

BOOK REVIEW

Comfort women of the Japanese empire: colonial rule and the battle over memory, by Park Yuha, Routledge, 2024, 256 pp., A\$273.00 (hardback)

In *Comfort Women of the Japanese Empire: Colonial Rule and the Battle over Memory*, Park Yuha offers a provocative reassessment of the ‘comfort women’ issue – first proposed over a decade ago in the Korean version of this book. Situated at the heart of one of the most contentious debates in East Asian historiography, the book examines the enduring legacies of Japan’s colonial rule and its impact on the lives of Korean comfort women. Park positions comfort women within a broader imperial context, claiming that comfort women were not only self-internalised imperial subjects but also ‘compatriots’ (38; 186). She argues that conventional approaches – viewing the issue as a war crime (responsibility) – are problematic and that it should instead be examined ‘within a different context of imperialism/colonialism’ (xii). This book presents the comfort women issue as a collective outcome, shaped by multiple factors and actors – from Japanese imperial ideology at the top to middlemen or Korean collaborators at the bottom.

The book includes 14 chapters presented in four parts. The first part, ‘Who Were the Comfort Women?’, explores who the comfort women were, their relationship with the empire, and factors that shaped their identities. Examining selective memory practices in Korea and Japan, Park reveals political dynamics that have shaped public understanding of the comfort women issue, advocating for a nuanced historical reckoning that acknowledges the complexity of these women’s lives and the legacy of imperial violence. The second part, ‘Colonial Rule and the Korean Comfort Women’, examines how South Korea’s collective memory of comfort women has been constructed and politicised over time. Park argues that support groups, particularly the Korean Council, have hindered reconciliation by reducing the issue to a moral indictment of Japan, neglecting Korean collaborators and the post-liberation ostracism of the women, and perpetuating animosity between the two countries while leaving unresolved the deeper contradictions of colonial history. The third part, ‘The Conflict of Memory’, focuses on contested narratives surrounding the comfort women. Here Park explores how Japan and South Korea’s conflicting positions have deepened their historical rift, turning the comfort women issue into a larger struggle over national identity, colonial legacy, and historical justice. The final section, ‘Beyond the Empire and the Cold War’, explores the systems and ideologies that sustained the comfort women system, tracing its roots to licensed prostitution and broader imperial structures, and examining how the system extended beyond Japan’s empire. Park provides a broader critique of capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy, calling for a re-evaluation of historical narratives and a move towards genuine reconciliation and justice.

The issue of comfort women is deeply traumatic, especially in South Korea, where it remains a powerful symbol of historical injustice and national suffering. In nationalist discourse, comfort women were depicted as ‘200,000 girls’ (30) or young women, symbolising the chastity of Korean women and creating an ideal victim image ‘of the identity South Koreans wish to superimpose on themselves’ (88). Within this prevailing nationalist situation, Park’s book stirs controversy because it deviates from the predominant narrative of these women as only victims of brutal coercion by the Japanese military. Instead, she considers their complex experiences, suggesting that

some comfort women might have gone voluntarily or even cooperated with Japanese soldiers because of their unified identity as imperial citizens. Some may find Park's analysis uncomfortable, as it touches on positive and collaborative attitudes of comfort women, such as 'patriotism' (26), 'pride' (36), and a sense of camaraderie as 'fellow compatriots' (38).

Park labels various types of women as 'comfort women' without necessarily offering clear definitions and distinctions. The definition is broadened to include most women engaged in either sex work or 'service' to the empire, and narrowed to apply to those whose experiences align with particular imperial narratives, such as providing 'spiritual comfort' to Japanese soldiers 'without having sex' (37). This prompts readers to question the complexities of identity, agency, and the diverse experiences of women within the imperial system. Simultaneously, the book has been critiqued as an attempt to dilute the severity of the exploitation and suffering endured by comfort women, undermining the gravity of the historical injustice and providing a narrative that could absolve Japan of responsibility for its wartime actions. In the end, Park contextualises her claims within a broader framework of 'Asian solidarity' (200), suggesting that South Korea, together with Japan, can achieve this solidarity by overcoming the enduring impact of Western imperialism. This approach – examining the comfort women issue within the imperialism/colonialism framework – appears limited in transcending nationalist discourses. The controversies surrounding the book highlight key questions: How might we transcend nation-state frameworks? Is positioning Western imperialism as the primary obstacle sufficient to achieve solidarity?

Comfort Women of the Japanese Empire is a thought-provoking book, eliciting positive and negative reactions as it boldly counters much of the existing scholarship on comfort women. It compels readers to (re-)evaluate accepted narratives – whether reflexively or with fresh insight – and to confront the (un)comfortable complexities within this history. While the long-term impact of the English translation remains to be seen, the arguments delineated in Park's research are likely to resonate over time. This book is an arguably welcome challenge to conventional perspectives on sexual violence studies and beyond, and it should be read by the general public and academics alike.

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