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Japan's feminist reckoning

In World War II, the Japanese Army forced women and girls into sexual slavery. With 'Me too' gaining momentum, it's time to reckon with the past

On 23 January 2012, I sat in front of the Japanese Embassy in London, my skin and kimono coated entirely with a thick layer of bronze water-based acrylic paint, and my mouth covered with masking tape. I was a living 'statue' of a Japanese 'comfort woman' – women and girls forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army before and during World War II – in an attempt to speak about their silencing.

'Comfort women' are an example of how prevalent some postcolonial problems in East Asia still are. The Japanese government not only claims that the issue is 'resolved finally and irreversibly' with the agreement reached at the 2015 meeting between the Japanese and South Korean foreign ministers, it also upholds that the 'forceful taking away' of women by the Japanese military and government authorities cannot be confirmed in any historical documents. The government therefore claims that the expression 'sex slaves' contradicts the facts and should not be used.

Now, the Japanese government even opposes erecting commemorative statues in various countries – and intervenes when statues or other artworks related to wartime atrocities are shown in exhibitions, as in the case of the exhibition *After: Freedom of Expression?* at the Aichi Triennale in 2019.

The violence of Japanese imperialism

Furthermore, historical revisionists in Japan have claimed that 'comfort women' were merely prostitutes, and as prostitution was legal in pre-war Japan, there is nothing wrong about military brothels. According to this logic, there is no need to offer compensation and/or apologies. The truth, however, is that 'comfort women' were taken abroad, to the front lines, and did not have the freedom to leave at will, a situation that even under the laws of pre-war Japan constituted slavery – and thus was illegal.

With my performance, I protested specifically the Japanese government's demand to remove the so-called 'Statue of Peace', a memorial to Korean 'comfort women' created in 2011 by the artist duo Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung and placed opposite the Japanese embassy in Seoul.

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Moreover, I tried to draw attention to the often overlooked fact that the violence of Japanese imperialism was not limited to its colonies. Around 10 per cent of 'comfort women' were Japanese. Most of them were women who had been sold to geisha houses and brothels, and they knew they were to provide sex to the soldiers. The existence of Japanese 'comfort women' illustrates the structures of oppression within Japan – as well as in its colonies – wherein those most vulnerable in terms of gender and class were violated and abused to the advantage of the colonial order.

Transnational collaborative art

After the first performance in front of the Japanese Embassy in London, I performed the work again at Tokyo's Yasukuni shrine and the Japanese Parliament in the same year. Then in 2018, I performed it in collaboration with Tomorrow Girls Troop, 'a fourth-wave, feminist, social art collective, fighting for equality of all sexes and genders in East Asia'.

The collaboration with Tomorrow Girls Troop was crucial in order to place the performance within a transnational feminist framework. The group's website describes our collective performance as follows: 'The two artists' performances aim to overcome the nationalism strongly engraved in the issue, and to seek solidarity beyond the boundaries between the nations in the past and the present.'

This was also my attempt to prevent the wider issue of 'comfort women' from being reduced to a bilateral issue between the governments of Japan and Korea. I do not intend to belittle or relativise the suffering caused by Japan's colonisation of Korea. But I do believe that the issue of 'comfort women' has been over-simplified and it ignores the fact that social class and, of course, gender also play a major role here. This dangerous simplification has contributed to younger Japanese people avoiding any discussion of 'comfort women' altogether. For them, it has simply become a historical matter that should be solved by the governments of Japan and Korea.

However, as the ‘Me too’ movement gained momentum internationally in recent years, sexual violence against women has finally become a subject of political debate in Japan. This makes it ever more important to present the issue of ‘comfort women’ in a way that is relevant for Japanese society today: not only as a historical issue but as a violation of the human rights of women. This is precisely where art and culture – and the transnational collaboration of women in East Asia and beyond – come into play.



Yoshiko Shimada
Tokyo

Dr Yoshiko Shimada is a visual artist, art historian and feminist activist based in Japan. She lectures on feminism and art in the postwar Japan at College of Arts and Sciences, The University of Tokyo.