Japanese Activists of the “Comfort Women” Issue and the Opposition to their Voices

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Introduction and Contextualization of the “Comfort Women” Issue:

On December 8, 2000, Japanese feminists proposed to hold a tribunal against their own government to hold them accountable for the military sexual slavery that they committed during the Second World War.[[1]](#footnote-1) While Japan had grown accustomed to outcry regarding their wartime actions from the nations that suffered them, as well as third-party nations concerned by perceived crimes against humanity, this current effort to compel Japan to take responsibility for their wartime actions was being spearheaded domestically. This tribunal, while a monumental effort by some Japanese to get their own government to take responsibility, was just one event in a long list of efforts to hold Japan accountable for the Imperial Military’s crimes during the Second World War. Time and time again, however, Japan has argued that they have already taken responsibility for their war crimes.

Why then has this issue persisted until today? A common sentiment from the victims, their nations, and those sympathetic to their struggle is that Japan’s words and apologies regarding the military sex slaves, or “comfort women” as they are also known as, has not been reflected in their nation’s actions. In fact, the nation as a whole, on the surface, seems to be unapologetic on the matter, and most Japanese are seen as apathetic to the victims. This is not completely true, however. As with the Tribunal against the Japanese government in 2000, other efforts have been made by Japanese citizens in favor of the victims of the “comfort women” system. There are many reasons as to why the Japanese voices crying out in support of the wartime victims are smothered to a whimper, in comparison to the louder and more problematic voices cast by the nation. Japanese “comfort women” activism within Japan has met resistance due to underlying political and cultural principles that champion nationalistic principles and favor strong revisionist rhetoric.

To understand the current controversy regarding the “comfort women” issue, a brief understanding of the chronology of the topic is paramount. During and in the decade leading up to the Second World War, the Japanese Imperial Military enacted the “comfort” system that kidnapped and otherwise coerced women to serve in military brothels as prostitutes for their soldiers. In reality, as the women were not given any choice in serving the soldiers, they were sex slaves, not prostitutes. Twenty years following the end of the Second World War, Japan and South Korea re-established diplomatic relations with The Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea in 1965.[[2]](#footnote-2) Another agreement was reached between the two nations in 2015, this time supposedly addressing and putting the issue of the “comfort women” to rest once and for all.[[3]](#footnote-3) Unfortunately, the agreement was not warmly received in Korea. It can be easy to see Japan as united in its opinion regarding the “comfort women” as many official stances and policies seem to oppose the women, however, this is not the case. There are people and groups that fight for proper compensation for the survivors.

Japanese activists have taken many steps to try and assist the struggle for “comfort women” survivors. The most direct way in which this is done is by confronting the state. Time after time, this has proven to be a difficult endeavor as the government of Japan has typically tried to ignore the issue. By bringing this topic up at a legislative level, however, the activists hope to bring undeniable awareness to the public.[[4]](#footnote-4) Aside from directly confronting the government about the issue, some activists fly survivors to Japan to share their stories.[[5]](#footnote-5) This may not bring about any compensation or public acknowledgement from the state, but what it does do is introduce the wider public to the topic, while also giving the survivors a platform to tell their stories and advocate for themselves. Instead of taking the reins from the survivors, this method of activism simply promotes the continuing struggles of the “comfort women.” In both cases, the main goal seems to be trying to acclimatize the Japanese public to the issue. In a nation that has commonly attempted to downplay if not simply rewrite history at an administrative level, it makes sense that opening the minds of the public to this problem would be one of the main priorities for the activists.

Despite the many agreements supposedly bringing about an end to the issue and the efforts of the activists to bring the controversy the proper attention it deserves, it has persisted. The issue of Japan’s responsibility on the matter has lasted for over seventy years with no resolution that any party finds agreeable. It is understandable that the nations of the victims are upset about the Japanese responses toward the issue, but what is the Japanese response to the “comfort women” issue? The response is varied. While the government and likeminded interest groups lean more towards a revisionist mindset, there are people and organizations that support and fight for the “comfort women” in Japan, like the Violence Against Women in War Network-Japan. The government, however, has more weight to throw around that influences the balance of the responses in Japan, ultimately leading to a nation that is seemingly tired and frustrated that this issue will not die down. For as many political reasons that erect a wall for the supporters of the issue, there are also cultural reasons.

There is not just any singular reason that “comfort women” activism in Japan by the Japanese has met resistance in their efforts to realize their goals of proper acknowledgement and compensation for the survivors of Japanese Imperial Military sexual slavery, but a combination of them. The historically ingrained systems of patriarchy that have persisted and thrived throughout changes in time play an important role in understanding Japan’s long established, misogynistic views toward women and directly influence how the Japanese view the so called “comfort women.” The adoption of hyper-nationalism by the government at the turn of the twenty-first century that prioritizes Japanese pride through historical revisionism also directly contradicts the efforts of the activists. Finally, the influence of the state on the media has led to the issue being largely ignored by the Japanese population as a whole.

Historical Patriarch, Misogyny and their Survival into the Contemporary Era:

One source of the resistance to comfort women activism within Japan stems from the perpetuation of patriarchal attitudes that has permeated the greater society as a whole. These attitudes have adapted over time to, not only survive, but thrive in a contemporary climate. The idea of the modern Japanese housewife stretches back to the Taishō period, with the word *shufu* being used as a replacement of a former term *okusan*; and while these words have different definitions, the context in which they were used in the Taishō period was very similar.[[6]](#footnote-6) Okusan (奥さん) is made of a character, 奥 (oku), that means interior, while the second part, さん (san), is an honorific that denote a person. The translation of the word is thus “person of the interior.” As this was only given to women, it shows that their perceived place in the world is in the home. *Shufu* (主婦), on the other hand, is comprised of two characters; the first one, 主 (shu), means head or master and the second, 婦 (fu), means lady or woman. The meaning of this word is thus head woman. These terms denote both a woman’s role in the family as well as their position in society as a whole, and while the outward connotation of *shufu* seems more progressive than the term *okusan*, signaling society’s move toward equality between the sexes, there is still in both terms an underlying stigma of a women’s role being tethered to that of a mother or bearing children.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The idea that a woman’s most important duty is to her husband and bearing children for him has its origins as early as the eighteenth century. For example, works like Kaibara Ekken’s *Onna Daigaku*, a Confucian inspired text, states as one of the grounds for divorce a woman's failing to birth an heir. However, she can be saved from divorce if she willingly allows her husband to produce an heir with another woman.[[8]](#footnote-8) This, in conjunction with the other reasons provided within the text, further emphasize the patriarchal ideals of the time as well as presenting a guideline, from a man’s perspective, for how a proper woman should conduct herself. During the Meiji era, Japan saw a revival and reimplementation of some of these Confucian ideals that were used to delegate women to the role of subservience and emphasized that as the template of a “good” woman.[[9]](#footnote-9)

These patriarchal and misogynistic views have not disappeared entirely, but they have changed from how they once were. The reality is that the established patriarchal ideals have adapted to the changes of time while gaining and losing aspects from past incarnations. For example, the thought of women being allowed to work in the public sphere would have been inconceivable during Kaibara’s time, as the woman was bound to her husband’s family’s home, not even typically being allowed to visit religious sites until the age of at least forty. [[10]](#footnote-10) Fast-forward to the modern era and women are needed to work in the public sector. The need for labor in the workplace following the Second World War and the economic boom that accompanied it forced the traditional patriarchal norms of the past to change. However, they changed in a way that could still uphold the expectations of prioritizing the family and the duties of reproduction.[[11]](#footnote-11) In the nuclear family, it is seen as reasonable for a woman to work in the public sphere if her duties to the house are still fulfilled.[[12]](#footnote-12) Even as times change, arguably the most important and continuous duty of a woman is relegated to the home space, with a particular emphasis on reproduction. As long as the work of a woman does not interfere with her ability to bear and raise children, it is allowed; this clause reenforces the idea of pre-delegated roles in society based solely on sex.[[13]](#footnote-13) Thus, this view of women as reproducers has been a consistent ideal for Japanese patriarchal society since the ancient era.

Intrinsically tied to the patriarchal views of Japan is their bifurcation of women, or the separation of women into two different categories. According to the research of Muta Kazue, a common thought is that there are “good” women and “bad” women, and these bad women are less deserving of protection, if not more deserving of punishment or hardship.[[14]](#footnote-14) The “comfort women” would fall into this category to many Japanese, explaining why there is resistance to any form of resolution at an administrative level. The reality is, however, that this bifurcating of women does not exist just in relation to the “comfort women” – it exists and thrives more broadly, embedded in Japanese culture. Japanese women are held to the same fabricated standard of what is proper conduct for a woman, echoing similar patriarchal overtones as Kaibara’s *Onna Daigaku* of the past. The perceived badness of a woman, “was attributed to them by a sexist and male-dominated society that has attempted to define, limit, and control women.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Perhaps, it is for this reason that Japan and the victims of Imperial Military sexual slavery cannot reach a consensus on the matter of compensation, as culturally, some Japanese do not see any point in protecting a “bad” woman. This bifurcation of women is so unconditionally accepted in Japan, that despite the uproar of various peoples demanding apologies from the Japanese government, Japanese women that were also forced into sexual slavery do not lend their voices to the issue. [[16]](#footnote-16) They have been conditioned to feel a deep, personal shame for their victimization, and speaking out on their treatment is a potential reason to be publicly ostracized and rejected by their fellow countrymen. The unspoken sexism is present at both a cultural and even a legal level of Japanese society, which will be discussed in a couple of paragraphs.

To fully understand the impact that the bifurcation of women has in relation to the “comfort women” issue, the societal norms of Japan must be explored. As previously discussed, the patriarchy of Japan continues to endure and when looking at some instances of normalized sexism, the patriarchal values can become clearly evident. Female molestation on public transit is a big problem in Japan, with almost half of women admitting that they had been groped on a subway during a survey conducted by the Gender Equality Bureau in 2000.[[17]](#footnote-17) The widespread nature of the issue of molestation is indicative of a broader cultural attitude, which contribute to normalizing sexual violence against women. The implementation of female only trains has been met with controversy as those who use the trains and those who do not use the trains fill both categories of supporters and opponents of female only trains. A common reasoning for not supporting the use of female-only trains range from the issue of molestation being a personal one to not wanting to inconvenience men.[[18]](#footnote-18) This would suggest a high-level of personal shame and responsibility being thrown upon victims of sexual assault. A “good” woman would not have these things happen to them, thus when assaults occur, it needs to be hidden, lest the woman be publicly shunned.

The perception of “good” and “bad” women in Japan is so caricaturized that it fills different mediums of popular media, such as pornography. A common scenario in Japanese pornography features women being assaulted sexually.[[19]](#footnote-19) The pornography may be fictious but is tells much about cultural attitudes towards women. The saturation of this type of material desensitizes the public to sexual violence of women. Not only does it permit the idea of sexual violence against women, but it also shows that bifurcation of women in a nuanced way. By virtue of being assaulted, the women lose any relation to the category of being a “good” woman and their assault can be viewed as a consequence or a deserved action. This mirrors reality, as many court cases in the Japanese Supreme Court overturn the guilty verdicts of lower courts in instances of sexual assault. In 2011 the court overruled a previous conviction because they concluded the victim was not actually a victim because she did not try to get away from the perpetrator.[[20]](#footnote-20) She was not seen as a real victim because she did not act in a way the courts perceived a “good” woman would in the situation. There are instances when rape is villainized in the courts, a common theme with these cases, however, is that the victims are young virgins.[[21]](#footnote-21) Typically, the contributing factor to how serious a rape is seen to be is determined by the perception of the woman. If she fits the “good” model of a woman, then the assault is a tragedy and deserves to be condemned. If the woman is “bad”, then it seems almost like a consequence for that woman, or it is insinuated that it was not an actual assault.

Despite these evident patriarchal standards and sexist systems, women activists do exist in Japan and they are very connected to the “comfort women” issue. Beginning in the 1980’s, the women’s movement started to combat the misogynistic values of sexual exploitation that were present in Japan and stood with women from around the world in solidarity against the patriarchal systems of oppression. From the onset of the movement, the activists were faced with a problem: the “comfort women.”[[22]](#footnote-22) The Japanese women’s movement was placed in a precarious, but unique situation, as they were part of both sides of the issue during the Second World War. Japanese women were included in the “comfort” system, but they were also Japanese, an aggressor in the eyes of many other nations. This juxtaposition forced them to acknowledge their struggle was intertwined with the “comfort women” issue and they had a responsibility to advocate for them.[[23]](#footnote-23) The only questions were how best to do that activism and how to get started. For many women’s rights activists in Japan, their journey began with feeling disfranchised within Japanese society due to their gender, and while many of these women empathized with the “comfort women” survivors, their involvement with the issue occurred only after meeting survivors.[[24]](#footnote-24) In a sense, the struggle for equal gender rights in Japan is tied to the “comfort women” issue. A place of commonality with the survivors and the activists is the emphasis on being a woman. This creates a connection between victims of the nation and women that belong to that nation and helps, “to create common understanding of each other’s history.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

As the “Me Too” movement has spread across the world, Japanese women activists have likewise adopted this movement. However, the movement in Japan is incredibly small and prone to criticism.[[26]](#footnote-26) This criticism comes from the misogynistic tendencies of Japan, with victim blaming or rationalizing the assaults being common. Ito Shiori, a public face for the “Me Too” movement in Japan, pressed charges against her abuser but these were never taken seriously by the police and her abuser was not arrested.[[27]](#footnote-27) It was suspected that because her abuser was a friend of the then current Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, there was political interference that resulted in Ito’s case being largely ignored. As previously established, the legal system in Japan does not take victims of sexual assault seriously. Oftentimes, the burden of proof is placed on the victim, otherwise, the victim is seen as compliant to assault.[[28]](#footnote-28) After a long-fought battle, Ito was able to face her abuser in a civil court, and in a surprising turn of events, her abuser was convicted and forced to pay monetary compensation to Ito.[[29]](#footnote-29) While Ito successfully prosecuted her abuser in a civil court, he did not receive a prison sentence for his crimes. Ito’s case not only says a lot about how the legal system treats victims of sexual assault, but also how the “Me Too” movement has not grown as quickly or as big as it has in other nations, stemming from Japan’s traditional misogynistic views toward women. Drawing a parallel from Ito’s case to the “comfort women” issue, activist efforts have also gone largely unacknowledged and seldom taken seriously by the Japanese state.

An organization working in favor of the “comfort women” is the Center for Research and Documentation on Japan’s War Responsibility. While not explicitly a women's rights activist organization, the organization was created following an International Public Hearing Concerning the Post-War Compensation of Japan (JWRC) in 1992.[[30]](#footnote-30) Unsatisfied with the result of the hearing, members of the committee created the JWRC to research and comprehensively document Japan’s war crimes in the hopes to aid and compensate the victims.[[31]](#footnote-31) Another important group is the Violence Against Women in War Network japan (VAWW NET Japan). VAWW NET Japan played a major role in activism for “comfort women'' against the government. As the primary organizer of the Women's International War Crime Tribunal, the organization sought to open a dialogue not only about the suffering of the women in the past, like the “comfort women,” but also focus on more recent atrocities committed against women.[[32]](#footnote-32) That being said, bringing charges against the government of Japan for its role in the “comfort” system was one of the main objectives of the Tribunal. The Tribunal was larger than just one woman’s rights group in Japan’s effort to advocate for victims of war crimes committed over half a century ago. It was a multinational effort comprised of organizations from all over Asia and spearheaded by the VAWW NET Japan to openly condemn the normalization and continuation of violence against women around the world, starting with the hope of a definitive resolution to the “comfort women” issue.[[33]](#footnote-33)

This view of women has improved from how it was in the past and women are increasingly seen to be equal to their male counterparts in Japanese society, but their equality is conceptualized differently than it would be from a Western perspective. At the turn of the twentieth century, Minister of Education Dairoku Kikuchi emphasized this point and wanted to differentiate Japan from Western expectations of gender equality as, “[Japan’s] national stress on the importance of women was linked to the role of mothers in… the household.”[[34]](#footnote-34) This does raise the question of if there is a single, correct way of implementing and culturally accepting equality. The Japanese government essentially feels like the rest of the world does not get a say in the matters regarding their country. This builds on the foundation of women and men being equal differently, and thus subjugated to different rights, duties, and protections. The patriarchal ruling Japan has evolved, and the severity of misogyny is less overt, but it still exists in society. This kind of refusal to be judged by outside nations is not an isolated incident as the Japanese government holds a similar attitude towards foreign opinion regarding the “comfort women” issue, discussed later in this paper. The state refusing to be judged also applies to the “comfort women” activists, as well, as any criticism to their policy is seen as unpatriotic.

Japan’s patriarchal roots and attitudes toward women is not a new phenomenon but is embedded far into its past. These ideals of what a woman should be and do persist to the contemporary era and lay the groundwork for explaining how Japan bifurcates women. The expectation of a specified role for women in Japanese culture is one dimensional and further leads to the bifurcation of women in the society by promoting the image of a modest, pure homebody intent and content on raising children as the ideal form of a woman. The bifurcation of women upheld at a judicial level also helps set a precedent for how Japanese society deal with issues of sexual violence against women and openly reflect the position of the Japanese state on the “comfort women” issue. They are seen as “prostitutes” by many who rally against them and thus, using the logic and precedent set by the courts, were probably not really raped.[[35]](#footnote-35) Even as women in Japan are granted progressively more freedoms that bridge the gap in equality between the sexes, the assumption that a woman’s primary purpose is that of reproduction influences the decisions and policy-making regarding the “comfort women” issue, particularly as some Japanese nationalists consider these women to have been doing their assigned duties to the Japanese Imperial Military during the Second World War. This is one reason as to why the Japanese state has not been particularly receptive to international sense of morality or obligation, as well being hostile to advice or suggested recourse on how to navigate the issue of sexual slavery of the past.[[36]](#footnote-36) The government has been very thorough in trying to change public opinion on the matter of wartime sexual slavery, however, in an attempt to forge a strong sense of nationalistic pride.

Government Stance on the “Comfort Women” Issue and the Cultivation of Hyper-Nationalistic Pride:

The Japanese government and like-minded interest groups have a particular narrative they wish to tell about Japan and its history, and this often clashes with the efforts of activists in Japan. The main factors motivating both the government and the interest groups are to create a sympathetic Japanese historical narrative and to form a strong nationalistic pride amongst the population.[[37]](#footnote-37) The government had always denied any official involvement in the “comfort” system implemented in the Second World War until 1992, when records of the government’s involvement in the sexual slave system were discovered and published in the Asahi Shimbun.[[38]](#footnote-38) From the onset of the controversy, the state has tried to avoid any responsibility toward the victims of the sexual slavery. Even after evidence was reported, the government only ever gave private or vague apologies that let it escape taking full responsibility for the “comfort women” issue. [[39]](#footnote-39) This has been a constant source of strife between not only Korea and Japan, but the other nations, like Taiwan and the Philippines, whose citizens were also forced into the “comfort” system. During the 1990s, relations between the Japan and Korea seemed to be improving with multiple efforts to try and remedy the “comfort women” issue on the part of the Japanese state; however, the efforts received a critical reception.

Many lawsuits have tried to get the Japanese government to pay the survivors of the “comfort system” reparations for their treatment at the hands of the Japanese military. [[40]](#footnote-40) In an attempt to placate these concerns, the Japanese government established the Asian Women’s Fund in 1995. There was resistance and criticism directed toward the fund immediately following its conception. One of the reasons for the criticism was that the fund was reliant on civilian donations to pay for the compensation of the victims.[[41]](#footnote-41) Good-hearted people that sympathize with the struggle of the victims helped fund this effort of compensation. The government did allocate funds to the Asian Women’s Fund and oversaw its operations, but the reliance on civilian donations can be seen as another attempt by the government to avoid taking responsibility for the “comfort system,” while still trying to address the concerns of the “comfort women” issue. In this way, the Asian Women’s Fund is more of a public relations campaign instead of an actual attempt to settle the underlying concerns of the issue. This could be used by the state as a way to ignore the demands of activists by saying that an honest effort was already made in compensating the former “comfort women” even if the effort was merely symbolic and did not satisfy any party involved. Before the fund became active, there was criticism of it by both supporters of the “comfort women” and those who opposed them.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Outcry from the “comfort women,” the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, and other supporters of the victims emphasize that the government was avoiding taking responsibility for the war crime of sexual slavery by claiming that the fund was established as a moral responsibility instead of a legal one.[[43]](#footnote-43) In this way, Japan could try and alleviate the trauma of the victims without admitting fault legally. Between this measure and the reliance on civilian donations, the activists of the victims and the “comfort women” themselves have been hesitant to accept the fund as a legitimate form of compensation for the war crime. Juxtaposed against the activists’ concern of the fund, critics of the “comfort women” also disliked the Asian Women’s Fund. Some thought that the survivors’ motivation was purely monetary; this was a concern as Japan held the belief that the issue on monetary compensation was settled already with the Japan Republic of Korea Basic Relations Treaty of 1965, even though comfort women were not explicitly discussed in it. In addition to this, critics also stated that, “everybody suffered during the war,” including Japanese women that also served as “comfort women”.[[44]](#footnote-44) The fact that Japanese women also served as “comfort women” during the Second World War and were not complaining about their situation reveals more about the normalized patriarchal systems of misogynistic norms in Japan and undermines the stance Japan held that the fund was established out of a sense of moral obligation to the women that suffered during the war, as efforts to help Japanese “comfort women” have been even less of a concern. Ultimately, the fund went through and served as Japan’s official response to the “comfort women” issue until its termination in 2007.

During the 1990s, the government of Japan also issued many apologies regarding the “comfort system” in an attempt to pacify the demands of the survivors and their allies. Following the discovery of evidence that implicated the state in the “comfort” system, then Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei released an apology in 1993 to the “comfort women” that “extend[ed] [the government’s] sincere apologies to all those who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.” [[45]](#footnote-45) The reaction to this statement by the Republic of Korea was split. While the South Korean government found the apology to be sufficient, the Korean Council demanded action to accompany the apology. The Japanese government, however, deemed the issue to have come to a satisfactory conclusion between the two nations and would no longer be a pressing diplomatic issue.[[46]](#footnote-46) Another statement was released about a year later by then Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi on the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Once again, this statement expressed deep remorse for Japan’s wartime actions, but it also expressed a hope for the future, by educating current and future generations of Japan’s wartime history for the continuation of peace and cooperation with others, as well as a declaration that, “Japan must eliminate self-righteous nationalism.”[[47]](#footnote-47) This stance by the government would drastically change in the 2000s, as the very notion condemned in the Murayama statement would become a primary focus for them.

Prior to the 2000s, the Japanese government seemed to be trying to settle the differences of the state and the “comfort women,” regardless of how effective the efforts were. However, from the 2000s onward, building nationalistic pride became a primary focus for the Japanese government. In order to forge a strong national image, many organizations in Japan lobbied the government for a more hardline approach in constructing a strong national rhetoric. As “comfort women” activists place the blame on the Japanese state and demand that the state does something to settle the issue, their goals were seen as antagonistic to the desired cultivation of nationalism. The activists’ goals are seen by the ultra-nationalists as a weakening of the Japanese state and people. For the government to be able to create this nationalistic pride, the “comfort women” activists’ message must be undermined. There were different ways the government accomplished this. One way was to rewrite a version of history that enabled the state to foster a strong patriotism amongst its citizens, while another was to influence media coverage directly and indirectly on the issue, the latter of which will be discussed later in this paper.

In order to create this nationalistic sentiment among the population, many conservative organizations and agents came together to support the government creating a strong patriotic narrative and formed organizations like the Japan Conference and the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform. Both organizations are comprised of members of the political, economic, technological, and social worlds.[[48]](#footnote-48) A major goal for the organizations is to form a patriotic national narrative through textbook revision. A common tactic used in textbook reform is the “softening” of language of events that may be deemed as subversive to the national historical narrative, in addition to the glorification of Japan’s wartime aggressions.[[49]](#footnote-49) This has caused strife between Japan and the nations victimized by the former’s war crimes. However, from the 1990s to the 2000s, Japan’s history textbooks did acknowledge and represent both “comfort women” and the Rape of Nanjing in explicit detail.[[50]](#footnote-50) While these groups lobby for textbook revisions, Japan has a compulsory education system, meaning that the state has to provide school resources; so, every textbook that public schools are allowed to use has to be screened and deemed suitable. The shift from depicting the war crimes of the past to blatant revisionism occurred at the turn of the twenty-first century because these right-winged ultra-conservative interest groups think that, “postwar Japanese history education became masochistic and Japanese people have lost pride in their nation” and have lobbied to change that perception.[[51]](#footnote-51)

The international community also has an interest in the Japanese response to the “comfort women” issue. Many in the international community hold similar views as the Japanese activists on the issue and urge the Japanese government to deal with the issue in a satisfactory manner. Nations of the victims of the “comfort” system have been very vocal and critical of the courses of action that the Japanese have taken, in particular, South Korea filed various lawsuits and engaged Japan in different agreements in the hope of finding a satisfactory resolution. It is not just neighboring nations that have interjected on this issue, but even Western nations, as well. The United States has intervened on several occasions like in 2007 when a resolution from the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee was passed that demanded that Japan apologize for their role in sexual slavery during the Second World War.[[52]](#footnote-52) Eventually, Prime Minister Abe conceded to the wishes of the United States and apologized to the comfort women. Despite the apology, there was little change on how the right-leaning groups and government administration viewed and treated the “comfort women” issue. A common response to international pressure is that the war crimes the Japanese military committed were simply common occurrences during the war by many nations or that the facts are grossly mistaken or overestimated, thus invalidating any and all criticism from others.[[53]](#footnote-53) Consistently, the Japanese have found a plethora of ways to try and justify their actions during the war, or how they have navigated the fallout of the war in the decades following it. For every concern raised by international interest on the matter, Japan has a response ready to give as to how their reactions to the controversy are acceptable. Oftentimes, the media plays an important role in how the Japanese are able to sidestep the issue all together.

Domestication of the Media and Coverage of the “Comfort Women” Issue:

With the Japanese government’s tendency to favor revisionist rhetoric to build a strong sense of nationalism within its citizens, the government has not limited its revisionist ideals to just modifying textbooks, but also to monitoring the press. The press had once been instrumental in getting the government to admit involvement in the “comfort” system, with the discovery of records by historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki and published in the Asahi Shimbun in 1992 proving that the government oversaw the system of sexual slavery and the coercion of the victims.[[54]](#footnote-54) Times have changed, as now in Japan, the issue of “comfort women” has become a bit of a taboo among the press, leading to a short career in the field for those who attempt to cover the topic.

One of the most infamous cases is that of Uemura Takashi, the first Japanese person to cover the story of the “comfort women” in Japan in 1991.[[55]](#footnote-55) Uemura is now synonymous with the “comfort women” issue and the main target for groups and individuals that favor right-wing revisionism as a fabricator of the truth.[[56]](#footnote-56) Uemura’s article told the story of Kim Hak-sun, the first comfort woman to share her experience as a comfort woman and drew upon a recorded interview with a then-anonymous Kim.[[57]](#footnote-57) Uemura’s article went relatively unnoticed at first, but by the next year, criticism started appearing. However, it was not until after the beginning of the twenty-first century that the criticism became as widespread and intense. It could be that Uemura’s article was simply not as important as other issues regarding the “comfort women” at the time, as Kim Hak-sun revealed herself publicly just days after Uemura released his article about her.[[58]](#footnote-58) However, despite multiple newspapers reporting on the historic revelation, there was little interest on the topic from the Japanese press media as a whole.[[59]](#footnote-59) This change in criticism toward Uemura and his work coincides with the trend towards strong nationalism and revisionism brought about by the government at the turn of the century. As Uemura had been the first to report on the taboo topic of the “comfort women,” he became an easy symbol of the perceived problems to nationalism to target by the right-winged revisionists. Prior to the widespread critical opinion of Uemura, he has been actively criticized by fellow press member Nishioka Tsutomu. Nishioka criticized Uemura’s piece on Kim because Uemura did not mention that Kim had attended a school for female entertainers, to which Uemura responded that her background, “[did] not excuse a woman’s being… forced into sexual servitude against her will” and thus had no importance to his article.[[60]](#footnote-60) The insistence on Kim’s background as an entertainer is another clear example of the bifurcation of women that permeates Japanese society. The criticism of Uemura became so severe that he had been put into a position where he could possibly lose his employment, as well as having various threats made against him and his family.[[61]](#footnote-61) Uemura’s situation has influenced how others have approached the “comfort women” issue since, because as Uemura puts it, “if a reporter works on the ‘comfort women’ issue seriously and enthusiastically, it is likely that he/she will be bashed.”[[62]](#footnote-62)

The pressure from both conservative media outlets and the state have bred an environment of “comfort women” discussions as being taboo. A factor as to why this might be is the press club system in Japan. This system lets reporters work within an organization for special, privileged access to sources.[[63]](#footnote-63) With this special access come the close ties established with the sources, and in order to preserve that access and those relationships, reporters tend to self-censor themselves to retain access to the sources. In the case of the “comfort women” issue, if a reporter does report anything that is seen as subversive to the state constructed narrative, they risk ending up like Uemura. Whether or not their specific newspapers are liberal or conservative, the reporters of the government affiliated press clubs tend to regurgitate official statements given to them by the state so as to maintain their access to their sources.[[64]](#footnote-64) Aside from bashing reporters and newspapers, the government can subtly influence the news and promote whatever narrative they wish with the reliance on the press club system. Former Prime Minister Abe also personally dined and golfed with many top executives in the media industry, leading to many reporters wondering if their executives will stand up for their journalism or align themselves with Abe’s desires.[[65]](#footnote-65) Even the former NHK President, Momii Katsuto, essentially stated that they cannot say anything that would contradict the government.[[66]](#footnote-66) Between the press clubs’ special access to sources and the media executive’s close relationship to the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), former Prime Minister Abe’s political party, news outlets in Japan see it in their best interest to monitor what they say before government intervention comes to them.

The reluctance of the press to cover certain taboo topics had a severe effect on how the Japanese reacted to the “comfort women” issue. A large feminist movement culminated in the Women’s International War Crime Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery. As previously established, this event was a massive attempt by feminists to hold the Japanese state responsible for the government operated sexual slavery during the Second World War instead of individuals.[[67]](#footnote-67) The event also included many media representatives from both domestic and international media outlets.[[68]](#footnote-68) The event was of major interest to both the Japanese and foreigners alike; at least, that is what the numbers of media representatives present would seem to indicate. The reality is that while almost one hundred foreign and fifty Japanese media companies sent representatives to the Tribunal, only one Japanese media outlet reported on the whole affair in any detail.[[69]](#footnote-69) Most Japanese media outlets tried to ignore the event, most likely for the reasons listed earlier. There was even a debate as to whether or not the NHK had been pressured by the government to revise their documentary about the Tribunal.[[70]](#footnote-70) This was later shown to be true as an Asahi Shimbun article featured the producer of the documentary discussing how the LDP had sent members to meet with NHK executives to discuss the contents of the documentary and said how their opinion could not be ignored due to the NHK’s budget for the following year being a topic at the Diet.[[71]](#footnote-71) As the NHK is owed and funded by the government, they have various rules that they have to abide by when they discuss sensitive topics. Similar to textbooks softening the language used, the NHK cannot use words like “sex slaves” and “brothels” when talking about the “comfort women” and refer to the Nanjing Massacre as the “Nanjing Incident.”[[72]](#footnote-72) The NHK was essentially at the mercy of the Japanese government and yielded to their demands to save their funding, regardless of what side of the “comfort women” debate they fell on. The influence of the government on the media is seen by some as censorship and unconstitutional, as the Japanese constitution safeguards press freedom.

Due to the normalized notion of condemnation to the “comfort women” issue and an emphasis to foster a strong national pride among the population, many Japanese have aligned their own views with the revisionist rhetoric. Many Japanese wonder why Japan has to take the blame for what has happened in the past when other nations committed heinous war crimes too.[[73]](#footnote-73) This sentiment calls back to the mindset that because Japanese “comfort women” were not complaining about their sexual slavery that Japan had no obligation to other nation. In line with national revisionism, there is an emphasis on showing what is great about Japan to the younger generation, even if it means omitting the problematic past.[[74]](#footnote-74) This is seen in popular culture media as right-leaning citizens also want a country where it is alright to show national pride, echoing the government’s stance on history. Authors like Hyakuta Naoki have released books and movies that glorify aspects of the Japanese Imperial Military, like Kamikaze pilots, despite also stating that children should not be taught about the war crimes committed by the nation.[[75]](#footnote-75) It seems that teaching future generations about Japan’s wartime history is only acceptable when it does not portray the nation in a bad light. With the rise of hyper-national popular media, there has also been a resurgence of xenophobic media as well, with books from the hate genre “dislike China, hate Korea” topping the best-selling list in 2014.[[76]](#footnote-76) The fact that popular media is seemingly trying to normalize xenophobia and hyper-nationalism through the glorification of military history, has led many nations to see Japan as apathetic to the long-standing issues plaguing the country. It also creates a society that is tired of seeing what it perceived as anti-Japanese sentiments from other nations, further separating the nations from any acceptable conclusion to issues that have been debated for over seventy years.

As the “comfort women” issue has haunted Japan for well over seventy years, a quick solution to it is unlikely. The patriarchal values of the nation would have to be seriously dealt with to ensure that women are seen as more than just their bodies and reproductive system. Only then would a conversation regarding Japan’s resurgence of hyper-nationalism have any chance of being meaningful. As women are mostly valued for their roles as mothers, sex is a normal attribution to them. This has prevented the right-winged nationalist from seeing any issue with the “comfort women.” Acknowledging past wrongdoings does not automatically and permanently condemn a nation to be a pariah. Germany is a prime example of how reconciliation with the past and neighboring nations can help a nation move forward without sacrificing a sense of its identity.[[77]](#footnote-77) The media would not have to worry about what they say on certain taboo topics if the government reconciled the issue from the war with the victim nations, fostering a more open and honest media culture. Ultimately, however, the problems preventing Japan from adequately dealing with the “comfort women” issue are long-standing and deeply ingrained in their culture and furthered by historical revisionism and the importance of patriotism. Only by addressing these issues plaguing contemporary Japan, will there be any hope for a resolution to this issue that is agreeable for all parties involved.

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