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The place of "comfort women"
in the Japanese historical revisionism
Rise of neo-nationalism in the post-cold war era

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Abstract: The Japanese sociologist Chizuko Ueno (Tokyo University) analyses the Japanese historiography on the subject of forced prostitution during the Second World War. She tries to demonstrate how the present revisionist discourse tend to make the abuses against women – said to be "comfort women" – look common-place and more or less normal. The article underlines how difficult it is to bring about à mentality shift on this subject, in a country where women's submission is firmly rooted in the traditions.

Résumé: La sociologue japonaise Chizuko Ueno (Université de Tokyo) analyse l'historiographie japonaise concernant les prostituées forcées dans la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Elle cherche à démontrer la banalisation de la violence commise envers les femmes dans les discours révisionnistes actuels. L'article souligne combien il est difficile de transformer les mentalités dans un pays fortement marqué par la tradition de la soumission de la femme.

The place of “comfort women” in the Japanese historical revisionism

Chizuko Ueno

The beginning of the post-cold war era opened up a room for a rise of neo-nationalism in Japan. Claiming themselves as “liberal” historians, they constituted a forum in 1996 against the two old fashioned views of post-war history as what they called Masochistic or self-blaming. One was the view of Tokyo War Crime Tribunal imposed by the US and its allies, which looked at Japan as a war criminal ; the other one was that of the left wing imposed by international communism with a support of Soviet Union, which looked at Japan as an imperialist offender, responsible for invasion of China, and other Asian countries.

It aimed to put an end to a post-war binary opposition between the left and the right, a domestic miniature of the cold war opposition between the west and the east. It is an irony that they called themselves as “liberal,” since they claimed they were free from the both political extremes. In reality, they wished to restore the national pride, tired of being criticized by neighbouring countries.

Contrary to their understanding, Japanese post-war history has been torn and oscillated between self-blame and self-justification. Their view was merely a reproduction of a nationalist history in a new guise which justified Japan’s war as forced by the Western powers for the good purpose of liberating Asia.

It may be useful to point out here about the social historical background where this neo-nationalist trend arose. After the collapse of the so-called Bubble economy in 1991, Japanese economy has experienced a long lasting recession, with a threat by catching up countries like Asia Nies. In the midst of economic anxiety and social insecurity, neo-nationalism attracted many people, especially found support among the young generation. In a way, an old song found new voice.

Forming a grass-roots activism, the forum made an active campaign for new “more liberal” history textbook so as to transmit the national pride to the next generation.

The rise of neo-nationalism was coincided with the historical event of the first testimony by a living witness, Kim Haksoon, a survivor of the former “military comfort women” by the imperial army during the WWII. Kim came forward to sue the Japanese government for formal apology and individual compensation in 1991. In 1993, the Japanese government made a public statement

which admitted the official involvement of the Japanese imperial army to organize the military prostitution, and decided to include a few lines on the "comfort women" in the state-censored history textbook in the following year. The neo-nationalist forum attacked this decision, and the "comfort women" issue has become a focus of a symbolic war in the battle field of historical discourses. This has become a Japanese counterpart of *Historikerstreit*, namely, German historians' debate, which involved many conservative as well as conscience historians, sociologists, feminists, right-wing people and activists, and I am among them.

It should be noted that the paradigm shift in viewing rape from 'the shame of the victim' to the sexual violence against women was preceded to the appearance of the first testimony. With the rise of Int'l feminism in the 80s, Korean feminist activism had started problematizing sexual violence by the military dictatorship of the time, and also accused sex tourism mainly by Japanese male travellers. In retrospect, Korean Women's Council Against Drafting Volunteer Women Corp made an public appeal to survivors to testify, and Kim Haksoon came forward to meet this request, after a long lasting silence for more than half a century. It is important to know that the paradigm shift took place prior to the actual presence of a witness so that her voice could be heard.

Interestingly enough, there was nothing new in her testimony. The fact was widely known and soldiers openly wrote their contact with comfort women in their journals and memoirs without slight sense of shame. But so far no one has claimed it as a sexual crime against women. First because victimized women kept silence as they were stigmatized in their own communities. They have not told their stories even to their closest kins, and it is their family who strongly oppose them to speak out in public.

Secondly the brutal male sexuality was tolerated in the name of nature. The myth that male sexuality is uncontrollable provides justification for military rapes and prostitution. Thirdly the Tokyo War Crime Tribunal never problematized this issue (except local tribunal courts in Indonesia for sexual slavery of Dutch women), and allied forces had also enjoyed so-called Recreation Army made of Japanese women under occupation.

The testimony had brought about a great shock, and this shock was double fold. First with the forced nature of sexual services with its brutality, and second with a forced silence for more than half a century. Confucianist patriarchy in both countries, Korea and Japan, are responsible for muting them, and I myself found responsible to be a part of this oppressive society. Hence this double crime against women belongs to the present but not to the past. It can constitute the triple crime of negating their testimony, as the neo-nationalists' intervention tried to construct it as prostitution for business. Here the women's agency has become a focus of a symbolic battle, whether prostitution was by force or by choice.

Double standard in the Japanese empire: racism in military prostitution

"Comfort women" is an euphemism deployed by the Japanese imperial army to obscure the forced nature of military prostitution. Whose comfort is it ? It can be by no means comfort on the women's side, and because of this there are survivors who reject to be called "comfort women."

The comfort women system was widely established after the Nanjing Massacre in 1937 for the following reasons ; first to prevent soldiers from frequent rapes : rape was criminalized among soldiers by the military code, and rape of local women made occupation difficult, because it raised anger among the occupied people : secondly for the purpose of hygiene, as the imperial army suffered from the venereal diseases among soldiers : thirdly to keep soldiers away from local women, in order to keep military operation secret.

For those purposes, they found Korean women most suitable and mobilised them by force, by cheat, and by money. There were two different kinds of "comfort women," by race, Japanese and Korean, and they were assigned respectively with the former to the officers, and the latter to the lower soldiers, and they were treated differently. Racial double standard was clear in this organization of ranked sexual service. While Japanese army recruited only professional prostitutes among Japanese, it mobilized Korean women with no professional experience. The total number of mobilised women was unclear, ranging from some ten to hundred thousands, first because most of the military document was destroyed by intention at the end of the war, secondly because there was even not a list of names of those women, as they were shipped overseas as military goods but not as passengers ; and lastly because most of the women were died or lost abandoned in the battle field and even survivors have kept silence.

Feminine subjection: construction of imperial subjects

Looking back at the gender regime in the Japanese empire during the war, it is important to know that the different rules were applied respectively to the mainland and to the colonies. Whereas chastity of Japanese women had to be protected as mothers and wives of soldiers, sexuality of colonized women was mobilized for the "comfort" of imperial soldiers. Racism was introduced to divide women and threw them into opposition. For example, Japanese military nurses looked down upon "comfort women" who occasionally worked as nurses in case of need, and they opposed to use comfort women as nurses in defense of their professional pride. Comfort stations were also established at some places in the mainland. When local women opposed to establish a comfort station in their neighbourhood in Okinawa, they were persuaded by the military authority in defense of their chastity at the sacrifice of Korean women. In each case, the construction of the imperial subject among Japanese women, and the feminine subjection as well as subjectivation was achieved with their agency in contrast with the colonized subject.

Paradigm shift in women's history: restoring women's agency to history

The paradigm shift in the view of sexual violence was accompanied by the paradigm shift in women's history that has tried to restore women's agency to history. This paradigm shift resulted in the rise of reflexive women's history in the 80s, which tried to examine women's responsibility as perpetrator, or at least as an accomplice of Japanese imperialism.

Until then women historians were accustomed to construct women as victims, in other words, passive agent disposed at historical whim. The new reflexive women's history, which restored women's agency to history does not excuse single woman in the past, elites or non-elites, for their participation in Japan's ultra-nationalism. No leading feminists except few could escape from severe reexamination for their responsibility for the war, as they did not hesitate to take advantage of the totalitarian regime in order to promote women's status in the public sphere, because the total war made necessary to mobilize women. They justified their cooperation with the state for the purpose of nationalization of women, for women had not yet been endowed with a right to vote, and accordingly not entitled as a citizen.

Non-elite women were neither innocent for their support of war at the home front. In the course of feminist revisioning the history, it is noted that we should not be naïve to refer to such words as femininity nor motherhood as symbols of peace, for historical findings tell us that those gendered symbols could be mobilized for militarism as well.

The stress on women's agency has brought about the split between victims along with the line of race and nationality. While Korean survivors insist the forced nature of the military prostitution, in other words, military sexual slavery named after the UN Committee of Human Rights against contemporary slavery, Japanese survivors kept silence as they are stigmatized as professional prostitutes.

Appropriation of women's agency by nationalism: "model victim" in the narrative formulation

Narrative theory tells us that there is nothing unique to the narrative formulations. However feminist consciousness has provided alternative formulation of women's narratives, less oppressive, which can restore their dignity and agency, but at the same time appropriate it. There was an interesting shift in formulating the victims' narratives, as they were more accustomed to receive interviews with news reporters : they started to deform their narratives so as to meet the expectation from their audience ; that is to say, a narrative of innocence by a "model" victim, such as an innocent maiden, fetched by force, thrown into the living hell and survived. (For instance, a survivor began her story with her unhappy marriage from which she wanted to run away, but later she cut this part down.)

Activists were also guilty even out of good will to construct the innocence and ignorance of victims so as to hear the story which they wanted to hear. (By portraying victims as innocent they will end up with reinforcing the patriarchal notion that women are responsible for inviting sexual violence.)

This is another kind of repression to conform the diversity of victimized women to a survivors' stereotype, easy to understand, which in turn represses other forms of deviant stories, which constitute a grey zone.

By so doing, while those Korean survivors became national heroes, Japanese survivors kept silence. While the feminist discourse tried to construct this issue as violence against women so as to bridge over the nationalities, the Korean nationalist discourse constructs it as a Japanese imperialist crime against colonized people. Yet sexual violence against their own women remains least questioned in both countries.

Gendered nature of Japanese historical revisionism and the backlash against feminism

What is notable with the Japanese historical revisionism and current neo-nationalism is its gendered nature targeted to women's sexuality. Those conservatives learned from the new school of history and use it as a weapon for counter-attack. Where women's agency comes to matter, they appropriate it to justify prostitution by choice on the basis of self-determination of women's sexuality. Frustration caused by economic insecurity and threatening of their masculinity has led them to condemn feminism as a source of all evils coming from outside, like Hong Kong flu. They organize anti-feminist activism at a grass-roots level and defend their abusive discourse in the name of "Freedom of Speech." The fact that they use the discursive practice which was once a weapon of minorities in defense of their rights indicates that they are fully aware that they belong to the minority, yet their political influence can not be neglected. The grass-roots conservatism give agreement to the voice of neo-nationalism as is shown in the case of Ishihara Shintaro, a Japanese counterpart of Mr. Le Pen, racist, sexist, neo-nationalist, and anti-Americanist, who was elected as a president of Tokyo metropolitan office with a support of the majority of voters. He then targeted Tokyo Women's Foundation sponsored by the local government of the Tokyo metropolitan prefecture and made a decision to dissolve it in the name of financial crisis. A sense of frustration among Japanese voters is so strong that it gives a voice to anti-Americanism where the Japanese government so faithfully follows the foot steps of the US. It can also be led to racism against north Korea, whose residents in Japan are now under obnoxious attacks especially focused on young women in Korean school uniforms.

In December 2000, Tokyo Women's War Crime Tribunal was organized by an international women's group, Violence Against Women in War Network, inviting witnesses and legal specialists from more than 20 regions and countries. It attracted 2000 audience as well as international

media, but was relatively neglected by domestic media. The 4 days' court was threatened by neo-nationalist harassment, knowing that women were judging the Emperor Hirohito. On the final day of the court, the judges sentenced guilty to Hirohito, which had never been done by Allied Forces at the Tokyo Tribunal, and it brought about a great joy among survivors who wished to restore their dignity. International feminism was successful in restoring justice in the place of the state which had ignored the war responsibility, though the victory at the people's court remained symbolic.

Beyond the nationalization of women (and men)

At the same time, several lawsuits by former "comfort women" for individual compensation are still going on, though the government insists that the compensation has been settled with the bilateral treaty between the countries. The logic by survivors that the state does not represent individual interests opens up the post-nationalist claim that "my body, and my self does not belong to the state."

If a woman's agency allows self-determination of her body, why not is it the case with a man on his body? Why does he not say that my body does not belong to the state so as to be disciplined as a soldier, or more precisely, a killing machine?

Historical lesson tells us that nationalization of women serves as a trap to construct woman as a national subject, along with all the bias of sexism, racism, classicism of the nation state, which draws a line among women. Feminism has no way to find a goal in nationalization of women, and innately contradicts with it.