



Department of Political Science

Chair of Contemporary History

**Comfort Women: Japan, South Korea and the painful
struggle for memory reconciliation**

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ACADEMIC YEAR 2017/2018

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INTRODUCTION

The dissertation deals with the delicate question of the comfort women in the current relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea, examining the countries' never-ending struggle in the reconciliation of their shared – and painful – colonial memories.

The “comfort women issue” – as it is frequently addressed in the academic field – represented a severe violation of human rights committed by the Imperial Army of Japan to the detriment of roughly 50.000-200.000 women between 1932 and 1945, in the period involving the Asia-Pacific War. It consisted in the systemic recruitment and enslavement of foreign young girls belonging to Japan's colonized or occupied territories into organized structures called “comfort stations”, where they were forced to pleasure the military personnel serving at the frontline.

This event – later recognized as one of the most shameful crimes committed by Imperial Japan before and during WWII – notoriously became a diplomatic deadlock in the Far East, given the controversial circumstances under which this atrocity struggled to emerge. Despite the territorial extension of the phenomenon around the Pacific and the consistent number of victims involved, the existence of this crime remained buried for an unimaginable arc of time, with the suffering of the survivors largely ignored both by the adamant Japan and by the rigid patriarchal society of South Korea. Indeed, not mentioned in the Tokyo Trial and constantly denied by the post-war Japanese government, the public discovery of the comfort women issue was destined to occur only 47 years after the dismantlement of the comfort stations.

Albeit mostly unknown to the West, the comfort women issue mirrors a tormented side of the Asia-Pacific history that experienced a hard time emerging in the collective memory of the nations involved, where sentiments of hatred and mistrust were nurtured among their respective governing political forces.

Nowadays, the unresolved question concerning Japan's military sexual slavery represents the fundamental element of discord between Japan and South Korea's diplomatic relations, consequentially exercising a great deal of pressure in today's regional politics of East Asia and mining the future security and economic equilibrium of the area. Indeed, in twenty years of continuous altercations and likewise unsatisfying attempts to restore the memory and the dignity of the victims, no joint long-term resolution over reparations and admission of responsibility has been reached so far between the two Asian governments.

The comfort women issue serves as an interesting instrument for the understanding of the divergent historical perceptions regarding the colonialization period and the consequent Asia-Pacific War carried out by Japan at the expense of the population in the Korean peninsula. More than just a cruel war crime committed by the Imperial Army, the military sexual slavery of thousands of women quickly became the emblem of the past humiliation endured by colonial South Korea, while its political consequences clearly showed the inability of modern Japan to fully and coherently accept the responsibility of its darker and violent history. The recognition of past wrongdoings, indeed, never took an easy path in Japan, turning a suffered admission of responsibility into a vicious circle of missed compensations, insufficient apologies and ambiguous nationalistic policy making which necessarily severed the diplomatic relationships with its close neighbour.

At the same time, the joint acceptance of this historical fact has been in fact hampered also by the controversial role assumed by the Republic of Korea as the leader of the comfort women movement. While the various factions in the Japanese political arena struggled with the public admission of responsibility and with the adoption a different commemorating approach of the past conflicts, South Korea assumed an ambiguous behaviour in the fight for the comfort women's justice. Although the country strongly advocated for moral and legal compensations, it often neglected the survivors' actual needs and rights, persevering in the instigation of hostile sentiments towards Japan rather than striving for a peaceful resolution. Indeed, the inflexible stance of the South Korean government and NGOs over the settlement of any comfort women accord, with their irreducible unwillingness to fully accept Japan's apologies, irremediably contributed to the profound stagnation of the debate.

Through a fierce dispute between clashing visions of the past, the comfort women issue offered a fertile ground for the reinforcement of the mutual antagonism between Japan and South Korea, impinging on their effective diplomatic collaboration in the East-Asian region.

Through this research, we indeed aim to examine critically the rhetoric behind the comfort women issue adopted by the two contrasting parties and understand the political stalemates which impeded the discourse from reaching a definitive and peaceful conclusion at the diplomatic level. By historically analysing the phenomenon of the comfort stations and evaluating the post-war behaviour adopted by Japan and South Korea, we strive to provide the reader with a broader analysis of this delicate debate, in a way that fundamentally rejects the conventional and simplistic focus towards the aggressor's struggle between denial and redemption and takes into account the multiple agency shaping the discourse at a national and international level.

In delineating the controversies and deadlocks that characterized the comfort women issue until the recent days, we necessarily questioned the fate of this debate and the possibility to formulate a final

verdict which could satisfy both countries once for all. Hence, the research question lying at the core of this dissertation aims to investigate whether the comfort women issue could already be defined an endgame or might reserve a wishful resolution in the next future.

In Chapter 1, the comfort women issue will be introduced from a historical perspective. The development of the comfort stations will be traced from the early establishments in China to the vast organized structure escalated all around the Asia-Pacific during the conflicts of the Second World War. In this part, particular attention will be dedicated to Japan's responsibility in the institution, management and system of recruitment of the military brothels, through the indirect participation of the governmental organs and the active involvement of the Imperial armed forces.

In Chapter 2, the focus will shift towards post-war Japan and South Korea and the characteristic connivance they exerted over their thorny shared past, which postponed the public disclosure of the comfort women issue half a century later. In this regard, the 1990s will serve us as the year 0 of the modern dispute between Tokyo and Seoul, with the sudden emergence of the victims' testimonies and the discovery of official records incriminating the Japanese State. Contention over apologies and reparations is what mainly defined this period and irremediably influenced the contemporary diplomatic discussions between the two parties.

Lastly, in Chapter 3 we will examine more in-depth the questions hidden at the core of the comfort women issue, which hampered the possibility to draw an end to the altercation. Strong waves of nationalism on both sides, along with their respective economic and political interests, have heavily compromised a plausible and unique vision of the crime and the fair distribution of responsibility that the State should bear towards the victims. By investigating the persistent historical revisionism in Japan and the nationalist approach of South Korea to the comfort women issue, we will discuss about the contemporary complications of this debate and its future development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From an academic point of view, the comfort women issue constitutes a relatively recent theme of research. This might be considered odd since Japan's military sexual slavery dates back to the Asian-Pacific conflicts occurred between the early years of the 1930s and the end of World War II.

The comfort women issue represents an exception among the various war crimes committed by Imperial Japan, not because of the systematic violation of human rights that it allowed for more than a decade, but for the silence that it experienced in the post-war period.

The ianfu question has been indeed ignored both politically and academically for almost 50 years since the end of the Pacific War in 1945. The coerced sexual slavery imposed by the Japanese military to almost 200.000 women throughout the entire Asian Pacific resulted absent from the allegations presented at the Tokyo Trial shortly after the end of the war, set by the Allies in order to prosecute the crimes perpetrated by Japan. Despite evidence has shown that the US forces were aware of their existence, comfort women received complete indifference and disinterest by the Allied forces, who apparently considered it neither a war crime nor a violation of human rights. Indeed, prosecution of members of the Japanese Army for enforced prostitution was barely observed in B and C Class war crimes tribunals, being mentioned only in two singular cases which respectively involved only Caucasian women from the Dutch Indies and Guam.

Absence from the Trial allowed the existence of these comfort women to be denied for half a century not just in Japan, but in the rest of the world. In fact, academic researches contributing to the study of the comfort women only developed in the period signing the end of the 1980s and reached their peak in the 1990s, revealing the painful truth to the public and contributing to boost the scandal within the Japanese government.

Accordingly, when carrying on our research, we had to adapt to the shortage of historical resources that the comfort women issue presented. Plenty of documents and official records had been indeed destroyed by Japan after its surrender in 1945, in a desperate attempt to erase any possible evidence of the State participation in the procurement and regulation of the comfort women. With a relatively scarce information available regarding such a theme, contemporary speculation over the comfort women issue results based for the most part on a limited number of researches, which combined what had been left from the official archives and the testimonies offered by the victims later in the 1990s. Along with the lack of an extensive historical documentation, the extent of bibliography accessible to our examination has been strongly limited by the linguistic barrier we encountered during the

research. Most of the literature regarding the comfort women issue has been produced in Japanese, Korean and additionally English. Our missed understanding of both Japanese and Korean constricted us to rely exclusively on translated documentation and academic researches carried on in a limited spectrum of languages of our comprehension, mainly English, Italian and potentially Spanish.

In the analysis of the historical events involving the planning and construction of the comfort station system and the consequential institutionalization of sexual slavery between 1932 and 1945, we heavily relied on the documentation collected by Professor Yoshimi Yoshiaki and Professor Yuki Tanaka, which constituted our main indirect source for the consultation of official records and data belonging to the Japanese military and government concerning their involvement in the comfort women case. Yoshimi Yoshiaki has been considered a leading figure in the scholar struggle to document Japan's concealed war crimes and recognition of the military comfort women. Indeed, other sources contributing to the development our dissertation, including Yuki Tanaka's "Japan's comfort women", were themselves based on the previously published studies carried on by Yoshimi in the early 1990s. The publication of his researches – later collected in the book "Military Comfort Women" – nationally exposed the Japanese government to the evidence of its systematic involvement in the procurement and enslavement of thousands foreign women, causing a massive political scandal which contributed to its very first admission of responsibility in 1992.

Professor Yuki Tanaka's study on comfort women also constituted a precious source for the indirect analysis of the documentation offered by Japanese, American and Australian Archives on the topic discussed. Thanks to his researches within the official records and reports collected by the Allies at the end of World War II, we were able to critically assess the degree of Western responsibility towards the comfort women issue by observing the discrepancy between the crimes prosecuted during the Tokyo Trial and those the Allied powers were actually aware of.

In the second and third part of the dissertation, our thesis was mainly supported by academic journals and books – dating between the end of the 20th century and the recent years – written both by East Asian and Western scholars, in the attempt to offer a critical historical perspective over the period preceding and then following the rise of the comfort women issue in Japan and South Korea. The majority of the sources selected were helpful in providing a detailed understanding of the political and social background that characterized the post-war transition of the two countries and contributed to the birth of the comfort women movement in the 1990s. The preponderant academic view emerging from the sources analysed offers a critical picture of the long-lasting diplomatic debate that has invested the East Asian region for over two decades, evaluating the development of the political

debate engaged by the governments of Japan and South Korea amidst the controversies arising from the numerous official apologies and the institution of the Asian Women's Fund. In this regard, Hiro Saito's writings constituted a fundamental source for the understanding of the political turmoil between the opposing forces of the LDP and the JSP in the "making of" the comfort women debate in Japan, which shaped the commemorating approach and general behaviour of the government in dealing with the issue. In the analysis of what has been called the "politics of memory" employed by Japan after WWII, the works by Jungmin Seo and Chizuko Ueno also provided us with an interesting overlook of Tokyo's bivalent approach towards its past wrongdoings, by exploring on the diplomatic side its "apology diplomacy" and on national one its strong historical revisionism.

The documentation we examined in this respect presents an overall neutral perspective over Japan's behaviour when confronted with the comfort women issue, highlighting its faults and responsibilities as well as some positive acts of engagement that the country attempted during and after the '90s. According to the several authors we had the opportunity to consult, the struggle at heart of this historical debate could not be solely reduced to the several political quarrels and controversial declarations that characterized the Japanese government in the last two decades, but it needs to take into account also South Korea's strong aversion to overcome the anger and frustration experienced during its colonization days. The instability surrounding comfort women debate has been indeed interpreted by the large majority of our sources as a collective recalcitrance to accept a painful legacy of the past rather than just the result of terrible diplomatic choices. After having analysed the current progression – or rather stagnation – of the comfort women issue within the diplomatic relationships between Japan and the Republic of Korea, we as well agreed in considering the missed reconciliation of past colonial memories and the divergent perspectives of history the prevailing obstacle in the final resolution of this political conflict.

In our dissertation, we wanted to provide the reader with a more comprehensive picture of the current debate surrounding the comfort women issue, which could investigate more in-depth the fragile lands of Japanese and South Korean nationalism, conflictual historical perspective and gendered discrimination. To do so, we examined the various currents that shaped the discourse through the years, from the nationalistic approaches of the topic to the more feminist interpretation of the event. In this respect, we tried to shift the general attention from Japan towards South Korea, which rarely had been framed as an active agent contributing to the suffering of the comfort women but it surprisingly bears some – untold – responsibility in their procurement and in the perpetration of the social shame they later experienced. Indeed, while Japan's involvement and guilt over the military sexual slavery perpetrated by the Imperial Army has been accurately documented by plenty of

historical records and academic studies, the importance of the South Korean role within the comfort women issue has been relatively set aside in favour of a more severe judgement of the Japanese government's actions and public statements collected at the end of the century. When carrying on our bibliographic research, this sharp and inaccurate distinction between the culprit and the victim – whose roots are set in the old verdicts of the Tokyo Trial – created some relevant difficulties in the objective assessment of the problematic rhetoric consuming the comfort women issue in the Far East. Indeed, only few authors (accessible among the sources collected) expressly examined the actual agency that Seoul had in the lives of the victims during and after their obscure years of forced prostitution. Above all, in this substantial lack of critical academic perspectives over South Korea's management of the discourse, the works by Professor C. Sarah Soh constituted a precious source of information for the provision of a cross-sectional overlook of the comfort women issue within the Republic of Korea.

When dealing with more recent discussions about the comfort women issue and the latest controversies over the 2015 South Korea- Japan landmark agreement, we consulted both international and local Japanese newspapers (such as the Asahi Shinbun and The Japan Times). Even in this case, the language barrier precluded us from having a broader picture of the media content surrounding the topic, given the shortage of an English-translated section within national newspapers in Japan. Moreover, it is necessary to acknowledge that this shortage is also influenced by a major shift in the mediatic attention from Moon Jae-in's drawback from the agreement at the beginning of the year to the more troubling questions of regional security and the recent history-making news involving the two Koreas. Nevertheless, the young nature of the controversy around the 2015 deal has left the debate freshly open and ready for further updates in future.

CHAPTER ONE

1.1 SETTING UP MILITARY COMFORT STATIONS

According to the documents uncovered so far, the first military brothels for the use and “comfort” of the Japanese troops and officers belonged to the Japanese Navy in Shanghai, in the period signing the “Manchurian Incident” of 1932. Indeed, at that time, the Japanese Army needed a pretext to invade northeast China and plotted a sabotage which resulted, on September 18 1931, in the explosion of the Lake Liu railway in southern Manchuria. The responsibility for the attack was voluntarily claimed upon the Chinese troops by the Japanese forces, which were then rightfully able to wage war against China and quickly brought the northeast region under its control. The following January, the Japanese troops contrasted the Chinese forces in Shanghai in an event that would be later remembered as the “First Shanghai Incident”. This assault was intended to divert the attention of the American and European powers away from the Japanese attempt to establish the Manchukuo puppet state in 1932¹.

The first comfort stations appear to be instituted by the navy deployed to Shanghai around this time. Indeed, as the Vice Chief of Staff of the Shanghai Expeditionary Force Okamura Yasuji reported in his recollections, the military comfort women system was introduced to the army on the model previously established by the navy. The establishment of these stations – at first licensed houses – was mentioned in one of the reports by the Japanese Consulate-General’s office in Shanghai which declared: “as soon as the Shanghai Incident occurred, some staff from our military forces stationed here established the navy *ianjo* (comfort station) to serve as leisure facilities for its members, which continue to be operated since then”².

Before that time, the Japanese government had already tried to establish in Shanghai some subtle form of privately operated brothels, for the leisure of Japanese residents and visitors. Since there had been efforts by the Chinese government to enforce a ban on licensed prostitution, in 1929 the Japanese Foreign Ministry was forced to abolish the *kashizashiki* (house of assignation) system - which at that time constituted a type of licensed brothel – to avoid further problems in collaborating with the local

¹ Y. Yoshimi, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during World War II*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000, p. 43

² Y. Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women: Sexual slavery and prostitution during World War II and the US occupation*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 8

authorities³. Nonetheless, the government shrewdly retained a form of licensed prostitution under the form of a “restaurant serving woman” service (*ryoriten shakufu*), where prostitutes were officially employed as “waitresses” at Japanese restaurants in the city. Hence, Japanese-run brothels existed long before the Shanghai Incident, but they were not exclusive to the military, as the *ianjo* would later be.

At the time of the Shanghai Incident, only a few military comfort stations were instituted. Then, in late 1936, around the number of ten houses were reported to exist, seven of whom were navy brothels while the other three served as “Japanese restaurants”. These seven brothels constituted what could be called navy comfort stations, whose access was allowed only to the members of the Japanese Navy - and not civilians - and whose prostitutes were regularly subjected to medical examinations to prevent venereal diseases. These first naval comfort stations appeared, therefore, to be instituted primarily to prevent sexually transmittable diseases and operated under the strict supervision of the Consulate-General’s office and the navy authorities. Once the Navy mastered this system of military-controlled prostitution, comfort women (*ianfu*) started to be sent to China immediately after the outburst of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937⁴.

Likewise, the Japanese Army started to establish its first military comfort stations in Shanghai in 1932, as reported by General Okamura Yasuji, who requested the Governor of Nagasaki to send comfort women to Shanghai. At this early stage, the army had planned to use as comfort women Japanese prostitutes rather than other foreign women, such as Koreans. The establishment of these army comfort stations rested again undoubtedly under the control of the high officers of the Japanese forces and it was carried on by their senior staff. Then, according to an official document, a comfort station was also set up in the northeast of China in 1933 as a “Hygienic Facility for Prevention of Epidemics”, to avoid the infections of the troops from VD diseases caught in ordinary brothels. It is only after 1937, with the full-scale invasion of China, that the Japanese forces finally applied the *ianjo* system as a general policy for the military, as massive numbers of troops were deployed overseas and acts of rape and sexual violence started to increase vertiginously, ending up in the infamous Nanking Massacre. By that time, the Central China Army issued a command to build comfort stations for each contingent force.

³ Ibidem, p. 9.

⁴ Y. Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, 2000, p.44.

As it had already been observed in the previous years, comfort women were becoming an integral part of the Japanese military system, to such an extent that they were even addressed as “girl army”⁵. Indeed, from the end of the Nanking offensive, the *jugun ianfu* started to be treated as an essential element for the correct functioning of the army – in the provision of leisure for soldiers after the exercise of their duties - so that they had no choice but to move along with the troops in the various expeditions⁶. Wherever the Japanese Army was going to be deployed or transferred, comfort women were forced to accompany them as if they were part of the provisions, up to the point that they were transported even by airplane. Consequently, as the number of Japanese troops stationed in China started to increase and the Sino-Japanese War entered into a phase of stalemate, the *ianjo* system gradually started to become strictly interlocked with the military one⁷.

World War II and Japan’s involvement in the Asian Pacific War did not stop the army from further enforcing military sexual slavery and it did not spare women from being coerced and deceived into working inside the *ianjo*; rather, it contributed to its development all around South East Asia. Indeed, a project extending the comfort station system had been ideated years before the beginning of the war and it was subsequently developed and carried on in the various South-eastern territories subject to the Japanese invasion. As proved by the numerous records and documents uncovered, such as the Diary of Official Duties at the Ministry of War issued by Kinbara Setzuo, secret roundups and hygiene inspections were conducted in order to establish future comfort stations for the army personnel in the light of a future Japanese occupation the Dutch East Indies⁸.

When in 1941, the Asia Pacific conflict began, Japan waged war against the United States of America and the Allied forces and proceeded to invade a large part of the British and Dutch territories in South East Asia - such as Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Indonesia - together with islands and US naval bases in the Pacific. The following year, the Japanese army initiated an operation aimed at establishing the now-so-familiar comfort stations throughout the occupied countries⁹.

⁵ As reported in the testimony of Nakayama Tadanao, director of the Nakayama Institute of Japanese-Chinese Medicine, in Y.Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, 2000, p. 49-50.

⁶ *Jugun ianfu* is the Japanese term used in reference to the comfort women, meaning “military prostitutes”.

⁷ Y.Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, 2000, p. 49-50.

⁸ Kinbara Setzuo, “Rikugunsho gyomu nisshi tekiroku” as reported by Y. Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*.

⁹ Y. Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women*, 2002, p. 19.

1.2 THE REASONS BEHIND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF COMFORT STATIONS

According to the documents collected by Yoshimi Yoshiaki from the records of the armies and commissioned offices, the very first justification for the institution of comfort stations was provided by the necessity to prevent the Japanese military personnel from further perpetrating acts of rape in occupied territories. In 1932 comfort stations for the army were commissioned by the Vice Chief of Staff of the Shanghai Expeditionary Force Okamura Yasuji after recurrent acts of rape were committed by the Japanese military corps in Shanghai, forcing him to contact the Nagasaki Prefecture and request the establishment of “a military comfort women corps”¹⁰. This can be observed in the diary of one of the Senior Staff Officers associated to Okamura, where it is reported that:

“Recently, soldiers have been prowling around everywhere looking for women, and I often heard obscene stories about their behaviour. As long as conditions are peaceful, and the army is not engaged in fighting, these incidents are difficult to prevent. Rather, we should recognize that we can actively provide facilities. I have considered many policy options for resolving the troops’ sexual problems and have set to work on realizing that goal.”¹¹

With the start of the Second Sino-Japanese war of 1937, the relationship between acts of rape and the institution of military comfort stations started to become undeniably evident. While carrying the offensive toward Nanking, the Japanese Central China Army called for the establishment of comfort stations as a reaction for the wrongdoings of its military personnel. Indeed, when earlier in 1937 the Japanese troops invaded and carried on a mass-slaughter in the city of Nanking, rape constituted again one of the atrocious forms of violence that the army inflicted on the defenceless population¹². Any further perpetration of this acts would have led to serious consequences for Japan, not only due to the gravity of the crime itself but because mass rapes risked undermining its international relations by bursting the outrage of the international community. Moreover, they constituted a serious obstacle to the maintenance of order in the occupied territory, as China regarded rape as the “worst act of violence”

¹⁰ Y. Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, 2000, p. 45

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Y. Tanaka Y., *Japan’s Comfort Women*, 2002, p. 13.

and “an extremely serious social problem”¹³. Therefore it comes as no surprise that, immediately after the occupation of Nanking, comfort stations were set up while Chinese women of the region were rounded up by the military police and coerced into becoming comfort women¹⁴.

The immediacy and resolution with which the military introduced comfort stations suggested that the Japanese officers had familiarity with this matter long before the Manchurian Incident of 1931. Indeed, the Japanese forces faced for the first time this issue almost a decade before, between 1918 and 1922, during the “Siberian Expedition”. The regulated prostitution set in Siberia during those years could be considered the first step towards the gradual development of the Shanghai’s *ianjo* for the Japanese navy and army in the later 1930s. Indeed, already in 1920, the army was pressured to set up a licensed prostitution system under military control after having dealt with the unruly behaviour of its troops on their mission in Siberia who, driven by a low morale and resentful to discipline, engaged in acts of rape and pillaging at the expenses of the civilian population¹⁵.

From the very same experiences of the troops deployed in Siberia during the expedition of 1918-1922 that another fundamental problem emerged for the first time: the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. The VD rate was so high among the troops stationing in Siberia that the Japanese military police force (*kempetai*) needed to intervene, regulating private prostitution and providing periodical medical examinations to the prostitutes. Indeed, once settled, military comfort stations served as a solution to the usual licensed areas where prostitutes tended to be infected¹⁶.

The last justification provided by the military for the institution of comfort station was instead the prevention of espionage and the protection of army secrets. By attending the comfort stations set up and controlled by the military, soldiers would have avoided or rather considerably limited the risk of leaking secrets to local prostitutes. To ensure this, frequent examinations of management practices and of relations between the army and the comfort women were conducted by the military police or inspector officers. At first, to guarantee protection from espionage, only Japanese subjects were employed and entrusted in the comfort stations; but soon it became evident that the number of

¹³ As indicated by the 1932 report of the general staff headquarters of the Kwantung Army, in Y. Yoshimi Y., *Comfort Women*, 2000, p. 49.

¹⁴ Y. Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, 2000, p. 49.

¹⁵ *Ibidem* p. 46-47.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

Japanese women was not sufficient to provide the service for the soldiers and that the cost and effort of importing women from Korea, Taiwan or Japan would have been considerable, so the army was forced to round up comfort women locally¹⁷.

Nevertheless, despite these questionable justifications, the massive system of exploitation of women in comfort stations demonstrated soon to be less than effective. The widespread sexual violence by Japanese troops did not stop after the establishment of comfort stations, since acts of rape were committed even after the attachment of comfort women to the military. Of course, this can be stated only if we ignore that the establishment itself of *ianjo* and the coercion of these women into sexual slavery was not already an advanced and institutionalized form of sexual violence and rape. The same discourse could be applied to the prevention of sexually transmittable diseases: setting up medically controlled comfort stations did not prevent VD since soldiers refused to use condoms or to apply prophylactic disinfectants and, when found to be infected, failed to report it to their medical officers¹⁸.

1.3 WOMEN: RECRUITMENT AND DECEPTION

Due to the current lack of data – incinerated or still left uncovered by the Japanese institutions – it is impossible to calculate the exact number of comfort women involved in the conflicts between 1930-1945. Relevant researchers such as Yoshimi Yoshiaki set the estimate between 50.000 and 200.000 women involved in the military sexual slavery system of comfort stations¹⁹.

Regarding the ethnic background of comfort women, it has been officially confirmed that those rounded up as *jugun ianfu* were mainly of Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, Filipina, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Burmese and Dutch nationality. Among the statistics, Korean women are found to be overrepresented in terms of number, making them the largest percentage of comfort women – followed by the Chinese – employed by the Japanese empire²⁰.

Korean and Taiwanese women were particularly targeted for their cultural proximity with Japan, due to the strong colonial policy that the country carried on in the two States since the early years of the

¹⁷ Ibidem, pp. 74-75.

¹⁸ Y. Tanaka Y., *Japan's Comfort Women*, 2002, p. 30.

¹⁹ Y. Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, 2000, p. 93.

²⁰ Ibidem, pp. 94-96.

20th century, when the Japanese language was made compulsory and a policy of forced ethnic assimilation was protracted among the population²¹.

Testimonies from survivors have delineated the various mechanisms of rounding up behind the recruitment of comfort women, usually by means of deception or coercion. Especially among Koreans, cases of women deceived into working as *ianfu* were the most common: young girls were recruited through false promises of employment in Japan or other occupied territories as assistant nurses, factory workers or kitchen helpers only to be sent abroad into military comfort station. As Tanaka highlights in his book, Japanese agents travelled to Korea in order to “enlist” young women for a “comfort service” – whose nature was not specified but related to the relief of the wounded in hospitals – in the newly conquered territories in Southeast Asia²².

Especially in the case of Korea, women were not provided with an adequate – if any – education and lived in a perpetrated condition of poverty, due to Japan’s colonial policies and perpetrated discrimination encouraged by the Confucian mentality. Their condition made it easier for agents to take advantage of them and girls kept being deceived by the promise of a monetary reward which could ease their parents’ debts and with the false expectation of starting a new life in a foreign land²³. Many other women were instead sold by their own families into sexual slavery or in some cases, even kidnapped²⁴. For Dutch women, instead the nightmare was doubled: as the testimony of Jeanne O’Herne tells, they were first captured into internment camps and then selected and forcibly sent to the military stations²⁵.

Despite the evident difficulty to provide exact numbers, the estimated ratio of comfort women to soldiers has been set by scholars to 1/29. Given the common usage of the term “ni-ku-ichi” among the operators inside the comfort stations, it is indeed believed that one comfort women regularly served about 29 soldiers each day²⁶. In some cases, when the troops were transferred to new locations

²¹ Y. Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women*, 2002, p. 32.

²² *Ibidem* pp. 38-42.

²³ Y. Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, 2000, p. 104-106.

²⁴ C. S. Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial memory in Korea and Japan*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008, pp. 3- 4.

²⁵ Y. Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, 2000, p. 166-167.

²⁶ *Ibidem* p. 93.

or when new “recruits” were brought to the stations, the ratio increased drastically arriving to 1 *ianfu* forced to have sexual intercourses with 40/100 men²⁷.

In the brutal environment of the comfort stations, the victims were subject to inhuman working conditions while being deprived of their basic human rights. Besides, not all the comfort women survived the war: some got killed in the attempt to escape, others were mass-murdered by the very same army in order to occult their existence, whereas a part of them was even offered as military prostitutes for the Allied Forces. Those who managed to survive were destined to experience the harshest social marginalization in their homeland, as it happened in Korea, living in absolute poverty²⁸.

1.4 STATE RESPONSIBILITY

Until the early 1990s, the Japanese government had frequently denied any involvement with the crime concerning the recruitment and enslavement of comfort women. But, as soon as historical records and military documents were unveiled, it became evident that the truth was far from what the government had been stating for the past 50 years. A large number of documents attested how both the military and the Japanese ministries were deeply involved with the planning and organization of comfort stations, in different degrees each and in different periods of time²⁹.

Indeed, it would be inconceivable to suppose that a governmental organ such as the Ministry of War had no direct or indirect involvement with the establishment of comfort stations, being the latter responsible for military administration. Despite the absence of an official section designated to the administration of the comfort women system, the Ministry of War constituted a relevant actor in its settlement. Its participation was confirmed by a notice entitled “Matters Concerning the Recruitment of Women to Work in a Military Comfort Station”, which clearly demonstrate how high officials in the Ministry of War closely monitored the recruitment of women and how they were aware of the existence of *ianjo*. In the document, whose discovery had an incredible impact on the government’s

²⁷ A. Y. Chai, Asian-Pacific Feminist Coalition Politics: The "Chōngshindae/Jūgunianfu" ("Comfort Women") Movement, *Korean Studies*, Vol. 17, 1993, p. 71.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Y. Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, 2000, p. 35-37.

stance on the issue, the Ministry ordered a joint collaboration of the armies deployed in China to regulate the procurement of women, in order to compensate for the extreme methods of rounding up – mainly through kidnapping – employed by the police. Further reports have revealed how the Ministry was well aware of the function of these comfort stations as a method of VD prevention and maintenance of military discipline³⁰.

Along with the army and the Ministry of War, other governmental organs – such as the Home Ministry and the Governments-General of Korea and Taiwan – contributed in rounding up and transporting comfort women³¹. In particular, the Home Ministry regulated the dispatch of women overseas, tacitly approving the transportation of those who were traveling to China to work in a “shameful calling” (prostitution); the police forces of the Governments-General of Korea and Taiwan instead directly engaged in the round-up of local women. Likewise, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs initially exercised jurisdiction over the comfort women system but, with the intensification of the Asian Pacific War and the consequent development of comfort stations, it slowly lost its authority to the army and the navy³².

What has been undoubtedly more evident is the direct participation of the military forces in setting up the comfort women system. Despite not being officially mentioned in any records, the military and local police aided and even directly cooperated with agents in the recruitment of comfort women. Through time, the military developed a more precise and articulated recruiting system for new comfort women, which followed two different patterns: one characterizing mainly the occupied territories and the other the Japanese colonial empire. In the first case, women were rounded up in the occupied territories of China, the Pacific and Southeast Asia with the direct involvement of the Expeditionary Forces. The second case instead entailed the rounding up of comfort women by the local army in Japan or in the Korean and Taiwanese colonial lands³³.

There were two types of “recruiting agents”: one was made by individuals who were directly selected by the Army, usually managers or owners of comfort stations already settled in China; the others were composed by sub-contractors, that is those commissioned by the very same brothel managers to recruit women. As many testimonies have denounced, a large number of sub-contractors were Korean

³⁰ Ibidem p. 63.

³¹ Y. Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women*, 2002, p. 23-25.

³² Y. Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, 2000, p. 63.

³³ Ibidem pp. 64-65.

“employment agents” already known in the prostitution business³⁴. This provides an interesting insight into contemporary debates on the comfort women issue, since it reveals the significance of local collaboration (such as the one involving the Korean sub-contractors) in perpetrating these acts of violence and sexual slavery along with the military government of Imperial Japan³⁵.

³⁴ Y. Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women*, 2002, p. 38.

³⁵ C. S. Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 2008, pp. 3-4.

CHAPTER TWO

2.1 THE TOKYO TRIAL

Silence rested upon the comfort women issue for more than forty years. Despite being briefly mentioned afterwards, with a few academic studies carried on both in Japan and South Korea, the argument was destined only to surface in the period signing the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s. Why has such a dreadful event been buried for over four decades, without any possibility to emerge? To understand this perpetrated silence, it is necessary to examine in depth the post-war situation in Japan and in one of the most-affected countries, South Korea.

As already discussed in the previous chapters, no mention of the comfort women issue has been found within the war crimes recognized by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, commonly known as the Tokyo Trial.

Following the Japanese surrender in 1945 and the US occupation of the country, the Trial was instituted with the aim to prosecute Japanese military authorities who instigated the war against the Allied nations and perpetrated crimes against their soldiers and civilians. Despite prosecuting Japan for war crimes that included murder, ill-treatment and rape, no allegation referred to the systematic, controlled military sexual slavery that the Japanese Army and Navy had imposed to almost 200.000 foreign women across the Asian Pacific for more than a decade³⁶. Crimes of enforced prostitution were briefly mentioned in two exceptional cases examined in B & C Class war crimes tribunals without any substantial reference to the comfort women issue. Sexual slavery here was solely conscripted to the coerced prostitution of Caucasian women in Indonesia and Guam and, in the case of the second trial, it was examined in conjunction with a Japanese affront to the American national flag³⁷.

This could have been justified at first by the Allies unawareness of the extensity of the crime, but official Allied reports and photos have suggested otherwise. Evidence has shown – despite a considerable lack of documentation – that the US had knowledge of the comfort women situation long before the actual Tokyo Trial. Reports by the ATIS (Allied Translator and Interpreter Service) referred to detailed information regarding the management and organization of military “brothels”

³⁶ Y. Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women*, 2002, p. 84.

³⁷ *Ibidem* p. 86.

offered to the Japanese military overseas and the nationality of the women who served as comfort women (who were Korean, Indonesian and Chinese). In addition, brief interrogation reports of *jugun ianfu* belonging to the Psychological Warfare Team were found in the US Archives³⁸.

Nonetheless, as demonstrated during the Tokyo Trial, the Allied forces showed limited interest in the comfort women case, providing no official record of the interrogations and generally refraining from prosecuting the Japanese officers who committed such atrocities. It has been suggested that this discrimination in the gravity and visibility of war crimes had a lot to do with the Allies' perception of the victims: the majority of military comfort women were Asians, not civilians belonging to the Allied nations, a characteristic that might have biased the latter when carrying on the investigations on enforced prostitution³⁹.

In any case, the omission of the comfort women sexual slavery from the Tokyo Trial had a severe impact on the process of recognition of this violence as a war crime and violation of human rights in Japan. Without any mention of this violence in an international court of justice and without any proof of existence on the soil of Japan, the comfort women issue was destined to remain in silence for 47 years.

2.2 1990s: REVELATIONS AND REACTIONS TO THE COMFORT WOMEN ISSUE IN SOUTH KOREA AND JAPAN

Whereas the comfort women issue was destined to emerge only at the end of the century, scholar knowledge about the crime revealed to exist long before the first denunciations that led to its public scandal in 1991. Studies have demonstrated that stories of *jugun ianfu* – or “*chongsindae*” as they are commonly referred to in Korea – had already been shared in numerous novels, reports and academic documents, including 21 monographs in Japanese and one in Korean⁴⁰. The availability of such sources and their contextual invisibility in the academic and public discourse might suggest that this long-lasting connivance involved more complex questions of gender, nationalism, foreign and domestic policies rather than a simple lack of documented proof.

³⁸ Ibidem p. 84-85.

³⁹ Ibidem p. 87.

⁴⁰ J. Seo, *Politics of Memory in Korea and China: Remembering the Comfort Women and the Nanjing Massacre*, Routledge (2008), p. 373.

In Japan, controversial historical questions had been largely overlooked since the end of the World War II and kept being silenced for 47 years in order to protect the fragile reputation that the country was building in international politics. At that time, with the Cold-War finally approaching to an end, Japan was striving to become an influent power at the regional level by reaching diplomatic and economic equilibrium with its Chinese and Korean neighbours⁴¹. To do so, any reference to the country's dark and inglorious past was largely avoided, including the controversial visits to the Yasukuni Shrine⁴².

Indeed, the several LDP governments that followed in the post-war period repetitively took an ambiguous stance over the issue, never fully acknowledging it in a reprehensible self-defensive act: the leaders saw no necessity in questioning the Japanese role in the previous war as long as the economy flourished and the party remained safely in power. Indeed, Japan's engagement in the Korean region remained prevalently economic, with rather distant political relationships. In this situation, the "excuse of no evidence" reigned supreme. For almost 50 years, the Japanese government refrained from issuing any official apology or individual compensation due to the lack of substantial documents proving governmental responsibility for the comfort women issue, documents that nowadays are known to be systematically destroyed by the latter at the end of the war⁴³.

This general attitude reflected a wider picture of a post-war Japan which in general perceived itself a victim rather than an aggressor: the crimes committed by the Japanese military before and during WW2 took place in foreign lands, while the population suffered at the hands of the Allies and felt heavily the consequences of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing attacks. The blindness and lack of information by post-war Japanese generation over the crimes committed by their own officials during the war was also a result of this condition⁴⁴.

⁴¹ H. Saito, *The History Problem: The Politics of War Commemoration in East Asia*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2017, p. 76.

⁴² A Shinto shrine built in commemoration of the country's war dead, including those later convicted as Class A criminals. This site has been object of numerous controversies due to the frequent official visits of the Japanese Prime-Ministers (including Shinzo Abe) to the place. It represents another dramatic aspect of the history problem between Japan and its neighbor States.

⁴³ Y. Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, 2000, p. 34.

⁴⁴ S. Ogawa, The Difficulty of Apology: Japan's Struggle with Memory and Guilt, *Harvard International Review*, Vol. 22, No. 3, p. 43.

In South Korea, the discourse followed a similar path. Despite having been freed from the Japanese rule, at the end of the Second World War South Korea severely struggled in bringing the comfort women issue in the political and societal debate, discouraged both by Japan and the USA as well as by the strong Confucian influence pervading the popular culture. Indeed, the invisibility of the comfort women was accentuated not only by the attempts of the Japanese government to conceal the fact but by the general reluctance of the USA to reveal the latter's war crime, given its strategic location as a Pacific defence base against the USSR and China in a Cold War environment.

But what reveals to be more interesting is the influence that the Korean patriarchal society had on the issue: according to this social context, women victims of sexual violence were regarded as possessing an unfortunate fate or loose morals and they often ended up being degraded or spoiled⁴⁵.

In the Korean culture, chastity was deemed the most valuable feature of a woman, the most important virtue that a girl could possess. Impurity, therefore, was deplored and unaccepted by the society, becoming a death sentence for all the women who contravened the norm: those who lost their virginity pre-marriage were destined to become "damaged goods", isolated and discriminated for life.

Once the war ended, Korean survivors had to face not only the physical and psychological traumas deriving from years of sexual exploitation, but the social ostracization that came with their embodiment of immorality and corruption. They became victims in their own country, constricted to abandon their villages or to keep serving as prostitutes in foreign territories⁴⁶.

Many comfort women who came forward in the 1990s shared this condition of perpetrated oppression and silence which has relegated them into a life of poverty⁴⁷.

Nevertheless, it is exactly in South Korea, the country presenting the majority of women fallen victims of military sexual slavery, that the comfort women movement originated for the first time. The subject was brought into the public discussion following the end of South Korea's military dictatorship, as the result of both the process of democratization and the rise of women's movements in the early 1980s. The events that preceded the emergence of the comfort women movements and prepared what would be a long-lasting historical and diplomatic debate were numerous. Already in the early 70s, women in South Korea had started to participate in a campaign against international

⁴⁵ J. Seo, *Politics of Memory in Korea and China: Remembering the Comfort Women and the Nanjing Massacre*, *New Political Science*, Vol. 30, No. 3, p. 374.

⁴⁶ A. Y. Chai, *Asian-Pacific Feminist Coalition Politics*, 1993, p. 74.

⁴⁷ J. Seo, *Politics of Memory in Korea and China*, 2008, p. 374.

sexual tourism, directing their protests especially towards Japanese male visitors⁴⁸. Later on, the oppressive Korean perspective on rape and sexual violence started slowly to divert its focus from the impurity and shame of the victim towards the actual criminal, with the first testimonies of sexual tortures by Kon In Suk experienced during the dictatorship⁴⁹. Indeed, the 1980s observed a general shift in the self-perception of women in relation to their past sufferings, which paved the way to the emergence of the first public declarations and testimonies of both ex-military officers and ex-comfort women, whose impact was fatal for the Japanese government⁵⁰.

The 1990s provided finally South Korea with a political structure which could finally unveil and support the comfort women question, thanks to its post-1987 democratization process and the 1991 acquisition of UN membership. This new political stance of South Korea was also particularly helped by the long unresolved divergence between the two Asian states on the legitimacy of Japan's colonization of Korea, marked through the years by the strong historical revisionism that the ex-Imperial power enforced⁵¹.

The year of 1990 signed the starting point of the comfort women movement's activism. In May, in coincidence with the President Roh Tae-woo's visit in Japan, a group of Korean women issued a joint statement asking for an apology and a compensation for the "volunteer corps" (many of which served as comfort women); on August 14, the 67 years old former *chongshindae* Kim Hak-sun was brought to Manchuria in order to publicly share her story at the offices of Korean Church Women United, which constituted the first official testimony of a comfort woman. This event led to a chain reaction that ended, in 1991, with three former comfort women filing a lawsuit in the Tokyo district court in conjunction with other survivors and relatives of the Pacific War victims, demanding apologies and compensation for damages for what they had suffered. In the years to come, many more women added to the list⁵². Both the testimony of Kim Hak-sun and the subsequent class action lawsuit against Japan helped the comfort women issue to be recognized internationally by the time of 1992 and inspired researchers such as Yoshimi Yoshiaki and the Korean women's movement to contribute in uncovering the truth over this controversial theme and publicly condemn the crime.

⁴⁸ C. S. Soh, Japan's National/Asian Women's Fund for "Comfort Women", *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 2, 2003, p. 215.

⁴⁹ C. Ueno, The Politics of Memory: Nation, Individual and Self, *History & Memory*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1999, p. 136.

⁵⁰ Ibidem p. 137.

⁵¹ C. S. Soh, Japan's National/Asian Women's Fund, 2003, p. 215.

⁵² A. Y. Chai, Asian-Pacific Feminist Coalition Politics, 1993, p. 80.

2.3 APOLOGIES AND CONTROVERSIES

At the end of the Cold War, Japan was struggling to find a good balance between the conservative and nationalistic attitude which characterized the aftermath of the Asia-Pacific conflict and the possibility of exploiting the political opportunities offered by the current international arena. To raise Japan's international standing, the LDP needed to soften its nationalism and open the country to a more cosmopolitan approach, engaging in peacekeeping operations and improving the diplomatic relationships with its close neighbours China and South Korea. It was around this delicate time, amidst the national debate over the Self-Defence Forces deployment in the Gulf region and the government struggle to maintain a regional leadership, that the *ianfu* issue burst into the public discourse⁵³.

When the comfort women issue invaded the national newspapers, with the recently discovered records and the growing number of testimonies from South Korea, Japan had to finally face the wrong-doings committed in the past. Nevertheless, as soon as public statements were issued by the government, controversies started to emerge.

In 1990, following the petition submitted by Korean Council for the Women Drafter for Military Sexual Slavery, apologies were not issued as expected. The government did not shift from its previous stance and denied any involvement in the organization and perpetration of the crime, asserting that the responsibility for recruiting and enslaving comfort women rested upon private contractors who managed the business. This position was maintained even after thirty-five plaintiffs filed the infamous joint lawsuit against the Japanese government at the Tokyo District Court, sustaining that all issues of compensation had been resolved with the 1965 normalization and no official document had been found to demonstrate any governmental responsibility towards the crime⁵⁴.

This lasted until 1992 when, following the publication by the Asahi Shinbun of professor Yoshimi Yoshiaki's discovery of a document entitled "On Recruiting Women for Military Comfort Stations", the "lack of evidence" excuse collapsed, to the great dishonour of the government. The revelation spread five days before the scheduled visit of Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi to South Korea and

⁵³ H. Saito, *The History Problem*, 2017, p. 76-78.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem* pp. 80-81.

fuelled protests among Japanese and Korean women's associations – the most famous one held in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul – asking for government compensation and a Diet resolution offering an apology⁵⁵. After 127 documents were found in relation to comfort women, Miyazawa's chief cabinet secretary Kōno Yōhei released the infamous Kōno Statement on August 4 1993, where he recognized officially the direct or indirect involvement of the military in the establishment and management of the comfort stations as well as the transfer of *ianfu* and concluded:

“We shall face squarely the historical facts as described above instead of evading them, and take them to heart as lessons of history. We hereby reiterate our firm determination never to repeat the same mistake by forever engraving such issues in our memories through the study and teaching of history.”⁵⁶

Despite that, disputes over apologies followed quickly and signed indelibly the credibility of the Japanese government in the next decades, severing the relationship of diplomacy with the Republic of South Korea. In a mismatch between public statements and the effective internal politics, between heartfelt apologies and nationalistic commemorations and policies, the government of Japan demonstrated its inability in taking a definitive stance over the comfort women issue and to confer real meaning to those words of sorrow and remorse that more than once had pronounced.

In the 1990s, politics in Japan became increasingly entangled in the so-called “apology diplomacy” towards other Asian countries. This form of diplomacy tends to use the instrument of the apology as a political strategy to deal with unresolved questions of the past without merging them into the present⁵⁷.

At the 1993 elections, the LDP suffered a considerable loss of power and saw the proclamation of the first non-LDP Prime Minister, Hosokawa Morihiro. In the debate over comfort women and war crimes Hosokawa took at first a surprisingly straightforward position, being the first PM to commemorate foreign victims at the National Memorial Service and most importantly to argue in a

⁵⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono on the result of the study on the issue of "comfort women"*, MOFA [website], <<https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/women/fund/state9308.html>>, accessed 22 March 2018.

⁵⁷ M. Izumi, *Asian-Japanese: State Apology, National Ethos, and the “Comfort Women” Reparations Debate in Japan*, *Communication Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 5, 2011, pp. 478-479.

press conference that the Asia-Pacific War “was a war of aggression” (*shinryaku senso*) and a mistaken one (*machigatta senso*). Strongly criticized by the LDP, Hosokawa was forced to change the wording of his first keynote address, modifying “war of aggression” with “act of aggression” while retreating back in the conservative position that not all the Japanese acts had been aggressive. Despite his attempt to tone down the nationalistic emphasis over Japan’s war commemoration that had been imposed for so long by the LDP governments, he encountered severe criticisms among his coalition partners that forced him to withdraw in 1994⁵⁸.

Controversy over public apologies continued with new Japanese Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi and the adoption of a resolution for the Asian-Pacific war memorial in 1995. In 1994, Murayama headed a three-party coalition government which, for the first time since 1955, was driven by a political party – the JSP – that had expressly striven for a cosmopolitan commemoration during the post-war period. Despite the great hopes for a drastic change in Japan’s official commemoration, the three coalition parties – the LDP, the JSP and the New Party Sakigake – struggled severely in adopting a shared resolution on the 50th anniversary of the end of the war. While the LDP wanted to emphasize Japan’s commitment to peace without any further mentioning of past crimes, the JSP supported a resolution framed in terms of an apology acknowledging the country’s wrongdoings. The divergence of views and the antagonism surrounding this topic lead to a final resolution which passed in the House of Representative with 241 out of 502 votes boycotted both by members of the JDP and the JSP. Despite mentioning Japan’s past wrongdoings, the final text adopted by the Diet ended up reflecting the LDP’s dominant position in the government, offering a meagre, inadequate apology expressing only “sincere condolences” and “deep remorse”⁵⁹.

These politics of apology worsened with Murayama’s establishment of the Asian Women’s Fund in July 1995. Atonement money delivered to the victims were accompanied by a “letter of apology” (*owabi no tegami*) with the signature of the Japanese prime minister, expressing again remorse and moral responsibility for the military comfort women sexual slavery. This method was met with strong criticism in particular during Hashimoto Ryutaro’s government, when the prime minister used the term “my personal feelings” (*watashi no kimochi*) in some of the letters addressed to the survivors. The phrase – together with the absence of any reference to Japan’s colonial dominance and war of aggression – stirred the indignation of many activists who interpreted such words as conveying the

⁵⁸ H. Saito, *The History Problem*, 2017, pp. 83-85.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem* pp. 88-90.

feelings of only one individual rather than of the entire Japanese government⁶⁰. Despite the progressive steps taken so far, Japan's integrity over the comfort women issue continued to remain on the edge of crumbling down, revealing a fragile and unstable position under a strong, irremovable political façade.

At the same time, as C. Sarah Soh reports, it is worth to notice that all the government's efforts to manifest a more forceful apology after 1998 - with all consequent terminological changes - remained almost unnoticed outside of Japan and especially in South Korea, since the Fund's project could hardly be debated in public due to the strong objections made by the Korean Council⁶¹.

2.4 REPARATIONS: CONTROVERSIES BETWEEN MORAL AND LEGAL RESPONSIBILITY

Another delicate question revolves around the problem of compensations. Until the early 90s, the government of Japan repeatedly affirmed that post-war compensations had been already settled by the San Francisco Peace Treaty and the various bilateral agreements signed by Japan and the other countries involved, thus eliminating any further right to claim additional legal reparations in the future. When, in 1992, the government recognized the involvement of the military in the recruitment and enslavement of comfort women, it still continued to reject any accusation of legal responsibility towards the single victims⁶². Nevertheless, public pressure following the comfort women revelations pushed the government into revising its previous statement. It is during the Murayama administration that the infamous Fund was established in order to express a sense of national atonement to the former comfort women from the Japanese people⁶³.

Indeed, in 1994 high hopes were conferred in the figure of the newly elected Prime Minister Murayama, leader of the Japan Socialist Party known for his progressive and cosmopolitan views, for a better redressing of the state compensation issue; the idea for an official fund was further stressed after the International Commission of Jurists' report encouraged Japan to make suitable restitution to

⁶⁰ C. S. Soh, *Japan's National/Asian Women's Fund*, 2003, pp. 225-226.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

⁶² M. Izumi, *Asian-Japanese: Reparations Debate in Japan*, 2011, p. 477.

⁶³ H. Saito, *The History Problem*, 2017, p. 91.

the victims and recommended the government to pay a sum of US\$ 40.000 as interim measure “for rehabilitation of each woman who has come forward”⁶⁴.

One year later, the plan for the establishment of the Asian Women’s Fund (AWF) – initially named Asian Peace and Friendship Fund for Women- was laid out. The Fund represented an attempt to express an act of “atonement by the whole of Japanese citizenry” (*zenkokuminteki tsugunai*), and it was regarded officially as an NGO (since its staff members were not composed by government’s employees) even though the government was responsible for its direction and supervision⁶⁵.

Meant to embody a heartfelt apology for the suffering inflicted to thousands of women, the Fund aimed at combining both governmental and civilian activities in the form of atonement money and medical/welfare support projects. The former consisted in the delivery of two million yen to each victim-applicant from a fund financed by the donations by the Japanese people, along with letters of apology from the Prime Minister and the president of the organization; the latter resulted instead in the government’s implementation of medical and social welfare programs (1.2-3 million yen) for individual survivors. In addition, the Fund committed itself to support activities addressing contemporary issues of violence against women and to collaborate in the collection of historical documents dealing with comfort women⁶⁶.

However, the Asian Women’s Fund collected constant hostility since its very beginning, stirring criticism from both Japanese and foreign NGOs advocating for comfort women’s justice. This is mainly due to the government inflexible position over its legal responsibility which, despite the creation of the Fund, continued to be constantly denied. The Asian Women’s Fund was presented by the Japanese government not as a project acknowledging the government’s legal responsibility over the issue, but as a moral remedy, as a sign of the nation’s redemption for the suffering caused to the victims. All the legal compensation issues were deemed settled in the previous treaties, to the victims’ dismay.

Government’s rhetoric over a moral – rather than legal – responsibility and its decision to set the Fund as a non-profit organization severely questioned its committed to the project, especially in its contribution through state funds, and its acknowledgement of the comfort system as a war crime. It

⁶⁴ C. S. Soh, *Japan's National/Asian Women's Fund*, 2003, p. 220.

⁶⁵ H. Saito, *The History Problem*, 2017, p. 92.

⁶⁶ C. S. Soh, *Japan's National/Asian Women's Fund*, 2003, p. 223.

did not take long before the Fund started to be defined by the various opposition movements as “a trickery” or an act of “deception”⁶⁷.

Unsurprisingly, South Korea offered the harshest criticisms toward the project. The Korean Council – as well as other South Korean NGOs – emerged quickly among the fiercest opponents of the AWF, accusing the Japanese government to evade from its responsibility towards the crime by making its citizens contribute to the donations⁶⁸.

While severely criticizing the establishment of the Fund as a subtle way of condoning Japan from the crime that had committed and pointing out the government’s inability to assume fully its responsibility, it is also necessary to acknowledge that South Korea – and in particular the Korean Council - had been one of the advocates for legal compensation of the victims since the first declarations and plaintiffs⁶⁹. As Professor Sarah C. Soh underlines, both the leader of the comfort women movements in Korea and Taiwan adopted extremely drastic positions against the AWF compared to those from countries such as the Netherlands and the Philippines, characterized by a more pragmatic (and successful) stance⁷⁰.

The strong, homogenous consensus over the Fund in South Korea and Taiwan was in fact given by the powerful influence that the government and organizations such as the Korean Council had over the comfort women issue debate. Indeed, NGOs assumed a key role in raising the funds for the survivors and the governments provided monthly support and welfare benefits to the victims: when few of them accepted the Fund’s offer, outrage spread among the movement’s leaders while the rhetoric of a “second rape” of the victims tempted by money quickly spread in South Korea. It is in particular the Korean Council that, after having lobbied with Kim Dae-Jung administration, encouraged the establishment of a government special payment, with the condition that survivors would sign a pledge not to receive any future money from the Fund. Tension grew when, in 1998, the government supported the Korean Council position, demanding Tokyo to end soon the atonement money project. In the *Asahi Shimbun*, Professor Wada Haruki criticized the manners with which

⁶⁷ Ibidem.

⁶⁸ H. Saito, *The History Problem*, 2017, pp. 20-21.

⁶⁹ P. G. Min, Korean "Comfort Women": The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class, *Gender and Society*, Vol. 17, No. 6, 2003, p. 946.

⁷⁰ C. S. Soh, Japan's National/Asian Women's Fund, 2003, pp. 226-227.

Seoul carried out the decision, saying that forbidding survivors to exercise their rights and accept the atonement money from Japan could not be called a democratic practice. Protests soon emerged among survivors, who asked to receive the Korean government's payment and to carry public investigation on the Korean Council⁷¹.

Despite the overflow of criticism investing the project, it is necessary to acknowledge that, in a period extending from 1996 and 2002, the Fund was successful in providing 364 survivors – in the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan and the Netherlands – symbolic and monetary expressions of atonement⁷².

In conclusion, both the apology and the compensation controversy could be seen as a derivation of a broader – and still unresolved - problem regarding divergent perceptions around the historical incident and clashing opinions over the methods to properly address the comfort women issue.

Japan's countless attempts to conciliate the LDP's insufferable nationalism with more cosmopolitan approaches have been repetitively met with extreme caution and inflexibility by its neighbour South Korea, mindful of a recent history of colonization and cultural annihilation which still continues to remain an open wound for the country. Condemnation for military sexual slavery served as the main scapegoat for ex-colonial countries such as South Korea to denounce a more complex problem over Japan's attitude towards the commemoration of the Asian-Pacific War and the crimes that had perpetrated since. For these reasons, no resolution has been indeed reached successfully nowadays: the constant political incoherence of the Japanese government and the extreme unwillingness of South Korea to accept a deal led the last two decades into a long stagnation of the debate, deeply severing the bilateral diplomatic relations among the two countries.

⁷¹ Ibidem pp. 228-229.

⁷² Ibidem p. 232.

CHAPTER THREE

3.1. UNDERSTANDING PAST GRIEVANCES: UNCONCEALABLE COLONIAL MEMORIES

A much greater problem could be observed when dealing with the comfort women issue in South Korea and Japan: the conciliation of past memories. Indeed, what fuelled and complicated the relationship between the two Asian countries could be generally found in their divergent – often incompatible – perspective of the past, especially in relation to the years of colonialism conducted by Imperial Japan on the Korean lands in the first half of the 1900s⁷³.

Japan and South Korea share a painful and controversial history which starts long before the military enslavement of comfort women, with the annexation of the Korean peninsula in 1910. Between the end of the 19th and the start of the 20th century, the Japanese army indeed fought two wars – respectively against China and Russia – in order to gain what was considered a strategic point for the control and access to the Asian mainland: Korea⁷⁴. The colonization that followed left heavy scars in the collective memory of Korean people due to the strong policy of cultural annihilation that the Japanese colonial administration enforced in the region⁷⁵.

Dominance was expressed by the Japanese empire through an atrocious process of eradication of the Korean identity, which saw the imposition of Japanese culture and tradition onto the local one. Japanese names were forced onto the inhabitants and any reference to Korean history, language and culture became forbidden in schools, while the traditional lifestyle of millions of Koreans was disrupted by the forced readjustment of the economy to the colonialist's standards⁷⁶.

By the half of the 20th century, the Korean identity had been indeed largely violated. For this reason, it comes as no surprise that the criminal event involving the sexual enslavement of thousands of Korean women for the pleasure of the Japanese army became quickly the emblem of the country's

⁷³ D. Hundt & R. Bleiker, Reconciling Colonial Memories in Korea and Japan, *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2007, p. 62.

⁷⁴ Ibidem p. 65.

⁷⁵ R. David, The past or the politics of the present? Dealing with the Japanese occupation of South Korea, *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2016, p. 62.

⁷⁶ D. Hundt & R. Bleiker, Reconciling Colonial Memories in Korea and Japan, 2007, p. 66.

indignation and strive for justice at the end of the 1990s. The comfort women issue perfectly fit such a picture of domination and violation that the Korean population had to suffer.

Roots of tension in the bilateral relationships between South Korea and Japan have been individuated in the difficulty to deal with the historical remembrances of the colonial period. Since the signing of the Normalization Treaty in 1965, no fundamental change has been detected in the diplomatic discourse between the two countries, with questions of war crimes and colonialism – such as the controversies involving the comfort women issue – still open to academic and political debate⁷⁷.

When South Korea and Japan established for the first time official diplomatic ties in the '60s – under the U.S. pressure – questions regarding their colonial past were indeed massively neglected. At that time, the process of normalization between the two countries was mainly motivated by economic necessities and strategic justifications provided by the Cold War. Their rapprochement was extremely encouraged by the United States of America – which sought to coordinate its precious bilateral ties in East Asia in a strategic network of allies during its growing commitment in the Vietnam War – and by the promising economic benefits that such a partnership could have offered. The two neighbours saw each other as potential economic partners rather than allies: Japan as a source of economic development for South Korea and South Korea as a precious market for Japanese manufactured goods and investments⁷⁸.

This odd economic collaboration was not met by a political reconciliation between the two East Asian countries. In South Korea, President Park justified the normalization of diplomatic relations with Japan solely in terms of the country's duty towards the United States, refraining from promoting any public discussion on the decision taken. Addressing the problem of the colonial past would have been a serious political risk in South Korea's attempt to boost the nation's economic development and to ensure Washington's support, knowing the entity of the population disapproval. In like manner, Japan averted any possible political implications deriving from the normalization by exclusively maintaining basic, economic interactions with the region⁷⁹.

⁷⁷ H. G. Lynn, Systemic Lock: The Institutionalization of History in Post-1965 South Korea—Japan Relations, *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, Vol. 9, No. 1/2, 2000, p. 55-56.

⁷⁸ D. Hundt & R. Bleiker, *Reconciling Colonial Memories in Korea and Japan*, 2007, pp. 66-67.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem* p. 68.

The fragile equilibrium surrounding Japan and the Republic of Korea resides also at the heart of the Normalization Treaty, in the legal deadlocks dating back to the negotiations and later agreements of 1965⁸⁰. Along with the absence of any reference to colonialism in the previous San Francisco Treaty, the vague interpretation of Article 2, the Treaty's missed mention of reparations and the lack of a legally binding apology contributed to build a "systemic lock" in the future bilateral relationships of the countries. In particular, Article 2 declared "null and void" – rather than illegal and invalid – the precedent treaties between the Korean and Japanese Empire, including that of Annexation: a statement that had important political implications. Indeed, by signing the 1965 Treaty, the South Korean government offered Japan the legal opportunity to assert that the annexation and colonialism of the Korean peninsula occurred through an act of mutual consent, rather than through one of pure coercion⁸¹.

By signing the 1965 Treaty, South Korea chose the possibility of economic growth and flourishing over the recognition of 35 years of suffering of its own population. Indeed, the absence of a political reconciliation over the delicate question of colonialism and past wrong-doings and contextually the presence of a strong economic and strategic bond created a divide between Seoul and the population's perception of its neighbour Japan. Feelings of anger and resentments among South Korean people were neither cancelled nor eased after the rapprochement with Japan, rather, they were augmented up to the point that – after the democratization process – they resulted in frequent social upheavals filled with anti-Japanese sentiments⁸².

By not confronting each other and not reaching a common, shared vision of the past, South Korea and Japan quickly escalated in modelling their nationalism on their own particular historical memories. In the case of the comfort women issue, the growing nationalistic approach from each side has severely affected the possibility of adopting a definitive resolution over a mischievous crime after more twenty years from its public revelation⁸³.

⁸⁰ H. G. Lynn, *Systemic Lock*, 2000, p. 57.

⁸¹ *Ibidem* p. 64.

⁸² D. Hundt & R. Bleiker, *Reconciling Colonial Memories in Korea and Japan*, 2007, p. 69.

⁸³ *Ibidem* p. 62

3.2 HISTORICAL REVISIONISM IN JAPAN

National identity and different perceptions of the past are the protagonists of the point of maximum tension between the Republic of South Korea and Japan: the problem of historical revisionism.

After the economic distension between Tokyo and Seoul in the 1960s, a growing revisionist trend started to emerge along with an increasingly conservative pressure in the Japanese government, after years of LDP's relative absence from the political arena. The debate over colonial memories spurred in Japan during the 1990s – contemporary to the emergence of the comfort women movement – and revolved around the new school textbook reforms indicted by the Ministry of Education.

In 1996, all junior high school history books were finally edited to include considerable mentions of Japan's war crimes – including those regarding the comfort women – committed during the Asian Pacific War⁸⁴. This reform represented the final outcome of a long struggle against textbooks inspections started in the 1980s, which saw the Ministry of Education illegally discarding some events belonging to the War in the Asia-Pacific from being included in the pages of students' history books, in particular those dealing with the Nanking Massacre and the acts of rape perpetrated towards Chinese women. After several lawsuits against this arbitrary content inspections and a ruling by the Tokyo High Court, textbooks for junior high and high school saw a growing inclusion of the country's wrongdoings during their Imperial years. Such a decision immediately caused the indignation of members of the LDP and revisionist intellectuals who saw in the accurate portrayal of Japan's war crime a danger for the national pride and a commitment to the much-hated Tokyo Trial “masochistic” view of history that the Allies imposed to the country in the post-war period⁸⁵.

At the front row of the discussion on the textbook reform stood Professor Fujioka Nobukatsu who, in 1995, founded the Liberal History Research Group (*Jiyūshugi Shikan Kenkyūkai*) promoting a new “liberal” view of history (*jiyūshugi shikan*)⁸⁶. The use of the term “liberal” in this occasion is not even remotely associated with traditional liberalism but rather with the concept of a liberation from either the left's “Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal” and the right's “Great East Asian War” historical

⁸⁴ J. Sand, *Historians and Public Memory in Japan: The “Comfort Women” Controversy*, *History and Memory*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1999, p. 120.

⁸⁵ H. Saito, *The History Problem*, 2017, pp. 98-99.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

perspectives that dominated post-war Japan⁸⁷. Indeed, the aim of liberal view was to re-write Japanese history in a way that diverted from the two polarized historical interpretations of the post-war period, which depicted Japan either as completely guilty or as fundamentally innocent⁸⁸.

The comfort women issue was not spared by the liberalist/revisionist interpretation of history that during the years grew prominent in Japan. Revisionists heavily campaigned against the inclusion of the comfort women crime in the students' textbooks, claiming that the trustworthiness of the sources available could not be assessed due to the severe lack of official documentation – known to be systematically destroyed by the Army – showing evidence of the forced nature of their labour. The minimalization of a crime involving enslavement and prostitution of around 200.000 women was also supported by the silence pervading the victims since the post-war period. In the liberalist campaign, therefore, victimhood was denied on the basis of the very same motivation that guaranteed the invisibility of the comfort women for almost 50 years⁸⁹. The Liberal History Research Group rallied also against representations of war crimes in school textbooks for two other specific reasons: the safeguard of students' sexual innocence and the restoration of national pride. Fujioka and his group of revisionists indeed deemed the representation of the comfort women story a potential source of discomfort and inadequateness for high school children, rather than a necessity for their fair and mindful historical knowledge. Descriptions of Japan's past wrong-doings were deemed to reinforce a "masochistic view" of history in the mind not only of the young, but of the entire population, instilling feelings of shame and guilty in the mind of Japanese citizens⁹⁰.

Tensions over school textbooks did not end in 1996 and neither did historical revisionism.

The historical perspective proposed by revisionists well matched the nationalistic tendencies of the main conservative parties within the Japanese government and their claims regarding Japan's war responsibility and actions during its belligerent period. If the LDP's brief absence had led to a more critical and accurate depiction of history, its return to power re-opened the tension around the school textbooks and embraced fully the revisionist approach towards it⁹¹. In the various LDP governments

⁸⁷ C. Ueno, *The Politics of Memory*, 1999, p. 129.

⁸⁸ H. Saito, *The History Problem*, 2017, p. 98.

⁸⁹ C. Ueno, *The Politics of Memory*, 1999, pp. 130-131.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem* pp. 131-132.

⁹¹ D. Hundt & R. Bleiker, *Reconciling Colonial Memories in Korea and Japan*, 2007, p. 74.

that followed, critical assessments of Japanese wrongdoings started to disappear and deemed “self-torturing” for the nation. In a matter of time the relationship with South Korea started to deteriorate again, with Seoul publicly denouncing the distortions in the Japanese school textbooks and their misleading descriptions of colonialism and of the comfort women issue⁹².

A “Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform” (*tsukurukai*) was even inaugurated in 1996, right after the reform, with the aim of producing a new history textbook which would offer a more positive portrayal of Japan’s past. Despite the approval of the Ministry of Education, the *tsukurukai* textbook did not enjoy a vast success nationally: between 2002 and 2004 only the 0.1-0.4 percent of Japanese schools adopted it. Nevertheless, the strong revisionist campaign experienced in these years irremediably had an impact on the content of the following approved textbooks, some of which completely omitted the comfort women issue⁹³.

Elements of historical revisionism could be still observed – in a limited degree – within the domestic and foreign affairs carried on nowadays by the Abe Administration. Although not openly, Japan has tried to affirm its peculiar understanding of history more than once inside the main UN’s bodies. In 2015, Abe’s government contrasted a Chinese proposal for the inclusion of documentation concerning the Nanjing Massacre in the UNESCO’s “Memory of the World Register”, explicitly mentioning previous Japanese attempts to suppress the topic. Despite the positive response by the UNESCO, the application was hampered by the harsh Japanese response and by government’s threats to cut its contributions to the body’s budget⁹⁴. The recent scandal regarding the Prime Minister’s involvement in the Moritomo Gakuen school might also suggest that nationalistic and revisionist tendencies are far from being overcome in Japan. In 2016 Abe and his wife were found supporting an ultra-nationalistic kindergarten and sharing with the founder the same membership to a right-wing nationalistic group deemed strongly revisionist and sympathizer of Imperial times⁹⁵.

⁹² Ibidem pp. 75-76.

⁹³ S. Arai, History Textbooks in Twentieth Century Japan: A Chronological Overview, *Journal of Educational Media*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2010, p. 117-118.

⁹⁴ H. Dobson, Is Japan Really Back? The “Abe Doctrine” and Global Governance, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 47, No. 2, 2017, pp. 214.

⁹⁵ J. Adelstein., School Scandal May Get Japan’s PM Expelled -- Can Abenomics Survive Without Abe?, *Forbes*, Asia, 29 March 2018, < <https://www.forbes.com/sites/adelsteinjake/2018/03/29/school-scandal-may-get-japans-pm-expelled-can-abenomics-survive-without-abe/#3db291007c26>> , accessed 8 May 2018.

The controversies arising from the textbook reform controversy clearly demonstrate how the history problem in Japan has been concerned with the past as much as with the future⁹⁶. Revisionism and nationalism could be interpreted as two sides of the same coin, represented by Japan's struggle to deal with its post-war treatment while reasserting itself as a powerful and trustworthy country in the international arena.

The resentment provoked by the hard – and not completely fair – sentence of the Tokyo Trial had contributed to boost Japanese nationalism since the end of World War II, recognizing Japan as the sole wrongful agent in the Asia-Pacific War and contributing to target the country as the only actor accountable for the emergence of the conflict. Confronted with such a harsh judgement, conservative politicians defended Japan's intervention in the war as a necessary act of self-defence against the Western powers and considered the Trial a “victor's justice”. Indeed, the way in which the Trial was framed – and could only be framed in an international setting of that time – did not allow for a correct distribution of responsibility, neither could provide a picture of collective agency within the contest of the war⁹⁷. Despite evidence has later shown its inaccuracy, the historical view proposed by the Trial was widely accepted both in the West and East Asia and it was considered a reference point for the commemoration of the Asia-Pacific War, to the great dismay of Japan which continued to be depicted as the sole agent having committed such crimes⁹⁸.

While Japan's war responsibility and guilt cannot be denied, it is possible to understand the reason behind nationalists' obstinacy in rejecting the Tribunal's view and subsequent questions of historical importance. Embracing the Trial's perspective would have meant depicting Japan as an aggressor and an abuser in front of a population who already experienced the atrocities of the war, but not at the hands of its own army. Promoting such a historical view was considered dangerous by LDP members for the fragile pride of the Japanese people and the future of the nation⁹⁹. In fact, the history problem has always been framed in terms of domestic policy in Japan, being patriotism a powerful source of motivation in times of economic recession and discontent¹⁰⁰. By proclaiming a liberation from such

⁹⁶ H. Saito, *The History Problem*, 2017, p. 99.

⁹⁷ H. Saito, *The History Problem*, 2017, p. 136-137.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem* pp. 129-130.

⁹⁹ C. Ueno, *The Politics of Memory*, 1999, p. 132.

¹⁰⁰ H. Saito, *The History Problem*, 2017, p. 99.

a masochistic view of history, historical revisionism has served perfectly the demands of Japanese nationalism.

3.3. BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE COMFORT WOMEN DEBATE IN SOUTH KOREA

In the long-lasting discourse concerning the specific case of the comfort women, Japan has been depicted as the sole actor bearing the total responsibility for the crime committed. Rightly so, one would say: the country had actively cooperated in building an efficient system of sexual slavery, supervising the institution of the comfort stations and the recruitment of innocent women; furthermore, its political forces had contributed since the end of the war to maintain a certain connivance over the crime.

Surprisingly, the controversies characterizing the 1990s highlighted how questions over responsibility and guilt in the violation of comfort women's rights did not involve a single wrongful culprit. The nationalistic devolvement of the comfort women discourse impeded a neutral and rightful consideration of the actual degree of accountability that the two countries share over the much-debated crime. It has obscured how – although on a different level – South Korea had its own fair share of responsibility over the enslavement of its citizens and their later post-war discrimination, despite being reluctant to acknowledge it.

Several scholars have highlighted the fundamental intersectional nature of the comfort women issue, lingering in particular on its gendered and nationalistic framing in South Korea.

Indeed, in shaping the domestic discourse over comfort women, South Korea was not spared from nationalist tendencies either. Although the movement had been subject to many relevant feminist influences, nationalism easily dominated the debate by transforming the suffering of the victims in the colonial grievances of an entire nation¹⁰¹. From the very beginning, the comfort women issue in South Korea found itself absorbed in a larger narrative of tragedy which substantially neglected the real needs and rights of the survivors but alimanted the hostile sentiments of the population towards Japan. Korean comfort women quickly became a symbol of collective victimization and humiliation

¹⁰¹ A. Varga, National Bodies: The 'Comfort Women' Discourse and its Controversies in South Korea, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2009, pp. 292-293.

at the hands of an invader which violated their bodies in the attempt to reinforce its rule over the country¹⁰².

Despite the big social mobilization that the nationalist discourse created, little concern has been in reality directed towards the life and suffering of the single survivors. As the debate over the Asian Women's Fund has already shown, South Korea was more interested in restoring the pride of the nation rather than the dignity of the single victims: the choice of impeding or even discriminating ex-comfort women from benefitting of the atonement money constituted a clear example of a stubborn political standpoint rather than a selfless act in support of their well-being¹⁰³. Negative sentiments towards the social re-integration of the survivors also contrasted the advocacy movement that emerged in the '90s. A request for the erection of a memorial for the comfort women in Pusan was highly contested in 1992 by the Association of Widows of War Dead and Deceased Policemen and later rejected, deemed not worthy to stand next to those who sacrificed their lives for the nation. Likewise, the Korea Council's proposal to insert a commemorating monument in the Independence Hall was met with strong opposition by government's members, who refrained from openly considering comfort women at the same level of the fallen of the war¹⁰⁴. Hence, military sexual slaves were still framed as "fallen women" who served the nation for the remembrance of its colonial memory but could not be socially accepted within the female ideal and role that the Korean nationalist and patriarchal society promoted¹⁰⁵. Women's dignity and freedom were not restored under the domestic public discourse in South Korea rather, it was blamed and then exploited at a national level.

By shifting the attention towards Japan's imperialist behaviour, the country was indeed successful in hiding the gendered structural violence that not only permeated the Korean society but allowed the systematic exploitation of its female population. An example of this biased perspective has been reported by Professor Soh's findings which pointed out the misleading manner in which the nationalistic discourse addressed the comfort women issue, erroneously describing the victims as ex-members of the Volunteer Corps (*chongsindae*). While this might have been true for a great deal of them, it substantially excluded an important detail: not all the women forced into the comfort stations

¹⁰²A. Varga, *National Bodies: The 'Comfort Women' Discourse*, 2009, pp. 293-294.

¹⁰³ C. S. Soh, *Japan's National/Asian Women's Fund for "Comfort Women"*, 2003, p. 228.

¹⁰⁴ C. S. Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 2008, pp. 230-231.

¹⁰⁵ A. Varga, *National Bodies*, 2009, p. 293.

were at first mobilized as volunteer recruits, some were also sold in the human traffic market by their own families. Moreover, a large part of the Korean women deceived into military sexual slavery were escaping domestic violence and oppression, leaving their home in the attempt to achieve independence and self-actualization¹⁰⁶.

The nationalization of the discourse allowed Seoul to easily divert the focus from the actual problematics involving the comfort women issue in the country, revindicating the sufferings and struggles of the victims – now embodying the entire population – against one single enemy: Japan. In reality, it has been demonstrated that South Korea bear its own part of responsibility for the active exploitation and enslavement of its women¹⁰⁷. The Republic of Korea collected a significant number of collaborators during the years of Japanese colonialism, who also contributed to the recruitment and coercion of young women at the time of the war¹⁰⁸. In order to continue to exercise control over the territory, local authorities in Korea cooperated with Japan during the colonial period and offered their help in the assemblage of thousands of women for the Imperial Army¹⁰⁹.

The country has repetitively refrained from openly address the question, assuming no responsibility for the enslavement of comfort women and redirecting the fault towards the prevalent aggressor, Japan. Until the early years of the 21st century, the collaborators' controversy could not be even considered part of the public discourse, with the National Assembly fearing for the potential politicization of the issue. Moreover, no purges for the collaborators occurred in South Korea as it happened instead in China and Taiwan¹¹⁰.

3.4 FROM THE 2015 AGREEMENT TO NOWHERE

In the recent years, questions concerning the comfort women issue did not cease to take part in the diplomatic exchanges between South Korea and Japan, increasingly highlighting the complexity of its potential resolution.

¹⁰⁶ C. S. Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 2008, pp. 3-4.

¹⁰⁷ J. Seo, *Politics of Memory in Korea and China*, 2008, pp. 377.

¹⁰⁸ Y. Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women*, 2002, p. 38.

¹⁰⁹ Y. Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, 2000, p. 107-114.

¹¹⁰ J. Seo, *Politics of Memory in Korea and China*, 2008, pp. 377-378.

In 2011, a commemorating monument – commonly referred to as the “Peace Girl Statue” – was abusively erected right in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul as the Korean Council was celebrating its 1.000th “Wednesday demonstrations”¹¹¹. Demands by the Korean activists for a state apology and compensation immediately followed up, provoking obvious negative reactions on the Japanese government’s behalf. In fact, the establishment of the statue has been defined by Japan as an act of dishonour towards the country and a clear “impairment of the dignity” prohibited by Art. 22 of the Vienna Convention¹¹². Albeit the numerous requests for the removal by the Japanese government, until now nothing has been done to relocate the monument elsewhere.

Surprisingly, four years later the countries’ stance over the comfort women issue took a really unexpected turn: in 2015 South Korea and Japan jointly agreed to sign an agreement ratifying a final verdict over this historical divergence. While the public could have considered it quite an unpredictable move, given the previous recalcitrant behaviour of South Korea’s President Park to hold a summit with Japan’s Shinzo Abe, in reality the decision had been awaited for a long time at an international level. The deterioration of diplomatic relations between two of the most influential – democratic – countries in East Asia represented a serious danger for the security and economy of the region: a pacification between the two governments would have signified a stronger commitment of the countries to face the nuclear crisis in North Korea and the steady rise of China¹¹³.

The agreement, widely supported by the USA, was indeed symbolically reached during the 70th anniversary of WWII and 50 years after the Normalization Treaty between Japan and South Korea¹¹⁴. Signed on 28 December 2015, it partially resembled the one introducing the much-debated Asian Women’s Fund but with some significant differences: for the first time, an intention of reconciliation was officially manifested by both parts, with Japan explicitly admitting its responsibility and South

¹¹¹ The “Wednesday Demonstrations” represent the weekly protest of Korean activists and ex-comfort women in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. It has been deemed the world’s longest running protest, taking place more than 1,300 times in 25 years. See more at: A. Bemma, South Korea: World’s longest protest over comfort women, *Al Jazeera*, Asia Pacific, 8 September 2017, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/south-korea-world-longest-protest-comfort-women-170908024721239.html>> , accessed 14 June 2018.

¹¹² N. Kumagai, The Background to the Japan-Republic of Korea Agreement: Compromises Concerning the Understanding of the Comfort Women Issue, *Asia- Pacific Review*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2016, p. 78.

¹¹³ *Ibidem* p. 68.

¹¹⁴ S. H. Choe, Japan and South Korea Settle Dispute Over Wartime ‘Comfort Women’, *The New York Times*, Asia Pacific, 28 December 2015, para. 8, < <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/29/world/asia/comfort-women-south-korea-japan.html>>, accessed 16 May 2018.

Korea recognizing the efforts made by its counterpart in apologizing to the nation. Mr. Abe and Ms. Park jointly committed to future reconciliatory policies and set the agreement – if successful – as final and irreversible¹¹⁵.

Unfortunately, complications followed, breaking the fragile equilibrium established by the accord. Roughly two years after its ratification, the 2015 deal on the comfort women issue was brought again into question. Indeed, after the impeachment of South Korean President Park Geun-hye, the government position over the deal changed drastically. On December 2017 the new country leader Moon Jae-in declared the agreement as consistently flawed and not able to resolve the comfort women issue, after a panel investigating the accord declared it not in conformity with the needs of the victims¹¹⁶. Few weeks later, South Korea suggested that the government might not have any intention to renegotiate the agreement and that it expected a more heartfelt apology by its neighbour.

Such a statement created serious political tensions between the two countries, right before the start of the Winter Olympic Games that South Korea was going to host. The South Korean rhetoric of insufficient apologies and reparations has grown heavy in Japan in the last 20 years and the recent quarrels over the comfort women issue are clearly demonstrating so. The Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono considered “totally unacceptable that South Korea demands Japan carry out more measures, even though the 2015 Japan-South Korea agreement confirmed a final and irreversible resolution”¹¹⁷.

While it is indeed true that the 2015 landmark agreement presented some visible flaws, both Japan and South Korea jointly agreed in adopting it. Some scholars had in fact highlighted how the deal substantially represented a convenient convergence of interests rather than a complete and coherent resolution of the long-lasting political conflict: indeed, at the time of signing, neither Japan nor the Republic of Korea provided a clear definition of what kind of responsibilities the Japanese government was going to assume, whether of a moral or a legal nature. In any case, Japan donated 1 billion yen of funding to a local foundation supporting the victims as stipulated by the deal and it

¹¹⁵ N. Kumagai, *The Background to the Japan-Republic of Korea Agreement*, 2016, p. 73.

¹¹⁶ J. Lee & H. Shin, South Korea says 'comfort women' deal flawed, but Japan warns against change, *Reuters*, World News, 28 December 2017, para. 1-4, < <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-japan-comfortwomen/south-korea-says-comfort-women-deal-flawed-but-japan-insists-on-no-change-idUSKBN1EM056>>, accessed 16 May 2018.

¹¹⁷ D. Kikuchi, & T. Osaki, South Korea will not seek renegotiation of 'comfort women' deal with Japan, *The Japan Times*, Politics, 9 January 2018, < <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/01/09/national/politics-diplomacy/south-korea-will-not-seek-renegotiation-comfort-women-deal-japan/#.WvxPMtNuaCQ>>, accessed 16 May 2018.

offered again its official apologies, which at that time South Korea gladly accepted¹¹⁸. The sudden retreat over the deal was obviously met with disbelief by Japan, especially after having framed the agreement as an irreversible, final resolution. For these reasons, Moon's further requests over the comfort women accord have been rejected by the Japanese government since early January, clearly stating that no other option could be reached over the deal. Even after Mr. Abe visit to the Olympic Games in February, no improvement on the discussion was made: the South Korean leader expressed his willingness to resume a form of bilateral summit – to improve the dialogue between the two countries – but continued to deny any possibility to renegotiate the agreement¹¹⁹. Currently, the debate remains still open but at this point setting the hopes too high for the comfort women issue might be considered fairly unrealistic. Despite having finally got closer to a final, decisive resolution, the diplomatic dialogue between Japan and South Korea has again demonstrated how the fragile question of the past can be easily manipulated by nothing but the political and nationalist interests of one, if not both, of the parties. Undoubtedly, leaving the comfort women issue in a perpetual condition of stalemate entails the unavoidable risk of exacerbating the already worn out patience of public opinion, weakening the credibility of the leaders' intentions, whether genuine or insincere.

¹¹⁸N. Kumagai, *The Background to the Japan-Republic of Korea Agreement*, 2016, p. 74.

¹¹⁹Anonymous, EDITORIAL: Abe-Moon meet chance for fresh start to stabilize bilateral ties, *The Asahi Shinbun*, 10 February 2018, <<http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201802100030.html>>, accessed 16 May 2018.

CONCLUSION

What necessarily emerged from the comfort women issue is the hardship experienced by Japan and South Korea in coming to terms with their own past.

Regardless of which role one had played in it, whether the ruthless aggressor or the fundamental victim, the struggle to accept and leave behind the shameful experiences of Asia-Pacific war was common to the post-war behaviour of the Korean and Japanese governments. The key element of this long-lasting misunderstanding is indeed the reluctance of the two countries to overcome the dark memories of the colonial period in favour of a single historical synthesis of their past, which could strengthen their diplomatic bond in the already tense area of East Asia.

The comfort women issue served as a symbol of an irreducible clash of historical perspectives, given the high resemblance of this truly pitiful phenomenon with the much bigger act of invasion carried out by Japan in the Korean peninsula more than one century ago. The discovery of an organized military sexual slavery imposed by an aggressive force, the Japanese Imperial Army, onto defenceless Korean young women could have hardly prevented a fervent bilateral debate over 35 years long history of colonization and cultural annihilation experienced by the conquered population.

In this regard, the *jugun ianfu* dilemma embodies an extremely delicate theme when confronted with today anti-Japanese and anti-Korean feelings nurtured in the respective countries, because the debate behind this dreadful event has revealed to be profoundly biased for a long time. Although the responsibility for the recruitment and establishment of such a system of comfort stations surely resided in the State of Japan, as the remaining records and testimonies have demonstrated in the last two decades, the overall guilt towards the victimization and instrumentalization of these young foreign women hardly skewed towards one sole actor.

As a matter of fact, while the active involvement of the Japanese government and army in setting these military brothels could not be denied either minimized, it is impossible not to acknowledge the extensity with which both countries have contributed to the denial of this issue for almost 47 years. Despite the apparent clear-cut division between the guilty and innocent party in the public framing of the crime, the discourse encompassing the comfort women issue has been jointly shaped by the active agency of the two friends-or-foes, before and after the scandalous revelations taken place at the end of three 20th century. Especially after the publication of the first findings and Kim Hak-sun testimony, Seoul and Tokyo actively engaged in manipulating the inevitable altercation over moral and legal compensations, providing room for the irrepressible resentments that each one nurtured for its own past.

Since 1990, the comfort women issue became the official battlefield welcoming disputes over controversial interpretations of history between the Republic of Korea and Japan. The auspicated reconciliation of colonial memories was indeed hampered by the respective nationalist waves that each State has experienced since the end of WWII and after the hostiles period of the Cold War. The problem of nationalism emerged clear in our dissertation, diverting the comfort women discourse from a plea for the restoration of dignity and wellbeing of the survivors to a claim for justice of an entire population. From the historical revisionism exercised in Japan to the actual mistreatment and stigmatization of the survivors in South Korea, the comfort women movement seemed to lose its original vocation, transforming into a never-ending quarrel between two countries struggling to accept the harsh legacy of a shameful history.

In both countries indeed questions of the past faced several back-offs due to the long-lasting connivance established on this theme until the 1990s and the inability of the respective leaders to address the problem in a coherent, transparent and neutral way.

In the commemoration and condemnation of the Asian-Pacific War and the related past-wrongdoings, Japan's difficulty to harmonize more cosmopolitan approaches with the LDP's fervent nationalism resulted in an unconvincing political incoherence which severely affected the country's credibility outside the national scope. On the other hand, South Korea subtle nationalist verve in the promotion and framing of the comfort women issue and belated crimes resulted in an extreme unwillingness to cooperate in adopting a final resolution.

In this mutual animosity, the controversies arising from the apology politics and the institution of the Fund clearly represented an unavoidable step towards the profound stagnation affecting nowadays the comfort women issue and the auspicated reconciliation of historical memories.

While assessing whether the comfort women issue could already represent the endgame of this fierce chess-strategy between South Korea and Japan or a new opening in their future tactics for diplomatic re-pacification, we did not find a clear answer to our research question.

During the composition of this dissertation, the deal established by the ex-President Park and the current Japanese Prime Minister Abe manifested warning signs of crumbling apart. The very same accord that surprised the public opinion in 2015 came under the spotlight after the new South Korean President took office and shared some doubts over the content of the agreement. The arguments in support of the current skeptical position of Moon Jae-in retraced the same dialectic used by Seoul that, in the last twenty years, signed the public emergence of the comfort women issue in East Asia. The recent confrontations between the two countries also have reasserted that equilibrium built on

hatred and mistrust which finally seemed to be overcome. Although it would be pretentious and hurried to declare such a controversial theme definitively a lost cause for the future bilateral diplomacy between South Korea and Japan, it surely leaves us with a big question mark over the next power alliances and leadership demarcating the regional politics of East Asia.

Especially in a moment that is observing a surprising rapprochement of the two Koreas, a situation of stalemate between Seoul and Tokyo over the comfort women issue could reserve us new unexpected developments.

Despite the disappointing turn of the events, we still want to stress the importance that a shared interpretation of history would have in the resolution of the comfort women issue and in the overall diplomatic dialogue between the two nations.

As we could observe, through time, each country adopted its own personal understanding of the past, which did not necessarily match one another. Such unevenness in the historical perspectives of Japan and the Republic of Korea led to mutual feelings of antagonism when faced with uncomfortable questions of the war, due to the strong nationalist influences that developed and shaped the political and collective identity of each State. While it is not in our powers to predict whether the two current governments will demonstrate to be capable to resolve the deadlocks still affecting the comfort women issue, we can argue that no future resolution could be foreseen in absence of a re-formulation of their shared past. Without a reconciliation of memories, without a united effort to build a common ground for the sharing and comprehension of history, no agreement would be ever effective.

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Comfort Women: Giappone, Corea del Sud e gli ostacoli di una problematica riconciliazione storica

In questa tesi si affronta il delicato tema delle “comfort women” che ha creato una frattura – ancora oggi non ricomposta - nei rapporti diplomatici tra il Giappone e la Corea del Sud, a partire dalla fine della Seconda guerra mondiale.

Questo lavoro di ricerca valuta in maniera critica il dibattito storico che si è tenuto sulle donne di conforto, evidenziando in particolar modo i motivi che impediscono ancora oggi una distensione nei rapporti diplomatici tra i due Stati.

Attraverso l’analisi storica degli eventi che portarono alla nascita delle stazioni di conforto e alla tardiva diffusione della notizia a livello internazionale, si vuole fornire al lettore una visione più articolata di questo terribile fenomeno, rispetto all’interpretazione convenzionalmente accettata della “comfort women issue” come sintesi dei comportamenti di uno Stato, quello giapponese, diviso tra il rifiuto di riconoscere appieno le proprie colpe e la volontà di redenzione rispetto ai crimini commessi. In questa riflessione critica sono anche rappresentate le implicazioni nazionali ed internazionali che hanno caratterizzato l’argomento in questione.

La scarsità di documentazione accademica, dovuta alla tardiva conoscenza del fenomeno a livello internazionale, ha rappresentato la difficoltà maggiore nello svolgimento del presente studio.

Va considerato infatti che i retroscena del colonialismo e dei crimini di guerra del Giappone Imperiale sono emersi solamente dopo i primi anni Novanta ed hanno inizialmente attirato l’interesse accademico di studiosi nipponici e sud-coreani. Non avendo la scrivente una sufficiente conoscenza né della lingua giapponese, né di quella coreana, si è dovuta affidare soprattutto a fonti documentali tradotte o redatte in lingua inglese. Non meno rilevante è il fatto che una considerevole quantità di documenti ufficiali, report e registri siano stati distrutti dall’esercito stesso giapponese al termine della guerra, in un disperato tentativo di occultare le prove dell’esistenza delle stazioni di conforto. Per risalire alle fonti storiche primarie si è quindi fatto riferimento ai dettagliati lavori di alcuni dei più autorevoli professori e ricercatori giapponesi che hanno analizzato la vicenda storica.

La questione delle *comfort women* – così comunemente riferite nel linguaggio accademico – o “donne di conforto” rappresenta una grave violazione dei diritti umani perpetrata dall’esercito imperiale giapponese nei confronti di un numero elevatissimo di donne dell’area del Pacifico stimata tra le 50.000 e le 200.000, in un periodo compreso tra il 1932 e il 1945 circa. Specificatamente, il crimine comprende il sistemico rastrellamento e la resa in schiavitù di giovani straniere provenienti dai territori colonizzati ed occupati dall’Impero giapponese, le quali vennero costrette ad una prostituzione forzata in bordelli ad accesso esclusivo militare (le cosiddette “stazioni di conforto”/”comfort stations”), volte a soddisfare i piaceri dell’esercito coinvolto nei conflitti localizzati nel Pacifico durante la Seconda guerra mondiale.

L’istituzione di queste strutture illecite fu promossa dal Giappone per contrastare tre fenomeni che si manifestavano regolarmente nelle spedizioni belliche: l’alta percentuale di stupri e violenze sessuali perpetrate dalle truppe nei confronti della popolazione invasa, l’aumento di malattie veneree tra i soldati e la rischiosa diffusione di segreti militari nei lupanari pubblici. La diffusione delle *comfort stations* aumentò difatti a seguito dell’invasione su vasta scala della Cina e dei primi massacri compiuti per mano dell’esercito giapponese. L’incidenza degli stupri in questi frangenti cominciò a gravare considerevolmente sul mantenimento dell’ordine nei territori conquistati e del ruolo che il Giappone possedeva a livello internazionale. La creazione di luoghi “ricreativi” ad accesso esclusivo del personale militare fu quindi concepito come un astuto rimedio al comportamento insubordinato dei sottoposti così come al graduale insorgere di malattie sessualmente trasmissibili contratte nei bordelli popolari. Le stazioni di conforto furono progettate in modo tale da esercitare un totale controllo sia sulle prigioniere che sugli stessi frequentatori, con rigorosi controlli medici effettuati a cadenza regolare e nessuna possibilità di stabilire contatti con l’esterno da parte delle donne di conforto, visto lo stato di prigionia a cui erano soggette.

Nonostante l’estensione territoriale del fenomeno delle stazioni di conforto e il sorprendente numero di vittime coinvolte in questa inaudita schiavitù sessuale militare, l’esistenza delle *comfort women* fu pubblicamente ignorata per un lunghissimo lasso di tempo che arrivò quasi a sfiorare la metà di un intero secolo. Il riscatto dalla sofferenza e la riconquista della dignità delle donne sopravvissute furono compromessi sia dal forte negazionismo caratterizzante il Giappone del post-guerra, reo della violenza commessa, sia dalla stessa cultura patriarcale radicata nella Corea del Sud, la quale risultò la nazione del Pacifico più colpita da questo crimine. Non menzionata sin dal Processo di Tokyo e rigorosamente negata dai successivi governi giapponesi, la notizia del fenomeno delle *comfort women* si diffuse ufficialmente solamente al termine del millennio, 47 anni dopo lo smantellamento delle ultime stazioni di conforto.

Riconosciuto successivamente come uno dei più efferati ed estesi crimini commessi dal Sol Levante nel territorio asiatico, questo fenomeno ha con il tempo creato una ulteriore barriera nei fragili rapporti bilaterali tra il Giappone e la Corea del Sud, per le circostanze controverse che ne impedirono la naturale ed immediata accettazione storica in entrambi i Paesi.

Rimasto fondamentalmente sconosciuto in Occidente, questo caso rappresenta oggi uno dei avvenimenti più dolorosi e tormentati della storia dell'Est asiatico, che ha fomentato crescenti sentimenti di odio ed incomprensioni tra le rispettive forze politiche a loro rappresentanza.

Ancora oggi, la colpa di questo orrendo crimine fatica ad essere riconosciuta dal Giappone, così come la Corea non riesce a dimenticarne l'onta subita.

Non a caso l'irrisolta questione riguardante la schiavitù sessuale imposta alle donne di conforto continua ad essere elemento di discordia nelle relazioni diplomatiche tra lo Stato giapponese e il suo vicino sud-coreano, esercitando, di conseguenza, una notevole tensione politica nella regione asiatica, dove entrambi svolgono un ruolo chiave per la sicurezza ed equilibrio economico dell'area. Dopo oltre un ventennio di formali alterchi tra i due governi e di insoddisfacenti tentativi di restaurazione della memoria e dignità delle vittime, un'efficace collaborazione tra i due Stati volta ad una finale e decisiva sintesi storica del tema delle *comfort women* stenta ancora ad essere raggiunta.

La discussione ancora oggi in atto sull'argomento offre quindi uno spunto di riflessione per un'analisi più ampia riguardante la dicotomia tra le visioni storiche proposte dai due Paesi a proposito del periodo coloniale e della successiva guerra del Pacifico durante la quale il Sol Levante invase la penisola coreana.

Molto più di qualsiasi altro brutale crimine perpetrato dall'esercito imperiale nella prima metà del ventesimo secolo, la schiavitù sessuale di migliaia di donne economicamente svantaggiate è diventata simbolo dell'umiliazione e della violenza subite dal popolo coreano sin dagli albori del colonialismo, nonostante il Giappone rifiuti di accettare in maniera inequivocabile la responsabilità dell'accaduto. I reati passati – ed in particolar modo i crimini di guerra – sono sempre stati riconosciuti con notevoli difficoltà dal governo giapponese, il quale ha col tempo proiettato l'iniziale ammissione di responsabilità in una spirale di mancati risarcimenti legali, opache scuse ufficiali ed ambigue istanze nazionaliste. Al contempo, la posizione inflessibile adottata dalle forze politiche sud-coreane e le ONG nei confronti di una qualsiasi proposta di accordo sulla questione, accompagnata da una costante indisponibilità nell'accettare le molteplici ammende giapponesi, ha contribuito a determinare una lunga fase di stallo nella risoluzione della controversia.

Quel che inevitabilmente emerge dalla questione delle *comfort women* è la mancanza di disponibilità di entrambi i Paesi a scendere a compromessi con il proprio passato. Indipendentemente dal ruolo

che ciascun Stato assunse nel conflitto – il Giappone come carnefice e la Corea del Sud come vittima - la difficoltà di accettare e superare le esecrabili esperienze del periodo coloniale si è rivelato essere un elemento comune nell’atteggiamento politico delle due potenze asiatiche sin dal post-guerra. I fantasmi delle violenze commesse e subite durante l’occupazione della penisola coreana influenzarono profondamente le politiche interne ed estere di Seul e Tokyo tra la fine del ventesimo secolo e gli albori del nuovo millennio, come testimoniano la nascita di correnti nazionaliste e gli scontri diplomatici fra i rispettivi leader.

La questione delle *comfort women* può essere considerata quindi il simbolo di questo scontro irriducibile di prospettive storiche, data la facile e netta distinzione di ruoli tra chi è persecutore e chi soccombe alla violenza. Difficilmente la scoperta di un massiccio sequestro di inermi e giovani coreane, costrette alla prostituzione forzata all’interno delle aree militari, avrebbe potuto scongiurare una accesa controversia diplomatica, al termine di tre lunghi anni di invasione ed annichilimento culturale sperimentati dalla Corea del Sud.

Non a caso, i sentimenti di odio corrisposti tra le due potenze asiatiche rendono ancora più difficile risolvere la questione delle *jugun ianfu* - locuzione giapponese con il quale vengono indicate le *comfort women* - rendendo di fatto fazioso ed poco equilibrato il giudizio espresso da entrambi i Paesi. La responsabilità dell’istituzione delle stazioni di conforto, nonché del reclutamento delle vittime, senza dubbio è dello Stato giapponese, come largamente dimostrato dai pochi documenti ufficiali ancora disponibili e dalle testimonianze delle sopravvissute; tuttavia, sarebbe inesatto proiettare la completa colpevolezza del crimine verso un solo ed unico attore, specialmente per ciò che riguarda la successiva vittimizzazione e strumentalizzazione delle *comfort women*. Se da un lato risulta evidente ed ingiustificabile il comportamento criminale del governo e dell’esercito imperiale giapponese, d’altro lato non è possibile nascondere la colpa che entrambe le nazioni in conflitto ebbero nel perpetuare le sofferenze delle vittime al termine della guerra, contribuendo al contempo ad un offuscamento delle prove per oltre 47 anni.

Benché a livello mediatico si tenda frequentemente a semplificare il giudizio sul crimine, sottolineando le responsabilità del Sol Levante nei confronti delle vittime, il dramma delle donne di conforto è il frutto degli errori di entrambi gli Stati compiuti antecedentemente e successivamente alla pubblica denuncia dell’accaduto.

La sofferenza subita dalle donne di conforto parla di oppressione e di stigmatizzazione, durante e in seguito alla loro prostituzione forzata. Se per mano del Giappone le *comfort women* furono costrette a patire le più bestiali violenze sessuali e ad essere espropriate della propria dignità, in patria furono trattate come “merce danneggiata”, soggette a quel disonore riservato a coloro che macchiavano la

propria immagine di castità prima del matrimonio. In Corea del Sud, le donne sopravvissute dovettero fare i conti non solo con i pesanti traumi fisici e psicologici recidivi di un'esperienza brutale e ai limiti dell'umano, ma con il forte stigma sociale che la mentalità confuciana attribuiva all'impurità femminile. Ostracizzate, relegate ai margini della società coreana e costrette all'assoluto silenzio, molte *ex-comfort women* furono destinate a passare il resto della propria vita nella vergogna e nella povertà.

A segnare il destino delle vittime contribuì quindi sia l'attiva partecipazione del Giappone moderno nell'occultarne la memoria, sia l'intelaiatura di stampo paternalista della cultura della Corea del Sud, e non ultimi gli interessi economici che entrambi i Paesi anteposero alla risoluzione del dilemma storico.

Inoltre, dopo la pubblicazione delle prime testimonianze dell'orrore subito dalle donne coreane, sia Tokyo che Seul si prodigarono nel manipolare le ragioni del dibattito, amplificando i sentimenti di rancore che ciascuno dei due Paesi aveva nutrito verso l'altro nel passato.

L'auspicata riconciliazione, dopo le tristi vicende coloniali e il crimine commesso verso le donne coreane, è stata ostacolata dalle correnti nazionaliste presenti in entrambi i governi post-bellici, e che tuttora alimentano l'odio e la diffidenza tra i due Stati. Come ampiamente sostenuto in questo studio, il problema del nazionalismo - punto chiave nell'antagonismo storico fra il Giappone e la Corea del Sud - ha gradualmente dirottato il dibattito sulle *comfort women* dal tema del risarcimento per i soprusi subiti dalle donne coreane e del riconoscimento tardivo della dignità e dell'onore delle sopravvissute ad una generica richiesta di giustizia per le sofferenze sperimentate da un'intera popolazione.

A causa del revisionismo storico esercitato dal Sol Levante e dei sentimenti nutriti di disapprovazione e vergogna per le ex-donne di conforto in Corea del Sud, il dibattito sembra aver perso parte della sua obiettiva chiarezza, confondendo il tema delle *comfort women*, con i risentimenti coloniali di due popoli che, privi di un dialogo storico, faticano ad accettare l'eredità di un passato scomodo.

L'incapacità dei leader politici e dei movimenti nati a sostegno delle vittime ad affrontare la questione con un atteggiamento obiettivo, neutrale, trasparente e coerente ha minato le numerose possibilità di riconciliazione offerte negli ultimi venti anni.

L'evidente dicotomia tra l'approccio più cosmopolita di alcuni dei premier giapponesi che si sono succeduti nel tempo e l'acceso nazionalismo dell'inflessibile Partito Liberal Democratico, ha inoltre nel tempo incrinato la credibilità del Giappone, che ha dimostrato un'incoerenza politica nella commemorazione e condanna dei reati commessi durante la Guerra del Pacifico, nonostante le numerose ma tentennanti iniziative di riparazione intraprese.

Al contempo, la vena nazionalista della Corea del Sud preleva in occasione delle campagne in supporto delle *comfort women* ha contribuito ad elevare una barriera insuperabile di fronte al tentativo di rappacificamento diplomatico dei due Stati.

In questa continua tensione e animosità di rapporti le due nazioni, le controversie scaturite dalla “politica delle scuse” giapponese e l’istituzione di un Fondo stanziato per risarcimento delle vittime sono diventate l’alibi per giustificare l’origine della stagnazione che da decenni caratterizza il tema delle *comfort women* e, più in generale, della riconciliazione delle memorie storiche nell’Est Asiatico.

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Nell’esaminare le inconciliabili posizioni di entrambi rispetto alla questione delle *comfort women*, abbiamo tentato di portare alla luce le cause di tale contrasto diplomatico, fornendo una opinione sulle reali possibilità di arrivare ad una soluzione finale che possa soddisfare entrambe le nazioni.

L’intento di questa ricerca è stato infatti quello di cercare di capire se la strategia dei due Paesi sulla questione delle *comfort women* porti ad una posizione di stallo nel finale di partita di questo lunghissima partita di scacchi tra Tokyo e Seul o possa ancora riservare la sorpresa di una mossa decisiva che possa ristabilire un’armonia e riappacificazione tra i due Stati.

Certamente l’assenza di una comune interpretazione della storia impedisce al momento di ricomporre il dissidio sulla questione delle *comfort women* tra la Repubblica di Corea e il Giappone. Ciascuna delle due nazioni ha infatti elaborato – in modo totalmente discorde rispetto all’altra - una ricostruzione faziosa del passato storico, su cui ha costruito successivamente la propria identità collettiva. Per questo motivo, in assenza di uno sforzo congiunto nel creare un terreno fertile per un dialogo diplomatico, nessun accordo bilaterale potrà mai portare ad un successo di lungo termine.

La conclusione a cui è dunque giunto questo studio è che non si vede all’orizzonte la meta finale di questo irrisolto dibattito. Non a caso, proprio in concomitanza con la stesura di questa tesi, il celebrato accordo del 2015 sulle *comfort women*, tra l’ex-leader coreana Park Geun-hye ed il primo ministro giapponese Shinzo Abe, ha iniziato a manifestare i primi segni di un visibile cedimento, a seguito della forte opposizione del nuovo Presidente Moon Jae-in che ha rinnegato le condizioni di rappacificamento precedentemente concordate.

Quella stessa intesa del 2015 che sorprese l’opinione pubblica e compiacque la stampa estera per la sua improvvisa risolutezza, oggi sembra soggiacere ai piedi di un rinato dissidio tra i due Paesi, alimentato dalle stesse antitetiche posizioni degli ultimi 47 anni sulla questione delle donne di conforto.

L'apparente fallimento dell'intesa del 2015 e le ultime divergenze tra Moon ed Abe, conseguenze contemporanee di questa grave eredità storico-politica, rendono scettici dinanzi alla possibilità di prevedere in un futuro non lontano una soluzione definitiva a questo dibattito ormai inaridito.

Forse potrà sembrare prematuro considerare gli ultimi sviluppi politici come una sentenza di morte per la soluzione della questione delle *comfort women*, ciononostante le conclusioni di questa analisi sollevano un grande punto interrogativo nelle future relazioni tra i due Stati.

In questo momento storico, nel quale si assiste al riavvicinamento delle due Coree, lo stallo sul tema delle donne di conforto potrebbe infatti riservare nuovi, inaspettati e nefaste evoluzioni nelle relazioni internazionali tra il Giappone e la Corea del Sud.