

Review – The Comfort Women of Singapore

Written by Kristin Hynes

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The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory

By Kevin Blackburn

National University of Singapore Press, 2022

After World War II, women and girls across East and Southeast Asia who had been coerced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military suffered in silence due to the shame of being perceived as “fallen.” It was not until 1991, when South Korea publicly acknowledged their ordeal, that victims in other countries began to come forward as well. These victims, better known by the euphemism “comfort women,” started giving their testimonies and pushed for compensation from Japan. However, while victims in other Asian societies had come forward, Singaporean comfort women remained silent. In *The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory*, Kevin Blackburn examines the effects of the sex industry in Singapore established by the Japanese military during wartime occupation to uncover why Singaporean women remained silent while women from other societies shared their stories.

Blackburn’s work highlights the fact that the use of comfort women was a widespread practice by the Japanese military that affected not only Koreans. In challenging this misconception, Blackburn sheds light on how sexual slavery was used as a weapon of war, affecting women and girls from various Asian countries. Additionally, he delves into the reasons why these victims remained silent for so long, despite the widespread nature of the abuse. Blackburn posits that the reasons behind the silence were multifaceted, but specifically outlines the lack of community support and the social stigma attached to the label of “comfort women.” He also identifies specific factors that deterred Singaporean women from speaking out when women in other countries came forward.

Blackburn emphasizes the ways in which masculinist memories have often obscured or downplayed the experiences of comfort women, leading them to remain silent. He cites C. Sarah Soh, who has argued that Korean comfort women were forced to remain “silent for fear of being seen as ‘sexually defiled women’” (p.13). It is because of these masculinist memories that “women were subordinated and objectified as either ‘pure’ and ‘chaste,’ or ‘fallen’ and ‘defiled’” (p.13). Blackburn then wonders whether a similar ideology exists in Singapore and, if so, if it could have influenced memories of the comfort women there. His analysis of the impact of masculinist memories on the experiences of comfort women demonstrates the need to examine the role of gender ideologies in shaping historical narratives, not only in South Korea but also in other countries, such as Singapore.

Blackburn maintains that these masculinist memories were widespread in Singapore and that these memories contributed to the marginalization of comfort women. One misconception that was perpetuated by Singapore’s founding prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, was that due to the prevalence of Korean comfort women in Singapore, local women were able to keep “their ‘chastity’ during the war” (p.19), unlike Korean women who were considered “fallen.” Lee’s “statement provoked no controversy inside or outside of Singapore” (p.19). The view that Korean comfort women saved the chastity of local Singaporean women echoes an assumption held by the Japanese military, which believed “that without comfort stations, its soldiers would otherwise go on violent sprees raping local women” (p.19). As Blackburn shows, the idea of dishonoring one woman to “save” the chastity of another is rooted in patriarchal attitudes toward women and their bodies. It reflects a belief that a woman’s worth and value are inextricably linked to her sexual purity and that the sexual violation of one woman can somehow protect the honor and virtue of another.

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Blackburn argues that in addition to masculinist memories, another prominent factor was that “the type of organizations that were critical for the comfort women of other countries to speak out were absent in Singapore” (p.140). The absence of these organizations hindered Singaporean comfort women from breaking their long silence and seeking accountability. In South Korea, for example, supportive feminist humanitarian organizations were essential for the “comfort women to publicly recall their memories in a conservative Asian society” (p.140). Blackburn’s argument underscores the significance of social support and the role it plays in enabling survivors to speak out about sexual violence during times of war. As he demonstrates, when survivors of sexual violence feel supported, they become more empowered to share their experiences and seek justice. In the case of Singaporean comfort women, the lack of aiding organizations made it much more challenging to come forward and demand accountability for the sexual violence they suffered.

Moreover, Blackburn suggests that the relatively favorable economic situation of Singaporean women, compared to their counterparts in other countries, could have also played a role in their decision to remain silent about their experiences. In countries such as the Philippines and Malaysia, poverty motivated some survivors to come forward and seek compensation. Blackburn draws attention to Hani Mustafa’s assertion that many Malaysian comfort women lived in poverty, “and compensation would have made a difference in their lives, whereas many Singapore women who were financially better off had little to gain” (p.184) by sharing their stories publicly. This analysis illustrates the importance of considering the economic context in understanding the experiences of comfort women and the factors that contribute to their silence or advocacy.

Although comfort women faced significant barriers to speaking out, memories of the brutality of wartime occupation have persisted. The last few chapters of the book focus on the ways in which these memories have been preserved, such as the conserving of former comfort stations as “dark heritage” sites. There has been more of an effort within Singapore to raise awareness about the local comfort women and the injustices they faced, but as Blackburn notes, “the dwindling number of women who worked in the Japanese military’s sex industry have still chosen to remain silent” (p.176). The negative societal attitudes that they encountered after the war discouraged many of them from sharing their stories, even years later. The continued silence of many survivors brings to light the ongoing challenges and barriers to achieving justice and recognition for their experiences and underscores the need for continued efforts to raise awareness and support for comfort women.

In *The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory*, Blackburn adds to the literature on comfort women and increases the visibility of Singaporean ones. However, since local Singaporean comfort women continue to refuse to give their testimony, much of the book focuses on the non-local women and girls who were in Singapore during the time of Japanese occupation. This may be disappointing for readers looking for a more in-depth exploration of the experiences of Singaporean comfort women specifically. Despite this limitation, Blackburn’s work is still a valuable contribution to the study of comfort women. His research reinforces the transnational nature of the issue and demonstrates how these women and girls were subject to similar patriarchal attitudes in different parts of Asia. The author’s empathy towards these survivors is evident throughout the book, and he presents their stories in a respectful and poignant way. Overall, *The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory* is an insightful read that serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggle for gender equality and justice in Asia.

About the author:

Kristin Hynes is a PhD candidate in International Relations at Florida International University who primarily focuses on East Asia. While she has a wide range of interests in that region, her research has mostly focused on South Korean soft power and tensions between Japan and its neighbors as a result of Japanese imperialism. Her dissertation focuses on postcolonialism and explores parallels between South Korean-Japanese relations and Irish-British relations.

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