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Systemic Silencing: Activism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in Indonesia

KATHARINE E. MCGREGOR

Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2023.

The issue of “comfort women” is about the history of sexual violence and Japan’s military-enforced slavery system in Asia. At the same time, it touches on issues of nationalism, Japan’s imperial past, and the politics of historical remembering. Therefore, it has been a major topic of diplomacy and social/transnational activism involving Japan, Korea, and beyond; and for a long time it has been an important research area in both the modern and contemporary history of East Asia and beyond. Kevin Blackburn’s *The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory* (2022) added long-awaited research into the scholarship on comfort women from Singapore and contributed to the wider scholarship on comfort women studies. In 2023, following in the footsteps of Blackburn’s brilliant work, Katharine E. McGregor in her *Systemic Silencing: Activism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in Indonesia* takes up the more formidable task of coming to grips with the past of highly marginalized groups—*rōmusha* (laborers), *heiho* (auxiliary soldiers), and, most prominently, *ianfu* (comfort women)—thereby offering the first sustained analysis of the Indonesian comfort women system that was silenced in the *long durée* of Indonesian colonial and postcolonial history. By skillfully situating sexual violence and the human rights movement in the broader context of transnational activism and memory, McGregor breaks new ground in adding much to our understanding of the complex vicissitudes of comfort women—not only in Indonesia but also in Korea, Japan, the Netherlands, and more.

McGregor carefully periodizes more than a century of Indonesian history and deftly arranges the book into different themes against a backdrop of major historical events or movements. Aside from an introduction and a rather short conclusion, the book unfolds in nine chapters. Chapter 1 traces the long history of sexual exploitation of women in Indonesia and Japan. It further examines how women and children became a matter of international concern due to trafficking and explores

the origin of shame and stigmatization associated with sex workers and *nyai* (a form of concubinage, live-in housekeepers/wives). Chapter 2 explains the connection between the Japanese licensed prostitution system and its development in the Japanese empire. In addition, this chapter reveals a larger pattern of how the Japanese occupying forces tapped into local human resources through coercion and deception in order to recruit *rōmusha*, *heiho*, and girls/women. However, Chapters 1 and 2, for this reader at least, can be read as a comprehensive review of historiography, interweaving the analyses of sexual exploitation of women and the enforced military prostitution system. The chapters hence lay a solid foundation for the ensuing discussions as well as provide rich historical background information for the reader.

That said, the real meat of the book gradually starts from Chapter 3, which looks at the commonalities in how deception and coercion, arguably, became a key strategy to bring, for example, girls and women into a system of enforced military prostitution. In this process, a cluster of factors contributed to the recruitment, for instance, the Indonesian feudal/patriarchal values and Japanese military occupation, etc. Chapter 4 charts the different postwar relations the governments of Indonesia and the Netherlands pursued with Japan and further details how shame and societal stigmatization against women operated in the immediate wake of Japan's surrender. Indonesia's increasing economic dependence on Japan complicated its memory of its wartime experiences under Japanese occupation. The combination of these factors, including the conservative New Order regime, which suppressed women's activism (e.g., censorship and repression of women's studies in universities, etc.), set the stage for what unfolded in later activism and restitution movements.

Chapter 5 shifts attention from Indonesia to Japan and Korea, where war redress and activism first took place and then discursively influenced the Indonesian perception of human rights. Moreover, the social milieu of the Korean *minjung* movement (literally the "people" movement, a mass movement for democracy and against the exploitation of the working classes) effected change in the way women participated in activism. Of particular importance are the feminist research and teaching carried out in universities in Japan and Korea, such as Ewha Womans University, which provide significant intellectual support for research into marginalized historical groups and women's activism. In this regard, Indonesia was a latecomer (almost two decades behind Japan and Korea), due to the authoritarian New Order regime. Chapter 6 turns attention back to Indonesia, examining its nascent activism by juxtaposing its domestic sociopolitical and academic situation with that of Korea in the 1990s. In Indonesia the sociopolitical ramifications of the New Order still hampered women's activism, whereas Korea had transitioned into a post-*minjung* movement period of democracy and advocacy for human rights. As the ideology of the New Order regime lingered in Indonesia, it effectively constrained how the comfort women issue was framed, reported, and accepted within the country.

Chapter 7 maps out the transition from Indonesia's emerging activism to an escalating activ-

ism, which was largely facilitated by a visit by the delegation of the Japan Federation of Bar Associations, the most representative body of lawyers in Japan. The experiences of comfort women and *rōmusha* surfaced again, to be viewed through the lenses of military sexual violence and human rights violations. The media this time turned the spotlight on Mardiyem, Indonesia's answer to the "iconic" Korean survivor Kim Hak-sun. Here, McGregor particularly highlights an interesting yet ironic dilemma posed by an "ideal" victimhood (pp. 153–154) as represented by Tuminah, the first Indonesian survivor to publicly come out, and Mardiyem, the first Indonesian iconic survivor. Chapter 8 considers the inherent nature of the Asian Women's Fund (AWF) and the divisive consequences it brought to different parties and stakeholders, such as the rejection of AWF by the Korean Council, the Indonesian government's controversial agreement with AWF, and the survivors' decision on whether to accept payments or not.

Chapter 9 takes on a few dramatic regime-changing events that occurred in mid-May 1998, including massive sexual violence against Chinese Indonesian women. As a result of the changes and in the wake of the New Order period, military sexual violence captured public, media, and international attention. The attention came first through the cases of rape of an estimated 168 Chinese Indonesian women (p. 189) in 1998 and then through the historical cases of comfort women. Ultimately, women's rights activism culminated in Indonesian women's participation in the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery in Tokyo in 2000, which raised the international profile and recognition of Indonesian comfort women survivors—even though it was "a form of symbolic justice" (p. 206).

A short review certainly cannot do justice to McGregor's impeccable work, but below are highlighted some of the enduring insights into sexual violence and women's activism contained in her well-researched scholarship. First and foremost, McGregor makes a critical intervention in the extant literature regarding what methodology should be used to interrogate the sexual violence surrounding comfort women. By extension, what sources should be used? The author gives a clear example of holding both archival material and testimonial evidence in high regard. This provides a piquant counterpoint to the hotly debated issue of the value of non-textual sources (Ueno 2012). The combination of archives and testimonies makes a strong case in the context of the Indonesian history of comfort women studies that empirical historiography can be supplemented by non-textual historical materials such as testimonies.

In this way, the reconstruction of women's experiences was possible in McGregor's work, providing a fine example for comfort women studies in general. Furthermore, the author's thorough analysis of the issue of Indonesian comfort women relies on, and benefits from, literary sources such as the novel *Kadarwati: A Woman with Five Names* (pp. 99–101). In her work, literary sources serve their purpose well by corroborating the main thesis. However, should they be separated out as a single subsection, or should they be integrated into the examination of comfort women? It may sound like a judgment call, but after all, all good social history holds cultural sources

in high regard.

Another insightful aspect of the book is the light it casts on the discourses of the “ideal” victim (p. 153) or “model victim” (Ueno, cited on p. 154). Though McGregor does not drill too deep into this part of history (pp. 153–155), the empirical research she offers on an interesting contrast between Tuminah and Mardiyem will have a lasting impact on the debates over what experiences of sexual violence will be considered acceptable or which comfort women will be considered “worthy victim[s]” (p. 154). As McGregor claims, this particularization of certain comfort women’s experiences seems to have characterized the early days of Indonesian activism; fortunately, Tuminah’s experiences were memorialized in 2013. Worryingly, the simplification of comfort women’s diverse experiences created and promoted by certain stakeholders unwittingly overshadows the experiences and voices of those who do not conform. The empirical cases of the two Indonesian comfort women mentioned above also point to the dominant Korean comfort women discourse, leading us to face a challenging, sensitive question: Why do we privilege one kind of experience and marginalize others? This is another thought-provoking point the book leaves us to ponder.

Despite how rigorous and compelling it is, the work is prone to some minor typos (“military policy force,” p. 70), a few grammatically incorrect instances (“to be heard from the first time,” p. 121; “I examine the how in the early 1980s,” p. 124), and, most important, some inconsistent and inappropriate romanization of Japanese phrases. Not to be pedantic, but as a historian of modern East Asia I find the Japanese romanization and inconsistency in italicization jarring—for instance, *kenpeitai* (“the kenpetai commander,” p. 67; “the *kenpeitai* (military policy force),” p. 70; “two or three policemen (*kenpeitai*,” p. 76); *kankokujin* (“*kankojin*,” pp. 110, 112, 213). These trivial issues could have been easily amended by the copyeditor(s) or the author’s Japanese translation assistant(s) mentioned in the preface (p. xiii).

Regardless of these quibbles, *Systemic Silencing* offers one of the most comprehensive accounts of sexual violence and transnational activism involving not only Indonesia but also Japan and Korea, among others. It therefore sets the transnational human rights activism in seeking justice for marginalized historical subjects such as comfort women in the wide sociopolitical and historical contexts of Indonesian domestic politics and international relations. Equally important, its fascination lies in the painstaking attention to detail it brings to the Indonesian history of a normalized gendered violence against women and international human rights activism. McGregor leaves no stone unturned in her research into the topics under discussion. What is more, the book’s sophisticated use of, and the depth of, different genres of sources—archival materials, testimonies, literary sources, etc.—throws new light more broadly on the problems of sexual violence and human rights issues. Either assigned as a whole or each chapter as a stand-alone article, the book will appeal to a wide readership of undergraduates, postgraduates, and scholars alike.

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Signs of Deference, Signs of Demeanour: Interlocutor Reference and Self-Other Relations across Southeast Asian Speech Communities

DWI NOVERINI DJENAR and JACK SIDNELL, eds.

Singapore: NUS Press, 2023.

The edited collection *Signs of Deference, Signs of Demeanour* is an important milestone in bringing the insights of linguistic ethnography into conversation with the field of Southeast Asian studies. The book also signifies the expansion of the field outside the traditional centers of Europe and North America, stemming from a collaboration between Australian and North American scholars and published in Singapore, which makes it more readily available for an Asian readership.

The topic of the volume may sound a bit obscure at first glance, but for anybody who is even slightly familiar with the languages of Southeast Asia the subject matter will be immediately relatable. The book is ultimately about how we refer to ourselves and to others in everyday conversation, and how that affects social and intersubjective relations and intersubjective relations on both micro scales—for instance, power asymmetries between kin—and more macro contexts, such as political speech. In each case, the choices we make in how we refer to ourselves and others are crucial to understanding how we as speakers are perceived and how our speech acts are interpreted by our interlocutors.

The book's motivation draws from the domination in sociolinguistics over the years of the Brown and Gilman model of interlocutor reference. Roger Brown and Albert Gilman wrote an influential article in which they generalized the European pronoun division between T (from the French *tu*) and V (from the French *vous*) to pronoun usage universally across languages, arguing that T forms signal “intimacy” and V forms are used in asymmetrical “power” relations (Brown and Gilman 1968). This argument has been criticized in later sociolinguistic and linguistic ethnographic study, but the “common sense” underlying the argument still holds sway in much of the discussion about person reference cross-linguistically.