

Comfort Women and the Human Rights Documentary

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By Julia Alekseyeva

In the 1990s, the issue of “comfort women” leapt into international consciousness after the democratization of South Korea. Military comfort women, known in Japanese as “*jugun ianfu*,” were used by the Japanese military during its Imperial conquests before and during World War II.

Although the comfort women issue was previously raised in films by leftist filmmakers in Japan and elsewhere, two relatively recent documentary films have brought the issue to international attention.

Both films were helmed by directors who are members of the Asian–North American diaspora, and serve as a linguistic and cultural bridge between two continents. Interestingly, while both films received significant accolades and media attention, they operate on fundamentally different modes.



While Tiffany Hsiung’s *The Apology* (2016) uses a humanitarian appeal to tenderness and affect to illuminate the struggles of three elderly former comfort women, Miki Dezaki’s *Shusenjo: The Main Battleground of the Comfort Woman Issue* (2019) appeals to logic, attempting to provide a more objective account of the contentious issue.

Seen together, the films each provide a vital humanitarian view and analysis of the problem, even while using contrasting approaches, geared towards entirely different audiences.

These different styles and viewpoints are understandable given the complexity of the comfort women issue.

Comfort women spanned the area of Japanese imperial conquests during the Pacific War. Some experts estimate there were as many as 200,000 comfort women. Ⓒ While some worked as prostitutes out of their own free will, many were forcibly coerced.

The term "sex slave"—
"sei dorei" in Japanese—is
frequently used to describe these
women, who could not escape their
stations and return home.

Approximate map of WWII comfort
stations, with locations indicated by
a circle, via the Women's Active Museum
on War and Peace (WAMW) in Tokyo, Japan

Ⓒ Yoshimi Yoshiaki, trans. Suzanné O'Brien, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 93.

Despite the many former soldiers and civilians who remember the comfort women stations, and the testimonials of many former comfort women describing the cruelty and horror of their experiences, legal, certifiable evidence of "coercive recruitment" remains fairly slim.

Given that the Japanese government burned or destroyed approximately 70% of their wartime records (2), however, and given the huge number of circumstantial evidence and testimony, it remains fairly obvious to most researchers that coercive recruitment of comfort women existed despite the erasure of a strict historical document.

Although comfort women were used by the Japanese military since at least 1932, the issue lay relatively dormant for over 50 years. Several important events in the early 1990s launched the issue to the forefront of global human rights:

(2) *Researching Japanese War Crimes: Introductory Essays* (Washington, DC: Nazi War Crimes and Japanese Imperial Government Records Interagency Working Group, 2006), 9.

First, the testimony of former Korean comfort woman Kim Hak Sun shocked East Asia in 1991. She demanded that Japan take responsibility for its war crimes. As the only person to attach her name to a lawsuit, she became emblematic of the comfort women struggle.



In addition, in January 1992, historian Yoshiaki Yoshiaki reported his discovery of documents in the Self-Defense Ministry archives which confirmed that the Imperial Army had

systematically monitored, if not directly managed, the comfort stations. A large number of publications on the issue then followed. (3)



Finally, a series of hearings concerning comfort women began at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in 1992. It grew from a December 1991 class action suit to an international human rights issue, supported by legal experts and feminist activists worldwide. (4)

As the iconoclastic feminist historian Ueno Chizuko contends, this sudden global interest in comfort women was not because women suddenly remembered a forgotten past, but because women's support groups began to exist in South Korea only in the late 1980s, after many years of brutal military dictatorships.

(3) Jordan Sand, "Introduction," *History and Memory* II, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1999), 119.

(4) Chunghee Sarah Soh, "Prostitutes versus Sex Slaves: The Politics of Representing the 'Comfort Women'" in Margaret Stetz and Bonnie B.C. Oh, eds, *Legacies of the Comfort Women of World War II* (Armonk NY: ME Sharpe, 2000), 69.



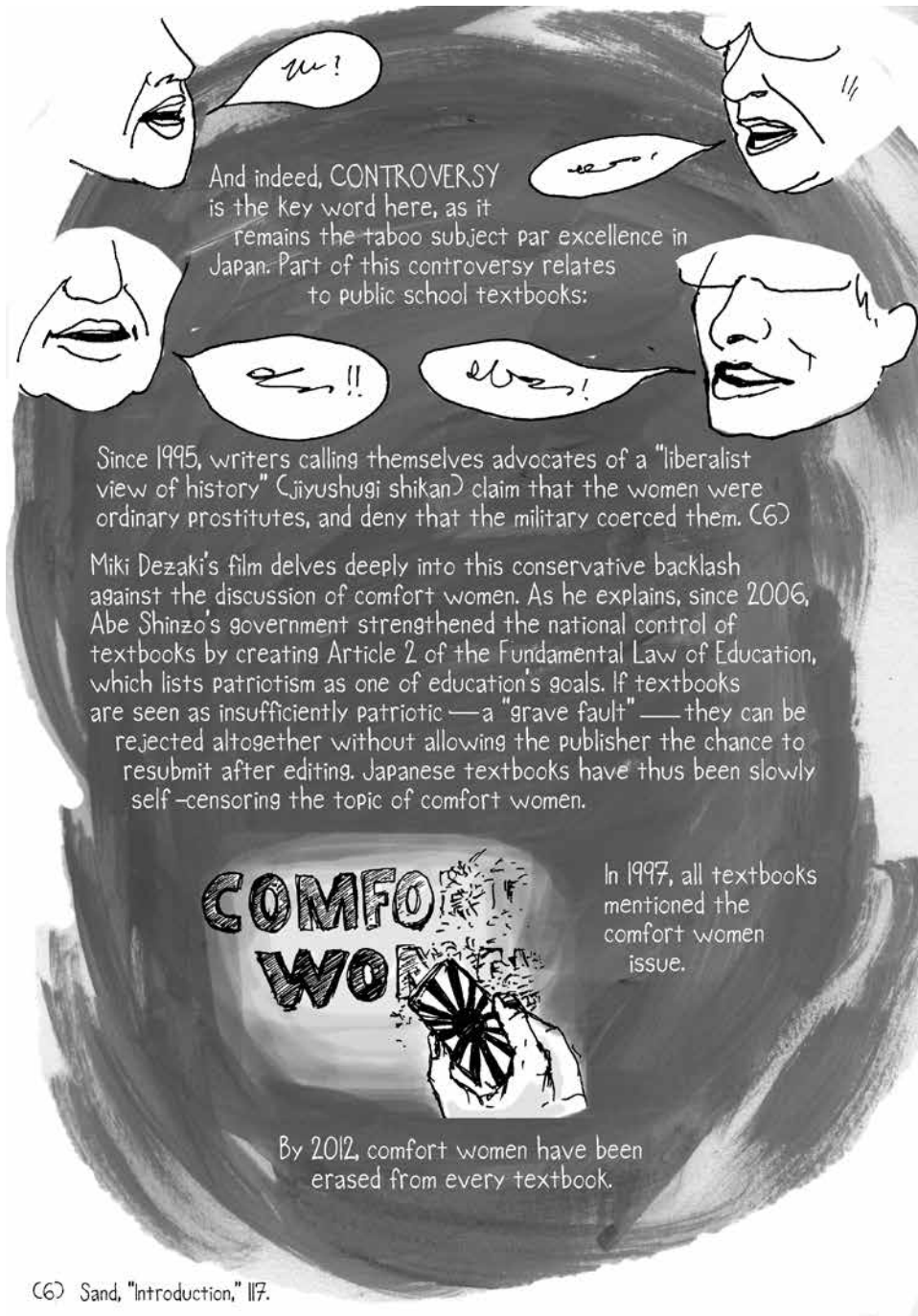
As Ueno asks:

What kept them silent for fifty years? The answer plainly is that the crime continued, in the present tense, for that half-century period. There are probably still numerous women who have not come forward. It goes without saying that patriarchy in Japan and Korea has played the greatest role of all in perpetuating the crime.

It is mistaken to say it took them as long as fifty years. Rather, the accusation was only possible after those fifty years. (5)

In fact, the issue continues to be, largely, quite difficult to discuss, especially in Japan. The Woman's Active Museum for Peace (WAMP) in Tokyo, despite being a beautifully curated, thoughtful, and extraordinarily detailed museum highlighting the struggles of comfort women, is held in a rather unassuming building, with little advertising. When I visited in 2015, I was shocked by how secret the museum seems — how jam-packed with information and testimony, and how camouflaged its exterior (including the euphemistic title), as if its founders have courted enough controversy.

(5) Ueno Chizuko, "The Politics of Memory: Nation, Individual and Self" in *History and Memory* 11, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1999), 137.



Dezaki's film walks the viewer through the logistics of the comfort women question. The film actually centers textbook "revisionist" voices in Japan, and those who deny that comfort women were forcibly coerced. He also highlights Americans, such as the YouTube personality "Texas Daddy," who support conservative Japanese voices and lend credence and a certain bizarre authority to their claims.



The film appears to start from a neutral stance and then uses historical arguments to break the arguments of "denialists" one by one.

Dezaki has had success screening his film in both East Asia and North America; in fact, he noted that the style of the film was able to convince moviegoers in Japan especially well because of its grounding in a thorough investigation of "proof" and historical realities. Its attempt to foreground logic, and to act as its own "devil's advocate" by providing a countervailing argument, tends to read as measured and thoughtful for a Japanese audience. (7)



(7) Miki Dezaki, Q & A after screening of *Shusenjo* at the Bryn Mawr Film Institute in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, March 4, 2020.

On the other hand, Tiffany Hsiung's film *The Apology* appeals to audiences largely unfamiliar with the comfort women struggle, as well as those who are already critical of Japan's wartime atrocities.

It follows the lives of three extremely old "grandmothers" in different countries, all of whom suffered through the war as comfort women:

Adela Reyes Barroquillo, from the Philippines



Gil Won-OK from South Korea



and Cao Hei Mao from
mainland China.

The film emphasizes the testimonies of these grandmothers, most of whom were unable to have biological children because their experiences rendered them sterile. The film features extensive close ups of their fragile bodies: hands, mouth, feet.



Tiffany Hsiung noted that she told the grandmothers' stories out of frustration:



I felt frustrated by the fact that they had to come to a room full of strangers... having to tell their story in a way where it almost felt unsafe for them.

And speak about atrocities and only that, and not ever really knowing who they are as people. (8)

Hsiung and Dezaki's films both include footage of the director speaking to their subjects. In both, this lends a feeling of authenticity and verisimilitude. They balance each other well: where Hsiung's film shows deep sympathy and tenderness, Dezaki demonstrates the intricacies of the legal process, providing essential background.

(8) Tiffany Hsiung, quoted in "War Does Not Just End: The Survivors of World War II Sex Slavery Demanding to Be Heard," The Daily Beast, June 10, 2017.

While both films have been acclaimed by critics, it is important to note that Dezaki's Japan-oriented film has been in the midst of a legal battle since 2019. Despite purposely shying away from an overly emotional rendering of the comfort women issue, five people — Nobukatsu Fujicka, Tony Marano ("Texas Daddy"), Shunichi Fujiki (Texas Daddy's manager), Yamamoto Yumiko, and Kent Gilbert — filed a lawsuit against Dezaki and his distributor, Tofoo Films, claiming that Dezaki deceived and defamed them.



The legal process is sure to be long and arduous; Dezaki notes that Japanese courts are known to be quite slow, and that resolving the case could take 5, even 10 years. The result of this lawsuit, however, is immensely important. (9)

As Dezaki describes:



This case... could set a precedent for future documentary films on controversial topics and copyright law in Japan.

Losing this lawsuit to these people could be very damaging to the comfort women issue in Japan. Whenever these neo-nationalists win any kind of lawsuit or force a newspaper like Asahi to apologize for old articles, they frame it in the media as proof that the whole comfort women issue is a lie. Even if we lost on one of the smaller claims, I'm sure they would spin the story to mean that the whole film is discredited and therefore the comfort women issue is a lie.

(9) Miki Dezaki, email correspondence, printed with permission, Dec 9–10, 2020.

Thus, despite crafting a film with an abundance of views from both sides of the aisle of Japanese politics, Dezaki continues to be hounded by lawsuits and the fear of censorship.

In mid November 2020, a link to a trailer of *Shusenjo* was removed by Facebook for "violating community standards" for "adult nudity and sexual activity," ostensibly because of a complaint made by a right-wing user.

Even I was the recipient of abuse from a right-wing troll on Twitter, who commented on a post I made about the writing and drawing of this very article, citing wartime documents (often ones also discussed in Dezaki's film) which "prove" that comfort women were prostitutes, not "sex slaves."

The issue, indeed, continues to be a difficult one.



If even Dezaki's logic-oriented approach is met with such censorship and harassment, and if any discussion of the comfort women issue results in relentless attacks from "liberalists," "reformists," and those on the right-wing in any society, it is fair to say that the alleged defenders of "free speech" are far closer to fascism than they claim.

As both Hsiung and Dezaki's films point out, we are swiftly approaching a world in which no living comfort women remain: a world in which Japan's horrific wartime atrocities, unaddressed and unfronted, are relegated indefinitely into the dustbin of history.



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