



Can the Comfort Women Speak?: Mainstream US Media Representations of the Japanese Military Sex Slaves

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Abstract

The US media's coverage of the comfort women issue has primarily focused on three main aspects: human rights, nationalist conflict, and security. First, American newspapers and magazines asked the Japanese government to apologize to the former comfort women by revealing the misery of their lives through a discussion of human rights. However, that discussion not only reflected the East-West power imbalance, but even served to promote voyeurism and sexual fantasies. Second, following the end of the Cold War, as tensions between South Korea and Japan over the issue have escalated, US media have increasingly taken a position as middleman, indifferent to the history of these women. The US media have scolded both South Korea and Japan for their nationalistic conflict. Third, the US media began to employ a security discourse on the comfort women issue as the controversy between South Korea and Japan deteriorated to a level that threatened the interests of the United States in East Asia and disrupted the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia" strategy. US media have played the role of midwife for the birth of the 2015 South Korea-Japan Comfort Women Agreement by shaping and disseminating a security discourse.

Keywords: US media, comfort women, subaltern, Cold War, post-Cold War, human rights, nationalism, security

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Introduction

Although the comfort women controversy has attracted the attention of a few researchers at the international level, it was largely ignored for almost 40 years following the end of World War II. Strenuous efforts to evaluate the history and memory of the comfort women of the Pacific War have been made by only a few progressive intellectuals and activists in South Korea and Japan. In particular, the United States, a party to the Pacific War, maintained a long period of silence on this controversy. Why have there been so few voices for these women in the United States? Why was the comfort women issue not publicized internationally for more than 40 years? There are two possible explanations for this. First, the patriarchal and nationalist political attitude toward sexuality in South Korea and other Asian countries has prevented the issue from being publicized by labeling the experiences of the comfort women as shameful. This political culture, interlocking with the non-democratic political environment of Asian countries, impeded the civil movement from resisting the injustice surrounding the issue until the women's movement and the global solidarity of feminist organizations grew in Asia in the 1990s.

Second, the Cold War was the main culprit behind the lack of publicity for the comfort women problem. In the context of the Cold War, which emerged as the new grammar of the international order following World War II, the United States needed to make Japan a pro-American bastion in Asia in its rivalry with the Soviet Union and other communist elements. As a result, during the Cold War, the United States threw cold water on any attempts at historical redress or making World War II a sensitive issue by avoiding any reference to Japanese war crimes, including the issue of sexual slavery. Aside from a few conscientious intellectuals, until the early 1990s, the vast majority of Japanese did not feel the need to admit to crimes associated with the so-called comfort women.

The reality of the abuse of these women began to be internationally recognized in the early 1990s, after the Cold War had ended and the spring breeze of democracy began to blow through various Asian countries, including South Korea. It was around this time that major media outlets in

the United States began reporting on the comfort women issue. This research is a study of that US media coverage. Yong-wook Chung's *Press Report on Historical Conflict and Peace in East Asia* (2016) is the only research to have analyzed the American media reports on the problem of World War II comfort women. Chung reviewed the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal* from December 2012 to May 2016 and found that the coverage of the comfort women issue in these publications had shifted from a discourse on women's human rights to one on security and cooperation. However, Chung's research is limited in that it does not pay enough attention to the different historical conditions in which various discourses about the comfort women were formed and the inherent political limitations of each discourse. In addition, the timeframe for the study was only three and a half years, and magazines were excluded from his analysis. To fill these gaps in Chung's research, I set the thirty years between 1990 and 2019 as my research timeframe. I first selected the daily newspapers with large circulations, and then classified them based on their political orientations. Through this process, the daily newspapers that I finally selected for research were the *New York Times* (liberal), *USA Today* (moderate), and *Wall Street Journal* (conservative). American magazines have published fewer articles dealing with the comfort women controversy than have daily newspapers. Therefore, considering the influence of magazines in the United States and abroad, I selected the following six magazines: the *New Yorker* (liberal), *Foreign Policy* (moderate), *Atlantic Monthly* (moderate), *Foreign Affairs* (moderate), *Newsweek* (conservative), and *Weekly Standard* (conservative). My purpose in this study is to analyze how the mainstream media in the United States perceived the comfort women controversy and how the media's comfort women discourses were formed and changed by historical events. At the same time, I examine whether the comfort women victim-survivors were in a position to talk about their experiences or whether they were only subalterns who tried but could not speak in the media.¹

1. Postcolonial historians and critics use the concept "subaltern" to put greater emphasis on power relations in history by identifying subordination in terms of class, race, ethnicity, gender, caste, and so on. In particular, the Indian historian Ranajit Guha tried to recover the subaltern as an autonomous subject who occupied a separate domain from the realm of elite

Human Rights Discourse around the Comfort Women

One of the early mainstream media outlets to publicize the comfort women controversy was the *New York Times* (hereafter, sometimes just the *Times*). On November 10, 1991, that paper published a short review of a Korean-American autobiographical novel by Choi Sook-Ryul, *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*. The *New York Times* briefly reported the decontextualized dry fact that young women in Chosun (the name of Korea under Japanese colonial rule, 1910–1945) were sent to the frontlines to provide comfort to Japanese soldiers. The controversy began to emerge as the subject of full-scale coverage only after 1992, when then Japanese Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi visited South Korea. Although other high-ranking Japanese politicians had previously visited South Korea, Miyazawa's visit in January 1992 was different. Just before Miyazawa's visit, Yoshimi Yoshiaki, a professor at Chuo University, found documents in the archives of the Japanese Ministry of Defense which proved not only that Japanese troops set up comfort stations during the war, but also that they supervised the kidnapping of young females in Japanese-occupied Asian countries. The progressive Japanese newspaper *Asahi* immediately reported this. As a result, Prime Minister Miyazawa was forced to express his apology for the comfort women issue four times, before and after his visit to South Korea.

After Miyazawa's 1992 visit and apologies, media outlets in the United States identified the comfort women issue primarily from the perspective of human rights. The *New York Times* was responsible for much of this human rights discourse. After the early 1990s, when the media began to investigate the sexual slavery employed by the Japanese military, the *New York Times* noted the fact that the Japanese army had forced many women in occupied territories into becoming comfort women. An Asian-American journalist, Jane H. Lii of the *New York Times*, interviewed a comfort woman named Kim in her small and shabby apartment at a time when most American media outlets conveyed the voices of comfort women, at best, through

politics. By turning toward anti-humanist poststructuralism, however, Subaltern Studies scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak sought to reconceptualize the subaltern subject as an effect of elite discourse. See Prakash (1994) and Chakrabarty (2000).

indirect quotes. Kim had immigrated to Queens, New York in 1979; she had lived in Ulsan, South Korea, before her immigration to the United States. Lii reconstructed the process by which Kim was eventually forced into sex slavery by Japanese officials and police at the age of 16 in 1944 (*New York Times*, September 10, 1995). The *Times*' discussion of human rights reached its peak in 2007, when Japanese politicians denied the existence of these women and tried to distort history textbooks. In particular, the United States House of Representatives House Resolution 121, initiated by California congressman Mike Honda, asked the Japanese government for an official apology for the mobilization of nearly 200,000 comfort women. When then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and other Japanese right-wing politicians denied the coercive recruitment of young women by the Japanese military, the *Times* on March 6, 2007, argued that Japan's denial of history was nothing less than dishonoring Lee Yong-Soo, a former comfort woman, who testified before the US House of Representatives about the brutality of the Japanese army during the Pacific War. On the same day, in an editorial entitled "No Comfort," the *Times* argued that what Japan gained by distorting the truth was only dishonor (*New York Times*, March 6, 2007). Also, in interviews in 2007 with Professor Yoshimi, who fifteen years previously had discovered primary sources on the role of the Japanese army, and with John W. Dower, a renowned professor of Japanese history at MIT, the *Times* revealed the arrogance and self-deception of the Japanese government's position that even if the Japanese military was involved in the establishment of comfort stations, sex slavery could not be proven, because no official data existed to prove the compulsory mobilization of young females (*New York Times*, March 31, 2007). Furthermore, the *Times* accused the Japanese government of not only concealing the truth about these women but also disguising war crimes by the Japanese military by omitting subjects or using passive sentence construction in its history textbooks (*New York Times*, April 1, 2007).

Of course, the mainstream media in the United States have not always understood the comfort women question through the discourse of human rights. *Newsweek* in particular did not show much interest in the question until 2007. When the discussion of human rights for young women forced

into sex slavery reached its climax, however, *Newsweek* published an article by Hideaki Kase, a Japanese activist. Kase, well-known as Yoko Ono's cousin, is a far-right diplomatic critic and a leading figure in Japan's push for historical revisionism. *Newsweek* was willing to apply Clio's cosmetics to Kase and introduced him as a "historian" when he made the following claims:

The fact is that the brothels were commercial establishments. U.S. Army records explicitly declare that the comfort women were prostitutes, and found no instances of "kidnapping" by the Japanese authorities. (*Newsweek*, April 2, 2007)

Kase's essay was soon criticized by readers, and *Newsweek* eventually published some of these criticisms in its August 2007 issue in the forum "Mail Call." Vicky Liu, a Chinese American living in Seattle, asked *Newsweek* to be more cautious in its reporting (*Newsweek*, August 13, 2007). However, *Newsweek* made no apparent effort at apology in response to such protests by its readers. The case of Kase in *Newsweek* could have been more controversial. Still, it was a small deviation from the general trend of mainstream media coverage in the United States at the time, which was to examine the comfort women issue through the prism of human rights, because even conservative media such as the *Wall Street Journal* were aware, like the *New York Times*, that the issue was a matter of human rights. For example, the *Wall Street Journal* published a joint article by Jeannie Suk, a professor at Harvard University, and Noah Feldman, a professor at NYU Law School, who claimed that the Japanese government's evasion of responsibility continued to cause pain to those who had been forced to provide sex as "comfort women" (*Wall Street Journal*, March 13, 2007). Furthermore, through editorials, the *Wall Street Journal* insisted that the Japanese people should know what kind of cruelty their country had inflicted and also warned Japanese politicians that they should never deny those acts (*Wall Street Journal*, March 28, 2007).

Why then did the *New York Times* as well as the *Wall Street Journal* look at the problem through the lens of human rights? Is it because media outlets

in the United States were initially interested in human rights? For answers to these questions we should first examine the political and economic environment in the United States and abroad. As a result of the Cold War, the United States and Japan were forced to maintain an interdependent relationship in terms of diplomacy and security, but economically, in the 1980s they experienced conflicts over a worsening trade imbalance. According to US government statistics from 1980, the United States had a US\$10 billion deficit in its trade with Japan, which increased to more than US\$40 billion by 1990 (US Bureau of the Census 1991, 4). This trade imbalance caused widespread anti-Japanese sentiment to rise in the United States. In June 1982, a Chinese American, Vincent Chin, was misidentified as Japanese and murdered with a baseball bat by two white workers. Some well-known figures fueled this anti-Japanese sentiment through hateful language. For example, in a paid article published in the *New York Times* in 1987, Donald Trump argued that Japan was taking advantage of the United States (Bergen 2019, 10). Additionally, Bennett Bidwell of Chrysler Motors even remarked that the best way to correct the trade imbalance with Japan was to use the Enola Gay, a reference to the bomber that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima (Park 1996, 17). The 1993 film *Rising Sun*, starring Sean Connery and Wesley Snipes, also contributed to the anti-Japanese sentiment, in that it showed the *yellow peril* symbolized by Japanese capital. This anti-Japanese sentiment sometimes reached a boiling point and created a volatile situation, but until the late 1980s, it could largely be suppressed for diplomatic and security reasons. However, as the post-Cold War era unfolded, the tools that had suppressed the anti-Japanese sentiment disappeared. The control system of the Cold War had encouraged the US media outlets to remain silent on Japan's war crimes. Once the control mechanism of the Cold War had been removed, however, American media became able to publish humanitarian reports in response to Japan's denial of history and its thoughtless remarks about the comfort women problem.

In 2007, the discussion of human rights came to a head, reflecting the tension between the United States and Japan. A small crack in United States-Japan cooperation had been created in the wake of the international financial crisis that swept through Asia in the late 1990s. Japan, which

had been pursuing the internationalization of the yen after the foreign-exchange crisis in many Asian countries, tried to create an Asian Monetary Fund in 1997. However, Japan was frustrated by the United States, which did not want to lose hegemony in Asia or allow the US-centered IMF to be weakened. The conflict between the United States and Japan was rekindled in 2007, with North Korea as the epicenter. At that time, the United States, which was seeking a solution to the North Korean nuclear issue, needed Japan's cooperation. However, Abe, who accumulated political gains by raising the issue of Japanese abductions by North Korea, insisted that his government would not participate in the implementation of the 2/13 agreement made during the Six-Party Talks in 2007 until the abduction issue was resolved. It was quite a difficult situation for the United States. American media were able to wield the sword of human rights discourse against Japan, because there were gaps in the US-Japan relationship that could not be easily resolved in the post-Cold War era.

This discourse, which was born during the post-Cold War era and grew through the fissures in the US-Japan relationship, was quite effective in conveying the wretched reality of the comfort women. The sword, however, was double-edged. Human rights themselves are neither *a priori* nor universally self-explanatory, but are a social construct. Discussion of human rights reflects power relationships between countries, and it was not easy for the comfort women victim-survivors to take a place in the human rights discourse. Therefore, to critically understand the discussion of human rights in major US media outlets, it is necessary to analyze the process whereby the concept of human rights was formed and used and to carefully examine the political effects of these concepts on the comfort women problem.

In the late 1970s, human rights and humanitarian politics based on human rights re-emerged as the dominant political practice in the West because of the failure of the Marxist revolution, the decline of the left, the frustration of the organized labor movement, and the proliferation of liberal ideology. According to Alain Badiou, the so-called New Philosophers emerged in France from the 1970s; these included André Glucksmann, Maurice Clavel, Christian Jambet, and Bernard-Henri Levy. In the words of Badiou, with regard to the Third World, the language of human rights

represents the West's "self-satisfied egoism" (2001, 7), because the misery of the Third World is assumed to be "the result of its incompetence, its own inanity—in short, of its *subhumanity*" (Badiou 2001, 13). The perception of the mainstream media in the United States about the comfort women does not deviate significantly from that notion of Western self-satisfaction, or more precisely, Orientalism for self-deception. Within this Orientalist representation system, the perpetrator, Japan, and the victim, South Korea, have been regarded as possessing the same characteristic—the subhumanity of the Third World. For example, Nicholas Kristof won the Pulitzer Prize in 1990 for his reporting on Tiananmen Square. He was also known as a progressive journalist who showed much interest in human rights. In 1997, Kristof introduced a Japanese soldier, Shinzaburo Horie, who testified that he not only stabbed the chest of a Chinese suckling but also ate the flesh of a 16-year-old boy during the war (*New York Times*, January 22, 1997). Although Kristof's writing was intended to emphasize the brutality of the Japanese military, he described a Japanese as a subhuman. However, a similar type of dehumanizing language was used to describe Koreans. In South Korea, mass protests occurred over remarks made by Japanese Foreign Minister Ikeda Yukihiko claiming Dokdo Island to be Japanese territory in 1996. At that time, a *Wall Street Journal* editorial described Koreans' responses as subhuman by reporting how sword-wielding Koreans tore up and young Korean taekwondo students repeatedly kicked effigies of Foreign Minister Ikeda. In that same column, the *Wall Street Journal* compared a Korean to "a small man, full of bravado and anger" (*Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 1996). A Korean discussing the comfort women problem is viewed as subhuman or, at best, infantile by the mainstream American media. What then is the political effect of this Orientalist human rights discourse? This can be explained in four main ways. First, the discussion of human rights posits the West as an exemplar of virtue with the role of the West being to save the victims of Third-World violence. Second, it draws attention away from the political problems that exist within Western societies by representing the Third World as a place of brutality. Third, it conceals the fact that the West conspired to exacerbate the problems now facing the Third World by ignoring its role as the causative agent of

imperialism and colonialism. Finally, it deprives the Third World of political agency by portraying its people suffering from injustice as beneficiaries of Western charity (McLoughlin 2016, 310).²

The mainstream US media also seriously undermined the possibility of comfort women victim-survivors speaking for themselves by producing sexual fantasies through decontextualization and the use of realism code. The media often emphasize the accurate observation of events as a way of uncovering the truth. The foundation of media realism is the idea that if a report accurately describes an object in the real world, it is true. Therefore, there is no room for imagination and fantasy to intervene in this realistic description. However, as literary critic Maximillian E. Novak claims, fiction can exist within, not only outside of, realism (Novak 2014, 159–160). The same goes for documentaries. The documentary is known to actively use realism as a way of asserting “referential status” (Roscoe and Hight 2001, 12). However, according to Paul Ward, who studies cinematics, the documentary is not only a realist representational space but also a realm of subjectivity and fantasy (Ward 2005, 83). American media reports on comfort women also seem to succeed in securing the status of realism by paying attention to the details, but this realistic depiction often distorts the context of comfort women history, which results in the creation of sexual fantasy and voyeurism (Gopalan 2003, 369). For example, *USA Today*, which boasts the largest circulation among American dailies, published one article describing how a girl only 14 years old was forced to have sex with a dozen soldiers every day (*USA Today*, August 5, 1993). The *New York Times* also described the price for sex with comfort women: “one yen for a Chinese woman, one and a half for a Korean woman, and two yen for a Japanese woman” (*New York Times*, July 7, 1992). In another *New York Times* piece on a Filipino comfort woman, Maria Rosa Henson, reporter Seth Mydans cited the following passage from Henson’s 1996 autobiography: “The bathroom did not even have a door, so the soldiers watched us. We were all naked, and they laughed

2. Although I criticize the dominant discourse of human rights, I do not deny the possibility that human rights might play a major role in re-imagining progressive politics in the post-Marxist age. For the counter-hegemonic and radical politicization of human rights, see Balibar (2013) and Rancière (2004).

at us” (*New York Times*, November 12, 1996).³ Who is the subject of the gaze that desires the body of the comfort woman standing naked here? Japanese soldiers, of course, but also voyeuristic male readers. Consequently, the comfort women were made the objects of sexual fantasy and voyeurism by the release of excessive information. As a result, they remained subordinate or subaltern people who could not convey their own experiences to listeners in a meaningful way while still maintaining their sense of personhood.

Comfort Women, Nationalist Conflict, and Security Discourse

The mainstream media in the United States have also identified the comfort women problem in the context of East Asian nationalist conflicts. This is evident in the US media’s criticism of the Japanese right-wingers who do not want to acknowledge the problem. Japan’s right-wing movement came from social anxiety associated with a prolonged economic recession and China’s increasing power in East Asia. The Japanese right-wing politicians attempted to revise the 1946 peace constitution, which is based on the renunciation of war and the abolition of a state military, in order to transform Japan into a country capable of war. In order to return to a normal state, Japanese right-wing politicians justified the Yasukuni Shrine worship, where fourteen class-A war criminals, including Hideki Tojo, who was sentenced at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, were jointly buried. Right-wing politicians also worked to distort official history textbook accounts of colonialism and comfort women, and did not hesitate to beautify Japan’s history of aggression by defaming fact-based history as a masochistic historical view. American media found it difficult to accept Japan’s dark nationalism. A 2001 *New York Times* article, for example, accused Japan of distorting the crimes committed by the Japanese military during the imperial period by defining its army as

3. Mydans once again quoted Henson’s autobiography for his obituary of Henson: “I lay on the bed with my knees up and my feet on the mat, as if I were giving birth” (*New York Times*, August 27, 1997). Of course, I do not doubt Mydans’ good intentions, but it is no exaggeration to say that the content of his article is reminiscent of a scene drawn by a Japanese far-right cartoonist, Kobayashi Yoshinori.

“a noble Asian liberation force rather than a brutal colonizer.” In addition, Japan disseminated such propaganda as, “There was justice in Japan’s war!” and “We must protect our grandfathers’ legacy!” From the perspective of the United States as party to the Pacific War, the slogan of the right-wing Japanese movement that “the United States deliberately snared Japan into war” was only a pathological phenomenon (*New York Times*, March 25, 2001). The US media’s criticism of Japan’s right-wing movement was also evident in the evaluation of Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro. For example, the *Times* criticized Koizumi as a nationalist who had attempted to amend the country’s Constitution and textbooks (*New York Times*, July 10, 2001). It also asserted that Japan’s right-wing politicians, once a minority group, had during the Koizumi administration successfully entered mainstream politics (*New York Times*, September 19, 2006).

However, American media did not reserve their criticism only for Japanese nationalism. In 2001, two days before the Memorial Day marking the end of the Pacific War, Koizumi fulfilled his old pledge of visiting the Yasukuni Shrine to consolidate the conservatives who constituted the Liberal Democratic Party’s base. Not surprisingly, Koizumi’s visit to the shrine sparked opposition from South Korea and China. China was infuriated by Koizumi’s shrine visit and stated that it was a “challenge” to Asian countries (*Dong-A Ilbo*, August 13, 2001). A spokesman for the Millennium Democratic Party, the South Korean ruling party, condemned “the evil spirit of Japanese imperialism” (*Dong-A Ilbo*, August 13, 2001). The comfort women victim-survivors and college students were also infuriated by Koizumi’s visit to the shrine. In particular, college students held a protest rally in front of the Independence Gate in Seoul, South Korea, and what the *New York Times* chose to report on was the scene of about twenty young men saying they were affiliated with Save the Nation (Guguk gyeolsadae), cutting their fingers and wrapping them in the Taegeukgi (the Korean national flag). The *New York Times* article explained that this ritual was initially a way of gang members to pledge allegiance to a boss. The term *comfort women* was thus defined in the context of the nationalistic conflict between Japan and its neighboring countries, such as South Korea and China (*New York Times*, August 14, 2001), since the voices of comfort women themselves remained

unheard due to the grotesque nationalist screams of Koreans who were even inclined to commit self-harm. Even when the 2002 World Cup was held jointly by South Korea and Japan, the US media reported that the fiercest rivalry would be between South Korea and Japan by emphasizing the distrust and hostility that Koreans held toward Japan because of Japan's history of colonialism. Thus, the US media depicted the comfort women issue as being only a symbol of excessive nationalism (*USA Today*, May 31, 2002).

When discussions on human rights were in full swing in 2007, *Newsweek* published an article by Phil Deans, a professor at Temple University's Japan campus. He rebuked both South Korea and Japan, saying that Japan uses history for its interests, but so does South Korea (*Newsweek*, April 30, 2007). Deans' both-sides-ism demonstrates the position of the US media on the comfort women controversy. The American media attempted to grasp the issue through human rights discourse, but at the same time, they treated it as an issue of nationalist conflict and tried to paint the United States as middleman. The United States, which provided cover for Japan's war crimes under the pretext of the Cold War, now found itself in the middle of a nationalist confrontation between South Korea and Japan. The US acted as if it had no historical connection to the conflict between South Korea and Japan. The silence of the United States and its condemnation of both South Korea and Japan are reminiscent of Master Chen, the male protagonist of the Chinese film *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) starring Gong Li as Songlian, a 19-year-old woman. Master Chen, who made Songlian his third concubine, remains silent during the quarrels between his wife and concubines. The viewer does not even see Master Chen's face. The plot of the film, set in the 1920s and 1930s, is centered on the smoldering enmity in "the claustrophobic, walled space of the mansion," where one wife and three concubines are married to a wealthy merchant (Lu 1997, 116). Master Chen merely plays the role of a man who quietly tells his wife and concubines not to quarrel with each other. This brings to mind the United States, which condemns both South Korea and Japan for their nationalistic conflicts.

What would have happened if the envy, jealousy, and conflict between Master Chen's wife and concubines in the film had deteriorated to a level that would threaten Master Chen's family tradition and patriarchal status?

The answer can be found in the press strategy that the media outlets in the United States began to utilize as the nationalistic conflict between South Korea and Japan intensified. The major American media outlets, which identified the comfort women issue as a nationalistic conflict, sought to control and manage the situation by talking about security as the tension between South Korea and Japan began to threaten the interests of the United States. Although discussion of security had been somewhat obscured by the human rights discourse, since the early 1990s, US media have attempted to understand the issue as a matter of security. Above all other media, the *Wall Street Journal* took the lead in promoting and disseminating this discussion of security. For example, the United States wanted Japan to consolidate its political influence in the region because of the withdrawal of US troops from Asia and the growth of China. Likewise, the newspaper pointed out that Japan must expand its own present role in Asia by admitting its past violence, yet it only “hemmed and hawed and fiddled” with the truth about the comfort women problem (*Wall Street Journal*, July 8, 1992). Between 1993 and 1997, the *Wall Street Journal* asserted at least three times that Japan must apologize for war crimes, including comfort women, if it wished to expand its diplomatic influence in Asia (*Wall Street Journal*, May 25, 1993; August 5, 1993; May 16, 1997). In 2001, the *Wall Street Journal* published Francis Fukuyama’s article stating that Japan needed to offer an apology to secure political leadership in Asia (*Wall Street Journal*, February 28, 2001). *Foreign Affairs*, well known for its review of international relations, inherited the *Wall Street Journal*’s discussion of security and did not allow the comfort women victim-survivors to talk about their experiences because of East Asian security and the strategic interests of the United States (Kristof 1998). *Foreign Affairs* even published a portion of Dartmouth College Professor Jennifer Lind’s book, *Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics*, which stated that Japan should not apologize for war crimes. Professor Lind suggested a modified domino theory by claiming that Japan’s apology would strengthen Japanese nationalist forces and eventually endanger stability in East Asia (Lind 2009).⁴

4. For a critique of Lind’s argument, see Glaser, et al. (2009) and Dülffer (2009).

In 2007, when human rights discourse was dominant, discussion of security continued steadily in conservative media (Currie 2007, 18–19). However, the topography of discourses on the comfort women question was fully reterritorialized around East Asian security when the relationship between South Korea and Japan worsened and the US media perceived it as an obstacle to American interests. The main reason for this heightening tension between South Korea and Japan can be found in the new diplomatic and security strategy introduced by the Obama administration. Since World War II, Washington's Asia security strategy has been shaped as a hub-spokes structure. The United States, which served as the hub in the security strategy of the Cold War, entered into separate military alliances with South Korea and Japan—the spokes to the American hub. However, there was no concurrent military solidarity between South Korea and Japan (Liu 2018, 303). Obama's 2011 speech to the Australian Parliament made a significant change to the existing strategy. The Obama administration's new strategy, also known as "Pivot to Asia" or "Rebalancing to Asia," was intended to maintain the hegemony of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region. Obama was confident that his decision to "pivot to Asia" with "deliberate and strategic" emphasis on Asia was the correct one with the gradual waning of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. On the other hand, the importance of the Asia-Pacific region had grown. Obama stressed that the United States should play a leading role in the security and prosperity of Asia as a member of the Pacific region (US-China Economic and Security Review Commission 2016, 475). Of course, China was upset by the Obama administration's new Asia strategy.

China claimed that the US strategy aimed to block China and strengthen American hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region, which would lead China and the United States to a new Cold War or quasi-Cold War. China accused the United States of leading them into this situation (Zhang 2016, 3; Duchatel and Puig 2015, 128). Why did China react so sensitively to President Obama's Pivot to Asia strategy? One reason is that the Obama administration's security strategy no longer followed the hub-spokes model and instead pursued a trilateral alliance among South Korea, Japan, and the United States by establishing a channel for direct security and military

cooperation between South Korea and Japan. Why then has the Pivot to Asia strategy, which is the core of this triangular alliance, worsened South Korea-Japan relations? The answer is that the United States tried to dampen China's expansion in East Asia through its Pivot to Asia strategy, but was also willing to tolerate the strengthening of Japan's military power in order to lighten the US defense budget for East Asia (*Kyunghyang sinmun*, December 7, 2015; *Chosun Ilbo*, July 2, 2014). The country most supportive of the Pivot to Asia strategy was Japan, an American security partner. Not only did Japan dream of returning to a normal state of combat capability, but it was also pleased, having been in territorial disputes with China in the East China Sea, with the new strategy of the United States. When President Obama visited Japan in April 2014, he bolstered Abe's position by declaring that the United States could apply Article V of the US-Japan Security Treaty to the Senkaku Islands/Diaoyu Islands, where Japan was in a dispute with China (Hiebert 2016, 22). However, the Japan-focused Pivot to Asia strategy of the United States raised concerns in Korea about strengthening Japan's military capabilities and the potential deterioration of Korea-Japan relations.

More frequent discords between South Korea and Japan have also threatened the US plan to build Asian security through cooperation between South Korea and Japan. For example, on August 10, 2012, President Lee Myung-bak of South Korea visited Dokdo Island, over which South Korea is in a territorial dispute with Japan, to stop any power leakage at the end of his term with an appeal to Korean nationalism. Predictably, President Lee's visit to Dokdo Island increased the tensions between South Korea and Japan. The Dokdo Island issue "was resolved by not being resolved" (Asahi Shimbun Company 2010, 208), and his visit led to "the death" of the so-called Dokdo secret agreement of 1965 (*Hankyoreh*, June 2, 2015). Some media outlets in the United States expected that South Korea-Japan relations would improve if President Park Geun-hye, who valued the alliance with the United States, were elected president to succeed Lee Myung-bak (Bosco 2013, 16-17). However, President Park did not have a summit meeting with the Japanese prime minister for nearly three and a half years after taking office, perhaps because she had a complex about the pro-Japanese behavior of her father, former president Park Chung-hee. President Park Geun-hye showed such

hostility toward Japan that even a right-wing critic of the *Korea Economic Daily*, Jung Gyu-jae, was concerned about the deteriorating relationship between South Korea and Japan (*Korea Economic Daily*, August 8, 2016).

Japan also fueled the worsening South Korea-Japan relationship. In May 2013, Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto argued that “the comfort women were needed” to promote the morale of Japanese soldiers (*Hankyoreh*, May 23, 2013). Additionally, despite dissuasion efforts by US Vice President Joe Biden, Prime Minister Abe visited the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013. The US embassy in Tokyo expressed dissatisfaction with Abe’s visit to the shrine by using a strong word for diplomats: “disappointed” (Itoh 2017, 199; Glosserman and Snyder 2015, 108). In January of the following year, Momii Katsuto, the newly appointed chairman of the NHK (a major Japanese broadcasting company), said that the comfort women were prostitutes, and that such comfort women existed in any country that fought in a war (*JoongAng Ilbo*, January 27, 2014). Furthermore, Japan tried to eliminate the so-called *last safety buffer* of the South Korea-Japan relationship by casting doubt on the credibility of the 1993 Kono Statement, which had acknowledged the Japanese military’s involvement in the recruitment of young women as comfort women in Japan-occupied countries (*Hankyoreh*, February 28, 2014).

The successful Pivot to Asia strategy required cooperation between South Korea and Japan. However, as the two countries confronted each other and headed toward catastrophe without dialogue, both conservative and progressive media outlets in the United States poured out a security discourse. In particular, the comfort women issue was at the center of the discussion of security. The press strategy of most US media outlets was that the issue should not shake up cooperation between South Korea and Japan or weaken the international order in East Asia. The *New York Times*, for example, reported on South Korea’s backlash against Japan’s attempts to revise the Kono Statement. The *Times* noted the concern that the issue could harm relations between South Korea and Japan, the “two top Asian allies” of the United States (*New York Times*, March 11, 2014). If there was a sub-text shared by major media outlets in the United States to complete this discussion of security, it was the Chinese responsibility theory. Although

analyses showed that the situation in Asia had become unstable because of the Japanese right-wing movement (*Wall Street Journal*, September 26, 2012), most US media outlets began to posit China's responsibility for the deteriorated South Korea-Japan relationship. In particular, the *Wall Street Journal* published a piece by Michael Auslin, a former professor of history at Yale University. In his column, Auslin described how China had built a building to commemorate Korea's independence movement hero, Ahn Jung-geun, in Harbin, China. Such an act by China was viewed as an intentional stimulation of the nationalist sentiment among Koreans, and China was blamed for the nationalist wedge between South Korea and Japan (*Wall Street Journal*, March 28, 2014). Despite the backdrop of the Pivot to Asia strategy to deteriorating Korea-Japan relations, the *Wall Street Journal* instead questioned China's intentions and responsibility (*Wall Street Journal*, July 5, 2014). Even the conservative *Weekly Standard* attempted to locate the cause of South Korean President Park's pro-Chinese behavior by discussing unconfirmed reports that she was fluent in Chinese (Halpin 2014, 20–21). As such, the discussion of security that uses Chinese responsibility as a sub-strategy aims to excuse the United States from its own share of responsibility for the crisis in East Asia. Additionally, it consolidates the interests of the United States by forcing military and diplomatic cooperation between South Korea and Japan. According to this discussion of security, the comfort women were simply *dangerous women* who could easily be exploited by China, and the comfort women issue could weaken Obama's Pivot to Asia strategy by amplifying the crisis between South Korea and Japan. Thus, the issue was a keg of dynamite. For the United States, which desperately needed cooperation between South Korea and Japan to maintain and expand its hegemony in the Pacific region, the sorrow and suffering of these women had to be silenced.

The Korea-Japan Agreement on Comfort Women of December 28, 2015, which was promoted as the "final and irreversible resolution" to the comfort women problem, was also created by the needs of the United States. Of course, the parties to the agreement are South Korea and Japan. Still, the Obama administration did not hesitate to exercise "crude pressure" toward South Korea and Japan for the agreement to make the Pivot to Asia a

successful strategy (*The Guardian*, December 28, 2015; Rachman 2016, 94). After Abe's visit to the United States in April 2015, the relationship between the United States and Japan grew warmer. Moreover, by having a summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Prime Minister Abe broke the freeze that had fallen over China-Japan relations since Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013. With this, the pressure from the United States must have felt intense to South Korean President Park. Abe also found it difficult to deny Washington's demand to resolve the comfort women problem, because he needed Washington's help to gain leverage in Tokyo's territorial disputes with Beijing. Media outlets in the United States, who had played a midwife role in creating consensus for the 2015 Korea-Japan Agreement on Comfort Women through the discussion of security, played a fanfare to celebrate America's victory. While the *New York Times* argued that it was unclear whether Japan's admitted responsibility was legal or moral (*New York Times*, December 29, 2015), it did report that the 2015 agreement was a "landmark" decision necessary for stability in Asia (*New York Times*, December 30, 2015). The *Times* later suggested the need for a task force to re-evaluate the agreement. The task force concluded that the agreement failed to accurately reflect the voices of the victims (*New York Times*, December 28, 2017). In 2015, however, the *Times* could easily define opposition to the agreement as nationalistic (*New York Times*, December 30, 2015). The *Wall Street Journal* went a step further. It attempted to promote the agreement by quoting the assessment of Victor Cha, former director of Asian Affairs on the National Security Council during the George W. Bush administration. Cha highlighted the historical significance of the 2015 agreement by using the analogy of President Nixon's visit to China in 1972 when President Park, who maintained a hardline position on war crimes committed by Japan, reached an agreement with Abe (*Wall Street Journal*, December 29, 2015). Furthermore, the *Wall Street Journal* introduced China's cynical reaction to the 2015 agreement and even argued that communists had long used the nationalism card to preserve their legitimacy. Thus, the *Wall Street Journal* added McCarthyism to the discussion of security (*Wall Street Journal*, December 30, 2015).

Conclusion

Japanese-American director Miki Dezaki's 2018 documentary *Shusenjo: The Main Battleground of the Comfort Women Issue* received extraordinary attention from both South Korea and Japan. In South Korea, Dezaki's documentary was evaluated as revealing the naked faces of the Japanese right-wing's attitudes toward the comfort women controversy (*Kyunghyang sinmun*, July 28, 2019). In particular, the director critically pointed out that the Japanese right-wing believed they could change the world's view by changing the American perspective (*Hankyoreh*, July 22, 2019). *Shusenjo* showed that Japan had expanded the main battleground on the issue and how the United States became that battlefield. Then was it only Japan that expanded the main battleground of the issue to the United States, as Dezaki claims? The answer is no. South Korea also increased US attention on the issue. For example, Korean Americans wanted to accuse Japan of brutality during the Pacific War by installing comfort women statues in major American cities. Also, to solve the comfort women problem, activists from civic groups in South Korea tried to put pressure on the Japanese government by establishing a transnational advocacy network. The United States was the center of this transnational alliance.

On the other hand, a more critical topic that *Shusenjo* misses is the American perception of and response to the comfort women issue. In Dezaki's view, the United States was a passive actor that Japan needed to get on its side to win its fight with South Korea. However, the United States was deeply involved in the issue from the beginning. The United States did not take a simple bystander approach to the comfort women controversy and was not satisfied with the third-party position of settling past disputes between South Korea and Japan. Instead, major media outlets in the United States built the structure and contours of discourses on comfort women by fixing the flow of unfixed meanings about the comfort women and establishing the boundaries of the debate. Even before the end of the Pacific War, the United States had recognized the Japanese military's use of sex slaves (Pang 1992, 221–255), but did not question it for a long time, with the Cold War as a pretext. After the issue was publicized in the early 1990s, the

United States did not remain passive either. As this study has illustrated, at the beginning of the post-Cold War era, major media outlets in the United States condemned Japan in the name of human rights. The discussion of human rights had the merit of revealing the terrible reality that these women had to experience. Still, it was often coded by pornographic imagination, reflecting not only the power relationship between West and East, but also engendering voyeurism. In addition, American newspapers and magazines in the position of middleman sternly rebuked South Korea and Japan and viewed the issue as a manifestation of the nationalist conflict between South Korea and Japan. Such a middleman position absolves the United States of responsibility for the problem. Furthermore, after the Obama administration declared its Pivot to Asia strategy, American media felt compelled to ask South Korea and Japan to solve the problem by describing the comfort women question as a wedge that threatened to disrupt Asian security and harm the interests of the United States.

From the end of World War II up until the early 1990s, major media outlets in the United States silently conspired with Japan on the comfort women problem. Because of their long silence, the comfort women victim-survivors remained non-beings, unheard and unseen. Since then, media outlets in the United States have appeared to interpellate them as subjects mainly through discussion of human rights, nationalist conflict discourse, and discussion of security. It was then that the issue gained visibility and a voice. However, the comfort women, who were supposed to be the subjects, became only “impossible subjects” (Hartley 2003, 235), mere subalterns. They did not have a subject-position from which to tell readers about their stories. Their experiences and memories were decontextualized even within the text of newspaper and magazine articles about them. They could not avoid refraction and disruption of the signification process because of this decontextualization. The voices of the comfort women and their experiences, among other things, could not be conveyed to us in a proper sense “without altering the relations of power/knowledge” of the media discourses that constituted them as subalterns in the first place (Beverly 1999, 29). As Spivak claimed (1996, 292), “speaking and hearing complete the speech act.” However, these women were “not able to be heard.”

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