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## Teaching War and Security through the Comfort Women: Pedagogical Strategies from Korea's Margins

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Korea often occupies a peripheral position in undergraduate understandings of global political processes. This article explores a bottom-up pedagogical approach to teaching World War II and international security through the case of the Korean comfort women, presenting two complementary strategies. The first, implemented in a lower-division course, juxtaposes dominant national narratives of World War II from the United States, Japan, and China with survivor-centered accounts of Korean comfort women through curated readings and visual materials. This approach enables students to analyze how lived experiences are frequently overlooked in conventional state-centered narratives of war. The second strategy, used in an upper-division course on international security and conflict resolution, applies a structured set of readings and a reconciliation-oriented analytical framework to examine the comfort women issue as an ongoing security and reconciliation challenge rather than a settled historical dispute. The article demonstrates how the Korean comfort women case functions as an empirical anchor for expanding students' conceptual understanding of war, colonialism, security, reconciliation, and Korea's integral linkage to global processes.

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## Introduction

Despite a recent spotlight on the global spread of Korean popular culture through K-pop and K-dramas, Korea still sits on the periphery of the understanding and imagination of global political processes for most American students. For example, while they learn about World War II at various stages of their education as a major global event that shaped and transformed world politics, Korea's place in the war is typically overlooked in their formal learning, even at the undergraduate level. As a result, Korea is absent from American students' cognitive map of the world, so they neglect its relevance to and consequentiality in the war and remain unaware of the war's impact on the country and of Korea's role in global processes. In fact, World War II is often portrayed as a struggle by Western powers, with Japan as the notable exception, while giving insufficient attention to other states and their people, despite their deep involvement in the war and its aftermath.

This article adopts a bottom-up approach to teaching World War II and global politics through the case of the Korean comfort women.<sup>1</sup> By zooming in on their stories and lived experiences, it explores pedagogical approaches that integrate women's wartime experiences into analyses of World War II and international security, treating Korea as a focal empirical case, thereby extending the analytical range through which global warfare and security are examined. My pedagogical intention to shed light on female victims in World War II has been profoundly influenced by my background and education in three countries – South Korea, Japan, and the United States. I have always been intrigued by questions about colonial and postcolonial relations between South Korea and Japan, as well as the role of the United States in shaping postwar East Asian international relations. Pursuing a doctoral degree in the United States and teaching undergraduate courses in colleges and universities there provided me with opportunities to review and select course materials in the field of International Relations. Typical accounts of World War II and subsequent global developments in many of the textbooks and instructional materials prioritize the actions and rivalries of imperial metropolises as the primary agents of warfare, often overlooking other wartime actors as well as the experiences of people from other regions. Such perspectives not only shape conceptual understandings of world politics, international security, and the global political economy among scholars (Barkawi 2006; Hobson 2012, 2021), but also profoundly mold the way that global politics is taught in undergraduate classrooms, directly impacting students' learning. Incorporating Korea and women's wartime experiences broadens the empirical and analytical scope of world politics instruction, enabling students to develop a deeper cognitive understanding of historical and political dynamics that are often underrepresented in standard curricula.

Specifically, this essay introduces two pedagogical strategies for teaching about the comfort women: juxtaposed national and testimonial narratives for a lower-division course called *Global Issues* and the reconciliation-oriented security pedagogy for an upper-division course called *International Security and Conflict Resolution*. The narrative juxtaposition approach introduces Asian countries' narratives of World War II, with particular attention to testimony-centered accounts of Korean comfort women, enabling students to examine a wider range of interpretations of the conflict alongside women's victim-centered experiences. The reconciliation-oriented security pedagogy treats the comfort women issue not only as a historical injustice but also as an ongoing matter of international security and reconciliation, with the aim of developing students' skills in conflict analysis and reasoning. By positioning the comfort women issue as the pedagogical anchor across these two teaching strategies, my pedagogical goal is to expand students' cognitive understanding of World War II and contemporary security and reconciliation dynamics by engaging them with a wider range of historical narratives, lived experiences, and analytical perspectives that extend beyond commonly taught frameworks. Using the comfort women case as a pedagogical focal point highlights Korea's integral linkage to the global history and contemporary world politics.

The term *comfort women* is a euphemism for the girls and women who were forcibly drafted to work in Japanese military brothels as sex slaves before and during World War II. Up to 200,000 young girls and women in colonized Korea, China, the Philippines, Burma, Thailand, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Dutch East Indies were forced to serve as sex slaves for Japanese soldiers during the conflict in Asia.<sup>2</sup> It is known that the largest proportion of the women were from Korea, constituting eighty percent of the sex slavery (Tsutsui 2006). This is why the issue of comfort women is crucial for understanding Korea during and after the war and its historical experience under Japanese colonial rule, along with the ongoing effects.<sup>3</sup> The issue offers a multitude of ways to introduce Korea into the undergraduate curriculum in the company of related themes such as colonial and postcolonial history, war, social hierarchies, historical memory, wartime violence, and its diplomatic and security dynamics in East Asia in relation to global processes and world politics.

### **Juxtaposed National and Testimonial Narratives: Teaching World War II through Korean Comfort Women's Testimony**

Originally designed as a gateway course for the major in International Affairs, the lower-division course *Global Issues* has been open to students from other majors since Fall 2018 as part of an effort to promote a global perspective within the general education curriculum. Since then, approximately ninety percent of enrolled students have been

non-majors. Aligned with the mission of the university, the goal of the course is to enhance students' critical sensibility and expose them to multiple perspectives on the world. The course takes an interdisciplinary approach by drawing on various concepts developed across several disciplines, including, but not limited to, anthropology, history, geography, political science, economics, and international relations.

History is an important factor that shapes contemporary world politics and future global evolutions. World War II is one of the historic events introduced in this course to analyze connections between the past and the present, as well as the contested nature of interpreting history and its effects on the contemporary world. As a pedagogical strategy, I employ juxtaposed national and testimonial narratives to highlight multiple, often competing, national interpretations of World War II across the United States, Japan, and China through assigned readings and curated video clips that reflect each country's dominant historical framings. This is followed by testimony-focused videos and documents featuring Korean comfort women, which introduce Korea into the comparative framework through lived experience rather than a state-centered national narrative.<sup>4</sup> I begin the class session by posing a discussion question regarding whether and to what extent history matters for understanding today's world. This sparks students to recognize that memories of the past are not the "intact vertebra of fossil animals" (Halbwachs 1992, 47), continuously shaping and being shaped by present political frameworks. Then I ask students for their reactions to the reading assignment, a chapter from *International Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Global Issues* (Anderson et al., 2018), titled "The Past in the Present: Historical Interpretation in International Conflict." I further ask students what they learned previously about World War II, what they know about the conflict, and what the dominant American interpretation of the war is. Typically, students' responses are centered on the decision of the United States to enter the war in the wake of the Pearl Harbor attack and to end the war with President Harry Truman's decision to drop nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which was deemed "necessary" to prevent the extension of American casualties. After these preliminary discussions, I cover some conventional approaches to World War II, elaborating on the countries involved in the alliances and the developments considered to be "major" events in Europe and Asia, including the abovementioned typical views of the war from which students derive their impressions and events such as the Holocaust.

As a next step, I assign David Kenley's (2009) article "History and Memory: The Role of War Memorials and Museums in China and Japan" to provide multiple perspectives on the war. The article offers a brief, but succinct overview of the history and memory of World War II based on the Asian experiences, highlighting the Hiroshima Peace

Memorial Park and the Yasukuni Shrine in Japan and the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall in China, as well as the controversy over the Enola Gay exhibit in the Smithsonian National Space and Air Museum in the United States. I ask students to post their thoughts before the next class session on the class's Canvas discussion board, in response to the following prompt: "Identify the three East Asian memorials and museums mentioned in the reading, discuss briefly how each of these sites displays World War II, and consider what role these memorials and museums play in constructing public memories of the war in East Asia." This sequence of assignments prepares students not only to be aware that there is a multiplicity of versions of history and memory beyond the globally conventional perspective, but also, importantly, prompts them to realize that Korea's war experience is still marginalized in the public history of East Asia. Kenley notes that approximately "35,000 Korean forced laborers" were among those killed in the Hiroshima bombing, discussing how the monument commemorating the Korean victims of the atomic bombing, which was erected in the 1970s, was not placed inside the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park until 1999 (6). The image of the Korean memorial located outside the grounds of the park aptly symbolizes the sidelined memory of Korea's war experience.<sup>5</sup>

In the classroom, I incorporate the Korean perspective through survivor-centered accounts of the comfort women, using the case as a pedagogical anchor to bring experiences from the margins of global politics into analytical focus. After discussing Kenley's (2009) article, I augment four different narratives from the United States, Japan, China, and Korea with different video clips that represent key moments with the understanding that narratives of World War II are much more complicated and complex than these perspectives, even within each of these four countries: a clip from "The Battle of Iwo Jima" underscoring the American perspective of victory; a clip from Japan's animated war film on "Grave of the Fireflies," which highlights the experience of Japanese victimhood through the story of siblings and war orphans; a clip about the 1931 Manchurian Incident which focuses on Japan's occupation of Manchuria after the explosion of the South Manchurian Railway, indicating a strain of victimhood in China's national psyche; clips featuring the comfort women, which symbolize Korea's position during the colonial and wartime periods.

As for visual materials relating to the former comfort women, I show the testimony of Kim Bok-dong on an approximately ten-minute clip shot, which I received in June 2018 from the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (formerly the Korean Council) after I conducted face-to-face interviews with staff members during my research fieldwork.<sup>6</sup> The clip, which features a first-person narrative by Kim subtitled in English, serves as a valuable resource for guiding

American students to reflect on the war through the eyes of an elderly survivor who vividly recounts her life story. By engaging with her testimony, students revisit her youth, when she was forced into sexual servitude as a “comfort woman,” gaining insight into the physical and emotional suffering she endured during the colonial and wartime periods, as well as in postcolonial Korea. This pedagogical method is effective; the students become immersed in Kim’s complex emotions and her agonized, but firm, voice as she tells how young girls became comfort women, how they were treated, and how they were subjected to societal prejudice after their return to postwar Korea, which continued for the rest of their lives. Kim passed away in January 2019. Like countless other former comfort women, her life was knotted in *han*, which as Sarah Soh (2008, 80–81) explains, is a complex condition made up of “undesirable emotions and sentiments such as sadness, regret, anger, remorse, and resignation,” which is deeply entwined with the unequal social structure of gender, race, class, and sexuality that former comfort women experienced (ibid. 105–6). Students’ learning can be amplified when they encounter the victims’ personal stories,<sup>7</sup> supplemented with assigned readings, discussions, and visual images, as this enables them to connect the personal histories to the collective plight of former comfort women, situated in layers of historically developed violence across societal, national, and global levels. Kim’s testimony is the uncovering of a subaltern voice, bringing to the center the experiences of silenced women that have long been neglected and omitted from understandings of the global conflict, its process and aftermath, and subsequent perceptions of it.

After watching videos on these different perspectives, my students read the stories of female survivors, including the story of Lee Yong-soo (Kim et al. 2019). Then I divide the class into small groups and encourage them to discuss and compare the central themes and images in each version of the war. After that, I bring the class together to report on their small group discussions. On the whiteboard in the front of the classroom, I write the students’ responses, so they can visually contrast themes from each version of the war and realize that countries record history differently.

The juxtaposition of the comfort women’s stories with other national narratives of the war makes students aware of the impacts of the war on vulnerable women and of the status of Korea under colonial rule, a country that has been effectively muted in mainstream understandings of the global conflict. While many students recognize the end of World War II through the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, their broader understanding of Japan’s wartime role is often framed in isolation, with limited awareness of the war’s impact on and involvement of other Asian countries. Focusing on these cases of Japan, China, and Korea promotes an awareness of Asia in students. Importantly, the case of the comfort women prompts students to realize

how marginalized women's war experiences and wounds have been omitted from recordings of history that prioritize the military dimension of the conflict. Students gain an understanding that the majority of the comfort women were from Korea and learn how the Imperial Japanese government and the military were involved in rounding up the women, sending them to the battlefields, and maintaining the comfort stations (Yoshimi 2000; Nishino et al. 2018). The story of the comfort women from the Korean periphery can be used to expand students' Great Power-centered view of World War II, opening up conceptual landscapes for rethinking not only the global military conflict, but also how the war and imperialism were sustained by violence against women in colonized Korea and by multiple social hierarchies that continued into postcolonial Korea under the authoritarian government. Examining World War II through the comfort women case illuminates dimensions that are frequently overlooked in Great Power-centered narratives.

War stories can be reconstructed from the lived experiences of the marginalized. A vast majority of students have never heard or learned about the comfort women before my class sessions. By bringing Korea and the comfort women to light, my pedagogical strategy aims to expand students' minds and perceptions to help them evaluate past events and reassess their relationships with the present, as well as to uncover the war experiences of a colonized country and its marginalized female victims of sex slavery.

### **Reconciliation-Oriented Security Pedagogy: The Comfort Women Case**

The mainstream view of international security concerns itself primarily with material conflict, focusing on wars, weapons systems, competition among states over resources, and trade-related tensions. My upper-division course *International Security and Conflict Resolution* addresses not only conventional ways of looking at security issues, but also non-conventional approaches, considering multiple theoretical perspectives beyond realism and liberalism by incorporating constructivism, critical theory, feminism, and postcolonialism. The course also explores various ways of promoting conflict resolution and reconciliation from a multitude of angles. By grappling with various theoretical and conceptual frameworks, students come to realize that security issues are multidimensional and deeply rooted in ideational factors, such as cultural meanings, national identities, socially constructed hierarchies, and social injustices.

The comfort women issue figures into the course in the context of historical conflict and reconciliation. While most students enrolled in the course are juniors and seniors, many have limited prior knowledge of the comfort women issue. Before introducing the case, students are exposed to feminist perspectives in international security, which prepare them to approach the topic through a victim-centered analytical lens. Feminist

scholarship expands the referent of international security beyond the state by drawing attention to individuals and marginalized groups, highlighting how those located at the margins of political authority often experience persistent insecurity in everyday life (Enloe 2014; Sjoberg 2013; Whitworth 2007). Drawing on these analytical insights, one of my pedagogical goals in introducing the comfort women case is to provide students with a framework for examining the multifaceted factors beyond the state level that have caused the issue to persist unresolved, even after the 2015 agreement between the Japanese and South Korean governments, and to facilitate discussion of how reconciliation is conceptualized and pursued in cases involving unresolved historical injustice.

To ensure productive class discussion, students are asked to complete two sets of reading assignments. The first set includes Jungmin Seo's (2008) work on historical memory politics in Korea and China, which provides an intricate analysis of the memory politics involving the comfort women, and Zheng Wang's (2009) article on the trilateral history textbook-writing project initiated by scholars and schoolteachers from South Korea, Japan, and China, as an example of the "middle-out" approach. As a method of reconciliation, this approach emphasizes the role of middle-level leaders in contributing to peace, including highly respected individuals or leaders of civic organizations and identity groups who can "act as channels through which new perceptions and ideas are filtered" to top elites and grassroots citizens (120). Through the trilateral history textbook-writing project in East Asia, scholars and schoolteachers can act as middle-level leaders to shape understanding, tolerance, and peace discourse by overcoming the historical tensions plaguing these countries. Initiated in 2002, the project resulted in the simultaneous publication of the first joint history textbook in China, Japan and South Korea, entitled *The Modern and Contemporary History of Three East Asian Countries*.

The articles by Seo and Wang provide an overview of the role of history and memory in conflict and security relations in East Asia and describe a possible method of coming to terms with history in the region. In the second set of readings, students read about attempts to facilitate reconciliation of the comfort women issue, focusing on the fact that the controversy is not over yet, drawing on the role of transnational activism and the relations between Japan and South Korea (Ku 2016)—even after the 2015 diplomatic deal reached between the two governments (Ward and Lay 2016)—and considering how a gendered global system of relational masculinities among the U.S., Japan, and South Korea enables it to persist (Lee 2024).

In the classroom, I first ask students about their reactions to the readings. Then I provide key conceptual underpinnings relating to the politics of history and memory, presenting the ideas that a nation is founded upon its history and that history textbooks

serve as a central mechanism through which a shared historical understanding can be fostered. The issue of the comfort women aligns with our discussion on the role of historical memory in nation-building, processes of conflict and reconciliation, and the impact of memory on postwar negotiations and reconciliations in East Asia. Drawing on my fieldwork at memory sites in South Korea and Japan, I present photographs from the two markedly different institutions: the War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul, which preserves the stories of the comfort women, and the Yūshūkan, the Military and War Museum of the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, which offers a nationalist narrative of Japan's wartime past. This serves to illustrate how memories encoded in museums in different national contexts are integrated into nation-building processes.<sup>8</sup> For example, I show how the Yūshūkan's exhibits and museum narratives, while glorifying the war in such a way as to bolster military nationalism, are silent on the subject of the comfort women, who were direct victims of the Japanese militarism. On the other hand, the War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul commemorates the comfort women by disclosing their untold stories. Providing visual images from my fieldwork has proved to be pedagogically effective for stimulating students to rethink the war's impacts by remembering the female victims. They become aware of how the starkly different ways of remembering the war in museums can contribute to complicating the conflict.

Next, I divide the class into small groups to evaluate the middle-out approach to the historical reconciliation of East Asian countries, taking the issue of the comfort women into account. I ask the following questions:

- To what extent do you think the middle-out approach is effective for promoting reconciliation in East Asia in relation to the conflicting histories involving the comfort women?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach in the context of historical conflict in East Asia, and in what ways might this approach enhance or diminish social justice for the former comfort women?
- Do you think the Japanese government's official recognition of / apology for the past wrongdoings is essential for reconciliation? If so, in what ways? If not, why?
- What do the female victims' stories reveal about historical (in)justices and reconciliation, and how might this process impact plural versions of security in the region?

These discussion questions help students to think about possible paths of reconciliation, to evaluate the method suggested in the reading, and to consider the merits and drawbacks of a particular way of fostering reconciliation. They

also help students rethink the roles of state and non-state actors in the process of reconciliation and the potential hurdles they must overcome. While the comfort women issue is often understood as a national conflict between Korea and Japan, the class discussions guide them to approach the issue by thinking beyond national boundaries (Kim et al. 2019; Ku 2016). By rethinking the various factors that can support or hinder reconciliation, students can come to recognize the complexity of the identities and relational power dynamics of various actors at the intersections of nationalism, state-society relations across national borders, and diplomatic relations from the local to the global levels.

Another activity that I built into the syllabus is role playing. I divide the class into groups and ask each group to represent a specific constituency, including the comfort women, the Korean and the Japanese governments, and the Korean and Japanese publics. This exercise helps students articulate each group's position and perspective, along with the rationale behind its position. Then I have the class discuss how each group's position can be shifted. This activity forces students to confront the complexities, possibilities, and challenges involved in advancing reconciliation, and it helps them situate the issue of the comfort women in a multifaceted setting that entails a variety of actors with different or conflicting backgrounds, identities, and power dynamics. Moreover, this activity opens a space for students to listen to and recognize the voices representing women victims. In short, this approach encourages students to examine the comfort women issue through an analytical lens that recognizes its layered and interwoven dimensions.

### **Korea and the Comfort Women as Stepping Stones towards Conceptual Linkages**

Many students with little prior knowledge of Korea often lack awareness that it was once a single, unified country. Through examining the comfort women issue, students not only expand their understanding of Korea but also develop the ability to connect this issue to other concepts and topics discussed in the class, such as marginalized people's suffering from other conflicts and global disparities that are deeply ingrained in political, economic, cultural, and social practices. Moreover, this process is crucial to the development of critical thinking skills that can be used to analyze other cases of colonialism.

This process also helps students link our discussions of Korea and the comfort women to the mission of the university. Rooted in the Holy Cross tradition, the university's mission includes confronting critical issues of society and pursuing justice and peace. Learning about and discussing the comfort women in these ways encourages students to explore the topic from multiple vantage points, including competing war narratives, the omission of certain victim groups from historical accounts, the relationship between

historical narratives and nation-building, the enduring trauma of survivors, social hierarchies, the material and ideational sources of conflict, and multiple approaches to reconciliation.

Of course, talking about the comfort women and related issues in the classroom is not an easy task. However, active inclusion of a difficult topic like this can expand students' learning and critical thinking, prompting them to think deeply about issues of justice and peace. Throughout this process, I strive to cultivate a safe and respectful space for discussion. Students are encouraged to realize that the pursuit of justice and peace is complex and encompasses various stakeholders, among them women victims, society, governments, and the international community. Motivated by the university's mission to uphold social justice, students are deeply inspired to seriously tackle issues like that of the comfort women. Various forms of discussion and role playing provide opportunities for them to put themselves in the shoes of marginalized and victimized people, and this process can spark compassion.

### **Concluding Thoughts and Reflections**

Korea has largely been neglected in the International Relations curriculum. Exceptions would be the Korean War and the nuclear threat of North Korea. In fact, when it comes to news about Korea, what comes to mind for most students is North Korea's nuclear weapons program and its threat to international security. An exclusive focus on these topics leaves American students with a limited understanding of the country, given that most of them have little or no knowledge of the history of Korea before they enroll in college classes. In this case, employing multiple pedagogical strategies, such as assigning relevant reading materials, showing multiple video clips of the female victims' testimony, engaging in class-wide and small group discussions, role playing, and sharing my own experiences of fieldwork at key memory sites, helps students gain a nuanced awareness of the comfort women and Korea.

Examining the comfort women case from Korea's historical and geopolitical margins can enhance students' understanding of Korea's place in the world during and after World War II in three important ways. First, the issue pulls Korea out of the dark by teaching students about the country's experience of colonialism and its enduring effect on contemporary everyday lives. Furthermore, learning about and discussing the comfort women introduces the neglected country, and the region of Asia, into perceptions of colonial historical legacy, enabling them to connect Korea's experience with other parts of the region and the world and to realize how deeply colonialism has affected contemporary global society and politics. Moreover, students learn about Korea's historical connections to other countries in the region, such as Japan and China, during and after the war.

Second, integrating the topic of the comfort women into undergraduate courses brings to light the experiences of marginalized female victims who endured systematic sexual violence and militarism under Japanese colonial rule, and whose suffering was later ignored by the authoritarian postcolonial Korean government. The fact that the surviving comfort women still suffer from trauma attests to the long-term effects of sexual violence and social negligence. Making the comfort women visible as an empirical anchor helps students realize how the marginalized female victims' stories have been ignored and sidelined in efforts to understand historical legacies and in the stories of incidents that have shaped the world order, such as World War II. Revealing how the plight of the comfort women continues in the contemporary era and discussing their situated historical context helps students make connections to other cases of colonialism, militarism, and women's suffering as a way to envision justice in the world.

Finally, my pedagogical strategies and practices highlight how Korea is an essential part of Asia and the world. This leads to my third reflection, on how incorporating the topic of the comfort women in the curriculum can contribute to expanding students' cognitive understanding of world politics beyond conventional frameworks. Course evaluations reveal how these pedagogical approaches helped students expand their worldviews, which is shown by such comments as the following: "The professor introduced a variety of new perspectives that I had never learned about before and got us to really think critically about them and how they apply to the world around us"; "[the professor] excels at teaching the issues beyond simply global conflict" and has "done a wonderful job at teaching Eurocentrism's impacts and other issues that are still at stake" and "how women and children account for most of the victims and are silenced." Students overwhelmingly appreciated "employing a variety of diverse teaching tactics" and the "combination of lecture materials and class discussion" that helped them "think critically about security and conflict concepts" as "a great outlet for students to participate and learn through firsthand discussion." Learning about the comfort women ultimately enabled them "to ask larger questions about global security and conflict and think critically about the answers."<sup>9</sup>

Teaching Korea's comfort women in the context of war and security can effectively prompt students to reexamine their assumptions and broaden their perspectives on geopolitical processes. As of March 2026, only five comfort women survivors in South Korea are still alive. Remembering them and uncovering their stories in the classroom is done not only to seek justice for these female victims, but also to contribute to restoring a bottom-up worldview from the margins.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to the “Centering Korea in the Curriculum” Workshop hosted by Hendrix College and the University of Central Arkansas in 2019, which invited me to present preliminary versions of this article. I am grateful to the organizers and other participants, including Drs. Michael Sprunger, Zach Smith, Taine Duncan, Sun Joo Kim, and Katherine In-Young Lee for their helpful comments and feedback.
- <sup>2</sup> For more detail about the military comfort women system, see Hicks (1995), Nishino et al. (2018), Soh (2008), and Yoshimi (2000). The first confirmed military comfort station was set up in Northeastern China in March 1933. See Yoshimi (2000) for a detailed analysis of the direct involvement of the Imperial Japanese government and its military in the establishment and operation of the military comfort women system. Yoshimi observes that “the Japanese government systematically destroyed official documents at the end of the war” (34), arguing that this obscured evidence of state involvement for several decades following the war, until his research brought these findings to light.
- <sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the issue of the comfort women is not limited to Korea. There is a growing body of scholarship on the comfort women issue in other parts of Asia, including Japan (Tsukamoto 2022), China (Qiu et al. 2014), Singapore (Blackburn 2022), and Indonesia (McGregor 2023), as well as research examining how the issue has been engaged in the United States involving various actors (McCarthy and Hasunuma 2018; Hasunuma and McCarthy 2019).
- <sup>4</sup> Until a former comfort woman, Kim Hak-soon (also known as Kim Hak-sun), came forward publicly in 1991, the postcolonial Korean government ignored the comfort women issue, effectively silencing women victims’ perspectives and experiences (Lee 2024, 133).
- <sup>5</sup> See Yoneyama (1999) for a detailed analysis of the politics surrounding the Korean memorial in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. She estimates that “20,000 to 30,000 (and perhaps even more)” Koreans were among the nuclear victims in Hiroshima, constituting “between 10 and 20 percent of those killed immediately in the Hiroshima bombing.” She further argues that Korean victims and their distinct experiences have been largely absent from official representations of Hiroshima’s nuclear history (152).
- <sup>6</sup> The Korean Council changed its name to the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan.
- <sup>7</sup> See Kim et al. (2019) for the importance of the use of personal stories in teaching about the comfort women.
- <sup>8</sup> Although the exhibits of the Yūshūkan do not necessarily encompass all of Japanese society’s national memory of the war, the military museum’s perspective is increasingly gaining traction, aligning with an ultranationalist viewpoint in Japan. See Lee (2018) for further analysis of the Yūshūkan. For details on the politics of the Yasukuni Shrine, see Takenaka (2015). For more on the Japanese neo-nationalist denial and counterattack against the comfort women, see Ahn (2008) and Rumiko et al. (2018). Lee (forthcoming) offers a comprehensive analysis of evolving war narratives in Japanese history textbooks, popular culture, and museums.
- <sup>9</sup> Quotes in this paragraph have been drawn from comments on anonymous student course evaluations.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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