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The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory

KEVIN BLACKBURN

Singapore: NUS Press, 2022.

Kevin Blackburn's *The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory* broadens understanding of "comfort women"¹⁾ by uncovering the "disappeared" collective memory of Singapore as a onetime "centre for comfort stations" (p. 3). The book adds to debates on the silenced voices of comfort women, exploring the interplay of nationalist and paternalistic discourses in Singaporean politics and culture around sexual labor before, during, and after World War II. This book sets out to examine the silence of Singapore women, which is noticeable compared to their counterparts from other Asian countries, including Korea and Indonesia. The absence of the voices of local women coming forward with their narratives led the author to draw on alternative sources, such as the diaries of a brothel manager and a Japanese colonel or the testimony of a doctor or an errand boy who could observe lives at the comfort station. Along with archival records and secondary literature, the creative use of source materials enriches our historical understanding, presenting both strengths and weaknesses of personal written records, which are "credible as not influenced by the heated debates over the circumstances of the comfort women" (p. 72), and oral histories, which are "special connecting the past as memory with the present" (p. 63).

This book begins with Lee Kuan Yew's 1992 statement that the presence of Korean comfort women "saved the chastity of many Singaporean girls" (p. 17) and its silencing effects. Putting aside the statement's incorrectness and insensitivity, the importance of this statement is claimed in its "setting the tone for the public debate" and "discouraging local women from coming forward to speak out" (p. 25), given that many survivors from Korea and other countries had started to seek truth and justice following the Korean survivor Kim Hak-sun's testimony in 1991. Chapter 2 explores comfort women's issues in relation to Singaporean people's fear of rape at war and masculinized understanding of the sexual needs of men, locating it in a broader context of sex work. Chapters 3 and 4 illustrate the daily lives of women, largely from Korea and Indonesia, at comfort stations in Singapore, engaging with diverse sources. The narrative moves on to postwar situations in Singapore in Chapters 5 and 6, focusing on the silencing effects of political and

1) Many scholars and activists, including myself, use quotation marks to indicate that this was a euphemistic term created by Japan's Imperial Army to deceive and downplay the nature of sexual enslavement. In this review the quotation marks have been deleted in the interest of readability, following the book author's choice (pp. 1–2).

public reactions to former comfort women. Chapter 7 elaborates on how the Singaporean link with the transnational comfort women issue has been represented as “dark heritage” sites and in popular culture. This chapter demonstrates how the history of comfort women is narrated and somewhat selectively memorialized in Singapore.

Blackburn skillfully engages with existing arguments and materials, tracing the possible reasons behind the silence of local comfort women. However, this book does not address how the debates around comfort women issues or women’s agency—as exemplified by watching a movie (p. 74)—are conceptualized. Bringing more attention to the politics of power and knowledge would be welcomed. As the book notes, the diversity of national and socioeconomic contexts and paths to becoming comfort women, power differences, and dynamics should be considered in order to understand historical accounts. Furthermore, the long debates on the comfort women issue involve elucidating “who generates which knowledges and for what purposes, and what or whose knowledges are considered legitimate or valued” (Newman 2023). This book’s contribution to broader scholarship would be more substantial with a detailed analysis of the nature and consequences of knowledge production and dissemination. At present, the materials present variations in recruitment processes or some women’s agency, though very limited and contingent upon the different styles of comfort station managers. The variations can be questioned from a human rights perspective, given the enforceable nature of the military sex industry, or even can be unintentionally used by those who deny the integrity of victim-survivors’ testimonies. For example, this book mentions that monetary compensation could lead some comfort women to break their silence, while “many Singapore women who were financially better off had little to gain” (p. 184). Despite the author’s careful approach to “compensation,” what comfort women have demanded is “reparation,” which aims at correcting a prior injustice and restoring the dignity and humanity of victims (Khatchadourian 2006). The author’s attempts to consider diverse reasons for local women’s silence can be distorted by some history denialists, who have invalidated the testimonies of comfort women survivors, calling them money grabbers (Dudden 2022).

Importantly, Blackburn highlights the role of the feminist movement and media in breaking the long silence of victim-survivors in Korea, Japan, and the Philippines. Their awareness-raising campaigns enabled victim-survivors to come forward with their stories, and the testimonies enhanced the public’s understanding and sympathy. This book seeks to provoke readers into rethinking “memory suppression in Singapore” (p. 135). Societal silencing appears to have multiple layers of discrimination by gender, nationality, and ethnicity. As a result of such intersectionality, victim-survivors from other Asian countries were called “fallen women” (p. 110) or “a danger to society” (p. 118) and blamed for an increase in the incidence of venereal diseases. As discussed in Chapter 5, those who decided to stay on in Singapore to avoid humiliation and shame in their home communities had to go through detention in the name of “rehabilitation” (p. 124) before being accepted. Comfort women from other parts of Asia faced defaming and

othering practices both inside and outside the comfort women system. Thus, greater attention should be given to the abusive and discriminatory nature of the system, which can resonate with current issues such as sexual violence at war, human trafficking, and vulnerability of the marginalized. In that sense, comfort women survivor-activists, including Kim Bok-dong,²⁾ who is briefly mentioned in this book as a Korean comfort woman drafted to Singapore, show how they meaningfully exert their agency by working for transnational solidarity based on the commonalities of suffering and structural violence.

Another thing to mention is the book's presentation. The book cover shows the darkened image of the former comfort station at Cairnhill Road, possibly to serve the notion of a "dark heritage." Given that the book will certainly attract international readers, I wonder whether such readers would find the illustrations, primarily maps of comfort stations in Singapore, interesting or engaging. The inclusion of photos from movies, television dramas, and plays mentioned in Chapter 7 would have been more helpful for readers, as they would capture the representations of comfort women in popular culture.

The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory is an important addition to the history of comfort women in Singapore, which has remained largely unknown. Blackburn's book emerges in the company of recent monographs and edited books on the past and present of comfort women issues, including Katharine E. McGregor's *Systemic Silencing: Activism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in Indonesia* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2023), Sachiyo Tsukamoto's *The Politics of Trauma and Integrity: Stories of Japanese "Comfort Women"* (Taylor & Francis, 2022), Eika Tai's *Comfort Women Activism: Critical Voices from the Perpetrator State* (Hong Kong University Press, 2020), and Nusta Carranza Ko's edited volume *New Ways of Solidarity with Korean Comfort Women: Comfort Women and What Remains* (Springer Nature Singapore, 2023). Along with these scholarly works, Blackburn's book expands our understanding of the complexity around comfort women issues, confirming the transnational nature of memory and activism against gender-based violence.

As the book sets out to accomplish, it sensibly investigates how gender ideologies have shaped local and other Asian women's shared and often differentiated experiences. Blackburn, with great care, explores encounters between comfort women from other countries and Singaporean society during and after the Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945. This book suggests the Singaporean political, social, and cultural contexts as a fragmentary force that divided women into local and others. Although local women's experiences of engaging in the comfort women system were silenced and erased in the public sphere, the collective memory has left visible and invisible marks in Singaporean society. Central to the analysis are local communities' experiences of having

2) Kim Bok-dong (1926–2019) established the Butterfly Fund with Gil Won-ok (b. 1928) to support survivors of gender-based violence in armed conflicts across the globe, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Palestine, and Vietnam.

comfort stations, which were intertwined with historical, international, and structural relations. In this light, scholars and students of Asian history, women's history, gender studies, international relations, and memory activism would find much of interest in this book. The book would also attract a wider readership with its accessibility through the provision of relevant background in text and footnotes. Without a doubt, this book is a significant contribution to the memory scholarship in Asian history, successfully demonstrating the extent of complexity and tensions in the past and present of comfort women issues.

Jae-Eun Noh

*Gender and Women's History Research Centre, Institute for
Humanities and Social Sciences, Australian Catholic University*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9324-8192>

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Burmese Haze: US Policy and Myanmar's Opening—and Closing

ERIN MURPHY

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The United States has diverse national interests and poses strategic threats in several Asian states, with significant diplomatic, economic, security, and geopolitical implications. China's rising power challenges the United States' status quo in multiple arenas and spheres, ranging from friction with Taiwan to strategic competition in the South China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific space. Meanwhile, North Korea has expanded its nuclear capabilities as a disruptive player in Asian security systems and is dubbed a rogue state by hawkish American policy planners and others.

Myanmar has become a battlefield of great power rivalries due to its geopolitical location linking Southeast Asia, South Asia, East Asia, and the Indian Ocean. It is, and will continue to be, a conflict zone. Much of its peripheral highlands are still under the de facto control of ethnic armed organizations. Under the rule of the military junta, Myanmar was considered a pariah state accord-