# BEYOND NATIONAL MEMORY: MULTILINGUAL WITNESSING AND TRANSNATIONAL COMFORT WOMEN SURVIVORSHIP IN *63 YEARS ON*

SEN NI

## INTRODUCTION

"We were all sisters in our suffering at the same time." This reflection offered by Jan Ruff-O'Herne, a Dutch survivor raised in the colonial East Indies, in Kim Dong-won's "comfort women" documentary[1] *63 Years On* (Kkeunnaji aneun jeonjaeng, 2008), has often been cited for its emotional clarity. Yet its claim of shared suffering carries a resonance that transcends the moment of its utterance. A Dutch woman raised in the colonial East Indies makes a remark that immediately touches women in South Korea, China, the Philippines, and across Southeast Asia. Her words open a space where histories that rarely meet begin to intersect, a space where disparate events momentarily converge. It maps a topology of affect produced through a violence that crosses borders, battlefields, and a wide range of colonial spaces. Rather than a politics of identity, "sisterhood" actualises a structure through a shared experience of the same imperial power. It is this that provides the starting point for this analysis, which explores how *63 Years On* translates this structure of transnational resonance into cinematic form.

This documentary was made at a time when the issue of "comfort women" had already been consolidated as a focus of civil activism in South Korea. In fact, in the 1990s, an increasing number of protests, lawsuits and survivor-driven narratives began bringing this issue to public attention in South Korea, Taiwan, Japan and the Philippines (Ku, 2015). By the early 2000s, activists in this area were engaging in wider international networking, not only to raise public awareness about this issue but also to ensure its inclusion in discussions of wartime sexual violence worldwide. Among the actions taken, documentaries on "comfort women" function as an archive

that can fill the gaps left by official documentation (Kim, 2025). It was in this context that Kim Dong-won—known for decades for documenting human rights issues in his films[2]—made *63 Years On*, which brings together survivors from Korea, China, the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies, in the first meeting of its kind in history. The time of the documentary's release was a significant moment in the history of the "comfort women" movement, which by the end of the 2000s had developed into a transnational network supported by survivor testimony, NGO activity, and legal challenges in several jurisdictions, most notably the US House of Representatives Resolution 121 (2007). At the same time, memory studies was undergoing a transcultural turn, reflected in texts such as Erll and Nünning's *Cultural Memory Studies* and Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* (2009), which reimagined the collective memory as an activity that transcends national borders, media formats, and historical references (Erll and Nünning 2008; Erll 2011; Rothberg 2009). In this respect, *63 Years On* can be said to have anticipated developments in memory studies as a field, providing a cinematic foreshadowing of the concept of transcultural and multidirectional memory that would become prominent in academic circles only a few years later. The film premiered at the Jeonju International Film Festival in 2008, won the Asia Pacific Screen Award for Best Documentary, and was later used by NGOs as a tool for international education.

While the film's circulation was significant, the formal structure used to organise the testimonies it presents deserves equal attention. Most documentaries dealing with the "comfort women" issue have adopted a national focus: South Korean films about Korean survivors, Chinese films on Chinese survivors, or Filipino films featuring Filipino survivors.[3] These works offer a vital memory of the past, even as they index the administrative borders of the modern nation-state. Memory is nationally anchored; the survivor appears as a signifier of national suffering, and the analysis of the imperial structure that created the conditions for "comfort women" is frequently broken up into separate national contexts. Scholars have noted that transnational memory practices around "comfort women" often reproduce national agendas rather than dismantling them (Ahn, 2015, Herr, 2016, Nadesan & Kim, 2022). As Kim (2020) argues, the global proliferation of statues of "comfort women" tends to be animated less by cross-border ethics than by a nationalist imperative that travels across borders.

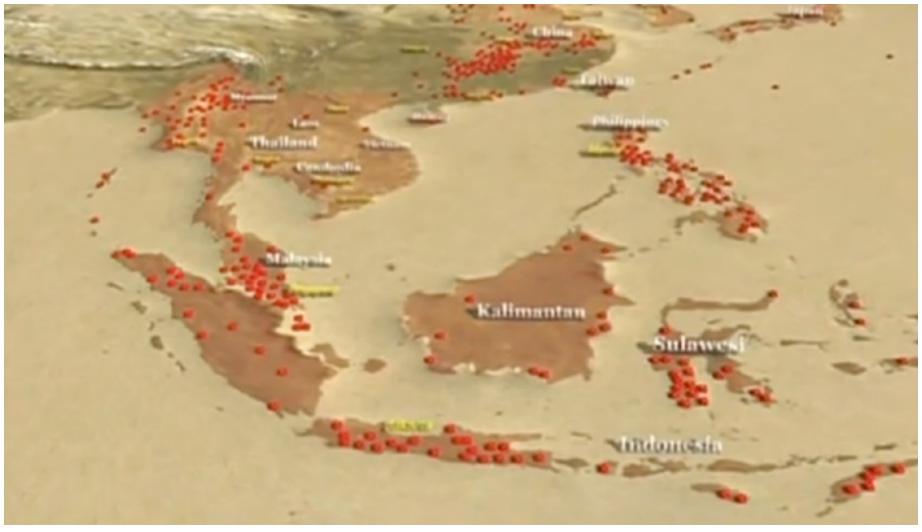
Yoneyama (2016) suggests that the "comfort women" issue cannot be understood through a strictly national frame: it emerged out of a *longue durée* of transpacific entanglements: Japanese colonial violence, the postwar US military presence in Asia, and the Cold War institutions that delayed efforts to address it. This helps clarify what the film makes newly visible: a regionally organised system of militarised sexual slavery. *63 Years On* offers a different kind of map. Instead of portraying each survivor's experience through a narrowly national lens, the film allows their stories to cross borders. It takes the viewer from Korea to China, from the Philippines to Australia, neither to emphasise cultural variations nor to elucidate a linear "before" and "after" of the war, but to expose the regional mechanisms of violence that have shaped their experiences. The stories are not presented as separate instances; each one resonates, intertwines and engages with the others. The editing places these stories side by side, creating a horizontal structure of memory. The regional scope also reorients the spatial imagination of the history of "comfort women". Documentary accounts have tended to anchor testimony to bounded sites of violence: individual "comfort stations" or specific villages where the women were captured. *63 Years On* instead lets its testimonies travel across Korea, northeast China, the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies in a single film (Figure

1). What emerges is not an administrative map of the system, but a lived geography produced when survivors' memories are placed alongside one another, cultivating a mode of listening that transcends borders and contributing to recent efforts to remap the wartime spatialities of the Asia-Pacific from the perspective of those who were moved—forcibly—through them.

Building on these critiques, this paper proposes what I call an "ethics of connection" as the analytical framework for reading *63 Years On*. Rather than identity or equivalence, the term "connection" here refers to adjacency, to the filmic organisation of testimonies next to one another in such a way that their uniqueness is respected and maintained even as they are heard in relation to each other. This theoretical paradigm integrates three concepts from feminist theory and memory studies. First, based on Chandra Mohanty's idea of a "global sisterhood" (2003: 110–112), it embraces the principle that women's solidarity must be based not on identity, but on an understanding of how power dynamics overlap, particularly the regional dynamic of Japanese military sexual slavery. Secondly, it engages with the notion of "speaking nearby" (Chen & Minh-ha, 2014: 433), a practice of documentary ethics that avoids speaking on behalf of or about its subjects, choosing instead to listen alongside them. And third, from Rothberg's account of multidirectional memory (2009) it takes the premise that traumatic histories gain rather than lose meaning when they are placed in dialogue across national and cultural lines. The ethics of connection thus names a cinematic practice in which sisterhood is reconfigured as a structural rather than an identitarian relationship, sustained by formal techniques that hold survivors together without dissolving their differences.

Methodologically, this paper identifies what is described here as an emotional syntax through which the film performs its ethics of connection. For this study, "emotional syntax" means the expressive elements in the context of traumatic memory: the tremor prior to uttering a word, the pause between phrases or the silence held in front of the camera. These are the ways that emotional syntax is performed, across linguistic, bodily and cinematic registers. In the multilingual dialogue of the film, these are affective markers common to Korean, Mandarin, English and Tagalog. On the bodies of the survivors, these are the shaking hands, the teardrop held in check and the scars that mark the skin regardless of culture. On the cinematographic level, these include the framing, editing and the use of distance.

Figure 1. Distribution of "comfort stations"




In this way, this study develops its argument over the course of the following sections, each one focused on a particular level where the film pursues its ethical objective. The first section analyses its translingual mode of testimony, showing how affective and bodily traces allow suffering to travel across linguistic borders. The next section deals with embodied witnessing, reading the ageing

body—its scars, gestures and silences—as an archive that goes beyond national framing. This is followed by an examination of the film's camera ethics, showing how staging, editing and measured distance create a horizontal field in which no survivor's testimony is privileged over another's. The conclusion then situates these formal practices within the broader transnational advocacy networks that *63 Years On* both documents and helps to sustain.

## TRANSLINGUAL TESTIMONY: HOW PAIN TRAVELS ACROSS LANGUAGES

As Thoma (2000) argues, testimony is never a self-contained personal narrative; rather, it is a relational practice shaped by the dialogic encounter between speaker and listener. In this context, it is evident that *63 Years On* creates a transnational community of testimony based on the notion of women who have never met speaking "toward each other" within a relational space made possible by editing and "translation". From the outset, one of the most salient effects of *63 Years On* is its pragmatic demonstration of a linguistically plural form of testimony. The film contains a range of languages that include Korean, Chinese, Filipino, English and occasionally Dutch. Each survivor speaks at her own pace, using vocabulary shaped by distinct colonial histories, yet these voices increasingly converge in shared registers of pitch, hesitation and emotion. *63 Years On* highlights the effort involved in speaking itself. Survivors are not hurried through their accounts; silences are kept rather than cut. What becomes audible across languages is an "emotional syntax"—the constriction of the throat, the tremor of an utterance, the failure of a word—through which the structure of violence registers before the content does.

The film's earliest demonstration of this translingual logic occurs in a sequence dealing with childhood. Jan Ruff-O'Herne, speaking in English, recalls her Dutch colonial childhood in Java: "We were a very musical family [...]. We loved dancing and lovely games as children in the garden and at birthday parties." With no intermediary verbal cue, the film cuts here to monochrome footage of Korean *haenyeo* divers underwater, and then we hear Lee Soo-san speaking in Korean, recalling the joy she experienced when she was sent out to gather abalone with her father. Two languages, two colonial spaces, and two testimonies of joy converge by proximity. Neither testimony clarifies the other.

There are more convergences when the women talk about the physical environment of violence that they experienced. Although the settings differ, the details match up. They speak of a wet mattress smell, the sound of boots on wooden floors and the absence of sunlight. They describe being led to beds with coarse sheets, lined up or made to wait in a series of small rooms until soldiers led them away. These minute details of violence differ verbally but share a similar structure. The imperial system of violence was at once systematic and systemic: it imposed a programmed logic of repetition on the bodies it controlled while embedding that logic into the everyday architecture of the comfort station. The comfort station's environment, although now long gone, still betrays the presence of this imperial system. Over visual shots of the rooms, the film's voice-over narration describes the comfort station as a "cramped space" in which the women "had to receive dozens of Japanese soldiers each day, from morning to night." The film's editing then renders this spatial logic legible by linking rooms

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across testimonies. Jan Ruff-O'Herne, speaking in English, recalls the small window of her room, through which Japanese soldiers could look on as she was raped. In the absence of a verbal bridge, the film then shifts to the testimony of Lee Soo-san, who offers a first-person narrative in Korean about her detention inside a small room beside a Manchurian railway track, where she suffered physical violence when she tried to escape; later, Wei Shao Lan recounts her experience of being confined to a room resembling a bunker in Guangxi. The editing makes the space of captivity itself, rather than any single station, the unit of memory.

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The same logic intensifies when Jan Ruff-O'Herne recounts a forced medical examination: the doctor "left the door wide open [...] he said to the Japanese, oh, you can all come and have a look while the girls were being examined. I mean, the humiliation, can you imagine the humiliation?" Her voice speeds up, then halts on the repeated word. The film does not translate this into another woman's testimony in the same scene; it does not need to. Humiliation in English, the unspoken pause in Korean, the lowered voice in Mandarin all become resonances rather than synonyms, each language coming to a place where speech fails. What the film thus makes audible is not individual psychology but a regional structure of affect: the imprint left by wartime forced sexual slavery, in nearly identical form, across every linguistic group it reached.

Lee Soo-san's testimony makes translingual dislocation itself a topic of discussion. Returning, on camera, to the Mudanjiang site where she was held for two years, she stands before what is now a factory and points to where there were once spiked walls installed to prevent escape. She speaks in Korean, but the place she returns to is now Chinese. After the war ended, return proved impossible—postwar stigma, broken family ties and closed borders in the context of the Cold War precluded the homecoming that had once been imaginable. She remained in China, married a Chinese man, and raised a Chinese son in a language not her own. Japanese imperial violence did not end in 1945; instead it became a permanent condition of linguistic and familial exile. The film registers this not by translating it away but by portraying her standing in the gap, the camera showing her at the threshold of a building she once could not leave.

Subtitling, however, creates a textual point of contact that makes patterns repeatable in different languages accessible for interpretation. While they cannot heal fractures of memory, subtitles allow them to be put into context. In this context, English becomes the language of the domain, as the film is narrated in English and the dialogue is translated into other languages. Here, the film engages in a discussion of what Mohanty refers to as the worldwide human rights debate, the linguistic requirements for which are well worth analysing. By saying that "the world might listen more to me" because she is a European speaking English, Jan Ruff-O'Herne draws attention to this hierarchy of visibility from within the film, showing how some voices speak out without translation while others can only be heard if there is someone to translate them. In other words, it is not accidental or neutral to choose English as the language of narration. While it opens up many possibilities, it reiterates the very structure of marginalisation that Mohanty (2003) criticises in her analysis of global sisterhood, the idea

that it is centred around a particular language, English. Although *63 Years On* does not resolve the issue, it dramatises it by using the devices of equal framing of the interviews and horizontal montage while preserving a linguistic hierarchy nonetheless.

Considering its asymmetry of address, it is worth asking what type of sisterhood is enacted in *63 Years On*. The women in the film do not share the same culture, language or nation, or even the same imperial connection to the Empire of Japan. What connects them is an architecture of violence, with localised modes of practice that follow one common logic: the same networks of recruitment, medical examination, physical containment and erasure. Sisterhood here is not a horizon of identification but a relationship born of structural proximity: women who never met are, through the very mechanism of their oppression, located at the same point on the map of empire. This definition of sisterhood is considered to be a historical fact that allows the establishment of an affective connection despite the presence of difference, a fact that is neither articulated nor emphasised in the film but expressed through translingual testimony, witnessed pain, and a horizontal composition.

## EMBODIED WITNESSING: HOW THE DOCUMENTARY MAKES VULNERABLE BODIES VISIBLE ACROSS BORDERS

In much of East Asian memory culture, the female body has been read as a site for projecting a national trauma (Cui, 2003). *63 Years On* shifts this register by treating the body as a transnational site of witnessing. The film foregrounds what the camera renders legible across linguistic and cultural differences: trembling hands, bent backs, scar tissue hardened by time. The women appear on screen many decades after the events they recount, and their bodies are presented before their voices are heard. Each survivor is introduced in an extended, uninterrupted take, long enough that small body gestures become legible: the faint tremor of Lee Soo-san's folded hands, the gradual shift of Wei Shao Lan's posture from upright to slouched as she speaks, the contained alertness of Jan Ruff-O'Herne's gaze. The extended length of these shots not only provides visibility to these moments but recontextualises the relationship of the body to the time within the frame. If the shot were shorter, then these micro-moments would be ignored; they are too slow and too subtle for a quick shot to pick them up. Instead of following this conventional logic of the documentary, where evidence of the testimony comes through the spoken word and the body merely serves as the visual complement, the film focuses on the temporal nature of the body—the slight tremble that occurs after a few seconds, the shift in posture while speaking—which becomes another form of testimony.

These corporealities are particularly important to the construction of a space of embodied witnessing. When language falls short in the narration of trauma, the body records something that words cannot fully express. Butler's theory of vulnerability is useful here, although it must be carefully considered in context. According to Butler, vulnerability is not something specific to any individual or to certain bodies; rather, it is something universal to embodied lives that can be recognised only when it is not equally shared (Butler, 2004). The objective then is not to elicit sympathy for vulnerable individuals but to ensure that their vulnerable bodies have been made grievable: their wounds matter. Instead of protectively withdrawing the body, *63 Years On* performs a kind of paradox of closeness and distancing in relation to bodily injuries. Pilar Frias removes her headscarf to show a wound burned into her scalp; Lee Soo-san holds up her hand to point to the mark on her chest where she was burned with a branding iron; Wei Shao Lan pulls down her clothes to show a scar on her thigh. Close-up shots capture

what each of the interviewees chooses to reveal and how. But after each such revelation, the focus of the shot moves back to their faces in mid-shot, thus rendering the body and the subject who speaks of trauma inseparable. As a result, what the camera achieves here is not merely to establish some general "respectful distance" from the bodies but to reconfigure the process of disclosure in a specific way: the close-ups on the body are determined by the survivors, not by the filmmaker. Vulnerability becomes grievable precisely because it is articulated on screen by the one who has suffered harm.

The film organises its most explicit confrontation with bodily memory into a tightly composed sequence on the survivors' present-day bodies. In one frame, Pilar Frias lifts her headscarf to expose a circular depression in her scalp: cigarette burns left by a Japanese soldier sixty years earlier. In another, Lee Soo-san describes, in Korean, the moment her chest "was so hot that it was hard to move [...]. I was hit by a steel wire," and the camera follows her hand as she points to the flesh beneath her clothing. The editing layers her description of being branded over images of other survivors' marked bodies. The body is not "shown" but offered as testimony in the position oral witness usually occupies (Figure 2).

The longitudinal presence of these injuries is even more enlightening. They occurred sixty years ago, yet they can be read today, defying the common belief that memory vanishes or is washed away by the passage of time. The body is now a long-term memory that bridges linguistic and national divides. What Saidiya Hartman, in a different historical register, calls the "afterlife of slavery" (2007: 6), the persistence of structural violence long after the institution that produced it has formally ended, offers a useful frame for reading these images. The injuries inscribed on the survivors' bodies similarly outlive the war, the soldiers and the empires that produced them. The system that branded these bodies has been dismantled in name, but its work continues to be borne, materially, by those it harmed. The body bears the political fact that historical reckoning has denied.

This is a quality of time that reveals itself through the scars, but also through the texture of ageing. Each woman's bearing, gaze and movement create a topography that is a product of time. The hardness in Jan Ruff-O'Herne's eyes contrasts with the hesitancy of her utterances;

Figure 2. Close-up shots of scars



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the enlightened gaze speaks of a memory that is sometimes corroborated by words that are stumbled over. It seems as if Wei Shao Lan's skin is inscribing the experience of decades of survival through its deeply embedded scars. Lee Soo-san's quiet weeping traces paths across the terrain of age, making her sorrow both fresh and familiar, a long-known phenomenon. But perhaps the most disquieting form this archive takes is musical. Felicidad de los Reyes, in one of the film's quieter moments, begins to hum a Japanese military song she was forced to memorise as a girl. She trembles; she falters; her memory of the melody, however, is intact. Decades after the violence ended, what her body has held most accurately is the sound the violence made her produce. The camera again maintains a measured distance, neither too reverent nor too cold. Here is where the embedding of violence in the body reveals its own truth. The song is embedded somewhere, in a lifetime of memory.

The body's archival function is not limited to scars. In a sustained mid-shot, Jan Ruff-O'Herne speaks of a fear that returns every evening: "Sometimes when it's getting dark at night and I draw the curtains and I see it's getting dark; I get that funny feeling coming over me again of total fear." The camera does not push in, but remains at her side as she finishes the sentence, and a sustained silence follows. If the burn scar shows the body as a record of something that happened, this shot shows the body as the place where it continues to happen—archival and ongoing at once.

The editing expands this bodily dialogue across borders. The bodies here appear not to erase each other in uniform similarity but to develop patterns of resonance: the rhythms of ageing bodies, the irregular patterns of bodily movement, the silence of a body prior to weeping. These images, moving from one survivor to another, constitute a dialogue among a group of bodies that never occupy the same space. They are coordinated into a shared template that is readable by the viewer, who identifies patterns in them that would never be spotted separately. Here, the body's vulnerability is a condition produced by, and indexed through, a regional body of violence, registered through the precise montage of bodies in the film.

## THE CAMERA AS A CROSS-BORDER ETHICAL APPARATUS: HOW THE DOCUMENTARY ORGANISES A TRANSNATIONAL ETHICS OF WITNESSING

The camera in *63 Years On* establishes a space for cross-witnessing that is neither competitive nor spectacular. The subjects come from different parts of the world and speak different languages, and their educational backgrounds, access to representation and experiences with justice are varied. Thus, rather than the plot, the challenge of the film lies in the ethics of how to create a common visual field out of a diversity of subjects, without privileging any one of them.

The framing of each witness is not positioned at eye level; instead, the camera is at a slight low-angle that does not make the witness appear grand or important but gives the body dignity in the wake of all the erasures suffered at the hands of the historical record. It is not the grand upward angle typical of political photographs, but it is enough to make the viewer sense the slight difference between looking from up close and looking up. This framing is an ethical choice related to what Chen and Minh-ha call "speaking nearby" (2014), an attempt to address the ques-

tion of how one person can be close to another and speak without claiming to fully understand them. This practice entails a rejection of two common stances in documentaries: speaking for (representation) and speaking about (anthropological mastery). Instead, it raises the question of what it might mean to speak alongside, to be nearby and not to claim authority on what is being said. *63 Years On* achieves this ethically complex practice through its form. The camera does not zoom in when the subject's emotions are rising, there is no voice-over commentary explaining the witnesses' stories and the differences between them are not reconciled to create one unified image. What the framing produces is the visual analogue of "speaking nearby": a position from which the viewer can listen without having already understood.

This horizontal position is also a way of avoiding differential intimacy. The fact that a South Korean filmmaker is documenting Korean, Chinese, Filipino and Dutch survivors could result in uneven access, whereby his compatriots are more closely framed, more frequently shown or more amply contextualized. *63 Years On* rejects this asymmetry. The film's lighting, colour tone and shot scale remain consistent across all four national registers, embedding each testimony in a cinematic field of equal weight.

What this consistency makes possible is something close to what Ariella Azoulay (2021) calls a *civil contract* in the visual sphere. For Azoulay, photography is not a one-way act of representation but a tripartite relationship between the photographer, the person photographed and the spectator, a relationship that compels the viewer to recognise the subject as a civil claimant whose claim exceeds the jurisdiction of any particular nation-state. This frame is unusually apt for *63 Years On*, as the survivors it documents have been failed by national frameworks: Lee Soo-san,




Figure 3. Camera positions of comfort women survivors

unable to return to Korea after the war, lived as a denizen in China, holding no full citizenship in either of the countries where the comfort women system had been imposed. The film does not "represent" her on behalf of any nation. By offering her testimony in the same cinematic terms as the testimonies of survivors from three other countries, it positions her—and each of the others—as a civilian interlocutor with a transnational audience brought together by the documentary itself. The viewer, in turn, is asked not to consume these images but to assume a responsibility for them: to acknowledge the close-up of a scar, the tremor of a hand, the song carried in a body, as claims addressed to a public of which the viewer is now a member (Figure 3).

While the framing organises equivalence within each shot, the editing organises equivalence across shots. The sequencing of the shots is what controls the way the stories are combined. Whereas most survivor stories would typically present a series of national chapters, from Korea to China to the Philippines, and finally the Dutch survivor, *63 Years On* varies this pattern by intertwining the stories. After one survivor recounts her memory of her first night in a "comfort station" and another tells of her experience of a "confinement room", a description of euphemisms for a "camp" is offered. It is up to the viewer to pick out common patterns.

When the sequence about Wei Shao Lan's capture in Guilin, where she was thrown into a river with her one-year-old daughter in her arms, is followed without commentary by Lee Soo-san's recollection of being lured onto a military train bound for China with the promise of factory wages, the editing does not subordinate one woman's account to the other. The Korean shoreline, the Guangxi village, the eastbound train, the Mudanjiang room: each one appears in the same shot scale, with comparable lighting. Different places, recognisable in their specificity, are made adjacent by the system that shaped them. This is a form of ethical juxtaposition, as the edit constructs a horizontal dialogue in which each testimony is positioned alongside the others without being subsumed by them. The comfort station, the rural Chinese outpost, the Philippine garrison and the Dutch East Indian camp become points on a regional grid rather than local anomalies, not because the film asserts their similarity but because the editing renders their structural co-location visible.

It is equally important that the camera functions as a silent witness. The camera's restraint becomes most articulate in Jan Ruff-O'Herne's longest testimony, describing the daily mechanics of the comfort station: the photographs of the women posted on the wall for soldiers to choose from, the disinfectants distributed for use before and after intercourse, the dozens of soldiers received "from morning to night." Throughout this account, the camera shows her in a frontal medium close-up and never moves. There are no inserts, no music, no cutaways. When her voice tightens, the camera does not zoom in. Stillness here is not neutrality, but a rejection of the television grammar in which intensified suffering is treated with intensified visual access; the pace of the testimony continues to be controlled by the witness.

Ultimately, *63 Years On* pursues a documentarian purpose that offers a template for recording testimonials of "comfort women" based on a discourse of transnationalism, rather than a testimony of one national experience over another.

## TESTIMONIAL ALLIANCES AND TRANS-ASIAN SURVIVORSHIP: TOWARD A TRANS-ASIAN ETHICS OF REMEMBERING

The film demonstrates that survivorship takes on a different shape when testimonies cross borders. The defining moment of this transition is when Jan Ruff-O'Herne mentions witnessing Kim Hak-sun and other Korean women share their

experiences on television. Their testimonies, she says, meant that "the time had come" for her to "back them up because the world might listen to a European woman." It is crucial to point out an important aspect of this situation: a woman who survived the atrocities in one region found the ability to express herself only after other women from another region were able to do so. It is interesting to note that, as indicated by Kim (2022), although many countries formally recognise human rights, they tend to regress in the face any accusations made by foreigners instead of their own nationals.

This alliance of "comfort women" has also developed as an activist group, which has always been dependent on an extremely dense network of international civil society organisations across at least eight different countries, who cooperate in Asia and beyond to obtain information and documents and engage in cross-border activism (Shin, 2021). This film was made with the aid of these networks. The testimony in it includes victims from South Korea, China, the Philippines and the former Dutch East Indies, while the end credits thank the advocacy groups, archives and researchers involved in the project. The documentary can thus be considered an exercise in activism itself.

It is possible to trace the lineage of this influence on the next generation of "comfort women" documentaries. Tiffany Hsiung's *Within Every Woman* (2012) and *The Apology* (2016) feature women from China, Korea and the Philippines, proposing a regional scope much like that of *63 Years On*, through multilingual storytelling that is structurally comparable to the earlier film's interview structure, and editing techniques that create a space for women to engage across different sites. These productions can be seen to continue the regional approach begun by Kim Dong-won's documentary, as they are the product of a regional focus for which *63 Years On* provided the model.

The film's most concentrated demonstration of the cross-border alliance can be found in a single sequence that begins with archival video footage of Kim Hak-sun's December 1991 press conference. We see her in close frontal framing as she explains: "I was forced to live in a Japanese camp. I want to make sure that I say it before I die." The image is grainy, marking it as a historical document. The film cuts, without a voice-over bridge, to Jan Ruff-O'Herne in the present-day colour of the documentary's interview footage: "And when I saw those women, I thought, now is the time to speak [...] because as a European voice, a European woman, it sounds terrible to say, but I thought the world might listen more to me." Three temporal layers are thus compressed into one sequence: the 1991 archival image of the Korean testimony, the act of viewing that image and the present-day testimony in which the act of having viewed it itself becomes articulable.

The subsequent sequence of shots constructs a short montage of images spanning many different geographical areas: Korean activists protesting in Seoul, rekindling the "comfort women" story in the press after half a century, protests by members of the diaspora and expressions of European solidarity. Jan Ruff-O'Herne's act of breaking the silence around the "comfort women" issue cannot be seen as an independent ethical action, but rather as one that forms part of a larger loop. While Mohanty argues that solidarity must be built on a shared analysis of structural conditions rather than presumed identity, *63 Years On* shows how that analysis can be performed cinematically, edited into being rather than asserted.

What sustains this network across borders is the film's combination of linguistic readability and bodily proof. Viewers may dispute a translation or contest the truth of a memory, but a trembling hand or a decades-old cigarette burn carries a weight much harder to deny. On this evidentiary foundation, the film builds something more ambitious than a corroborated record. While the

SURVIVORSHIP EMERGES AS THE WORK OF CONTINUING TO LIVE AFTERWARD, ACROSS THE BORDERS, LANGUAGES AND SILENCES IMPOSED BY THE IMPERIAL VIOLENCE

"comfort women" system is conventionally narrated through national framings (Korean trauma, Chinese trauma, Filipino trauma), *63 Years On* reframes it as a regional phenomenon of the wartime Asia-Pacific. Multisited testimony, multilingual subtitles and horizontal montage combine to construct what could be described as an infrastructure of shared memory, in which the system itself, rather than any single national wound, becomes the unit of historical recognition.

The epistemological implications of this are significant. The film offers a model of regional historiography that neither replaces national histories nor attempts to place them within a larger spatial or political dynamic, but that instead reveals the failure of memory cultures founded on a national paradigm, where memories often speak to each other across a divide or at cross-purposes. It establishes a space where experiences can occupy the same frame, offering a different way of finding one's place through a cross-Asian memory space.

From this perspective, the ethical horizon of the film lies not in emotional resonance alone but in the structural work of memory. What the preceding sections identified as a "sisterhood" is transformed, in the coda, into a political-historical relationship articulated through shared experiences of violence and a shared need for recognition. This sisterhood is articulated not through emotion or feeling but through resonance: the resonance of patterns of recruitment, of the similarity of prison spaces, of the experience of stigma, of shared experiences of being reduced to silence. The film indexes these resonances, even as their differences emerge. It also indexes a possible ethics of memory that is trans-Asian and less bound to the concerns of one nation's memory than to its own pursuit of a form of historical justice.

The film's closing register is not denunciation but restoration. Near the end, Lee Soo-san is reunited with her Chinese son, the child she raised in a language not her own, in a country to which she could not return as anything but a stranger. The reunion does not resolve the violence documented in the film; instead, it contextualises that violence in a life that goes on. Survivorship emerges as the work of continuing to live afterward, across the borders, languages and silences imposed by the imperial violence.

This ethic transcends the simple representational function of memory to embrace an ethical politics that looks toward a future where women's testimonies can maintain a kind of corroborative relationship with each other and challenge denialism by offering stronger evidence, while also generating a regional memory of the violence connected through cross-regional relations. The expected apology by the Japanese government in the film is thus considered essential not only for these women but also for peace between countries, including within Japan itself. In this sense, *63 Years On* serves not merely as an archival document but also as an apparatus for forming a transnational community of survivors and allies, as an archive of moving images circulating internationally, and as a methodology through which regional histories might be narrated. ■

## NOTES

1 The term "comfort women" is a euphemism used by the Japanese army during the war for women forced into a transnational system of military sexual slavery (Soh, 2008; Yoneyama, 2016). The term is placed in quotation marks throughout the article to mark its euphemistic nature while preserving its established usage in survivor-led and scholarly discourse. The

term "comfort women documentary" refers to films that foreground survivor testimony and function as a counter-archive to the silences of the official record (Kim, 2025).

2 Kim Dong-won is a leading figure among South Korean independent documentary makers. His major works include *Sanggye-dong Olympics* (1988), *Myungsung, Six Days of Record* (1997), and *Repatriation* (2004), which won the Sundance Freedom of Expression Award. He founded the collective Purun Video in 1991, and for years he has focused on urban dispossession and human rights issues.

3 In South Korea, Byun Young-joo's landmark trilogy comprised of the films *The Murmuring* (1995), *Habitual Sadness* (1997) and *My Own Breathing* (1999) focuses exclusively on South Korean survivors; in China, Guo Ke's *Thirty Two* (2012) and *Twenty Two* (2015) both deal solely with Chinese victims; and in the Philippines, films such as Björn Jensen's *Forgotten Sex Slaves: Comfort Women in the Philippines* (2015) present Filipino cases.

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## BEYOND NATIONAL MEMORY: MULTILINGUAL WITNESSING AND TRANSNATIONAL COMFORT WOMEN SURVIVORSHIP IN *63 YEARS ON*

**Abstract**

This paper examines how *63 Years On* (Kim Dong-won, 2008) reconfigures the history of the Japanese military "comfort women" system through a transnational mode of witnessing. Instead of organising testimonies within national boundaries, the film brings women from Korea, China, the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies into a shared cinematic space. Their memories—spoken in different languages yet shaped by similar ruptures of childhood, community and bodily integrity—form a network of resonance that reveals the regional structure of wartime violence. The film achieves this through a network of practices that include a translingual model of testimony, whereby suffering can be articulated across linguistic difference; a bodily semiotics of the women's facial expressions and gestures, of halting body movements and of restrained weeping that is readable across cultural difference; and finally, a mode of camera ethics that places each woman's testimony on an equal footing with the others that is maintained through careful staging, measured distancing and a horizontal montage. Each of these practices creates a space of cross-cultural dialogue that is unreadable through any of these methods independently. It is thus argued that *63 Years On* not only documents traumatic experiences but proposes a trans-Asian ethics of remembering, where survivorship emerges as a shared historical claim grounded in interconnected experiences of violence and the collective pursuit of justice.

**Key words**

*63 Years On*; Comfort women; Embodied memory; Documentary; Transnational witnessing.

**Author**

Sen Ni is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Korean Language and Literature at Seoul National University, expected to receive his Ph.D. in February 2027. His research interests include Korean cinema, film history and theatre history. His dissertation, *Negotiating Colour: A History of Natural-Colour Cinema in Korea (1948–1980)*, examines the technological, industrial and aesthetic formations of colour film in postwar South Korea. His research has been accepted for publication in 2026 in *Animals & Society* and *Women's Studies: An Inter-disciplinary Journal*. Contact: nissen1@snu.ac.kr.

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## MÁS ALLÁ DE LA MEMORIA NACIONAL: TESTIMONIOS MULTILINGÜES Y SUPERVIVENCIA TRANSNACIONAL EN *63 YEARS ON*

**Resumen**

Este artículo examina cómo *63 Years On* (2008) reconfigura la historia del sistema de «mujeres de consuelo» del ejército japonés mediante un modo transnacional de testificación. En lugar de organizar los testimonios dentro de límites nacionales, la película reúne a mujeres de Corea, China, Filipinas y las Indias Orientales Neerlandesas en un mismo campo cinematográfico. Sus memorias —expresadas en diferentes idiomas, pero marcadas por rupturas similares en la infancia, la vida comunitaria y la integridad corporal— forman una red de resonancias que revela la estructura regional de la violencia en tiempos de guerra. La película logra este efecto mediante un conjunto de prácticas que incluyen un modelo translingüístico de testimonio, a través del cual el sufrimiento puede articularse más allá de la diferencia lingüística; una semiótica corporal que se manifiesta en expresiones faciales, gestos, movimientos interrumpidos y lágrimas contenidas, legibles a través de distintas culturas; y, finalmente, una ética de la cámara que sitúa los testimonios en un plano de igualdad, mantenido mediante una puesta en escena cuidadosa, una distancia medida y un montaje horizontal. Cada una de estas prácticas crea un espacio de diálogo intercultural que no puede comprenderse plenamente a través de ninguno de estos elementos por separado. Sostengo que *63 Years On* no solo documenta experiencias traumáticas, sino que propone una ética transasiática de la memoria, en la que la condición de supervivencia se convierte en una reivindicación histórica compartida, arraigada en experiencias interconectadas de violencia y en la búsqueda colectiva de justicia.

**Palabras clave**

Mujeres de consuelo; cuerpo; *63 Years On*; transnacional.

**Autor**

Sen Ni es candidato doctoral en el Departamento de Lengua y Literatura Coreanas de la Universidad Nacional de Seúl, y prevé obtener su doctorado en agosto de 2026. Sus líneas de investigación abarcan el cine coreano, la historia del cine y la historia del teatro. Su tesis doctoral, *Negotiating Color: A History of Natural-Color Cinema in Korea (1948–1980)*, estudia las configuraciones tecnológicas, industriales y estéticas del cine en color en la Corea del Sur de la posguerra. Sus investigaciones serán publicadas en 2026 en *Animals & Society* y en *Women's Studies: An Inter-disciplinary Journal*. Contacto: nissen1@snu.ac.kr.

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