



## Culture and Empathy

International Journal of  
Sociology, Psychology, and Cultural Studies



ISSN: 2635-6619 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://culturenempathy.org/>

---

# Book Review: The Comfort Women Issue for a Transnational Paradigm

Ingyu Oh, Kansai Gaidai University

To cite this article: Ingyu Oh. 2021. “Radical Empathy.” *Culture and Empathy* 4(2): 181-184.  
DOI: 10.32860/26356619/2021/4.2.0007.

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.32860/26356619/2021/4.2.0007>



Published online: 25 June 2021.



[Submit your article to this journal](#) 

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at

<https://culturenempathy.org/terms-and-conditions>

## Book Review:

### The Comfort Women Issue for a Transnational Paradigm

*Korean “Comfort Women”: Military Brothels, Brutality, and the Redress Movement*, by Pyong Gap Min, Rutgers University Press, 2021, 324 pages, 978-1978814967, \$130 (Hardcover), \$44.95 (Paperback).<sup>1</sup>

Ingyu Oh, Kansai Gaidai University

Among many failures of the Tokyo Tribunal was its inability to link Japanese imperialism with the transnational system of racism and malevolent rituals of ethnic cleansing in similar scales as those witnessed by the Nazi Holocaust. The Tribunal was not interested in establishing the long-held suspicion of the Japanese Imperial Army’s systematic efforts at massacring Chinese, Manchurian, Korean, and Russian peoples by bioterror or by weapons of mass destruction (see Honda, 1999; Orbach, 2019). Related to this ostentatious failure to obliterate the transnational system of racism in postwar East Asia was the Tribunal’s neglect of another transnational system of sexism that had been rampant within the Japanese empire in the form of the oppression of women on the one hand and the forced sexual slavery on the other of young women and even girls from its colonies and occupied areas (p. 66). The comfort women issue is not about serving the imperial soldiers sexually on the battle front, but about a systematic plan to massacre women from colonies and occupied areas after being used as sex slaves. Therefore, it was part of the larger scheme of transnational racism-sexism than a mere plan of setting up a military brothel for the soldiers. Min’s book starts from this important shift of paradigms in the study of the comfort women issue, from a conventional study of colonial brutality to a larger paradigm of multinational system of racism and sexism (p. 45).

Against this theoretical backdrop, it is arguably more important than other issues of colonialism to realize that colonial women faced harsher life conditions than those of the colonial men in general and those of the Japanese women in particular. Furthermore, given that the whole structure of the colonial economy awarded massive profits to the imperialists, thoroughly impoverishing the majority of the colonial subjects, Min contends that the social class factor was not critical in the creation of the Korean comfort corps for the Japanese army, because most Korean young women were economically vulnerable to either the forcible or deceptive system of prostitute recruitments (p. 50). The ultimate culprit of the comfort women system therefore was Japanese imperialism that tried to impoverish and massacre

---

<sup>1</sup> All page numbers are from the e-pub version of the book.

colonial subjects for the purpose of ethnic cleansing and war efforts, not the gender bias among Koreans or their low social class in the empire.

Another evident contribution of this book to the study of the comfort women issue is Min's eloquent explanation that it was postcolonialism (the specter of Japanese imperialism) in tandem with the U.S. postwar foreign policy establishment that had successfully gagged the victims of the wartime sex slavery by strengthening and bribing the illegitimate military governments and other forms of ruthless dictatorship throughout Asia. However, the fall of the cold war world system augured the rapid destruction of the fake postcolonial conviviality between former empires and colonies that became democratic one by one. The democratization of former colonies removed the infamous gag from the victims' mouths, as former comfort women came forward one by one and exposed their personal stories of forced sex slavery to the public in large (Ch. 3 & Ch. 10).

The final merit of this book in the study of the comfort women issue is the comparison of the post-cold war politics of comfort women redressing movements in Korea, Japan and the U.S. No other study on the topic has ever carried out this type of comparison, even though it is pivotal to see how the engineers of postcolonialism, who had stifled the victims from 1945 to the 1990s, reacted to and are still countering the radical feminist movements that empowered the victims to speak out. In Korea the comfort women movement, led by Yoon Mi-Hyang, changed one of the most male chauvinistic of all East Asian societies into one of the most progressive polities that promote universal gender equality on the one hand and finance Yoon's redressing movement on the other. Rather than wrongfully highlighting Korean nationalism against Japan, Min emphasizes the multinational network of feminist movements in other countries and the rise of Japanese historical revisionism as causes of this successful transformation of postcolonial Korea (Ch. 10).

The U.S., which hurriedly closed the Tokyo Tribunal with the execution of some of the Class A war criminals, including Tōjō Hideki and Hirota Kōki, but without investigating crimes against Asian women during the war, is surprisingly siding with the comfort women redressing movement led by a multinational coalition between feminist movement organizations throughout the world. One of the reasons for this attitude taken by American feminists could be the fact that some of the comfort women were whites. Both the federal and subnational governments in the U.S. are not denying the historical validity of testimonies by the victims of the Japanese imperial comfort women corps, even though this new political posture is completely contradictory to the 1945 policy and thus may endanger the U.S. military alliance with Japan and South Korea vis-à-vis North Korea and China (Ch. 12).

The problem is the assailant, Japan, which is divided into pro-feminist and revisionist groups. The majority opinion among the Japanese is the postcolonial conviviality argument that Japan has already redressed with proper apologies to all the Korean victims of Japanese imperialism in 1965. Therefore, to demand new rounds of reparation for the sex slavery victims is the breach of the conviviality agreement. However, a large number of people in

the conscientious sector of Japanese society, including scholars who study the comfort women issue from the Japanese vantage point, underline the ethical problem embedded within the conviviality agreement itself, which basically was another unequal treaty between a former empire and its colony, which ultimately legitimated the Korean military dictatorship that had desperately looked for foreign currencies to buy necessary goods and services for economic development. Although split, Min feels that many Japanese people are still very ethical and conscientious, making the future of the Korea-Japan relations bright (p. 294).

*Korean "Comfort Women"* is a worthwhile reading for those who want to know the complicated history of the comfort women issue. This is the first attempt in English that tried and succeeded in substantializing the Comfort Women issue using statistical analyses. The book provides detailed data regarding recruitment, exploitation, life as a sex slave, return of the Comfort Women to Korea, and the reparation movement in Korea, Japan, and the U.S. Min uses both statistical data, including 103 former Comfort Women, who gave full testimonies, his own primary interview data, and secondary data of both qualitative and quantitative nature. His critique against the Japanese, Korean, and Korean American historical revisionists (e.g., Sarah Soh), therefore, is much more plausible than simple anthropological or historical study without triangulation using both quantitative and qualitative data.

One minor lament from some readers would be Min's failure not to mention the current flareup between the redress movement leader, Yoon, and one of the victims, Yong-soo Lee, who openly criticized Yoon and her organization for embezzling the funds donated by citizens for the purpose of redressing and helping the victims. Yoon is now a national assembly member who also openly supports the late Seoul mayor, Park Won-Soon, who killed himself after his female secretary had threatened litigations against him for sexual abuse. However, Min told me in his email communication with me that the real reason for this flareup was Lee's anger against Yoon's idea of erecting a memorial hall dedicated to the comfort women that Yoon wanted to name after Kim Bok Dong, a famous comfort woman who had led an international movement against sex slaves during war until her death. Min in fact writes in his book that: "I have some reservations about naming such a center after a particular KCW (Korean Comfort Women). I am afraid that naming the center after Bok Dong Kim is likely to alienate other KCW, such as Yong-soo Lee, who have also been very active in the global redress movement" (p. 470).

The future of Korea-Japan relations is getting only worse, as the Highest Court of Korea ruled that the 1965 agreement between Korea and Japan did not resolve the issue of reparation for victims of Japanese imperialism. The U.S., which is frightened by the rapid rise of China and the nuclear armament of North Korea, is also siding with Japan for a stronger military alliance than before. East Asia seems to be going back to the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Japan aligned with the West to fight China and colonize Korea.

*Ingyu Oh is a Professor of Sociology at Kansai Gaidai University, Osaka, Japan, and the editor of Culture and Empathy. As the former president of the World Association for Hallyu Studies, he has written several articles and books about Hallyu.*

## **References**

- Honda, K. 1999. *The Nanjing Massacre: A Japanese Journalist Confronts Japan's National Shame*. New York: ME Sharpe.
- Orbach, D., 2019. "The Military-Adventurous Complex: Officers, adventurers, and Japanese expansion in East Asia, 1884–1937." *Modern Asian Studies* 53(2): 339-376.