

Unfolding the
'Comfort Women' Debates

Modernity, Violence, Women's Voices

MAKI KIMURA



Genders and Sexualities in History

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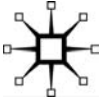
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Modernity, Violence, Women's Voices

Maki Kimura

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Introduction

1

A Question of History

In May 2013, Hashimoto Toru,¹ the Mayor of Osaka, Japan, and the co-leader of the Nationalist Japan Restoration Party, caused an outcry from some international communities, particularly those of feminists, by commenting that the ‘comfort women’ system during the Second World War was ‘necessary’. Hashimoto was fiercely criticized, not only by feminists but also by the media, the wider public in Japan and even by some conservative Japanese politicians. However, this incident exemplifies how the dominant political climate in Japan surrounding war atrocities during the Second World War, including the ‘comfort women’ system, has, particularly over the past decade, turned nationalist and reactionary in a way that deeply disturbs feminists and left activists. This tendency has worsened since Abe Shinzo became Japanese Prime Minister for the second time in December 2012. He attempted to withdraw the Kono Statement of 1993, which acknowledged the involvement of Japanese authorities in organizing the ‘comfort women’ system,² and to review the pacifist constitution so that Japan can use force to participate in settling international conflicts.

However, nationalism is not the only problematic aspect of Hashimoto’s comment (Kimura, 2013). The ‘comfort women’ system, since it became widely known in the 1990s, has raised an extensive range of issues, such as: the gendered and racialized nature of war and militarism; the role of testimonies in historical documentation; political subjectivity and war compensation; the violation of human rights; and the de/construction of a national memory of war and authoritarianism. Hashimoto’s comment and the ways that it was reported, debated and criticized nationally and internationally reminds us that the issues surrounding ‘comfort women’ are still far from settled, and of the immense complexity in situating the ‘comfort women’ system in wide and complicated historical and political contexts. This is also well demonstrated by further strengthening of the revisionist claim that the Japanese government is not responsible for the ‘comfort women’ system, after the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper published a special report in August 2014. The *Asahi Shimbun* reported that articles they published in the 1980s and

throughout the 1990s that used Yoshida Seiji's memoir as the evidence of the use of coercion by Japanese authorities in recruiting the women, should be withdrawn, as the historical accuracy of the memoir has been questioned (*Asahi Shimbun*, 2014b).³ The *Asahi Shimbun* also emphasized that this does not imply that there was no coercive nature in the 'comfort women' system (*Asahi Shimbun*, 2014c). Nevertheless, revisionist media and ultra-nationalist politicians took this opportunity to claim strongly that the incorrect reporting of the 'comfort women' system, where the Japanese authorities forcibly dragged innocent women to become 'comfort women', presented an inaccurate history of Japan. They also argued that this tainted the image of Japan because it was accused by the international community of sexual slavery when this was not what actually happened.⁴

1.1 The emergence of the discussion on 'comfort women'

The term 'comfort women' refers to women who were sexually exploited by the Japanese military during the Second World War.⁵ The existence of 'comfort women' and the so-called 'comfort stations', in which soldiers had access to 'sexual services' of these women, were known for a long time (in Japan) through, for example, memoirs of soldiers or independent research studies, but only to limited groups of people. Some research studies were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s; for instance, in the Republic of Korea (South Korea), Professor Yun Chung-ok of Ewha Women's University initiated research into 'comfort women' in the 1980s, and called for a full investigation into the issue and political recognition of these women. This developed into the request by women's groups in South Korea for the Japanese government to carry out an inquiry into the 'comfort women' system just before the South Korean President Roh Tae Wu's visit to Japan in May 1990. In Japan, a former journalist, Senda Kako wrote a book *The Comfort Women* in 1973, which became a best-seller and sold several million copies.⁶ Also, Kawada Fumiko, a freelance journalist, published a biography of a former 'comfort woman', Bae Bong-gi, in 1987, after listening to her life story over ten years.⁷

However, the brutal exploitation that 'comfort women' suffered only became more widely known when the actual experience and ordeals of these women were disclosed through their testimonies, and they started to file lawsuits against the Japanese government. The 'comfort women' system began to be recognized as a serious human rights violation and the subject of political debate, particularly in Japan in the 1990s. Kim Hak-sun gave testimony about her experience at the Korean Church Women United office on 14 August 1991, and she became the first publicly known Korean 'comfort woman'. Together with two other women, she filed a lawsuit in the Tokyo District Court on 6 December 1991.

In January 1992, following the lawsuit, Yoshimi Yoshiaki, a historian in Japan, reported that he had uncovered Japanese government documents

that show the involvement of the Japanese military in 'recruiting' women and organizing comfort stations (*Asahi Shimbun*, 1992). Until this 'discovery' of official documents, as it is termed, the Japanese government had firmly and repeatedly denied government involvement in the operation of comfort stations. They reiterated, even after these documents came to light, that comfort stations had been organized and managed as private businesses. However, in July 1992, after some official, though very limited, inquiries, the Japanese government finally admitted for the first time its 'minor' involvement in managing and supervising comfort stations. Scholars and feminist activists established non-governmental organizations to support the victim-survivors of the 'comfort women' system. These organizations also undertook research into the 'comfort women' system and the women's lives and experience, both through their testimonies and through official documents that have become increasingly available.

This issue particularly attracted the attention of feminists in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and other Asian countries, who organized the first Japanese Military 'comfort women' Asian Solidarity Conference in Seoul in August 1992; but the stories of sexually exploited women also moved feminists beyond these geographical boundaries. The courage of the former 'comfort women' in testifying to their painful experience deeply stirred feminists, human rights and other activists as well as the wider public, regardless of their nationality, gender and age. The women's determination and the empathy of those who support them, especially feminists, has enabled the development of national/regional/international networks helping to gain recognition of these women's sufferings. Women's narratives of their experience also became vital for those concerned about the issue of war compensation and reparation in Japan, as, after fifty years the Japanese government admitted, with a lot of reservation, a certain level of involvement of Japanese authorities in the operation of the 'comfort women' system;⁸ this has opened up the possibility that the war compensation issue may see a political solution in the near future. 'Comfort women' victims, feminists and other activists and scholars demanded that the Japanese government should acknowledge its full responsibility and pay compensation to these women. Such a political claim led to a series of heated discussions in Japan concerning 'comfort women', which eventually became known as 'the issue of "comfort women"' (*Jyugun Ianfu Mondai*).

Under this mounting political pressure, in August 1993, a year after the Japanese government admitted some involvement in the 'comfort women' system, it presented the second report and Kono Yohei, then Chief Cabinet Secretary, issued a statement acknowledging some level of coercion in the organization of the 'comfort women' system. In August 1994, Murayama Tomiichi, the first Socialist Prime Minister in Japan since 1948, presented a governmental plan on war reparations. Under this plan, the Peace, Friendship and Exchange Initiative was to be founded in support of historical research

and to develop better communication and understanding between Japan and the Asian countries concerned. Regarding compensation to 'comfort women' victims, the Murayama government proposed a small amount of money to be provided from a private charity fund, which was to be set up as part of this arrangement. This plan was, however, strongly criticized by the victim-survivors and the activists who supported these women, as it was considered merely a way to circumvent the legal responsibility of the Japanese government.

Despite the controversy and protest, the Asian Peace and Friendship Fund for Women (the Asian Women's Fund) was established in July 1995. By this time, the Japanese government had decided to subsidize the operational cost and to provide welfare and medical care for the 'comfort women' victims, but not to finance provisional compensation ('atonement money') from the governmental contribution (Asian Women's Fund (AWF), 1995; *Asahi Shimbun*, 1995a). Demanding official compensation for individual 'comfort women' by the Japanese government, support groups in Japan criticized and rejected the Asian Women's Fund, and launched an alternative citizenship fund to provide financial assistance to the women (*Asahi Shimbun*, 1995b). Nevertheless, the Asian Women's Fund went ahead from 15 August 1996 with the payment of 'atonement money' to those women in the Philippines who agreed to receive it, with a written apology from the Japanese Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro.

As most 'comfort women' victims refused to accept this 'atonement money' from the Fund, the Japanese government made a statement in October that receiving this money would not prevent them from continuing legal proceedings against the Japanese government (AWF, 1996). However, the Fund caused serious conflicts within support groups of 'comfort women'; many women and support groups rejected the Fund and the money offered, but some women chose to accept. The Fund was criticized for causing a division within the 'comfort women' support movement, and alternative voluntary funds and support organizations were established in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and other Asian countries to assist 'comfort women' victims who refused to receive 'atonement money' from the Fund (Jeong, 2008).⁹ In South Korea and Taiwan, their respective governments provided financial support to the women in 1997 and 1998 equivalent to the 'atonement money' so that the women could avoid receiving the money from the Fund (WAM, 2013).

The 'comfort women' issue was discussed at the international political level for the first time in the 48th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in February 1992 (UN, 1992). Since then it has been discussed in various official UN bodies and other (human rights) organizations linked to the UN, such as the International Commission of Jurists. The human-rights-violating nature of the 'comfort women' system was recognized and extended discussions took place in the Commission on Human Rights (and then the Human Rights Council), the Sub-Commission on the Prevention

of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, the Sub-Commission's Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, the Human Rights Committee and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). In 1995, Radhika Coomaraswamy, a Special Rapporteur on violence against women and its causes and consequences, presented a preliminary report to the UN Human Rights Commission in which the 'comfort women' issue was discussed in the context of violence against women in situations of armed conflicts (UN, 1995a).¹⁰ In January 1996, the following year, she further submitted a full report on the issue as an addendum to the report on violence against women, its causes and consequences, to the 52nd session of the Commission (UN, 1996). The report confirmed the legal responsibility of the Japanese government and called for compensation to individual 'comfort women'. Linda Chavez was also appointed as a Special Rapporteur in the Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, and conducted research into 'the situation of systematic rape, sexual slavery and slavery-like practices during wartime, including internal armed conflict', covering the issue of 'comfort women'. After submitting a number of working papers,¹¹ she was succeeded by Gay J. McDougall, who completed a full report on this matter in 1998 (UN, 1998). The report yet again emphasized the legal responsibility of the Japanese government and the need to establish mechanisms for prosecuting those who were responsible and compensating the survivors (O'Brien, 2000: 19; Matsui, 1998: 4).

As this demonstrates, the 'comfort women' issue has received increasing international acknowledgement in the context of increased awareness of women's human rights, in particular violence against women, since the 1990s. With the report of horrific incidents of sexual violence during the conflict in former Yugoslavia at the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, women's human rights, including those related to violence against women, were recognized as an 'inalienable, integral and indivisible part of human rights'; and this was documented in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action for the first time (Charlesworth and Chinkin, 2000: 246–7; Matsui, 1998: 3–4). This prompted the adoption of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women in the UN General Assembly in December 1993. The Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action in 1995 further acknowledged women's rights as human rights. Such development of the international legal framework has helped to gain recognition of gendered aspects of slavery, such as forced prostitution and pimping, trafficking in women, and violence against women in armed conflict as forms of the violation of human rights (Charlesworth and Chinkin, 2000: 236).

Heightened awareness of women's human rights urged the international women's movement to demand the prosecution of those responsible for sexually exploiting and violating women during armed conflicts. This movement achieved the recognition of the international community that sexual

violence against women in armed conflicts, such as rape, sexual slavery and/or forced pregnancy, should be treated as a 'crime against humanity', which is within the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court. The International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda (ICTY and ICTR) included rape as a crime against humanity. Following this move, the Women's Caucus for Gender Justice successfully achieved the inclusion in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court of 'rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity' as a crime against humanity (ICTY, 1993; ICTR, 1994; ICC, 1998; VAWW-NET, 2002: 13). Such recognition also initiated civil society to establish the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal for the Trial of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery (WIWCT) in Tokyo in December 2000. Through the Tribunal, feminist and citizen groups attempted to bring justice to compensate for the lack of state and/or international prosecution of those who were responsible for the 'comfort women' system.

However, despite all recommendations made by UN human-rights bodies and specialized agencies such as the International Labour Organization to the Japanese government since the 1990s, as well as the judgement of the above Tribunal, the Japanese government has not so far made much progress on finding a solution to this issue. During the 111th Session of the UN Human Rights Committee held in July 2014, the Committee considered the State Report of Japan and adopted the concluding observations that the Japanese government should 'take immediate and effective legislative and administrative measures' to solve this issue, including criminal prosecution of those who were responsible and full reparation to victims (UN, 2014). During the meeting, however, it was reported that the Japanese representative expressed that the term sexual slavery is inappropriate to refer to 'comfort women' (Takita, 2014).

As the Japanese government has not shown any sign of taking full responsibility, feminists have also started to explore other political measures to address this issue. This resulted in the US House of Representatives passing (non-binding) resolution 121 on 31 July 2007, calling on the Japanese government to formally acknowledge, apologize and accept full responsibility for the abuses of 'comfort women'. This was followed by similar resolutions in the Netherlands, Canada and the European Parliament on 13 December 2007 (Amnesty, 2008). Although to date no acceptable official apology and compensation has been offered to the women by the Japanese government, the continual effort of 'comfort women' victim-survivors and feminist activists and scholars internationally has kept the issue on the political agenda at national, regional and international levels for over twenty years.¹² Such a global movement was made possible because women's testimonies of their experiences not only revealed and highlighted the injustice they suffered but also addressed the violation of human rights regularly and globally

happening during the war and in peacetime. This is why the testimonies of 'comfort women' victim-survivors became one of the crucial aspects in the discussion of the issue.

'Comfort women's' testimonies have been vital in raising various questions beyond the violation of women's human rights. First, these testimonies stimulated a strong demand from feminists in Japan for the study of history to be more gender conscious. The feminists criticized the lack of gendered perspectives in existing work on history, which has ignored women's experience of and in history, and claimed that this has distorted historical 'truth'. They emphasized the need for the rewriting of history with ingrained gendered perspectives to appropriately reflect historical 'truth'. In this process, they also questioned what should be considered as legitimate historical record and documentation and the politics of writing history. Second, these women's testimonies have also triggered a heated debate about the understanding of the circumstances and the status of 'comfort women'; some claim that 'comfort women' were (military) prostitutes who were paid sex workers in war-affected areas and who knowingly volunteered to become 'comfort women'; others consider the women to have been sexual slaves who were 'forced' to provide sex to soldiers against their will without any recompense. These different perspectives usually represent the divide between right-wing scholars and politicians, and left-wing and feminist scholars and activists. Third, the engagement with the testimonies of 'comfort women' victim-survivors has addressed the question of the national and gender identity of people in Japan. These people wondered to what extent they and the present Japanese government are responsible for the past wrongdoing of the country and how this memory should be taught to and remembered by younger generations.

In short, the testimonies of 'comfort women' victim-survivors and the discussion surrounding the 'comfort women' system have raised fundamental but complicated questions about history: the political and social nature of history; the politics, of the writing, of and the study of history; the ways in which history is politically constructed at specific times and places; and how history mobilizes and is mobilized by specific political subjectivities. The call, therefore, for writing history incorporating gender and the debates over historical 'truth' surrounding testimonies of 'comfort women' victim-survivors should be understood in the context of re-examination of modern historiography and the study of history, influenced by the work of feminist and Marxist historians as well as post-structuralist/post-modernist and post-colonial critics. This entails, first, critical examination of the political construction of gender, which is the central force in social organization, but often hidden and invisible (Scott, 1988: 27); and second, understanding that writing history about the past is the very practice of the present and of its power relations (Dean, 1994: 28–9). With the emergence of post-structuralist/post-modernist theories on representation and discourse, as seen in Michel

Foucault's approach to history, a naive understanding of history and the historical 'facts' and 'truth' being out there began to be challenged.

1.2 Framing issues: the discussions surrounding 'comfort women' in the 1990s

It is often believed that the existence of 'comfort women' was 'unknown' or 'hidden' for fifty years because the Japanese military government, after its defeat in the war, destroyed huge numbers of documents on the 'comfort women' system. However, records of the Allied Forces show that they were aware of the existence of the system, as they interviewed Japanese soldiers and civilians including Korean 'comfort women' who were captured nearer the end of the war (Yoshimi, ed., 1992).¹³ War literature such as novels and the diaries and memoirs of former soldiers published in Japan after the Second World War often made reference to comfort stations and the women who 'worked' there (Takasaki, 1994; The Center, 1994a; 1994b), and in the 1970s and 1980s a few independent research studies were conducted on 'comfort women' in South Korea and Japan. In addition to the work of Yun Chung-ok, Senda Kako and Kawada Fumiko mentioned earlier, Kim Il-myon published his study *The Emperor's Forces and Korean Comfort Women* (1976) in Japan, claiming that the lack of knowledge on 'comfort women' was a collective amnesia. Yamatani Tetsuo's film *Okinawan Halmoni (An Old Lady in Okinawa): The Testimony of a Comfort Woman* about a former Korean victim-survivor Bae Bong-gi living in Okinawa, Japan, whose biography would later be published by Kawada, was released in 1979. In the 1980s more books were published, including, in South Korea, *My Mother was a Military Comfort Woman* (1982) by Yun Chung-mo¹⁴ and, in Japan, *My War Crimes: The Forced Draft of Koreans* (1983) by Yoshida Seiji.¹⁵ Shiota Suzuko, a Japanese victim-survivor, published her life story *Maria no Sanka (Mary's Hymns of Praise)* under a pseudonym in 1971, but it went out of print soon after publication. However, after she recounted her experience again to a pastor of the Kanita Women's Village, a rehabilitation and care institution for vulnerable women in Chiba near Tokyo, a memorial to 'comfort women' was erected, according to her wishes, on the premises in 1985; her life story and the erection of the memorial was reported in a radio programme in 1986 (Awa Bunka Isan Forum, 2009; 2014).

Given these examples, it is more appropriate to argue that the 'comfort women' system and the existence of these women were not necessarily unknown. Rather the system was not problematized widely nor was extensive research conducted until a number of former 'comfort women' started to come forward to talk publicly about their experiences in the 1990s (Yoshimi, 2000: 33).

As mentioned above, however, it should be noted that some effort to engage with women's own accounts of their experience, highlighting the

systematic sexual exploitation, had already been made during the 1970s and 1980s. For example, Kawada met Bae Bong-gi, a Korean victim-survivor, then living in Okinawa Island in Japan, and listened to her life story in an attempt to comprehend women's sexual exploitation (Kawada, 1994: 11, 297). Kawada focused on Bae's narrative because she regarded this as the only way to comprehend the 'comfort women' system in the absence of any systematic studies of the system. It was believed then that most official documents concerned had been destroyed after the war, so that any extensive archival research on the 'comfort women' system was considered to be impossible. Kawada's work on Bae's life story was published as *A House with Red Roof Tiles – a military comfort woman from Korea* (1987).

Reflecting on her days of listening to Bae, Kawada stated that due to the lack of comprehensive research into the 'comfort women' system then, and to the extremely difficult life that Bae had experienced, she could not fully grasp Bae's life experience (Kawada, 1994: 297–8). Yun Chung-ok similarly embarked on critical research in the 1980s to investigate what had happened to girls of her generation who had been drafted by Japan during the war, as she had wondered for a long time why so few had returned to their home villages (Yun *et al.*, 1992: 13–14). Her research, also in part based on interviews and the oral history method, was presented as four serial articles in *Hangyore Newspaper* in South Korea in January 1990 (Yun *et al.*, 1992: 13); this inspired other (Korean) feminists to undertake further research into the issue of 'comfort women' through women's testimonial narratives.

The emergence of a number of testimonies of 'comfort women' victims in the 1990s also encouraged historians in Japan to look into official archives more comprehensively. In the late 1980s, Yoshimi, who first presented Japanese official documents on 'comfort women' to the public in 1992, came across official documents related to the 'comfort women' system in the National Institute for Defence Studies Library at the Self-Defence Agency in Japan. Deeply moved by Kim Hak-sun's testimony made in December 1991 and her courage in coming forward, he went back to the library and managed to track down the documents concerned (Yoshimi, 2000: 35). He subsequently campaigned for the disclosure of further official documents and, in 1992, published as an edited volume some of the documents he and other scholars had found, to make them more publicly accessible. In April 1993, together with individuals of wide-ranging backgrounds, including scholars in history and international relations, legal experts and activists, he founded an independent and non-profit research institute The Center for Research and Documentation on Japan's War Responsibility (O'Brien, 2000: 7; The Center, 2014). It aims to carry out research into Japanese war crimes, uncovering more official documents, and to fulfil Japan's responsibility to Asian war victims (The Center, 2014). Many interviews with former 'comfort women' were also conducted by researchers affiliated with the Center.¹⁶

Independent feminist researchers in Japan also carried out further research into the 'comfort women' system, consulting official documents and testimonies of 'comfort women' victims, and contributed to a fuller understanding of the system. For example, feminist historian Suzuki Yuko explored the system within the context of Japanese colonialism and critically examined the relation between Japanese colonial policies on Korea and the development of the 'comfort women' system (Suzuki, 1992). Considerable attention was given not only to testimonies of 'comfort women' survivors, but also to those of soldiers and civilians who worked in the Japanese military. Many of these testimonies were later published as collected volumes.¹⁷ Takasaki Ryuji (1994) critically examined more than fifty wartime diaries and memoirs that describe comfort stations and 'comfort women', and similar work was undertaken by the Center for Research and Documentation on Japan's War Responsibility (The Center, 1994a; 1994b).¹⁸ Books aimed at a younger audience, such as those by Nishino (1993) and Ishikawa (1993), were also published in an attempt to offer young people an opportunity to learn about 'comfort women' as a critical part of history. The number of research studies and publications concerning 'comfort women' increased throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium.

Given the limited presence of and access to official documents, in particular during the early days of the discussion on 'comfort women', researchers considered testimonies of 'comfort women' to play a vital role in uncovering the full picture of the system. From the beginning, testimonies of 'comfort women' survivors posed a challenge to the study of the modern history of Japan. They opened to question the ways that (mainstream) modern history is recorded, documented and studied, predominantly focusing on written materials, in particular the (government) official documents. Less attention has been paid to other forms of record, such as oral history or gendered aspects of history. As these women's testimonies have offered alternative ways to record, study and understand the modern history of Japan, they have attracted the immediate attention of a wider public – a shift that, as discussed earlier, is similar to the feminist and social history approaches made in Europe and North America.

For example, publishers in Japan considered the inclusion of a short commentary on the 'comfort women' system in school history textbooks and it was referred to in junior high school history textbooks for the first time in 1997.¹⁹ Women's testimonies also raised questions about the objectivity, neutrality and transparency of history and the claims of its association with historical 'facts' and 'truth'. Given this, feminists (in Japan), influenced by the 'her-story' approach, embarked on rewriting history, endeavouring to subvert the prevailing understanding of history, which had overlooked gendered experience. Feminists challenged the naive understanding of history as strongly associated with objectivity and 'truth'. However, these norms continued to haunt the discussion on 'comfort women' and the

testimonies of victim-survivors, and what follows is an attempt to explain how, at times, this has actually undermined feminist arguments against revisionist critics.

In the 'absence' of official documents and traditional history's lack of interest in gender, the testimonies of 'comfort women' victims were welcomed as they were believed to uncover historical 'truth'. They were treated as newly discovered data, or information that could revise existing (gender-blind and male-centric) knowledge of history and engender a truer understanding of the past. Gaining information, not known before, from testimonies, and critically engaging with official records available to substantiate what women had testified, feminist activists and historians have attempted to draw a full picture of the 'comfort women' system. This includes: the scale and extent of the system; the degree of involvement of the Japanese government; and women's lives in comfort stations. However, in encountering these testimonies, we can also question whether they should be treated as alternative historical data that ultimately can uncover historical 'facts' and 'truth'. Here, two possible problems can be identified.

First, as the 'comfort women' system was deemed to be an example, though possibly one of the worst, of the universal oppression of women, survivors' testimonies have often been seen as yet another piece of evidence that can provide the 'truth' of history – the prevalence of women's oppression. Perceiving their testimony in this manner, indeed, was an important drive behind bringing the issue of 'comfort women' to the wider public sphere, developing collaboration with women of diverse backgrounds who challenged the universal oppression of women. However, this also ran the risk of overlooking differentiated experiences of oppression suffered by women, potentially overgeneralizing women as a single, unified category, implying the homogeneity of their experience of gender oppression, and assuming they can understand each other's pain. This is the very point that is problematized by feminist historians and other scholars in Europe and North America in working on 'her-story'.

The second point is more complex and concerns the effect of claiming the existence of the 'truth' of history. This issue became particularly problematic when Japanese revisionists started to dismiss women and challenged their testimonies, claiming they were fabricated and full of lies. To counter this revisionist claim, as will be shown in Chapter 5, feminist and left critics inadequately repeated that these testimonies are the 'truth' of history. Although revisionist arguments should strongly be challenged, feminists and left-wing critics underlining the importance of historical 'truth' does not seem to have been the most effective or appropriate counter argument. This is because it appears contradictory to claim the existence of the 'truth' of history when criticizing (other) metaphysical notions such as objectivity and neutrality – the underpinning of traditional history – as gender-biased.

Indeed, this point was clearly identified by Ueno Chizuko, feminist sociologist in Japan in the late 1990s.

Treating testimonies as the transparent (therefore stable and unchangeable) historical 'truth' is also problematic as this can prevent feminists and left-wing scholars from acknowledging the inconsistency identified in some of the testimonies and offering any reasonable explanation for it. As will be explained later, it is this inconsistency that has been used by the revisionists to assert that these testimonies are unreliable and fabricated. Moreover, the claim that women's testimonies present the single and transparent 'truth' often overlooks the intervention and the mediation of the researcher and/or interviewer in delivering testimonies, as well as how they are consumed, from interviewing, transcribing, translating and editing the testimonies, to publication or broadcasting. It is essential to note, however, that without continual and enormous effort and the altruistic actions of these researchers with both linguistic skills and cultural and political sensitivities, victim-survivors' testimonies could not reach a wider global audience. Moreover, devoid of collections of testimonies made available through this complex and challenging process, most research studies, including this book, on the 'comfort women' debates undertaken outside survivors' immediate linguistic and cultural environments would not have been possible.

This multi-layered translation and interpretation process of testimonial narratives can, however, prevent the reader of these testimonies from identifying what is actually said and meant by these survivors. For example, the discussion of testimonies of Chinese victim-survivors from Shanxi province, which will be presented in Chapter 5, is mostly based on the Japanese translation of their testimonies. As they recounted their experiences in a local Chinese dialect, their words have sometimes gone through (at least) two processes of translation, from the local dialect to Mandarin Chinese and then from Mandarin Chinese to Japanese (and then to English for this book). Working with such testimonies delivered through the process of multiple mediation and translation, researchers are required not only to consider critically what 'truth' means in this context, but also whose voices we are listening to and can actually hear. This provides a constant reminder for researchers, particularly those who may be linguistically and culturally less qualified, including myself, of the impact of the linguistic, and possibly cultural, limits of our research. At the same time, such limitations also suggest that engaging with the testimonies of 'comfort women' victim-survivors is to enquire whether we can and how should listen to these women's voices.

This further requires from researchers and activists a serious reflection on their relation to the testimonies of 'comfort women' victims. Engaging with these testimonies always entails a crucial questioning of the identity and positionality of the listeners/audience. As will be explored later in this chapter, any fixation of identities, and any assumption that these pre-fixed

identities would automatically define how we should and can engage with the testimonies and ultimately with victim-survivors themselves, should be contested. However, this is not to suggest that we can be completely free from the influence of such categorization and identification. For instance, whatever the category of 'Japanese' implies, 'I' am required to constantly negotiate and renegotiate its meaning; born as a Japanese citizen and still travelling with a Japanese passport; I received most of my compulsory and higher education in Japan, but have spent the past twenty years studying and working in UK universities. I, as well as other researchers, have to question how such positionality can impact on my research and how this is interpreted by others.

The testimonies of 'comfort women' victim-survivors brought up another related concern of modern history: the centrality of shared memories to the sense of belonging, the formation of political subjectivity and the role of emotion and affect in this process. This issue was mainly addressed through two sets of debates on history education in Japan and Japanese war responsibility. In 1996, heated debates sparked off in Japan on whether a short commentary on the 'comfort women' system should be included in school history textbooks. Schools in Japan (particularly state primary and junior high schools) are required to use ministry-approved textbooks in teaching that meet the requirements of the (National) Curriculum Guidelines. Publishers put teams of experts together, prepare the drafts of textbooks in subjects such as Japanese literature, English, mathematics, science, social studies, history and citizenship studies, and submit these drafts to the Ministry of Education (now the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) for screening and approval.

The process of production demonstrates how school textbooks reflect ideas of history, nation, citizenship and belonging in Japan – in particular those of the Japanese government – and construct a shared memory of history. As the views of younger generations are shaped by teaching using these textbooks, the decision on what content is to be included, especially in history and social studies textbooks, has always been one of the crucial political debates in contemporary Japan, becoming possibly more intense in the post-cold war era. As international political power and relations were being renegotiated, and with the emergence of diverse ethnic identities and political movements, the existing understanding of belonging, citizenship and nation began to be challenged. Discussion about textbooks against the background of changing global politics is of the utmost importance. As scholars such as Laura Elizabeth Hein, Mark Selden and Tessa Morris-Suzuki argue, school education is central to state building, clarifying the implications of citizenship and shaping the memories of the past (Hein and Selden, 1998: 3; Morris-Suzuki, 2001: 300; 2013: 14).

Despite revisionist protest, Japanese publishers decided to include a short commentary on 'comfort women' in their textbooks and all seven history

textbooks approved in 1997 to be used in junior high schools included comments on 'comfort women'. Right-wing critics opposed this inclusion, claiming that the factuality of women's testimonies was unsubstantiated and the topic, which involves sex and violence, was inappropriate to teach to junior high school students.²⁰ They also argued that the reference to 'comfort women' in textbooks imposed a biased and 'incorrect' view of history and forced young people to internalize shameful and negative images of Japanese people; so these textbooks were self-tormenting or even 'masochistic'. Led by Fujioka Nobukatsu, a professor at Tokyo University, these critics set up a group, the Japan Society for History Textbook Reform, to produce alternative history and citizenship studies textbooks based on their reading of history.²¹ While the group's approach is based on revisionism and the Emperor-centred view of history, they call their perspective 'Liberal historiography'.

The views within the group were diverse, and not all outspoken nationalist critics have been involved. However, these nationalist critics still share a common attitude to 'comfort women'; they all question the validity of the testimonies of these women and claim that the Japanese government was not responsible for the operation of the 'comfort women' system, thus challenging calls for compensation for these women. They consider 'comfort women' to have been licensed prostitutes, who willingly worked under (then legalized) state-regulated prostitution and earned a lot of money. They also argue that there is no convincing reason to teach schoolchildren about the 'comfort women' system, as licensed prostitution was not unique to Japan. They maintain that such a system was a necessary evil, merely responding to so-called male biological and 'natural' sexual desire (under a special and extreme circumstance), and is not an appropriate topic to teach schoolchildren (Tawara, 1996; Uesugi, 1996: 290–2; Nishino, 2001: 61).

Meanwhile, left-wing critics and feminists criticized their labelling of 'Liberal' as inappropriate and unacceptable; and they accused them of being insensitive to and ignorant of the Japanese colonial past. Left-wing scholars condemn the revisionists as thoughtless because they are not accepting the 'reality' of the past and the fact that they, as Japanese citizens, are also responsible for the deeds of Japan's past. Many feminists and left-wing critics argued that the 'comfort women' system was an obvious example of historically common women's oppression and that the revisionists are complicit in the way that these women had been mistreated (Matsui, 1997: 3–4, Yoneda, 1997: 17). This has escalated to heated discussions between these two camps on what is a legitimate understanding of Japanese history, what should or should not be taught in the history class at school, and how to make this decision.

However, overwhelmed by insistent revisionist demands and the general political drift to the right, the number of textbooks that made reference to the 'comfort women' system declined throughout the first decade of

the twenty-first century. In 2001/2, the year that the revisionist textbooks obtained the ministry approval, the number of textbooks that commented on 'comfort women' dropped (Uesugi, 2002: 2). In April 2010, a right-leaning newspaper, *Sankei Shimbun*, reported that Nihon Shoseki Shinsha, the publisher of the last remaining textbook that had the commentary on 'comfort women', had decided to withdraw the submission of their new draft for the 2010 screening (*Korea Joongang Daily*, 2010, Takashima, 2010). After 2012 therefore, no government-approved textbook used in junior high schools in Japan has a commentary on the 'comfort women' system or about victim-survivors (WAM, 2013: 65).

In the meantime, since the history and citizenship studies textbooks that the Japan Society for History Textbook Reform produced for junior high schools were approved by the Ministry of Education for the first time in 2001, further approvals of their textbooks have been made in 2005, 2009 (for junior high schools), and 2011 (for senior high schools). These textbooks have been officially used in schools where local education authorities adopted them as part of their teaching resources,²² and the Society also claimed that 4 per cent of children at school are using their textbooks.²³

Both the South Korean and Chinese governments have made official complaints to the Japanese government regarding the approval of textbooks submitted by the Japan Society for History Textbook Reform. Feminists and left-wing historians have also been challenging this right alignment of politics around educational policies, and the implementation of these textbooks as teaching materials in schools. They complain that these textbooks are supported by the Emperor-centred historical view, that they reject a scientific approach to history and downplay the history of Japanese invasions of other Asian countries and atrocities that Japan committed during the war.²⁴ However, as strong public opinions support Japanese children in learning narratives of history that make them proud of being Japanese, the struggle of feminists and left-wing historians to reverse the situation has not met with much success.

The growing popularity of textbooks written by the Japan Society for History Textbook Reform and a gradual drift towards more nationalistic attitudes to education and politics in general in contemporary Japanese society may partly be explained by the effect of ultra-nationalist politicians in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). These politicians share a similar historical view to the critics and scholars associated with the Japan Society for History Textbook Reform, and many of them have acquired ministerial roles (Children and Textbooks Japan Network 21, 2013). The Prime Minister Abe Shinzo is the most notable example of such a politician. In February 1997, just before the start of the new academic year, when history textbooks with a commentary on the 'comfort women' system were to be used in junior high schools for the first time, a group of MPs of the LDP founded a (study) group on Japan's future and history education.²⁵ Abe was appointed as the

secretary of the group, which problematized the inclusion of the commentary on 'comfort women' and advocated the revision of history textbooks.

After the first Abe government was formed in September 2006, the group was revitalized and it aimed to review the 1993 Kono Statement (Yamamoto, 2013: 72). The LDP has also encouraged its politicians to undertake various activities in order to exert their influence at local assemblies and on local education boards in the selection of textbooks (Szczepanska, 2014: 33, 120). In December 2012 the LDP won the general election under the leadership of Abe for the second time, and during the election campaign the LDP's manifesto included the plan to review and respond to 'incorrect' historical discourses such as those on 'comfort women' (Yamamoto, 2013: 76). As stated above, while the Prime Minister Abe claimed that his government is not planning to withdraw the Kono Statement, nearly half of his Cabinet ministers have been members of this (revisionist) group (Children and Textbooks Japan Network 21, 2013).

Concerned with the impact of such right alignment on education, Yoshimi and other researchers who have painstakingly worked on the issue on 'comfort women' to illuminate the Japanese government's war responsibility, launched a website on 'comfort women' in August 2013. They are particularly troubled that without formal teaching on 'comfort women' in the classroom, younger generations are now obtaining information on 'comfort women' from the internet, where nationalist discourses are dominant. The new website aims to tackle this trend (*Asahi Shimbun*, 2013; Fight for Justice, 2013).

The second debate concerning shared memories revolved around the issue of Japanese war responsibility and political subjectivity. Questions posed were: to what extent are post-war Japanese generations held accountable for crimes conducted by the Japanese military government during the Second World War; and how to nurture the political subjectivity in Japan that takes responsibility for remembering the crimes committed by Japan? This debate, which mainly took place during the 1990s, was often referred to as 'the debate on historical subjects'.²⁶ In discussions concerning both history education and textbooks, and historical subjects, critics and scholars who took part referred to their individual and collective identities and belongings as 'we Japanese', 'our' or 'us'. For example, '*we Japanese* have to teach *our* children history, which enables them to be proud of being Japanese', or 'Japanese students have to know *our* past horrific conduct during the Second World War', or else '*as a Japanese male*, I often think about how I can engage with the issue'.²⁷ Such a use of language immediately poses the question of who is indeed hailed as 'Japanese' and what kind of collective memory Japanese citizens share. Although Japanese citizens present and past are not identical, and the society of Japan has gone through a massive change after the Second World War, the homogeneity and continuity of the society and Japanese citizens often seemed to be assumed in this debate. Such narratives

imagined a consistent collectivity of Japanese citizens, and a society and culture with an inherent and fixed Japaneseness; and this fails to fully acknowledge that the Japanese as a collective is historically, socially and politically constructed, and entails a certain kind of political subjectivity.

In addition, the debate has demonstrated a complex understanding of the relationship between the state/government and its citizens/public; in particular between the Japanese government and Japanese citizens and/public. In demanding an official apology from the Japanese government for its past atrocities, some 'comfort women' victims differentiate the responsibility of the Japanese government and that of individual Japanese people, stating, for example, 'I hate the crimes committed by the Japanese government, but I do not hate Japanese people' (Yi Yong-su in Yanaihara, 1995: 45).²⁸ Similar attitudes can also be observed when people in Japan accuse the Japanese government of not fulfilling its responsibility, dissociating themselves from the Japanese government. Needless to say, the political implication of people in Japan simply criticizing the Japanese government and distancing themselves from it is quite different from victim-survivors drawing a line between the Japanese government and its citizens.

In summary, the discussion on 'comfort women' has raised critical questions, not only about the writing of history but also about belonging and collective memory, highlighting how history is politically grounded in a particular space and time. However, a naive assumption that there is a pre-given and unchangeable category of 'Japanese', for which a consistent and single narrative of history is possible and desirable, seems to have been shared by critics of different political perspectives, particularly during the 1990s. This caused considerable tension between left- and right-wing critics, preventing them from developing any productive dialogue: they promote contrasting images of ideal 'Japaneseness' and narratives of Japanese history. The emotive language that they employ has also suggested how the study of history and politics, which has been considered 'rational' and scientific, is deeply influenced by emotion and affect.

While the political issues and debates have often been influenced by emotion, traditionally, the study of history and politics has dissociated itself from the discussion of feeling. Emotion, considered as being in the sphere of the private, has long been disregarded as the basis of a legitimate political claim and any emotional or non-rational claim in politics has been undermined. However, as Lauren G. Berlant (1997) suggests, recently not only have emotion and affect played a key role in political debates, but they have also become central to what we understand as 'political'. A growing interest has been shown in the place of emotion and affect in the public sphere, to the extent that Berlant maintains that the feminist slogan 'the personal is political' in the 1970s has been reversed and now replaced by 'the political is personal'. She refers to this new space as 'the intimate public sphere' (Berlant, 1997: 4, 177–8). The discussion surrounding the 'comfort women'

system, thus, is one of these examples of the contemporary development where emotion and affect become central in formulating the discussion on belonging, citizenship and the idea of the political.

1.3 Discourses of modernity and Orientalism

In addition to the question of history and the voices of women (testimonies), another related, significant issue raised in the discussion of the 'comfort women' system is the discourse of modernity and Orientalism. In preparing the first report on the 'comfort women' system to the UN Commission on Human Rights, the Special Rapporteur Radhika Coomaraswamy and other members of the team visited the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), the Republic of Korea (South Korea), and Japan in July 1995 and had meetings with sixteen victim-survivors.²⁹ The report, which was supported by most nation states, included four quotations with a distinctive character from the testimonies of survivors; two out of four women's testimonies described how they had witnessed Japanese soldiers beheading fellow 'comfort women' one after another with swords.³⁰

The incidents of beheading 'comfort women' were, indeed, commented on in testimonial narratives of 'comfort women' victims. However, the reference to beheading of 'comfort women' is fairly limited in over 100 testimonial narratives of victim-survivors that became available by the beginning of the first decade of the twenty-first century in Japanese and English. Even when cases of beheading were mentioned, these were more likely a single incidence and not cases of multiple beheadings. Instead of beheading, however, victim-survivors testified to other equally horrific acts of violence that Japanese soldiers inflicted on them. These include: Yi Sun-ok having been stabbed with a sword after refusing to have sex with a soldier (The Korean Council *et al.*, 1995: 118); Wan Aihua severely beaten until her bones were cracked and broken (Senso Giseisha, 1997: 34); a piece of blazing wood pressed against Mun Pil-gi's skin and her skin badly burnt (The Korean Council *et al.*, 1993: 125);³¹ or Yi Sang-ok dragged with a rope around her neck as a punishment for attempting to escape (The Korean Council *et al.*, 1995: 128–9).

While incidents of beheading could have happened, it is equally intriguing why this particular representation of atrocities was chosen in the report; whether the decision to include this depiction of atrocities was possibly influenced by a certain Orientalist view towards Japan, a stereotypical image of samurai soldiers performing *hara-kiri* (a ritual suicide through stabbing one's stomach) or *uchikubi* (beheading).³² When the report was published, only a limited number and range of research studies on the 'comfort women' system were available in English. Therefore, the report played an important role in circulating the knowledge about 'comfort women' beyond Asia. It may be possible that the report further evoked the image of barbaric and

pre-modern Japan that created the 'comfort women' system. This is troubling not simply because Japan and its culture are stereotyped, but also such a view could attribute the evil of violence to the non-civilized Orient, dissociating the evil from modernity and the West.

In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Zygmunt Bauman explains how he once believed that the Holocaust was 'an interruption in the normal flow of history, a cancerous growth on the body of civilized society, a momentary madness among sanity' (Bauman, 1989: viii). War crimes and atrocities in recent history, whether it is genocide or the abuse of prisoners, have often been considered as incidents that can be dissociated from everyday life of normality. That is to say, they are seen as accidental disruptions of civilization, or deviations from modernity. However, even if war atrocities that happened in the West, such as the Holocaust, have indeed been regarded as the interruption of civilization, it is questionable whether the brutality of the Japanese military during the Second World War would be considered in the same manner. In fact, it is often believed, both in and outside Japan, that Japanese culture and people are completely different from western culture and people and that this has particularly been demonstrated by the Japanese war atrocities during the Second World War. As Yuki Tanaka (Tanaka Toshiyuki) (1996) explains, post-Second-World-War views on Japanese War atrocities shaped and were shaped by this notion of Japan and its culture as inherently different.

The popularity of Iris Chang's book *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* has well demonstrated this tendency. After its publication in November 1997, it was positively reviewed and became one of the bestsellers in the US in 1998 (Inokuchi and Nozaki, 1999: 49–51). Overall, it was highly acclaimed as having revealed a 'long-forgotten' wartime barbarity: the massacre and rape of thousands of civilians in Nanking (Nanjing) by the Japanese military in 1937. While its crucial role in (re)storing the memory of the incident was highlighted, for more critical historians of Asia and Japan, this book is problematic and contains many flaws (Fogel, 1998). Chang claimed that she is critical of works such as *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* by Ruth Benedict, which attributes Japanese atrocities to Japan's (distinctive) culture (Chang, 1997: 13, 54–5).³³ However, she also sees that the twentieth-century Japanese identity was the construct of 'a thousand-year-old system in which social hierarchy was established and sustained through martial competition' (Chang, 1997: 19). This view, despite her claim, creates a narrative that a unique and traditional (or ahistorical) *Bushido* ethic in Japan, which highly honours sacrificing one's life for one's lord, actually caused Japanese atrocities. Such a narrative is deeply problematic, however, as Fogel argues, and will be demonstrated in Chapter 4. This *Bushido* ethic was itself considered to be the modern invention of 'tradition' (Fogel, 1998: 818).³⁴

Chang's repeated claim that the memory of Japanese war atrocities had been suppressed and put under a gagging order in its post-war society cannot

be substantiated either (Chang, 1997: 12, 15, 200, 220). For example, Seaton (2007) argues that in post-war Japan there was accumulation of war narratives instead of suppression. Indeed, whereas the ultra-nationalists in Japan, including some LDP politicians, challenged the factuality of the Nanking Massacre and other Japanese war atrocities, as mentioned earlier, groups of historians and activists in Japan conducted research into the Nanking Massacre for many decades (Fogel, 1998: 819). This materialized as a number of books published on the Massacre since the 1980s and as the commentary on the Massacre that was included in Japanese history textbooks throughout the 1980s to the early 1990s.³⁵

Despite such critical readings of *The Rape of Nanking* by specialists and scholars of Asia, its popularity among the mass media and the wider public suggested that the portrayal of Japanese culture and people as unique is socially more appealing. For example, in the *New York Times* Book Review, Orville Schell drew a comparison between the ways in which the history of the Massacre had been denied in Japan (and the Chinese government's reluctance in bringing up this issue) and how the Holocaust had been dealt with in Germany and other western countries. Referring to Benedict's work, he highlighted the difference between Asian values of 'shame' influenced by Confucianism and Christianity-based 'guilt' cultures. He argues that Japanese people are not concerned with their wrongdoing unless they 'get out into the world' (Schell, 1997).

As Inokuchi and Nozaki suggest, however, such a comment could further encourage the image of Japan and Japanese people as idiosyncratic, failing to acknowledge their responsibility to their past contacts (Inokuchi and Nozaki, 1999: 53). This not only completely overlooks a long history of research into the Massacre (in Japan) mentioned above, but also the fact that English-speaking countries had not been interested in the Massacre for a long time; the book was sensational because the Allied Force and the US did not carry out any investigation into the Massacre after the Second World War. This discourse of idiosyncratic Japanese culture is often replicated when academics and the media give more and regular attention to the denial of war atrocities by conservative politicians and the revisionists in Japan today, marginalizing the activism of more 'progressive' grassroots movements. As indicated above, conservative politicians in the LDP have indeed placed pressure on the revision of school textbooks and their selection by local education authorities. However, as Szczepanska (2014) argues, they are not representative of public opinion in Japan and more progressive voices also exist that accept Japan's responsibility for its colonial past and war atrocities.

The perspective that attributes Japanese war atrocities to the unique tradition and culture of Japan, failing to place these atrocities within a wider context of the history of modernity, was reflected in the way that the 'comfort women' system was initially discussed during the 1990s. Two