

Korean Comfort Women as Political Discourse

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Abstract. In the dichotomy between force and agency in prostitution, the placement of comfort women, girls taken by Japan during WWII and forced into sex service, presents a clear field in which the question of agency fades. With the deep impacts of war intrinsically linked with comfort women, the issue of representation reemerges as a potent symbol in post-war peace. This paper examines the realities and symbols of Korean comfort women as it relates to Japanese relations. Jeffrey Alexander's theory of cultural trauma will be applied to the process of these representations and establishing these women as both victims and survivors, not only contained to personal perseverance but also as a powerful, living symbols in the building of images of Korea.

1. Introduction

In discussions of militarized sex work, Korean comfort women under Japanese imperialization serves as an extreme example. Systematic, institutionalized, transported, and drawn from a colony, the discourse of comfort women is a checklist of victimization in post-imperial gender research in the most manifest and severe form. Adding to the overarching discussions on the subject is the official Japanese denial, or at most minimal acknowledgment of, the comfort women project of World War II. However, as these women come forward with their stories at the end of their lives, the subject is becoming more and more positioned as a discourse both within and between the countries it involves. The goal of this paper is two-fold. After establishing a theoretical premise based on Jeffrey Alexander's cultural trauma, the historical establishment that trapped these women and some testimonies of the women themselves will be given. After presenting their stories and the structures that forced these experiences, the re-emergence of the discourse surrounding comfort women as a political tool will be tracked. Concluding this paper will summarize the issues with respect to the theories and attempt to further problematize the process of the creation of cultural trauma in light of the inherently gendered and dialectical discourse of these women's, and their culture's experiences.

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

Sociologist Jeffrey Alexander defines cultural trauma as what "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways"[1]. In the introduction to this book, "Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma," Alexander works to redefine previous notions of trauma, dissecting them between lay, enlightenment, and psychoanalytical models, all of which are used in social theory. Rather, he pushes for viewing trauma as being a selected event around which a discourse is created; in other words, Alexander views trauma as a process undergone on a cultural level. As a metaphor, he offers the comparison to "speech acts," as certain groups are the ones who forward the event as traumatic to an audience and attempt to direct the discourse and incorporate it as a fundamental aspect of group identity. As the "casualty is symbolic and aesthetic," Alexander proposes that there are a series of representations needed in the creation of cultural trauma: the nature of the pain, the nature of the victim, relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience, and the attribution of responsibility. The 'carrier groups,' the "collective agents of the trauma process," that work to create these trauma processes are institutions, each possessing their own hierarchy and method, of which Alexander includes: religious, aesthetic, scientific, mass media, and state bureaucracy. He notes, however, that there are failures that occur; that is, not all traumatic events become traumas and not all processes are complete or accepted. In this instance, the positioning of comfort women exists as an element of a larger trauma process. The Japanese imperial project in Korea from 1876-1945 has served as a key component of framing Koreans as victims or survivors.

The dying generation of comfort women has only helped isolate the experiences of these victims as a discourse, a part of the cultural trauma process. The application of Alexander's required representations (the nature of the pain, the nature of the victim, relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience, and the attribution of responsibility), then, becomes easily manipulated and met. Employing these representations in this context, the nature of the pain becomes embodied in the comfort women's being taken from their homeland and raped in both their physical selves and as a symbol for the nation as a whole. The nature of the victims then becomes symbolic as young, mostly virgin, women were targeted. With an increasing awareness to class, another layer is added to the culturally constructed imagining of women as defenseless as those taken to become comfort women are now both gendered weaker, but are more objectively economically vulnerable. Rooted in a shared Korean ethnicity, the comfort women are intrinsically placed in direct relation to the wider audience.

The increasing inability of these women to present alternative narratives, all theoretically bolstered by their first-hand experience, creates, in essence, a vacuum in terms of the attribution of responsibility. As shown, the attribution of trauma to the Japanese is obvious, though there exists also a level of accusation against the "wider audience." By accusing Koreans of the time of failing to protect those taken or even harming those returned, the attribution becomes quickly problematized. Though the death of these women, sadly but certainly, helps in purifying the direction of the process towards framing Japan as the responsible party, it does not provide for a singular explanation for the overarching and rarely question placement of blame on Japan.

Alexander's additional identification of institutions that direct events to become traumas (religious, aesthetic, scientific, mass media, and state bureaucracy) proves illuminating. Given that until 1987 the government was, in essence, a police state, the entire direction was dominated by the state bureaucracy, though it had the ability to access and utilize mass media while stifling other institutions. The monopoly on direction, then, allowed the state to all but erase alternative discourses and narratives of the cultural trauma, including those that it saw as harmful to its own, in this case the accusation of leading Korean officials, businessmen, and media moguls as profiting from allegiances with those "responsible."

In the more recent context, then, the same level of examination must be used. Regarding the narratives set down by comfort women as being wronged by both the Empire and their own nation, it is important to keep in mind that these tales are intrinsically gendered. Particularly as it concerns the direction of the event as trauma inflicted by the Japanese, the institutions that represent, interpret, and disseminate the comfort women's stories are male dominated. In the case of South Korean trauma, the mass media, state bureaucracy, and religious communities (though less so) remain firmly male controlled, leaving, in many ways, the feminist discourse secondary in light of the broader national-oriented. Arguably, for this, perhaps more inclusive, victim to be established, the blame cannot rest on any part of the whole. Beyond this, the domination of the direction by men may be seen as having a conscious, vested interest in deterring responsibility from being placed on themselves.

3. Conclusions

The need for Comfort Women to be acknowledged contributes in two ways to the creation of Cultural Trauma: the event itself and the denial of it. The question that rises is what importance this holds if it is acknowledged, as the creation of this has been a gendered, political issue. The catch-22 is that the elevation of this has been inherently entwined with the denial. Once it becomes acknowledged, the entire issue loses that inherent power, leaving it to become a submerged issue again. With such a question left, perhaps the best that can be said for cultural trauma as a theory is that it falls in line with the program set forth by Clifford Geertz in his effort to change the understanding of anthropology as a diagnostic, rather than predictive, field[2].

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[1] Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2004. "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma." *In* Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Gernhard Giesen, Niel J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, eds. Pp:1-31. University of California Press:Berkeley.

[2] Clifford Geertz. 2000. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York: Basic Books.