CHAPTER 4

What the World Owes the Comfort Women

Carol Gluck

Fig. 4.1 Comfort Woman statue in Seoul (Carol Gluck)

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Abstract The women who served in Japan's military brothels across Asia during the Second World War are a focus of the politics of memory in East Asia as well as a touchstone for international human rights and sexual violence against women. By the 1990s, the "comfort women" had become a "traveling trope," which like the Holocaust, both recognized and transcended its original time and place. Gluck traces their "coming into memory" through changes in five areas of the evolving postwar "global memory culture": law, testimony, rights, politics, and notions of responsibility. She shows how the ideas and practices of public memory changed over time, in the course of which the comfort women became "global victims" in a transnational memoryscape.

Keywords World War II • Comfort women • Public memory
• Testimony • Global memory culture • Japan; Korea

In 2015, during the year of the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, the politics of memory in East Asia bristled with tension. The strong rhetoric and diplomatic sparring arose in the context of surging nationalisms in an ecology of public memory that since the 1990s had once again employed history as a political instrument to arouse patriotism, promote national unity, and strengthen support for the regime in power. This global phenomenon included such political leaders as Abe Shinzō in Japan, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Xi Jinping in China, Narendra Modi in India, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and a number of others who played the national history card for domestic purposes and then deployed it in international relations.

For East Asia, Russia, and Eastern Europe, World War II remained a magnetic site of memory in the polarized landscape of instrumental nationalism. No surprise then that the seventieth anniversary of the end of the war, like the fiftieth and sixtieth before it, generated a geopolitical blizzard of angry interchanges among East Asian leaders, with others, including Americans and Germans, adding their voices in an effort to calm the latest historical storms in the region. What might have been surprising, however, was the way in which the "comfort women," who served the Japanese military in brothels throughout wartime East and Southeast Asia, occupied so central a place in the geopolitics of memory in 2015. Ten years earlier in 2005, the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the war, the comfort women had figured in diplomatic tensions with South Korea, and

China together with protests against Japanese history textbooks and politicians' visit to Yasukuni, the national shrine of the war dead. In that year conservative Prime Minister Koizumi repeated the general apology for Japan's having "caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of many countries" that had been offered for the first time by socialist Prime Minister Murayama on the fiftieth anniversary in 1995. In 1995, the comfort women had indeed been a prominent government issue. Following a direct apology to former comfort women by a cabinet official in 1993 (the Kōno Statement), Prime Minister Murayama established the quasi-official Asian Women's Fund to compensate survivors, inaugurating a controversial "Atonement Project," which began in 1995 and ended in 2007.¹

Outside official circles in the public terrain of war memory, the former comfort women remained a vexed and visible presence for the remainder of the 1990s, as Chinese and South Korean leaders chastised Japan for not having confronted what they called its "history problem." Yet in most Asian countries the continued and expanded efforts to recognize and compensate the surviving comfort women took place in civil society, largely apart from the state. How then did the comfort women come to the fore in 2015 as a target of renewed government denial in Japan; a sharpened diplomatic weapon in South Korea, even overshadowing for a moment the ever sore point of Japanese colonial rule; an issue evoked in China together with the Nanjing Massacre and other wartime atrocities; a talking point for both South Korea and China in the controversies with Japan over the disputed islands in East Asian waters? One answer lay in the rising tide of nationalism in Japan, China, and South Korea, which threatened to sweep away earlier signs of transnational reconciliation and recreate the hostilities of decades past. Yet, when it came to the comfort women, no amount of nationalistic flag-waving and geopolitical name-calling was likely to alter the views of wartime violence against women that had spread

¹ "Statement by Prime Minister Junichirō Koizumi," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August 15, 2005, accessed May 3, 2020, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/announce/2005/8/0815.html>; "Statement by Prime Minister Murayama 'On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the war's end' (August 15 1995)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August 15, 1995, accessed May 16, 2020, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/press/pm/murayama/9508.html>; "Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary Yōhei Kōno on the result of the study on the issue of 'comfort women'," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August 4, 1993, accessed May 3, 2020, www.mofa.go.jp/policy/women/fund/state9308.html; "Closing of the Asian Women's fund," Asian Women's Fund, accessed May 3, 2020, www.awf.or.jp/e3/dissolution.html.

so widely during the preceding two decades. Nor would renewed Japanese denials of coercion be likely to dissuade international opinion from focusing on the injustice of the comfort women system.

The reasons for these predictions, I argue, are to be found in the changes that occurred in the ideas and practices of public memory in the second half of the twentieth century, often as a result of the conflicted processes of remembering the Second World War. Identifying five areas in what I call the *global memory culture* that evolved, largely since 1945, I suggest the ways in which the comfort women figured in each of them. The areas are *law*, changes in the legal processes treating past injustice; *testimony*, changes in the ways we know the past; *rights*, changes in notions of the obligations states and societies owe their citizens in relation to history; *politics*, changes in national and international political practice in regard to historical wrongs; and *responsibility*, changes in ideas of moral accountability for past and present actions. Entangled with one another in social practice and crossing national borders in influence and impact, these trends amounted to a sea change in the ideas of how the past is—or ought to be—collectively and publicly remembered.

LAW: CHANGES IN JUDICIAL PROCESS

Legal changes linked to the war occurred in both criminal and civil law. In criminal trials, the main trends over time included the change from a focus on perpetrators to a focus on victims; from conventional war crimes to crimes against humanity; and from legal locality to universal jurisdiction. This began of course with the Nuremberg and Tokyo War Crimes Tribunals held in Germany and Japan immediately after the war. Following conventional judicial procedure, the Allied trials assigned individual responsibility for the newly defined crimes against peace and crimes against humanity. The trial of wartime leaders had another, overtly pedagogical, goal of offering history lessons for “civilization,” which according to Justice Robert Jackson was “the real complaining party” at the bar in Nuremberg.² Thus the trials were in part *performative justice*: in this case, performing the consequences of the deeds of Nazi and Japanese officials in waging barbaric and aggressive war. The trial of the Class A war

²“Opening Statement before the International Military Tribunal,” Robert H. Jackson Center, accessed May 16, 2020, <https://www.roberthjackson.org/speech-and-writing/opening-statement-before-the-international-military-tribunal/>.

criminals in Tokyo had the *memory effect* of seeming to hold twenty-eight leaders responsible for the war while everyone else—emperor and people included—could imagine themselves as their victims.

The comfort women—or “comfort girls,” as American wartime reports referred to them—were not included in the Allied charges. They were not purposely excluded, like the biological war crimes of the Japanese army’s research Unit 731, but in part because of what might be called “familiarity blindness.” At that time, and afterward too, brothels were familiar, considered normal or necessary by a number of militaries to protect troops against venereal disease and local populations against rape. Thus although Dutch, French, and Chinese investigators presented evidence of Japanese sexual violence, it seems plausible that the comfort women system itself was not “seen” as an ethical or criminal violation: that prosecutors were as if morally “blind” to it. An exception occurred later in the so-called B-C Trials for conventional war crimes conducted by nine Allies in seven Asian countries with more than six-thousand defendants, large numbers of them charged with mistreating Allied POWs. In one such Dutch trial in Batavia in the Indies, Japanese officers were tried and convicted for “forced prostitution” of thirty-five Dutch women, a charge that derived as much from the violation of racial as of gender boundaries. In terms of public memory, the many tens of thousands of Asian comfort women remained invisible, or at least unseen, in the charges made at the postwar tribunals.³

However flawed the legal bases of the “victors’ justice” meted out at Nuremberg and Tokyo, the tribunals set the course for developing criteria and procedures for adjudicating violations of evolving international law. By the 1990s, in the International Criminal Courts for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, crimes against humanity had become central; and international legal tribunals—if still, as ever, beset with legal difficulties—had become an established means of post-conflict practice. This change occurred, not only through international law proper but through substantial changes in national courts, primarily in trials related to the Holocaust. These national trials were also *performative* and pedagogical in intent, but

³ The numbers given vary from more than 200,000, the figure commonly used by international scholars and activists, to between 20,000 and 40,000, a number associated with historian Hata Ikuhiko and echoed by conservative Japanese “denialists.” See Hata Ikuhiko, *Ianfu to senjō no sei* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1999). Chances are that some 100,000 women were involved, although in my view the exact number, while ultimately unknown, matters less than the brute fact of the extent of the “comfort women system.”

their practice—and memory effect—changed over time, until victims became almost as central as perpetrators.

Many identify a turning point in the 1961 Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem, which brought victims' stories directly into the Israeli courtroom in testimonies of survivors, including the pseudonymous Kazetnik "of the planet of Auschwitz."⁴ The testimonies continued in the 1963–65 trials of the Auschwitz guards in West German courts, which while conducted under German criminal law helped to spread knowledge of the Holocaust more widely, shifting the weight of wartime criminality toward an emphasis on crimes against humanity. In France, after the 1970s, the national obsession with the Vichy past intersected over time with the increasing prominence of Holocaust memory. By the late 1990s, in the trial of Maurice Papon for his role in the wartime deportation of Jews, the testimonies of family members and the photographs of victims projected on the courtroom walls made the trial into a form of what some have called *commemorative justice*.⁵ Before the long tail of Holocaust justice reached its end as the last perpetrators died, the trials in national courts had helped over the years to alter the script of war crimes adjudication. Other official, quasi-judicial procedures developed that paid similar attention to the importance of victims' stories, in particular, modes of transitional justice like Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, which performed the past for the sake of recognition of grievous wrongs in Latin America, South Africa, and elsewhere. Often cloaked as much in moral as in legal authority, these commissions attempted to provide a kind of *restorative justice*, whose aim was to heal society, not leave it forever divided into victims on one side and perpetrators on the other.

These altered national scripts of memory politics had significant effects on international law, including, for example, the assertion of universal jurisdiction in the form of the end of legal impunity for heads of state, as represented by the case of the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet in 1998–2000. Transnational discourses on human rights led to the inclusion of rape as a crime against humanity in the Rome Statute of the

⁴ His real name was Yehiel Dinur, though he later became famous as Kazetnik, "inmate of a concentration camp." For part of his testimony (Sessions 68, 69), see The Nizkor Project, accessed May 4, 2020, <http://www.nizkor.com/ftp.cgi/people/e/eichmann.adolf/transcripts/Sessions>.

⁵ Nancy Wood, "The Papon Trial in an 'Era of Testimony'," in *The Papon Affair: Memory and Justice on Trial*, ed. Richard L. Golsan (London: Routledge, 2000), 96–114 (here 96–97).

International Criminal Court in 1998. In each phase of the numerous legal justifications for this landmark statute, the arguments referred to the “Asian comfort women,” who had raised their voices in public at around the same time in the early 1990s that Bosnian “rape camps” and women’s rights—or as it was then expressed, the human rights of women—drew the international spotlight. Just as the Holocaust became a global example of genocide, so did the comfort women become a touchstone for new international law relating to the violence against women in war. And so rape, a violation as old as warfare itself, became a crime against humanity in international law. The first conviction for employing rape as a weapon of war occurred in the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague in 2001.⁶

The second area of legal change relating to World War II appeared in the increasingly important civil trials, which adjudicated claims filed by individuals or by groups in class-action suits, for redress, restitution, and compensation for grievances suffered during the war. The demands concerned compensation for individuals, as distinguished from reparations exacted between states. Moreover, these individuals or groups were not only suing their own governments, they were also making direct legal claims against foreign states and foreign corporations. And they frequently did so without the assistance of their national governments, or even in the face of state opposition. Amid the surge of civil suits during the 1990s, many related to the Holocaust, the comfort women, too, went to court. Indeed, the 1991 class-action lawsuit filed by three Korean former comfort women and others against the Japanese government accelerated the process of the comfort women *coming into memory* in the broader public landscape of views of the wartime past.

Their existence, after all, had never been a secret in Japan. The comfort women appeared in newspapers, novels, films, nonfiction accounts, and in parliamentary discussion about the relief law for former Japanese comfort women.⁷ Nonetheless, somewhat like the impact of the Holocaust survivor testimonies at the Eichmann trial, the initial civil suit and public

⁶For this and other cases of rape in international courts, see Mark Ellis, “Breaking the Silence: Rape as an International Crime,” *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 38, no. 2 (2006–7): 225–47.

⁷For the Diet questioning about relief for former Japanese comfort women, Ikeya Kōji, “‘Ianfu’engo jitsurei ni kansuru kokkai shingi,” *Senjō sekinin kenkyū* 33 (Autumn 2001): 76–81.

statements by the Korean women in 1991 made the comfort women *visible* to a wider public. In this and subsequent suits Japanese courts routinely denied the plaintiffs' claims, basing their denial on earlier state-to-state treaties, such as the one concluded between Japan and South Korea in 1965; the lack of provision in international law for claims by individuals; or the statute of limitations, which for civil suits in Japan was twenty years. Yet, as Japanese courts continued to rule against the plaintiffs for damages, the introductory narratives and appendices of the negative judgments began to acknowledge violations of international law, coercion, suffering and even the responsibility (but not the obligation) of the government to recognize them. In suits filed by Korean, Filipino, Chinese, Taiwanese, and Dutch women, the courts rejected compensation, but a number of judges recognized the truthfulness, the "irrefutable historical evidence," of the plaintiffs' accounts of abduction, brutality, and violence.⁸ The *compensatory, or reparative, justice* denied in these failed lawsuits nonetheless reflected and affected the changing public memory of the comfort women in Japan and around the world.

Yet it is clear that criminal and civil trials are imperfect vehicles for dispensing justice on matters like war responsibility and wartime sexual violence, not least because the law is not designed to put history on trial. Rules of evidence, burdens of precedent, and the generally conservative character of legal systems limit what national and international courts can do, even when they are so minded. Still, it is true that the body of international law accumulated since the end of World War II contributed to what one scholar termed "trans-temporal justice," and others refer to as "memory-justice."⁹ In their *performative, commemorative, restorative, and compensatory* roles, the criminal and civil trials helped to change the law and also the way in which the darkest parts of the past were regarded. They had, in short, a powerful memory effect.

⁸Tsubokawa Hiroko and Ōmori Noriko, *Shibō ga nintei shita Nihongun "ianfu": higai-kagai jijitsu wa kesenai!* (Kyoto: Kamogawa shuppan, 2011).

⁹Kohki Abe. "International Law as Memorial Sites: The Comfort Women Lawsuits Revisited," *Korean Journal of International and Comparative Law* 1, no. 2 (2013): 166–87 (here 181–82); Christopher J. Piranio and Edward Kanterian, "Memory, Justice and the Court: On the Dimensions of Memory-Justice under the Rome Statute," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 24, no. 3 (2011): 425–47.

TESTIMONY: CHANGES IN THE WAY WE KNOW THE PAST

The second area of change is epistemological, a result of the expanded role of testimony as a window on history. We live, one French historian said, in “the era of the witness,” epitomized by the 1990s, when individual testimonies of personal wartime experience overflowed the courtroom, the memoir, and social memory circles to become one of the main currencies of public memory and an increasingly recognized source of knowledge about the past.¹⁰ In many instances the signal importance of witnessing had to do with the nature of the crimes and injustices at issue. They were often not documented, not recorded, not written down, and indeed in many cases, they were actively covered up, the evidence of their existence destroyed or expunged. This was as true of state crimes against the Disappeared in Latin America in the 1970s as of the civil violence of the Rwandan genocide in the 1990s. The deportation of the Jews of Western Europe and the extermination camps to which they were sent were indeed documented, sometimes in horrifying detail. But the so-called Holocaust by bullets in Eastern Europe, in which millions of Jews were killed in mass shootings, left mostly traces of mass graves and ghostly villages as evidence of its murderous horror.¹¹ How often it happened during the massacres of civilians, which occurred in so many regions during World War II, that there was “just one witness,” frequently someone who had climbed out from under a pile of corpses as the sole survivor of the mass murder that took place on that spot.¹² The question then became: Was just one witness sufficient to know the truth of what happened there? Or, to use the language of a common challenge to the value of oral testimony, whether made near to the events or at a great distance of time: No documents, no historical truth. This modern conceit, so long established and so deeply believed—that history must be derived from written sources—came in fact to be regarded differently in the era of the witness than it was in earlier years. The voices of the victims had been heard. Testimonies of Holocaust

¹⁰ Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

¹¹ See Patrick Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

¹² Carlo Ginzburg, “Just One Witness,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”*, ed. Saul Friedländer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 82–96. Ginzburg’s context is different but the Roman formulation of “one witness, no witness” presents the same legal problem here.

survivors now numbered in the tens of thousands, joined by those of others who suffered in, or suffered through, the war.¹³ Ordinary people, most of them, their voices were supplemented at times by those of equally ordinary perpetrators, not concentration camp commandants but Polish villagers, not military leaders in Tokyo but soldiers who used the comfort stations in Asia. These testimonies raised the epistemological challenge of how to know the past in order to do justice to it.

There is no doubt that the testimonies of former comfort women proved crucial in the process of their coming into public memory.¹⁴ After 1991, when Kim Hak-sun, the first Korean comfort woman to tell her story publicly, appeared in South Korean and Japanese media, the gathering of witnesses, oral histories, interviews, and testimonies across Asia gradually amassed a powerful archive of overlapping accounts of comfort women who served the imperial Japanese military throughout its areas of wartime occupation. These by then elderly women told of brutality and horror about which many had long remained silent—out of trauma, shame, or survival instinct. They were now old enough to tell their stories and to want their stories heard. And in a late twentieth-century social context altered by feminism, women's rights, concerns about sexual violence, and local, regional, and global challenges to the deficits in Japan's war memory, there were people willing to listen to them and to help them seek justice so long deferred. "I want to shake the whole world," said one former Korean comfort woman, and together with others who recounted their experiences, shake the world they did.¹⁵ The public power of private stories proved enormous. In the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, held in Tokyo in 2000 as a "people's tribunal" on Japanese

¹³For example, the 55,000 video testimonies in the Visual History Archive of the USC Shoah Foundation, which began as a Holocaust archive but expanded to other genocides, in which it includes the Nanjing Massacre, <https://sfi.usc.edu/>.

¹⁴Although for the sake of simplicity I refer to the former comfort women, it is important to stress that they were aided, supported, and funded by a transnational network of activists and civil organizations throughout their efforts to obtain redress. Stephanie Wolfe notes this difference from Japanese-American and Jewish redress movements: *The Politics of Reparations and Apologies* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 2013), 245.

¹⁵"Shake the whole world": Hwang Koom Ja in the documentary film by Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women* (see her book with the same title (Parkersburg, IA: Mid-Prairie Books, 1999). The documentary includes testimonies of soldiers as well as comfort women. See also the documentary *Shusenjo: The Main Battleground of the Comfort Women Issue* by Miki Dezaki (2018), which includes comments from all sides, including deniers.

military sex slavery with international prosecutors and judges, nearly seventy former comfort women attended, twenty of whom told their stories as witnesses before the mock tribunal.¹⁶ Coming from nine countries, including East Timor and North Korea, most of them did not know one another, and many had never spoken publicly (or even privately) of what they had suffered. Two former Japanese soldiers testified, too, but it was the women whose stories made the tribunal a testament to a still largely unrecorded history.

The reasons for this are well known. Rape and sexual violence are among the most difficult experiences to trace, or even talk about, especially for their female victims, whether in peacetime or in war. In addition, it appears that there was no extensive documentation of the comfort women system, and much of what might have existed was either destroyed or did not survive the end of the war. That the imperial Japanese army established or encouraged military brothels was clear from documentary evidence unearthed by the historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki in 1992, after the three Korean former comfort women came forward with their stories.¹⁷ Japanese military brothels—the “comfort women system”—were part of a sprawling, far-flung, and diverse operation that ranged from the Philippines in the Pacific to the Nicobar Islands in the Indian Ocean, but it was one that did not leave much of a paper trail. What it did leave was human evidence in the testimonies of the former comfort women, which provided accounts of systematic violations of human rights.

Abe Shinzō, Diet member and twice prime minister, held a different view. Elected to the Diet in 1993, he campaigned with conservative allies

¹⁶Some testified on video, some in person. For the 2001 judgment, which found the Japanese government guilty of crimes against humanity in “state-sanctioned rape and enslavement,” see “The Prosecutors and the Peoples of the Asia-Pacific Region v. Hirohito Emperor Showa et al.,” International Crimes Database, accessed May 16, 2020, <http://www.internationalcrimesdatabase.org/Case/981/The-Prosecutors-and-the-Peoples-of-the-Asia%E2%80%93Pacific-Region/>. For testimonies of former Chinese comfort women, See Peipei Qiu, Su Zhuliang and Chen Lifei, *Chinese Comfort Women: Testimonies from Imperial Japan’s Sex Slaves* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013).

¹⁷Yoshimi Yoshiaki became a central scholar and activist in the movement for redress for the comfort women and recognition of state responsibility for the wartime system of sex slavery. *Jūgun ianfu shiryōshū* (Tokyo: Ōtsuki shoten, 1992); *Jūgun ianfu* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1995). In English: Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*, trans. Suzanne O’Brien (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Kaishun suru teikoku: Nihongun ianfu mondai no kitei* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2019).

against what they called “masochistic history” in the late 1990s.¹⁸ As prime minister in 2006–07, Abe denied that the comfort women had suffered “coercion in any narrow sense”—something that his own party had admitted in the 1993 Kōno statement—since nothing “in the documents” confirmed such a view.¹⁹ Then, more aggressively in his second term as prime minister beginning in late 2012, Abe made the comfort women a focus in the run-up to the seventieth anniversary of the end of the war in 2015. He commissioned a report intended to discredit the Kōno statement and continued to deny what he called the “baseless, slanderous claims” of sexual slavery and the forcible taking (*kyōsei renkō*, forced labor) of women.²⁰ Instead, the comfort women were prostitutes who voluntarily signed up, young women duped by Korean or Chinese civilian recruiters, or daughters either sold by their parents or driven by poverty to sell themselves. While women of these backgrounds could be found in the brothels, so, too, were young girls forcibly taken and forcibly prevented from escaping the brutal physical treatment to which many were later subjected. To make the argument against coercion—and the national dishonor associated with trafficking and sex slavery—the government and its nationalistic supporters denigrated the testimonies of the former comfort women as—in their words—subjective, inconsistent, nebulous, unreliable, and as just

¹⁸ Masochistic (*jigyakuteki*) history was associated with the revisionist *jiyūshugi shikan* (liberal view of history) founded by Fujioka Nobukatsu in 1995 and with the Atarashii rekishi kyōkasho o tsukuru kai [Society for History Textbook Reform], formed in 1996. Abe was the secretary of the Young Diet Members Group for Japan’s Future and History Education, established in 1997, supporting the revisionist textbooks and countering the recent public accounts of the comfort women. For a summary of the range of right-wing revisionism, see Sven Saaler, “Nationalism and History in Contemporary Japan,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal-Japan Focus* 14, issue 20, no. 7 (October 2016): 1–17, <https://apjif.org/2016/20/Saaler.html>.

¹⁹ Abe made these comments on March 5, 2007 to the Budget Committee of the Upper House, and repeated them on more than one occasion. For Abe and the revisionists, see Hayashi Hirofumi, “Disputes in Japan over the Japanese Military ‘Comfort Women’ System and Its Perception in History,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 617 (May 2008): 123–32; Hayashi Hirofumi, Tawara Yoshifumi and Watanabe Mina “*Muryama-Kōno danwa*” *minaoshi no sakugo: rekishi ninshiki to ‘ianfu’ mondai o megutte* (Kyoto: Kamogawa shuppan, 2013).

²⁰ “Details of Exchanges Between Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) regarding the Comfort Women Issue – From the Drafting of the Kōno Statement to the Asian Women’s Fund – (Provisional Translation),” Cabinet Secretariat, June 20, 2014, accessed May 4, 2020, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/documents/2014/140620.html.

“confused memories.”²¹ In 2016 UNESCO was considering a joint nomination by civic organizations in nine countries to include documents collectively entitled “Voices of the Comfort Women” in the International Memory of the World Register. Pressure from the Abe government resulted in a postponement of the matter in 2017, again with its allies claiming that the testimonies offered no persuasive proof of coercion.²² But postponement or no, the ideologically driven government position did little to diminish the value of the women’s testimonies in a world by now grown accustomed to relying on individual voices as a source of first-hand knowledge about the past.

Experts in several fields recognize the limits to the epistemological value of personal testimony, not least for accounts rendered more than a half-century later. Experience and neuroscience have both shown that human memory is malleable, that it changes over time, and that it is affected both by subsequent events and also by the stories that are socially available and acceptable at any given moment. Oral histories are influenced by interviewers and the questions they ask while testimonies of people with similar experiences, such as Holocaust survivors or comfort women, are also influenced by one another, as suggested by the so-called model comfort woman story that emerged in the early 1990s.²³ Many accounts followed a similar narrative arc, beginning with when the women were taken, by deception or force, at a young age, then recounting the hellish treatment in the brothels, ending with the physical and psychic aftermath of pain and shame after the war was over. While the details differed, the narrative template could sometimes flatten, omit, or embellish

²¹ For a scholarly but typical example, Hata Ikuhiko, *Ianfu to senjo no sei* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1999); expanded English version, Hata Ikuhiko *Comfort Women and Sex in the Battle Zone* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2018).

²² For example, a letter from Japanese scholars supporting the government’s position: “Over 100 Scholars Oppose UNESCO Registration of ‘Comfort Women’ Documents,” Japan Forward, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://japan-forward.com/89-japanese-scholars-oppose-unesco-registration-of-comfort-women-documents/>.

²³ Ueno Chizuko and Jordan Sand, “The Politics of Memory: Nation, Individual and Self,” *History and Memory* 11, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1999): 129–52 (here 143–44); Ueno Chizuko, Araragi Shinzō and Hirai Kazuko, eds., *Sensō to senbōryoku no hikakushi ni mukete* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2018). For “the paradigmatic story,” see C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008), 46–51.

things, just as time, temperament, and trauma affected individual memories of their personal pasts. Even so, there could never be a single comfort women story. For whether read separately or taken as a whole, the diversity of experience among the comfort women came through well and true. To be sure, scholars continued to argue about the relative evidentiary weight of testimony and written sources, exemplified by the contrasting views of Yoshimi Yoshiaki and Ueno Chizuko, both standing in opposition to the nationalistic revisionists.²⁴ Despite the alleged difference between Yoshimi's insistence on the historian's normal practices of verification of the facts, whether in documents or testimonies, and Ueno's poststructuralist accommodation of multiple truths and subjective agency in the stories told by the comfort women, in the end the two scholars and activists shared rather similar views. In fact, it was not the historian Yoshimi but the right-wing nationalists who were document-obsessed, on the one hand—denying the military brothel system because of the lack of written proof—and dismissive of the comfort women's testimonies as “fabrications” because of inconsistencies and factual errors, on the other.²⁵

And yet, it seems clear to almost everyone—except Japanese conservative nationalists—that the comfort women were telling stories they did not invent and relating experiences that were common enough to appear in testimonies across a broad swath of Asia and among radically diverse groups of women. It is also clear that the soldiers who used the comfort stations told of their experiences, too, both before and after the comfort women came forth to tell of theirs. It follows that insistence on the utter unreliability of testimony is untenable, precisely because the assemblage of witnesses produced what even Japanese courts called irrefutable knowledge of past injustice. This epistemological change—a change in accepted modern ways of historical knowing based not on new but on renewed respect for the evidence of testimony, came about largely through remembering the atrocities of the Second World War.

²⁴Ueno Chizuko, “Kioku no seijigaku: kokumin, kojīn, watashi,” *Inpakushon* 103 (1997), 154–74.

²⁵For example, one of the many tendentious articles distributed by the right-wing Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact: Nishioka Tsutomu, “Behind the Comfort Women Controversy: How Lies Become Truth,” accessed May 16 2020, <http://www.sdh-fact.com/book-article/229/>.

RIGHTS: CHANGES IN THE REALM OF RIGHTS

After law and testimony, the third marked change in memory practices occurred in the realm of rights, where public memory came to be linked to social justice of a civic sort. In many cases, this link appeared early in claims for the rights of the unincorporated. Because dominant national narratives of the war began as simple black-and-white stories with a putatively unified nation as the subject of the story, they naturally excluded the wartime experiences of many people. Over the postwar years, those who were not included in the main national narratives of the war worked to have their stories recognized in the commons of public memory. These memory activists, as I have long called them, were countless in number, reflecting wartime experience of every conceivable kind, including all points across the political spectrum. Their associations and their activism brought pressure “from below”—from outside the state—on behalf of their *rights of memory*, thus providing one of the main levers of change in the all-too-simple narratives of the war so long dominant in official and popular memory.²⁶

What then are the rights of memory? Those excluded from the national story of the past, and often disadvantaged in the national society of the present—frequently but not always victims—typically sought a combination of four demands: recognition, which included both knowledge and acknowledgment of their experience; compensation, as a measure of redress for injury done to them; education, in order to transmit that knowledge to future generations; and public apology, as open expression of remorse for the injustices of the past. Monetary compensation was important but generally secondary—for how could money redeem such incalculable loss?—while *knowledge and acknowledgment* appeared as the main demand. And the source of that acknowledgment had to be public, official, with the authority of history behind it, which nearly always meant the state. It had also to be visible, in the form of public memorials, commemorative anniversaries, parliamentary resolutions, and the like. Recognition had to include an educational component, which so many memorials came to do, whether of the Holocaust or African-American slavery. The proliferation of “memorial museums” in the late twentieth

²⁶ Carol Gluck, “Operations of Memory: ‘Comfort Women’ and the World,” in *Ruptured Histories: War, Memory, and the Post-Cold War in Asia*, eds. Sheila Miyoshi Jaeger and Rana Mitter (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 47–77.

century reflected this injunction, which was a combination of “never forget” and “never again.” Similar patterns appeared in nearly every society, not only in regard to war memory but to many forms of past grievances, from state violence in Latin America to racial apartheid in South Africa. And these rights of memory were understood and demanded, not in judicial or emotional terms, but as *civil rights* or *social rights*—claims made by citizens on the state and society on the basis of human rights.

Such were the claims made in the testimonies of the former comfort women. They spoke of justice: “I want to see justice done before I die,” was a common complaint.²⁷ By justice they meant recognition of the truth of their experience, which in turn was linked to apology and compensation, both from the Japanese government. This demand was one reason why some former comfort women rejected the so-called atonement payments from the Asian Women’s Fund established in Japan in 1995 at the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war, under a government that had accepted the Kōno statement of two years earlier.²⁸ Those who did not accept the payments rejected them because the compensation came from a non-governmental organization, not from the state. Twenty years later in December 2015 an agreement between Japan and South Korea created another fund for compensation, this time from the Japanese government, but without consulting the dwindling number of surviving former comfort women and without a direct apology from Prime Minister Abe. One survivor, age eighty-eight, repeated a point she had made before: “We are not craving for money ... what we demand is that Japan make official reparations for the crime it has committed.”²⁹

The demand for education both centered on and in a number of instances also transcended gendered memory. The comfort women represented systematic sexual violence against women, which included not only

²⁷ For example, the memoir of the first Filipina *Lola* (as the former comfort women are called in the Philippines) to tell her story in public: Rosa Marie Henson, *Comfort Women: Slave of Destiny* (Manila: Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, 1996), 152.

²⁸ See <http://www.awf.or.jp/> for the official Japanese view of the fund; for a critique, Nishino Rumiko, Kim Puja and Onozawa Akane, eds. *‘Tanfu’ basshingu o koete; ‘Kōno danwa’ to Nihon no sekinin* (Tokyo: Ōtsuki shoten, 2013), in English, *The Japanese State’s Assault on Historical Truth* (London: Routledge, 2018); for a defense, Ōnuma Yasuaki, Shimomura Mitsuko, Wada Haruki, *‘Tanfu’ mondai to Ajia josei kikin* (Tokyo: Tōshindō, 1998).

²⁹ Lee Yong-soo, quoted in Choe Sang-Hun, “Japan and South Korea Settle Dispute Over Wartime ‘Comfort Women,’” *New York Times*, December 28, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/29/world/asia/comfort-women-south-korea-japan.html>.

military brothels but rape, mutilation, and murder of the sort that occurred during massacres in Nanjing and elsewhere as well as the wider range of such ongoing practices as sexual trafficking. At the same time many demands for redress avoided the conventional (male) language of the violation of female dignity, honor, or in South Korea, even “chastity.” Instead, the grievances were presented as a violation of *human rights*—not women’s rights, but the human rights of women.³⁰ In this way the activists and the survivors sought to move the comfort women from shame to rights, from injury to redress, from invisibility to citizenship. And they did so via the rights of memory.

A related idea appeared in the “Right to the Truth” articulated by the United Nations in 2006, an idea that had a long postwar history, sharpened by the demand of relatives to know the truth about the disappearances of their family members in Latin America in the 1970s, and heightened since the 1990s by war, genocide, and other violations of human rights. The UN described the right to the “full and complete truth” about gross human rights violations as “an inalienable and autonomous right, linked to the duty and obligation of the State to protect and guarantee human rights.”³¹ Moreover, since the 1990s it had become common to insist on “the universality, indivisibility, interdependence, and interrelatedness of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.”³² According to this strong, if aspirational, assertion, the right to the truth was now a right that tied doing justice to the past to civic and human rights in the present: in short, the rights of memory.

³⁰ This formulation became the rallying cry at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, informed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995, and has remained on the UN agenda ever since. See “Women’s Rights are Human Right,” The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, accessed May 16, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Events/WHRD/WomenRightsAreHR.pdf>.

³¹ “Promotion and Protection of Human Rights: Study on the Right to the Truth - Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights,” Commission on Human Rights, accessed May 16, 2020, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G06/106/56/PDF/G0610656.pdf?OpenElement>.

³² For example, “Right to the Truth 10 October 2012,” UN Human Rights Council Resolution, accessed May 16, 2020, http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Truth/Documents/A_HRC_21_7.pdf. The phrase dates at least from the World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, 1993.

POLITICS: CHANGE IN PRACTICES OF PUBLIC MEMORY

Law, testimony, rights, and now politics—the politics of memory, too, changed over the course of the decades after 1945. In domestic terms, the war was of course fought by nations in the name of nations so that war memory everywhere enshrined national ideologies of identity, pride, and sacrifice. War memory was political from the first, and subsequent shifts in domestic politics affected public memory, especially that of the institutional or official sort.

China, for example, did not much engage in large-scale national commemoration of the Second World War during the Maoist era, especially in comparison with the anniversaries of the 1949 Revolution.³³ The government view of the war focused on Chinese Communist heroism in the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance, as World War II is known in China, and took the stance that it was not the Japanese people but their militarist leaders who had been responsible for the war. Then, in the 1980s, in the context of consolidating political power after the death of Mao, shifting from class struggle to economic growth, and making overtures to Taiwan, “a new remembering” of the war began to take hold in official discourse.³⁴ The government turned to patriotic education, which presented the war with an emphasis on Japanese atrocities and Chinese victimhood. 1985, the fortieth anniversary of the end of the war, saw a national ramp-up in commemoration, including the opening of the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall, and in a nod to Taiwan, a growing recognition of the Nationalists’ contributions to the “All-nation War of Resistance.” After the democracy protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989, for reasons of strengthening state power, the government intensified patriotic education, again featuring Japanese atrocities and Chinese suffering. The intensification continued under Xi Jinping, notably around the seventieth anniversary of the end of the war in 2015. Two of three new national holidays established in 2014 commemorated the war, one on December 13 for the Nanjing Massacre, the other on September 3, for the signing of Japan’s surrender. The government designated nearly 200 national memorial sites related to the war; and on September 3, 2015, Xi Jinping presided over the largest military

³³ For official war memory before 1982 and the gap between it and popular views, see Chan Yang, *World War Two Legacies in East Asia: China Remembers the War I* (London: Routledge, 2017).

³⁴ For this phrase, see Arthur Waldron, “China’s New Remembering of World War II: The Case of Zhang Zizhong,” *Modern Asian Studies* 30, no. 4 (1996): 945–78.

parade ever held in Beijing. “History Cannot Be Distorted,” stated the title of one of Xi’s anniversary speeches, but it could clearly be instrumentalized for the sake of strengthening a political regime.

Vladimir Putin followed a similar pattern in Russia. He expanded the patriotic commemorations of Victory Day (May 9), especially on the sixtieth and seventieth anniversaries in 2005 and 2015. With the annexation of Crimea in 2014, when opposing sides were hurling epithets of “Nazis” and “fascists” at one another, Putin signed a new law making it a criminal offense to “spread intentionally false information about the Soviet Union’s activities during World War II” and “to publicly desecrate symbols of Russia’s military glory.”³⁵ The Great Patriotic War, as it is known, had long been the centerpiece of Soviet and Russian national memory, and Putin, like nationalist leaders elsewhere, was deploying the politics of the past in the name of power in the present.

In Japan, the politics of war memory played out in official terrain largely through the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), whose members over the years took positions that angered South Koreans, Chinese, and others, including many Japanese. Such incidents included prime ministers visiting Yasukuni, the shrine of the war dead; cabinet members denying the realities of the Nanjing Massacre; the Abe government refusing to recognize coercion of the comfort women; and the like. The memory politics of the LDP was partly a product of nationalist true believers, partly a position addressed to its right-wing supporters, and partly a refusal to acknowledge the way the winds of transnational memory were blowing. Notably, when the LDP fell in 1993 after nearly four decades in power, the first non-LDP prime ministers followed a different line, even traveling on what were nicknamed “apology tours” to Asian countries. When the LDP lost power again in 2009, the new prime minister immediately decided not to visit Yasukuni, suggesting that not every Japanese politician would work from the same playbook. Indeed, not every LDP leader did either. Miyazawa Kiichi, the prime minister when the Korean former comfort women filed their suit against the Japanese government in December 1991, expressed his “sincerest apology” in Seoul as early as January 1992. And Kōno Yōhei, who acknowledged military involvement in the comfort stations and the presence of coercion in his 1993 statement, was at the time the Chief Cabinet Secretary of an LDP government. But it was a different politician

³⁵ Ivan Kurilla, “The Implications of Russia’s Law against the ‘Rehabilitation of Nazism’,” *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, no. 331 (August 2014): 1–5.

and a different political context when the LDP returned to power in a coalition government in December 2012. Combining his own nationalistic beliefs with an electoral appeal to the conservative base of the party, Abe Shinzō made the comfort women a campaign issue, even pledging if elected to revise the Kōno Statement, twenty years after it was issued. Such were the domestic politics of war memory.

Yet the more decisive memory effect occurred in the arena of geopolitics. For if war memory was always national, memory of a world war was also always international. The dominant national narratives of the war originated in a geopolitical context that helped to determine the shape they took. For Japan that context was the Allied (American) occupation, which oversaw the renaming of the conflict as the Pacific War, reducing it chronologically to 1941–45, Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima, that is, the war between Japan and the United States. As a consequence the China War—total war from 1937 to 1945—faded out of the main story, and with it the wartime experiences of the peoples of East and Southeast Asia. Many in Japan accepted this congenial version of the past, which was reinforced by postwar domestic peace and prosperity, and frozen into place by the US-Japanese alliance during the Cold War. Then in the 1980s, and dramatically after the end of the Cold War in 1989, Japan confronted a different world, one in which the rise of Asia was transforming the geopolitical context, and with it, the memory of the Second World War.

In this respect, East Asia had much in common with Eastern Europe, in that both regions experienced a surge of war memory in the 1990s, as the long-dominant narratives—the Japanese story of the Pacific War under the American Cold War imperium; the Eastern European memories subsumed in a story of anti-fascism under the aegis of the Soviet Union—broke apart in contentious national and international debate about the publicly unremembered parts of the wartime past. And so it was said that the geopolitical postwar era in East Asia and Eastern Europe truly began only after 1989. The contrast with Western Europe was stark, precisely because countries like France and Germany had been working at postwar reintegration and reconciliation since the late 1940s. For this reason the geopolitics of war memory during the seventieth-anniversary year of 2015 was particularly vexed between, for example, Poland or the Baltics and Russia just as it was between Japan and South Korea, while the commemorations in Western Europe and North America seemed almost sleepy and formulaic in comparison.

For Japan, confronting its wartime past after the end of the Cold War meant dealing with the China War, thirty-five years of colonial rule in Korea, and the range of Japanese wartime actions and atrocities across East and Southeast Asia and in the Pacific. During the 1990s Koreans, Chinese and others increased the pressure on Japan to acknowledge these officially unacknowledged pasts. In this geopolitical context, in January 1992, the former Korean comfort women and their supporters began their weekly Wednesday demonstrations in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. On the day of the thousandth demonstration in 2011, the now famous bronze statue of a seated comfort woman was erected on that site. The demonstrations continued for decades afterward, even as the number of survivors shrank and their age rose to an average close to ninety. By the late 1990s, Chinese and Korean leaders had raised Japan's "history problem" to a regional political issue.

The regional issue was internationalized further as Chinese- and Korean-American and Canadian activists expanded their efforts to communicate Japanese wartime actions to wider audiences and to press for official demands on Japan to remember the Nanjing Massacre, POWs, the comfort women, and so on. There followed in the mid-2000s a series of parliamentary and congressional resolutions in Canada, the Netherlands, the EU, the US and other places, calling on Japan to confront the dark sides of its wartime past. In January 2014, the US Congress even passed a law, however ineffectual, demanding that Japan do so. Statues and memorials to the comfort women were erected in Korean-American communities in New Jersey, California, and soon other places as well, supported not only by Asian-Americans but by students, feminists, and others.³⁶ Of course, like most memory activists, these groups had their own agendas, whether of ethnic identity, gender, or local politics. But the collective outcome of their respective concerns was to take the comfort women issue across national and regional borders, adding the diverse voices of transnational civil society to those of international organizations like the United Nations. By 2017, there were statues and memorials in Germany, China, Taiwan, Australia, with proposals for more. The strenuous efforts of the Japanese government to protest the statues had the opposite of their intended effect. Indeed, it seemed as if every time Japanese diplomats opposed a memorialization of the comfort women in one place, a new

³⁶Thomas J. Ward and William D. Lay, *Park Statue Politics: World War II Comfort Women Memorials in the United States* (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2019).

statue was erected somewhere else. In fact, the comfort women had become universalized as what one scholar terms “global victims” whose “symbolic power” was by then out of Japanese or even Asian hands.³⁷

Meanwhile in the regional context, in 2011 the South Korean Constitutional Court ruled that the failure of the Korean government to seek compensation for the comfort women was a constitutional violation of the basic human rights of the victims. This unexpected judicial ruling brought law into diplomatic politics, requiring the government to engage with the issue in a new way in its relations with Japan.³⁸ After the ruling, Korean officials pursued the issue before the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva and in New York. The United Nations, whose censure of the comfort women system dated back to the 1996 Coomaraswamy report on “military sex slavery in wartime,” continued through the 2010s to call for Japan to confront the comfort women issue and settle its dispute with South Korea.³⁹ The Japanese government, for its part, continued to protest the UN reports and censure.⁴⁰ Like Japanese courts, the government argued on the basis of its long-held premise that part of the 1965 normalization of relations between the two countries included a settlement which had, in the words of the agreement, “completely and finally”

³⁷ The argument is based on Holocaust survivors and others, but the comfort women also fit the description. Carolyn J. Dean, *The Moral Witness: Trials and Testimony after Genocide* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 21–25.

³⁸ The South Korean ruling contravened the doctrine of avoiding “political questions,” a doctrine upheld in 2012 by the Philippines Supreme Court in a similar case brought by Filipino comfort women. Monica E. Eppinger, Karen Knop and Annelise Riles, “Diplomacy and Its Others: The Case of Comfort Women,” *Scholarship Commons*, Saint Louis University School of Law (2014): 23–45. For some reasons that might account for the South Korean court’s ruling, Hideki Okuzono, “South Korean Judiciary Shakes Japan-South Korea Relations,” *International Circumstances in the Asia-Pacific Series*, Japan Digital Library (March 2016): 1–12 (here 4–5).

³⁹ “Compilation of Recommendations by the UN Human Rights Bodies on the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue,” Japan/Alternative Report on the Issue of Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery May 2014, accessed May 16, 2020, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/JPN/INT_CCPR_CSS_JPN_17435_E.pdf.

For a representative official Japanese response, see e.g., Okamura Yoshifumi, “Letter from Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary for Human Rights Okamura to Chair Janina of the Committee on Enforced Disappearance,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, accessed May 16, 2020, https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/postwar/page22e_000883.html.

⁴⁰ For a summary of Japanese official rebuttals, see “Japan’s Efforts on the Issue of the Comfort Women,” *Diplomatic Bluebook 2019*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, accessed May 16, 2020, https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/postwar/page22e_000883.html.

resolved all claims made by South Korea on Japan. Koreans who thought otherwise were bolstered in their views by the 2011 ruling of the Constitutional Court demanding that the government take action on behalf of the surviving former comfort women.

Calls for compensation and “victim-centered” resolution of the dispute were accompanied by an unrelenting emphasis on the need for a government apology. Indeed, the politics of apology that developed in the decades since World War II paralleled the influence of domestic political concerns and changing geopolitics on East Asian war memory. By the end of the twentieth century it had become common to expect states to apologize to their citizens for injustices like slavery and mistreatment of indigenous peoples on the one hand, and to apologize to other states for wrongs committed during wartime and colonial rule on the other. Hence, the demands by Poland and the Baltic states for apologies from Russia for the depredations of World War II, and hence the calls on Japan for apologies to the former comfort women. The phenomenon of state apologies, which did not exist in this form seventy-five years ago, was now widespread. We live, asserted one scholar in “a guilty age.”⁴¹ Whatever one thinks of such official expressions of remorse—sincere or not—the politics of apology had become accepted, expected international practice.

When it comes to war memory, international practice matters, and not only for strictly political reasons. I have argued that change in national narratives of war is often impelled *from below*—from memory activists in civil society—but such change also comes *from outside*, from international pressure. The pressure can be geopolitical, as in the case of the reintegration of West Germany into Cold-War Europe and the demands now placed on Japan from the “neighboring countries” in post-Cold-War East Asia. International opinion plays a similar, often independent role in challenging national memories, as it did in responding to the Nazi genocide of the Jews in the years following the war and as it does currently in viewing the comfort women system as a violation of the human rights of women. Just as Holocaust memory no longer belongs to Germany alone, so, too, do the comfort women now occupy a place in transnational memory. International forces, both geopolitical and ethical, are thus not likely to cease calling on the Japanese government to follow current political practices in acknowledging past injustices.

⁴¹ Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, *A Guilty Age: Apologies for the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015).

When the Japanese and South Korean foreign ministers signed the December 2015 agreement that set up the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation to compensate the surviving comfort women, they declared the resolution to be “final and irreversible.” But the politics of memory knows no such historical finality, and it often proves reversible, too. In this case, it took no time at all to demonstrate the futility of such diplomatic wishful thinking. Indeed, it had been sabotaged at the moment of the agreement by the Japanese demand that the comfort woman statue be removed from its place in front of their embassy in Seoul, a demand met with vehement public opposition in South Korea. In a typical poll, three-quarters of the Korean respondents were against moving the statue, and an even larger number (84%) thought that Japanese government had not apologized to the former comfort women.⁴² No matter how often Japanese officials pointed to the number of public apologies Japan had offered since the first one made by Prime Minister Miyazawa in 1992, critics in Korea, China, Europe, the US, and elsewhere continued to deem them insufficient. The new South Korean president, Moon Jae-in (elected in 2017) rejected the 2015 bilateral agreement, declaring that the issue would be solved “only when the world, including ourselves and Japan, deeply reflects on sexual violence against all women.”⁴³ He made this speech on the first commemoration in 2018 of a newly established national day in memory of the comfort women on August 14, the date Korea was liberated from Japanese colonial rule in 1945. Thus, he appealed to world opinion on women’s rights on an occasion clearly linked in the public mind to an emotional evocation of Japan’s oppressive colonial and war-time rule.

This mixed appeal to transnational values and national emotions aptly mirrored the memory politics characteristic of the “age of apologies,” which itself was an outcome of a “normative cascade” that occurred over the decades since World War II. Redress and apology to the victims of past injustice became an international norm that spread together with human rights discourse and made coming to terms with the past “a tool of international politics.”⁴⁴ But it was always a tool wielded in the service of national politics as well. National pride polarized domestic opinion in

⁴² *Jiji tsūshin nyūusu*, September 2, 2016.

⁴³ *Nikkei Asian Review*, August 15, 2018.

⁴⁴ Stephanie Wolfe, *The Politics of Reparations and Apologies* (New York: Springer, 2014), 167–70, 178.

South Korea and Japan, suggesting that the “apology drama” between the two countries would continue, at least as long as conservative LDP governments remained in power in Japan.⁴⁵ Yet the changes in the global practice of memory politics also suggested that at some point, for the sake of regional and international relations, the Japanese government—however afflicted with so-called apology fatigue—would again apologize to and for the comfort women. For such are the political norms in the age of apologies.

RESPONSIBILITY: CHANGES IN ACCOUNTABILITY FOR THE PAST

The fifth change in the global memory culture since 1945 related to conceptions of responsibility. In the simplest terms, responsibility for World War II was initially assigned to demonic or militaristic leaders, then broadened to those implicated by their positions in “organizational guilt,” later widened still further to “ordinary men” who were involved in the atrocities of war, until finally it came to include society at large, bystanders as well as collaborators. Immediately after the war, both in national narratives and the international war crimes tribunals, Hitler, Mussolini, Tōjō, and their fellow leaders were considered responsible for waging aggressive war, a war that led to crushing defeat for the three Axis powers. Frequently described as a “handful” of evil or misguided leaders who misled their people, such a small number of leaders could scarcely have by themselves waged a total war that engaged all parts of state and society. In postwar reckonings with the Holocaust, the circle of official responsibility was enlarged to include organizational functionaries, so-called desk perpetrators, bureaucratic figures like Eichmann who claimed of his role in genocide that he was just “following orders.”⁴⁶ By the 1990s, the sweep of responsibility had broadened further to include “ordinary men,” who committed acts of horror, whether police battalions in the Holocaust by bullets in Eastern Europe or conscript soldiers during the Nanjing

⁴⁵ For “apology drama,” Hiro Saito, “The Cultural Pragmatics of Political Apology,” *Cultural Sociology* 10, no. 4 (2016): 448–65.

⁴⁶ Eichmann at his 1961 trial: David Cesarani, *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes* (London: Heinemann, 2004), 237–323.

Massacre.⁴⁷ Whatever coercion of command they may have experienced, they and many others, including civilians, could still be held accountable for their actions during the war.

By the end of the twentieth century the probing social histories of fascism, militarism, imperialism, and wartime occupation cast the political and moral net more widely still, implicating even more ordinary citizens, often called bystanders, whose accountability rested in their non-action, or acquiescence in the face of events they might have silently opposed, whether out of self-interest or reasonable fear of the consequences of speaking out. In short, total war now seemed to suggest total complicity. Such complicity was not the same as collective guilt, an earlier idea roundly rejected after the Second World War, but rather the responsibility of individuals in their respective civic contexts. This broadening of the range of responsibility usually derived less from the act of war itself than from moral atrocities committed in its name. The expansion of the concept of responsibility partly explained why wartime occupation and collaboration received increasing attention again after the turn of the century. In Vichy France, colonial Korea, Japanese-occupied East Indies, and many other places, the question became what made civilians behave as they did, and in what way were they to be held responsible for actions that at the time seemed sensible, useful, and even necessary.

While the idea of individual, rather than collective, responsibility gained ever greater prominence, a related question arose as to the extent of trans-generational responsibility. Across how many generations—to take the most common example—were young Germans expected to “inherit” the responsibility for the actions of their Nazi forebears. In 2004, when for the first time a German chancellor appeared with the French president at the commemoration of the Normandy landings, Chancellor Schröder suggested that “With regard to future generations, we should speak less about culpability and much more about responsibility.”⁴⁸ The *responsibility* of citizens to recognize such unsavory parts of their nation’s past as slavery and wartime atrocities is clearly different from *guilt* for having participated in them. Responsibility carries over to subsequent generations but guilt does not. The notion of “postwar responsibility” (*sengo sekinin*) used by

⁴⁷The phrase made famous by Christopher R. Browning in his *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

⁴⁸*Le Monde*, June 5, 2004.

some in Japan expressed a similar thought, if not so directly.⁴⁹ Transgenerational responsibility also relates to transgenerational justice of the sort claimed as a right to the truth for the grandchildren of the Disappeared in Latin America and in the current claims for compensation by families and descendants for injustices done to past generations during the war. One might claim that some of the young activists across the globe who took up the cause of the comfort women were themselves bearing transgenerational responsibility for violations of the human rights of women long before they or even their parents were born.

Public opinion polls on war memory conducted since the 1990s suggested that the Japanese public understood their transgenerational relation to the past. In 2009, 49% thought Japan should apologize to the comfort women, 58% of those in their thirties and forties. In 2013, 75% disapproved of Osaka Mayor Hashimoto's remark that the comfort women were necessary to "offer rest" for the soldiers. In 2014, a poll found that 64% of university students surveyed thought the Japanese government should apologize to and compensate the victims. In a July 2015 poll, in which only 6% of respondents had experienced the war, 49% considered the war a "war of aggression" and 67% thought that Prime Minister Abe should apologize for colonial rule and aggression before and after the war in his seventieth-anniversary speech in August.⁵⁰ Important here were "communities of memory" that expressed a social consensus of the sort that came to exist about slavery in most places, and would perhaps one day come to exist about sex slavery, too.⁵¹ And should that happen, it would be due in part to the former comfort women and their advocates around the world.

The stress on individual civic responsibility and the responsibility of states to their citizens and indeed to other states and *their* citizens found an echo in the thinking that underlay the United Nations commitment to R2P: Responsibility to Protect. Endorsed by the member states in 2005, the doctrine was described as a new international security and human rights norm to address the international community's failure to prevent and stop genocides, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against

⁴⁹ For example, Ōnuma Yasuaki, *Tōkyō saiban, senjō sekinin, sengo sekinin* (Tokyo: Toshindō, 2007); Takahashi Tetsuya, *Sengo sekininron* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1999).

⁵⁰ *Chosun ilbo*, October 20, 2009; *Asahi shinbun*, May 20, 2013; *Kyōdō tsūshin*, September 27, 2014; *Kyodo News* July 21, 2015.

⁵¹ W. James Booth, *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity, and Justice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

humanity. A response in part to Rwanda and Srebrenica, it enjoined the world to “never forget the victims of atrocities and crimes.” To exercise “collective responsibility” was to commit to work together to prevent them.⁵² However unreachable an ideal, it was born of the changes in ideas of historical responsibility that had occurred over the course of the twentieth century.

GLOBAL MEMORY CULTURE IN AN AGE OF RISING NATIONALISMS

The changes in law, testimony, rights, politics, and responsibility together constitute what I have been calling a *global memory culture*. Although based in part on precedents, its current form gradually emerged in the decades after 1945, to a considerable extent through debates and developments in the changing public memories of World War II. By the turn of the twenty-first century the global memory culture possessed its own norms and expectations, processes, and practices. States and societies were now expected to practice a politics of memory that included knowledge and acknowledgment of past actions; apologies and compensation to victims of injustice; education and memorialization to transmit their memory to future generations; and a general, collective, public, and official confrontation with the dark as well as the bright parts of a nation’s past. The Holocaust figured in many of the changes outlined here, from trials to notions of responsibility, transforming the Holocaust into a *traveling trope*: a transnational and global referent for genocide. In the years after 1991, the comfort women, too, became a traveling trope: a transnational and global referent for the violation of the human rights of women. If, as Ueno Chizuko said of the comfort women in 1995, it had taken fifty years to change “the shame of women” into “the crime of men,” it was also true that by the end of the 1990s people in Japan, Asia, and around the world came to know about the comfort women and what they represented.⁵³

⁵² “United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect,” accessed May 16, 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/about-responsibility-to-protect.shtml>; “Never forget the victims of Atrocities, Urges Secretary-General as He Opens Special General Assembly Session on Implementing Responsibility to Protect,” accessed May 16, 2020, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2009/ga10845.doc.htm>.

⁵³ Ueno Chizuko, “Kioku no seijigaku: kokumin, kojīn, watashi,” 154.

Their experience was written into international law in the 1998 statute of the International Criminal Court, which made wartime rape a crime against humanity, and references to the comfort women frequently appeared in the ongoing UN campaigns for the elimination of gender-based violence and the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. UN reports from the mid-1990s used the term sex slavery for the comfort women system, a term vociferously opposed by the Japanese government and other conservatives but one that became established as part of a wider international discourse on trafficking, sexual violence, and rape. When it came to apology and compensation, speakers in UN deliberations often expressed the position held by South Korean officials and transnational civil society activists alike that human rights violations would not be settled “until the victims received satisfaction.”⁵⁴ This victim-centered understanding of past (and present) injustices was itself a product of the global memory culture. In this instance it meant that the demands of the surviving former comfort women had to be satisfied; the issue could not be settled by the state without their participation—a criticism leveled at the “final and irreversible” 2015 agreement between Japan and South Korea. In sum, at the same time that the comfort women remained a flammable topic in the national and regional politics of memory in East Asia, they had also become a global referent in the international campaign for human rights. And having become part of transnational memory, transnational norms now placed pressure on the same Japanese official memory whose recalcitrance accelerated the international movement to recognize the comfort women in the first place.

Nationalism was surely the main obstacle to official Japanese recognition of the comfort women system and other malign parts of the wartime past. The resurgent nationalisms that afflicted so much of the post-Cold War world each wielded history as an instrument of national pride and patriotism at home and a geopolitical cudgel in regional relations abroad. In this regard, China, South Korea, and Japan exemplified a globally widespread revisiting—and revising—of national history to serve present political power. Nationalism suffused South Korean views on the comfort women to the point that it could seem that only a single narrative would

⁵⁴ For a typical example of UN claims and Japanese responses: “Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women Examines Reports of Japan,” The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, accessed May 16, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=17052&LangID=E>.

be permitted, not only in the court of public opinion, but in law courts as well. The South Korean scholar who described voluntary as well as coerced sexual service and wrote about the role of Korean recruiters of young girls in her study of the comfort women lost a 2015 lawsuit against her for defaming the honor of the victims and causing them mental stress. Her narrative of willing Korean participation in the comfort women system violated Korea's preferred national story of coercion and forced labor by Japan as the oppressive colonial and wartime power.⁵⁵ The Japanese government's response was just as predictably nationalistic, praising the book for affirming its stance that the comfort women were either prostitutes or sold by their families and were therefore not coerced. At issue were less the facts than the two national narratives, with each side trying to prevent the other from besmirching the nation's honor, in the process drawing Korea and Japan further away from the "reconciliation" that the author claimed was her goal in writing the book.⁵⁶

The patterns of nationalistic memory politics differed from place to place, but in East Asia the most serious consequence of the recent contention might well turn out to be the attitudes of young people in each country. Although polls showed that they often knew little of the factual history of the war, new generations of so-called angry youth in China learned to hate the Japanese for wartime atrocities and national humiliation, and younger South Koreans responded to the escalation of the "history problem," which banked the fires of postcolonial hostility. Numbers of young Japanese responded with anger at the constant harping on Japan's shortcomings. The Internet harbored a vast swamp of regional hate speech, expressed in one's own language and directed to like-minded fellow Chinese, Korean, or Japanese youth. Far from being age- or even decades-old, this "hate nationalism," as I call it, surged after the turn of the century. And unlike the Abe regime, whose political power was finite, hostility learned in one's youth could last a lifetime.

The comfort women and other historical issues certainly affected attitudes toward relations between Japan and South Korea. Hate nationalism

⁵⁵ Pak Yu-ha, *Teikoku no ianfu: shokuminchi shibai to kioku no tatakai* (Tokyo: Asahi shinbun shuppan, 2014), the Japanese version by the author of the original, *Cheguk ūi wianbu*, first published in Korean in 2013, reprinted in 2018, the versions differing somewhat one from the other. After appeals and support from in and outside South Korea, she lost the civil suit against her in the Seoul High Court in 2017.

⁵⁶ Pak's previous book was *Wakai no tame ni: kyōkasho, ianfu, Yasukuni, Tokutō* [Toward reconciliation: textbooks, comfort women, Yasukuni, Dokdo] (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2006).

notwithstanding, polls in 2019 showed that young people had more favorable impressions of the other country than the general population, although larger percentages of Japanese youth had a “bad impression” of Korea than vice versa. Half the Japanese with a negative impression of Korea gave the “continued criticism of history issues” as the reason for their opinion. The top reason for Koreans’ negative impression of Japan, given by three quarters of those polled, was that Japan had not “properly reflected on its history of invading South Korea.” And both sides gave “resolving historical disputes (comfort women/forced labor)” as the most important issue necessary to improve bilateral relations.⁵⁷ Prospects for resolution seemed less than rosy in another 2019 poll, in which 87% of South Koreans wanted further apologies from Japan, while 80% of Japanese believed that additional apologies were unnecessary.⁵⁸ These figures reversed in the past and they could well reverse again, but they clearly demonstrated the volatility that nationalistic uses of the past could arouse within nations and between them.

But because the comfort women, like the Holocaust, transcended local and regional borders to become part of transnational memory, the issue was no longer confined to contention between Japan and other Asian countries. And because the norms of the global memory culture required official acknowledgment, apology, and compensation, it was unlikely that future Japanese governments would forever choose to evade living up to those norms. Yet the point of greater significance might well be the role played by the comfort women and their supporters in helping to bring the violation of the human rights of women to sufficient global visibility that people and institutions sought to do something to prevent such violations from continuing. One critical factor was the civil courage of the former comfort women—including the poor and powerless, some illiterate, all elderly, from different countries across Asia—in coming forth to tell their stories and bring their experiences, terrible as they were, to the attention of the world. A second critical factor was the global memory culture brought about by the changes in legal, social, political, and moral understanding of the rights of women, sexual violence, and of civic

⁵⁷ “The 7th Japan-South Korea Joint Public Opinion Poll, Analysis Report on Comparative Data 2019,” The Genron NPO, accessed May 16, 2020, http://www.genron-npo.net/en/opinion_polls/archives/5489.html.

⁵⁸ “Poll: Japan, ROK see ties worsening,” *The Japan News*, June 11, 2019, <http://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0005803183>.

responsibilities in times of war and peace. The norms and practices of the global memory culture combined with the spirit of these women to produce what might have seemed an unlikely scenario—maltreated women against a maltreating world—not only possible but successful in effecting change.

What the world owes the comfort women then is a debt both to the past, in the form of a more responsible public memory, and to the future, in the effort to prevent similar injustice in our own time.

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