

The Politics of Depicting the ‘Uncomfortable’ History of ‘Comfort Women’

*“What was inflicted on these women was far beyond moral, intellectual, and legal wrongs that can simply be condemned in sermons, lectures and courts. It was a violation of human spirits, both individual and collective. The evil performed with the shameless justification of “comforting” soldiers in a brutal war is the common grief of humanity that should be felt and mourned.”*¹ — *Director of Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women*, Dai Sil Kim-Gibson.

The “unspeakable atrocities” inflicted on “comfort women”—the estimated 50,000 to 200,000 Phillipino, Chinese and primarily Korean young unmarried women sexually enslaved by the Imperial Japanese Army in the colonial past—have been systematically silenced and institutionally minimised in the postcolonial present.²³ This essay will outline the controversial history of comfort women in order to analyse how the stylised depictions of temporality and spirituality in the ground-breaking docudramas, *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women* (Kim-Gibson, South Korea, 1998) (*Silence Broken*) and *Spirits’ Homecoming, Unfinished Story* (Jung-lae, South Korea, 2016) (*Spirits’ Homecoming*) resists the revisionist stance imposed by the Japanese government and challenges the complicity of South Korean leadership. It should also be noted that the term “grandmas” will be used out of respect for the elderly surviving activists, as customary in Korea.⁴ The controversial term “comfort women” will be utilised when discussing the grandmas in the colonial past while the Imperial Japanese army actively enslaved them.

¹ Kim-Gibson, 2001: 192.

² Ibid.

³ Min, 2003: 938.

⁴ Kim-Gibson, 2001

Firstly, I will outline the political significance of the contentious debate around the history of comfort women and analyse how the films' fluid temporality situates this debate as an extension of the same systematic violence the grandmas endured in the colonial past. Secondly, I will examine the films' thematic emphasis on traditional Korean spirituality as both a direct protest to Imperial Japan's attempted cultural genocide and a powerful symbol for the resilience of the grandmas' fighting spirit. Finally, I will highlight how the significant funding challenges the filmmakers tirelessly sustained exemplifies the continuing institutional violence against the grandmas while also illustrating the public's widespread desire to finally "feel" and "mourn" the grandma's traumatic past as *Kim-Gibson* urges us to do.⁵

Fluid Temporality and the Evolution of Systemic Violence

I will examine the contentious history of the comfort women debate and the political significance of the films' engagement with multiple temporalities: specifically, *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women's* use of stylised historical reenactments and photographic evidence narrated by the grandmas' testimonies and *Spirits' Homecoming's* material connections between the abusive bureaucratic environments of the diegetic past (the 1930s - 1940s) and the diegetic present (1990s).⁶ The films' fluid expression of colonial institutional trauma and postcolonial systemic silencing poignantly implies that the Japanese government's active erasure of history, as facilitated by the complicity of the South Korean government, preserves the same violent system the grandmas faced as comfort women.

⁵ Ibid: 192.

⁶ Pecic, 2016: 72.

Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women by independent filmmaker Dai Sil Kim-Gibson and LA Rebellion legend Charles Burnett is one of the first films to portray the history of comfort women through a radical medium: the voices of surviving grandmas.⁷ The stylised documentary weaves the grandmas' testimonies with peaceful scenic longshots of their homes in the Korean countryside and dramatic reenactments of their agonising abuse, emphasising their trauma without denying their humanity.⁸ *Silence Broken* also includes the testimonies of revisionist historians and Japanese politicians who attempt to protect Japan's global image. They fervently reject the grandmas' accounts by claiming that they were not enslaved underaged girls, but rather, well-paid volunteer sex workers. These revisionists repeatedly cite a lack of documented evidence for any systematic coercion of underaged girls even though nearly all incriminating documents were methodically burned, resulting in the loss of an estimated 70% of all Imperial Japan's war records with the Emperor's surrender in 1945.⁹ Due to this deliberate destruction the Japanese government has refused to take legal responsibility or issue an appropriate apology, despite countless testimonies from comfort women and imperial soldiers alike and the few remaining documents proving Imperial Japan's organised role in mass sexual coercion.¹⁰

By engaging with the political implications underlying the debate of the comfort women, *Silence Broken's* use of fluid temporality validates the grandmas' subjective experiences and can be recognised as a stylised rejection of contemporary Japan's revisionist stance. The opening scene of *Silence Broken* begins with a somber violin melody as the camera pans into a close up of

⁷ Kim-Gibson, 2001.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Drea, 2006: 9.

¹⁰ Pecic, 2016.

Grandma Bae Jok Gan on the verge of tears, as she explains how she was officially drafted to serve as a comfort woman: “we were taken [...] they went into schools and drafted Korean virgins, even as young as twelve.” As her words ring out, a black and white archival photograph of school children dissolve into disturbing images of young comfort women surrounded by smiling Japanese soldiers. Then a close up of a young girl melancholically gazes into the distance, as if searching for something, fades back to a close up of Grandma Bae Jok Gan as she exclaims, “I wonder if our politicians realise we will be stepped on again.” Contrasting with Japan’s repeated denial of any systematic targeting of underage girls for sexual enslavement, the sequence’s cross-temporality combination of oral testimonies, photographic proof and young actress reenactments dynamically underscores the comfort women’s stolen childhoods. This sequence directly rebuts Japan’s revisionist position. Moreover, the still-images of smiling school children interwoven with photographs of enslaved young women surrounded by smiling soldiers directly underscores the severity of what was “taken” with their childhood, their sense of innocence, humanity and joy. This untreated pain is utilised in the film as a pivotal link between the present and the past as the close up of the young girl staring off into a distance fades into a close up of Grandma Bae Jok Gan discussing how they will be “stepped on again”—emphasising the continuing bureaucratic violence in the present day. Ultimately, the sequence utilises fluid temporality to correct a revisionist history and position this deliberate revision as a continuation of institutional abuse intended to preserve and silence the anguish of the melancholic young girl within the grandma.

While *Silence Broken* mixes temporalities to combat Japan’s revisionist stance on the history of comfort women, *Spirits’ Homecoming* uses flashbacks to position Korea’s contemporary

prejudices towards comfort women as a continuation of the trauma they endured. Released thirty years after *Silence Broken, Spirits' Homecoming*, directed by Cho Jung-lae, brought the heartbreaking experiences of comfort women onto the South Korean big screen.¹¹ The period drama depicts two storylines fifty years apart and is based on actual art therapy pieces painted by grandmas.¹² The first follows 16-year-old childhood best friends Jung-min (Kang Ha-na) and Young-hee (Son Sook), as they attempt to escape a brothel after being forced to serve as comfort women to the Imperial Japanese army. The second storyline is set in the present day as Jung-min comes to terms with her traumatic childhood through the help of a young shaman, Eun-gyeong (Choi Ri).¹³

One of the central conflicts in the film is contemporary Korea's cultural stigmatisation of the grandmas. The severity of the stigmatisation can be historically understood through the large-scale counter-protests in the 1990s after the government discussed a possible public memorial for comfort women. Protesters reportedly refused "to equate 'ugly comfort women' with freedom fighters who died for their country."¹⁴ In a nation whose contemporary culture is deeply influenced by its Confucian past, the "purity" of a woman's virginity was held in the highest moral regard and seen as a reflection of the family's honour. Hwa-Young Chong writes in "In Search of God's Power in Broken Bodies" that the majority of grandmas: refused to come out as comfort women, attempted suicide, and never returned to face their families because "losing one's virginity outside marriage brought a great shame not only to a woman but also to her entire extended family [...] and the nation."¹⁵ This cultural stigma is evident on a governmental level at

¹¹ Pecic, 2016.

¹² Qin, 2005.

¹³ Pecic, 2016.

¹⁴ Ibid: 74.

¹⁵ Chong, 2005.

the 2015 conference between Japan and South Korea, which the comfort women activists have fervently described as the greatest betrayal since their coercion.¹⁶ At this conference, Japan and Korea sought to strengthen their diplomatic relationship and finally “resolve” the tension surrounding Japan’s colonial past, which included the issue of comfort women.¹⁷ However, grandmas and comfort women activist leaders were purposefully excluded from the settlement discussions.¹⁸ Thus, the Korean government is recognised as a co-conspirator in maintaining the grandmas trauma through its absolution of Japan’s past sex slavery crimes and assistance to the Japanese government to avoid any legal responsibilities.¹⁹

Recognising the roles Korea’s culture and current governing institutions have played in maintaining the violence against comfort women provides the foundation for *Spirits’ Homecoming’s* cross-temporality connection between a Korean police station, and the Japanese brothel. The film opens with archival interview footage of Grandma Kim Hak-Sun, the first survivor to go public with the abuse she faced as a comfort woman. In this opening scene, the elder Young-hee is seen watching the interview, which ends with a PSA asking all survivors to register at a local precinct to receive possible financial compensation. After reflecting on her trauma and seeking spiritual assistance from the young shaman, Eun-gyeong, Young-hee reluctantly enters the police station to register as a survivor. However, while waiting, she overhears two officers in their cubicles laughing at the grandmas and vocalising their disgust, exclaiming, “who would be crazy enough to reveal such a past?” As she turns around in shame, she experiences a flashback to her time at the Japanese brothel, where, from a birds-eye view,

¹⁶ Yi, 2017.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Pecic, 2016: 71

¹⁹ Ibid.

dozens of girls are seen in divided rooms being violently sexually assaulted by Japanese soldiers. The similar architecture of the cubicles links the diegetic present, where she is shamed by Korean officers, with the diegetic past, as the women are uniformly sexually and physically abused. Through flashbacks and parallel depictions of isolating infrastructures, *Spirits' Homecoming* connects the marginalisation caused by South Korea's government to the abuse caused by the Imperial Japanese army in order to highlight the systematic nature of the violence. Thus, both films use different temporalities from the colonial past and postcolonial present to highlight how trauma has systematically continued. From the Japanese minimisation of history to preserve its global image to Korea's bureaucratic silencing of survivors in order to move on from the past, the films use reenactments and memories to centre the grandma's experiences as inherently political in the context of Korean, and especially, Japanese institutionalised silencing.

Spirituality, National Identity and Resistance

Through a brief examination of the significance of folk spirituality as it pertains to national identity, the display of traditional Korean spirituality in *Silence Broken's* and *Spirits' Homecoming* can be understood as a rejection of Imperial Japan's attempted cultural genocide and a symbol of the grandmas' resistance.²⁰ During Imperial Japan's occupation of Korea from 1910 - 1945, Japan systematically attempted to conquer not just the land but also the culture, language, and notably, the spirit of the Korean people.²¹ Japanese assimilation policies, which began at the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, made it illegal to speak Korean in public.²² Additionally, the practice of Shamanism (Shinism), the Korean Folk religion —which

²⁰ Min, 2003: 943.

²¹ Pecic, 2016. 71.

²² Min, 2003: 943.

centres on communication with ancestor's spirits and honours a sacred link between femininity and nature— was outlawed and replaced with State Shinto, the patriarchal national religion of Japan which worships the Emperor as a divine being.²³ Comfort women were particularly targeted by the assimilation policies, as evident in one edict that forcefully stripped the comfort women of their family names and replaced them with traditional Japanese surnames to permanently erase any concept of heritage and identity.²⁴

In her work, “Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF,” Laurel Kendall theorises that within Korean society, shamanic rituals have been understood as an embodiment of Korean identity against imperial Japan's cultural genocide as it is seen as a “widely recognised idiom of protest theatre.”²⁵ Arguably, in the final climactic scene of *Spirits Homecoming*, a shaman ritual is utilised as “protest theater” in order to demonstrate the power of the once-marginalised Korean identity and symbolically heal the grandmas of their colonial trauma that haunts them to this present day.²⁶ In this scene, Eun-gyeong brings Young-hee back to her hometown to perform a *gut*, an ancient ritual in which a female shaman dresses in a traditional white robe, a symbol of spiritual purity, and performs folk dances to sacred music in order to connect with and liberate an ancestor's spirit.²⁷ Crowds surround Eun-gyeong as she twirls, jumps and twitches while the intensity of the drums escalates. The camera then cuts to a series of close-ups of sweat dripping off Japanese soldiers' tense faces as they watch nervously from the crowd. Notably, this is the first time in the film where the viewer sees the ‘spirits’ of the abusive soldiers in the postcolonial

²³ Pecic, 2016.

²⁴ Ibid: 73.

²⁵ Kendall, 2009: 22.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Pecic, 2016: 74.

present. Thus, a symbol of Imperial Japan's aggression is powerfully positioned as fearful of Korean spirituality.

Eun-gyeong's energetic movement is then dramatically juxtaposed as she travels through the spiritual realm into the colonial past and overlooks a pit filled with the lifeless bodies of dozens of burned comfort women. From their motionless bloodied bodies, hundreds of fluttering white butterflies appear, symbolising their freed spirits. The movement of the butterflies' white wings mirrors Eun-gyeong's flowing white robes, suggesting that the comfort women's spirits are pure despite the cultural shame associated with sexual assault. Moreover, the linking of Korean culture with the historically marginalised comfort women acts as a way to take back the national identity that was violently stripped from them with the Japanese assimilation policies.²⁸ While the white butterflies symbolise the pure Korean spirits of the comfort women, it is also the symbol used by protesters, who every week since 1992 have demonstrated outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul.²⁹ Grandma Kim Bok-dong explains the significance of the butterfly as a symbol of the grandma's fight for proper recognition of their traumatic past: "[We want] to be free from [the] hurtful past, like a butterfly that has just come out of its cocoon."³⁰ Thus, through the final scene of *Spirits' Homecoming*, Korean spirituality is positioned as a form of cultural resistance and used as a way to symbolically heal the comfort women's violated national identity.

Silence Broken also engages with concepts of Korean spirituality. However, there are notable differences between how the films handle this common theme as *Silence Broken* positions the grandma's "spirit" as less of a magical essence and more as a symbol of the activist's inner

²⁸ Pecic, 2016: 74.

²⁹ Shim, 2017: 269.

³⁰ Ibid.

strength and determination to fight for justice. In an interview with the *Independent*, Grandma Kang il-Chul, a prominent activist and survivor, vocalised disappointment in the media's depiction of comfort women, "they want to show us weak and dying, especially the camera crews. They follow the oldest, sickest women around."³¹ The Japanese and Korean media's villainous attempt to erase the grandmas' perseverance and portray them as too weak and too old to engage in political matters is contradicted by their portrayal of fiery strength in *Silence Broken*.

In an emotional scene midway through the film, Grandma Chung Seo Woon passionately declares, "It is the Japanese government that should feel ashamed, not we [...] I want to die as a daughter of Korea, not as a prostitute. I will accept nothing but legal compensation. The Japanese defiled my body, not my spirit." Here, their fighting spirit is honoured as the distinguishing virtue the Japanese Imperial army and contemporary government have failed to "defile" and destroy. Moreover, this powerful assertion retargets the misogynistic shame directed at the survivors onto the Japanese government and calls on Korean society to fight for the grandmas as "daughter[s] of Korea." The portrayal of the grandmas' spirits as an antidote to the shame and trauma that they were expected to swallow highlights their desire to fight for compensation from the Japanese government, which the Korean government has failed to do. Ultimately, an analysis of *Silence Broken*'s and *Spirits' Homecoming*'s engagement with Korean spirituality illustrates the grandmas' strong desire and fight for recognition by the Korean government and society.

Funding Challenges

³¹ *The Independent*, 2011.

Finally, I will highlight how the filmmakers' funding challenges demonstrate the continuing institutional assault against the grandmas. Both *Silence Broken* and *Spirits' Homecoming*, despite the thirty-year gap, faced significant obstacles surrounding funding.^{32 33} These challenges also illustrate the determination by filmmakers, volunteers and contributors to portray the grandmas' harrowing experiences as symbols of hope in the fight for justice. In "A film Within the Film: Making a Documentary about Korean Comfort Women," Dai Sil Kim-Gibson reflects on the lack of substantial funding for *Silence Broken*, which she claims was due to the political and cultural barriers erected around the contentious topic.³⁴ Despite being rejected from numerous Korean filmmaking grants, Kim-Gibson funded the majority of the film through personal loans and donations from her husband.³⁵ Similarly, most of the film crew volunteered their time while others took significant pay cuts because of their shared commitment to the importance of publicly displaying the subject matter, for the first time.³⁶ Eventually, western media channels such as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (PBS), Sundance and the History Channels picked it up for international exhibition.³⁷ As a result of the sacrifice and resilience of the filmmakers, *Silence Broken* has won numerous awards and been used in classrooms globally to reveal the contradictions to the revisionist historical narrative pushed by the Japanese government.³⁸

Spirits' Homecoming faced similar financial difficulties to *Silence Broken*. In a *New York Times* article, director Cho Jung-lae hinted at the close relationships between the Korean production

³² Pecic, 2016: 71.

³³ Kim-Gibson, 2001: 190.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid: 190.

³⁶ Ibid: 175.

³⁷ Howard, 2000.

³⁸ Ibid.

studios and Japanese government as one of the primary reasons his film was repeatedly denied funding.³⁹ Moreover, Jung-lae claimed the studio executives considered the subject matter to be too taboo to be successful in the domestic market, “they asked me why I wanted to throw salt on an old wound [...] They see the subject of comfort women as a history of shame.”⁴⁰

Taking matters into his own hands, Jung-lae initiated and sustained a public crowdsourcing campaign that lasted fourteen years and resulted in more than 75,000 international contributors.⁴¹ As with *Silence Broken*, multiple cast and crew members of *Spirits’ Homecoming* (of both Japanese and Korean nationalities) volunteered their time and worked without pay, describing their part in creating the film as a form of reparations.⁴² Due to these concerted efforts of the filmmakers, cast and crew, and despite the relatively small budget earned through crowdfunding (only 1.5 million pounds), the film was a box office success as Koreans came out in droves to support the grandmas stories.⁴³ The significant funding challenges faced by *Silence Broken* and *Spirits’ Homecoming*, as a result of the Korean production companies’ close ties to the Japanese government and unease around the topic, exemplifies the contemporary systematic silencing of the comfort women’s traumatic history. Arguably, the systematic withholding of funds for documenting the grandmas’ testimonies mirrors Imperial Japan’s destruction of documents that would affect their global image. However, the unwavering determination of the filmmakers, volunteers and contributors to support the grandmas’ voices powerfully acts as a symbol of hope for the continuing fight.

³⁹ Qin, 2015: 1.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Pecic, 2016: 71.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

Conclusion

Since 1991, 240 grandmas, of the estimated 200,000 comfort women, have bravely revealed their history despite the associated social stigma. Only eighteen remain alive today.⁴⁴ Thus, the importance of these films in both honouring and preserving their stories must be recognised in order to ensure the fight for justice does not end with their deaths. Through my analysis of fluid temporality in *Silence Broken* and *Spirits' Homecoming*, the revisionist narrative maintained by the Japanese government is positioned as a continuation of the institutional trauma the grandmas experienced as comfort women. Furthermore, my examination of the films' engagement with Korean spirituality as both a protest to Imperial Japan's culturally disruptive policies and a symbol of Korean national identity works to exemplify the grandmas' fighting spirit. Finally, the significant funding issues the filmmakers' sustained demonstrates the continuing systematic violence against comfort women while also revealing the widespread public desire for justice for the incorruptible spirits of the grandmas.

⁴⁴ Shim, 2020.

Word Count: 3332

Filmography

Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women (Kim-Gibson, South Korea, 1998)

Spirits' Homecoming, Unfinished Story (Jung-lae, South Korea, 2016)

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