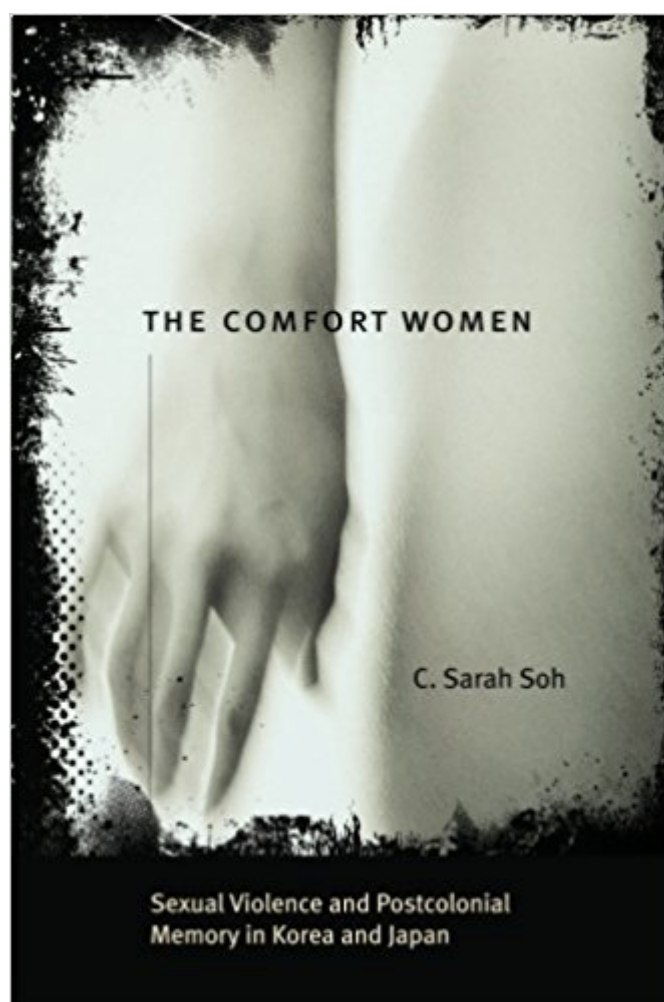


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# The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence And Postcolonial Memory In Korea And Japan (Worlds Of Desire: The Chicago Series On Sexuality, Gender, And Culture)





## Synopsis

In an era marked by atrocities perpetrated on a grand scale, the tragedy of the so-called comfort women—mostly Korean women forced into prostitution by the Japanese army—endures as one of the darkest events of World War II. These women have usually been labeled victims of a war crime, a simplistic view that makes it easy to pin blame on the policies of imperial Japan and therefore easier to consign the episode to a war-torn past. In this revelatory study, C. Sarah Soh provocatively disputes this master narrative. Soh reveals that the forces of Japanese colonialism and Korean patriarchy together shaped the fate of Korean comfort women—a double bind made strikingly apparent in the cases of women cast into sexual slavery after fleeing abuse at home. Other victims were press-ganged into prostitution, sometimes with the help of Korean procurers. Drawing on historical research and interviews with survivors, Soh tells the stories of these women from girlhood through their subjugation and beyond to their efforts to overcome the traumas of their past. Finally, Soh examines the array of factors—from South Korean nationalist politics to the aims of the international women's human rights movement—that have contributed to the incomplete view of the tragedy that still dominates today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“This is a courageous, judicious, and well-written book that refuses to yield to knee-jerk

responses or politically correct narratives, but rather insists on setting the comfort women within broader historical and cultural contexts. Sympathetic and sensitive, C. Sarah Soh nevertheless challenges both feminist and ethnic nationalist paradigms in an astonishing display of objectivity. The *Comfort Women* is a lucid, brave, and important work. (Gail Lee Bernstein, author of *Isami's House: Three Centuries of a Japanese Family*) "C. Sarah Soh's study of comfort women offers a close-grained yet compassionate analysis of this disturbing experience. She cogently deploys ethnography and history to illuminate a crucial case in gender and international issues. (James L. Peacock, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) "This is a dispassionate, careful, well-researched, and brave book. Embedding her story in the whole history of prostitution and abusive treatment of women from the colonial period to the present, Soh shows that the comfort women system partook not just of the authoritarian politics of Japanese colonialism, but was also deeply rooted in a Korean patriarchy whose effects continued on after 1945. I expect this book will be the standard work on the subject for some time. (Bruce Cumings, University of Chicago)" "A brave and impressive book that usefully complicates and adds layers to our understanding of a sordid system." (Jeff Kingston *Japan Times*)

C. Sarah Soh is professor of anthropology at San Francisco State University and the author of *Women in Korean Politics*.

This book provides a much-needed alternate angle of the comfort women experiences. Because the era and the situation was so tragic, most accounts are written in a narrative that everything was terrible, all of these women hated every aspect of their miserable lives, and that is the only way to interpret this time in history. C. Sarah Soh comes in and offers to tell the largely ignored accounts of the women that had neutral or even positive things to say about things that happened to them. She is not glorifying anything that happened at this time, just offering the testimonies that do not fit into the popular narrative. The events of this period are still tragic, and I support the survivors' seeking closure by way of an official apology, but I appreciate being able to see more sides of the situation to get a fuller picture. Only four stars because sometimes the writing got awkward, like when she would unnecessarily provide the Korean pronunciation for a random word. Some made sense because they were thematic and appeared often throughout the book, but others seemed to just be there as a reminder that you are reading about people in another country who spoke another language.

Fantastic work viewing the comfort women issue in light of gender issues. Well-researched and footnoted, and yet written in a very accessible way that's an easy read.

it`s good!!

I enjoyed reading this book, because it has a balanced yet in-depth look at the Comfort Women in Korea. It was educating yet sobering to learn about all the different complicated circumstances that lead to militarized prostitution.

... and most definitely NOT for casual readers or those who are not willing to re-examine their preconceived ideas and views of the wartime comfort women. This work is likewise ill-suited for those who aren't serious readers of history. C. Sarah Soh, as a native Korean who was fortunate to receive formal education both in her homeland and abroad, has produced a masterful examination of a controversial issue involving Korea and Japan which people from both countries have long oversimplified. Koreans generally believe that Imperial Japan's leadership ordered, planned, and executed the gunpoint kidnapping of thousands of Korean females and summarily shipped them like chattel to frontline brothels. Japanese people - at least those who know this issue - either agree that the Koreans were largely victimized, or claim that this is a gross fabrication and that the comfort women were essentially willing prostitutes. Professor Soh cites several examples, such as interviews with survivors, to show that the truth is far more complex. Some survivors stated they were not forcibly taken by Japanese troops. Others are shown to have bought their way to freedom with earnings - earnings??? Yes. Hence the question - if the comfort women were slaves, they wouldn't have had wages. Then what were they: slaves or prostitutes or something else? Additionally, Professor Soh does the reader a huge service by detailing the sociocultural contexts of 1930s-1940s Korea and Japan. Information on views on sex, women, and the sexism that characterized pre-modern Korean and Japanese societies is provided, thus presenting the reader with a better understanding of what facilitated the existence of "sex care work" in both societies. Anyone familiar with Korea and Japan today will be aware that extramarital affairs have been generally tolerated, historically speaking, and that older men have often availed themselves of sexual services provided by far younger women. The comfort women issue did not happen in a vacuum. Japanese generals didn't wake up one day, deciding to 'award' their enlisted men with females to sate their urges, and they didn't decide to violently seize thousands of Korean women at will. As a reader of Korean ethnicity myself, I know this is a painful subject, and I personally believe

there were abductions. But as the attentive reader will see, the story is far more diverse and much more complicated than flag-waving nationalists on either side of the East Sea (or, as some call it, the Sea of Japan), would want us to believe. It is worth noting (somewhat of a spoiler alert) that Professor Soh was shunned and coldly treated by South Koreans who are involved in the redress movement after those activists learned of the fruits of her research. I wonder why. Did Professor Soh's findings upset their ostensibly benign agenda? Is there something she uncovered the redress activists preferred not to even know and prefer that their compatriots remain ignorant of? If the comfort women issue is of any interest to you, read this book. It is a must-have in the library of any serious student of Korea's modern history.

This has become a painful read. Not the material - just the author and her fascination with big words. It's been mentioned previously in other comments. She also loves to add suffixes to make basic words seem big as well. Overall the book doesn't flow well. I've still got to finish the book for a college class but dreading it.

Sarah Soh has written a balanced and informative new book on the Comfort Women issue that looks at the subject from the perspective of the bigger issue of prostitution in Asia. She meticulously documents the diversity in experiences of women recruited into this industry. Some are falsely recruited and misled to believe that they would be doing another form of work. Others are allured by the promises of entering a profession such as the *kaisang* profession only to end up in comfort women stations. Still others have been kidnapped by soldiers and forced into sexual slavery. Her book is a must read for those interested in scholarly research based on archival documents and extensive interviews-and observations conducted on both sides of this issue. The result is a provocative new work that challenges us to think beyond the comfort women issue to that of the rise of industrialization and women's quest for liberation from all forms of male-oriented domination-and control in favor of a more balanced relationship between peoples of all genders (i.e., a relationship of partnership and mutual respect between men and women).

This is certainly one of the best studies that have been written on this topic. The arguments are balanced and extremely well researched and they are presented in an interesting and lively fashion. I myself have worked many years researching the question of prostitution (both forced and by choice) and I found Soh's Appendix on 'Doing Expatriate Anthropology' to be very representative of the problems that people can find when research and writing on a topic with so many problematic

and upsetting facets and political agendas. The fact that Soh avoids generalizations is to her credit and her examination of how 'comfort women' fitted into national structures of gendered violence (in both Korea and Japan) brings new and important debates to this topic. I thoroughly recommend this to anyone interested in really understanding this topic from a balanced position.

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