacific war (1931-1945). The paper introduces and discusses the personal accounts of Korean and Chinese “comfort women” which hitherto were unavailable to English readers. Qiu’s article demonstrates, through the testimonies of the survivors and eyewitnesses, the close correlation between the proliferation of the military comfort stations and the progression of Japan’s aggressive war. The lived experiences of the “comfort women” reveal undeniably that the “comfort women” system was created for the war and made possible by the war. The survivors’ narratives highlight that in today’s world when sexual violence continues to be used as an instrument of armed conflicts that prevents societies from achieving sustainable peace, the comfort women’s memories constitute a legacy of global significance.

In addition to the four special feature articles on “comfort women,” the Spring issue also presents an article by Tvirmantas Cenka, whose article explores the possibility of Korean War cinema serving as a medium in creating and spreading new Korean War cultural memory. Cenka’s study categorizes recent Korean War movies produced in South Korea as belonging to a new wave of Korean War cinema, which portray war as a national tragedy, focusing on the damage caused

by ideology and outside forces, rather than portraying it only as a North Korean aggression and blaming communists for the tragic destiny of the Korean nation. The study suggests that these movies can be used in creating a new paradigm in remembrance of the Korean War.

The two reviews concern the cultural and political history of the two Koreas during the early Cold War period. In the first review, Robert Winstanley-Chesters discusses Ruth Barraclough's work "Red Love in Korea: Rethinking Communism, Feminism, Sexuality," which describes how female communists such as Hō Jōng-suk, Vera Kang, Kang Kyong-ae and Chong Ch'il-song would dramatically break the moulds which once bound Korean culture. However, the potential these women saw for personal and gender liberation and transformation through the lens and power of communism and materialist dialectics for the most part would be dashed by the reality of autocratic state formation, the misery of Stalinism and the rise to power of a disinterested Kim Il-sōng clique.

Chesters' review is followed by Jean Do's discussion of *Assassination*, written by Korean historians Park Tae Gyun and Jung Changhyun. As the authors explore the reasons for the prevalence of a right-wing anti-communist government below the 38th parallel, they trace the assassination of five political elites, namely Hyōn Jun Hyōk, Song Jin U, Yō Un Hyōng, Chang Dōk Su, and Kim Ku. Although the party and ideological affiliations of these figures vary, their elimination from the political landscape from 1945 through 1949 represent the fall of moderation and the ascent of ideological extremism in the lead-up to the establishment of a separate government and subsequently, the Korean War in 1950. In particular, the authors draw attention to the role of state organs such the intelligence, police, military, and even the judiciary in engineering political outcomes that would mitigate the criminality of their pro-Japanese collaborationist past and allow them instead to reinvent their significance as anti-communist patriots. By highlighting the role of state organs in the use of violence to defeat the political opposition, Park and Jung show that while the responsibility of national division can be distributed widely, it was the internal split between the anti-communist right supporting a separate government on the one hand and its detractors on the other calling for national unity that made the establishment of the separate government

at once inevitable and irreversible.

The March 2017 issue of *S/N Korean Humanities* represents our ongoing commitment to cultivating new avenues of thinking, writing, and communicating in order to promote integrated Korean studies of *Hangukhak* and *Chosŏnhak*. The editorial board will continue the endeavor to situate the study of inter-Korean division and unification within the field of humanities and look forward to engaging with a wider audience and authorship in building the field of humanities for unification together.

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Chief-in-Chief

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