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History of U. S. Camptown Prostitution in South Korea and Challenges of Women's Oral History

Introduction

U.S. military camptown prostitution recently became visible in the public arena in South Korea. In July 25, 2014, there was a lawsuit filed by 112 former prostitutes in U.S. military bases under the name of military 'comfort women' in U.S. camptowns. It was reported that the lawsuit would be against Korean national government which condoned, supported, and regulated U.S. military prostitution. Those who filed the lawsuit in a media conference argued that because their basic human rights were violated through the system, the Korean government should recognize the historical fact, take legal responsibility, compensate financially, and apologize to them for its historical misconducts. Many people in South Korea wondered who they are, how they are different from Japanese military 'comfort women,' and how they can exist despite the anti-prostitution law.

The military camptown in Korea is a legacy of colonialism and a symbol of national tragedy and insecurity in Korean history. Since September 1945 when U.S. troops arrived in Korean peninsula to transfer power from the Japanese colonial empire, the presence of American soldiers along with military bases has not been a peculiar feature of Korean society. The number of U.S. bases and military facilities has fluctuated and is dependent upon what counts as a military base, when it is investigated, and by whom. Despite the change in the number of facilities as the political atmosphere has changed over time, U.S. troops in South Korea had historically numbered no less than 37,000 until 2013. Given that Korea technically remains in a state of war, the number of U.S soldiers may not be so striking.

However, the presence of camptown prostitutes has been forced out of Korean people's consciousness and left behind official national history for a long time. Korean people have long treated them as pariah, dirty trash, and/or fallen women, calling them highly derogatory names such as *yanggalbo* (Western whore) and *yanggongju* (Western princess), but anyone has officially talked about them in the public.

The purpose of this paper is to rewrite Korean modern history about U.S. military camptown through revealing hidden stories of women's experiences. Based upon ethnographic research for over 10 years, multiple methods of gathering information and analysis are employed, including archival research, participant observation, oral life history, and textual analysis.

According to Sandra Harding (1987), a research method is "a technique for (or way of proceeding in) gathering evidence" (2). Through such evidence-gathering techniques, we carried out varied methods such as "listening to (or interrogating) informants, observing behavior, or examining historical traces and records" that androcentric researchers have used (Ibid. 2). However, for feminists, the matter is not just about the use of technique itself to be identified as distinctive features of feminist research, but instead, "new uses" of familiar

research techniques for the transformation of androcentric academic fields in specific and society as a whole. That is, the question is how existing theoretical approaches are designed for women and applied to understand women's experiences to legitimate women's knowledge production.

Particularly for us, inspirations and insights of feminist oral history sheds light on the way of our journey as feminist researcher and activist. Feminist oral history to historicize women's experiences is not just a means of illuminating hidden, marginalized, and/or distorted women's experiences in official androcentric history, but also a process of reevaluating historical as well as social standards of signification of gender and sexuality from feminist perspectives. Therefore, writing her-story is inevitably a way to challenge the "History" as revising and rewrite "History" (Reinharz, 1992: 134; Scott, 1999: 17), which led to reconstruction of alternative histories and societies. More importantly, we believe that feminist oral history should be a part of feminist politics because oral history as a process of collaborative generation of knowledge is not only an academic work but also political activism in terms of contributing to improvement of our knowledge and at the same time to empowerment to the vulnerable, underprivileged, and disadvantaged (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011: 133; Armitage & Gluck, 2006: 75). This paper is a product of our activist involvement in the field of U.S camptowns since 2003 and empathetic communications with former prostitutes in it. Nonetheless, it is us who should take responsibility of the final re-representation of women's experiences.

Legacies of the Korean War (1950-1960): *Tacit Permission* and Only Choice for Survival

The Korean War ended in cease-fire—not a peace treaty—in 1953 and left a harsh legacy in its wake. Along with the division of a previously sovereign nation, the war resulted in roughly \$3 billion in property damage, massive destruction of infrastructure, including industrial factories and equipment, extreme privation, and more than four million casualties as well as approximately 30,000 widows. As Cumings (1997) recalls, "South Korea in the 1950s was a terribly depressing place, where extreme privation and degradation touched everyone. Cadres of orphans ran through the streets, forming little protective and predatory bands of ten or fifteen; beggars with every affliction or war injury importuned anyone with a wallet, often traveling in bunches of maimed or starved adults holding children or babies" (303). The miserable experiences resulted in the long-term psychological as well as physical traumas to all Korean people.

[It was in the middle of the night and] my arms must've been this tiny. The ground was covered in all these broken pieces of ice and I could feel it all round my feet and ankles. I asked my brother where we were going without mommy and daddy and he said that it was time to escape; that *we had to go*. I ask why and he goes, 'We're gonna die, don't you see all these people hurt?' ... That's how I left ... It snowed like hell, too, that day. Your feet just sink every time you take a step. Sometimes we follow the lights way over there and it's just so cold. I don't know, maybe the tires were flat. The North Korean army had probably lit the fire and then ran away. We kept wishing it was a town but we had to just keep walking if we didn't find one cause we had to go quickly no matter what...*we were all starving the entire time...* (9) (emphasis mine)

Most women in U.S. camptowns feel very painful whenever they recall their childhood memories in the 1950s. It was “just all bad memories [during childhood]” and they ask themselves “what is bringing all that back for?” (12)

Another legacy of the Korean War is the stabilization and relative permanence of the wartime U.S. military camptowns. As U.S. camptowns became widespread, military prostitution began to be officially organized into an R & R system after the U.S.-ROK (Republic of Korea) Mutual Defense Treaty (effective November 1954) (Moon K 1997, 27). In the 1950s, eighteen camptowns were formed throughout Korea in symbiotic relationship with U.S. military bases (MBC 2003).

Such national and social situation forced many women, who had lost families and homes and suffered from severe poverty, to make the choice of prostitution on or near a U.S. military base. Regardless of their education levels or family background (Chosun Ilbo 27 July, 1953), “half-ton trucks full of pathetic women careened onto military bases for the weekend” (Cumings 1997, 303).

I was born in a village deep in the mountains. My mother died after she had me, and after that my father spent all his money drinking and gambling so he decided to move to a different town. Before moving there, he got a new wife and she brought her daughter...My father was doing some type of repair work for the train station at the time, and it was hard to survive just on that job, so he sent me to a different family a little after the Korean War... *At 16*, I think, I worked as a hostess at a tavern, and it was a place where women sell their bodies at night...uh... so many American soldiers coming and going around the place near the railroad at night. I ask what it was, and they say that’s where *yangsaekshi* (western brides) live over there...I thought if *I had to sleep with someone for money*, it’d better be Yankees so I borrowed money from here and there and went to that town, where the *yeangsaeshi* live. (5)

Even though some women were unwillingly forced to prostitution or induced by deceit, others could not help choosing the work in camptowns in order to survive. For women in military prostitution, therefore, the stereotypical dichotomy between coercion and voluntary is meaningless and unjust.

I have to do what I have to do to eat, right? *I was hungry and I went there for a while in the end...* And what do you do once you’re there? ...*Got no choice, so started the life there.* (1)

The term “comfort women” (*wianbu*) to refer to military prostitutes serving American soldiers signals the widespread acceptance of camptown prostitution as an inevitable means to entertain foreign soldiers, actually deeply embedded in Korean history. This term, “comfort women” was commonly used in newspaper articles throughout the 1950s along with the phrases as “prostitutes catering to UN soldiers” and terms like *yanggongju* (western princesses), *yangsaeksi* (western bride), *yanggalbo* (western whore), and/or “UN madams.”

This usage continued during the 1960s and 1970s when camptown prostitution became more consolidated apart from non-U.S. military prostitution.

The Korean government's policy on prostitution reflected its public's perspectives on prostitution, which was regarded as a necessary means to feed Korea's impoverished population. Although virtual as well as systematic coalition between the two countries seemed absent in the early 1950s, construction of U.S. bases and the increase in military prostitution after the Korean War could not have taken place without the *tacit permission* from the Korean government. Periodic health examinations, mostly targeting camptown prostitutes and prostitutes who were arrested by the police periodic raids (Yi 2004a, 240), and the issuance of health cards to prostitutes (McNinch 1954, 147) in these areas suggest that the Korean government cooperation with the U.S. military to protect American soldiers from VD. Once safety and control over VD was guaranteed in accordance with consolidation of prostitution, the USFK permitted its soldiers to stay out of the barracks in 1957, which brought about the rapid growth of camptown prostitution (Kim 1980, 274).

In principle, prostitution was illegal, but the government did not in any material way attempt to enforce Korea's own anti-prostitution laws. This contradiction of the illegality of prostitution in principle with the acceptance of camptown prostitution in practice has remained a lasting feature of the U.S.-Korea military alliance.

Government *Permissive Promotion* and Heyday of Camptown Prostitution (1961-1970)

The ascendance of Park Chung Hee's junta through the military coup in May 1961 brought significant changes in camptown prostitution through a shift in policy from *tacit permission* to *permissive promotion*. Based upon the previous government policy on prostitution, the Park Jung Hee regime intensified the consolidation and development of *camptown* with more systematic institutions, reflecting its priorities for state-building, national security, and economic development interlocked with utilizing women's labor and sexuality in the attainment of these goals. Throughout the 1960s, camptown prostitution was a significant source of foreign currency, zealously pursued by the Korean government, which aggressively directed economic growth based upon the more organized structures that emerged in the years immediately prior to the coup (Sin 1970; Söng and Chang 1970). These structures included, so-called *special districts*, the *Tourism Promotion Law*, and the *Korean American Friendship Society* (KAFS).

(Many sentences skipped)

Due to Korean government support and the U.S. military's unwillingness to get involved in Korean domestic concerns, U.S. military camptowns enjoyed their heyday in the 1960s. The rapid development of camptowns turned farming villages outside Seoul into "commercial districts of *panjatjips*" (literally, houses made of boards) (Kim 1980, 288), filled with clubs, bars, convenient stores, pawn shops, barber shops, tailor shops, photo and portrait shops, and drug stores catering to American soldiers. With the explosive growth of military prostitution, young girls mainly from the countryside began to flock to camptowns. It is said that there was one prostitute per two or three American soldiers in camptowns in the 1960s

(Pok 1994, 179). Many women in camptowns testified that the number of women was as almost same as that of soldiers, or was few less than that.

The camp [in Jincheon] had maybe two hundred soldiers and there were not a hundred, but over seventy to eighty [girls], I think.... Here [in Anjeong-ri] had like over a thousand, yeah, the girls, I came here back then it was over a thousand. (1)

I heard there were two thousand American soldiers on this camp, and there were many girls, like as many [as the soldiers]. There must've been just a few hundred less than two thousand.

To the Korean government, the so-called “camptown economy” or “PX economy” was the origin of the influx of U.S. dollars into the South Korean economy, which would encourage foreign investment and, with it, the importation of the technologies of industrialization (Sin 1970, 30). Camptown prostitution as a special tourism industry was regarded as start-up capital to enable the nation to earn foreign currency. In general, U.S. troops contributed 25% of South Korea’s GNP in 1960s (Moon K. 1997, 44) and roughly 46,000 Korean workers in camptowns earned \$70 million in 1969 alone (Söng and Chang, 1970, 134).

You feel like a king when you go to the PX. You know, we didn't work on Sundays and Saturdays... we weren't married so we waited outside and the soldiers go buy stuff at the PX, they tell us they'd get everything we want and they get us those.... Then we'd get a big pile of things and eat that for half a month or a couple of weeks.

(Q: Didn't people sell those? I hear there were people trying to buy)

There were many of those traders for Yankee things. Like ‘This and that, less money for you, *sell the PX stuff if you get more.*’ If the coffee is ten bucks they'd give fifteen or thirteen and that much is profit, they did the math about how much comes out of it. So there were traders... Ah... *dollars were so expensive, you know.* (14)

People in the town and everyone in Korea lived off the money these girls made. (14)

Such economic significance of camptown prostitution in the 1960s was well reflected in a series of concerned responses to the impending withdrawal of American troops in 1970 in the aftermath of the Nixon Doctrine proclaimed in Guam in July 1969, as discussed later.

Active Support and Tight Control for National Interests (1970-1980)

The Nixon Doctrine, combined with Park’s desire to stay in power, resulted in explicit government involvement in running and controlling camptown prostitution. Particularly, as the Korean government’s yearning for foreign currency utilizing women’s bodies began to be

manifest, control over U.S. camptown prostitutes became increasingly tighten with the shift in emphasis of policy from *permissive promotion* to *active support*.

The Nixon doctrine was proclaimed in Guam in July 1969, clearly signaling that the U.S. would reduce its involvement in other nation's affairs. For South Korea, this meant the rapid withdrawal of one-third of U.S. troops by the end of 1971 (Lone and McCormack 1993, 148). Koreans expressed fear that "United States would abandon infant-like Korea," which reminded Koreans of the tragic situation prior to the Korean War (Kim 1970, *Sindong-a* (September), 140).

Yet, the fear was not just about national security but also about the national economy. As the Department of Tourism and Transportation of Kyōnggi Province estimated in 1970, the so-called "western princesses" earned \$8 million annually, and each of these women supported an average of four additional family members. Thus, the withdrawal of one American soldier would affect not only prostitutes and their families, but also local business people who ran dry cleaning and laundry shops, hair salons, and convenience stores (Sōng and Chang, 1970, 131).

Such sense of crisis caused the Korean government's reconceptualization of camptown prostitution not only as an integral part of "national economic growth," but also as "self-reliant national defense" (*chaju kukbang*) that had been widely promulgated since at least 1971.

To the U.S. military, "safe" amenities were in need to entertain its troops stationed near the DMZ, which were regarded as doing "hazardous duty" (*Washington Post* 4 April, 1968). And soldier's sexual behavior was regarded as "a sphere of personal autonomy over which the military held very little rightful authority" (Yom 2004, 68). Therefore, VD was a serious and urgent problem to be controlled, which threatened military efficiency and soldiers' health. The USFK kept strongly pushed the Korean government to take official responsibility and accountability for camptown prostitution. Due to the Nixon Doctrine and subsequent reduction of U.S. troops in Korea, the Korean government seemed to do no more than bow to events beyond its reach. As a result, the so-called "Camptown Purification Movement" was inaugurated in the guise of American and South Korean national interests.

On December 22, 1971, Park ordered the establishment of the BCCUC (Base Community Clean-Up Committee, namely "Purification Movement" in Korean) and the formulation of "purification policies" for U.S. military camp areas (Moon K. 1997, 75-76). The BCCUC's VD prevention program consisted of increasing the registration of women, enforcement of regular VD examinations for the women, improved examination and treatment techniques, construction and renovations of VD clinics and detention centers (for infected women), efforts to reduce the numbers of streetwalkers, and cooperation with U.S. military authorities on "contact identification" (Ibid., 97).

Called for patriotic service through selling sex, women became subject to intensive government control and indoctrinated in intensive education regarding "good conduct" and proper "etiquette" to induce more G.I.s. In the so-called "education class" held in either at local government office or at health center, the importance to improve women's behavior and to prevent VD was emphasized.

[In the early 1970s] maybe it was *from the county office*... maybe it was by the assembly members... they rented the club storage room for a bit, like an hour or two.... (Q: What was it about?) *They told us to be cautious, that we have to be nice to the American soldiers and be clean when we're in contact with them.* (14)

When we were working at the club, *an assemblyman said that he felt sorry for us because we gained foreign currency*. He said we worked so hard and saved the country by earning foreign currency, and felt bad for us. He told us the mayor's wife said *"These sisters save the country and make foreign currency so they can get some help here and there. Don't get weak and live with a pride."* (1)

The rhetoric to "live with a pride" and the hypocritical label of "personal ambassador" or "patriot" could not eliminate or enhance their pariah-like status. Rather, sever control over women's bodies and psychological isolation as well as physical separation from residential areas became more intensified. In accordance with the intensified control over VD, all women working in clubs were required to take a VD test every week or twice a week and to carry a VD identification card. According to a former prostitute, any Korean woman with a GI was required to carry a VD identification card unless she was married and had a dependent's card. If she was still working in a club after marriage, she must have the VD identification card issued by a government-supported VD clinic. Moreover, twice a month, base personnel, Korean authorities, and the Civilian Military Operations (GMO) went on VD spot checks. They stopped women on the street to check their VD identification cards. According to a formal prostitute, "CP guys would go around and *take the ones without a health card* (11)." If a woman did not have the card with her at the spot, she was taken to the police office and got a summary conviction. If she could not afford to pay the fine, she was imprisoned for five days or a week. If she turned out to be affected, she had to be imprisoned until complete recovery. Most women remember that the regular health check and enforced imprisonment in the health center were the hardest experiences.

The health center checkup was the hardest...The weekly test...with the legs open and the machine in, putting ointment in there like picking ears... I hated it the most. You'd just go up there and the men, it was Korean men who did it. If you had a disease then they'd take you in... in P'yöngt'aek... to a place like a health center and I also saw American soldiers there too...They give medicine and all, for days... like half a month. Now they know it gets you tired, the penicillin was so strong and awful then. Gave a shot twice a day, and you have no idea how big those needles were. It hurts after getting one. They gave more only to Korean girls. It's supposed to be just this much... if you get it wrong, you should be lying in bed for days and can't walk around. (14)

In addition, institution of the "volunteer army system" which began in the U.S. military in 1974 significantly changed the racial and socioeconomic characteristics of military personnel (Sin 1987, 270). Bok (1994) observed that "American service men were spending less money and enjoying more drugs instead of alcohols...and many of them were blacks...there were few college-graduated soldiers" (221-222). Accompanied by the increased number of Black soldiers, clubs and bars in camptowns were physically separated by race. Such racist division resulted in split among women as well: black brides vs. white brides. American racist thoughts and attitudes permeated Korean civilians and prostitutes in camptowns which led to prejudice and discrimination against black people, even though lots of people knew that "blacks are kinda nice" (13) and even "loyal (to women)" (1).

The girls divided, too. Girls for the black only do blacks and girls for the

white only do whites.... Blacks don't come to white clubs, and whites don't go to black clubs. White guys don't go to black clubs cause they're scary. Ah, but black guys say white guys are pigs or something... People go and say, 'Wow, blacks! Oh, so nasty.' Yeah, even the same Korean girls are different, a lot different. (1-2)

For women, such changes meant worsened environments of camptown as a daily living place. As price of prostitution was reduced, women's working condition became tough. One former prostitute recollects that she was like a "dollar making machine" those days.

It was cheap. So, we did multiple times every day. We're just dollar making machines. That sex, it's not even prostitution, just money printers.... The money we got for it was like a couple of dollars for what it is now. (9)

In addition, repeated violent crimes including sexual violence and even murder of U.S. soldiers against Korean prostitutes and frequent fights between U.S. soldiers and Korean residents as well as between black U.S. servicemen and their white colleagues could be easily observed in camptowns (Chosun Ilbo 9 July, 1971; 14 July, 1971). Such daily incidents had been neither noticed nor properly publicized in the media, but vividly embedded in women's bodies and memories. Women's everyday lives in it were full of "dreadful terrors" (Kim 1995, 10).

A while ago in this camp, a U.S. soldier choked a Korean woman, somebody found her body in the mountains under a rock... many were killed. I heard there were many homicide cases long ago, so there were many bodies in the mountains. (11)

The helicopters were going round and round. I was going to the mountains and saw a helicopter flying so low. I wondered why it was so low... I heard they were looking for a dead girl's body. (10)

As such, the Korean government successfully ghettoized U.S. camptown as "buffering zones or walls blocking Americans from entering Korean society and blocking normal Koreans from interacting with Americans" (Moon 1997, 178), and camptown prostitution has long been major means for national security and economic growth. On the other hand, due to the Korean government active support for camptown prostitution to ensure U.S. soldiers' safety, camptowns became a "Sexual Paradise" for G.I.s, which has been an "open secret," as Strategy Page reported as follows: "For half a century, duty in South Korea was officially considered a hardship tour. The one bright spot was the inexpensive and widely available prostitution. This was a dirty little secret, but troops who ended up in South Korea quickly found out about it, and enthusiastically enjoyed themselves" (Strategy Page 19 November, 2004).

Women's Tactical Strategy and Resistance for Survival

As military prostitution was consolidated in specific geographical areas separated from ordinary residential areas and systematically organized as an integral part of national security and economic growth, women in camptowns became increasingly subject to collective

control, losing autonomy. Yet, they were neither helpless victims of national interests nor ignorant poor women. According to a former prostitute, *yanggongju* (Western princess) councils provided women with collective power of negotiation with pimps, clients of U.S. soldiers, or the government, playing a key role to “help themselves out” on a daily base (*Chosun Ilbo* 27 June, 1962; 15 August, 1962). In Pup’yŏng, for example, some 150 “comfort women dealing with American troops” protested against the strict restriction on their access to enlisted men’s clubs and demanded the improvement of their treatment by the U.S. military (*Chosun Ilbo* 23 August, 1960). Another protest in May 1971 occurred in P’yŏngt’aek, which was against GI’s efforts to cut their rates for sex, exemplifies how military prostitutes staged demonstrations on behalf of their interest (Kim 2005, 129). In addition, about two hundred prostitutes were carrying sticks to demonstrate outside [Camp Ames] and to demand immediate arrest of a GI alleged to have murdered a prostitute on July 16, 1971 (Moon K. 1998, 159). As such, when women in camptowns felt their basic human rights are threatened or violated, they were willing to take actions. Actively waging protests, some women voiced their grievances against abusive pimps or U.S. clients.

Then who’s gonna carry the bier? The chairman went around to make people carry it. We carried it three times. It was clear that American soldiers killed them... but there needed to be a witness who saw it... We gave three or four day long funerals. We buried the bodies on the mountain... we protested several days... but there was no evidence. These days you can talk about it without evidence. (14).

Another noteworthy aspect in camptowns was the interracial marriage between American G.I.s and Korean prostitutes. Even though the tendency had not been new since 1950s, the enactment of the Act of April 7, 1970, in particular, caused the rapid growth of the total number of Korean women admitted to U.S. as wives or spouses-to-be of U.S. citizens increased rapidly (Sin 1987, 251). A Korean journal estimated that one out of six military prostitutes managed interracial marriage with G.I.s in the 1970s, based upon the contemporary record of 3000 interracial marriages per year (*Mal* 26, 109).

Actually, cohabitation of prostitutes with American soldiers has been a significant figure in military camptowns. Because of the long-term nature of U.S. troop deployment in South Korea, many camptown prostitutes cohabited with American soldiers as if they were legally married. Through the stable relationships, women could stop working in bars and clubs and get monthly living expenses from their partners. Moreover, for women, cohabitation meant a relief from stressful daily dealings with customers and pimps, and opened a possibility of real marriage and immigration to the U.S as military spouses.

Of course, living together is way better, much less tiring. He had to go after seven or eight months. After living together for several months he got attached to me, so he asked me to marry him and move to America. (14)

As one former prostitute asked to us, “why not? If the [exclusive] relationship was the only way to get to America for me who have no hope in this country, and if they took care of me. Why not?” Therefore, the considerable number of interracial cohabitations and marriages paradoxically shows Korea’s ostracism of and oppressive environment against military prostitutes, who increasingly had no place to return.

Interestingly, many women testified that American soldiers treated women as “respected” partners as providing highly valued goods, and were even “kinder” and “better than Korean men” as they did not care about the women’s backgrounds. In many cases, therefore, women’s relationships with American soldiers were not that different from those of ordinary lovers. As crossing boundaries between official marriage and cohabitation, between romantic relationship and prostitution, and transgressing our normative notions of family, nation, and sexuality, women in camptown actively sought to make their lives better.

The black guy, an American soldier...*we were young*, so we were wearing bikinis on the roof, putting stuff on for tanning. *We’d play the music and drink while tanning when we hang out on the roof...*we hung out together drinking and all, then *he gave me the watch* with jewels on top to ask for marriage. It was like crystals all over it...*That’s how he became the father of my child.* (5)

Even though three-quarters of marriages between Korean women and U.S. servicemen end in divorce, and seventy percent of such marriages are abusive, and thus many women ended up working as prostitutes in U.S. massage parlors (Hey 1999, 2), and even though many women left behind in Korea with mixed-blood children and should endure community discrimination, women in camptowns took risks to realize the only hope to leave their abusive community and nation.