

**LISTENING TO VOICES:  
TESTIMONIES OF “COMFORT WOMEN” OF  
THE SECOND WORLD WAR**

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# **LISTENING TO VOICES: TESTIMONIES OF “COMFORT WOMEN” OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR<sup>1</sup>**

## **Introduction**

This paper argues that “Comfort Women”, who were systematically raped by the Imperial Japanese Military during the Second World War, are not merely helpless victims, whose being is entirely in hands of others. Nor does it claim that these women have been deprived of their own voices by activists and researchers so that they could pursue a political goal - an apology and full compensation by the Japanese Government for exploiting these women’s bodies physically and sexually. Rather, following the discussion of Judith Butler, which is based on Louis Althusser’s theory of interpellation, it maintains that the women themselves are active participants in the discussions on “Comfort Women”. According to Althusser, in order for individuals to become subjects, namely, to be recognised, they have to be “hailed” by and subjected to given ideologies. I argue that the “Comfort Women’s” testimonies themselves are a site of this subject formation, which also embraces the possibility of the subversion of subject, and so that the women themselves are significant participants in the testimonial construction process.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the revised version of the paper I presented in the Narrative and Biography postgraduate seminar on October 8, 2002.

The existence of “Comfort Women” only became widely acknowledged in the 1990s, when these women started to testify their ordeals.<sup>2</sup> The existence of these women attracted the attention of feminists not only in Japan, Korea and other Asian countries, but also beyond such geographical boundaries. This is mainly because the system of “Comfort Women” was understood to be one of the worst examples of “universal” sexual violence against women by men. The issue also drew the attention of non-feminists who were interested in war compensation and reparation, since the Japanese Government had to some extent admitted its involvement in organising the “Comfort Women” system after fifty years of denials. Both feminists and non-feminists have been demanding that the Japanese Government take full responsibility and pay compensation to the women. Their demand is founded on the understanding that the conduct of the Japanese Imperial Military in drafting “innocent virgins” into sexual slavery was one of the cruellest cases of the violation of women’s human rights.

However, the violation of women’s human rights is not the only argument raised in the “Comfort Women” issue. For instance, in Japan, there is a strong demand by feminists to review history from a more gender conscious perspective, charging existing work with neglecting gender aspects and distorting the “historical truth”. They claim to be rewriting history based on “historical truth”. There is

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<sup>2</sup> The term “Comfort Women” itself is one of the most controversial of all arguments around “Comfort Women”. Some ex-“Comfort Women” reject the title of “Comfort Women”, claiming that “Comfort Women” implies that they provided sex voluntarily, although, they argue, this was not the case. These ex-“Comfort Women” and those who support them request the term “sexual slavery” to be used, in order to differentiate those “Comfort Women” who were forced into prostitution from voluntary military prostitutes. I cannot agree to make the distinction between those who were “forced” and “not forced” as this is the very distinction that I would like to tackle. Therefore, I will continue to use this term “Comfort Women” but with quotation marks out of respect to these victims’ disagreement.

another debate over the extent to which the contemporary Japanese Government or “Japanese people” have a responsibility to compensate “Comfort Women”. History teachers in Japan, meanwhile, question what they can teach of the “Comfort Women” issue to their pupils, and how. Furthermore, there is also an intense battle between those who see the “Comfort Woman” as prostitutes (that is to say, women who voluntarily became “Comfort Women or were paid sex workers at the battlefield) and those who claim that “Comfort Women” were forced to provide sex to soldiers for no recompense. These different perspectives mainly coincide with the disparity between “right” and “left” intellectuals. Actually, the “Comfort Women” issue evolves around this virgin and whore division of women which both parties similarly rely on, , though, as exemplified above, the arguments is not only limited to this point. Among the diverse discussions regarding “Comfort Women”, I would like to focus in this paper on the testimonies of the “Comfort Women” themselves, and these too are inseparable from the virgin and whore dichotomy .

So why are the testimonies important in the issue of “Comfort Women”? Testimonies, particularly those by “Comfort Women” have played a crucial role in exposing the nature of the system. This resulted from the inaccessibility of official documents concerning the “Comfort Women” system, whether by genuine loss or by the Japanese Government’s concealment. However, the most significant aspect of these testimonies is that the actual act of “Comfort Women” in coming forward to speak out about their terrible experiences moved many people, regardless of their nationality, gender or generation. This made it possible to organise

the movement nationally, regionally, and globally to gain recognition of these women. The impacts were various; organised interviews of these women were conducted, official documents were revealed, despite the Government's reluctance, diaries by officers and soldiers during the Second World War, and post-war war literature were reviewed critically in relation to "Comfort Women" or "comfort stations", and former soldiers, too, started to testify about their experiences with "Comfort Women". There seems to have been a dramatic accumulation of "information" on the system of "Comfort Women".

From the beginning, "Comfort Women's" testimonies were a challenge to the prevailing understanding of historical sources and historiography, and led to a re-examination of the processes of documentation, which had previously been focused on written materials, and mainly recorded without much concern for gender let alone for the oppression of women. The women's testimonies attracted immediate attention; some Japanese publishers started to consider the inclusion of a short commentary in school history textbooks on "Comfort Women" as women who were forced into prostitution; and the issue was to be taught in secondary schools for the first time in 1997.<sup>3</sup> The testimonies also raised questions about the objectivity, neutrality and transparency of history, and its claims to correspond to "historical facts". Feminists began to engage in a re-writing of history, thereby subverting the existing historical understanding.

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<sup>3</sup> In Japan, state schools use textbooks which are authorised by the Ministry of Education. By 2002, however, the number of textbooks which make reference to "Comfort Women" was reduced. Uesugi, S. (2002).

Many people have praised women's testimonies as the historical "Truth", treating them as new and alternative data or information that can correct the established historical stories from more accurate perspectives. With such new "information" acquired from testimonies and critical readings of official records which support what is said in the testimonies, they have sought to draw a fuller picture of the system of "Comfort Women"; the scale of the system, the degree of involvement of the Japanese Government; and women's lives at the comfort stations. However, one difficulty arising in the analysis of the testimonies is whether the testimonies should be treated as the historical "Truth". My aim in this paper is to explore the problem of reading testimonies as being the "Truth" of history and searching for a better approach to them.

### **Testimonies in the "Comfort Women" issue**

Since Kim Haksun, a Korean "Comfort Woman", gave her name as a "Comfort Woman" publicly in 1991, many women started to testify about their lives as "Comfort Women". Testimonies given at public hearings, at court hearings, and in interviews were broadcast on television, recorded in videos or published as books or booklets. In this paper, I rely heavily on published materials, which are the most accessible and wide ranging.<sup>4</sup> I can only give a

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<sup>4</sup> This paper is based on my Ph.D. thesis. During my Ph.D. research I did not conduct interviews on the ex-"Comfort Women" for a couple of reasons. Firstly, when I decided to do research on the issue, there was already a lot of material on testimonies published, either printed as books or pamphlets, or recorded. These means that these women had participated in a lot of interviews on their experience during the Second World War, and they have started to feel tired of repeating their stories. This is because, although some aspects of their lives have changed the compensation and apology from the Japanese Government, which they seek for most, has not yet been achieved. Moreover, repeating their stories has got negative aspects: they have to relive their painful experiences again. Therefore, I felt it was not appropriate for me to ask them to repeat their life stories again only for my research purpose. The second reason was simply a practical one: the interpretation and translation issue, namely my inability to speak any of the ex-"Comfort Women's" native languages. Because the nature of the topic is very sensitive I did not want to speak through interpreters. Thirdly, as I

few examples of testimonies due to the limited space, but the testimonies I examine include those of South Korean women, North Korean women, two Korean women resident in Japan, a Korean woman resident in Thailand, Filipina women, Chinese women, Taiwanese women, Dutch women, Indonesian women, Malaysian women, and women from East Timor. One initial point to stress is that the lives described in the testimonies differ greatly from each other. For example, some of the testimonies are presented by women who were “forced to work” (i.e. forced to provide sexual services to soldiers regularly) under the “Comfort Women” system, while other testimonies suggest that the women were victims of mass rapes in the battlefield.<sup>5</sup> In spite of these diversities, I will treat all the testimonies as testimonies by “Comfort Women.” Any attempt to separate out the victims into different categories can lead to theoretical contradiction – a virgin/whore dichotomy which feminists should actually be challenging – and women’s experiences cannot be easily separated into such a clear division. It is worth noting, in addition, how far the descriptions women give of their lives depends on the situation in which they testify, for example, women’s lives are generally presented in more detailed fashion in semi-structured interviews conducted by a researcher than in testimonies made in public hearings. Though other factors also influence what women say, it is important to make this initial point here, in order to clarify

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said because there had already been a lot of testimonies published I became more interested in analysing the problems associated with research into the testimonies.

<sup>5</sup> As mass rape by the Japanese soldiers prevailed, in the Philippines, victims of “Comfort Women” and mass rape are differentiated and respectively referred to. For example, in the Indictment prepared by the delegate of Philippines for Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal held in Tokyo, December 2000, these two categories are differentiated. However, the women in both categories are equally regarded as victims of wartime sexual violence, and organizations in the Philippines support them irrespectively.

that the testimonies I worked on are different in their structures and characters.

Here are some examples of testimonies. On their backgrounds,

I had six brothers and sisters. My father was a fisherman, my mother just a housewife. We were very poor and therefore, being the third eldest child in our family, when I was 12 years old I had to go to Manila in or around the year 1936 to work as a house maid. (Juanita Jamot, The Philippines)<sup>6</sup>

... (my father-my own addition) was taken to the police station and subjected to a heavy beating. As a result of this, he took to his bed and eventually died. Mother had to carry on life with the five of us - two elder brothers, one elder sister, one younger sister and myself. Making a living was not easy by any means. We were desperate for food. We dug up the roots of trees to eat, and my mother would work on a treadmill all day to bring back a few husks of grains as payment which we would boil with dried vegetable for our supper. Those who flattered the Japanese were able to get help from them; they might get rubber shoes. But those who kept firmly apart were forced into extreme poverty. (Kim Suntok, South Korea)<sup>7</sup>

This is how “Comfort Women” describe the situation when they were recruited.

One day a Mr Kim, from Chongup (where she was living – my addition), visited us and said that he could get me a job in a textile factory in Japan. He also offered to find work for a friend of mine. He said that our job would be as weavers

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<sup>6</sup> International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), ed. (1994), p.64

<sup>7</sup> The Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, The Research Association on the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, eds.,(1995), pp.42-43, (Hereafter The Korean Council eds.). She initially came forward under the pseudonym Kim Tokchin, but she later revealed her true name.

and added that we would be paid such and such a month. ...After the visit he didn't come back. We had almost forgotten about him when he suddenly reappeared and urged me to take the job which was on offer. I needed to earn money, so I went along with him, taking an old friend of mine called Okhui. (Oh Omok)<sup>8</sup>

We were about to leave when a Japanese soldier beckoned our foster father over. He was a military officer with two stars on his lapel and he asked if we were Koreans. ...The officer retorted that we could have stayed in Korea if we had just wanted money, and led him away, saying 'You must be a spy, come with me'. My friend and I were hustled away by other soldiers. We were led along a back street and came to a place where an open truck was parked. There were about 40 or 50 soldiers on board. They told us to jump on and, when we resisted, they lifted us into the mass of soldiers. After a few minutes the officer who had taken our foster father off returned, and the truck immediately sped off. (Kim Haksun)<sup>9</sup>

Suddenly there was a great commotion in the camp and a number of Japanese military men arrived in army trucks. ...However, this time the order was given: All single girls seventeen years and up were to line up with compound. ...The selection process continued until ten girls were ordered to step forward. ...I was one of ten. ...Through our interpreter, we were told to pack a small bag of belongings and report immediately to the front gate, where the trucks were waiting to take us away. We were not told any details. ...A total of sixteen girls were then taken from the Ambarawa camps, forced against their will. ...The truck stopped in front of a large house....Seven girls were told to get out. I was one of them. We were soon to find out what sort of a house we were being forced to live in. (Jan O'Herne)<sup>10</sup>

Some of women explain the way they were forced to have sex

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<sup>8</sup> The Korean Council (eds.), (1995), p.65

<sup>9</sup> The Korean Council (eds.), (1995), p.35

<sup>10</sup> The Executive Committee International Public Hearing, eds. (1993) , pp.60-61. (Hereafter The Executive Committee.)

with soldiers for the first time.

He raped me. I had no experience of sex, so I was too scared even to try resisting. If such a thing happened now, I would kill myself by biting my tongue off. But at that time I was scared and helpless. (Kang Tokkyong, South Korea)<sup>11</sup>

There are some descriptions of what sort of places the women lived in during their lives as “Comfort Women”.

The Comfort Station was a two-storey Japanese-style building with 20 rooms. There were already many women there when we arrived. ...The rooms were very small. Each was big enough for two people to lie down in. At the entrance of each hung a blanket in place of a door. The walls and floor were laid with wooden boards, and there was nothing else. (Yi Yongsu, South Korea)<sup>12</sup>

Through these testimonies, historians or feminists have been trying to draw a full picture of the “Comfort Women” system collecting information on the women, particularly, what sort of backgrounds these women come from, how they became “Comfort Women”, how they were forced to have sex with soldiers, their living conditions, what sort of violence they suffered, and their lives after their experiences as “Comfort Women”. Feminists focus intently on these oral testimonies as the alternative source of historical records. They insist that the testimonies of “Comfort Women” themselves are the primary fact of history, claiming these as historical “Truth”. Some feminists say that;

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<sup>11</sup> The Korean Council (eds.) (1995), p.180

<sup>12</sup> The Korean Council (eds.), (1995), p.93

Their (“Comfort Women’s”) “stories of their lives” penetrated the shadow of history and open up the door of the **truth**.<sup>13</sup>

Truth, here is simply asserted; there is no specific reason given as to why the “Comfort Women’s” testimonies should actually be the historical truth/fact. Therefore, this provides no secure basis from which to challenge the revisionist claims of authenticity; and there is no further questioning of the meaning of objectivity or the nature of historical “truth”. This issue becomes particularly central given that Japanese revisionists started to attack the women’s testimonies as false, trying to refute these “Comfort Women’s” testimonies, as feminists could only fight back inadequately with their continued insistence that the testimonies themselves were inherently the “Truth”.

The revisionist claim is that women’s testimonies are in fact lies and demonstrably inconsistent. Indeed, “Comfort Women” do give different testimonies at different places and times, which sometimes contradict each other. The revisionists take these differences as indicating a deliberate alteration by the women in order to take advantage in legal proceedings against the Japanese Government. Here are some examples of “inconsistency” in the stories of the lives of “Comfort Women”. For example, Kim Sun Dok testifies in the workshop in 1996 that:

In addition, “virgin delivery” was enforced. It became difficult to live without giving allotment of one of over fifteen-year old girls per family....As many girls hide in fear of “virgin delivery”, a different rule began to be enforced. It

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<sup>13</sup> Suzuki, Y. (1997), p.73

was rumoured that either the elder one or the younger one, they would take one young female from a family. Because my younger sister was so small, I met a “supervisor” thinking that it was no worse than my sister would be taken. I asked him what sort of job it was, and according to him it was temporary (part-time) nurse or a sewer of military uniform, something to do with the military. So I decided to go. It was 1937. I was 17 years old in Asian age.<sup>14</sup> (Translation mine from the Japanese text.)

However, according to the testimony based on the interviews by *The Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan*, the situation of her recruitment was as follows:

It was the middle of January or perhaps a little later, say the beginning of February 1937. I was 17 years old. I heard girls were being recruited with promises of work in Japan. It was said that a few had been recruited not long before from P’yongch’on where we had lived with my uncle. I wished that at that time I had been able to go with them, but then I suddenly heard a Korean man was in the area again recruiting more girls to work in the Japanese factories. I went to P’yongch’on to meet him and promised him I would go to Japan to work. He gave me the time and the place of my departure and I returned home to ready myself to leave. In those days people were rather simple, and I, having had no education didn’t know anything of the world. All I knew – all I thought I knew –was that I was going to work in a factory to earn money. I never dreamed that this could involve danger.<sup>15</sup>

Another example is the testimony of Mardiyem from Indonesia. In her testimony in December 1995, she described the situation of her recruitment in this way:

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<sup>14</sup> Senso Giseisha wo Kokoroni Kizamukai, eds. (1997), p.40. (Hereafter Senso Giseisha)

<sup>15</sup> The Korean Council eds. (1995), pp.43-44. In this book she gave the testimony anonymously, but later she revealed her name. In this testimony “virgin delivery” is not mentioned at all.

(In 1942, – my own addition) a Japanese doctor called “Sogenji” came from Kalimantan. According to him, he was looking for those who want to work at Kalimantan. And he was looking for those who work at restaurants and theatres. The news of recruitment was not official but was rumoured among people.<sup>16</sup> (Translation mine from the Japanese text.)

However, in the testimony made in July 1996, she said that,

The reason why I moved was that the Japanese mayor announced that the Japanese came to Jagjakarta to recruit people as labourers. And I was asked to join them, offered a job in a theatre.<sup>17</sup> (Translation mine from the Japanese text.)

Another example is Kim Haksun, the first woman to have come forward as a “Comfort Woman”. Kim Haksun’s testimonies made at various times and places, present different stories of her life at different periods and are arguably in that sense inconsistent.<sup>18</sup> In Asahi Shinbun (Asahi Newspaper), it was reported that she was recruited in 1939 in Pyongyang by a local influential man who offered her a high earning job. She was taken from Pyongyang by a train with Japanese soldiers. According to Ishikawa, a Japanese policeman and a villager came to Kim and told her that if she worked as *Teishintai* (girl labourer) she could earn a lot of money and that she must accept the offer because that was the Emperor’s order. Then, she was dragged into a Japanese truck, which took her to Pyongyang, and from there took a train to China.

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<sup>16</sup> Asia Forum, ed. (1997), p.13

<sup>17</sup> Senso Giseisha (1997), p.123

<sup>18</sup> Asahi Shinbun Evening Edition, 6<sup>th</sup> December, 1991, Ishikawa, I. (1993), p.10, Nishino, R. (1993), pp.32-3, The Korean Council (eds.) (1995), pp.33-4

Nishino's rather different story is that Kim was adopted by Mr. Kim and attended a kisaeng (entertainment girl) school for three years. When she was seventeen years old, she was taken by her stepfather to China to earn money, where she parted with her stepfather. Then she was taken to the house of the Chinese by Japanese soldiers and was locked in a room. Finally, in the testimony published by the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, Kim says that she was fostered by a family who trained kisaeng by a contract her mother made, for which her mother received 40yen.<sup>19</sup> After she had had enough training, her foster father took her and another girl to China, where he was interrogated as a spy by the Japanese soldiers while Kim and another girl were taken into a truck.

If testimonies are treated simply as the apparent (therefore stable and unchangeable) historical "Truth", it becomes difficult to explain such inconsistency, which is often pointed out by revisionists and which has encouraged them in their claim that the women's testimonies are thereby rendered invalid. The historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki is one of a few left wing intellectuals and/or feminists that actually admit testimonies do often differ from each other, and argues that the "accuracy" of the testimonies of "Comfort Women" can be assessed by reference to other existing historical records. Though he is aware of the importance of all the testimonies, including less "accurate" ones, and stresses the necessity of examining the reasons for the "inaccuracy" or "modifications", what actually matters to him are only those testimonies which are useful in establishing the historical "facts". Moreover, criticising those

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<sup>19</sup> Yen is the Japanese currency.

revisionists who point out these inconsistencies, Yoshimi maintains that it is “apparent” to researchers that the testimonies published by *the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan* is most reliable. The dilemma of this remark is, firstly, that people who read testimonies are not necessarily researchers, but people of all different backgrounds, therefore few of them will actually read all four different testimonies. The more important point is Yoshimi’s presumption that he can judge (at once) which testimonies are “less” reliable. His own method for assessing the reliability/authenticity of testimonies is not clearly presented nor critically examined; to that extent, his method is no different from those of the revisionists.

When any explanation for inconsistencies is offered by feminists (and others), the main suggestion is that women suffer from post traumatic stress disorder.<sup>20</sup> Referring to Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*, feminists have argued that the women experience a “fragmentation” of memory, where the memories may be very clear as segments, but lack either connections to each other or a logical chronology. This is offered as the reason why women cannot tell the (consistent) story of their lives. Though this approach may offer some explanation of the inconsistency, it does not suggest any breakthrough in dealing with the degree of fragmentation or the seeming “inaccuracies”. In both cases, “Comfort Women’s” testimonies are treated as supplementary information and data that can help clarify the already “constructed” past. This is extremely problematic, as women are not treated as

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<sup>20</sup> Yang, C. J. (1997), Kuwayama, N. (1998)

being main figures in history, and so neither the dynamism in the meaning nor the power of their testimonies is recognized.

There are other problems that arise when feminists claim the “Comfort Women’s” testimonies as the historical “fact/truth”. One of these is the positionality of researchers themselves. In most of the discussions, (feminist) researchers give little evidence of reflecting on their own role in producing (the text of) testimonies. Since many women gave testimony orally, partly because most of them were illiterate, most testimonies were recorded and edited by researchers or journalists.<sup>21</sup> There were also testimonies published by researchers with detailed biographic information on some “Comfort Women”, where the information is only mentioned by researchers and not given by “Comfort Women” themselves. Consider the case of Mardiyem from Indonesia, who was eager to become an actress, and applied for the job, because the recruiter (a Japanese dentist and businessman) Shogenji Kango was accompanied by her close friend who was working as a singer. Envy and believing her friend, she was willing to take the offer, which turned out to be “working” as a “Comfort Woman”. After she became a “Comfort Woman”, she got pregnant, and was first asked to take some medicine to abort the child. Although she took it for a week it did not work, and the proprietor then asked a German female doctor to carry out an abortion. Without appropriate tools or anaesthetics, the doctor removed the foetus

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<sup>21</sup> Only a few exceptions are autobiographies by Maria Rosa Luna Henson from Philippines, Jan Ruff-O’Herne from Netherlands (now living in Australia), Mun Okuchu and Kim Yonshim from South Korea and a picture diary by Remedios Felias from the Philippines. However, even these are also not free from the editing and translating process. Ruff-O’Herne (1994), Henson, M. R. L. (1995), Mun, O. and Morikawa, M. (1996), Felias, R. (1999), Kim, Y.-S. (2000)

by scraping the womb without anaesthetics. The foetus was still alive. These detailed descriptions, however, are only given in the story of her life as written by a researcher called Kawada Fumiko.<sup>22</sup> In the testimony Mardiyem made in 1996 in Japan, she describes the situation as follows:

I was brought up in Yogyakarta, but was taken up to a place called Banjarmasin in (the former Borneo). The reason why I went there was the Japanese mayor announced that the Japanese come to Yogyakarta for recruitment. I was asked to come, offered a job in theatre.<sup>23</sup> (translation mine from the Japanese text)

In 1943, when I was fourteen years old, I became pregnant, When my pregnancy became apparent, I was called and was forced to abort without anaesthetics.<sup>24</sup> (translation mine from the Japanese text)

As has been suggested by this example, when the stories given by researchers and the women themselves are compared, the contents and the comprehensiveness of them diverge and often stories presented by researchers are more detailed. For a full understanding of the system of “Comfort Women”, it is of course crucial to have extra knowledge of the lives of “Comfort Women”, which they themselves either were unaware of or could only give to researchers they trusted, but not in the public hearings. However, concerning stories provided by researchers, it is hard to differentiate what was really said by the women themselves and what was added or omitted by the researchers in the course of their own researches. This is a particularly complicated issue,

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<sup>22</sup> Kawada, F. (1997)

<sup>23</sup> Senso Giseisha (eds.) (1997), p.123

<sup>24</sup> Senso Giseisha (eds.) (1997), p.125

because most of the oral testimonies of the women themselves are indeed recorded and edited by the researchers . It seems likely that when researchers recount the lives of ex-“Comfort Women”, in summarising their testimonies, they unintentionally modify or sometimes change the testimonies in order to suit their own perspectives and needs. Researchers who work hard to deliver these testimonies to a wider audience by transcribing, translating, editing and publishing tend to regard themselves as transparent tools that bring the women’s testimonies light. This is a risky assumption.

However, here arises a question as to whether the involvement of researchers means that “Comfort Women” are just being exploited, deprived of their own actual voices, and their voices only used as a political agenda? I would like to argue against such a claim. Recently, there has been a lot of research into testimonies, and some researchers have started to treat testimonies as “the powerful textual affirmation of the speaking subject.”<sup>25</sup> And it is from this perspective that I would like to look at “Comfort Women’s” testimonies. Testimonies should, in short, be understood as the space for the complex process of subject formation and the agency’s relation to this process. These “Comfort Women” are, therefore, not exploited beings but actually participate in the testimonial construction process.

### **Testimonies as the space for subject formation**

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<sup>25</sup> Beverley (1992), p.73. On testimonies, see Salazar, C. (1991), Sommer, D. (1991), Beverley (1992), Carr, R. (1994), Beverley, J. (1996), Beverley, J. (1999), Thoma, P. (2000).

In Althusser's theory of interpellation, the subordination to authoritative voice (power) takes place through language. To become subjects, thus means they come to exist as linguistic beings. However, there are some difficulties in Althusser's theory of interpellation. In Butler's reading, one of the problems that Althusser did not explore much was the possibility of the subject to subvert, because subject for him is only constituted according to given ideologies. Following Butler's argument, it is that although the subjection is initiated by the call and operated within certain ideologies, subjects are neither fully constructed in accordance with such hailing nor can the process of subject-formation ever be completed. In other words, subjects are not determined by discourse, and they are open for resignification, and actively involved in the process of interpellation. As subjects are constructed being called by certain names, there arises the possibility of subversion of these original names. What needs to be stressed here is that the individuals are not only waiting passively to be assigned their names. They might, and this is particularly pertinent in the analysis of "Comfort Women", have started to talk some time ago. As the utterance of the individuals meets the call of the addresser (ideology), they could become the subject, so being recognised. Here their own initiative in voicing becomes important. Although individuals' active involvement in voicing their message is crucial, it is necessary to clarify the fact that only the voices which meet a certain ideology can be heard, and can thus become subjects. If one borrows the argument from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak<sup>26</sup>, most individuals are foreclosed to become subjects as they are not actually "hailed", therefore they

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<sup>26</sup> Spivak, G. C. (1988d), Spivak, G. C. (1999).

are not heard and do not become discursive beings. What I would like to emphasise, based on Butler's argument, is that there is no agency (individuals) prior to subject-formation. The voices of individuals are found retrospectively, after the constitution of subjects, when resignification is taking place.<sup>27</sup> Because of the interaction and dynamics of interpellation, subjects are always imperfect and individuals cannot be exhausted. I argue, following the theory of interpellation, that testimonies can be the moment or space for formation and subversion of subjects. This way of viewing testimonies goes beyond the discussion of truth-value or exploitation of the narrator by the listeners.

"Comfort Women's" testimonies too, can be considered as an attempt to constitute subjects, where the agency emerges, and I will present some examples of these, below. As I said, many "Comfort Women" started to give testimonies from the beginning of the 1990s answering the call to tell of their experience during the Second World War. However, long before they came forward in the 1990s, quite a few of them had started to talk. Therefore, it is not in the 1990s, as mostly suggested, that their voices suddenly emerged for the first time. The voices were there, but only retrospectively present, and they were not heard. Even before the 1990s, some of the women attempted to speak, but their efforts met with little success. Their speech has only been listened to from the 1990s, when, I suggest, the ideologies surrounding the "Comfort Women" issue changed, and so enabled the formation of a certain subjectivity of "Comfort Women". The maturing of feminism, to give an example, allowed for an international and

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<sup>27</sup> Butler, J. (1995b), p.135

global collaboration, which helped enhance the awareness of women's human rights in international institutions.<sup>28</sup> It also helped introduce a shift in the notion of "rape" in an international setting as a war crime.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, being sexually exploited is no longer something that the women should be ashamed of or blame themselves for. Once freed from their lives as "Comfort Women", the women not only buried their past deep in their hearts, being ashamed of what had happened to them, but also somehow blamed themselves for being the cause of the event. People around them also treated them as outcasts or socially deviant. These women were in despair, believing for many years that their stories of suffering and abuse and murmurings of complaint would never be listened to. Therefore, the time when they met the call for sexually enslaved women not to be ashamed and not to blame themselves for what had happened, was the moment of their subject formation. Feminists had started to claim that it was the Japanese Government that was responsible, and pleaded that the survivors of the system of "Comfort Women" should face up to their past bravely, in order to restore to themselves their dignity. With this change in the climate of opinion, women began to constitute the subject position as the "victims" of the system of "Comfort Women". Such a calling came to emerge nearly fifty years after the Second World War, and was aided by the growth of feminist movements, particularly in Asia, which had slowly started to carry out investigations into sexual slavery during the Second World War.

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<sup>28</sup> For example, The UN Women's Conferences since 1965. See Charlesworth, H. and C. M. Chinkin (2000), p.48 and Chapter 7.

<sup>29</sup> Stetz, M. D. (2001), p.92, Charlesworth, H. and C. M. Chinkin (2000), pp.252-255

One of the Filipina “Comfort Women”, Maria Rosa Luna Henson described how she was very shocked to hear a women’s appeal on the radio on 30th June 1992, and she can never forget it.<sup>30</sup> “Do not be ashamed of yourself. Having been sexually enslaved is not your fault. It is the Japanese Military that is responsible. Please stand up and fight for your right.”<sup>31</sup> Henson lived a very painful life because of her experience as a “Comfort Woman”, and particularly after her mother’s death, who was the only one to know she had been a “Comfort Woman”, she felt isolated in not being able to talk about her experience. Therefore, she was astonished to hear the appeal on the radio. Many women describe their joy at being recognised by coming forward to testify and express how relieved they were that their sufferings were actually listened to.

There is no single healthy part in my body. I hurt everywhere. There was a time when I suffered severe insomnia. But since I have now poured out my life story to you I feel much more easy. I will be able to sleep and eat much better. (Mun Okchu, South Korea)<sup>32</sup>

It is extremely hard to tell the painful experiences during the War, but by unloading the burden like a mountain from my shoulders, and pulling out thorns from my wounded heart, I felt my strength and dignity, which had been lost for ages, were being recovered. (Maria Rosa Luna Henson, the Philippines – translation mine from the Japanese text)<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Henson, M. R. L. (1995), p. 163

<sup>31</sup> Henson, M. R. L. (1995), p. 168

<sup>32</sup> The Korean Council (eds.) (1995), p.114

<sup>33</sup> Henson, M. R. L. (1995), p.172

Now, having reported to the Council and after having poured out my story, I feel so relieved. (Yi Yongsu, South Korea)<sup>34</sup>

As I said earlier, some women had been trying to speak out about their experience before the 1990s, for example, in the 1970s or 1980s, but they were never heard. One of the examples can be presented from So Shin Do, a Korean Women who has been living in Japan for fifty years after the War. Having lived in very harsh financial conditions for a long time, and realising that she could not cope with such difficulty any longer, she applied for social benefit in the 1970s, to the local welfare office. However, far from being sympathetic to her, the staff at the office and neighbours humiliated Song Shin Do making insulting remarks that she was not entitled to receive the benefit and should go back to Korea.<sup>35</sup> Unable to bear such abusive treatment from the staff at the local welfare units and also of a local council assembly member, she got angry and shouted: "Stop making a fuss! I served in the battlefields. I fought for this country. You have no right to speak ill of me!"<sup>36</sup> But nothing changed. She was made fun of, was insulted and shouted at to go back to Korea. She had never told anyone explicitly about her past as a "Comfort Woman".<sup>37</sup> However, as she had to register as the local office as a *Higkiagesha* (repatriate) from the battlefield in China in order to receive her food ration when she came to Japan, everyone around her noticed (or would suspect) that she had been a "Comfort Woman". Many ex-soldiers who went to the war knew about comfort stations, and as Song Shin Do, a Korean

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<sup>34</sup> The Korean Council (eds.) (1995), p.94

<sup>35</sup> Zainichi no "Ianfu" Saiban wo Sasaeru Kai (eds.) (1997), p.98. (Hereafter Zainichi)

<sup>36</sup> Jyugun Ianfu Mondai Uriyoson Network (YosonNet), p.54

<sup>37</sup> Zainichi (eds.) (1997), p.102

woman, returned from the battlefield, people often gossiped unsympathetically that she had been a “Comfort Woman”.<sup>38</sup>

It was only in 1992, when the issue of “Comfort Women” began to be discussed widely that Song Shin Do’s voice met receptive ears for the first-time.<sup>39</sup> Although it would be an overstatement to say there was a fundamental shift in patriarchal ideology, the 1990s was the period during which the problematic issue of women’s sexual exploitation by capitalism and the nation-state found a wider space for discussion. This context enabled a new call of interpellation, finally meeting Song Shin Do’s anguished cries. By being recognised and in turn by recognising herself as a victim of the system of “Comfort Women”, who had suffered sexual exploitation at the hands of the Imperial Japanese Military, she could also gain fuller? understanding of the reason for her suffering: the nature of the colonisation of Korea, and the discrimination against Koreans in Japanese society. Listening, in the thirteenth oral proceedings of her court case in March 1997, to the extended explanation of the social structure of discrimination endured by her and other Koreans in post-war Japan, Song Shin Do is said to have remarked happily that: “I knew that I had been discriminated against, but I did not know why. But today, everything became clear. Nobody ever explained to me in such a comprehensive way.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Zainichi (eds.) (1997), pp.101-2

<sup>39</sup> Song Shin Do has only become known to those who now support her lawsuit and other volunteers today, through the telephone hotline set up in 1992 to gather information on “Comfort Women”. An anonymous caller informed of Song Shin Do, suggesting someone should see her. Zainichi (eds.) (1997), p.5

<sup>40</sup> Zainichi (eds.) (1997), p.10

What is important to stress here is that the subject can only be constituted in accordance with given ideologies. The most obvious indication of this is that the “Comfort Women” are constituted along the patriarchal dichotomy of virgin/whore. Many “Comfort Women” came forward in the 1990s in the ideological shift that no longer regarded being “Comfort Women” as a cause of shame, and saw the Japanese Government as responsible, rather than the women themselves. Once ex-“Comfort Women” started to give testimonies on their experiences, many of them emphasised the distress and anger of losing their virginity.

I did hospital work during the day, and at night I had to sleep with the surgeon. It was he who took my virginity. I had been brought up to value my chastity, and I believed it to be important. So I wept a lot. I thought I was ruined. (Mun P'ilgi, South Korea<sup>41</sup>)

... I want them (the Japanese) to compensate us for the sacrifices we were forced to make when we were virgins. They took us completely under their control, but now they are making feeble excuses about the recruitment of comfort women, and they say that we volunteered. (Yi Yongnyo, South Korea<sup>42</sup>)

These women want to make the difference between voluntary prostitution and virgins who were forced into prostitution. Stressing their virginity was a way to emphasise the difference from prostitutes who voluntarily sell sex for money, and this

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<sup>41</sup> The Korean Council (eds.) (1995), p.83

<sup>42</sup> The Korean Council (eds.) (1995), p.150. The last part of the second sentence here reads in the Japanese translation, “they say that civilians voluntarily recruit women” (implies no involvement of the government). Japanese version, p.240

claim surfaces more and more frequently in testimonies in the late 1990s.

In Korea, the idea of chastity is so important that you can sacrifice your life for it. (The Japanese Military) took hundreds, thousands of these women who strongly wished to be chaste. (Kim Tokkyon, South Korea<sup>43</sup>)

I sometimes hear very odd things. Those are Japanese politicians comments that “Comfort Women” are those who voluntarily became “Comfort Women” to earn money... In Korea, when it was much more conservative (than now), it was unimaginable that young girls would sell sex for money. (Chong Soung, South Korea – translation mine from the Japanese text<sup>44</sup>)

Such emphasis on the subjects is associated with the prevailing assumption that virgins who were brought into military sexual prostitution were somehow worse off than prostitutes. Moreover, such testimonies may have been triggered by the series of comments of conservative (right-wing) politicians in 1996 that “Comfort Women” were prostitutes under state regulated prostitution, who earned money by selling sex, and that there were no forced “Comfort Women”.<sup>45</sup>

Another point I would like to indicate is that although the subjects that make up the “Comfort Women” are interpellated through a variety of ideologies, the very answers of “Comfort Women” to the interpellation could act as a call to the other “Comfort Women”. Many “Comfort Women” state that they

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<sup>43</sup> Senso Giseisha (eds.) (1997), p.44. In her earlier testimony she does not put stress on this issue. See The Korean Council (eds.) (1995), pp.41-49.

<sup>44</sup> Senso Giseisha (eds.) (1997), p.55

<sup>45</sup> Uesugi, S. (1997), p.200

decided to come forward after listening to Kim Haksun or Maria Rosa Luna Henson or other “Comfort Women” speak on the television or radio.

In November 1991, at 10:00 p.m., I watched Kim Haksun tell her story on national television. The following morning, I rang the number which had been shown, and met up with her. She showed me how to report what had happened to me. (Hwang Kumju, South Korea<sup>46</sup>)

All through the early part of 1992 I had been moved to tears each time I saw the plight of the Korean ‘comfort women’ on television. I watched them with pain in my heart as they were sobbing for justice. All I wanted to do was to put my arms around them and hug them. I should be with them, were my thoughts. ...And suddenly, I felt that the story I had carried for all these years, in my heart, could now be told. The courage of those Korean women gave me courage. At long last it could be told. (Jan Ruff-O’Herne, The Netherlands<sup>47</sup>)

Such inter-subjective calls prompted these women to come forward. The women are also involved in forming their subject position and performing their subjectivity. In a interview on her film *Nazen Mokusori II*, which explores the present lives of “Comfort Women”, the director Byun Young-joo claims that one of the reasons for the stylistic differences between the first film and the second is that the women are concerned with their image and how they are seen. After the first film, the women came to realise that they are attractive and were using their charms to appeal to the audience, so as not to be looked on only as pitiful victims of sexual

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<sup>46</sup> The Korean Council (eds.) (1995), p.78

<sup>47</sup> Ruff-O’Herne (1994), p.197

violence. They wished to be seen as vigorous and hard workers.<sup>48</sup> Byun, continues, however, that when they turn up in more public places, for example, when giving testimonies, they wish to be seen to be pitiful and therefore behave as such.<sup>49</sup>

There are, indeed, the problems and possibilities of unconscious/hidden exploitation of “Comfort Women” testimonies/voices, and this issue should not be overlooked. However, what I have tried to argue in this paper is that if “Comfort Women” are seen only as victims of this process of commodification and exploitation, that again can end in humiliating “Comfort Women” by denying their agency. Becoming the subjects is the very process that women themselves are also actively involved in. However limited the subjects might be – because they are constituted by pre-given ideologies – being interpellated is the path that opens up other possibilities of constituting a different subjectivity. The subjects as “Comfort Women” are no way stable. Quite a few “Comfort Women” who initially wanted to differentiate themselves from “voluntary Comfort Women” or prostitutes, have subsequently come to realise that these “prostitutes” are just as much the victims of social exclusion and oppression as they are.<sup>50</sup> Through attending seminars and meeting many people, they gradually came to understand that there was/is always a system in society which makes certain groups of people suffer. In a sense, they manage to subvert the subjectivity which was once formed according to the virgin/whore dichotomy. Moreover, many Korean “Comfort Women” realised that the nation-state with which they

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<sup>48</sup> Pandora (1998), p.26

<sup>49</sup> Pandora (1998), p.9

<sup>50</sup> Comité de soutien pur la projection du film *Murmures* (2000), p.18

identified, and which they regarded as their protector, can become oppressive to non-nationals. Byun, again, reports about a “Comfort Woman” who visited Vietnam and learnt about the massacre of villagers by the Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War:

Her knowledge of the Vietnam War was very limited, assuming that “Korean fought in Vietnam for the justice. Because they fought against the threat of Communism.” However, such understanding started to shake. She was bewildered because her own nation-state is not only the victim but is also the victimizer.<sup>51</sup>

After listening to one of the two survivors of the village, the woman asked the survivor to organise demonstrations in front of the Korean Embassy in Vietnam, as the women, the victims of Japanese war atrocities, have been demonstrating in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul.

What I have argued here in this paper is that the testimonies should not be read one-dimensionally in the light of “truth” or “falsity” but should be seen rather as the moment of, and space for, subject-formation. Although subjectivities are constituted only in accordance with given ideologies, they also offer the possibility of subverting subjectivity which was formed by such dominant ideologies. The examples above indicate that “Comfort Women’s” testimonies can provide the opportunity to break through socially prevalent ideologies, such as the virgin/whore dichotomy. It is in just such possibility of subverting the dominant ideology that the richness of testimonies actually lies.

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<sup>51</sup> Comité de soutien pur la projection du film *Murmures* (2000), p.18

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