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And now the telling of...

Uncomfortable “Comfort Women” Examining Shame Culture and the Internal Conflict Between Japanese-Americans and Korean-Americans Regarding the Comfort Women Issue

Janice Lee

Assigned in COM 513: Advanced Intercultural Communication (Dr. Charles Choi)

The word “comfort” is defined as freedom from pain and a state of physical and emotional well-being. However, why are “comfort women” always in a state of pain and never in a state of well-being? That is the irony of the term “comfort women.” Comfort women refers to the thousands of young girls and women taken from Asian countries, mainly Korea, to be sexual slaves for the Japanese Imperial army.

The “Comfort Women” issue regarding sexual slavery in World War II among the Japanese Imperial Army is a continuous and sensitive conflict between Japan and South Korea. To this day, it leaves a lasting impression on generations to come. Shame is the driving force of this issue. During World War II, many of the women taken felt ashamed and were shamed. Shame is universally experienced, but the nature of these experiences are influenced by culture. Between the United States, Japan and South Korea, shame culture has been very prominent. With the recent movements in the United States of #MeToo and in Japan and South Korea putting honor and respect as priorities within their culture, dealing with shame can be difficult within these nations.

This paper will discuss shame culture as the central concept describing the internal conflict between Japanese-American citizens and Korean-American citizens with the controversial comfort women issue.

Identification of Issues Japanese Occupation of Korea

The comfort women issue began in the midst of World War II. Korea was under Japanese occupation for nearly 35 years from 1910 to 1945.

Although in theory, as citizens under the Japanese empire Koreans should have been treated the same as Japanese citizens, the Japanese empire made a valiant effort to expunge as many aspects of Korean culture. As F. A. McKenzie (n.d., 145), who lived in Korea during the Japanese occupation, recalls:

It became more and more clear, however, that the aim of the Japanese was nothing else than the entire absorption of the country and the destruction of every trace of Korean nationality. One of the most influential Japanese in Korea put this quite frankly to me... The Korean people will be absorbed in the Japanese. They will talk our language, live our life, and be an integral part of us. (p. 145)

The Japanese empire forced the Korean people to speak Japanese, adopt Japanese names and assimilate into Japanese culture while leaving theirs behind. With Japan having a tight grip on the Korean peninsula, access to obedient young girls and women was fairly easy.

Comfort Women

“Comfort women” is a term used to describe those women who were mobilized by the Japanese army for sexual slavery during World War II. With Japanese occupation over Korea, Korea had no power to stop sexual slavery. It has long been one of the thorniest issues in Japan-Korea relations. Still to this day, the current administration of South Korea is not happy with how the Japanese government has dealt with this issue. It wasn’t until 2015 that Japan and the

former administration of South Korea negotiated a bilateral agreement to bring the comfort issue to an end. However, even this agreement did not suffice with the Korean people or the new administration which will be discussed later.

"The Rape of Nanking" is known to have started the comfort women movement. As the Japanese military moved across Asia for territorial gain, widespread atrocities were committed by its soldiers and officers. In 1937, the city of Nanking was invaded and destroyed by Japanese forces. A large scale of young women and girls were raped and the general population was treated horribly. This attracted international attention. The press reports of this incident reached Emperor Hirohito who was appalled by the negative image that the Imperial Army was creating. In order to regain and restore honor and stop the condemnation of Japan, "comfort stations" were created. These comfort stations would provide Japanese soldiers the "pleasure" they so needed. Since licensed prostitution existed during this time, comfort stations in Japan existed since 1932. Japanese soldiers called them whore houses or brothels. However, after the "Rape of Nanking," military regulations turned comfort stations into facilities for sexual slavery (Argibay, 2003).

Although many comfort women were from Japan and other parts of Southeast Asia, a large percentage of comfort women were taken, abducted, or tricked, from Korea. Many young women were promised jobs in factories so they could receive money for their families. Lee Ok-seon, a survivor, was running an errand for her parents when a group of uniformed men attacked and took her to a comfort station. She was 14 years old. She described the comfort stations as "not a place for humans" (Blakemore, 2018).

In 1992, Professor Yoshiaki Yoshimi uncovered an important Japanese military document that described the recruitment of comfort women. It states: "You are hereby notified of the order [of the Minister of War] to carry out this as with the utmost regard for preserving the honor of the army and for avoiding social problems." The most important issue to the Japanese forces was "preserving the honor of the army." In this document, it does not state the need

for a woman's consent or the age limit. In other words, minors could also be recruited (Blakemore, 2018).

There were three main ways that the Japanese recruited women. One was deception. Since Korea was a colony of Japan, many areas of the country were very poor. Japan had taken control of the sources that produced food. As a result, many young women and girls started working at an early age to provide for their families. This led recruiters to trick women and promised them better jobs as nurses, waitresses, or maids that came with a salary to help their families. Recruiters would also mention comfort stations, but describe them as "comfort services" where Korean women assumed that they would be visiting wounded soldiers and try to make them happy. Therefore, many Korean women enlisted in this service on the basis of misrepresentation (Blakemore, 2018).

Secondly, girls and young women were purchased from their families as indentured servants. According to a document by The Southeast Asia Translation and Interrogation Center (SEATIC), the Japanese manager of a comfort station in Burma purchased Korean women for 300 to 1000 yen based on their appearance, age and characters. After purchase, the women became his sole property. The United States Office of War Information Report on debt bondage states that the women bought for comfort stations could not leave the comfort stations even after their term finished. On these terms, many comfort women never left and about 90% of these women did not survive after the war (Blakemore, 2018).

Third, the Japanese army forcibly abducted women and girls. Like Lee Ok-seon's experience, many women and girls were kidnapped from their homes. At times, the Japanese military would use fear to take girls. They would tell the heads of small villages to gather girls of a certain age and transfer them to Japanese forces for "work." If some women refused, the Japanese military threatened to "destroy the village, kill the elders and children, and commit other violent measures" (Blakemore, 2018).

Other measures would include using

civilian internment camps and recruiting girls from there. Jan Ruff O’Herne, who was in one of those camps with her mother and sisters, told the Tokyo Tribunal 2000 that a group of Japanese soldiers and a high ranking official ordered women aging between 17 and 28 years old to be inspected. They would then select several girls and women and take them away to comfort stations despite resistance. If a woman was suspected of having a relationship with members of the resistance force or being part of the resistance force, she would be taken to comfort stations. This threat shows that comfort stations were portrayed and viewed as a source of punishment (Blakemore, 2018).

Japan had four main reasons for setting up comfort stations. First, and one of the main reasons, was the desire to restore the image of the Japanese army. Japan believed that comfort stations that were military-controlled would prevent another “Rape of Nanking” incident. Second, comfort stations were put in place to prevent anti-Japanese sentiment among local residents and in occupied territories. Third, Japan hoped to reduce the army’s medical expenses and keep its military personnel healthier. Many sexually transmitted diseases were common among the army due to access to brothels. Therefore, all comfort stations included medical examinations of the women by Japanese military doctors reducing the risk of diseases. Fourth, women who were kept in Japanese comfort stations were isolated. This was very important to the Japanese army because before military- controlled comfort stations, soldiers would go to brothels which led them to believe that spies could hide there. As a result, many women were trafficked from distant countries and would not understand the local language (Argibay, 2003).

The comfort women movement provides a plethora of legal, ethical, and international issues. At the start to World War II, several treaties went into effect that established slavery as an international crime and that forced sex was a form of slavery. Comfort stations, therefore, violated international law. Many of the comfort women survivors have passed away; however, those who are still thriving are finally using their silenced voice to share their testimonies. These

women promote the need to focus on human trafficking and women’s rights. They also emphasize that sexual slavery is a violation of human rights and therefore should be acknowledged by the entire international community.

Stakeholder’s Perspective Korean-Americans

Although the Comfort Women issue is a conflict that occurred during World War II between Japan and South Korea, the stakeholders in this case are Japanese-Americans and Korean-Americans. Many of these people are still affected by this issue. A lot of Korean-Americans empathize with comfort women victims. Korean culture is highly influenced by honor and respect and the issue of comfort women brought shame amongst many Koreans during World War II. Therefore, many citizens now are stepping up to fight this feeling of shame. There are many many Korean advocacy groups lead by Korean Americans. The Comfort Women Justice Coalition (CWJC) in California is prominent and well known. The Washington Coalition for Comfort Women Issues (WCCW) in Washington D.C. has had a big role in the local governments in Virginia and also the Korean-American community. The Women’s Human Rights Education Institute has also worked with local governments and educational organizations in the United States and Canada to promote the awareness of comfort women.

In 2007, a U.S. House of Representatives Resolution 121 (H.Res.121) was passed which called on Japan to acknowledge and apologize for the use of comfort women. Active Korean Americans were the main reasons why this resolution was passed. This same group of Korean Americans were disappointed in Japan’s failure to provide an apology and reparations; therefore, in 2010 the Korean American Civic Empowerment started the first comfort women memorial on public land in the United States. Since then there have been grassroots movement and comfort women memorials spread throughout California, Georgia, New York, Virginia and two locations in New Jersey. This movement of passing the H.Res.121 in 2007 is an active commitment among Korean American activists to spread the word

about this issue and emphasize that this is not only an issue for Korean Americans, but also a human rights and women's rights issues across ethnic groups. According to Grace Han Wolf, honorary co-chair of the Comfort Women Memorial Peace Garden in Fairfax, Virginia states that these memorials are "not just for Korean Americans or Asian Americans, but for all" (McCarthy, 2017). These memorials have been used to support local governments and spread the awareness of human trafficking.

Korean-Americans have increasingly become politically powerful in the United States. The first memorial was constructed in Palisades Park, New Jersey in 2010. The Comfort Women Memorial Peace Garden in Fairfax County, Virginia is an example of private-publics partnerships. It was funded and maintained by the Washington coalition of Comfort Women Issues (WCCW), a non-governmental organization founded in 1992 for the purpose of educating Americans and seeking an apology from the Japanese government. The WCCW approached the local government of Fairfax County and created a natural relationship (McCarthy, 2014).

Japanese-Americans

With activism and the spread of memorials, Japanese-Americans have a mixed view on the comfort women issue. Many Japanese-Americans have voiced opposition to memorials popping up throughout the United States. San Francisco was the first major U.S. city to plan a tribute to the comfort women. San Francisco's monument was an attempt to encourage education about trafficking of women. Seiko Fujimoto has been living in the city's Japantown since moving to the United States about 40 years ago, stated that she does not understand why the city has to destroy the relationship of coexistence among Japanese, Chinese and Korean ethnic groups (Horikoshi). Because San Francisco is a major U.S. city, the implications that the statue has is different compared to other smaller cities that also have monuments.

Since 1957, San Francisco and Osaka have been sister cities. In 2017, a memorial for comfort women was established in St. Mary's square in San

Francisco. The statue has three young women holding hands on a pedestal representing girls from Korea, China and the Philippines. Next to them is Korean activist Kim Hak-sun. According to Julie Tang, a retired California Superior Court judge and co-chairwoman of the Comfort Women Justice Coalition, the memorial meant to commemorate the tens of thousands of young girls and women in the comfort women system and was intended to emphasize the issue of women's freedom from sexual violence. After San Francisco mayor, Edwin M. Lee, signed a resolution to turn the statue into a city monument, the mayor of Osaka, Hirofumi Yoshimura, said he will cut ties with San Francisco. Yoshimura stated that its relationship of trust with San Francisco has been completely ruined (Horikoshi, n.d.). This further signals how the issue of comfort women is still a very sensitive topic in Japan.

Japanese-Americans living in San Francisco ask why the city needs a memorial for comfort women. Many of them protested against the installation of a memorial. According to populist figure Toru Hashimoto in a letter to Edwin M. Lee, he does not intend to defend the issue of comfort women now nor in the future (Fortin, 2017). Many Japanese Americans think it is unfair that the memorials portray a one sided story. They accuse other countries of having military brothels for soldiers during wartime as well and do not think Japan should be singled out. However, San Francisco is known for many immigrants with different backgrounds and therefore this monument represents the human rights for all. In Atlanta, when the Atlanta Comfort Women Task Force constructed their own comfort women memorial, private citizens and Japanese government-funded news groups opposed the construction and sent many emails to every major donor (Fortin, 2017). Many of these Japanese-Americans in opposition possess a traditional perspective in Japanese shame culture.

Many other Japanese-Americans; however, are in support of the memorial. In fact, the memorial in San Francisco was pushed by Chinese-Americans, some Japanese-Americans and Filipino-Americans. These Japanese-Americans focus on the importance of what the memorial

says. Women's rights and human rights are core values and reasons why many memorials are put up in the first place (Japanese Americans & Japanese Speak in Support of 'Comfort Women' Memorial in San Francisco, 2017). Japanese-Americans in support of this memorial want Japan to acknowledge its mistake during the war. It is more of a modern approach to Japanese shame culture. U.S. Congressman, Mike Honda, prominent figure amongst comfort women supporters.

Being a third generation Japanese-American, Honda sponsored the 2007 House of Representatives Resolution 121 that called Japan to acknowledge the use of sexual slaves.

Cultural Concept: Shame Culture

The idea of shame is the core cultural concept regarding this issue. Japanese, Korean and American culture all value and handle shame differently. For example, Japanese culture treasures honor and respect of an individual. As a result, sometimes Japanese people revert to hiding the issue that bring on shame. Therefore, since this comfort women issue brings intense shame to Japan and the government, the government refused to acknowledge the use of sexual slavery until the late 1990s. Japanese and Korean culture are also harmonious culture; therefore, do not want the international community to view their cultures negatively.

The term "shame culture" was coined by Ruth Benedict, an anthropologist that believed in cultural relativism, who observed Japanese culture during World War II (Benedict, n.d.). Shame culture is defined as a society in which the conformity of behavior is maintained through the fear of being shamed. According to Ruth Benedict, shame is becoming "an increasingly heavy burden in the United States" (The Rise of Shame in America, 2017). Recently the #MeToo movement has generated thousands of responses from citizens and celebrities. Shame culture can also relate to the communication concept of "saving face" which is a core social value in Asian cultures like Japan and Korea. Saving face is defined as a strategy to avoid humiliation or embarrassment and to maintain honor and dignity.

Shame is very prominent in Japanese

culture. Japanese culture highly values honor and respect. Relationships between people in Japan are greatly affected by duty and obligation. In other words, duty-based relationships focuses on what other people think or believe and has a more powerful impact on behavior than what the individual think or believes. In the 11th and 14th centuries, "Bushido," which means 'Way of the Warrior,' was developed in Japan. This was a code of conduct that Japanese warriors, the samurai, followed. The samurai's duty was to maintain their dignity and honor. If a samurai lost his honor, then the only way to preserve it was through "harakiri". Which is killing oneself in a painful, yet fearlessly heroic way, to sustain honor and eradicate shame (McCann, n.d.). Amongst Japanese Americans, the desire to preserve honor and avoid shame is highly valued. The bombing of Pearl Harbor during World War II brought shame to many Japanese Americans. Intense racism and discrimination was brought upon Japanese Americans by some other Americans. Young second generation Japanese in the U.S. (Nisei), were eager to fight against Japan to remove the shame caused by Pearl Harbor and bring honor to their Japanese community in the U.S. by proving their loyalty to their country (Kent, 1992). According to Ruth Benedict, shame is used to describe the pattern of Japanese society. In other words, the pattern of shame is used to define the bond that gives Japanese society its characteristic of the idea of one knowing one's proper place (Lebra, 1983). The core of this behavior goes back to allegiance to the Japanese emperor. Japanese people are taught at an early age to obey the rules of society and are cautious to act according to rule of different situations. In contrast to Western or American cultural ideal, where a man sticks to his principles no matter what and does not change his behavior to compromise the situation, the Japanese man adapts his behavior according to the people around him and situation. As a result, a man who can adjust his behavior easily is praised and respected and is known as "a man who knows shame" (Kent, 1992). Sakuta Kei'ichi, an expert on Japanese shame culture, states that Japanese behavior on shame depends on private shame or

embarrassment. Private shame is focused on the self-image and identity. This becomes a medium to which public shame is translated into guilt. He explains how shame is rooted in the “standards set for measuring inferiority-superiority” (Kent, 1992), which is associated with the ego ideal and based on norms governing good and bad associated with the superego. Sakuta stresses the sensitivity the Japanese feel to the exposure of the self due to an acute awareness of the self because there is always the attention or gaze of others. The idea of the ‘gaze of others’ can be traced far back in Japanese history comparing the behaviors of the differing classes that existed back in that time.

Another alternative to dealing with shame in Japanese culture is to hide it or replace the cause with something else. Japan’s ultimate goal is to preserve the image of the country; therefore, hiding shame has been instilled in Japanese culture for centuries. Inoue Tadashi, a social psychologist, gives a definition to personal shame which is caused when one compares one’s ego-ideal with one’s real self and feels inferior in comparison (Kent, 1992). South Korea is no exception to shame culture. Collectively, South Koreans suffer from the fear of losing face, *chemyeon* in Korean. Like Japan, Korean culture widely values one’s honor. If one’s actions brings shame to oneself, then it brings shame to the public as well. For example, Cho Hyun-ah, the center of the “nut rage scandal” brought shame to herself, the country, and therefore the Korean people. The nut rage scandal, also known as *nutgate*, involved a Korean Air executive assaulting a flight attendant. Like Japan, Korea is no stranger to hiding the shame. There were cover ups that were made so the news would not get out. South Koreans put a great amount of value on how others view themselves. The importance of reputation is based on the idea of the self where the self manages the reputation in anticipation of criticisms by others (Lee, 1999). The beauty standards in South Korea plays a huge role in today’s society of shame. There are expectations to be met by South Korean women, especially, of the way they look. Some standards include: being skinny, pale, having a double eyelid and a high nose bridge. It is normal to get plastic surgery done

at a young age because of societal pressures.

However, in modern Korean society, the feeling of shame is associated with the lack of an obedience-oriented value system. Nowadays, in order to enhance one’s competence, education has become the first priority. Koreans also associate shame with material objects. The more successful one is the more material items one will have. Therefore, the statues that are getting erected in different U.S. cities can symbolize success because it is a tangible thing that Korean-Americans successfully put up (Lee, 1999). In recent years, shame culture in America has grown. With the movements of #MeToo and other sexual assault headlines, America’s shame culture is growing rapidly. Former President Bill Clinton is an example of a prominent figure who avoided the truth and eventually had to admit his shame. Social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram also promote shaming like ‘fat-shaming.’ However, a lingerie brand, Aerie, created a platform called Aerie real in response to fat shaming. They use celebrities and plus size models to promote their brand that no retouching has happened on any of the pictures of the models.

On September 2017, the statue revealed in San Francisco that commemorated comfort women has coincided with the growth of the #MeToo movement in the United States. More and more victims of the comfort women movement have come forward to speak out and tell their stories after decades of crimes were committed against them. According to Julie Tang, former California Superior Court judge and co-chairwoman of the CWJC, the comfort women survivors, who now average the age of 95, are the mothers of the #MeToo movement. As they speak up 50 years later it inspires modern day women to talk about their own suffering of rape and sexual assaults (Westfall, 2018).

Masculinity

Beside shame culture, another interesting cultural aspect to touch upon is the idea of masculinity. The issue of comfort women reveals the culture of masculinity. In patriarchal societies like Japan and Korea, a naturalized masculinist sexual culture exists. Japanese people believe that

men have biologically based sexual “needs” that must be satisfied by the female body.

This cultural belief is called by the author “normative heterosexual masculinity” which is a component of an underlying hegemonic or social practice that constructs the idea of masculinity and femininity and gendered power relations between men and women in a patriarchy. In Japanese and Korean societies, this idea of heterosexual masculinity encompasses the traditional institutions of professional women entertainers who were formally trained in the arts, theater, dance and music to entertain male clients. As a result, with the existence of a state-regulated system of prostitution, the idea of the rule of male sex right, the right of men to have access to commerce and public sex, summarizes the viewpoint of Japanese culture on this issue (Soh).

Call to Action

The issue of comfort women impacts Japan, South Korea and the United States. With Japan and South Korea being the key allies for the United States against the current North Korean crisis, it is important that their relationship is kept peaceful. Actions have been made to end the comfort women issue. In 2015, Japan and South Korea had created a bilateral agreement on the comfort women issue. Under this agreement, the Japanese government made a one-time contribution to a South Korean government foundation that would carry out projects to tend the needs of survivors of the comfort system. However, the new administration under Moon Jae-in, had discovered that this agreement was “seriously flawed” in that it did not conduct direct hearings from comfort women survivors; therefore, the agreement should be renegotiated. This statement sparked a strong reaction from Tokyo. Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono issued a statement which included a strict warning that if Seoul decided to attempt to renegotiate, Japan-South Korea relations would be “unmanageable.” As a result, earlier this year the Korean government decided to keep the 2015 agreement (Tatsumi, 2018).

Because this issue is very sensitive to Japan, South Korea, and Japanese/Korean-Ameri-

can citizens, it is tricky to think of an action plan. With that said, educating Japanese-Americans and Korean-Americans of both sides of the issue can be very impactful. Many Korean-Americans do not pay attention to the Japanese argument and seeing the opposite perspective can open the eyes of many. Another recommendation is learning how to embrace the power of shame.

Shame is a powerful emotion that can be used as a weapon. However, if teaching Japanese-Americans, Japan, Korean-Americans, and South Korea to embrace the power of shame can be even more powerful. Embracing shame means to acknowledging an act of wrongdoing. Once one recognizes one’s wrongdoing, one can then move on to forgiveness or learn not to do it again. Although it might be hard to change the values of a culture, shame can be carefully nurtured by accountability and forgiveness. This issue has created a burden among three countries since the end of World War II. Learning how to forgive and embrace the shame can be used to move past this issue and focus on prioritizing current ones like North Korea. To be human, it is normal to feel shame and people should not be ashamed to be human. It is like teaching our children that mistakes will eventually lead to success. Shame does the same. It prevents societies from doing wrong again if it is acknowledged.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the issue of “comfort women” has been the most controversial topic between Japan and South Korea. Korean-Americans and Japanese-Americans are the main stakeholders in this case. Even though this issue happened over 50 years ago, it affects the generations of people that are of Korean and Japanese descent. Many organizations across the United States have successfully pushed for memorials and statues to commemorate this issue. As a result, there have been many backlashes from Japanese-Americans and also the Japanese government, including cutting ties off with San Francisco. This issue is driven by the culture of shame. Japanese, Korean and American culture all experience shame. With Japan and South Korea

putting emphasis on honor, respect and obedience, one way to get rid of shame is by hiding it. That is why the Japanese government has not acknowledged this issue until the late 1990s. American culture is now emphasizing shame with the #MeToo movement. It inspires women to come forward and use their voice to tell a powerful story instead of being silenced. However, learning how to embrace shame can help move on past this issue. Education is critical in providing a different perspective. Even though the 2015 agreement

between Japan and South Korea did not satisfy the Korean people, it is one step to resolving this issue. Hopefully, Japan and South Korea can put this issue to rest and move on to current situations. This can then influence Japanese-Americans and Korean-Americans to also move on and continue a peaceful relationship. The comfort women issue is not exclusive to just Japanese-Americans and Korean-Americans, but to women across all ethnic group. It is a matter of women's rights and human rights.

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