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Toward a Humanistic Discourse: Approaches to Gaining Public Support for Taiwanese Comfort Women

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Abstract

The sociopolitical context of Taiwan has long impeded the full recognition of surviving Comfort Women and the issues they face. This paper examines the public discourses with which activists have engaged to gain public support for survivors in such a challenging environment. Besides the dominant discourses centered on nationalism and women's human rights, there is also a "humanistic discourse" that has been undertheorized. This article discusses how activists in Taiwan initiated a humanistic public discourse that emphasizes the individual human characteristics of Comfort Women survivors, resisting the collective image reinforced by other narratives. By reflecting on the author's professional experience of arts-based social activism in this field, the paper offers new perspectives on Comfort Women discourses and the implications for human rights practice.

Keywords: comfort women, arts-based social activism, humanistic discourse, nationalism, women's rights, social workers and human rights

Introduction

Between 1932 and 1945, the Imperial Japanese Army used deception, abduction, and violence to recruit women to work as "Comfort Women", a euphemistic term to describe what is now recognised as military sexual slavery (Coomaraswamy 1996). An estimated 50,000 to 200,000 women from across Asia were victimized (Yoshimi

2000), with thousands believed to have been of Taiwanese origin (Lee 1998; Chu 2002). After World War II, Taiwanese victims continued to suffer, hiding their experiences because of the patriarchal norms in which women's sexual victimization is considered taboo and degrading (Chiang 1996). This forgotten history was unveiled in the 1990s, when Taiwanese activists were motivated by the South Korean reparation movement and encouraged survivors to come forward (Wang 1991). Seeking recognition for survivors has had two key challenges: the lack of meaningful reparation from the Japanese government, and the difficult sociopolitical context in Taiwan.

Activists in Taiwan have engaged with a number of discourses to address these challenges and gain public support and recognition for Comfort Women survivors. Influenced by the South Korean movement in the 1990s, advocacy drew on nationalism and women's human rights. The nationalist discourse focuses on survivors as compatriots and victims of unpunished crimes by Japan, but consequently established the issue as highly political. Activists also employed a transnational feminist approach, framing the Comfort Women in the language of women's human rights and the violation of sexual slavery. This broadened the movement but struggled to reach the general public due to perceptions of elitism and the underlying patriarchal norms.

In the 2000s, Taiwanese activists encouraged a new discourse, presenting the Comfort Women in a grandmotherly role, highlighting their individual characteristics and vivid life stories in a way that people could identify with their own grandmothers, as someone who had the perseverance to confront the miseries in their lives. Arts-based social activism such as photography, documentaries, books, and museum exhibitions helped to break through the stereotypical image of Comfort Women as merely the victims of Japanese war crimes. The author identifies this approach as a "humanistic discourse", which has had significant effects, especially in connecting the younger

generation with the Comfort Women issue. The term *humanistic* borrows from the concept of humanistic psychology which emphasizes personal worth and the uniqueness of individuals, of their free will, and the ability for self-actualization (Colman, 2009; Rogers, 2012).

These reflections draw on the author's experience of working with the Taipei Women's Rescue Foundation (TWRF) between 2008 and 2018, the only Taiwanese non-profit organization dedicated to the Comfort Women. The author served as the Chief Executive Officer for over seven years and spent one year as the Director of the Ama Museum (founded and managed by the TWRF in 2016). During this time, the author led arts-based social activism projects using the humanistic approach.

This article examines the development of the humanistic discourse in the context of Taiwanese Comfort Women. First, the background to the movement and an overview of the sociopolitical context is discussed. The nationalist and women's rights discourses are then analysed before identifying the process and impact of the humanistic discourse in Taiwan. This section reflects on using arts-based activism in the TWRF to reposition Comfort Women within Taiwanese society and connect with the public as well as the role of social workers as activists. Born from the efforts of social workers, activists, supporters and artists, this paper argues that a humanistic discourse counters the overgeneralized collective image of Comfort Women by highlighting their individual differences. Finally, it is hoped that the analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the humanistic discourse may provide lessons for other social movements.

Background

The Taiwanese Comfort Women Movement

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In December 1991, Kim Hak-sun (1924–1997) came forward as a former Comfort Woman of Korea in the colonial period to unveil her story and filed a lawsuit against the Japanese government with two other Korean survivors, demanding a formal apology and compensation. Kim's testimony was a bombshell to both Japanese and international society. Motivated by Kim's speech, in January 1992, the Japanese historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki found six official documents in the Library of the National Institute for Defense Studies in Tokyo which confirmed that the Japanese military and government directed the establishment of the military comfort system (Soh 2008; Yoshimi 2000). Later, the Self-Defense Agency of Japan began to research documents on Comfort Women and found about 70 relevant documents in the Agency's library. Soon after that, Ito Hideko, a member of the Diet (the Japanese parliament) demanded that these documents be disclosed to the public. The Self-Defense Agency handed Ito the 70 documents, including three telegrams, which proved unambiguously that during World War II, Taiwanese women were sent to the front line as Comfort Women (Yoshimi, personal communication, Jan. 10, 2019).

This critical finding motivated activists in the TWRF to intensify their efforts for the Comfort Women redress movement in Taiwan. Led by Ms. Wang Ching-Fen, the then-chairperson, the TWRF set up a survivor hotline in February 1992 and lobbied the Taiwanese government, which later established a special inter-ministerial committee in charge of related issues (Chen, 1992). The TWRF also held a press conference with three survivors in August 1992, in which the survivors opted for anonymity and revealed their stories to the media from behind a black curtain (TWRF 1999; TWRF 2012). Through the support of activists and historians, 59 survivors were identified by the TWRF from 1992 to 2004 (Chu 2009). As of 2021, only one living survivor remains.

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Taiwan's Sociopolitical Context

Unlike Japan's other former colonized or occupied territories, the Taiwanese have mixed feelings toward colonial rule (1895-1945), which makes it difficult to achieve social consensus against Japan on the Comfort Women issue. Jennings (2016) of the *Los Angeles Times* points out that Taiwan's friendly yet complicated relationship with Japan stems from a mixture of its colonial history, the return to the Chinese government after War World II, and its later separation from China under the KMT (Kuomingtang, Chinese Nationalist Party). This context sets Taiwan apart from its neighbors, such as China and South Korea, who have recently made strong condemnations of Japan regarding the Comfort Women. A few studies (e.g., Hwang 2010; Peng 2017; Suzuki 2011) note that the Comfort Women issue in Taiwan has been intertwined with Taiwan's national identity (independence or unification with China), involving the past and current relationship between Taiwan, China, and Japan. It is also an incendiary topic between local political parties, the KMT, and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Some believe that Taiwan was better off under Japanese colonialism, compared to the KMT's successive totalitarian reign which ended in the late 1980s. The Asia-Pacific War, in which Comfort Women were enslaved, is considered more a part of China's history than Taiwan's. Moreover, under the traditional Taiwanese patriarchal culture, the taboo of rape can lead to condemning the victim rather than the perpetrator. As a result, people in Taiwan often view Comfort Women as a politically charged or anti-Japanese issue. Some even claim that the victims were voluntary military prostitutes.

Kobayashi Yoshinori's manga *On Taiwan* is a significant example of the interplay between the Comfort Women movement and Taiwan's sociopolitical context. This

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Japanese comic book presents a positive evaluation of Japanese colonization, and sparked intense debate on the justification for Comfort Women in 2001 in Taiwan. In this manga, Kobayashi quotes a Taiwanese businessperson born and educated during colonial rule who says that Comfort Women voluntarily provided sexual services. He noted that working in a Japanese military brothel was the best possible thing for many Taiwanese women and was a means of raising their social status. This quotation was highly debated in Taiwan. The TWRF called a press conference with the survivors condemning Kobayashi and the businessperson and demanded an apology (Lai, Wu, Yu, & Ma 2005; Hwang 2010).

Suzuki (2011) argues that support for Comfort Women in Taiwan has been declining because the Comfort Women campaign has been overshadowed by identity politics, distorting the issue into a historical narrative of a benign Japanese colonial rule. Peng (2012) also proposes that the Taiwanese movement has been hampered due to factors such as the advancing age of survivors; a public empathy gap; ambivalence toward Japanese colonialism; and the younger population's ignorance of history. These elements have made advocating for justice extremely challenging.

Approaches to Gaining Public Support for Taiwanese Comfort Women

To contextualise the humanistic discourse used by Taiwanese activists, this section will first examine in greater depth the nationalist and women's human rights-based approaches. While these discourses intertwine, they also differ in significant ways.

Transnational Nationalist Discourse

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Under the nationalist discourse, the Comfort Women represent the atrocity committed under Japanese militarism which constituted the violation of a nation's integrity. Scholars have pointed out the flaw in this narrative by recognizing Comfort Women's individuality and the complexity of the Comfort Women system. Ueno (2004) proposes that this discourse neglects women's individual experiences and turns them into "national subjects," thereby reinforcing the patriarchal paradigm. Soh (2008) argues that public discourse on Korean Comfort Women has been fueled by postcolonial ethno-nationalism. This is characterized by an emotional devotion to upholding the honor of one's nation without taking the complex history of the Comfort Women system into account. Yang (2008) adds that Korea's patriarchal social structure would only oppress the victims' post-war suffering by framing survivors as subjugated to the nation in this way.

The rejection of the Asian Women's Fund (AWF) is considered an example of the nationalist discourse (Kim 2015). In 1995, the Japanese government established the AWF as an effort to bring closure to the Comfort Women issue. The AWF proffered compensation donated by the Japanese public, medical and welfare projects offered by the Japanese government, and an apology letter from the Japanese prime minister sent to the Comfort Women survivors. However, the AWF was heavily criticized by activists and survivors due to the perceived evasion of the Japanese government's legal and moral responsibility, as well as the fund's inadequate political and administrative leadership (Kumagai 2014). It was denounced and rejected by most survivors in South Korea and Taiwan. Kim (2015) argues that the following public statement made by South Korean campaign minimized the role of gender by appealing to nationalism:

> The comfort women issue is one that concerns the restoration of *national pride*, national existence in a struggle against wars, and

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> recovery of the victims' (*comfort women*'s) honor…. Taking the AWF means giving a remission to the Japanese government that has failed to admit its crimes (Public statement at the 137th Wednesday Demonstration, October 5, 1994, as cited by Kim 2015: 6).

The movement leadership in South Korea and Taiwan was criticized by Soh (2000b) for interpreting the AWF with an elitist mindset to exhort the survivors to form a unified front to reject the fund. This "…underlining the predominance of ethnic nationalism over feminism and/or human rights advocacy with regard to the comfort women movement" (Soh 2000b:128). However, from the activists' perspective, the AWF was a cunning ruse for the Japanese government to deny its responsibility. Therefore, they not only proposed that the survivors should reject the funds, but also raised alternative funds from the public and lobbied the South Korean and Taiwanese governments to provide support to survivors.

At that time however, a nationalist approach may have been necessary in order for activists to leverage this issue at the national and international levels, and to motivate citizens to support economically struggling survivors to reject the AWF. How to respect the survivors' self-determination without creating additional pressure while also facilitating survivors' full understanding of the possible results of their decisions remains a dilemma for activists.

Transnational Women's Human Rights Discourse

Comfort Women discourses centred on women's human rights also emerged in the early 1990s, developed by South Korean activist groups and influenced by the international feminist movement. Kim Hak-sun's testimony in 1991 served as an important trigger for framing the Comfort Women system as a military sexual crime

violating human rights (Ueno 2004). At the same time, the international community became more aware of wartime sexual violence, such as the atrocities committed during the conflicts in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. These factors supported the development of the women's rights discourse on Comfort Women (Kim 2012; Soh 2008). This discourse was utilized as a more effective way to gain support from the international community and "achieved its ascendancy in the context of the post-cold war politics of human rights" (Soh 2008:33). Led by the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (Korean Council) with participation from many countries with victimized women, a transnational coalition gradually formed, employing international solidarity to pressure the Japanese government to redress the Comfort Women issue. A series of UN formal hearings and investigations on Comfort Women, such as the Vienna Human Rights Conference (1993), the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women's Rights in Beijing (1995), and Reports from UN human rights specialist rapporteurs Radhika Coomaraswamy and Gay L. McDougall (1996) (Pipper 2001; Soh 2008), led to a radical paradigm shift for representing Comfort Women. They changed the nature of the debate from a bilateral post-war compensation dispute between Japan and South Korea, to an international condemnation of Japan's crimes against women during the War (Soh 2000a).

The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery in Tokyo, Japan, in December 2000 presents another milestone in the women's rights discourse. Approximately 1,100 local and international participants attended, including 64 Comfort Women survivors, and also survivors of mass rape from the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Bangladesh and other countries. More than 20 survivors from nine countries told their stories of enslavement (Matsui 2001). The preliminary judgment included a statement about the tribunal, an initial summary of findings, and

rulings on the liability of Emperor Hirohito and the responsibility of the state of Japan (Chinkin 2001). While it held no legal power, the tribunal was the first judicial decision to confirm the responsibility of the Japanese government on the issue of Comfort Women (Kim 2015). Although the participating countries failed to reach a unanimous agreement on some aspects (Dolgopol 2018), the endeavor gave survivors courage to speak publicly, and restored dignity to survivors through acknowledgement of their suffering (Dudden 2001). The combination of efforts of the tribunal such as consciousness-raising, networking, and alliance-building, all directed toward pinpointing the perpetrator's responsibility, surpassed the strategies of the women's rights movement in the 1990s (Chinkin 2001). It also transcended national and cultural boundaries to form international feminist solidarity on the Comfort Women issue (Dolgopol 2006; Kim 2015).

Scholars have acknowledged the limits of utilizing the nationalist and women's rights discourses in interpreting the suffering of Comfort Women, and have pointed out the need to recognize the multiple oppressions caused by imperialism, patriarchy and colonialism. Yang agrees with Chung's idea of locating the Comfort Woman issue at the intersection of state, race, class, and gender (Chung, cited in Yang 1997). Soh (2008) argues that both discourses over-simplify the roots of Comfort Women's misery, and proposes that Korean Comfort Women suffered from "gendered structural violence". This resulted from the economic, sociopolitical, cultural, and international forces embedded in everyday life – notably gender, class, racial and ethnic inequalities, and power relations in the context of Korean patriarchal colonial capitalism. Kim (2015) also points out that the Comfort Women system cannot be fully understood by viewing it from the perspective of sexual violence and war, because its establishment and operation as a system of female sexual slavery is unprecedented in the multilayered

socio-historical context of Japan's imperialism, colonialism, Korean patriarchal culture, and the interactions thereof. Analysis of the Comfort Women issue requires addressing the intersection of gender oppression and national oppression.

The Taiwanese Activist Context

The movement in Taiwan also employed nationalist and women's rights discourses to gain public recognition for surviving Comfort Women. Before the early 2000s, the main strategy adopted by the TWRF focused on the survivors' victimization and the demand for justice. Ueno (2004) and Kim (2015) argue that nationalist and women's rights discourses normalize the collective image of Comfort Women that emphasizes the compulsory nature of the Comfort Women system, creates the dichotomy of virgin/purity (forced Comfort Women) and whore/impurity (voluntary prostitutes), and excludes those who deviated from the model victims. This can be seen in one of the indigenous survivor's stories which was publicized by the TWRF under this discourse. There are 12 indigenous survivors among the 59 identified. Their victimization began from ages 13 to 29. Except for one woman who was recruited by a broker to be sent to Hong Kong, 11 survivors were forced by the Japanese police to serve soldiers stationed in Taiwan's mountainous region. They were originally recruited to do tasks such as cleaning, cooking, and laundry for the Japanese army, yet they were raped incessantly by troops between 1942 and 1946 (Chu, 2009).

> In December 1942, I was seventeen years old. A Japanese policeman ordered me to cook and do laundry at the Japanese military barracks. After a month, Narita, the soldier in charge of [indigenous] women ordered us to stay in the barracks at night. A maid during the day, my "night duty" was sex slavery. I was so young that I did not know

> intercourse would result in pregnancy. Even during my pregnancy, I was still raped. Only when I started having massive bleeding did I realize there was something wrong. I was taken to the hospital and finally saw [understood] that I was having a miscarriage. This nightmare repeated itself until my young life was totally ruined. In the mountains, the tribal [indigenous people] did not know of Japan's defeat in August 1945. We did not know that we were no longer in the clutches of the Japanese. We still obeyed the Japanese soldiers. They were very depressed because of the defeat and took out their anger on us. They drank and danced with over twenty girls. And right on the tatami, they ganged raped us. I don't remember what they looked like, but their names were Yoshinmoto, Yamamoto, Wukamoto (Grandma Shen-Chun, in Lai., et al, 2005: 164–165).

This narrative emphasizes the Comfort Women's victimization and suffering. However, it also raises the question as to what an "ideal" story would be for gaining public recognition. To a certain extent, these discourses influence how the survivors see themselves and other survivors and exclude stories that do not fit into the transcript of "ideal" survivors. According to Chu (2009), 80% of survivors identified by the TWRF are Han-Chinese who were between 16 and 34 years old when they were forced into the Comfort Women system. Many came from impoverished families and lacked education. More than half of them were raised by adopted families to provide labor or become future brides. Some were even forced by their adoptive families to work in brothels. Before being recruited by the Japanese military, about 60% of the survivors were factory workers, farmers, tailors, cookers, nursing aides, nannies, waitresses, while about 40% of them worked in various forms of the sex trade or entertainment

industry. Furthermore, according to Hsiao (1993) and Chu (2009), most of the Taiwanese survivors who contacted the TWRF were deceived by brokers under the guise of going abroad to work as nurses, cafeteria staff, and waitresses. Some victims who already worked in the sex trade were coerced through a lottery system by local officials or recruited by brokers, told they would be working as cafeteria staff or bar ladies. While some knew that they were going to work as Comfort Women, none could have known the monstrous suffering they would eventually face.

Despite these realities, survivors have been subjected to attacks by Japanese right-wing groups and some of the Taiwanese public, claiming that Comfort Women were military prostitutes and therefore unworthy of public sympathy. The criticism selectively ignores the intrinsic nature of sexual exploitation and purposely blames victims for the violence perpetrated against them. One could argue that, under the pressure of the Japanese right wing and the taboo of sexual victimization in society, it would be stressful rather than empowering for an "untypical" survivor to unveil her story and be scrutinized by the public. Activist groups thus chose to highlight aspects of Comfort Women's victimization and traumatic experiences to gain social recognition. However, the nationalist discourse has not been very effective within Taiwanese society, given the aforementioned sociopolitical context.

The TWRF has been involved in the transnational movement since 1992, framing the Comfort Women as a universal human rights issue. The women's rights discourse tries to link the movement to human trafficking and sexual violence in conflict. It is more consistent with the TWRF's mission as a women's rights advocacy group that also provides services to victims of human trafficking and domestic violence. It also allows for the TWRF to have dialogues with different political parties, and link feminist and human rights groups together. The women's rights discourse focuses on viewing

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the survivors as women's rights activists, and on situating Comfort Women within gendered violence. It acknowledges those Comfort Women who can express their opinions articulately and publicly. This discourse has the limitation of being perceived as somewhat elitist and hence it can be difficult to reach the general public under the patriarchal norms. Moreover, it risks overlooking the importance of colonial and historical factors that contributed to the establishment of the Comfort Women system. Furthermore, it may create tension among the survivors, especially for the survivors who chose not to testify to the public.

Toward a Humanistic Discourse

The TWRF has since made a "humanistic turn", to combine women's rights with a humanistic discourse so as to avoid the politics that undermine the development of the Comfort Women movement in Taiwan. Starting in 1996, several Mental Wellness Workshops were established to provide supportive services for Comfort Women survivors. The Workshops conducted various activities, such as storytelling, art therapy and drama therapy, all designed to help women to overcome their trauma and build resilience. The Workshops were well received and as a result, Taiwanese activists initiated several arts-based social activism projects in the 2000s. These aimed to showcase the survivors' stories, and the insurmountable courage shown in their artwork created in Mental Wellness Workshops. This new approach to gaining social recognition places emphasis on the humanistic characteristics of Comfort Women survivors; they are the essence of the discourse, and they deserve to be seen as ordinary human beings. It includes Comfort Women of all social positions, which is in defiance of the collective Comfort Women image of a victim of the Japanese or a women's rights activist. For example, Grandma Shou-mei was not only a brave activist for survivor's

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rights but also experiencing the joy of being a flight attendant, and the excitement of wearing a bridal gown in the Dream-Come-True project[1] (Tseng 2012, 192-199). We call this the humanistic approach; although is not new to the Comfort Women's reparation movement, it has been heavily relied on as the main discourse used to engage public response in Taiwan over the past decade. In the following section, the author will narrate how this discourse first emerged in Taiwan, and present two of its exemplary milestones: the documentary *Song of the Reed* and the *Ama Museum*.

Mental Wellness Workshops and Social Workers

A few studies have identified the long term psychological and physical distress of the older Comfort Women survivors (Lee et al. 2018; Min, Lee, Kim, & Sim 2011; Park, Lee, Anderson, & Schleitwiler 2016). Research has also shown that traumatic events earlier in life may make older survivors particularly vulnerable to additional challenges associated with aging such as retirement, widowhood, and chronic illness (Anderson, Fields, & Dobb 2011; Davison et al. 2006; Graziano 2003). How early trauma affects the psychosocial adaptation ability of older Comfort Women survivors is an issue that deserves more attention. Meanwhile, in the last two decades, the role of mental health workers, including social workers, in post-conflict settings has been brought into focus due to increased recognition of the need for psychosocial services in war-affected areas (Kagee 2018). Social Workers, a profession that requires a sense of mission to fight oppression, injustice, and human suffering, play a vital role in resolving conflict and recovering from violence. For example, there were cases where social workers

[1]With the generous support of the public, the Dream-Come-True project (2006–2012) was initiated by social workers in the TWRF and brought into realization the survivors' unfinished personal dreams, such as wearing a bridal gown, being a flight attendant, postwoman, policewoman, and singer.

contributed to truth and reconciliation commissions in post-conflict contexts by providing clinical services to the victims of violence, and professional advocacy and policy-making (Androff 2010).

In the process of advocating for the Taiwanese survivors' human rights and caring for their psychosocial needs, a few board members and activists in the TWRF, who were professional social workers, launched several initiatives. They not only participated in the advocacy work, but also provided supportive services to the aged survivors, which was a very unique distinction from other Comfort Women advocacy groups mainly composed of historians, lawyers, feminists, or human rights activists in other countries. Working with counselors and therapists, these activists utilized their skills to organize the Mental Wellness Workshops and group activities for the survivors three to four times a year (1996-2012) using arts-based healing intervention, such as talking therapies, art therapy and drama therapy. Kelly and Hamber (2005) argue that the process of reconciliation involves five interwoven and related stands: developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society; acknowledging and dealing with the past; building positive relationships; significant cultural and attitudinal change; and substantial social, economic and political growth. When reconciliation between the Comfort Women survivors and perpetrators cannot be achieved, how to help the survivors' inner psyche gain reconciliation with their past trauma, as well as attaining social recognition of their suffering becomes a key question. The Mental Wellness Workshops were some of the most important projects that the TWRF adopted to help the survivors develop their inner psychological resources, and it was a unique aspect of TWRF's services that set its support model apart from how those in other countries (Kang 2017). Social work-activists also used a geriatric practice perspective to assist the survivors in facing the challenges in their final stage of life. This element of social

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work focuses on the individual and allows each survivor to distinguish herself in the redress movement from the collective actions and images of the victims that are constructed by the normalization of the dominant discourses.

Two photographers, Huang Tzu-ming and Shen Chun-fan, were invited by the TWRF staff in the early 2000s to document the Mental Wellness Workshops. The Mental Wellness Workshops provided a sanctuary for the survivors to explore their feelings and stories. Moreover, the artistic elements within the Workshops became an inspiration for the photographers to present their healing process. The artwork of the survivors and the photos taken by the photographers became the foundation for the humanistic discourse and the public were engaged in the movement through exhibitions and publications. This approach has also been used in South Korea. Artwork initially used for therapeutic purposes has served as an immensely powerful and productive channel in attracting attention and support (Joo 2015).

As the Comfort Women movement gradually lost traction, this productive humanistic discourse emerged from intensive discussion within the TWRF and with its interdisciplinary collaborative partners, such as counselors, photographers and artists, about how the positionality of Taiwanese Comfort Women survivors should be taken into account. This positionality has been influenced by Taiwan's particular sociopolitical context toward the Comfort Women reparation movement, the agenda of the transnational movement, and the Comfort Women's intersectional roles as survivors of sexual exploitation, women, and older adults. During that period, many of the survivors' had rapidly deteriorating health, and it became difficult for them to actively participate in public activities. Moreover, those older survivors were encountering new psychosocial and physical challenges in their later stages of life while facing disappointment at the lack of official justice. Hence, some questions were

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raised by social work-activists: "Should we continue putting the survivors through rallies?", "Should we continue to encourage them to testify?", "Do they like being visited by artists and journalists for interviews?", "Can the survivors decide to quit from the movement?", and "Can they express their 'true' will freely and know that their decisions will be respected?" At the time of being the CEO of the TWRF, the author had been constantly dealing with and pondering over those debates brought up by her colleagues.

As an activist, how to prioritize their work with the Comfort Women survivors while balancing the needs of a social movement and attending to the survivor's individual needs has always been a challenging, yet necessary task. When a survivor, the subject of this movement, cannot be on stage anymore, how to continue on with this movement is a task that the activists need to tackle. The activists at that time concluded that they would respect the survivor's decisions concerning their level of involvement in the redress movement, and assure the survivors that their decisions would be followed. They also discussed these concerns in the Mental Wellness Workshops to ensure that the survivors were well-informed. Some survivors expressed that they would like to continue to attend the movement actively, while others said that they would like to take a rest from public activities. It is a process of reflection for both the activists and the survivors that gradually transforms the movement into a new phase.

With the rich data accumulated from the excellent work left behind by former activists, the TWRF initiated several new projects in the 2010s, including a documentary film *Song of the Reed*, a book *The Reason to be Strong*, several exhibitions, and the founding of the *Ama Museum*. Those initiatives are positive examples and outcomes of this new discourse. The author of *The Reason to be Strong,*

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Tseng Shu-Mei, portrayed the survivor Grandma Shen-Chun through an interview with her three grandchildren:

> When the topic of grandma's hobbies was brought up, her three grandchildren excitedly fought over whom should speak first. "Grandma loves watching Japanese and Korean TV dramas, which is really cool. Grandma also likes to watch the wrestling matches held in Japan, the Giant Baba and the one on channel Z, where two guys are beating each other up. Oh, she also likes the kind of wrestling that rings in the combatants on stage, and she just shouts go-go-go along with the real audience" (Tseng 2012: 50).

Through her grandchildren's narratives, we see Grandma Shen-Chun's optimism, enthusiasm, and humor, an image that is entirely different from one constructed by the nationalist discourse. She is no longer just a tragic victim, but a vividly "real" live and bouncing grandma.

Arts-based Social Activism

The arts have the power to raise critical awareness on social justice through different ways of knowing that may otherwise be suppressed or ignored (Sakamoto 2014). Arts also serve as a mutual communication platform where the mainstream meets marginalized populations to exchange dialogues and set up foundations for social change (O'Neill 2008). Moreover, the aesthetic power of art can evoke empathy and transformative understanding of social issues, which is different from cognitively acquired knowledge (Chilton & Leavy 2014). In the 2010s, Taiwanese activists launched several arts-based social activism projects to engage the general public with Comfort Women. This article will use the documentary film *Song of the Reed* and

the *Ama Museum* to showcase how arts-based social activism facilitates the development of the humanistic discourse.

Song of the Reed

The documentary film *Song of the Reed*, produced by the TWRF 2010-2013 and released in 2015, symbolizes the turning point of the TWRF's effort to reconstruct the existing nationalist discourse of Comfort Women. It used a humanistic approach that showed how the TWRF accompanied survivors in their healing process. Wu Shiou-Chin directed this film while the author was the executive producer. Based on the Mental Wellness Workshops organized by the TWRF and the supporter groups in Taiwan and Japan, this documentary tells the story of six survivors and their journeys to overcome their trauma during their twilight years (four of whom have passed away since the completion of filming in 2013).

Director Wu and the author of this article discussed how this film could focus on documenting the mental wellness workshops and the survivors' healing process. For Wu, the theme of this film matched with her interest in the reconciliation of personal trauma rather than focusing on accusation, despite the Comfort Women still not having received justice (Ho, 2015). "Despite the pain they suffered during the war, and lack of support from society and family members once the conflict ended, these inspiring figures proved that bravery and love could give rise to tremendous strength," Wu said in an interview (Taiwan Today, Aug 4, 2015). Her idea was to completely erase the overall stereotype of Comfort Women. Instead of focusing on the atrocities committed against them, she proposed to show the audience that the survivors are not so different from the ordinary older women we see, and they are maybe even very similar to anyone's grandma, who is going through a journey to find reconciliation with the

multiple traumas in their life. If their stories could touch people's hearts, people would be motivated to learn more about the history behind the stories.

This documentary is different from the first documentary, *A Secret Buried for 50 Years–The Story of Taiwanese Comfort Women,* released by the TWRF in 1998. The plan at that time was to urge Taiwanese society to support the Comfort Women's redress movement, focusing on testimony from 13 survivors, which told of the atrocity of the Comfort Women system. Wu's contrasting idea for the documentary received criticism initially, especially from activists within the movement. Part of the reason, according to the author's understanding, was that Wu's narrative was not familiar to most of the activists, who felt more confident using the dominant discourses on Comfort Women at that time.

When the production of *Song of the Reed* was completed in fall of 2013, the search for a distributor took another two years, because few distributors had confidence that the Taiwanese audience would be interested in a documentary about Comfort Women. We finally found a distributor in the spring of 2015, and the documentary was shown in theaters on August 14, 2015, which was International Comfort Women Memorial Day. At that time, there happened to be a vigorous debate in Taiwan about how high school textbooks should narrate and interpret the Comfort Women history. The social and political context facilitated the success of the documentary and brought media attention. The documentary was a box-office success, receiving positive reviews. According to audience feedback, it was evident that the film had also drawn the attention and interest of the younger generation. The TWRF and the director received many film screening requests from high schools, colleges, and governmental agencies. This was a rare phenomenon for the Comfort Women movement over the previous decade and gave the TWRF an opportunity to reach out to the public and publicize the

redress movement. It also effectively assisted the TWRF's fundraising campaign, and public support for the establishment of a museum in memory of Comfort Women. Among the many films dedicated to Comfort Women issues worldwide, *Song of the Reed* stands out to be an exceptionally unique narrative.

The Ama Museum

The birth of the Ama Museum in 2016 after 12 years of effort by the TWRF was truly a crystallization of the humanistic discourse. Although it only ran for four years (Dec 10, 2016-Nov. 10, 2020) due to the financial deficit (Taiwan News, Nov 10, 2020) and has been relocated to a new site, it connected widely with the public. The Ama Museum, literally meaning "grandma's home" in Taiwanese, is a museum dedicated in memory of Taiwanese Comfort Women. The museum itself was a restored 90-year-old traditional two-story southern Fujian-style building located in Dadaocheng, a historic commercial area that has been successfully transformed into a popular tourist spot in downtown Taipei. The most significant characteristic of this museum is that it alters people's sorrowful image of a Comfort Women museum. It used soft and warm hues in the design to create an inviting atmosphere, inducing visitors to enter and explore the "grandmas' stories." The aesthetic narrative of this museum, uniquely expressed by a combination of its lively architectural design and exhibition themes, merged with heavily traumatic yet inspiring stories of the survivors' resilience. It has received much acclaim since its opening.

After the opening of the world's first Comfort Women museum in 1998, the Historical Museum of Sexual Slavery by the Japanese Military in Seoul, South Korea, activists in the international community have been gradually establishing similar museums in their home countries to preserve history and educate the public. The TWRF

envisioned the need of a Comfort Women museum and approached the local and central governments for their support in early 2000s. The TWRF encountered many difficulties in finding a place to house the museum. In 2015, after a long and grueling lobbying process, the TWRF decided to raise the money and establish the museum on its own (Chiao, Dec 12 2016).

As the CEO of the TWRF and responsible for leading a preparation team for the museum, the major challenge the author faced was to achieve operational and financial sustainability, given the political and social context in Taiwan. Of particular importance, was the question of whether the mission of the Ama Museum resonates with the public and if it went beyond activists' sense of obligation for posterity. The museum preparation team and the author had several perspectives on this issue. In their opinion, for the private museum to run sustainably while preserving the history of Comfort Women, the theme should adhere to the humanistic discourse. By inviting people to observe the strength, resilience and power of Comfort Women survivors, the Comfort Women issue would connect with the audience emotionally, inspire the audience's strength, and encourage the audience to move forward in their personal lives. Hence, the museum is a place to link the past with the present and future, rather than merely a reminder of the past. Strategically, this is also a more practical way by which the privately run Comfort Women museum can operate by attracting parties who are indifferent or hostile to the topic in contemporary Taiwan (Menconi, 21 April 2017).

Despite some arduous and even harsh experiences for the survivors during this process, all in all, the long journey of the redress movement brought warm and important support, helping the survivors reconcile with their past traumas. As the number of aging survivors gradually declined, one important issue is: how can we pass on the knowledge and experience gained in supporting Comfort Women survivors on

to other people who have also encounter difficulties in their lives? Inspired by this question, we used the phrase: "The Ama Museum is a place just like your own grandma's home," and the mission statement:

> The Ama Museum preserves and commemorates this history to call for the ongoing attention to contemporary women's rights, to help the victims overcome their trauma, to stir the spirit of moving forward, to transform the scars of history into a cornerstone of peace, and to pursue a nonviolent future of respect and equality for the coming generations (TWRF, 2016).

We hope that visitors feel the warmth and supportive spirit of the mission when they visit the museum. While the Comfort Women grandmas' stories are laden with emotion, their powerful resilience has the potential to motivate people to move forward. Therefore, the tragedy and trauma of the Comfort Women grandmas should not be seen as simply unhealed wounds, but rather as scars of power and honor that can inspire people to see all the beauty in life.

With this mind, the design of the Ama Museum was exceptional. The Ama Café, supported in part by a socially responsible local coffee chain, was located at the entrance of the museum to generate an inviting atmosphere, quelling any feelings of unease visitors might harbor. Following the café are the displays of the history of the Comfort Women system, the victims' stories, and the decades-long redress movement, while highlighting the Comfort Women survivors' strength and humanity. The Museum further served its mission to empower women's social participation by hiring domestic violence survivors to work in the café (albeit it was not easy to achieve this goal successfully in the first year), selling merchandise designed by women in the gift shop, and holding several forums featuring women's resilience in the face of trauma.

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The Museum's architecture, art design, the showcase of the survivors' artwork from Mental Wellness Workshops and varied educational activities all worked in unison to highlight this theme. The architectural design by Sheng-Ming Wu and his team, and the underlying concept by the TWRF has won awards and media attention. The museum came to life through the efforts of an interdisciplinary preparation team, including architects, artists, designers, historians, lawyers, scholars and professionals of museology, gender scholars, social workers, writers, and marketing experts. Its location, design, and function has transcended the Comfort Women issue, heightening it into an issue through which people can feel a real connection. While some people will argue that the Ama Museum's decor was too "soft" to reflect the cruel historical facts, it is a successful crystallization of the humanistic discourse that was developed in a long-term process, cumulated by many people's efforts. The Museum's connection with interdisciplinary professions has made arts-based social activism with Comfort Women a productive example in Taiwan. More than 120,000 people visited the museum in just four years (TWRF, Nov 3, 2020). The reasons for the Ama Museum's closure deserves more assessment than is possible within this paper. Nevertheless, many young supporters have shown their concern about the Ama Museum's relocation in a fundraising campaign launched in Oct 2020. This is an example of how the museum for Comfort Women has won the hearts of many of the younger generation.

Lessons for Future Organizing Efforts

Why is justice for Comfort Women survivors necessary? Would telling survivors' stories reopen old wounds? For the victims and survivors of mass atrocities, receiving justice can restore their dignity, reaffirm their value as human beings, help them obtain assurances that the larger community understands the impact these acts on their lives,

and knowledge that the perpetrators have been punished (Dolgopol, 2006). Public support of Comfort Women survivors signifies that our society understands the suffering they have undergone even if justice has not yet been served. In the process of achieving social recognition, different discourses have shaped the image of Taiwanese Comfort Women. These have been influenced by the power interplay between survivors, activists, and local and international sociopolitical forces, which subsequently influence how we understand, perceive, and interact with the issue of the Comfort Women.

The nationalist and women's rights discourses in Taiwan were inspired by the South Korean-led transnational Comfort Women's movement, and intertwined with the local sociopolitical context. The two discourses can be thought of as the result of the activists' continued efforts to bring justice to the survivors, in a context where the Japanese government has not fully accepted its legal and moral responsibility. While these discourses have limitations, the results in mobilizing society to recognize the Comfort Women issue and bring forth an international level of recognition can never be over-emphasized. The humanistic discourse can be considered a manifestation of activists and supporters' resistance to the dominant public discourses that obscure survivors' humanistic characteristics. This discourse did not emerge overnight; it resulted from proactive responses from a diverse and inclusive interdisciplinary team of activists who strive to assure the survivors' positionality, individuality, and autonomy, and confirm that the collective action of a social movement will not obscure their individual needs.

The reflection above raises the question of how social workers in human rights settings find the balance between social work ethics and the needs of a social movement. How can we ensure that a service user's individuality, autonomy, and needs will not

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clash with the collective actions of a social movement? While the reflection process may bring tension and conflicts, it has also led to productive results that have formed a basis for new public discourse through creative artwork that speaks out to the public. The aesthetic power of artwork, such as the documentary *Song of the Reed,* and the *Ama Museum*, gives activists opportunities to gain standing on a social issue. The idea of using art projects to realize this discourse may be applied to other social movements to facilitate social dialogues and understanding of the voices of marginalized populations that otherwise may be dismissed or suppressed.

Nevertheless, the humanistic discourse has limitations and flaws that should be raised. It can be criticized for insufficient historical context, or for using soft, touching stories that may oversimplify the complexity of the Comfort Women's experiences. Possible misuse of this discourse is a new collective image that embellishes the survivors' stories, to the extent that they diverge from their original humanistic intent. Peng (2012) criticized TWRF that in order to obtain public recognition, the Comfort Women have become icons with the image of "living historical witnesses" that people can recognize rather than just as victims in the reparation movement. Publicizing the Comfort Women's anguish could distort the multiple aspects of the historical trauma. Several scholars (Kim 2012; Soh 2008; Yang 2008) have also argued that South Korean activists should not rely solely on one discourse to interpret the contributing factors that caused Comfort Women's suffering. This also applies to their Taiwanese counterparts. On the one hand, the humanistic discourse serves as an accessible way for people to be aware of this issue. On the other hand, activists must provide more critical information, so that people may be able to truly understand women's sexual exploitation, their atrocious suffering during wartime, gender inequality during the colonial era, survivors' pressure under the Taiwanese patriarchal society, and their

connection to current gendered violence and the international sociopolitical structure. Nevertheless, the crucial question is how such historical issues can find a footing in people's lives today. Each victimized country needs to solve this question under its own sociopolitical circumstances. In Taiwan, the mission, design, and even the closure of the Ama Museum have provided avenues by which to understand this question.

It is inspiring and uplifting to see an age-old issue being transformed into a new paradigm, thanks to critical reflections, the passion of many activists and supporters, and new perspectives developed by multidisciplinary collaboration. These interdisciplinary arts-based and person-centered experiences may be applied effectively to other social issues. The power struggle over Comfort Women narratives in Taiwan continues despite only one survivor remaining. While it is a challenge to keep the movement motivated in the context of these competing discourses, we have a historical responsibility to move forward, not only for the victims, but also for future generations.

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