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Mismanagement of Historical Memory and Political Instrumentalization: Comfort Women in Diplomatic Relations between the Republic of Korea and Japan

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Títol: Mala Gestió de la Memòria Històrica i Instrumentalització Política: Les Dones de Consol en les Relacions Diplomàtiques entre la República de Corea i el Japó
Mala Gestión de la Memoria Histórica e Instrumentalización Política: Las Mujeres de Consuelo en las Relaciones Diplomáticas entre la República de Corea y Japón
Mismanagement of Historical Memory and Political Instrumentalization: Comfort Women in Diplomatic Relations between the Republic of Korea and Japan

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Paraules clau
Dones de consol, memòria històrica, mala gestió, relacions diplomàtiques, Japó, Corea del Sud, República de Corea.
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Comfort women, historical memory, mismanagement, diplomatic relations, Japan, South Korea, Republic of Korea.

Resum del TFG

Aquest Treball de Final de Grau (TFG) se centra en l'estudi de les anomenades "dones de consol", víctimes d'un sistema de violacions múltiples sistemàtic i institucionalitzat pel govern i l'exèrcit japonès durant la dècada dels anys trenta i fins al final de la Segona Guerra Mundial. La investigació analitza la gestió de la memòria històrica com a factor determinant en les relacions internacionals en el context de la regió de l'Àsia Oriental, especialment entre Corea del Sud i el Japó, així com la manera en què el tema de les *"comfort women"* s'ha utilitzat com a moneda de canvi en política. També parla sobre la dualitat narrativa del Japó així com de la construcció de la identitat nacional coreana.
Aquest treball explora des de l'origen de les *"comfort stations"* i de la terminologia emprada, fins als seus corresponents memorials i la importància de les associacions per acabar amb la situació actual. Al final, conclou que el conflicte diplomàtic és causat per la gestió negligent de la memòria històrica i la necessitat d'un canvi d'enfocament en la resolució del problema.

Este Trabajo de Final de Grado (TFG) se centra en el estudio de las denominadas "mujeres de consuelo", víctimas de un sistema de violaciones múltiples sistemático e institucionalizado por el gobierno y el ejército japonés durante la década de los años 30 y hasta el final de la Segunda Guerra Mundial.
La investigación analiza la gestión de la memoria histórica como factor determinante en las relaciones internacionales en el contexto de la región de Asia Oriental, especialmente entre Corea del Sur y Japón, así como en la manera en la que el tema de las "*comfort women*" se ha usado como moneda de cambio en política. También habla sobre la dualidad narrativa de Japón, así como de la construcción de la identidad nacional coreana.
Este trabajo explora desde el origen de las "*comfort stations*" y de la terminología empleada hasta sus correspondientes memoriales y la importancia de las asociaciones para acabar con la situación actual. Al final, concluye que el conflicto diplomático está causado por la gestión negligente de la memoria histórica y la necesidad de un cambio de enfoque en la resolución del problema.

This Undergraduate Thesis (TFG) focuses on the academic investigation of the so-called "comfort women," who were victims of a system of multiple sexual assaults systematized and institutionalized by the Japanese government and military from the 1930s until the end of World War II.
The research analyses the management of historical memory as a determining factor in international relations within the East Asian region, particularly between South Korea and

Japan, as well as how the issue of "comfort women" has been used as political leverage. Additionally, it addresses Japan's narrative duality as well as the construction of South Korean national identity.

This paper explores everything from the origins of the "comfort stations" and the terminology employed to their corresponding memorials and the crucial role of associations in bringing an end to the current situation. In the end, it concludes that the diplomatic conflict is caused by negligent management of historical memory and the need for a change of approach in resolving the issue.

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1. Introduction

When we talk about sexual slavery, one of the first things we might come up with is women trafficking in the present. However, this is not something new. This Undergraduate Thesis discusses the topic of Korean comfort women[1], an institutionalized rape system established by the Imperial Japanese Government which started during the period between First and Second World Wars, but whose consequences persist to this day.

We all know about the Holocaust and Nanjing Massacre, but not everyone knows about comfort women, probably due to the fact that we might consider a war crime to be the only one when bloodshed is involved. Nevertheless, according to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and United Nations War Crimes Commission (UNWCC) it is considered when a serious violation of the laws and customs applicable in armed conflicts and international humanitarian law is committed.

Due to this limited public awareness of the comfort women issue, despite its continuing diplomatic and historical relevance, motivates this research.

In the academic field, topics that have been discussed could be divided into five main thematic areas: historical, political, memory, gender, and justice. I decided to create this certain division to make it clearer and easier to understand and classify them all. Nevertheless, it is essential to take into account some of the topics that could be catalogued in more than one thematic area.

The first one is the historical area, which is probably the most relevant one since it is extremely important to know the Korean and Japanese context from the period between the post-WWI and WWII up to the present day (C. Sarah Soh, 2009). The system of "comfort stations" started during the Japanese imperial expansion and occupation of its colonies, especially the Korean peninsula, and marked the beginning of this institutionalized system of sexual slavery (Yoshiaki Yoshimi, 2001). This whole establishment is a proof of lies and coercive mechanisms used to recruit women and clear evidence of how the control of the Japanese Empire extended not only to territorial and political domination but also to social dimensions and gender hierarchies (Yuha Park, 2025).

1 Although throughout this paper I am using the term "comfort women" to refer to these women who were victims of the institutionalized system of multiple rapes, I do this due to the fact that, at present, there is no alternative term that fully captures in a lexical-semantic level its implications as well as complexities regarding this topic, and it is the term most widely used in academic papers.

As for the political area, the legacy of the comfort women system, imperial policies as well as occupation tend to condition current international relations between both countries (Rumiko Nishino et al., 2018). Diplomatic tensions persist between Japan and its former occupied territories, especially with Korea, to which must be added the mismanagement of historical memory (Rumiko Nishino et al., 2018). It is important to mention that this memory is frequently used as political instrumentalization by all countries involved in the comfort women system legacy for their own diplomatic or intern interests (Rumiko Nishino et al., 2018). In addition, historical revisionism is also utilized as a political tool (Rumiko Nishino et al., 2018).

Regarding the memory area, what has been mentioned right above has been caused by Governments and institutions due to a failure to fully acknowledge these human rights violations (George Hicks, 1997). The lack of clear reparation policies has generated even more social and diplomatic tensions, as well as implementing long-term reconciliation mechanisms (George Hicks, 1997; Yuha Park, 2025). Moreover, in the context of historical memory it is essential to talk about the role of forgiveness, which has a complex role, due to the fact that victims and their descendants face several issues in balancing this and also justice (Yuha Park, 2025). Victims' testimonies form the core of historical and moral memory (Peipei Qiu et al., 2014), each one reflecting a different experience and coming from a diverse background (C. Sarah Soh, 2009). As discussed in academic papers, these are the key against forgetting and denialism, like the one from some Japanese right-wing sectors (Peipei Qiu et al., 2014). These minimize the existence of the comfort women system (Peipei Qiu et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the mismanagement and the lack of official acknowledgement are the main obstacles to preserving and transmitting these testimonies (George Hicks, 1997). This historical memory is also utilized as an element of political instrumentalization, which must be taken into account in diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan (Rumiko Nishino et al., 2018). Moreover, another topic discussed widely is regarding museums and memorials, which are really important to ensure transmission of memory, as well as cultural representation of comfort women as a way to visibility and denunciation (C. Sarah Soh, 2009).

As for gender area, it is crucial to talk about how, in general, women from colonies become subordinated as a result of the convergence of patriarchy, racism and misogyny dynamics (C. Sarah Soh, 2009), which, in the case of Korea, ended up strengthening Japanese's sense of superiority over the Korean population. The denial of basic rights and sexual violence was justified by misogyny (C. Sarah Soh, 2009). Also, it has been discussed in the academic field that sexual violence has been used on a systematic way and seen as another war weapon, due to the Japanese military saw women as available resources to achieve their goals (Yoshiaki

Yoshimi, 2001; Yuha Park, 2025). Moreover, these acts of sexual violence were planned and organized within military and administrative structures (Yoshiaki Yoshimi, 2001).

Lastly, we find the justice area, in which all lawsuits and trials related to this system are crucial to the pursuit of historical justice and their main goal was to seek a proper official acknowledgment and reparation (Yuha Park, 2025). Here, it is also important to talk about the debate over Japan's responsibility and "official apologies" since this has been widely discussed in academic papers regarding comfort women due to the controversial nature of this topic regarding alleged apologies, which some Japanese sectors consider enough (Yuha Park, 2025). All of this caused diplomatic relations to become even more tense and fuelled historiographical, political and ethical debates on how a State must face its own past atrocities and find a way of reconciliation (Rumiko Nishino et al., 2018). However, it could only happen when both governments show their will to build bridges through dialogue initiatives to manage historical memory (Rumiko Nishino et al., 2018). Then, reconciliation will be achieved (Yuha Park, 2025). The main problem lies in the obstacles arising from denialism and political instrumentalization, which is why associations play an important role in the fight for truth and justice (Rumiko Nishino et al., 2018).

As mentioned above, these five main thematic areas converge at a certain point, hence, I will approach these in an interdisciplinary way throughout my work, since analysing it from a single perspective would limit the understanding of its complexity and long-lasting impacts.

In this study, the mismanagement of historical memory refers to incomplete, inconsistent or victim-excluding responses to past violence, including partial apologies, lack of legal responsibility, revisionist discourse, insufficient reparations, and agreements perceived as excluding the victims. Political instrumentalization refers to the use of the comfort women issue by political actors to mobilize national identity, legitimize domestic positions, or exert diplomatic pressure in relations between South Korea and Japan.

I will address this article based on the following question: "How have the mismanagement of historical memory and the political instrumentalization of the comfort women shaped diplomatic relations between the Republic of Korea and Japan?" To achieve all this, I based my research on a qualitative methodology supported mainly by secondary sources, as well as primary ones derived from fieldwork which includes visits to the Seodaemun Prison Museum, the Women and Human Rights Museum, a Wednesday Demonstration, going to the Consulate General of Japan in Busan to see the Statue of Peace, and an asynchronous interview with The Korean Council.

Given this, in the following chapters, this article analyses the role of international relations in the context of East Asia and the importance of the memory when establishing these kinds of ties, as well as Japan's double projection and the Korean narrative, all this with the purpose of discussing about comfort women and give special emphasis on the political instrumentalization and the mismanagement of historical memory in diplomatic relations.

2. Role of memory in international relations in East Asia

Collective memory in the region is not presented as a merely introspection exercise, but also as a component of contemporary discipline of international relations, which can sometimes be conflictual (Thomas U. Berger, 2012). Due to this, this chapter focuses on how memory is used for nationalist purposes in the East Asia region, mainly in China, Japan and South Korea.

First, we must acknowledge that memory has been used as an active political resource in the present to strengthen each country's identity, not to remember the past in order to heal it (Jan Assmann, 2011). For instance, the Chinese Communist Party uses the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression narrative to present itself as the nation's only saviour, diverting attention away from internal issues. It is also crucial to mention that nationalism based on historical grievance serves as a social "glue" and, by pointing to an "other" (historical aggressor), strengthens the sense of national unity (Jan Assmann, 2011).

Memory can also be found as a diplomatic bargain chip and a pressure mechanism with repeated demands for apologies (Thomas U. Berger, 2012), allowing countries such as South Korea and China to gain more moral authority in international forums as well as to influence both economic and military agreements with Japan.

As for this country, one of the factors that has complicated the normalization of relations with its neighbours has been the controversial way in which Japan has dealt with its historical past (Thomas U. Berger, 2012) and, moreover, the Japanese narrative has gone in one direction while actions have gone in another one, ultimately causing increased tension in relations with China and Korea (Laura Elizabeth Hein & Mark Selden, 2000). This can be seen in official visits by several prime ministers and ministers to Yasukuni after 1978, when Class A war criminals were enshrined (refer to section 3.1.2. Tokyo trials for Class A war crimes and criminals), which creates a perception of insincerity.

In addition, it is important to discuss the structural tension created by the dichotomy between the need to normalize diplomatic relations with neighbouring States and the nationalist impulse that sees this assumption of guilt as a national humiliation (Thomas U. Berger, 2012). In Japan, there are many social entities and a significant portion of society that acknowledges what the country did during World War II, but there are also groups that believe the country should stop issuing apologies (Laura Elizabeth Hein & Mark Selden, 2000).

In the revisionist line followed by Japanese revisionist entities and groups, as well as the government itself, it is important to mention Nippon Kaigi (日本会議), Japan's largest ultranationalist and ultraconservative lobbying group and NGO which several influence in Shinzo Abe's administrations and advocates for a clean slate and for not looking back at the past.

Between South Korean and Japanese society, there may be a state of peace in the sense that there is no open conflict. However, because there has never been a fundamental reconciliation regarding issues like the comfort women, which remain unresolved, one cannot speak of a total absence of conflict, and therefore, one cannot speak of complete peace (Johan Galtung, 1969).

As Johan Galtung argues, in this case, there can be a situation of peace between South Korean and Japanese societies in the sense that there is no open conflict, but since there has never been a deep reconciliation due to issues such as the "comfort women", which remain unresolved, one cannot speak of a total absence of conflict (Johan Galtung, 1969).

Also, sometimes this historical management and its consequent reconstruction of memory end up transcending historical accuracy, so the past is not approached as an object of objective study but as a sacred pillar of national identity (Jan Assmann, 2011), where no nuance or deviation from the official narrative, whether regarding the idea of "victim" or "perpetrator", is allowed (Jan Assmann, 2011).

Regarding this, it is crucial to highlight Yuha Park's case, as she was denounced for her work *Comfort Women of the Japanese Empire*. According to her, she aimed to provide a balanced and multidimensional perspective, showing that state interests in East Asia have hijacked memory because they prioritize the mobilization of nationalist sentiment over reconciliation.

In conclusion, it can be observed that the reality of memory management in East Asia is complex and highly fragmented, despite the presence of sectors in all countries advocating for some form of reconciliation and for finding a common narrative or argument regarding the past. Nevertheless, there is a whole set of interests, especially political and nationalist, that prevent this from fully succeeding, whether because memory is used as a mechanism for political legitimization and internal cohesion, or because there is a desire to leave the past behind.

3. The two faces of Japan

3.1. Japan as perpetrator

3.1.1. War crimes

Before exposing war crimes committed by the Japanese Empire, it is crucial to acknowledge that, even though it has been almost 90 years since the firsts ones, there is not any closed list of all of war crimes. Moreover, we must take into account a lot of these were not even documented and, although I am only analysing those made by the Japanese, it is important to know that, unfortunately, it does not matter the perpetrator nor where the armed conflict is located, because in all wars these crimes against human rights are still committed.

First, it is indispensable to talk about Unit 731, which was established in the occupied territory of Manchukuo, in mainland China, in 1936 under the command of General Ishii Shirō. This unit's main goal was to develop biological and chemical weapons through experimentation directly with humans. Victims were prisoners of war, Chinese civilians and ethnic minorities and the estimated death range goes between 200,000 to 300,000 (Sheldon H. Harris, 2002), including affected population by biological attacks. There were also two more units we must discuss, which are Unit 100 and Unit 1644. The first one was in charge of bacteriological weapons research applied to animals and crops, while the second one focused on biological experimentation and warfare in other regions in mainland China.

Some time later, after the capture of the Nationalist China capital, Nanjing. The Japanese army conducted a campaign of terror that lasted around six weeks, from mid-December 1937 until late January 1938, resulting in the Nanjing massacre. Japanese troops carried out mass shootings, live burials, beheading contests between officers and rapes of women of all ages, including children and elderly females. The Nanjing massacre was the most thoroughly documented Japanese war crime, as well as the most studied one, and a central symbol of the structural violence of the Imperial Army.

In this section it is important to also mention comfort women, who are estimated to be between 50,000 and 200,000 (George Hicks, 1997; Radhika Coomaraswamy, 1996; Yoshiaki Yoshimi, 2001) from occupied territories, but some authors and sources believe this number could go up to over 400,000 (Su Zhiliang, 1999; Tessa Morris-Suzuki, 2007). The two main nationalities from these women were, in first place, Korea, and then, China. Nevertheless, there were also females from the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea. There are records where

there were Australian comfort women, from The Netherlands, who were captured in Dutch East Indies, and Japanese, who the vast majority came from an extreme poverty background (C. Sarah Soh, 2009; Yuki Tanaka, 2003).

In addition, throughout the Second World War Allied war prisoners were mistreated and murdered, humiliated publicly, forced to do extreme labours and executions. A prominent case is The Bataan Death March, which took place in 1942, it was a forced transfer of American and Filipino prisoners of war after their surrender in the Philippines. They were forced to march over 100 km under inhumane conditions and suffering constant abuse. As for the forced labour, it is crucial to mention the Burma-Thailand Railway, or also known as "Death Railway", was a railway line constructed through forced labour of Allied prisoners of war and other civilians under extreme conditions, violence, starvation and exhaustion, making this a clear example of the systematic exploitation.

At the end of World War II, both governmental and military authorities carried out a systematic destruction of evidence related to war crimes, burning out documents and destroying infrastructure with the aim of avoiding criminal responsibility and hindering future investigations. The war crimes mentioned above were discovered, however, it is truly likely we will never know the whole number and their details.

3.1.2. Tokyo trials

The International Military Tribunal for the Far East was established in 1946 by order of the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, General Douglas MacArthur, and took place in Tokyo, mirroring the Nuremberg Trials, from May 1946 to November 1948 with the main objective to try highest-ranking Japanese office for their responsibility during the war and committed crimes in Asia-Pacific region.

The tribunal was constituted by judges from 11 Allied nations such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom and 28 Japanese leaders including prime ministers, generals, diplomats and ministers of war were judged. Nevertheless, we must take into consideration that Emperor Hirohito was not prosecuted, since this was decided in order to maintain stability in occupied Japan.

At the end of the trial, the tribunal established three main types of crimes. In the first place, we find Class A crimes, which are those related to peace and planning, initiating, or waging a war of aggression in violation of international law [...] (Charter of the International Military Tribunal, 1945; Charter of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (Tokyo

Charter), 1946). Some notable convicts were Hideki Tojo, who was the Prime Minister from 1941 to 1944 and General of the Army, was charged with planning and directing the war aggression, as well as the crimes against prisoners and civilians, Iwane Matsui, general and commander in Central China, was sentenced for direct responsibility for the Nanjing Massacre, and Heitaro Kimura, general and commander in Burma, was responsible for forced labour and systematic brutality regarding the Burma-Thailand Railway.

As for Class B and C crime, these were the ones related to, on the one hand, serious violations of laws and customs of war, mistreatment and murder of prisoners of war, including the Bataan Death March, in all cases violating the Geneva Convention, summary executions and systematic torture, while on the other hand, crimes against humanity and other inhumane acts against civilians, for instance, massacres, such as the Nanjing one, mass rapes and slavery and forced labor. However, at that time, crimes regarding comfort women were not included due to the fact the first public and formal complaint dates back to 1991 (refer to section 5.3 Firsts reports).

Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that Tokyo Trials focused mainly on high-ranking Japanese leaders and Class A crimes, while Class B and C crimes were prosecuted separately later in Allied military tribunals across Asia-Pacific.

In conclusion, as outcome of Tokyo trials, there were seven high-ranks and ministers sentenced to death, other sixteen political and diplomatic figures were to life imprisonment, two people passed away during the trial period, another one was partially acquitted of the charges and another one was declared unfit to stand trial and removed from the proceedings due to an advanced neurosyphilis.

3.2. Japan as victim

When we discuss the topic of Japan as a victim, we must talk, in the first place, about the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki as an experience of absolute victimization due to the fact this was the first and only case of usage of nuclear weapons against the civilian population in history. These were two indiscriminate attacks and previous principles, such as distinction and proportionality ones, and Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 were broken by the Truman administration, causing a radical rupture in the concept of conventional war through an unprecedented scale of destruction, which in turn marked the beginning of the nuclear era as a new period of war.

However, it is crucial to take into account Japan was not able to defend its imperial perimeter, so did not have the real capacity to win the war by 1944. Also, in 1942 and 1943 suffered some irreversible strategic defeats and, in 1945, military production was drastically reduced caused by a lack of materials and qualified labor. Moreover, the Japanese Imperial Army was almost destroyed, and the United States totally controlled the Pacific which led to Japan's total naval block and cut of oil, food and raw materials; however, they did not surrender. The Truman administration decided to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki to finally force it and avoid Japanese territory invasion, which would have led to casualty estimates. Nevertheless, this had an implicit geopolitical message to the URSS in a global frame where the world was getting more and more polarized between communism and capitalism.

These two attacks became the core of Japan's war memory through the construction of a narrative focused on Japan's own suffering as a passive victim, shifting the focus from aggression to defeat. Furthermore, the country has codified the universalization of this pain as a global pacifist message, becoming a spokesperson against the use of nuclear weapons.

From 1945 to 1952, American occupation of Japan's national territory took place, and it was seen as a defeated and occupied country which lost its political and military sovereignty. A new Constitution was established and marked the formal democratization and redefinition of the State. However, it also meant Japan, based on article 9, would officially give up on war and using violence. In addition, there was censorship and control related to historical discourse, which limited public debate about war and some crimes were silent. In this context there were two dominant postures between those who defended this democratizing reform versus people who argued it was an external imposition.

Japan was seen as a subordinate partner in an unequal power relationship with the United States, on which it depended for national security because it had been delegated, limiting Japan's strategic autonomy. Furthermore, the permanent presence of military bases led to the normalization of foreign presence and had territorial and social impacts, especially in Okinawa, a prefecture that currently hosts over 70% of the United States' military facilities in Japan (Nippon.com, 2022), besides to conflicts with the local population and a sense of peripheral sacrifice[2].

In addition, reconstruction and an economic miracle took place under the U.S. umbrella thanks to economic aid and access to markets and indirect benefits from the Korean War. Also, during the Cold War Japan was aligned with the capitalist block, becoming a key ally in Asia.

2 Okinawa was under the U.S. administration after the Treaty of San Francisco (signed in 1951 but came into force in 1952). On May 15th, 1972, its sovereignty and administration were given back to Japan.

This was caused by Truman Doctrine, an American policy to contain the expansion of communism, which was based on the "Hubs and Spokes" system, in other words, the United States would act as "hub", establishing military bases in its allies' territories ("spokes"). Japan was the strongest and most stable "spoke", but at the same time, the most dependent one.

Taking all this into account, it can be stated Japan was forced to redefine its global role, unable to exercise military leadership and national identity was marked by defeat and foreign guardianship. This can also be considered the reason why some Japanese political parties tend to represent the country as a war victim, focusing on inner suffering and making the others' invisible.

Left-wing parties and sectors condemn on a clear and explicit way attacks in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and see Japan as a victim of global militarism and American imperialism, but argue Japanese previous responsibility cannot be hidden, are against political use of victimhood, defend an inclusive and transnational memory, recognizing war crimes as well as colonialism, and do support Asian victims, including comfort women (C. Sarah Soh, 2009; Thomas U. Berger, 2012).

Nevertheless, as for the Liberal Democratic Party, conservative and nationalist sectors all agree that the two atomic bombs are central symbols of Japanese suffering, use nuclear trauma as a national identity axis and also contextualize less the previous conflict, drawing Japan as a victim of extreme unjustified violence. Moreover, they see American occupation as a national humiliation and perceive the Constitution as a foreign imposition. However, do see the country as a protector and a strategic partner. As for self-victimization, right-wing emphasizes Japanese suffering and minimizes war crimes, revising or partially denying them, like the Nanjing Massacre (Laura Elizabeth Hein & Mark Selden, 2000; Yuki Tanaka, 2003).

4. Korean narrative

4.1. Korea as victim

Even when we discuss Korea as a victim of Japan, the comfort women topic is also relevant. Nevertheless, I consider addressing the Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula crucial.

At the very first beginning, the country became a protectorate of Japan after the Eulsa Treaty, signed in 1905, and even though this did not imply the annexation of the territory, it caused the loss of diplomacy and the establishment of a Japanese office to "supervise" the Korean government.

However, in 1910 the Korean territory officially became a colony, meaning the loss of sovereignty. The Japanese rule would last until 1945, when it surrendered in World War II. These years involved cultural suppression, banning Korean and forcing people to adopt Japanese names, as well as mass mobilization of millions of Koreans to work under exploited conditions in mines and factories and the obligation to participate in Shinto ceremonies and worship the emperor.

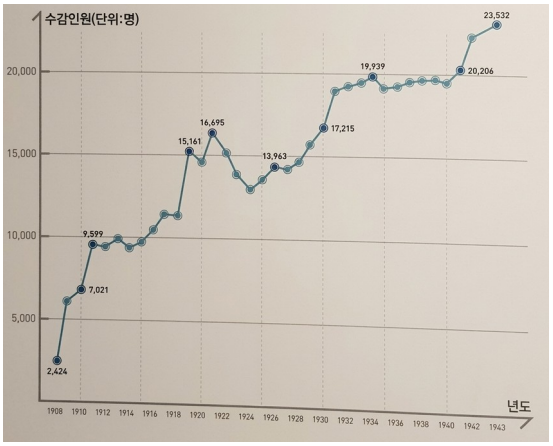


Figure 1. Chart of prisoners at Seodaemun Prison. Source: the author. Seodaemun Prison History Museum.

During these more than three decades, several people from all over Korea raised against the Japanese rule. Nevertheless, they were severely repressed and those who were not killed in the act, were imprisoned in jails such as the Seodaemun one, which was transformed into a museum, and so I decided to visit it. Moreover, this prison was built under pressure from the Japanese.

As I entered the first and main building, general information was provided, including a graphic S on how the number of Korean people were jailed for fighting to achieve national sovereignty. Its initial surface area was 1,600 m^2 but had to be expanded almost 30 times bigger because of the increase of independence activists imprisoned. This number grew notably in 1919 due to the March First Movement and the following protests.

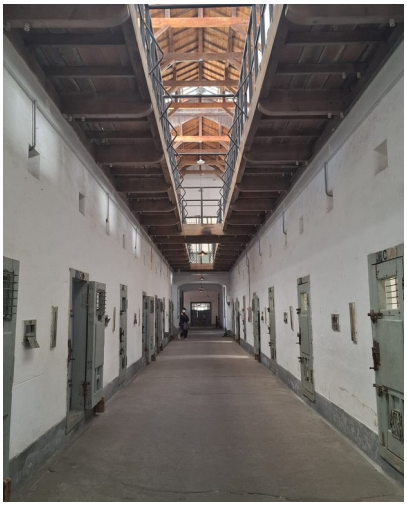


Figure 2. Module in the main building. Source: the author. Seodaemun Prison History Museum.

After visiting the first floor, the visit continued in the basement floor, however, no pictures nor videos could be taken. This was probably the hardest part of the museum due to the fact torture methods were explained in the information panels and through drawings and dolls. There were also real-size objects.



Figure 3. Cell in the previous module where prisoners were held. Source: the author. Seodaemun Prison History Museum.

After this part, I would like to highlight that visitors were able to visit one of the modules (see Figure 2), where Korean activists were imprisoned, and even enter the cell (see Figure 3). In the corridor there also were several information panels with some of the victims that were at the Seodaemun prison during the Japanese occupation and survived.

Finally, the second and last part where visitors were not allowed to take pictures nor record was in a small building in the courtyard where prisoners were executed. It was a kind of shed surrounded by truly high walls (see Figure 4). Inside of it, a rope could be seen in the middle and some benches in front of it. There was also a basement and there, bodies were kept.



Figure 4. Exterior of the shed where Korean activists were hanged. Source: the author. Seodaemun Prison History Museum.

Considering all of the above, the comfort women issue cannot be understood without addressing the occupation of the peninsula due to all its implications that had for the construction of a Korean national identity formed in direct opposition to the Japanese one.

4.2. Korea's moral double standard: the *Yanggongju* (□ □ □) system

In this chapter, I also consider it crucial to discuss the *Yanggongju* topic, since this took place in a short historical frame together with comfort women.

Yanggongju, or literally meaning "Western princesses," is the pejorative term used in Korea to refer to women who engaged in prostitution with American soldiers right after the Korean War (1950-1953).

As the country was left devastated and mired in extreme poverty, the Korean government encouraged the creation of "camouflaged towns" (기지촌, *kijichon*) in the vicinity of U.S. military bases. This was done with the goal of strengthening the military alliance and generating foreign currency (Katharine H.S. Moon, 2009). It is important to mention that this system was regulated and encouraged by the Korean government, as it viewed these women as "ambassadors" who helped maintain troop morale (Katharine H.S. Moon, 2009). Moreover, this whole system came to reached up to 25% of the GDP during the 1960s and 1970s (Katharine H.S. Moon, 2009; Seol Dong-Hoon, 2004).

Despite the fact that society rejected them for having relationships with foreigners, the government went as far as offering them English and etiquette classes (Katharine H.S. Moon, 2009).

The various administrations maintained the system of the *Yanggongju* and the "camouflaged towns," but the government of Roh Tae Woo, when the first public denunciation took place in South Korea in 1991, had an initially evasive reaction. It treated the matter as a legal issue that had already been resolved with the signing of the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea in 1965 by Park Chung-hee. This treaty can be defined as "money in exchange for silence."

It is for this reason that Yanggongju were also victims. They presented a profile of extreme poverty following the war, and these "camouflaged towns" were marketed as places where they could earn "quick money" in dollars. After being recruited by private intermediaries, or rather, pimps, they were deceived with promises of jobs for which they were then charged "transportation and housing expenses", thus creating a massive debt that forced them into prostitution (Katharine H. S. Moon, 1997; Katharine H.S. Moon, 2009). Throughout this process, the Korean government facilitated the flow (Katharine H. S. Moon, 1997), and, furthermore, the police returned women who tried to escape under the pretext that they "owed money" (Katharine H. S. Moon, 1997). Moreover, the Korean governments of that era can be considered as regulators and accomplices of this system (Katharine H. S. Moon, 1997).

Due to the points mentioned above, I consider it of vital importance to look at both systems, as well as the governments of both countries, in perspective. Although Korea some Korean political actors have also instrumentalized the comfort women issue in domestic and diplomatic contexts with Japan, the *Yanggongju* system does not erase or relativize Japanese responsibility for the comfort women system. Rather, it shows the need to analyze wartime and postwar sexual exploitation through a broader lens of gender, state violence, militarism and political instrumentalization.

What is clear is that all these women and girls were victims of two different governments that used them and treated them in an inhumane manner, treating them as active resources under the alleged justification that both were pursuing their own interests. Due to all of this, it is necessary to stop and reflect on the ethical values we all hold as a society, but especially those of the individuals who decided to implement the system of the comfort women and the *Yanggongju* one.

5. Comfort women

5.1. Used terminology

Before proceeding to develop this chapter related to comfort women, I consider it is truly important to address the terminology used to refer to this phenomenon, as most of the terms involved do carry historical, political and ethical implications that shape how this reality is interpreted and understood. For this reason, the choice of terminology may even contribute to the minimization, the distortion, or even the justification of this system of institutionalized violence.

In first place, we find term Comfort Women itself, also known as 위안부 (*wianbu*) in Korean, and 慰安婦 (*ianfu*) in Japanese. This expression is found mainly worldwide as well as in dominant academic literature. This general euphemism is utilized in Japan in a historical context, which can be found in military documents dated since the Second World War, and also in the official framework, a posteriori, for instance, in those aligned with conservative ideology in Japan (衆議院議員馬場伸幸君提出「従軍慰安婦」等の表現に関する質問に対する答弁書 | Written answer to the question by Nobuyuki Baba, Member of the House of Representatives, regarding the expression ‘military comfort women’, 2021). As for the Republic of Korea, this use varies slightly since it can be found in social, educational and mediatic contexts, but using a neutral and memorial tone. In addition, it is important to mention that “women of solace” is sometimes also used as a synonym.

Moreover, we must take into consideration the usage of quotation marks in the term (「慰安婦」 and “Comfort Women”) because this is utilized as a recurring discursive strategy to denounce euphemism without abandoning it, which can be found in Japanese neutral critical journalistic field, which shows that the media distance themselves terminologically.

Another term frequently found in the classical Japanese academic context during 90s and 00s it is Military Comfort Women 従軍慰安婦 (*jugun ianfu*), in Japanese, even though it is also used nowadays in the same context, it is not frequent to find it. As for South Korea, the term was adapted to 종군위안부(*jonggun wianbu*), which it is mainly utilized only in the academic context and in historical studies.

Also, one designation which can be seen in the Japanese academic context is Japanese Military Comfort Women or 日本軍慰安婦 (*nihongun ianfu*), but specifically in historical texts and gender studies, in which are used in a critical way.

The last term I would like to discuss in what relates to terminology used in Japan is Women Working in Brothels, 慰安所従事者 (*iansho jūjisha*) in Japanese. This is utilized by the revisionist current, which includes conservative press, as well as political parties aligned with a right-wing ideology. Moreover, these individuals call these female victims 売春婦 (*baishufu*), which literally translates to English as prostitute.

Moving to other terms used mainly in Korea, one is Comfort Women Victims which can be found in memorial and social ambits, such as museums and in the educational system. Even though it is utilized in a neutral way, it somehow shows empathy towards them.

As mentioned above, while the Japanese Government use the term Comfort Women itself, the Korean one utilizes Victims of Japanese Military Comfort Women System or **일본군 위안부 피해자** (*ilbon-gun wianbu pihaeja*) and in official resolutions, so it can be found in official and institutional contexts (**일제하 일본군위안부 피해자에 대한 보호·지원 및 기념사업 등에 관한 법률** | Act on Protection, Support and Commemorative Projects for Sexual Slavery Victims for the Japanese Imperial Army., 1993).

To conclude with Korean terms, the last one we might take into consideration it is Japanese Military Sex Slaves, known in Korean as **일본군 성노예** (*ilbon-gun seongnoye*), which is utilized in the activism field, the Korean left-wing and in international and human rights forums, such those at the UN. In addition, it is crucial to take into account that the word **성노예** (*seongnoye*) is used as a politically charged term that emphasizes coercion and criminality.

In line with the United Nations, the expression Military Sexual Slavery is found in its reports. Also, it is used in the legal sphere, as in the symbolic tribunals that have taken place.

Finally, the last term that can be seen is Enforced Sex Slaves. Nevertheless, we must take into consideration that this one has only been used in parliamentary speeches in the United States and the European Union by progressives.

As a final conclusion of this semantic analysis, it can be stated to some extent that, while the Japanese government tends to neutralize, the Korean government tends to resemanticize. Taking all this into account, these terms are not just simple descriptive labels, but also involve discursive constructions related to different historical interpretations, positioning the sender and conditioning the perception of the phenomenon.

5.2. Origin

Before addressing the issue of comfort women, it is essential to discuss the historical framework that preceded the creation of the first comfort stations, which originates with the Meiji Restoration.

On the one hand, this historical event marked Japan's rapid modernization and industrialization adopting Western technology and methods, which boosted the country's economy and infrastructure. Nevertheless, on the other one, it turned out to be the end of the feudal system. In this whole process, authoritarian structures were never left behind, and Japanese State modernization took place throughout a modern army, a centralized administration and industrialization.

Japan consolidated itself as an imperial power after its victories in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) and carried out a territorial expansion as a demonstration of power and modernity.

In this line, the Korean Peninsula was annexed in 1910 as a colonial territory, which led to repression, inequality between Koreans and Japanese and economic exploitation. All of this caused the population to suffer poverty and become more vulnerable, which is key to understanding the social origin of most comfort women (C. Sarah Soh, 2009; Yuki Tanaka, 2003).

During the 1920s and 1930s, the army gained greater influence over politics, with an ideology based on loyalty to the emperor, individual sacrifice for the nation, and the dehumanization of the enemy. As a result, sexual violence became a practice of war, with mass rapes carried out in occupied territories. Furthermore, there were no sanctions against soldiers, and sexual violence was perceived as a collateral effect of armed conflict.

The first comfort stations date back to 1932 in Shanghai (Amy Stanley, 2025; Radhika Coomaraswamy, 1996), following reports of rapes committed by Japanese troops in Manchuria after its occupation in 1931 (Asian Women's Fund, n.d.). Their establishment was conceived as an institutional solution and response aimed at channeling and controlling sexual violence caused by the army itself (Amy Stanley, 2025).

From 1932 to 1937, the firsts comfort stations functioned as pilot experiences, and the army observed a reduction in conflicts with the local population and greater sanitary control over the troops. Consequently, it was decided to expand and formalize the comfort station system after the following the outbreak of total war in 1937, many more troops were deployed, and the system was replicated throughout Southeast Asia, mainland China and Korea.

Taking all this into account, it can be stated that the comfort women system and comfort stations originated in Manchuria as an institutionalized response to the rapes committed in the territory by Japanese troops and was consolidated right before the Second World War (Radhika Coomaraswamy, 1996). However, it must be considered a deliberate military policy, rather than a deviation (Jonathan Gottschall, 2004).

5.3. The first report

Even though the comfort women system existed from 1932 to 1945, the issue was first publicly addressed in 1991 during a press conference.

On August 14th of that year, Kim Hak-sun broke more than four decades of silence. In her own words, she had remained silent due to the shame and social stigma surrounding sexual violence in postwar Korean society, as many survivors feared being labelled "impure" or being rejected by their own families.

However, she decided to share her testimony due to the fact, the previous year, in 1990, the Japanese government denied in the parliament that the military had forced women into prostitution, even referring to them as "civilian volunteers". Because of this, Kim Hak Sun decided that she could not die without telling her story of how she was abducted by Japanese soldiers in China at the age of 17.

On December 6th, 1991, she and two other victims filed a class-action lawsuit in the Tokyo District Court against the Japanese government. Despite the legal obstacles they faced, this action forced the world to pay attention to the atrocities committed against these women and girls. The plaintiffs sought 20 million yen each in compensation and a formal and official apology from the Japanese government.

The judicial process lasted ten years and was ultimately dismissed. The court argued that the State was not responsible for paying individual damages under the Constitution of that era and that the statute of limitations had expired. However, it set a precedent for victory; during this whole process, the Japanese government was forced to conduct an internal investigation to respond to the allegations, which eventually led to the Kono Statement (1993), in which for the first time it acknowledged the military's involvement in forced recruitment.

Nevertheless, Kim Hak Sun passed away in 1997 and did not see the final outcome of the lawsuit. However, her testimony undeniably laid the foundation for other women in various countries to break their silence, such in the Philippines and Taiwan. Moreover, on August 14th, coinciding with the day of her statement at the press conference, was established as the

International Comfort Women Memorial Day to remember the victims of sexual slavery during World War II.

5.4. Memorials

In the context of comfort women memorials, among the different ones that can be found, perhaps the most prominent and significant that might come to mind first are the sculptures.

The official name is “The Statue of Peace”, or 소녀상 (*Sonyeosang*) in Korean, which literally translates to "Statue of the Girl” in English, and was designed by the sculptors Kim Seo Kyung and Kim Eun Sung.

The first one was installed on December 14th, 2011, right in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul in order to commemorate the 1000th Wednesday Demonstration (Interview 1). This also caused a diplomatic conflict due to the fact the Japanese Government requested it to be removed. Nevertheless, in the present day it is still in the same spot.

Moreover, a second statue was placed in Busan (see Figure 5), the second biggest city in Korea, by activists and students in front of the Consulate General of Japan in December 2016. Even though local authorities removed it arguing it obstructed the pavement, it was returned to the original spot due to the huge public pressure.

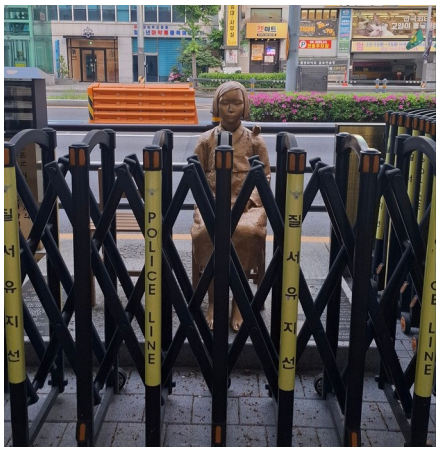


Figure 5. Statue of Peace in Busan. Source: the author.

In addition, I would like to highlight that, while seen from the street, there are no visible flags of Japan, even though it is the Consulate. Also, there is protection, making it difficult to get close to the statue. Moreover, there are two police booths close and there is always one police officer inside each of them (see Figure 6)



Figure 6. Consulate from the opposite sidewalk. Police booth on the left, statue on the right. Source: the author.

In the picture, the booth can be seen on the left, with a blue ceiling, and the statue is found on the right side. As for today, there are more than 100 replicas of the sculpture across South Korea and, due to the Korean diaspora as well as the support from human rights organizations, some were installed in countries such as Germany, the United States, China and more.

Moving on to a memorial that may be less familiar, the House of Sharing (나눔의 집, *Nanum-ui jib*) and its museum can be found. This is an active residence for survivors which opened in 1998 and can be found in Gwangju[3], in the Gyeonggi Province, and focuses on the healing process with exhibits that include paintings created by the women during therapy sessions.

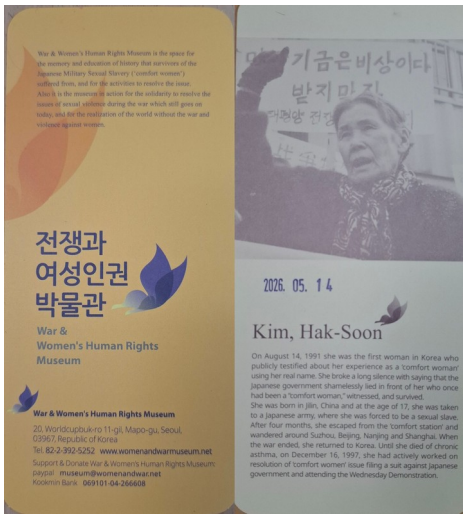
In addition, the Memorial Park is located outside the Sharing House. Here, visitors leave flowers and messages of support, and they can find bronze busts of all women who lived there and passed away.

Last but not least, I would like to take into consideration the War and Women Human Rights Museum (전쟁과 여성인권 박물관, *Jeonjaenggwa Yeoseongingwon Bangmulgwan*), which opened on May 5th, 2012, exactly on Children's Day in Korea in order to symbolize a future without violence (The Korean Council, 2026) and actually it is under the management of The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issue of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, a Korean NGO that fights for the rights of the victims of the system.



Figure 7. Museum exterior. Panel with handwritten notes. Source: the author. War and Women Human Rights Museum.

The visit starts after passing a door to the garden, where a gravel path can be found and on one side there are some paintings representing comfort women walking towards the battlefront, while on the other one there are women's faces and hands.



3 Should not be confused with Gwangju, the Metropolitan City in the southwest of Korea, which is surrounded by South Jeolla Province.

Right before arriving at the basement, there were some paintings made by some of these women which clearly reflected their trauma but in an artistic way. This room was definitely the darkest one and here a Kim Hak Sun video was played. Next to it there was a wall which had Japanese soldiers and buildings that were comfort stations as well as some victims' pictures in which they were seen smiling and crying.

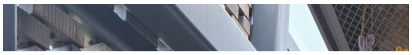
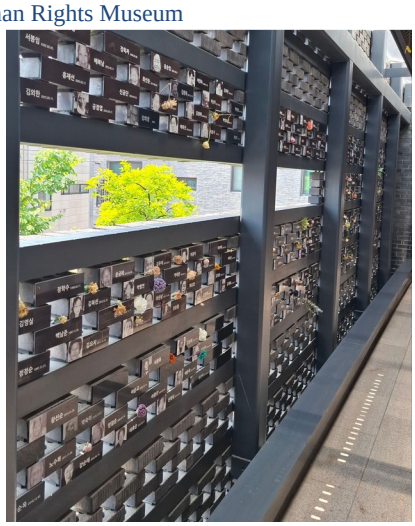


Figure 8. Visitor's ticket. Museum information on the front, Kim Hak Sun biography in the back. Source: the author. War and Women Human Rights Museum



After this, the next step was towards the second floor and in the stairs, there was much lighter, contrasting with the previous room, and more pictures could be seen.

In the second one there was much more information presented, from how girls were taken by force, comfort stations' system, fight for reparations, the Wednesday demonstrations, with objects used in the very first ones, and photos of all the women who have been identified. On the outside of that same floor, there was a low brick wall featuring more photos and their dates of passing. This space is built as a memorial, where visitors can leave flowers provided by the museum (see Figure 9)

Figure 9. Memorial on the exterior wall with victims' photographs. Source: the author. War and Women Human Rights Museum.



Figure 10. Sculpture of Kim Bok Dong (left) and Gil Won Ok (right) in the courtyard. Source: the author. War and Women Human Rights Museum.

I must highlight a temporary exhibition about Kim Bok Dong, one of the survivors who decided to travel all around the world to explain her testimony. Moreover, she decided to star "The Butterfly Fund" with the aim to support women who suffer sexual violence in actual conflict zones.

In short, all of these memorials are not just simple historical records, they are anchors of the collective memory aiming to transform the painful past of the victims into a pursuit of permanent demands for justice and clear reparations from the perpetrator.

5.5. Significance of associations

As for the associations, from the very first beginning the issue has been driven by civil ones, which turned into key to transform individual trauma into a global demand for legal accountability, becoming platforms to redefine standards regarding historical reparation and state responsibility.

The first one we should discuss is The Korean Council (한국정신대문제대책협의회, Hanguk Jeongshindae Munje Daechaek Hyeobuihoe), which was founded on November 16th, 1990 and was led by 37 feminist and academic organizations. Seven points were demanded so that it could be considered that justice had been served (Interview 1). Here, some such as the official resolution of military sexual slavery, a formal and official recognition from the Japanese government, and legal reparations, rather than private donations (Interview 1), can be found.

In addition, this association started the Wednesday Demonstrations in January 1992 in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, which continue to be held uninterruptedly to the present day (see Figure 11).



Figure 11. 1752nd Wednesday Demonstration. Source: the author.

During this same decade, they also brought the comfort women case to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, and the system was officially classified as “sexual slavery”.

Finally, this organization was the one that installed “The Statue of Peace” in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul in 2011 in order to commemorate demonstration number 1000, as previously mentioned, which followed other replicas in Korea and around the world.

Another key association is The Justice and Remembrance Foundation (일본군성노예제 문제 해결을 위한 정의기억재단, Ilbongun Seongnoyeye Munje Haegyeoreul Wihan Jeong-ui Gi-eok Jaedan) which emerged as a result of the 2015 Agreement, signed by Park Geun Hye and Shinzo Abe, in which Japan offered 1 billion yen to a foundation managed by the Korean government in exchange for considering the issue "finally and irreversibly" resolved.

The reaction of victims and activists was to reject it due to the fact a clear legal responsibility of the Japanese State was never included.

As a result of all this, the association established three goals: providing economic and medical support to the victims, financing research and education projects to ensure the issue is not forgotten after the passing of the last survivors and, finally, continuing to exert international pressure for the Japanese government to issue an official apology approved by its parliament.

It is crucial to acknowledge that both The Korean Council and The Justice and Remembrance Foundation merged on July 11, 2018 under The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (일본군성노예제문제해결을위한정의기억연대, abbreviated as 정의연, Jeong-ui Gi-eok Yeondae) in order to create a more efficient and professional structure. The first one provided political experience, international contacts, and a legacy of leading protests since 1990 while the second one possessed the legitimacy of having been funded by the people in 2016.

To summarize, without these types of associations, a testimony just becomes a personal story, however, with them, the trauma is collectivized and also raised the standard of the definition of “achieve justice” as well as proving that true reparation requires the perpetrator to recognize the crime, offer an official apology and educate future generations, so this is never repeated (Interview 1).

6. Memory and Diplomatic relations

6.1. Comfort women in politics and diplomatic relations

In South Korea's domestic politics, the memory of "comfort women" is a resource for ideological mobilization that divides the political elite into two, consequently directly influencing foreign policy discourse.

On the one hand, we find the progressive bloc, featuring former presidents like Moon Jae-in and the current one, Lee Jae-myung, and is defined by a centre-left stance, marked by democratic nationalism and support for social and feminist movements. Regarding foreign policy with Japan, it can be observed a posture of caution and confrontation, with an approach that prioritizes the revision of bilateral agreements in which they believe historical justice is omitted or ignored. This translates into a management of memory centred on the victims.

On the other hand, it can be observed that conservatives present a foreign policy toward Japan that is more cooperative and subordinate to the alliance with the United States in the face of the cooperation axis between China and North Korea.

Furthermore, increasing political polarization between genders can be seen in South Korea. An example of this occurred during Yoon Suk Yeol's 2022 presidential election campaign, which captured the vote of men in their twenties through a platform of gender confrontation, promising the abolition of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, which is the entity responsible for providing support to the victims.

For cases like the previous ones, the right wing has also been accused of "submissive diplomacy" and prioritizing capital, leaving individual human rights in the background.

Despite all the political fragmentation in Korea, we can find a common denominator in the dynamic of instrumentalizing the comfort women issue: the consolidation of national identity in the face of Japan during times of low popularity or with the goal of reaffirming historical sovereignty (Gi-Wook Shin, 2006; Mikyoung Kim, 2014).

Nevertheless, before addressing the topic in Japanese politics, it is crucial to highlight that both countries operated similar systems of authorized prostitution for U.S. occupation troops after World War II and the Korean War.

Shinzo Abe articulated the revisionist wing of the LDP through collaboration with Nippon Kaigi, an ultranationalist organization. The former Prime Minister consistently attempted to counter the Kono Statement through a campaign that included denying the

existence of evidence, pressuring American publishers to remove references to sexual slavery from history textbooks, and labelling "comfort women" as well-paid voluntary prostitutes, among other actions.

As for today, as long as Japanese right-wing revisionism, led by Sanae Takaichi, and the progressive-based nationalism of Lee Jae-myung continue to use the "comfort women" issue as a profitable resource to consolidate domestic power, the formation of a stable, long-term alliance will remain unfeasible.

6.2. The Japanese narrative

Throughout the years, the Japanese government has released different statements in which it has shown 'regret'; nevertheless, none of these have been viewed as genuine in Korea.

The first one was in January 1992 made by Kiichi Miyazawa right before his official visit to Seoul. This was issued within the framework of Kim Hak Sun's and the subsequent lawsuit in Tokyo. The Prime Minister offered an apology in which he quoted regret "from the bottom of his heart" for the "indescribable hardships".

Later that same year, in July, Kato Statement was formulated by Koichi Kato, Chief Cabinet Secretary, after the discovery of military documents in Japan's Self-Defence Agency's archives. This apology acknowledged the involvement of government and military authorities.

The next one that can be found is the Kono Statement in August 1993 and was issued by Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono after an internal government investigation. He admitted in an explicit way that the military was involved in the establishment and management of comfort stations.

As for the Murayama Statement (August 1995), an apology for Japanese colonial rule and aggression was offered by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama and the Asian Women's Fund was established, which gave private "atonement money" to the survivors.

Years later, in August 2010, coinciding with the centennial of the annexation of the Korean Peninsula, Naoto Kan, the Prime Minister, issued an apology focusing only on Korean people.

Finally, it is also crucial to mention the 2015 Bilateral Agreement between Shinzo Abe and Park Geun Hye.

Even though this has been related to the official narrative, it is important to acknowledge the revisionist sectors' one due to the fact that one of the pillars of their discourse is the idea that the comfort women issue is a recent "fabrication" that emerged in the 1980s,

entirely orchestrated by the liberal daily *Asahi Shimbun* and by lawyers and activists who have been labelled "unpatriotic". In other words, according to this perspective, Korean society did not show an active awareness of this historical trauma until coverage by Japanese media and the supposedly fictional accounts of figures like Seiji Yoshida "opened the floodgates" to this claim.

Returning to the official narrative, none of these apologies have been seen as sincere, since while a discourse of forgiveness is articulated, actions go in a different direction, such as visits to Yasukuni.

First, none of these apologies from Prime Ministers have ever been ratified by the Parliament, showing a lack of official and institutional recognition, limiting these to being mere statements by cabinet members.

It is also crucial to discuss Shinzo Abe, because during his first term, in March 2007, he declared in the Parliament that there was no evidence that these women were forcibly recruited. Moreover, after signing the 2015 agreement, he stated that there were no records which proved that comfort women were mobilized against their will.

Taking all this into account, it could be considered that the Japanese apologies have not been considered as sincere by Korean people and survivors due to the lack of official recognition and the disparity between the narrative of the statements and the actions taken.

6.3. The Korean narrative

During the early years after World War II, the issue of the comfort women was completely nonexistent because the victims chose not to go public, as the society of that era was heavily influenced by Confucian moral norms, and they would have been labelled a disgrace.

The Korean society as well as the activists reject the military euphemism of “comfort women” and promote the term Japanese military sex slaves victims.

Also, it is crucial to discuss the Asian Women’s Fund, since it was structured mainly through private donations from Japanese citizens, meaning that the government avoided having the public treasury assume direct compensation, which would have also implied accepting formally having committed this state war crime.

After its establishment to deliver “atonement money” with letters of apology signed by several Prime Ministers, everything was rejected in South Korea. Activists and survivors saw this as a manoeuvre from the Japanese government to avoid direct state reparations. As a countermeasure, the Korean one launched its own financial support program for them.

Subsequent to the Naoto Kan Statement, survivors and civil society considered it as empty words due to the fact sexual slavery victims were not even addressed nor a single time and, of course, no path towards legal reparations were mentioned.

In addition, after the Kono Statement and following its guidelines, Japanese textbooks incorporated mentions about comfort women issue. Nevertheless, due to the pressure from revisionist groups such as Society for History Textbook Reform (*Tsukurukai*) and a Cabinet decision from April 2021, these references were erased. The new ones present the system as part of the ordinary mobilization of civilian labour, which was interpreted in Korea as a hostile act of historical distortion that educates future generations in ignorance of the imperial past.

Also, according to the 1993 declaration done by The Korean Council after the Kono Statement and in my interview, they stated that: "partially acknowledged "coercion," but it did not use the clear expression "forced mobilization." It also had limitations in that it did not sufficiently address truth-finding regarding the Japanese authorities' clear involvement, the scale of the harm, or the issue of reparations (Interview 1)".

In conclusion, the Korean narrative moved the comfort women issue from the private trauma to a strong and firm collective demand for justice centered on victims and restoring their honour and dignity, also with the goal that this does not take place again in the future (Interview .)

6.4. Importance of historical memory management

As for historical memory management, we first must take into consideration memory as truth and as justice and both of them represent a base to forgiveness and reconciliation, respectively.

While talking about the first one, it is crucial to acknowledge that it is not a synonym of oblivion, but a decision that enables coexistence. Due to this, generally speaking, a state that shows forgiveness and achieves internal reconciliation also gains international credibility and institutional stability (Security Council, 2004).

In order to accomplish this, there are four steps for reconciliation in diplomatic relations, and all must be followed in order: security, ceasing hostilities; truth, reaching an agreement on historical facts, resulting in just one shared narrative; justice, deciding how to settle the debts from the past, and cooperation.

As for today, both South Korean and Japanese governments are in the second one since there is not a single and unified version.

In all of this, the comfort women issue in Korea is extremely related with their postcolonial national identity, meaning that forgiveness is not just a diplomatic act. Furthermore, for Japan, closing this would mean the closure of the topic as well as finally closing the World War II chapter.

During all the past years, some possible short-term reparation mechanisms from Japan could have been seen, such as the 1965 Normalization Treaty, the Kono Statement in 1993, in which the Japanese government admitted for the first time coercion and military involvement in "brothels".

In addition, it is crucial to note that during this whole time, there have been some oral apologies issued from individual members from the different governments but never an official document ratified by the Diet, as victims' associations do request.

However, it is important to highlight that this was just money in exchange for the Korean government's "forgiveness", never victims'.

As for long-term reparation mechanisms, in the first place, there is a necessity of creating a shared historical narrative due to the fact that lack of a common narrative creates discrepancies in how this is taught in both countries. Also, forgiveness cannot exist if revisionist sectors deny or downplay the truth. In the face of this enforced oblivion, Statues of Peace are necessary to be mentioned, especially those found right in front of the embassy and consulate, which act as memorial mechanisms (Mikyoung Kim, 2014).

Leaving Korea and Japan behind, we can see a good example of reconciliation with Germany and France because from the very first beginning the recognition was full, explicit and educational. Moreover, victims were placed at the centre of the reconciliation process, and a historical closure was achieved through a deep structural integration within the European Union.

Other examples regarding Germany are related to Spain and the bombing of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. Even though the official apology took 60 years to arrive, in 1997, the German President, Roman Herzog, sent a letter to the survivors in which explicitly acknowledged German responsibility as well as offering a formal plea for forgiveness. In addition, in November 2025, during Frank-Walter Steinmeier's official state visit to the town, he visited the victims' mausoleum together with King Felipe VI and the President of the Basque Country, and he made a floral offering. The Federal President could be seen with his head bowed and in silence as a signal of respect.

In conclusion, this could be considered the closing of the cycle and healing the wound with the town as well as with Spain's collective democratic memory (Jeffrey K. Olick, 2007).

Moving on to Poland, which was the first conquered country by the Nazis, Polish bishops sent a letter to the German ones that contained the following phrase: “We forgive and ask for forgiveness.” After this, the official one. In 1970, Willy Brandt, the West German Chancellor, visited the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes in Warsaw and, during this, fell to his knees showing vulnerability.

In the long term, joint commissions were established to revise school history textbooks, ensuring that a shared version was taught to the future generations.

Taking into account all of this, we can see that Japan used a “pay and forget” mechanism and that both governments negotiated over the heads of the victims. In addition, the past has been used as a political weapon in current commercial and political disputes. In the case of Germany, the international community perceived the apologies as sincere because they were accompanied by physical gestures and humility, however, as for Japan, it has only been attempted through financial compensation and formal agreements.

6.5. Comfort women in the present day

When discussing the current situation of the comfort women, probably the first thing that should be addressed is the biological factor due to the fact, out of the approximately 200,000 Korean victims, only a small number remains, with most of them being over 90 years old (Byung Chan Ko, 2023). In addition, there is only a truly limited group officially registered in South Korea.

Moving on to the associations, they continue the fight for the official recognition of the Japanese State’s responsibility, for an official apology as well as the inclusion of this in the country’s school curriculum (Interview 1).

Related to this, in recent years, different South Korean courts have issued landmark rulings ordering the Japanese government to compensate the victims, nevertheless, it has been rejected due to the appellation to sovereign immunity, in other words, the principle in which one State cannot be judged by courts in another one.

Moreover, it is crucial to talk about the case of Ramsey Khalid Ismael, or also known as Johnny Somali, an American influencer with right-wing political leaning. In October 2024, a video was uploaded in which he could be seen having a disrespectful and improper behaviour toward one of the “Statues of Peace”. As a result, he was sentenced on April 15, 2026, to six months in prison and 20 days of detention for disturbing the public order, in addition to obstruction of business and the distribution of manipulated sexual material (deepfakes).

Regarding the political situation, in Korea, the National Assembly's Gender Equality and Family Committee has approved the amendment to the Victims Protection Act, criminalizing historical denial and spreading false information regarding this sexual slavery can carry penalties of up to 5 years in prison and fines up to 50 million won (Yonhap News, 2026). This was made as a response to the growth of far-right groups which held counter-protests and called the victims "voluntary prostitutes".

Furthermore, with the change of government in South Korea, the Lee Jae Myung administration is facing a political dilemma between maintaining the military alliance with the United States against North Korea and the social pressure to take a tougher line with Tokyo.

It is crucial to mention that the Sanae Takaichi government argues that the matter was settled under the 2015 agreement, which, as a result, made her administration face several criticisms for questioning the victims' testimonies.

Also, a formal request was made to install a "Statue of Peace" in Auckland, New Zealand. However, after Makoto Osawa, the Japanese ambassador in the country, sent a letter warning that it would damage bilateral relations, local authorities ended up rejecting the petition.

Finally, on March 2026, United Nations experts launched a press release in which their "grave concern" of the lack of justice and also argued that political agreements between governments, referring to the 2015 one, cannot supersede the individual right of victims to receive reparations and an official apology from the responsible State (UN Experts, 2026).

Taking all this into account, despite the progress made in various fields since Kim Hak Sun's public testimony, all these recent developments prove that the comfort women issue remains active in politics and diplomacy, not only being as a historical controversy, but also as a contemporary field of contestation involving courts, civil society, denialist groups, international organizations and bilateral diplomacy.

7. Conclusions

Taken together, the analysis shows that the comfort women issue cannot be understood solely as a historical controversy, as its persistence has been shaped by incomplete, inconsistent and often politically mediated responses from both governments, from the initial reluctance of the Roh Tae Woo administration to address the issue publicly to Japan's attempts to bring the matter to a formal closure through financial and diplomatic agreements.

In relation to the research question ("How have the mismanagement of historical memory and the political instrumentalization of the comfort women shaped diplomatic relations between the Republic of Korea and Japan?"), since there have been presidents with different ideologies in Korea, the narrative regarding the comfort women and the relationship with Japan has shifted over time, moving from firmer stances toward Tokyo to attempts to resolve the conflict through financial means without even taking the victims into account.

Regarding the Japanese government, it has never fully acknowledged the totality of its actions. The letters from Prime Ministers were written on an individual basis. Furthermore, none of these 'attempts at apologies' through official statements were ever submitted to the Diet for approval.

Moreover, the coercion and the fact that these young girls and women were taken by force, against their will, to be raped have never been fully recognized. Additionally, Prime Ministers such as Shinzo Abe have even displayed a double standard by attempting to close the matter with money, while subsequently declaring that there is no documentary evidence regarding these events, thereby casting doubt on the victims' accounts to delegitimize them.

Although the Korean government has pressured Japan in certain ways, it also articulated a similar system for U.S. soldiers, which makes it necessary to raise the question whether there are governments currently involved in systems of sexual slavery, such as the camouflaged towns.

It can also be concluded that it was difficult for the truth to come to light due to two factors: the Confucian values of Korean society after the Korean War and the attempt by the Japanese government and military to destroy all evidence. This also leads one to wonder if there are other war crimes committed by the country, or indeed in any armed conflict, that has been successfully hidden through the destruction of evidence.

At present, much remains to be done, and it is important to highlight the role of associations and civil society, as they continue to ensure that the issue is kept in the public eye and not forgotten. Even though the real number or the full extent will never be known, it is of

vital importance to achieve official recognition from the Japanese government and subsequent apologies, along with mechanisms for reparation and reconciliation, not only for the survivors but also to create collective awareness through education in classrooms about the comfort women issue, so that in the future, women will not be used in the same way as they were by the Japanese army.

If both societies manage to reach peace by definitively resolving conflicts such as this one, it is possible that, in the future, South Korea and Japan could achieve a high degree of cooperation that might allow them to position themselves as partners, similar to what occurred with Germany and France and their subsequent integration into the European Union.

In summary, it can be stated that if the victims had been placed at the centre of the problem from the very beginning, we would be talking about a change in the current narratives. Although there are other factors that strain diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan, this would not be one of them, or at least not to the same extent.

This is not about being in favour of or against the Japanese or Korean narrative, but about standing with the victims so that, in the future, there will be no more cases like that of the comfort women.

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Interview with The Korean Council, conducted by email on May 20th, 2026

Annex: Interview

What are the association's short-term and long-term objectives?

The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (The Korean Council) aims from the perspective of women, human rights, and peace, to work together with international citizens toward the resolution of the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery, as well as the resolution of violations of women's human rights and sexual exploitation in conflict situations, and toward peace without war.

Specifically, its main goals are to achieve a survivor-centered and just resolution of the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery, including acknowledgment of the facts, an official apology, and legal reparations, and to remember, record, and educate about this issue.

Do you maintain any type of record regarding the total number of victims who are still alive in Korea?

The Korean Council regularly visits victim-survivors monthly, and from the early stages of the movement, has carried out support activities and activities for systemic improvement for the restoration of their lives, honor, and dignity, including support for victim-survivors overall daily lives and funerals.

Records of the activities of survivor-victims who carried out various activities together with this organization, as well as records and belongings of survivor-victims who participated in the past operation of the shelter, are managed in the storage facility of the Women's Human Rights and Peace Center under the organization. In addition, together with archivists, we operate the War and Women's Human Rights Archive, managing related records, making them public, and providing materials.

However, officially, victims' reports and personal information records concerning overall daily life are held by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family of the Korean government and the Korea Women's Human Rights Institute, and the implementation and management of related projects are also handled by those institutions. In addition, grassroots civil society organizations or history museums in the regions where survivor-victims reside also collect related records.

A few days ago, some articles came out mentioning that the fence in front of the Statue of Peace, the one located right in front of the Japanese Embassy, has been removed. Why was the decision made to fence it off initially, and what is the significance

of its removal now, especially to you as victims' association? Moreover, why does the statue in front of the Consulate General in Busan remain fenced off?

Since 2019, so-called "history denialists" have taken to the streets and begun to deny and distort the historical facts of the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery and to call for the removal of *the Statue of Peace.* They have continuously attempted to threaten and vandalize *the Statue of Peace.*

In Korea, there are approximately 150 memorials of various forms related to the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery, and each has different groups responsible for its management and construction. *The "Statue of Peace"* in Jongno, in front of the Japanese Embassy, is one of them and one such form, and was established by the Korean Council to commemorate the 1,000th Wednesday Demonstration. The Korean Council requested that the Jongno District Office and the Jongno Police Station protect the statue from threats, and, as a protective measure, fences were installed in 2020.

On February 12, *the ACT ON PROTECTION, SUPPORT AND COMMEMORATIVE PROJECTS FOR SEXUAL SLAVERY VICTIMS FOR THE JAPANESE IMPERIAL ARMY*, passed the plenary session of the National Assembly (to be implemented in June), and on March 20, Kim Byeong-hun, who is considered the representative of *"National Action for Abolition of the Comfort Women Act,"* which has insulted the victims and continuously threatened the Wednesday Demonstration, was arrested, and as a result, they no longer came out near the area. Accordingly, the Korean Council requested the Jongno Police Station to remove the fences so that citizens could once again approach *the Statue of Peace* closely, and so that it could again reach the public as a statue that speaks of women's human rights and peace.

In the case of the fences around the *Statue of Peace* near the Busan Consulate General, from early 2024, history denialists visited memorials established across the country and, under the name of a "challenge," committed insults and acts of terror, such as covering them with black plastic bags and putting masks with "removal" written on them over them. In fact, in 2024, they committed insulting and vandalizing acts four times against *the Statue of Peace* established at the rear gate of the Japanese Consulate General in Dong-gu, Busan. Specific acts included (i) covering it with a black plastic bag with "removal" written on it, (ii) putting a mask with "removal" written on it over it, (iii) placing a can of Japanese beer on the head of the statue, (iv) pouring Japanese beer onto the lap of the statue, and (v) sitting next to the statue and eating sushi. To protect the statue from such acts, civic groups in Busan requested the competent police to protect the statue, and after that, fences were installed.

Why do you think the "Wednesday Demonstrations" in front of the Japanese Embassy continue to be held so actively after so many years since the first one took place?

First, this is because the Japanese government has not taken proper measures regarding the seven demands that have been made to the Japanese government at the Wednesday Demonstration.

In the past, victim-survivors themselves participated in the Wednesday Demonstration and continued to make these demands, and many citizens took part together with them. Now, as most of the victim-survivors are elderly or have passed away, it has become difficult for them to participate in person, but in the past, victim-survivors gained greater courage through solidarity with civil society, while civil society also experienced the Wednesday Demonstration as a space of education, learning through the testimonies and words of the victim-survivors.

Since then, the Wednesday Demonstration has expanded into a space that speaks not only about the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery, but also about violence, sexual violence, violence against women, war, genocide, and other issues that continue today. In other words, it has developed into a public forum for discussing human rights, peace, and women's rights.

Every week, the Wednesday Demonstration is hosted by the Korean Council, but the organizing group differs each time. These groups include civic organizations, schools, religious organizations, labor unions, and others. Each week, these groups prepare solidarity speeches and share their diverse agendas in opposition to colonialism, imperialism, and militarism.

As an association dedicated to the issue of "comfort women," what was the reaction following the 1993 Kono Statement? Can this be considered a small step on Japan's part toward the official recognition of sexual slavery?

We will respond by quoting part of the organization's statement at the time, on August 4, 1993.

"[It is] an announcement that avoids the essence of the matter as a war crime, and no attitude of taking legal responsibility can be found. It is making a partial acknowledgment only to the extent that it avoids responsibility while subtly evading it."

"As for the most controversial issue of 'coercion,' it is a very weak partial acknowledgment that does not even meet the level we had expected."

"They must not try to hastily conclude this under the Miyazawa administration. We hope that Japan's new government will seriously address this matter with the position that postwar Japan's legal responsibility must be made clear. For the truth finding investigation, we

hope that the Japanese government and the Diet will supplement the problems pointed out above and submit a third report."

The Kono Statement partially acknowledged "coercion," but it did not use the clear expression "forced mobilization." It also had limitations in that it did not sufficiently address truth-finding regarding the Japanese authorities' clear involvement, the scale of the harm, or the issue of reparations.

Regarding forgiveness and reconciliation, what factors have caused the alleged apologies offered by Japan to be perceived as insincere?

The Japanese government has not officially acknowledged that this issue constituted a system of "sexual slavery" systematically operated and managed by the Japanese Empire and military at the time, and that it was a war crime. It also rejects the term "sexual slavery."

Because the "apologies" were made without such acknowledgment, it is difficult for the victims and civil society to accept them as sincere apologies. In addition, Japanese prime ministers have repeatedly reversed their positions or avoided clear expressions of responsibility, using phrases such as "personal expressions of regret." Especially from the administration of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe onward, there have been repeated active attempts at history denial and reversals of acknowledgment of responsibility. There have also been continued attempts to "re-examine" statements such as the Kono Statement in order to invalidate them.

A representative case is the "2015 Korea-Japan Comfort Women Agreement," which Korean victim-survivors, civil society, and intergovernmental organizations have repeatedly criticized for lacking a victim-centered principle. At the time of the agreement, former Prime Minister Abe officially stated in a phone call with former President Park Geun-hye that, as Prime Minister of Japan, he expressed his "most sincere apologies and remorse" to the comfort women victims. However, when Korea later requested that a "letter of apology" in Prime Minister Abe's name be sent to the victim-survivors, he dismissed the request, saying that he was "not thinking about it even one bit."

Japanese officials and government figures, including former Prime Minister Abe, have repeatedly reversed their positions or continued to make remarks denying the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery, colonial rule, wars of aggression, and war crimes, including current Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi.

In reviews by treaty bodies of intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations, it has also been pointed out several times in concluding observations that the Japanese

government and public officials' continued treatment of this issue as a subject of refuting, or their repeated denial of facts, may cause re-traumatizing victim-survivors. (CAT/C/JPN/CO/2)

In comparison to the case of Germany, which was an ally of Japan during World War II, to what extent might the current situation be different if the victims had been placed at the center of the process from the very beginning, like Germany did?

From the beginning, or even today, resolving the issue through a victim-survivor-centered approach would greatly contribute to restoring their honor and dignity. Full redress means enabling victim-survivors to recover and rebuild their lives by realizing justice from the perpetrator.

Moreover, issues of historical injustice, state violence, and wartime sexual violence, such as the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery, are not confined to the past. Continuing to discuss this issue is not only for the victim-survivors of this particular issue, but also to prevent the recurrence of similar forms of violence.

Five years after Japan's defeat in 1945 and Korea's liberation, the Korean War broke out. Thereafter, in wars and cases involving the Korean government and military, including the stationing of the U.S. military and the Vietnam War, issues such as the military "comfort women" system and wartime sexual violence also occurred. If postwar settlement, including post-war trials, had been adequately carried out, and if the relevant systems and structures of responsibility had been addressed in that process, it would have had a significant impact on preventing the recurrence of similar incidents thereafter.