

The Representation of the Cold War Regime in Recent Korean Films about the “Comfort Women”: An Analysis of *Herstory* and *I Can Speak*

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Abstract | *Herstory* and *I Can Speak* have advanced beyond previous films about the so-called “comfort women” by representing a reflective “post-memory generation” and “comfort women” as “subalterns that can speak.” The two films also weave into their narratives the mobilization and exploitation of female bodies and sexuality under the Cold War regime that persisted and became entangled with Japan’s colonial rule of Korea, as well as introspection about the patriarchy within us. These works exemplify the advances made in Korean society regarding public memory of the “comfort women” issue. However, the two films reenact the Cold War relationships between Korea, Japan, and the US by showing Japanese courts in the 1990s ignoring what the former “comfort women” said in transnational legal venues and the US House of Representatives in the early 2000s becoming the world’s first official body to listen to those voices. In addition, both films portray the post-memory generation that has heard the testimony of the “comfort women” as consisting solely of Koreans, betraying their indifference to the transnational nature and complicated temporality of the “comfort women” issue. That has kept introspection on these issues from going beyond Korea’s borders. How can we represent the complicated temporality of the amalgamation of colonialism and the Cold War regime that together make up the “comfort women” issue in Korean society? By demonstrating that this question is the point at which progress on the “comfort women” issue has stopped in Korean society, this paper seeks to specify the creative approach that public memory needs to develop in relation to this fraught historical and contemporary context.

Keywords | comfort women, Cold War, postcolonial Cold War regime, *Herstory*, *I Can Speak*

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Introduction

The testimony of Kim Hak-sun in 1991 was the first incident that brought the so-called comfort women issue out of the vernacular memory, where it had long resided, and into the public memory.¹ In subsequent years, efforts by transnational campaigns, international organizations, and feminist and human rights activists have made the issue of the Japanese military “comfort women” the locus of sharp analyses and competing claims about war and violence against women, politics in postimperial and postcolonial states, the patriarchy, and memory. The realm of cinema has not only recorded that process but also offered a perspective on the issue through visual language, helping to form public memory. Films that deal with historical incidents provide audience members with moments of profound identification and the sense that their emotions are shared by other audience members. Films form a specific kind of collective memory about historical incidents (Morris-Suzuki 2006, 168-73). This paper will focus on two films of that sort, both of which were produced and screened in the second half of the 2010s: *Herstory* (*Hösjūtori*, 2018, directed by Min Kyu-dong) and *I Can Speak* (*Ai kaen sŭp’ikŭ*, 2017, directed by Kim Hyŏn-sŏk). This paper seeks to examine how the subtext of these films concerns the Cold War’s impact on the formation of the “comfort women” issue and what significance their representations have for public memory of the “comfort women” issue in Korean society today.

Numerous movies have been made about “comfort women” over the past thirty years.² Researchers have found that “comfort women” movies from the 2010s are qualitatively different from earlier ones in regard to their critical awareness and methods of representation. For example, Kang Kyŏng-rae (2018) said the documentary films of the 1990s and 2000s faithfully recorded the survivors’ testimony in the past, their difficult lives in the present, and the activities of related civic organizations, which helped turn the “comfort women” issue from a scandalous rumor into public memory. In contrast, Kang said, the more diverse cinematic representations of the 2010s, including dramatic films and animation, illustrate a new ethical sensibility that can be regarded as

1. In Carol Gluck’s discussion of each society’s topography of memory about World War II, she argues that official memories about a given historical incident exist differently from vernacular memories and individual memories of the past. When a certain memory becomes subject to an intense public debate, Gluck said, that process moves it to the level of “meta-memory” (2007, 53-58). While she did not provide a definition of “public memory,” I use it in this paper to refer to specific memories that are subject to, and in the process of, public debate.

2. For films about “comfort women” that were made before the 1990s, see Kim Chung-kang (2017).

signifying a “post-memory generation.”³ In addition, Kwŏn Ŭn-sŏn (2019) said the dramatic films that were made soon after the Korea-Japan comfort women agreement of 2015 stand apart from previous films by shifting “from trauma to post-trauma, from victims to survivors, and from sisterhood to shared solidarity.” Pak Hyŏn-sŏn (2020) observed that *Herstory* and *I Can Speak*, both films made in the 2010s, are distinguished from earlier “comfort women” films because they serve as a forum for “meta-memory” by integrating Korean society’s public debate and memories about the “comfort women” as important elements in the narrative.

All these studies show that the films produced in the second half of the 2010s go beyond directly recording the harm suffered by the “comfort women.” Rather, they represent, on a meta level, the preceding debate in Korean society about the “comfort women” issue, the survivors’ activities and the changes they have undergone, and the memories of the younger generation. These are natural tendencies for cinematic representations in the second half of the 2010s, which will inevitably reflect the changes that have occurred since the discourse surrounding “comfort women” became an official issue in the 1990s, more than a generation ago. Furthermore, the furious pace of developments related to the “comfort women” issue since the 2010s—including the installment of the Statue of Peace (a statue symbolizing the “comfort women”) in 2011, the publication of Park Yu-ha’s book *Comfort Women of the Empire* (*Cheguk ūi wianbu*) in 2013, the criminal complaint filed against Park in 2014, the “comfort women” agreement reached by the governments of Korea and Japan in 2015, and the subsequent campaign to defend comfort women statues—suggest there will be even more representations of the “comfort women” movement and public memory about it in the future.

The news that the Obama administration in the US had orchestrated the Korea-Japan “comfort women” agreement in 2015 (Son Yŏl 2016) brought into focus the US’ leading role in the international order following World War II, as well as its responsibility for handling the “comfort women” issue. The Cold War regime, which began in earnest after the official dissolution of the Japanese Empire in 1945, was to blame for the persistence of the “comfort women” issue in the sense that it entangled that issue with colonialism. Furthermore, that self-same Cold War regime continues to have a weighty impact on our lives, as

3. “Post-memory generation” is a term used by Marianne Hirsch, a researcher of the Holocaust, to express the unique way that the descendants of Holocaust victims remember their ancestors. Descendants who did not experience the Holocaust themselves are handed down memories that are distinct from official narratives through the common culture of the family, including oral accounts and personal items (Kang Kyŏng-rae 2018).

indicated by the continuing division of the Korean Peninsula. That makes it necessary to identify the ways in which the entanglement of colonialism and the Cold War regime are embedded in the younger generation's cultural memory about the "comfort women" issue.

Those are the issues to bear in mind in this paper's analysis of *I Can Speak* and *Herstory*. As previous studies have remarked, the main characters in these two films are former "comfort women" who are quite distinct from those depicted in earlier "comfort women" narratives in both film and literature. Rather than "silenced victims," they are "speaking subjects" who personally hold the state responsible in the transnational legal venues of a Japanese courthouse and the US House of Representatives. Furthermore, the testimony they give there provides a fascinating look at the "comfort women" issue's location in the Cold War regime in East Asia, which is oriented on the past and present relationships between Korea, Japan, and the US. In addition, the relationship between former "comfort women" and the members of the younger generation who listen to their testimony occupies a critical place in the narrative. These members of the younger generation (who can be regarded, along with former "comfort women," as main characters in these films) are themselves worthy of analysis since they clearly reveal how the Cold War regime brought Korea, a postcolonial state, to where it is today.

Let me state clearly that this analysis is not intended to dilute the gravity of the Japanese government's primary responsibility for the "comfort women" issue.⁴ My ultimate objective in this paper is to facilitate fundamental reflection upon the way in which colonialism and the Cold War regime continue to be tangled up in Korean society.

4. For example, Park Yu-ha argues in her book *Comfort Women of the Empire* that the "comfort women" issue should not be regarded as solely concerning Japan because it also concerns US military bases under the Cold War regime in East Asia. For Park, sexual violence against women at those US military bases serves as grounds for weakening Japan's legal responsibility for the "comfort women" system adopted by its military, a claim that she positions as criticism of Korean nationalism. In her criticism of Park's argument, Kikuchi Natsuno asserts the need to view the "comfort women" issue in the framework of the criticism of colonialism, that being the context in which the modern nation-state took shape. Kikuchi's comparative analysis of the Japanese military "comfort women" system and the "A sign" system used to indicate Okinawa establishments licensed to entertain American soldiers indicates that imperial Japan's colonialism was replaced by a postwar system shared by the US and Japan. See Park Yu-ha (2013) and Kikuchi (2017).

Politics of Representation in “Comfort Women” Films

Following Kim Hak-sun’s testimony in 1991, a series of excellent documentaries—including the three parts of *The Murmuring* (*Najŭn moksori*, 1995, 1997, 1999, directed by Byun Young-joo)—have recorded the lives and voices of the survivors, playing a major role in forming public memory about the “comfort women” issue. Nevertheless, there was for some time a lack of serious research into “comfort women” films,⁵ which contrasted with vigorous discussion of other topics in the discipline of women’s studies following Kim’s testimony: the causes of the “comfort women” issue, the experience of violence during those women’s compulsory mobilization and their time at the comfort stations, and the routine examples of patriarchy and the cultural power of nationalism that persisted in Korean society even after the end of World War II and Japan’s colonial rule of the country.⁶ Presumably, those weighty issues needed to be addressed first before attention could turn to the issue of representation.

The conversation and criticism sparked by *Spirits’ Homecoming* (*Kwihyang*, directed by Cho Jung-rae), which was released to theaters in 2016, marked the beginning of serious research about cinematic representations of the “comfort women.” The film generated considerable discussion even before its release because of its lengthy fourteen-year production and because it was crowdfunded by 75,000 people. It ended up selling 3.5 million tickets, a rare feat for a film about “comfort women.” The social sensation of *Spirits’ Homecoming* can be understood in the context of a series of events that included the controversial publication of Park Yu-ha’s book *Comfort Women of the Empire* in 2013 and the Korea-Japan “comfort women” agreement reached on December 28, 2015 (Kwŏn Ŭn-sŏn 2017b; Son Hŭi-jŏng 2017). That has been examined from a variety of perspectives (Kwŏn Myŏng-a 2016; Kwŏn Ŭn-sŏn 2017b; Son Hŭi-jŏng 2017; Song Hyo-jŏng 2016; Chang Su-hŭi 2016), including Kwŏn Ŭn-sŏn’s (2017b) detailed analysis of how the guilt-ridden post-memory generation’s representation shifts to the perpetrator’s perspective, raising fundamental questions about what kind of aesthetics and political and ethical stances are required when representing gendered forms of sexual violence such as that suffered by “comfort women.” Studies comparing *Spirits’ Homecoming* with *Snowy Road* (*Nun kil*, 2015, directed by Yi Na-jeong), which came out around the same time, have examined the ways in which gendered sexual violence should be represented (Kwŏn

5. For studies of *The Murmuring*, see Kim Hyun Gyung (2022, n. 10).

6. In regard to research trends on the “comfort women” issue in the Korean discipline of women’s studies, see Kim Hyun Gyung (2021, 204-208).

Ŭn-sŏn 2017a; Son Hŭi-jŏng 2017; Chu Yu-sin 2017).

Around the time that *Spirits' Homecoming* became such a sensation, research into cinematic representations of “comfort women” expanded to cover popular films on the subject that were produced in Korea and Japan before the 1990s. For example, Chŏe Ŭn-ju (2014) traces the impact of censorship by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (that is, the US military administration of Japan) on the 1950 dramatization of *Story of a Prostitute* (*Shunpuden*), a postwar Japanese novel that features a “comfort woman” from Korea. In addition, Chŏe Ŭn-su (2019) argues that the female characters in the 1960s films *Story of a Prostitute* (1965, directed by Suzuki Seijun, a dramatization of the novel mentioned above), and *Fort Graveyard* (*Chi to suna*, 1965, directed by Okamoto Kihachi) epitomize the image of the “comfort women” who were characterized as voluntary prostitutes and pseudo-lovers in the flood of memoirs that World War II veterans published around this time. In an analysis of *Sunset in the Salween River* (*Sarŭbin Kang e noŭl i chinda*, 1965, directed by Jeong Chang-hwa), *Story of a Prostitute*, *The Comfort Women* (*Yŏja chŏngsindae*, 1974, directed by Na Pong-han), *Comfort Women* (*Yŏja chŏngsindae*, 1985, directed by Yi Sang-ŏn and Chŏng Chŏng), and *Your Ma's Name Was Chosun Whore* (*Emi irŭm ŭn Chosen ppi yŏtta*, 1991, directed by Chi Yŏng-ho), Kim Chung-kang (2017) identifies the violent and nationalistic male perspective of Korean films before the 1990s and the male complicity of both Korean and Japanese films from that period. Such films functioned as the primary mechanism of public memory that silenced the survivors, Kim concludes.

The films examined by those studies have interesting implications for this paper's thesis about the Cold War regime's subtle impact on the formation of the “comfort women” issue. For example, Chŏe Ŭn-ju (2014, 11-17) argues that while the US military requested the removal of Korean “comfort women” from the dramatization of the novel *Story of a Prostitute* on the grounds that they might be taken as criticism of Koreans, that was only the ostensible reason. The real reason for the US military's opposition, Chŏe says, was a concern that its image as a liberating force would be tarnished by the appearance of “comfort women” for the US military in Japan, where female prostitutes were being organized by the state to serve the US military in the postwar period. In addition, the films *Story of a Prostitute* and *Fort Graveyard* were produced around the time of a Korea-Japan summit in 1965, illustrating how Japan was able to maintain its status in the US-led Cold War regime without taking responsibility or expressing remorse for its actions in World War II (Chŏe Ŭn-su 2019, 160-66). Kim Chung-kang (2017, 166-70) notes that the “comfort women” in *Sunset in the Salween River*, which was produced in Korea around that time, were represented in a

similar way to the US military “comfort women,” who were called “UN madams” or “Yankee princesses.” Here is a glimpse of the tendency at the time not to distinguish between “comfort women” for the imperial Japanese military, “comfort women” for Korean and UN forces in the 1950s, and the “camptown” women who served the US military in the 1960s, which would appear to demonstrate the entanglement of Japanese imperialism and US imperialism through women’s bodies and sexuality. Finally, Kim Chi-ön (2021) analyzes the female characters in *Sunset in the Salween River* (camp followers, comfort women who double as nurses, and Burmese women in a guerilla unit) to argue that this film, set as it is in Southeast Asia, is a text that symptomatically reveals Korean society’s perpetrator mentality regarding the Vietnam War and the rejection of that mentality.

The films examined here (*I Can Speak* and *Herstory*), which both came out after the spirited debate over *Spirits’ Homecoming*, were credited for their innovative representation of “comfort women” not as young girls or sexual objects but as elderly survivors continuing their struggle in the courtroom. To be sure, even the earliest documentaries on this subject had focused on the “comfort women” survivors as subjects who could speak for themselves and file lawsuits, but this is a significant development for story and characters in dramatic films (in their capacity as popular image/narrative) since it shows that a certain consensus has been reached in public memory. In that regard, the fact that the main characters of *Herstory* and *I Can Speak* are not broken people who have lost the ability to speak but rather “women, adults, and citizens” (O Hye-jin 2017) who are searching and struggling for meaning in their own lives sheds light on the battle waged over the “comfort women” issue in Korean society and the knowledge and political and ethical sentiments accrued in that process. In particular, previous studies have credited the “subalterns with the agency to speak” (Kwön Ŭn-sŏn 2019, 20-21) in *I Can Speak* for showing the formation of a new “post-memory collective” through “the potential of testimony for members of the younger generation” (Kang Kyŏng-rae 2018, 249-56).

However, this post-memory collective has also been criticized for being thoroughly pseudo-familial and ethno-national in nature. Hŏ Yun (2018, 146-51) observes that expanding the relationships of the people who accept former “comfort women” (members of a marketplace, a level-nine civil servant and his brother, and a successful businesswoman and her daughter) still leaves them confined within the boundaries of the Korean nation. While *Herstory* obviously drew upon the documentary *My Heart Is Not Broken Yet* (*Na ŭi maŭm ūn chiji anatta*), it elides that documentary’s focus on solidarity with the Japanese people who provided both moral and material support to Song Sin-do and her battle in

the courts. In *I Can Speak*, the civil servant at the district office who helps Ok-pun (the main character) register as a former “comfort women,” as well as his younger brother, have been read as personifying government bodies (Yi Hye-ryŏng 2018, 116-20). The problem, as Yi observes, is that the imagination of these films and narratives fails to address the time before the former “comfort women” opened up about their past to government bodies and came into contact with virtuous citizens.

For the purposes of this paper, I propose to refer to this unexamined period of time as the “postcolonial Cold War regime.” More specifically, I use this term to mean “the institutional and discursive structures that formed through the intermingling of colonialism that continued after the official end of the Japanese empire in 1945 with the Cold War order that was established around this time in East Asia” (Kim Hyun Gyung 2021, 204). That also aligns with the critical perspective of East Asian and feminist intellectuals who have criticized Western-centric understandings of the Cold War (which could only be maintained through hot wars in the non-Western world) and of the end of the Cold War, which was declared at the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989.⁷ I intend to use this concept to examine the methods used by “comfort women” films to represent the Cold War regime—methods that have received little attention in previous studies.

The pre-1990s films about the “comfort women” discussed above hint at the amalgamation of colonialism and the Cold War regime with the male-centric gaze that dominated routine memories of the “comfort women” issue before it became a mainstream issue in society. That raises the question of how the Cold War regime was represented in films produced after the “comfort women” became an important social issue not only in Korea but on a transnational level. Through this question, I seek to uncover how public memory of the “comfort women” issue is currently being formed in Korean society and to intervene in that process.

“Subalterns That Can Speak”: Reimagining the International Stage in the Cold War

As previously mentioned, the main characters of the films *I Can Speak* and *Herstory* are “subalterns with the agency to speak” (Kwŏn Ŭn-sŏn 2019, 20-21) who give testimony in their local communities and in transnational legal venues,

7. Some examples include Kim and Choi (1997), Chen (2010), Kwon (2010), and Yoneyama (2016).

unlike the surviving "comfort women" in previous films who were unable to give a decent account of their experiences. Nevertheless, we should pay close attention to the act of listening to the former "comfort women's" act of speaking (both when performed in transnational legal venues and when specifically conveyed to Korean society), since listening is what completes speech. Perhaps the most influential thinker on the speech of the subaltern is Gayatri Spivak, who addressed that topic in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" She posed that question because the dominant discursive order did not provide an epistemological framework that was capable of understanding the speech of the subaltern. Speech by subalterns remained incomplete because their speech was either not heard or, if heard, not understood (Spivak 1988). If, therefore, a subaltern's speech appears to have been both heard and understood, we need to investigate the epistemological framework in which that speech occurred.

Why did the US House of Representatives want to listen to the testimony of a surviving "comfort woman" in 2007, and how was her act of speaking represented in the film *I Can Speak*? What testimony did the surviving comfort women make in the Shimonoseki Trial in the 1990s, and how is that represented in the film *Herstory*? To answer these questions, we need to consider the significance House Resolution 121 (which asked Japan to apologize to the former "comfort women") had in US society at the time and the significance the Shimonoseki Trial had in the context of Japanese society.

The first topic to examine is House Resolution 121 (the "comfort women" resolution). Feminist anthropologist Lisa Yoneyama traces the origins of this resolution back to a revision made to California's Code of Civil Procedure in 1999. Article 354, Paragraph 6, of the code had originally allowed victims of forced labor by the Nazi regime to request compensation, but the revision broadened the terms to allow compensation for acts carried out by countries allied to the Nazis. As this shows, the conclusion of the Cold War in the 1990s made it possible to raise questions about the inadequacy and immorality of the postwar reckoning that had been based on the interests of nation-states. That mood is what made it possible for the Shimonoseki Trial to be held. At the same time, these legal changes were instituted with Asian immigrants in mind, revealing their growing importance in US politics. This development signified that the US mainstream's memory of World War II, which had been centered on Europe and whiteness, had begun to incorporate Asians and the Asia-Pacific region (Yoneyama 2016, 149-53).

In 2001, the Los Angeles Superior Court ruled the revised code would not provoke an international dispute because judgments about private companies' use of slave labor could be reached in civil litigation. The court also remarked in

its ruling that the US government had adopted an inconsistent and asymmetrical attitude toward the damage caused by Japan and the damage that occurred in Europe during World War II (Yoneyama 2016, 154-58). That was evidently because the US had forged different relationships in Europe and in Asia after the war. In postwar Asia, the US was a new empire that both erased and replaced Japan's imperial legacy. The important thing is that such aspects went completely unmentioned by House Resolution 121 in 2007. Neither was any mention made of the US' decisive role in the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (1946-48), which fell short of holding imperial Japan responsible for its colonial rule and war of aggression, nor in the Treaty of San Francisco (1951), which restored Japan to the international community as a junior ally of the US in the Cold War. The same is obviously true of the expansion of prostitution and "camptowns" for the US army in postwar Asia. Those are all major reasons why the "comfort women" issue remains unresolved to this day. So, while House Resolution 121 revealed the truth about the "comfort women" issue, it also downplayed US imperialism during the Cold War (which was bound to become an issue as the Cold War wound down) on the pretext of universal human rights and diversifying mainstream memory about World War II and thus strengthening the US' image as the country that liberated Asians from Japan's harsh rule. Yoneyama dubs this "the Americanization of Japanese war crimes" (147-53).

Viewed in this context, the scene of Ok-pun's testimony before the US House of Representatives might represent a subaltern's speech being completed through the listening of an "empathetic audience" (Kim Su-jin 2013, 53-55), but it can also be taken as showing how the "comfort women" issue functions on the stage of international relations. The film itself implies as much. After Ok-pun's testimony, she is reunited with her younger brother Chŏng-nam, who has been waiting for her. When Min-jae, a level-nine civil servant and Ok-pun's English teacher, tells Chŏng-nam that Ok-pun wants to meet him in a phone call earlier in the film, he flatly rejects the idea, declaring he has nothing to say to her. Chŏng-nam doesn't speak very much Korean, presumably because he was adopted by an American family during the Korean War. His character symbolizes the desire of some Korean immigrants (as well as some Korean nationals) to assimilate into the US-centered ruling order because they have forgotten that they embody, in their very persons, the Korean War, which heralded the Cold War in Asia, and the US' newfound regional dominance. After Chŏng-nam reads in a newspaper article that Ok-pun is testifying before the House of Representatives, he rushes to see her and makes a tearful apology in his halting Korean, suggesting some sort of relationship between House Resolution 121 and Korean immigrants' citizenship and integration into American society.

Following this brief scene, the film transitions to a title card saying that House Resolution 121 represented the “international community’s official acknowledgment of the compulsory mobilization of Japanese military ‘comfort women.’” That message’s apparent facticity is reinforced by an accompanying photograph of Yi Yong-su, a former comfort woman who testified before the House of Representatives in 2007. But that message is less a factual statement than an expression of Korean society’s conception of the “international community.” Back in 2000, the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery had already found Emperor Hirohito to be responsible for the compulsory mobilization of “comfort women” and had furthermore said that the initial responsibility for the continuing lack of a resolution to the “comfort women” issue lay with the Allied Powers because they hadn’t forced postwar Japan to take responsibility (Kang Ka-ram 2006; Yoneyama 2016, 126; “The Prosecutors and” 2001). Perhaps the film’s directors and producers thought that the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal couldn’t represent the international community’s “first official acknowledgment” of this issue because it was a civilian tribunal, but I haven’t seen that addressed in any audience responses, film reviews, or academic research to date. It wouldn’t be unreasonable to take that as a sign that Korean society’s conception of recognition by the international community is still oriented on the US and that Koreans remain trapped in a Cold War-era mindset that is based on a hierarchy of nation-states.

Next, we will examine the cinematic representation of the Shimonoseki Trial in *Herstory*. The issues clearly foregrounded in this courthouse drama are the testimony of former “comfort women,” the authoritarian reaction of the Japanese court, and the hateful response from the Japanese public. The second half of the film focuses more and more on the trial, arousing nationalistic outrage in a similar manner to other “comfort women” films. But according to Hanafusa Toshio, the secretary-general of the Japanese group that supported the lawsuit, the overall atmosphere in Japan was friendly when the trial began in the early 1990s; one opinion poll even found that more than 50 percent of Japanese supported the idea of compensating the survivors. The blatantly discriminatory behavior and hate speech shown in the film reflect the mood that prevailed in Japan not in the 1990s, when the trial took place, but in the 2010s and today, after the “comfort women” movement was well underway and neoliberalism had gained ground (Hanafusa T. and Hanafusa E. 2021, 51-55). The film does not seem to adequately appreciate that the 1990s were a time when the potential for reflection on and transformation of the postcolonial Cold War regime was being tested across national borders.⁸

It would be wrong to simply say that the Japanese court in the Shimonoseki Trial unilaterally disregarded the testimony of the Korean survivors. In fact, the court recognized that the “comfort women” system amounted to a violation of basic human rights as well as ethnic discrimination and discrimination against women under the framework of Japan’s postwar constitution. It also ordered the Japanese Diet to draft legislation to remedy the damage by compensating not only the plaintiffs but all former “comfort women.” In short, this was their first victory in court.⁹ This ruling is presented at the end of the film, but the problem is the film’s representation of the process leading up to that ruling.

In Article 9, Japan’s postwar constitution renounces the possession of military arms, giving rise to its nickname of the “peace constitution,” but that same constitution was limited by its failure to take responsibility for Japan’s colonial rule and wars of aggression or provide compensation to the victims. Amidst those limitations, the Shimonoseki Trial ended with the court ordering lawmakers to take responsibility for the damage suffered by the “comfort women.” Evidently, this trial was a dynamic forum for discussing tricky legal issues, including the responsibility of perpetrator states, the moral responsibility of the state, compensation for colonial rule and wars, and the guarantee of basic human rights, all in the context of the global denouncement of the Cold War.¹⁰ But the filmmakers opted not to represent that process. In this film, Kwŏn Ŭn-sŏn (2019, 21-22) concludes, the narrative framework of the trial and the narrative setting of the courtroom serve not as the potential for addressing various legal issues about the “comfort women,” but rather as a vessel for conveying the testimony of “comfort women” and, at the same time, a symbol of power and domination that operates as a means of preventing the survivors’ speech act from being completed.

In short, the films *Herstory* and *I Can Speak* show progress in the sense that

8. In that regard, Hŏ Yun is right to observe that the female solidarity so emphasized in the film is grounded in ethnic identity (2018, 151).

9. The court came under considerable pressure from the Japanese government, which appealed the ruling. In the end, the district court’s ruling was overturned both by a high court in 2001 and by the Supreme Court in 2003 (Hanafusa T. and Hanafusa E. 2021, 59-127). Despite the political and popular interest in “comfort women” in Korean society, it is highly suggestive that no separate studies have been published about the Shimonoseki Trial. The stereotypical representation of the trial in *Herstory* reveals not only the generic limitations of film but also Korean society’s disinterest in the transnationalization of the comfort women issue. For an exceptional case, see Yi Chi-ŭn’s (2021) study about *Koreans Serving as Military Comfort Women: Accusation of a Korean Woman* (*Chōsenjin guntai ianfu: Kankoku josei kara no kokuhatsu*), a book published in Japan by Kim Mun-suk, the real-life inspiration for the character Mun Chōng-suk.

10. For more on this point, see Hanafusa T. and Hanafusa E. (2021, 65-100).

their main characters are former “comfort women” with the agency to speak and their narratives are organized around them, but they still reenact the Cold War relationships between Korea, the US, and Japan by either erasing the act of listening by which the subaltern’s act of speaking is completed (*Herstory*) or disregarding its context (*I Can Speak*). That is not merely a limitation of the genre of film—it constitutes the point at which Korean society’s public memory about the “comfort women” issue has halted.

The Nationality of a Reflective Post-memory Generation

Something these two films have in common is that their main characters include not only former “comfort women” but also members of the younger generation who listen to them and make relationships with them. Level-nine public servant Min-jae in *I Can Speak* and travel agency owner Mun Chŏng-suk in *Herstory* play a decisive role as both assistants and interpreters in enabling former “comfort women” to testify in transnational legal venues. They are also kindhearted citizens who accept the survivors into their families, despite the complete lack of blood ties.

To begin with *Herstory*, Mun Chŏng-suk is both the successful owner of a travel agency in Busan and a working mom who raises her daughter by herself. She represents a type of female character that is rarely shown in Korean films: a founding member of the Busan Businesswomen’s Association, she brags about how easy it is to make money and loudly insists that women need to toot their own horn when a younger friend modestly credits her husband for her success.¹¹ Even more interestingly, Mun Chŏng-suk becomes a spokesperson for survivors of the “comfort women” system and the Korean Women’s Volunteer Labour Corps at the Shimonoseki Trial not because she is sincerely interested in the issue, but rather because her business is suspended for three months for arranging “kisaeng tours”¹² in violation of a ban on prostitution. Mun Chŏng-suk ends up

11. More specifically, Mun Chŏng-suk represents the women who played a key role in the economic boom in Busan after the Korean War. It is rather refreshing to see this portrayal of a successful local businesswoman, a type that is common enough in real life but almost never the main character of a narrative. To be sure, Mun Chŏng-suk also reflects women moviegoers’ growing desire for films about women since the popularization of feminism in 2015 as argued by feminist literary and cultural critics. For more on this, see Hŏ Yun (2018, 148-51) and Wepjin Kyŏl P’yŏnjip T’im (2022).

12. “Kisaeng tours” refer to sex tourism in Korea’s 1970s and ’80s. Originally, kisaeng were women trained in various artistic skills and entertainment activities in the Chosŏn dynasty. They primarily entertained the upper class, including royalty, aristocrats, and scholars. During the period of

opening a center to help former “comfort women” and members of the Korean Women’s Volunteer Labour Corps register their status with the government, an idea that a friend suggested might help repair her travel agency’s reputation. The survivors she meets in that process change the course of her life.

But in this film, the kisaeng tours are not merely a plot device that set up Mun Chŏng-suk’s meeting with the surviving “comfort women.” Though the background is covered in a few lines of dialogue between the characters, moviegoers can surmise that while Mun Chŏng-suk was not actively involved in the kisaeng tours herself, she hired a manager who was familiar with them and made them the travel agency’s main source of income. Early in the movie, Mun Chŏng-suk visits a police station where she reprimands a young female employee who reported the death of a male tourist from Japan to the police and then fires the manager without giving him a generous severance package. Over the course of the film, it becomes clear that some of the former “comfort women” are aware that Mun Chŏng-suk’s travel agency had profited from kisaeng tours. At that point, she acknowledges her culpability with an attitude that is markedly different from earlier. This scene is crosscut with one that reveals the secret of one survivor’s perjury, constituting the climax of the film.

It’s widely known that kisaeng tours (along with “comfort women” at US military camptowns) were one of the main ways that the Republic of Korea, which was a developmentalist state during the Cold War, accumulated capital through women’s bodies and sexuality. According to Pak Chŏng-mi, the US’ position that government support for tourism was a preferred development strategy for the Third World was a major factor behind the kisaeng tours (which amounted to government-sanctioned prostitution tours) of the time.¹³ The tourism that the US recommended was largely prostitution for men from the First World; in fact, the US Department of Commerce, the US Agency for International Development, and other government bodies urged Seoul to put together tourism packages based on sexual services for such tourists. In 1968, the Korean government responded with the publication of *Comprehensive Measures to Promote Tourism* (*Kwan’gwang jinhŭng ŭl wihan chonghap taech’aek*),

Japan’s colonial rule of Korea (1910-45), kisaeng worked in the entertainment industry, particularly in establishments known as “kisaeng houses” or “kisaeng quarters.”

13. The US Department of Commerce launched a study of the prospects of the Asian tourism industry in 1958, the Kennedy administration enacted the International Travel Act in 1961, and the United Nations declared 1967 to be the International Year of Tourism. Those measures were part of a project to help Third World countries that continued to suffer political and economic stability under the Cold War regime to be integrated into the capitalist economic system through the tourism industry. They were also designed to benefit the capitalist tourism industry, including airlines, hotels, and travel agencies, in the US and Europe (Pak Chŏng-mi 2014a).

which included a plan to “develop Korea’s unique drinking establishments and kisaeng as tourism resources” (Pak Chŏng-mi 2014a, 242). Kisaeng tourism was not a big leap for the Korean government, which had already instrumentalized camptowns as a primary location for earning foreign currency.

In the late 1960s, Japanese men emerged as the primary clientele for those tours for several reasons, including the normalization of Korea-Japan relations, Japan’s economic growth, and the severing of Japan’s diplomatic relations with Taiwan. One of the main destinations for Japanese men going on kisaeng tours was Busan. *Korean Tourism Resource Guide* (*Han’guk kwan’gwang chawŏn chŏngnam*), published in 1972, candidly presents the following tourism itinerary for Busan: “City Hall→Yongdusan Temple→Songdo Island→Haeundae Beach (nightclub)→Tongnae Hot Springs (kisaeng party)” (Mun Chae-wŏn and Cho Myŏng-gi 2010). Around this time, Christian women’s organizations in both Korea and Japan launched a campaign against kisaeng tours. Yun Chŏng-ok’s report on a trip to “comfort women” sites in Japan during a campaign meeting in 1988 marked the beginning of the “comfort women” movement (Pak Chŏng-mi 2014b). Domestically, the campaign against kisaeng tours was a major factor behind the commitment to eradicate sex tourism made by Kim Young-sam, who became president in 1993. Internationally, the campaign exposed the lopsided economic development of Asian countries during the Cold War and the hierarchy and sexualization that occurred as a result (Yoneyama 2016, 28). Those circumstances serve as the backdrop for the scene in *Herstory* (which, as readers will recall, depicts the events at a travel agency in Busan in 1991) when the fired manager vents his spleen at Mun Chŏng-suk: “To be perfectly honest, why would tourists come to Busan if not for the kisaeng tours? Isn’t that why you brought me on? You seemed happy enough when I helped you increase your profits. I was the one who brought your company back from the grave, and now you’re treating me like a mangy dog . . .”

In short, Mun Chŏng-suk stands in for the average Korean who benefited through complicity with the developmentalist state’s exploitation of women’s bodies and sexuality as a means of earning foreign currency under the Cold War regime. A major component of this film’s narrative is Mun Chŏng-suk’s growth as a member of the post-memory generation as she recognizes and reflects upon the foundation of her wealth after coming face-to-face with the experiences of the former “comfort women.” When asked by a younger female friend why she got involved with the “comfort women” issue, she says, “Because I was ashamed of being so successful while others were not.” That line represents a moment of reflection and realization for her. It is to this film’s credit that it presents this issue—namely, the mobilization and exploitation of women’s bodies and

sexuality and the resulting capital accumulation that continued after Japan's colonial rule and into the Cold War regime—as something that Korean society needs to reflect upon in connection with the “comfort women” issue. That's rarely seen in other films dealing with “comfort women.”

But the nuance of this portrayal of Mun Chŏng-suk is not evident in the other members of the post-memory generation. Along with Mun Chŏng-suk, the Shimonoseki Trial is led by attorney Yi Sang-il, a Korean Japanese character who symbolizes imperial Japan's rule over Korea just like the former “comfort women.” The discrimination he faces in Japanese society is a major reason that he plays such an active role in the Shimonoseki Trial. Whereas Mun Chŏng-suk values results, Yi Sang-il focuses on process, rejecting the “might makes right” mentality in his struggle. But the differences between the two characters only function as a catalyst for Mun Chŏng-suk's personal growth and changing mindset.

Korean Japanese people can be seen to symbolize not only imperial Japan's colonial rule but also the Cold War regime in East Asia. In South Korea and Japan's negotiations for their treaty of basic relations in 1965, Korea proposed that ethnic Koreans in Japan be required to register as Korean nationals to receive permanent residency in Japan—a move that was aimed at bringing Korean Japanese under the sway of South Korea, rather than North Korea. While this “permanent residency by treaty” did improve the legal status of Korean Japanese, it also set off a sharp conflict in Korean Japanese society between the Korean Residents Union in Japan (Mindan), affiliated with South Korea, and the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon), affiliated with North Korea. Given these circumstances, Cho Kyŏng-hŭi (2017) argues that nationality for Korean Japanese is more of a tool of competition between the two sides of a divided peninsula than grounds for human rights or self-determination.

The film omits Yi Sang-il's complicated status as a Korean Japanese, which could easily have been dealt with along with the “comfort women” issue in the postcolonial Cold War regime represented by Mun Chŏng-suk's introspection.¹⁴ As a result, Yi Sang-il merely serves as a foil for the changes that Mun Chŏng-suk undergoes. This film's placement of Mun Chŏng-suk and Yi Sang-il is similar to the way in which standard male-centered narratives/images squander female characters' intriguing potential for the sake of the growth of the male main character. This gender reversal's radical significance is undermined by its overlap with the hierarchical placement of Koreans and Korean Japanese.

14. In this regard, it is worth noting the way in which *The Silence* (*Ch'immuk*, 2016) handles the positionality of director Pak Su-nam's status as a Korean Japanese along with the “comfort women” issue.

Min-jae in *I Can Speak* doesn't even require Mun Chŏng-suk's self-reflection before stepping up to help Ok-pun, a former “comfort woman.” Min-jae had studied in the US to become an architect, but after the death of his parents, he takes a job as a level-nine civil servant to look after his younger brother. In his spare time, he prepares for a test for the seventh level of the civil service, positioning him as a typical young person committed to self-improvement in a neoliberal era. After learning about Ok-pun's past, Min-jae bows his head and offers an apology without any particular prompting. What this signifies is that the “comfort women” issue has become something that Korean young people, as virtuous neoliberal global citizens, are expected to feel sorry for without the need for any extra explanation. Yi Hye-ryŏng (2018, 143-45) regards these characters as personifications of government bodies, while Hŏ Yun (2021) sharply criticizes the tendency for such “virtuous citizens” to self-identify through product consumption without internal meditation or interpretation in the trend of commodifying and popularizing memories about the “comfort women.” Such interpretations reveal how the “comfort women” issue was raised and embraced during the major changes that have swept Korean society since the late 1980s including democratization, the end of the Cold War, globalization, and neoliberalism. Some of that may represent what the “comfort women” movement and the survivors themselves have achieved in their thirty-year struggle, but I'm wary about treating that easy acceptance as an unqualified achievement. The “comfort women” issue's neat interaction with neoliberalism based on the late stages of colonialism and capitalism implies a lack of interrogation about the issue's late-colonial and late-capitalist contexts. When the “comfort women” issue loses its relevance for the present, that vacuum is inevitably filled with a calcified version of the past.

To sum up, the virtuous citizens in these films who either reflect upon Korean society's mobilization of female sexuality under the Cold War regime (*Herstory*) or accept former “comfort women” into their family without any particular reason (*I Can Speak*) are represented as members of a post-memory generation that has the potential to accept the testimony they are handed down. The two films do hint at the possibility of creating a post-memory community, as other critics have approvingly noted, but that community is totally composed of Koreans. Considering that the “comfort women” issue long ago became a transnational “meta-memory” that is international in scope (Gluck 2021), public memory in Korean society needs to move beyond the assumption that the “comfort women” are a memory belonging only to “us” Koreans.

Conclusion

My goal in this paper was to answer how the Cold War's continuation in the "comfort women" issue is represented in *Herstory* and *I Can Speak*, films that directly represent the relationship between the surviving "comfort women" and future generations, and what significance that representation has for the public memory of the "comfort women" issue in Korean society. While the Cold War regime was not itself a major cause of the "comfort women" issue, it did result in Japan not being held fully responsible for its colonial rule and war of aggression, so as to ensure that Japan would join the confrontation with countries in the Communist camp. Furthermore, the Cold War regime caused the "comfort women" issue to persist by placing Korea and other Asian countries into a hierarchy according to the interests of the West and more specifically the US. The subsequent calcification of the Cold War made the decolonization of Asia impossible and even today continues to function as the cause of many historical disputes.

Herstory and *I Can Speak* have advanced beyond previous films about "comfort women" by representing a "post-memory generation that remembers" and "subalterns that can speak." The two films also tell stories about the mobilization and exploitation of female bodies and sexuality under the Cold War regime that persisted and became amalgamated with Japan's colonial rule of Korea, as well as introspection about the patriarchy within us. That exemplifies the advances made in Korean society regarding memory of the comfort women issue. However, the two films reenact the Cold War relationships between Korea, Japan, and the US by showing Japanese courts in the 1990s ignoring what former comfort women said in transnational legal venues and showing the US House of Representatives in the early 2000s becoming the world's first official body to listen to those voices. In addition, both films portray the post-memory generation that hears comfort women's testimony as consisting solely of Koreans, betraying their indifference to the transnational nature and complicated temporality of the comfort women issue. That has kept introspection on these issues inside Korea's borders.

Going forward, how can Korean films reproduce the complicated temporality and transnational nature of the "comfort women" issue? By demonstrating that this question is the point at which the "comfort women" issue has gotten stuck in Korean society, this paper sought to specify the creative approach that public memory needs to develop in regard to this issue.

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