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**Book Review Essay: Korean “Comfort Women”:
Military Brothels, Brutality, and the Redress Movement¹**

Reviewed by Ñusta Carranza Ko²

Pyong Gap Min’s book, *Korean “Comfort Women”: Military Brothels, Brutality, and the Redress Movement*, offers a rich and comprehensive review of Japanese military sexual slavery during the Asia-Pacific War (1931-1945) and insight on the women and girls who were known as “comfort women.” The book covers the period from the beginning of the Asia-Pacific War all the way to the current period, discussing in detail the historical context about forced sexual slavery; the period of neglect and exclusion of the victims; the processes through which victims were able to break their silence and voice their demands; and the emergence of the redress movement that spread throughout diverse international contexts. Centered on a total of 103 Korean victims’ testimonies, it is the first English-language book that presents both the comfort women issue and the redress movement for the victims, without mischaracterizing the historical truth. The book is also the first of its kind to analyze victims’ testimonies from a qualitative and quantitative lens to explore the extent of sexual violence and uncover the sexual violence in the “mobilization” of victims from their home countries to Japanese military outposts. Additionally, the book focuses on the redress movement that emerged for comfort women, noting the importance of human rights focused non-governmental organizations, individual citizens, and diaspora communities that have formed a transnational activist alliance in their fight against impunity.

The book’s empirical work is based on two decades of scholarship on comfort women and the Min’s own interactions, interviews, and work with Korean comfort women. As such the book is an all-encompassing text that is also attentive to the most inquisitive aspects about the Korean comfort women issue. First, it dedicates time to address the layers of complexities that embody this atrocity, which includes discussions of the terminology of “comfort women.” Reflecting upon the nuances of the Korean language, Min unpacks the internal debates about how to properly address victims, victimhood, and their identities. He explains the Korean terminologies that are commonly used to reference victims of Japanese military sexual slavery, discussing both the denotation and connotations of each word. Min notes the differences between the terms used for Korean comfort women and other Korean women who were subjected to forced labor, a grave yet separate type of human rights violation. These explanations about Korean terminologies help non-Korean speaking readers understand the intricacies, involving politics and societal norms, that accompany the reference to Korean comfort women. In so doing, the book sheds light as to the sensitive nature of the identity and victimhood of comfort women.

Second, *Korean “Comfort Women”: Military Brothels, Brutality, and the Redress Movement* carefully outlines the historical details related to the comfort women system by referencing historical data, publications from diverse organizations, and scholarship on comfort women. This is extremely important. The corroboration of each Korean comfort woman’s stories with numerous references and data points elevates the quality of scholarly research and helps counter and confront any pushbacks that may arise from those who espouse a revisionist perspective about Japanese history or those who refute Japan’s responsibility for war crimes,

¹ Min, P. (2021). *Korean “Comfort Women”: Military Brothels, Brutality, and the Redress Movement*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

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particularly associated with comfort women atrocities. Relatedly, the precision and attention to detail evident in this book is also demonstrated in the innovative methodological approach of the book. Namely, the book uses cutting-edge mixed methods research to analyze testimonies from victims. No previous research on comfort women has ever analyzed victims' testimonies from this methodological approach (Soh 2008; Yoshimi 2000; Hicks 1997; Lifei 2014; Oh and Stetz). Min effectively produces numerous tables that quantify information that are relevant to understand the atrocities faced by Korean comfort, such as how women and girls were mobilized into military brothels. Such quantified information from testimonies is visualized and summarized in the form of descriptive statistics, mainly using frequency distribution. This data is validated even further with references to published research and historical documents. The quantification of testimonies is at times used in the book to directly refute claims from scholars who have questioned the veracity of the stories of Korean comfort women. For instance, with respect to the argument that Korean parents were complicit in the crime of comfort women, by discriminating and abusing their daughters, which eventually pushed the girls to leave their homes (Soh 2020), Min pushes back against this claim by showing quantified data that in fact, the majority of the girls were forcibly mobilized via coercive methods or employment fraud. Additionally, on the point about the number of women who were forcibly mobilized to comfort stations, Min provides a range of numbers, specifies the reasoning for each of these numbers noting historical documents, and explains why the maximum and minimum estimates about the number of comfort women mobilized by the Japanese Military are not exaggerated. In such ways, the book positions itself against the mischaracterization of historical truths. It is this level of precision to facts, data, and historical information using innovative research methods that sets Min's book apart from others.

Another great contribution of Min's work is that while many of the factual quantitative and qualitative evidence can be used to refute fallacious claims against comfort women, the book's content delivers more than a series of rejections of misconstrued truths. The book provides the most complete account about the sexual violence and injuries sustained by Korean comfort women. This includes the specification of the types of violence women and girls experienced, such as rape during pregnancy, killings, torture, beatings, and other forms of violence at comfort stations. Furthermore, the book describes what happened after the Asia-Pacific War, when Korean comfort women were left abandoned in Japanese military brothels. Using extensive testimonies from Korean victims, Min tells the stories of the women who were rescued by U.S. soldiers, others who spent years traveling back home to Korea, and why some women hesitated to go back home. Interestingly, among those who chose to not go back to Korea, the book demonstrates how many did so because they did not have a parent at home to visit. This insight differs from the common rhetoric that is told of Korean comfort women who remained overseas due to their overwhelming feeling of shame (Ching 2019). As such, the book provides the space to uncover the complexities of why some women chose to remain abroad.

Lastly, the book also provides an insightful analysis about the redress movement. Three chapters are dedicated to exploring the developments of the redress movements in Korea, Japan, and the United States. Although the chapters are separated by country, many of the domestic political dynamics overlap with transnational developments, along with international, domestic, and transnational advocacy networks' interactions with one another. For instance, the lawsuits that were filed by Japanese immigrants in the United States against the city of Glendale, California, for having a "comfort girl" peace statue that represented the memory of comfort girls and women in Glendale, is emblematic of the complexities of the three countries' dynamics in the comfort women issue. Along with these stories, the three chapters include some policy recommendations, including

how the first step to justice and dignity to comfort women victims is for the Japanese government to fulfill and recognize its legal responsibility.

Korean "Comfort Women": Military Brothels, Brutality, and the Redress Movement provides the most comprehensive account of the history of comfort women, explores the complexities of Korean comfort women and their experiences, and delves into a never explored mixed methods research involving victims' testimonies. As such, it is an essential text for scholars, practitioners, policy makers, and anyone interested in comprehending the turbulent history involving comfort women, the politics between states, and the difficulties of transnational redress movements in seeking justice for victims of sexual slavery.

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