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Teaching the History of "Comfort Women" without Casting Asians as Other

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In the city of San Francisco, a memorial called the Column of Strength, "bears witness," according to its plaque, "to the suffering of hundreds of thousands of women and girls, euphemistically called 'Comfort Women,' who were sexually enslaved by the Japanese Imperial Armed Forces in thirteen Asia-Pacific countries from 1931 to 1945." Unveiled in 2017, the monument caused a diplomatic incident: the termination of a long-standing sister city relationship between San Francisco and Osaka, Japan.[1] It was a flashpoint in a "history war" that has roiled East Asia, where memories of Japan's WWII-era aggression remain raw and contested. As the United States emerges as a "battleground" in this war over public memory, comfort women statues in cities like Glendale and San Francisco have garnered significant media and scholarly attention. Yet the teaching of comfort women history in American schools remains an underexamined topic.[2]

I argue that the difficult history of comfort women should be taught, but with special care. Comfort women history can all too easily reinforce dehumanizing stereotypes of Asian women as victims and sexual objects or leave students with feelings of shock and little else. This is especially true when comfort women are introduced as an isolated case study of Asian women's history, or when testimony is selectively framed as evidence of historical crimes, thus reducing the narrator

to a symbol of violation. A critical inquiry approach mitigates such problems by supporting a more nuanced examination of comfort women as complex individuals and not just victims.[3]

My experience teaching comfort women history has mainly been in the context of introductory-level history courses that frequently serve as my students' only formal education about Asia in college. Seeing as my students have had scant exposure to Asian histories or cultures, I take for granted that I have a role to play in combating ignorance and negative stereotypes about Asian people. This role has become weightier in the context of the pandemic and the anti-Asian sentiment and violence that has arisen, in part, because of the scapegoating of Asians as vectors of disease. Education can combat hate and I applaud legislation passed in the state of Illinois designed to guarantee that all K–12 public school students will receive some education about Asian American history.[4] I would argue, though, that efforts to confront stereotypes about Asian Americans, as "perpetual foreigners" for instance, will be less effective if students are simultaneously exposed to stereotypical portrayals of non-American Asians as unfathomable Others. Moreover, whether the topic is Asia or Asian America, and whether the context is a K–12 or college level class, curricular reform will not inevitably result in positive outcomes; *how* we teach matters. This article focuses on comfort women precisely because they have become such salient figures of public memory. But its broader goal is to encourage deep reflection on Asia-related pedagogy at a time of widespread xenophobia and discrimination, exacerbated by COVID-19.

The Danger of Comfort Women as a Single Story

American students who receive little education about Asia are susceptible to pernicious images of Asian women as victims devoid of historical agency. The novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie articulates the "dangers" of such stereotyping in a popular TED Talk. The Nigerian-born Adichie notes that many Americans cannot see past a "single story" of Africa as a land of "catastrophe," full of "incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves, and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner."[5] Similarly, American students, shallowly exposed to historical topics like Chinese footbinding and WWII-era comfort women, may struggle to form an association with Asian women in history that exceeds the provocation of mangled and violated bodies.

Consider the California public schools. In 2016, a new History-Social Science Framework incorporated comfort women into guidelines for tenth grade World History in response to community advocacy. The guidelines indicate that "Comfort Women can be taught as an example of institutionalized sexual slavery."[6] At first glance, this would appear to be a victory for greater inclusion of Asia-related

histories in American secondary education. But any victory is compromised by the shoehorning of the topic into a larger curricular framework that completely marginalizes Asian and women's history. In the framework's 60-pages of guidance for teachers and textbook companies, Korean history gets two brief mentions (351, 363). The section on "The Rise of Imperialism and Colonialism," fails to address Japanese imperialism (333–341) and alarmingly mischaracterizes the history of imperialism in China (337). Meanwhile, women are all but absent throughout. There is nothing on suffrage, feminisms, or any topic related to women and gender save for one: comfort women.[7] If teachers follow the framework, California students could easily encounter only one story about the history of Asian women: a story about Asian women as victims of the violent brutality of Asian men. This single story of sexual objectification is especially concerning considering Asian women's hypersexualization, a phenomenon tragically spotlighted by the 2021 murder of six women of Asian descent in Atlanta by a self-proclaimed "sex addict."[8]

The troubling single-story effect is hardly a problem of the high schools alone. For one, experts in Asian Studies should very much concern themselves with the way Asia is being taught (or not) at the secondary level. Moreover, college level history courses are also apt to marginalize the histories of women. Taking my own field of modern China as an example, Klaus Muhlhahn's recent 600+ page history of China, "from the Great Qing to Xi Jinping, has only four entries under the index heading of "Women," three of which pertain to the post-Mao period.[9] When our histories are so bereft of narratives about women, any encounter students have with women's history can become a "single story."

With this in mind, supplemental teaching resources directed at a crossover audience of high school and college teachers should be scrutinized for how they frame topics like the comfort women. Unfortunately, the website Asia for Educators (henceforth AFE), does not fare well under such scrutiny. Its "Primary Source Document" featuring testimony of Kim Tŏkchin promotes a simplistic and dehumanizing reading of her story.[10]

I have a personal teaching anecdote involving this source. When I was a novice teacher scrambling to put together a lecture on World War II in Asia, I drew from the AFE reproduction of Kim's narrative the following quotations:

> "Each of us had to serve an average of 30 to 40 men a day, and we often had no time to sleep…In each room there was a box of condoms which the soldiers used…Quite a few would rush straight to penetration without condoms, saying they couldn't care less if they caught any diseases, since they were likely to die on the battlefield at any moment."

When I came to this slide during my lecture, I immediately felt I had made a mistake. Not only had I too casually introduced the topic of sexual violence to an

audience that may have included survivors of sexual violence, but I had crudely reduced Kim's life experience and the experience of Asian women during the war, to these few sentences. Perhaps I also intuited an insight made by historian Laura Hein, who has noted the "disturbingly pornographic quality" of accounts of sexual violence "even when a critique of violence against women is intended."[11] In her article "Savage Irony," Hein criticizes the tendency to emphasize the sexual violence in comfort women accounts while editing out the narrators' experiences before and after the war.[12] The AFE Primary Source Document does just that in its selective reproduction of Kim's translated testimony. In a convention of all AFE Primary Source Documents, the teaching resource first provides a very brief source excerpt followed by one that is longer but still incomplete. The very brief version contains just three sentences, which correspond to three points of emphasis: (1) the deception involved in Kim's recruitment, (2) her initial experiences of rape by military personnel in Japan, and (3) her forced sexual servitude in a comfort station in China. One of the sentences is the one I dropped into my lecture: "Each of us had to serve an average of 30 to 40 men each day, and we often had no time to sleep."

I would like to call this a shut-down quotation, or a quotation that shuts down discussion and analysis. A quotation like this resembles graphic images of historical violence, such as photographs of mutilated bodies from King Leopold's Congo. Speaking of such images, Nancy Rose Hunt has argued that scholars should "push beyond the shock of the photographic that tends to blot out all else, and seek more fragile memory pictures and acoustic traces" in our sources.[13] With comfort women testimony, we have a rich archive of women's voices, but we still have the same responsibility to "push beyond the shock." In addition to presenting survivors as full people, with lives before and after their experiences of wartime sexual violence, Nancy Rose Hunt's attentiveness to multiple sensory registers suggests a useful reading strategy. Students can be encouraged to identify what survivors recalled seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, and smelling. This approach to testimonial sources could give students the words to concretely grapple with survivors' accounts instead of falling back on platitudes about the horrors of war. But no close reading strategy or guided discussion can compensate for the pitfalls of presenting sexual violence as an isolated example of the historical experiences of Asian women.[14]

Learning Comfort Women History as an Exercise in Critical Inquiry

Teaching comfort women history can be fraught, but it should be done. It should be taught as a historical atrocity, but also as an exercise in critical thinking, source evaluation, and open-minded exploration of primary sources. Such an approach

cultivates historical thinking skills and also discourages reductive portrayals of Asian women as interchangeable symbols of victimization.

It is well-known that comfort women history is contested. But while there are serious differences in historical interpretation, there are also denialist counter-narratives that are flatly wrong. For instance, comfort women were not well-compensated prostitutes who willingly worked in wartime brothels, yet this distortion is promoted by the article "Contracting for Sex in the Pacific" by J. Mark Ramseyer.[15] The Ramseyer article bears many of the characteristics that I guide students to look for in credible, academic sources, including publication in a peer reviewed journal. But confidence in the article should quickly crumble if it is subjected to what history education expert Sam Wineburg calls lateral reading, a practice of fact checkers, who evaluate unfamiliar web sources not by reading closely, but by interrogating the source through other sources.[16] Read laterally, the Ramseyer article reveals itself as a lightning rod for controversy, having attracted multiple open letters by experts in East Asian history calling for a full retraction by the journal. Sometimes bad scholarship is good teaching material. Japan historian Tessa Morris-Suzuki has produced a "Study Aid" for the article that "aims to encourage debate about ways to encourage research integrity while promoting free speech."[17] The co-authored open letter "'Contracting for Sex in the Pacific War': The Case for Retraction on Grounds of Academic Misconduct," methodically exposes shortcomings of the article, including a basic failure to provide accurate citations.[18] These resources and others on the Ramseyer controversy have been collated online by *Asia-Pacific Journal Japan Focus*.[19]

Ramseyer's manipulative framing of primary source testimony, particularly that of Mun Ok-ju, provides an especially pertinent teaching opportunity for a history survey course. Such courses, after all, regularly present students with selectively excerpted primary sources, as in the case of the Kim Tŏkchin testimony discussed above. As historians will quickly apprehend, the Ramseyer article and the AFE primary source are not equivalent cases of selective framing. Ramseyer uses cherry picked testimony of Mun Ok-ju to support the false claim that comfort women were prostitutes who earned and saved money to the point of "flamboyantly" profiting (6). This is contradicted by decades of scholarly research, the bulk of competing testimony, and a fuller analysis of Mun Ok-ju's own account, as presented in "A Case for Retraction." Though the AFE primary source document also selectively excerpts testimony to elicit a certain reading, it does so for a different audience and with a different objective. For students, it underscores parts of the testimony that bear witness to an injustice. It simplifies but does not falsify the source material. Students should be guided to understand that some instances of source framing are acceptable, if not ideal, while others are dishonest. They should also receive the message that no source, including survivor testimony, should be shielded from critical analysis.

The testimonial sources of comfort women, after all, will not crumble if critically evaluated. In fact, they will yield fuller portraits of narrators as individuals, historical agents, and survivors. In one move, students can move beyond the shock of sexual violence and interrogate the omissions in selectively framed sources. Teachers can first assign the AFE Kim Tŏkchin source and then have students read the full translation, which is still short and accessible.[20] Even better, they can read the full translation alongside a corroborating account. I recommend "Bitter Memories I am Loath to Recall" by Kim Haksun, who is credited as the first survivor to speak publicly about her experience as a comfort woman.[21] Both Kim Tŏkchin and Kim Haksun describe family poverty and negative experiences of life under Japanese colonial rule before the war. Both women developed a long-term relationship with a man during their captivity in China. Kim Tŏkchin became close with a Japanese officer, whom she "came to regard almost as my father, husband, and family rolled into one" (47). Kim Haksun escaped her comfort station with a Korean man who was living in China and entered an abusive marriage with him. Both Kim Tŏkchin and Kim Haksun had children who died young. These details make it harder to view these women *only* as victims of military sexual slavery, though they *were* that.

Once we accept that the survivors are not just victims but complex people who exerted some agency over their life stories, we must ask the obvious questions about bias and the fallibility of memory. Of course, this is fertile ground for denialists, who like Ramseyer, are quick to draw on testimony as evidence when they can twist it to their ends, but even quicker to dismiss the voices of survivors. I encourage my students to see comfort women testimony as just another type of oral history, and to see oral history as "just as contaminated as any other retrievable fragment of the past" as China historian Gail Hershatter has written.[22] In Peipei Qiu's epilogue to *Chinese Comfort Women: Testimonies from Imperial Japan's Sex Slaves*, she discusses the extent to which the activist movement for legal redress has shaped the narratives of Chinese survivors. "Having little education and having lived in imposed silence for most of their lives, these women needed to be empowered through a larger socio-political discourse in order to overcome their fear, and they also needed a venue in which they could articulate and reframe their narratives."[23] While Qiu acknowledges this active "reframing" of comfort women narratives, she asks in the face of those who would deny their validity: "In the reconstruction of history, whose words count?"[24] Whose words count, which words count, what do they count for? These questions are fundamental to the discipline of history, and they speak to a prior issue examined in this article: that of the single story. When women's voices are too easily discredited, their histories will be further marginalized, allowing single stories to perpetuate. And single stories will always fall short, even when they are true.

Conclusion

Instructors who teach about comfort women as an exercise in critical analysis must be ready to say *this happened*. Large numbers of women were coerced or otherwise forced into comfort stations across the Japanese wartime empire. In the comfort stations women were repeatedly raped; they endured dismal conditions; they suffered multiple forms of physical violence; they could not leave at will. Too often, testimonial accounts provided as teaching resources are framed as evidential proof of these conclusions. A better approach is to present these facts—widely agreed upon by scholars—as part of the background knowledge that allows one to responsibly engage testimony with an open mind, understanding that a single testimonial source cannot, on its own, prove the truth about comfort women, but it can do so much more. It can open up a world. Let us enter that world with our students and let us populate it with other Asian women whose voices are less contested, and thus, even more infrequently heard. Then we can say, as teachers, that we did not passively stand by as violence was inflicted on women of Asian descent in the pandemic's long wake.

Notes

[1] Christine Hauser, "'It Is Not Coming Down," *The New York Times*, October 4, 2018. The former Osaka mayor specifically took issue with the wording of the inscription and its use of the disputed figure of "hundreds of thousands." For a balanced discussion, see The Contested Histories Initiative, "Comfort Women Column of Strength in the United States of America," last updated May 2021, https://contestedhistories.org/resources/case-studies/comfort-women-column-of-strength-in-san-francisco/

[2] For a teaching resource essay aimed at high school educators, see Jimin Kim, et al., "Teaching About the Comfort Women of World War II and the Use of Personal Stories of the Victims," *Education About Asia* 24:3 (2019), 58-63. The *Education About Asi*a article is from an activist perspective. The article stemmed from the authors' earlier contribution to a teaching resource book designed, most immediately, for California educators after a curricular reform that I critically examine in the next section.

[3] A note on terminology: I follow the practice of a number of other scholars, including Peipei Qiu (quoted here), who acknowledge the problematic nature of the terms "comfort women," "comfort station," and so on, while continuing to use them, "omitting the quotation marks" to enhance "readability," because "these terms, on which decades of international debate, historical research, and legal discourses are mounded, have become widely recognized as referring specifically to the victims and institutions of the Japanese military's system of sexual slavery." See Peipei Qiu, *Chinese Comfort Women: Testimonies from Imperial Japan's Sex Slaves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

[4] Deepa Shivaram, "Illinois Has Become the First State to Require the Teaching of Asian American History," *NPR*, July 13, 2021.

[5] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," filmed 2009, TED video, 18:33, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en. Adichie's observation about the link between cultural Othering and white saviorism is pertinent to the topic of teaching comfort women. Engaging the issue from the perspective of Asian American Studies, Kandice Chuh notes a tendency to identify the "culture of the 'other'" as "patriarchal and oppressive while the United States appears in contrast as liberatory," potentially justifying U.S. militarism and violence in Asia. See, "Discomforting Knowledge: Or, Korean 'Comfort Women' and Asian Americanist Critical Practice," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003), 5-23, 8.

[6] California State Board of Education, History-Social Science Framework (Sacramento: California Department of Education, 2017), 353.

[7] The problem is not solved by the availability of teaching resources designed in the context of the revised California Social Studies Guidance; specifically, Phyllis Kim and Jimin Kim, eds., "Curriculum and Resources for 'Comfort Women' Education," Korean American Forum of California and Comfort Women Justice Coalition, 2018. Historical context is thin, and the curriculum is designed to lead students toward ready-made conclusions. As a historian of China, I find the resource guide's presentation of "Testimony of Zhou Fenying" (38) particularly concerning. Drawn from Peipei Qiu's *Chinese Comfort Women*, 89-93, the typo-filled excerpts strip content from the full translation that is extraneous to a portrait of Zhou's victimization and teachers are not prepared in any way to situate Zhou's life in a Chinese historical context. It is no wonder that the curriculum is designed to encourage students to make broad comparisons between comfort women experiences and contemporary cases of trafficking and sexual violence. Stripped of any social reality beyond her victimization, Zhou Fenying is available for all sorts of broad, but ultimately superficial, comparisons.

[8] See, for instance, Maria Cecilia Hwang and Rhacel Salazar Parrenas, "The Gendered Racialization of Asian Women as Villainous Temptresses," *Gender & Society* 35.4 (2021).

[9] Klaus Mulhahn, *Making China Modern: From the Great Qing to Xi Jinping* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 716-717. This is not just a problem of indexing. To be fair, Muhlhahn's book has many merits.

[10] "Oral Histories of the 'Comfort Women,'" http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/tps/1900_ko.htm#women, accessed March 16, 2022. I focus my attention on this source because I have frequently used AFE resources myself. A project of Columbia University's Weatherhead East Asia Institute, AFE is accessible, well-organized, and features contributions from prominent scholars. It is also uneven, and in some places downright irresponsible, as in its astonishing misrepresentation of estimated deaths from China's Great Leap Forward. The website indicates "an estimated 30,000 deaths from famine." Actual scholarly estimates range from 15 to 45 million. Asia for Educators, "KEY POINTS Across East Asia–by Era 20th CENTURY 1950-2000," accessed September, 2022, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main_pop/kpct/kp_1950-2000.htm.

[11] Laura Hein, "Savage irony: The imaginative power of the 'military comfort women' in the 1990s," *Gender and History* 11, no. 2 (1999), 336-372, 343.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Nancy Rose Hunt, "An Acoustic Register, Tenacious Images, and Congolese Scenes of Rape and Repetion," *Cultural Anthropology* 23.2 (2008), 220-253, 230-231.

[14] How to better integrate Asian women's history into curricula is a subject beyond the scope of this article. But there are ample resources that teachers could draw on. One recommended book on women in twentieth century China is Gail Hershatter, *Women and China's Revolutions* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019). Hershatter addresses the issue of sexual violence in wartime (179-182), but in two chapters on "Wartime Women," she also examines women writers, like Xiao Hong and Ding Ling, women as refugees, women as nurses, women as soldiers, and more.

[15] J. Mark Ramseyer, "Contracting for Sex in the Pacific War," *International Review of Law and Economics* 65 (2021), 1-8.

[16] Sam Wineburg, *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 150.

[17] Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "The 'Comfort Women' Issue, Free Speech, and Academic Integrity: A Study Aid," *Asia-Pacific Journal Japan* Focus 19 (2021), https://apjjf.org/2021/5/MorrisSuzuki.html.

[18] Amy Stanley et al., "'Contracting for Sex in the Pacific War': The Case for Retraction on Grounds of Academic Misconduct," *Asia-Pacific Journal Japan Focus* 19 (2021), https://apjjf.org/2021/5/ConcernedScholars.html.

[19] Alexis Duddin, ed., Supplement to Special Issue: Academic Integrity at Stake: The Ramseyer Article - Four Letters, *Asia-Pacific Journal Japan Focus* 19 (2021), https://apjjf.org/2021/5/ToC2.html.

[20] Kim Tŏkchin, "I Have So Much to Say to the Korean Government," in *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*, Keith Howard, ed. (London: Cassel, 1995), 41-49.

[21] Kim Haksun, "Bitter Memories I am Loath to Recall," in Ibid, 32-40. Kim Haksum is depicted in San Francisco's Column of Strength, mentioned earlier, as an elderly woman standing below the memorial's main column.

[22] Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 24.

[23] Peipei Qiu, *Chinese Comfort Women*, 193.

[24] Ibid, 194. For more on debates about the status of comfort women testimony as historical evidence see, for instance, Yoshiko Nozaki, "The 'Comfort Women' Controversy: History and Testimony, *The Asia-Pacific Journal Japan Focus* 3.7 (2005), https://apjjf.org/-Yoshiko-Nozaki/2063/article.html.

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