The Question of Ontology and Time in Korea-Japan Relations: in the case of the ‘Comfort Women’ issue

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Introduction

Study of International Relations (IR) has long been constructed on the unquestioned premise of state-centric ontology. Here ontology refers to the philosophy of existence, and the study of ‘actors’ in IR as an academic discipline, or subjectivity in a more general sense of philosophy and other disciplines. Obviously, we choose issues and events to focus on in order to comprehend the world in the practice of studying IR when we investigate the way the world functions. In this process, what, we think constitutes the world, has been actually chosen by us as relevant ‘factors’ or ‘variables’ of the world. This means that when we talk about Korea-Japan relations for example, the way in that we come to know the relations heavily influences the subjects and contents of the relations.

When we analyse or investigate international issues such as Korea-Japan relations, we always presume fixed identities of subjects, whether they are ‘pure’ or ‘hybrid’. Identities are presumably rigid in any sense, and this means that we are missing the concept of temporality in making sense of contemporary world affairs. When we investigate, let’s say, Japan, what constitute Japan, or contents of Japan, are presumably pre-given and will never change, and researchers are supposed to ‘discover’ them. Japan and its relations to Korea are set to be timeless, and completely deprived of possibility of transformation. This is also the case even when we look into such presumably fluid ontology as the Korea-Japan relations, the relationality is supposed to be fixed.

However, when we take into account the idea of time, the world appears to us in the form of completely different scenery. The concept of time
is initially put forward by Kimberly Hutchings (Hutchings 1998), and now attracting wide variety audience (Agathangelou and Killian 2016). In this paper, I will take up the Korea-Japan relations in order to investigate the way in which our perceptions are limited and controlled by the premise of the timeless idea of identity. Here I will analyse the Korea-Japan relations particularly regarding the historical issue of the war-time sexual violence committed by Japan, often referred to as the ‘Comfort Women’ issue, in order to clarify that not only discourses of the state level diplomatic relations but also the voices of NGOs have been captured by the static idea of identity and time. This point is indispensable because I presume that the neglect of time in IR is one of the reasons why this historical issue has remained unsettled so long.

Hybridity, Post-hybridity, and Relational Transformation

Recently, Chih-yu Shih and Josuke Ikeda developed an argument called ‘post-hybridity’ (Shih and Ikeda 2016). In the argument, they contend that anyone is by no means ‘pure’ in the contemporary world. Purity here refers to that of identity often found in the imperialism, and hybridity, as an identity of the dominated, has been often understood as where counter arguments to the colonising essentialism are put forward. Hybridity can be interpreted, in this sense, the origin of the strike-back of the colonised to the coloniser, of the victims of the imperial order to the beneficiary of the liberal international society, in the two distinct world order (Keene 2002; Suzuki 2009). One of the supposed advantages of the hybridity was its un-sited or de-territorialised identity. This is precisely the reason why it is regarded as having the potentiality for the world’s peaceful transformation. However, it became evident recently that quite a few hybrid identities do have their own sites, imagined territories, and fixed sources of identities, Shih and Ikeda correctly name them ‘sited hybridity’, which in turn produce ‘others’ of the two distinct orders (Shih and Ikeda 2016).

According to them, the reason for the emergence of the sited hybridity was the lack of attention to the concept of temporality. Even in the
case of hybrid identity, it is in a process of transformation, and never stops. Thus, hybrid identity is never stable or fixed. Kimberly Hutchings initially put forward an argument on time and IR that the world appears to us in the form of completely different scenery, when we take into account the idea of time (Hutchings 1998). This idea is transformative and now attracting wide variety audience (Agathangelou and Killian 2016). The issue of identity is also the case. As Shih and Ikeda argue, once we adopt the idea of time, identity appears to be a process.

The transformative process of post-hybrid identity is, however, no way to go everywhere. It is rather empirically witnessed that the time in post-hybrid identity goes cyclical rather than linear. It is a temporal appearance that a subject subscribes to a particular identity. In the next moment, it appears to do to a different, quite often opposite, identity. It totally depends on the time which identity to surface, and seems to be ‘without a scientifically decidable pattern’ (Shih and Ikeda 2016).

Under the conditions of post-hybridity, the territorially irrelevant call or urge of a particular mode of self-identification answered by indigenous leadership decides what reign for the time being. The same Korean intellectuals, for example, could take pride on the recognition of their English-written scholarship by their American colleagues in one moment, but denounce liberalistic suspicion towards nationalism in the next moment in order to promote Korean unification as the utmost life goal of all Koreans. Multi-layered values and identities do not oblige a synthetic solution to all acquired and internalized values and identities (Shih and Ikeda 2016).

The idea of the non-synthesis is the point here. The contention that all post-hybrid identities are fluid and changing means that they appear to be inconsistent. This is precisely the reason why the temporality of post-hybridity does not form a linear historiography. The process they are in is not a process we usually understand. It is rather a field in which different, sometimes contradictory, elements are co-existent.
This idea of non-synthesis reminds us of the philosophy of ‘eternal present’ put forward by Nishida Kitaro of the Kyoto School. Nishida was the prominent scholar of the School and developed an existentialist philosophy with a particular focus on time. Nishida argues that identity is out of the ‘continuity of discontinuity’ of the present which is constantly open to unexpected encounters. While the present is intervened by the past in the form of given socio-political circumstance of the self and under the influence of the its future plans, it is also open to unpredicted and uncontrollable contingencies. Sometimes these factors contradict each other, thus identity is always full of contradictions. As a result, he names it ‘self-identity of the absolute contradiction’ (Nishida 1965). This identity appears to us as contingent and unpredictable. This is because identity is in itself contradictory.

However, this unpredictable identity is under the pressure of territorialisation and totalization. This is because our efforts to understand and make sense of the world always forcibly expect a subject to be consistent and coherent. In fact, we always unquestionably expect Japan to be Japan as we know of, and Korea to be Korea that we know. In this process, we choose what Japan or Korea is composed of, and tend to disregard the element which does not fit in the story by disregarding the influence of temporality on the subjectivity. Consequently, we could see constructed relations of subjectivities, but they become frozen in time.

Previous works on the Korea-Japan relations

The subjectivities frozen in time are easily found in the traditional narrative of the Korea-Japan relations too. There have been numerous books and concerning the Korea-Japan relations published in this several years, there seem to be a few styles of ontological composition while all of them are based on the static idea of identity and frozen time without exception. The most typical is the discourse of confrontation on the basis of Hobbesian worldview of ‘War of all against all’. Discourses of this sort often appear with emotional and journalistic tone. The books and articles in this cluster mainly
aim to instigate audience in order to sell their products, and their
descriptions of Korea-Japan relations are often based on unreliable sources
and speculations without evidence. What Korea-Japan relations constitutes
here include personal issues of the Presidents and Prime Ministers, the
socio-political environments in which they grew up, differences of alleged
national human characteristics of both countries. They often claim that they
are reporting the ‘truth’ of the opponent.

The second is based on state-centered epistemology of Korea-Japan
relations which often focuses on such issues as the interpretations of history,
the war-time sexual violence commonly known as the ‘Comfort Women’ issue,
and the territorial dispute of ‘Dokdo/Takeshima’. Although this type
inevitably concentrates on such economic, historical and sociological issues,
the main concern is diplomatic as the main focus is on the state. Discourses
of this sort is quintessentially timeless in a sense that all ontological
qualities are presumed to be static and unchanging. They presume that such
agent as Korea and Japan hold fixed identities, their aims to maintain the
state sovereignty and maximise their profit are permanent, only
methodology to achieve their goals vary (Cha 1999).

Another stack is more cooperative. This type is unsurprisingly
exemplified by Korean and Japanese historian who are actively engaging in
drafting historical textbooks together and publishing them in both countries.
Obviously, this ambitious attempt has been done in reflecting the gap of
historical understanding between Korea and Japan, and a few series have
already been published (Kimishima 2009). Here ontology of Korea-Japan
relations consists of historical understanding. If both countries’ citizens have
consistent understanding of history of both nations, the relationship will be
reconciled. If not, confrontational scenario will prevail. As discourses of this
sort focus on history, they are likely to recognise the constitutive character of
Korea-Japan relations. In this sense, they are more conscious of the concept
of time. However, their approach does not go as far as to contend that
identities are fluid. Their argument presumes that historical facts are
multi-dimensional, thus subject to interpretation, the subjectivity as the
basis of understanding is presumably rigid and unchanging.
Among those, the most influential in contemporary East Asian IR is the second type, and it is often regarded as the starting point of the investigation. In this understanding of East Asian IR and Korea-Japan relations, the ontology is usually defined by three nation-states, mainly Korean, Japanese, and the US governments, and the foremost emphasis is on the antagonism between Korea and Japan. While this state-centric epistemology is mistakenly mingled with the traditional discourse of realism in IR, it is often said that the antagonism between Korea and Japan is the origin of the failure of realist theory of IR in the region. While realism assumes that all nation-states conduct their policies according to the rational calculation of maximising power and interests, the antagonistic relations between Korea and Japan appear to be an exceptional case. In other words, realism fails to explain with its presumptions and logics (E. Kang 2002, 1006; D. Kang 2000, 157-8).

The most prominent in this context is Victor Cha's *Alignment Despite Antagonism: the US-Korea-Japan Security triangle*. According to Victor Cha, Korea’s and Japan’s individual relations with the US explain Korea-Japan relations, and consequently Korea-Japan relations are just a ‘quasi-alliances’ (Cha 1999 loc. 495/5151). In this context, such concepts as ‘entrapment’ and ‘abandonment’ anxieties become indispensable. Abandonment refers to the ‘fear that the ally may leave the alliance or may not fulfil obligations to it’ (Cha 1999 loc.523/5151). This is typically exemplified by the fear of Japanese government at the present, and consequently the government is now forcibly legislating the ‘Security Pact’ despite the massive protest of students, intellectuals, ordinary citizens, and, more recently, even high school students (Asahi Shimbun 3/August/2015). Entrapment takes place ‘when a commitment to an alliance turns detrimental to one’s interests’ (Cha 1999 loc.523/5151). It is a political situation in which a nation-state is dragged into a conflict for the ally’s interest, which one does not share (Cha 1999 loc.523/5151). By using this anxiety, Japan’s fear of entrapment in the Vietnam War can be explained (Asaba 2015, 163).

Cha’s argument does not stop here. He contends that when two
nations have asymmetry in perception, then the relationship between Korea and Japan becomes characterised by antagonism. The period of 1972-74 when the détente started, for instance, the relationship between the two deteriorated. While Japan was less concerned with US desertion, Korea's anxiety was amounted. The result was friction (Cha 1998, loc.1341/5151). Following years, President Carter threatened withdrawal of the US army from Korea, symmetrical abandonment anxiety led both nations to be more cooperative (Cha 1998, loc.1870/5151).

What intriguing in Cha’s contention is his focus on the structural changes in the international environment. Symmetrical or asymmetrical anxiety is supposed to be a spontaneous reaction to the alteration of the international structure, particularly the US military presence in the region, consequently the origin of Korea-Japan antagonism cannot be fully explicated in terms of the bilateral relations, but always multilateral. Here is change in ontology, and Korea-Japan relations is placed in a larger context.

Adapting Cha’s argument, Asaba develops his theory in explicating the current relationship between Korea and Japan. According to Asaba, Korea now fears the entrapment in the conflict between Japan and China, and possible confrontation between the US and China. On the other hand, Japan now has an anxiety that the US might abandon Japan in the event of direct confrontation between Japan and China (Asaba 2015 163). Understanding of US perception towards China is the key in their individual diplomacy but differently perceived in both nations. While Japan does not conceive the possibility of US-China reconciliation and confrontation is inevitable, Korea cogitates the US-China relations and seems to be hoping the ‘New Model of Major Power Relations’ scenario to become materialised. This is not a new rule for the game, but the character and nature of the game itself have been substantially changed (Asaba 2015 156). Obviously Asaba sees Korea to become fully prepared and equipped with new thinking of the world to the new game, Japan does not appear in that way. In his theory of Asian version of revisionist realism, Asaba contends that the antagonism between Korea and Japan only benefits China in the rapidly changing East Asian international environment. China always has an ambition to capture
the western Pacific, and failure of cooperation between Korea and Japan will provide China a good opportunity to proceed its plan for oceanic expansion (Asaba 2015 177).

We have now four parties in comprehending the current East Asian politics with special attention to the Korea-Japan relations. However the discourse on the basis of revisionist realism does not provide much in terms of mutual understanding of Korea and Japan. The presumption here is such timeless concepts of nation-state with instrumental reason. It is supposed to rationally calculate the cost and benefit of diplomatic policies in order to maximise the power and profit, and their given identities are supposed to be static. As a consequence, settling the ‘Comfort Women’ issue or Dokdo/Takushima territorial dispute finds its place in their discourse only when East Asian realists speculate that the issues will bring the benefit to their nations in the context of East Asian international relations. In this way, majority of discourses of IR, undoubtedly including East Asian IR, appear to us as timeless and does not seem to count the possibility of fluidity and change in identity in the way the concept of post-hybridity suggests.

Post-hybridity and normative argument

Where could we find a different interpretation of identity and time in Korea-Japan relations? Before proceeding to a concrete discussion of time in Korea-Japan relations, we need to touch upon the relationship between post-hybridity and normative argument of IR. First of all, we need to understand that post-hybridity is a descriptive concept, which portrays the characteristics of identity in contemporary world affairs. As it is a descriptive concept, post-hybridity becomes extremely weak when it comes to the normative aspect of IR. Similar problem can be found in some ancient Asian philosophy such as Buddhism and Daoism as well as the Kyoto School philosophy. This is the reason why such philosophy and religions have fell into incorporation with violent dictatorship like the case of the Kyoto School (Shimizu 2010; 2014; 2016).

One of the ancient wisdoms in relation to this lack of normative
quality is the introduction of the concept of reincarnation. It is supposed in Buddhism that human beings reincarnate, and it is unpredictable what one will be in the next life. Buddhist wisdom tells us that what you will be in the next life totally depends on what you have done in the present life. This Buddhist teaching of reincarnation functions in the similar manner that John Rawls's argument of veil of ignorance and the original position does in terms of morality. Regarding the idea of the original position, John Rawls defines:

no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like. Nor, again, does anyone know his conception of the good, the particulars of his rational plan of life, or even the special features of his psychology such as his aversion to risk or liability to optimism or pessimism (Rawls 1999).

Buddhist concept of reincarnation has exactly the same effect here. The idea of veiled identity promotes everyone to behave with morality, that is, to act in maximising the interest of the society as a whole. This is because no one knows who he/she is, thus they are unable to define concrete and particular interest they are supposedly granted. Rather than benefiting someone who is also unable to be defined, they would choose to act for everyone. In the case of reincarnation, the premise appears the same. As people do not know who or what they will be in the next life, they will act to maximise the interest of everyone. Moreover, the premise of reincarnation produces a situation in which one's opponents, politically or economically, might have been families in the previous life. As a result, one would choose to stop competing with them. In any case, the lack of normative aspect in post-hybrid identity can be solved by adopting the idea of Buddhist reincarnation.

However, in order to apply the concept of post-hybridity in Korea-Japan relations, we need to tackle with a further question of collective morality. While Buddhist reincarnation and Rawls's idea of original position usher individuals to moral conduct, it does not necessarily result in morality
of society as a whole. To put it differently, the idea of reincarnation or original position does not practically provide opportunities for individual to think collectively for a particular moment. This is because it is impossible to make judgement of what is virtuous or evil for others in the present moment. In order to assure the collective conduct of citizens on the basis of morality, we are in need to focus on the idea of the public sphere. The public is commonly understood as having two normative meanings that ‘the exercise of governmental and state power should be both ‘public’ (in contrast to ‘secret’) and reflect the power of a deliberating public of free and equal citizens’ (Gripsrud et al. 2010). Hannah Arendt was particularly concerned with the concept of the deliberation, or thinking in her words, and contends that plurality, which is the most important characteristics of the public sphere, emanates from the condition of human beings, and the human condition including freedom to act and speak is an essential prerequisite in creating shared spaces, the public. In other words, the idea of public in Arendt’s understanding comes from the very condition of human existence which is characterized by deliberation, freedom and equality (Arendt 1958). Ultimately, these actions guarantees the ‘in-betweenness’ of human beings, and this is precisely what makes human beings human.

Arendt’s argument that the public sphere is a space in which people freely interact with each other in the form of acting and speaking is suggestive in understanding contemporary world affairs. This is because her concept of the public sphere leads us to an idea that difficulties or problems of a society should be solved by deliberation and dialogue of people in the public. If we take the traditional perception of IR, in which the world consists of nation-state, our discussion on the public will inevitably end up with the mere decision making of concerned government. This is because the problem to solve is often supposed to lie between nation-states in IR. However, if the problem is about human rights, the site of the issue dramatically shifts from between nation-states to individual minds. This means that what at stake in the case of the ‘Comfort Women’ issue is between offenders and the victims. This by no means that Japanese government owes no apology to the victims. On the contrary, it is Japanese government’s responsibility to give a formal
apology and compensation. It is also its obligation to investigate what actually happened in order to prevent similar future tragedies from taking place. However, these actions of Japanese government would not sufficiently heal the pain of the victims. It is rather by recovering what Arendt named the human condition, that is, ‘in-betweenness’ in the minds of victims.

The Issue of Historical Understanding of the war-time Sexual Violence by Japanese Military

The public dialogue, which comes close to between the offenders and victims, in the Korea and Japan relations can be found in interactions of NGOs and civil society movements transcending the border of Korea and Japan. There are several examples in this context. Among those, the most well known is women’s network across the state border for the victims of the ‘Comfort’ System, who sued the Japanese government for formal apology and compensation (Piper 2001; Chou 2003). Although it is still not certain to what extent the dialogue of civil society level has an impact on the Korea-Japan diplomatic relations for the moment, it is certain that these movements have potentialities that Arendt’s thesis of human condition suggests.

It is well known among Asian IR scholars that the issue of ‘Comfort Women’ has long been regarded as an impediment of South Korea-Japan diplomatic relations. The history dispute is about the understanding the Japanese imperial government’s inhumane domination over the region, Korea and China in particular. It is an issue of human rights, dignity, and pain of the victims of war-time violence although largely regarded as a diplomatic one.

The first time this issue of sexual violence came to public attention was in 1991, when three victims of the ‘Comfort System’ sued the Japanese government for an apology and compensation. While the issue started on the basis of individual compensation and demand for official apology, it turned into a diplomatic issue and became the biggest impediment in the way of development of sound diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan.
While this issue is often regarded as a question of the past, it is also a question of the present. This is because the demands of the victims of the ‘Comfort’ system for individual compensation and formal apology were not welcomed by the nationalist politicians and conservative intellectuals in Japan who are currently arguing two distinct counter-narratives regarding the issue. The first is mainly by politicians that Japan’s invasion of other Asian countries was to liberate the latter from the Western imperialist domination over Asia. The assumption here is that a good will justifies the means. When it is used directly to justify the ‘Comfort Women’ system, it also assumes that the relationship between sex and violence is natural and unavoidable, therefore the system was a necessary evil. They said that the ‘Comfort Women’ system was one of the costs they were supposed to pay in the battle against the West, while they did not mention that the alleged cost was not paid by Japan as nation-state but those women who are still suffering the pain even today. The argument of this sort is very old, but the former Mayor of Osaka, Toru Hashimoto, who used to be a media pundit, recently repeated the same argument. He said that the ‘Comfort Women’ system was a necessary evil even though he acknowledges that the women had been acting as prostitutes ‘against their will’ (BBC 14/May/2013). He went even further to say that the US soldiers stationing in the military bases in Okinawa should make use of the local sex industry (Asahishimbun 14/May/2013).

The second counter-argument justifies the ‘Comfort’ system by defining the victims as mere prostitutes and denies the forcible recruitment and conscription by Japanese military. They contend that the women were out there simply to earn money, and it was purely a business activity. The argument of this sort has been widely accepted by right wing politicians. Even a Minister of Education shamelessly revealed his personal opinion in 1996 on the basis of the similar contention. Okuno Shunsuke, an LDP politician and Minister of Education of the time, said that Koreans and other Asian sex slaves of the Japanese soldiers during the war ‘were actually prostitutes out to make money’ (Japan Federation of Bar Associations 1996).
With these alleged justifications of Japan’s responsibility in the ‘Comfort Women’ issue, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo recently announced he devotes himself into ‘resolving’ the issue and decided dispatch the Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio to South Korea for the resolution of the diplomatic obstacle (Japan Times 25/Dec/2015). Indeed, Kishida and Yun Byung-se, the South Korean counterpart, announced that they reached an ‘irreversible agreement’ on 27/Dec/2015, which presumably ‘settle’ the dispute (Asahishimbun 27/Dec/2015). They cerebrated the ‘historical’ achievement in the recent Korea-Japan diplomatic relations, and Japanese right wing audience started regarding the diplomatic agreement as the end of the story.

In this context, the voices of the victims of the ‘Comfort’ System are largely disregarded whether they are demanding apology and compensation or not. The experiences of the victims was politicized and distorted into the state-state diplomacy and their pain has never been regarded as the core of the issue. Abe or Kishida was exclusively concerned with what the South Korean government says and never gave a sufficient attention to the voices of the victims, not to mention the fact they never showed their interest in directly seeing and apologizing the sufferers.

What is salient in the history of the ‘Comfort Women’ issue is the continuous struggle over the legal and moral responsibility of Japanese government, and the focal point is mainly brought upon political actors such as South Korean and Japanese governments as well as the supporting groups of the victims and right wing activists in Japan. What has not received the sufficient attention is, however, the variety of voices of the victims and the offenders of former Japanese soldiers. The picture of the issue has been showcased in the form of state-state relations, and this composition has been structured in the confrontational form. In other words, the issue has largely been captured in the timeless confrontation typical of the international society, therefore the form of the issue itself has been transformed to fit in the institutionalized language structure of nation-state.

A re-introduction to the ‘Comfort Women’ issue with a different ontological scope
What does the issue mean to the contemporary IR literature then? As is noted above, the ‘Comfort Women’ issue has long been regarded as the diplomatic impediment between Korea and Japan. All those engaging with the two countries’ diplomacy have been making a good effort to ‘resolve’ the issue. What is missing here is, however, a perception to directly focus on the pain the victims of the ‘Comfort’ System who have long been suffering. Initially started in order to ease the pain of the sufferers, the focus of the issue has been gradually transferred onto the state-state confrontation.

It is also worth noting here that the voices of former soldiers are largely missing in the context of the issue. Despite the publication of a number of memoirs and novels written on the basis of Japanese soldiers experiences, none of them received a sufficient attention (Fujiwara 2014). Generally speaking, the voices of offenders have been used as evidence, which proves the existence of the ‘Comfort’ System and Japanese government’s direct involvement in it, what the offenders said to the victims have never attracted the public attention. This is largely because of the Japanese government’s irresolute attitude, by which Japanese politicians and conservative intellectuals try to deny the involvement of Japanese government.

One of the interesting attempts, which strive to illustrate the deprivation of the victims’ voices, is the recently published controversial book entitled The Comfort Women of the Empire. This book was authored by Park Yuha, a Japan trained historian who are critical of current state of the issue and searching for a new way of comprehending it. Park contends in her provocative book that the voices of the victims of the ‘Comfort’ system have been silenced not just by Japanese conservatives as widely known but also by the supporters of the victims in Korea (Park 2014). Park’s argument is based on a typical theoretical framework of post-colonialism, and implicitly utilizes Spivak’s famous quote ‘subalterns can’t speak’. Park argues the mutual misunderstanding between Korea and Japan is because of the power of the institutionalised narrative of IR by which what is actually demanded by the victims is distorted and misrepresented into the language of
diplomacy. The distortion and misrepresentation has been done by both side of the strait, and done so selectively in order to reinforce their own contention (Park 2014 101).

In describing what happened in the comfort stations, Park shows there were some, though not many, cases that mutual understanding between the victims and soldiers took place, and these cases are the reason why some former ‘Comfort Women’ are reluctant to pursue financial compensation. In these cases, the victims and soldiers are closely connected by the sympathy towards each other for their fates, unending suffering from the institutionalized sexual violence in the case of former ‘Comfort women and the foreseeable death in the case of soldiers. This sympathy deprived both of their nationality or origin. They became the bare human beings, and showed feeling of mutual sincerity towards each other (Park 2014).

What is intriguing when the book is published is that the Korean and Japanese NGOs and civil society movements of the victims did not hide their resentment against the author and later filed a libel court case and later, a public prosecutor’s office of South Korea indicted her for defamation. Japanese conservative scholars and politicians mistakenly applauded her publication and contended again that the victims of the ‘Comfort’ System are simply lying. In both cases, they resonantly argue that Prof. Park’s book is denying the responsibility of Japanese government. However, she did not say so in the book, and no words for denial of the Japanese government’s involvement can be found. Quite contrary, she repeated numerous times that Japanese government’s involvement is undeniable and surely it should take the responsibility of apology and compensation (at least in the Japanese version). Her political position regarding the Japanese government’s apology and compensation is consistent and never showed any vacillations.

Park’s book has been criticised for the lack of methodological rigorousness, particularly by historians, and their criticism appears to be reasonable (Hayashi 2015). The most rational and convincing criticism of the book comes from scholars of history, who severely criticize the book by particularly focusing on the methodology Park employed (Chong 2015). Chong Yong-Hwan argues that Park’s book is largely written on the basis of
novels as well as non-fictions published by Japanese journalists and former soldiers. He argues that relying on such fictional and journalistic accounts is unscientific and not trustworthy. Chong also accuses Park for being apologetic for the Japanese government. By drawing on Park’s writing, Chong contends that her argument is denying the direct involvement of the Japanese government in the ‘Comfort’ system, and thus rejects the legal responsibility of the government. In that quote, Park states Japanese government has a responsibility for ‘creating the demand and acquiesce the human trafficking’ (Chong 2015). Chong interprets this statement that Park was claiming that Japanese government was not legally responsible. While Park states before the quote that ‘before arguing whether the victims were forcibly taken to the comfort stations, the Japanese government’s responsibility resides in the acquiescence’, she clearly shows her political stance at the beginning of the book that Japanese government was likely to be legally responsible too (Park 2014, 32).

Different ontological approaches in IR

Mary Kaldor developed a new style of understanding of IR and named global civil society out of her experience of the Velvet Revolution in the Eastern Europe in 1989 (Kaldor 2003). In this prominent book, Kaldor places an imperative element of newly emerging global civil society in the experience of the Eastern Europe in and after 1989. It includes the struggles of East European dissidents and the European peace and disarmament movements whose demands for political and personal rights transcend the state boundaries and consequently transform the state (Kaldor 2003, loc. 152/4106). The same contention can be found in E. P. Thompson’s arguments on civil society movements pre-1989 period (Thompson 1982). In fact, Kaldor cites Thompson by saying his concept of ‘transnational movement of citizens’ is the ‘genesis of the notion of global civil society’ (Kaldor 2003, loc. 50/4106).

What performs an important role in Kaldor’s argument of global civil society is ‘conversation’. What is important in the discourse of global civil society is
the existence of a global public sphere – a global space where non-instrumental communication can take place, inhabited by transnational advocacy networks like Greenpeace or Amnesty International, global social movements like protestors in Seattle, Prague and Genoa, international media through which their campaigns can be brought to global attention, new global ‘civic religions’ like human rights or environmentalism (Kaldor 2003, loc. 213/4106).

Although Kaldor does not explicitly mention, it seems to be an extended version of Hannah Arendt’s concept of ‘public’ which is a space essential to the existence of human beings. It is a space in which freedom is realized through interactions and dialogue among rational individuals. This is essential to human being since Arendt thought that to be a human means to be free in the public space. The prerequisite of this space is the plurality among human beings (Arendt 1958).

To Kaldor, the transnational dialogue of citizens was the essential cause of the collapse of the communist regimes in the Eastern Europe. The existence of the transnational public realm empowered the citizens on both sides, and eventually led the regimes fall down. If it happened in Europe, then why not in East Asia?

In this sense, we are encountering two different but mutually intertwined tasks. First, we, as scholars of IR, must widen our academic scope to the extent that it covers civil society movements linked across the state boundary. This is an ontological issue. Second, we, as citizens longing for peace in the region, must continue exchange and dialogue with each other so that mutual understanding is fostered to the extent that confrontation becomes the story of the past.

Then, what does the global civil society approach tell us in the context of the Korea-Japan relations, regarding the ‘Comfort Women’ issue? In search for feasible solution of the issue, what helps us is the concept of the eternal present (Nishida 1950b). Nishida argues that a moment does not last long. This is because the present becomes past a second later, and then the
language of subject and object, thus the narrator of the history and the narrated, intervenes. Those who are engaging in the issue in the form of state-state confrontation narrate the experiences of the victims of the ‘Comfort’ System in one way or another. This can only be done ‘after’ the eternal present, and the language we are subscribing to inevitably distorts the experiences, distorts relying on the preset ontological presumptions. In some cases, the voices of the victims can be distorted from the beginning by the confrontation of Korea and Japan, and directly appears to the audience as ‘the’ voices representing all of them as the victims have already been incorporated into the structure and their memories themselves might have been constructed on that basis (Park 2014).

If this is the case, we need to get back to the experiences themselves. This is a demanding task, and seems to be almost impossible as the moment of experiences are not tractable or perceivable. The only possible way is to conceive and imagine the pain they are suffering. This can be done only through the voices of the victims of the ‘Comfort’ System and Japanese soldiers, not through the binary opposition on the basis of nation-state and state sovereignty.

Another possibility of applying the concept into the context of the issue resides in the Park Yuha’s position itself. However, it is not about what she says, but about the way in which her voice has been distorted by the narrative of state-state confrontation. As her text is published and present to the audience, the distorted reading of her text by the conservative media pundits and Korean supporters of the victims is easy to discover. By investigating the way in which the text has been distorted, the exercise of the power of the state-centric narratives will be revealed.

On the practical policy level, the agreement between Korean and Japanese governments made on the 27 of December 2015 would not be enough to ‘resolve’ the dispute. The Foreign Ministers were still speaking the Westphalian language and never showed their interest in other languages which opens the possibility of easing the pain of the victims. What is needed in this context is an attempt to share the same moment of experience with the victims. Therefore, unless PM Abe and President Park try to share the
‘present’ with the former ‘Comfort Women’, this issue is expected to last long. The last possibility lies in the global civil society. It is not just a responsibility of Japanese government, but also Japanese ordinary citizens to be critical of their past, thoroughly investigate the issue, reject the easy narrative of confrontation, and utilise the accumulated knowledge to prevent future similar incidents to take place. Their efforts seen by the victims would lead us to reconciliation.

Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to portray the framework of a post-Western IRT by using Nishida’s concept of time and present. The present represents the moment before the intervention of language of subject and object, the language of the Westphalian system. By using the concept, I attempted to provide a possible alternative interpretation of the ‘Comfort Women’ issue. In explaining the issue, I introduced Park Yuha’s argument in order to comprehend the meaning of focusing on the experiences of the former ‘Comfort Women’ in the context of contemporary IR. There I contended that the voices of the victims as well as Park’s argument are consciously or sub-consciously misread and misrepresented by those who are based on the Westphalian language system. As the space was limited, I could not extend my argument to the issue of identities of former ‘Comfort Women’ under the colonial rule of Japan over Korea, this is also an intriguing subject to investigate as, in many cases, this involves the power of the Westphalian language over everyday lives.

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