

“Comfort girls-women” as Military Sex Slaves in the Japanese Empire (1937-1945)

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical historical and didactic analysis of the Japanese Imperial military sexual slavery system (1937–1945), examining its structural dimensions, historiographical challenges and pedagogical implications for education. Despite extensive scholarly documentation, the so-called “comfort women” system remains marginalised within Eurocentric curricula and continues to be contested through Japanese state revisionism. This study analyses the institutionalisation of sexual violence as a military logistics strategy, the erasure of evidence through systematic document destruction and the transformative role of survivors’ testimonies as a collective force. The research proposes a didactic intervention, operationalising Seixas and Morton’s “Big Six” historical thinking concepts through source analysis, collaborative digital mapping exercises and ethical reflection tasks. Findings demonstrate that the system constituted a structurally integrated state crime rather than isolated wartime atrocities, while the pedagogical programme effectively decentres Eurocentric narratives and cultivates multiperspectival historical consciousness. The study proposes that teaching “difficult knowledge” about gendered wartime violence not only addresses historiographical omissions but also fulfills history education’s civic responsibility to foster active citizenship and human rights awareness. This intervention offers a replicable model for integrating overlooked Asian-Pacific theatres into European curricula while navigating the ethical complexities of teaching traumatic histories.

Keywords: “comfort stations”, “comfort women”, Japanese military sexual slavery

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Introduction

This paper undertakes a critical and didactic analysis of the institutionalized sexual slavery system enforced by the Japanese Empire during the first half of the 20th century. This subject poses a significant challenge to contemporary historical memory, demanding an approach that transcends mere factual description in order to scrutinize the structures of power and state violence underpinning it. Centered on the systematic architecture of exploitation of women and children, the study examines how the rupture of their silencing politicized individual trauma and fundamentally reshaped political and diplomatic history across Asia.

The educational relevance of this study falls within the scope of the secondary education History curriculum, addressing the epistemological and civic challenges currently faced by teachers. The primary pedagogical objective is to equip students with the tools to analyze painful and contentious topics, transforming the issue into a laboratory for the development of historical thinking. By confronting the omissions within Japanese state narratives with the testimonies of survivors, the aim is for students to cultivate a historical consciousness grounded in ethical responsibility.

Accordingly, this work seeks to develop a model of didactic intervention that promotes active and critical citizenship. The integration of this theme into the curriculum is intended to decentralize Eurocentric readings of the Second World War, providing students with the necessary analytical instruments to interpret historical complexity and to recognize the pressing need for gender justice in the safeguarding of human rights.

I. Historical background

1.1. Research topic – Historical and Educational Dimensions

The study of military sex slaves, during the second Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945) and World War II (1939-1945), embodies one of the most complex and contentious chapters in contemporary history. As Kim and Kim (2018) state, the reasons for learning about this topic are no different from those that sustain the study of other historical atrocities, stemming from the need to examine painful histories in order to prevent their recurrence. The historical significance of this research lies in the study of one of the cases of systemic sexual slavery in contemporary history. Far from being accidental or isolated, it was a military strategy deliberately orchestrated by the Japanese state (Yoshimi, 2000).

The system victimized women from various territories, such as China, Japan, the Philippines, the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia) and Korea. Although Soh (2008) estimates that approximately 80% of these victims were of Korean origin, it is important to note that estimates regarding the total number of victims and their geographical origins vary considerably among scholars.

The central issue lies in the educational gap regarding this topic in the Portuguese curriculum, which privileges a Eurocentric narrative of the Asia-Pacific and European theatres of war. This perspective prevails in legal documents and is also characterized by the tension between institutionalized silencing and the construction of transnational collective memory. For decades, Japan maintained a policy of revisionism and erasure. In 1991, Kim Hak-Sun publicly disclosed what she had experienced as a sex slave. Alongside other testimonies that have since emerged, the survivors’ act of breaking their silence was essential as a primary source for understanding and debating this historical issue (Min, 2021). On that account, the educational significance of this topic rests upon three analytical axes - understanding the colonial dynamics in East Asia, where racial hierarchy facilitated dehumanization (Yoshimi, 2000); unsettling the sanitized view of war by understanding gender-based violence as a tactic of war (Soh, 2008); and acknowledging that this issue persists to this day (Min, 2021).

1.2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

1.2.1. What terminology should be used for the victim?

According to Angela Son, “To historicize the experiences of Japanese military comfort girls-women is an attempt to bring back their experiences as the history of women that had been owned exclusively by national history and to see the nation again in the eyes and memories of the victims”. (Son, 2020, p. 2)

Terminological differences reflect political narratives of historical erasure. The designation *comfort women*, when used by revisionists, is strategically designed to obfuscate systemic violence by framing this conduct as a voluntary contractual transaction of a commercial nature, also known as prostitution. In contrast, critical scholars and activists invoke the designation “*comfort women*” precisely to denounce its institutional origins, rather than to describe an empirical reality. On grounds of legal and humanitarian precision, the term “military sex slaves” is used to highlight the reality of coercion, abduction and systematic abuse within a system of sexual slavery regulated by the Japanese state (Dionísio, 2025). The Japanese military regulated female bodies to optimize combat performance, instrumentalizing “sexual comfort” as a strategic military tool.

Situated at the intersection of historiography and contemporary international law, this analysis privileges the juridical term “sexual slavery” over the euphemistic “comfort women”. Although the

Rome Statute (adopted in 1998 and in force since 2002) criminalizes slavery as a crime against humanity, its definition, set forth in Article 7(2)(c), has been the subject of scholarly criticism for being overly restrictive. By requiring proof of an element of “ownership” or “commercial exchange” involving the person (Allain, 2012), this definition fails to encompass many contemporary forms of trafficking that do not fit the model of traditional slavery. In contrast, the Palermo Protocol (2000) adopts a broader definition of trafficking that is not contingent on proof of ownership, which has supported arguments in favor of amending the Rome Statute to include trafficking as a standalone crime (Kim, 2011; Women’s Caucus for Gender Justice).

The empirical evidence is corroborated by documents uncovered by Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery and by documentary sources, such as OWI Report No. 49, which substantiate the systematic violation of human rights.

The survivors’ psychological trauma was compounded by decades of imposed silence. Upon repatriation, many faced social ostracism.

1.2.2. Nationalism, Colonization and Imperialism in Japan

As Henshall (2008) discusses, understanding contemporary Japan depends on the ability to synthesize divergent perspectives, recognizing how the reconstruction of memory serves the purposes of political legitimization. Historiographical accounts of early 20th-century Japan commonly rest on a triad of mutually reinforcing ideological constructs: nationalism, colonialism and imperialism - whose convergence propelled the country’s expansionist trajectory, a logic that this study argues was instrumental in rendering the system of military sexual slavery both operational and systematically obscured. While Japan presented itself as Asia’s liberator from European domination, its policy was to maintain a “colonial-style system, but under its own aegis” (Dower, 1987), the core of Japanese Pan-Asianism. Mark R. Peattie points out that this served as an ideology promoting Asian unity, ultimately giving rise to the concept of the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” as a legitimizing framework (SvenSaaler, 2011).

This framework requires a rigorous semantic deconstruction. The designation “Sphere” refers to the consolidation of an exclusive regional sphere of influence, aimed at creating a bloc capable of challenging the hegemony of the Western powers. First articulated during World War I (1914–1918), the concept of “Coprosperity” was mobilized to characterize Sino-Japanese economic relations as interdependent (Beasley, 1991). As such, it provided the ideational scaffolding for an informal empire oriented toward safeguarding Japan’s economic stability and strategic autonomy.

Japanese nationalism constituted a field of contested forces in which competing visions of the

national community coexisted (Shimazu, 2006). From the Meiji Restoration onward, the ruling elites deliberately constructed and instrumentalized state nationalism as a device for social cohesion and wartime mobilization (Henshall, 2008). Central to this project was the ideology of *kokutai* - a discursive construct that posited the absolute uniqueness of the Japanese political system, thereby legitimizing imperial expansion and securing popular obedience to the state (Yazovkaya, 2018).

Colonialism, as Myers (1984) contends, constitutes a distinct form of domination over subjugated peoples. In Korea, formally annexed in 1910, Japan undertook a project of cultural assimilation aimed at the systematic erasure of Korean national identity. A dimension that remains conspicuously underexamined in colonial studies is the gendered infrastructure of imperial power. The vulnerability of colonized women to sexual slavery was not uniform but correlated with their position within intersecting racial, economic and patriarchal hierarchies (Soh, 2008). These women were doubly subalternized: subjugated as colonial subjects and objectified as bodies instrumentalized for the imperial army's exigencies. Japanese colonialism thus constituted a system of somatic regulation that entrenched hierarchies of power through institutionalized sexual violence.

1.2.3. Memory, Identity and Forgetting

When applied to the issue of military sexual slavery, memory acquires a distinctly political character. For decades, the memory of this system of sexual slavery remained confined to individual trauma shrouded in shame and silence imposed by postwar societies (Halbwachs, 1990). The emergence of individual testimonies marked a pivotal turning point in breaking the official silence surrounding systemic sexual violence during the Japanese occupation and in bringing the issue to international attention. However, these accounts are not self-authenticating historical facts. Rather, they represent one form of evidence among others. Their value is particularly pronounced given the systematic destruction of wartime documents by Japanese authorities after 1945, which rendered much of the official archival record unavailable. Furthermore, while testimonies alone did not transform this into a historical and contemporary issue, they undeniably supplied the initial impetus for the development of a humanitarian dimension, shifting the focus from state-centered legal claims to the lived suffering and agency of the victims themselves.

For an event to be reconstructed with accuracy, individual memory must become collective memory through the testimonies and recollections of those who witnessed it (Halbwachs, 1990). In this case, it was the corroboration of survivors' testimonies that enabled the reconstruction of the system's scale and geography. The central tension of the memorial conflict surrounding sexual slavery lies in the selectivity of memory. While survivors mobilized the painful preservation of memory as a means of pursuing justice, the Japanese state and nationalist groups actively erased this memory from the

national narrative (Halbwachs, 1990).

Ricoeur (2003) asserts that memory, both personal and collective, is shaped by historical narratives that select and interpret the past to construct identity. This perspective allows us to understand how survivors, through selective reinterpretation, reconstructed their lives after trauma, giving meaning to their suffering and reclaiming an identity of dignity and resistance (Son, 2020). Identity, forged by narratives that unify and provide temporal coherence (Pollak, 1992), was fractured by the system of sexual slavery. Bearing witness thus constituted a hermeneutic effort to reunify the self (Ricoeur, 2003), integrating the traumatic past into a broader life narrative and allowing the victim to recognize herself not only as a violated body, but as a survivor, a historical agent.

Ricoeur (2003) argues that forgetting can enable the reconstruction of identity through the selection of past aspects to create a coherent narrative. In the present context, two ethically irreconcilable regimes of forgetting stand in opposition. There is the instrumental forgetting practiced by the Japanese state and revisionist groups, designed to erase historical responsibility and reconstruct a postwar national identity, and the impossibility of forgetting experienced by the survivors. Thus emerges the concept of traumatic memory, whose emotional weight accompanies victims until their testimony transfers that weight to the collective conscience of humanity.

In this context, “places of memory” (Nora, 1989) operate in a paradoxical way: the “comfort stations” themselves were actively destroyed by the Japanese state and the occupying forces. In the absence of material traces, transnational civil society has constructed new places of memory, such as the “Peace Girl” statue in Seoul and its replicas, which provide a sense of belonging and connection to the traumatic past (Tao, 2024). It was the survivors’ living, emotional memory, articulated through oral testimonies and embodied in these sites that forced historiography to confront the magnitude of this crime.

Confino (2011) examines how collective memory is manipulated by political forces to shape identities and power hierarchies. In Japan, historical revisionism that denies the coercive nature of the system is linked to a project aimed at restoring national pride (Beasley, 1991). In South Korea, this memory is mobilized as a pillar of anti-colonial identity and a tool for diplomatic pressure (Myers, 1984). The survivors are fighting to have their memory elevated to a universal symbol of the struggle against sexual violence in conflicts.

1.3. Intersecting Imperial Logics: Nationalism, Colonialism and the Gendering of War

1.3.1. The Meiji Restoration

While the present study focuses empirically on the years 1937–1945, this chronological bound-

dary was deliberately established to capture the specific period during which this institutionalization and its attendant actions actively took place. This delimitation, however, does not signify that the military sexual slavery system began or ended during that period. Rather, its conceptual origins and gradual institutionalization extend back to the Meiji Empire. Accordingly, the article opens by developing this deeper historical trajectory, not to confine the analysis to a single juncture, but to foreground a range of explicit factors that together illuminate the progressive logic underpinning Japanese imperial policy with respect to this practice.

During the Meiji period, Japanese “Westernization” emerged as a defensive strategy to avoid colonization by European powers. The adoption of Western practices in politics, the armed forces, the economy and industry enabled the state to exert growing influence and control, especially in education, the driving force behind the indoctrination of youth, urging them to work for the common good and to serve the imperial figure (Henshall, 2008).

The Treaty of Ganghwa, signed in 1876, forced Korea to open its markets to Japan under military coercion, challenging Chinese influence and marking the beginning of Japanese colonization in the region (Seth, 2016). Following the Korean-Donghak Rebellion (1804–1895) and Chinese intervention, Japan also sent aid. As a result, both countries refused to withdraw from Korean territory after the uprising was quelled, culminating in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), which culminated in 1895 with the Treaty of Shimonoseki (Henshall, 2008). The treaty guaranteed Japan’s victory over the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), forcing the latter to recognize Korea’s independence from its rule (Seth, 2016). Under the camouflage of safeguarding Korean independence, Japanese intervention facilitated the deployment of military contingents and the gradual economic infiltration of the region (Duus, 1995). Political instability in Japan intensified against the backdrop of escalating tensions on the Liaotung Peninsula (southern Manchuria), where Russian expansion materialized in the establishment of the Port Arthur naval base, a strategic foothold that exacerbated Japan’s anxieties over regional hegemony and accelerated its military build-up, culminating in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905).

The failure of diplomatic efforts culminated in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). The Treaty of Portsmouth (1905) formalized the exclusion of Russian influence in southern Manchuria and secured Japanese hegemony over Korea (Daróz, 2018). By 1905, Korea had been formally reduced to a Japanese protectorate, its finances and foreign relations placed under Tokyo’s direct control (Duus, 1995). This protectorate status, this study argues, constituted a critical juncture in Japan’s imperial trajectory, consolidating the colonial and militarist ideologies examined above and laying the groundwork for the institutionalization of the system of sexual violence that would follow in the Pacific

War. The region of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897) fell victim to Japanese colonization through the imposition of the Japanese language, the adoption of Japanese names and forced integration into the Shinto belief system (Caprio, 2009). Furthermore, the Japanese repressive apparatus monitored the actions of anyone suspected of “ideological crimes” (Kang, 2001). Japan and Korea became “one body” (Seth, 2016) and the “Japanization” of Korea was carried out brutally (Cha & Pardo, 2023).

1.3.2. The institutionalization of sexual violence in East Asia

The development of the military sexual slavery system by the Japanese Empire hinges upon an understanding of the Meiji period, which established the social and legal frameworks for the exploitation of the female body. The transnational dimension of this exploitation is an integral component of Japan’s economic and imperial expansion. This prior context is fundamental to understanding the logic that would later be applied to victims from other occupied territories.

Consequently, the progressive development of the institutionalization of sexual violence, while gradual in nature, exhibits several identifiable milestones. The escalation of the war, particularly during the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, precipitated the expansion and formalization of a system that extended across China and, subsequently, into some areas of Asia and the Pacific. This process, however, should not be construed as an isolated act or as a “rehearsal” for a later system, but rather as the inception of a policy for managing sexual violence that became progressively institutionalized over time.

In 1937, under the allegation that Japanese troops stationed near Beijing had been attacked by the Chinese, a local clash ignited, leading to an escalation of atrocious violence. In December, the Japanese marched on Nanjing, then the Chinese capital, where they carried out an unprecedented massacre. Scholarly consensus states the death toll between 260,000 and 350,000, with victims subjected to systematic violence - including mutilation, decapitation, live immolation and mauling by dogs. The process of dehumanizing the Chinese, fostered by the Japanese educational system, brought a qualitative shift in the nature of the atrocities committed, particularly in the regard of sexual violence as a central dimension of the military aggression. Approximately 20.000 to 80.000 women were molested in Nanjing, accompanied by mutilations and murders. Faced with health concerns regarding venereal diseases, motivated by the need to preserve its international credibility, the Japanese military leadership institutionalized a system that enabled the perpetuation of sexual violence, minimizing local resistance and potential health problems among the troops. The Nanjing Massacre represents one of the identifiable milestones of this system, arguably marking an inflection point in the escalation of violence against women. (Chang, 2012).

The Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) overlaps with Japan’s actions during World War II (1939–1945). The National Mobilization Act of 1938 codified the concept of “total war” and vested the Japanese state with unprecedented authority over the material and human resources deemed necessary for national defense. However, it is important to distinguish between this general enabling legislation and the specific mechanisms through which the military sexual slavery system was implemented. The Act provided the overarching legal framework for wartime mobilization and state control, but it was through subsequent military orders that the Japanese military and civilian authorities systematically forced hundreds of thousands of women into sexual slavery by means of coercion, deception, threats and abduction (Astut & Surajaya, 2018; Yoshimi, 1992).

1.3.3. “Comfort girls-women” – the euphemism that masks barbarism

The Japanese Empire’s colonization of Asia, between 1910 and 1945, conceals one of the most systematic violations of human rights in the 20th century. The victims of this system came from diverse backgrounds and the methods used to mobilize them were varied. Social inequality meant that poorer children and women were the most vulnerable, left at the mercy of discrimination based on class, ethnicity and gender. As noted by Yoshimi (2000), victims from Japanese colonies, primarily Korean women, were recruited through false promises of work in factories or hospitals. Violent abductions were common in China and the Philippines and threats were used against families and local-leaders in the Dutch EastIndies, now Indonesia (Nishino Rumiko & Akane, 2012).

The Japanese sex slavery network was supported by civilian agents, both Japanese and Korean. Extreme poverty led families themselves to sell their daughters to ensure the survival of the rest of the household (Yu-ha, 2023), while the Japanese police and colonial authorities facilitated this trafficking. The doctors, hired to perform gynecological examinations on the victims, were accomplices. In addition to administering arsenic to treat venereal diseases and inducing abortions (Min, 2021), they also abused the victims (Norma, 2015). The army controlled every aspect of these women’s lives, keeping them under round-the-clock surveillance. The “comfort stations” were not only places of ongoing sexual abuse but also sites of forced confinement (Nishino Rumiko & Akane, 2012). The victims were forbidden from leaving the danger zone, sometimes dying alongside the Japanese army (Ha, 2026) and were forced to serve dozens of soldiers per day. In extreme cases, as many as 100 (Min, 2021). From the Japanese perspective, these spaces fostered the aggressive masculinity necessary for the Japanese military’s combat operations (Norma, 2015). At the end of the war, the Japanese government’s abandonment of them was undeniable. Many were killed by the troops or simply left to fend for themselves (Nishino Rumiko & Akane, 2012) and they remained silent for decades.

1.3.4. The issue in the contemporary debate

The issue remains to the present day, examining how trauma and attempts at historical revisionism, as well as the struggle for recognition of the victims, continue to shape diplomatic relations in East Asia and define the contemporary debate on memory and gender justice in times of war (Soh, 2008). In fact, trauma goes beyond painful memories. Survivors describe infertility caused by diseases or brutal medical interventions. Psychological disorders have prevented them from leading what is considered a “normal” life.

The women who broke their silence describe a culture of shame in Korean society. Due to the tradition of chastity and purity, the human rights movement in South Korea enabled the survivors to transform their “dishonor” into a public accusation. The international community prioritized economic influence and the balance of power in Asia over justice. Nevertheless, the Korean Council for Women Drafted into Military Sexual Slavery by Japan has been compiling testimonies from survivors since 1990, conducting exhaustive campaigns for the recognition of this crime and fighting for redress for these women (Howard, 1995).

Among the survivors, Kim Hak-Sun (1924–1997) broke her silence in 1991. The “Wednesday demonstrations”, held in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul (South Korea), serve as a vital stage for political and emotional expression (Pilzer, 2012). In 1993, the Kōno Statement marked the Japanese government’s first official acknowledgment that the Imperial Japanese Army had forced women into sexual slavery. Yet the Statement simultaneously notes that, in some cases, women were recruited against their will, a phrasing that implicitly leaves open the possibility of voluntary recruitment elsewhere. This ambiguity has fueled intense debate and has been strategically invoked by conservative Japanese factions, while simultaneously drawing criticism for its failure to articulate with sufficient precision the full extent of the Japanese Empire’s involvement. (Nishino Rumiko & Akane, 2012). The first official attempt to close this issue came through the Treaty of Normalization (1965), but it ultimately created numerous conflicts, as the survivors were never consulted (Kimura, 2019). The Asian Women’s Fund (1995–2007) was presented as a philanthropic gesture, deliberately designed to obviate state accountability by channeling private donations rather than state funds (Kimura, 2019). Despite Japan’s formal acceptance of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East’s verdicts, the Treaty of San Francisco (1951) - while establishing the legal framework for post-war relations between Japan and the Allied Powers - contains no provision addressing the system of military sexual slavery or the individual claims of its victims. Article 11 of the Treaty bound Japan to accept the judgments of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, yet the Tribunal never adjudicated the sexual slavery system, leaving a crucial legal void. Since 1990, the “New Right” has orchestrated

a campaign of historical revisionism, targeting school textbooks for the systematic removal of references to wartime sexual violence. The Treaty’s framework has thus been strategically employed by successive Japanese governments to argue that all war-related claims were settled (Nishino Rumiko & Akane, 2012).

The UN intervened with the Coomaraswamy Report (1996). The document replaced the term “comfort women” with “military sexual slavery,” justifying the change with testimonies of systematic rape and torture and mutilation. The text also attributed legal responsibility to the Japanese state (Coomaraswamy, 1996), aligning with the report by Gay J. McDougall (1998). Submitted to the UN and the Rome Statute of the ICC (1998), the official report classifies sexual slavery as a crime against humanity, characterizing it as a neglected tactic of war, denouncing national legal shortcomings and reiterating Japan’s state responsibility.

In 2000, the establishment of the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery, organized by a coalition of NGOs, was a historic milestone for the survivors. Although it had no executive power to impose penalties, its verdict carried symbolic weight, reaffirming that sexual exploitation constitutes a crime against humanity (Shin H., 2025). The 2015 agreement was an attempt to achieve a “final and irreversible” solution between the Japanese and South Korean governments. However, it failed once again because the survivors were not consulted (Kimura, 2019). In 2016, an international coalition of activists submitted the victims records for inclusion in UNESCO’s “Memory of the World” program. Nevertheless, opposition from Tokyo led to the suspension of the process in 2017 (Shin H., 2025).

Survivors’ testimonies render visible the systemic nature of military sexual slavery, illuminating not only the immediate violence but also its enduring psychological toll, a crucial dimension to understanding the full complexity of their suffering (Kim-Gibson, 1999).

For these reasons, museums dedicated to analyzing these testimonies transform individual trauma into collective memory and a space for public learning. Art serves the same function, transforming the pain of these survivors into “Living Memory” and educating generations (Stetz & Oh, 2001). The “Girl of Peace” statue in Seoul, created by Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung, in 2011, carries powerful symbolism that deeply unsettles the Japanese government. The work embodies South Korea’s collective memory and stands as a monument to mnemonic resistance against state-sponsored erasure. The statue’s short, uneven hair and raised heels register the forced severing of family ties and the precarity of the survivors’ postwar existence. Complementing this, the bird on her shoulder and the mosaic shadow of the elderly woman forge a visual connection between living survivors and the dead, figuring a mnemonic continuity that challenges the state’s systematic erasure. The political

intent of the piece is reinforced by its strategic location in front of the Japanese embassy and by the inclusion of an empty chair, which invites the observer to abandon passivity and become an active agent in denouncing this crime and demanding justice (Fernandes, 2022). The transnational reach of this memorial has taken the form of monuments in Germany, the Philippines and the United States, sparking strong opposition from Japan (Ushiyama, 2021).

II. Didactic Organization

2.1. Theoretical Framework – The Big Six

Epistemologically, historical thinking results from the dialectic between the researcher's creativity and fragmented empirical evidence in constructing discourse about the past. According to Seixas and Morton (2012), the historical operation confronts three central problems: the temporal gap between the observer's *locus* and the absent object, the selective operation necessary for narrative intelligibility and the axiological and identity-based conditioning of the historian himself.

Operationalizing the concept of "historical significance", which pertains to the selection of what is memorable, the trajectory of military sexual slavery illustrates the transition from a long silence to a geopolitical and memorialistic nexus in East Asia. Its relevance is contingent, as activists and survivors have conceptualized it as an exponent of twentieth-century sexual slavery (Kim, n.d.). In contrast, nationalist factions in Japan tend to regard it as an anti-imperialist discursive construction. Historical evidence interrogates how the past is reconstructed, demanding the selection, contextualization and corroboration of primary sources (Seixas & Morton, 2012). In the case under analysis, the systematic post-war destruction of documents by the Japanese army deepens this challenge, making the remaining traces crucial (Kim, n.d.). Research therefore imposes the cross-referencing of sources (Noh, 2024).

The articulation between continuity and change lends meaning to historical flows (Peter Seixas, 2012). The system of sexual slavery was enabled by a "culture of comfort" which normalized stigma and the devaluation of sexual labor (Nicolini, 2024). However, the inflection introduced by post-Nanjing Japanese imperialism lay in the convergence of this long-term matrix with the aforementioned ideologies and the state's war machinery, transforming a social practice into a systemic policy. Thus, the cause-consequence binomial makes explicit the intentionality of the Japanese state,

which formally integrated “comfort stations” into military logistics in 1938 (Rong, 2026). Nevertheless, human agency reveals itself as multi-causal, as the forces of Japanese colonialism and Korean patriarchy converged in a “double bind”, where the recruitment of many women was mediated by local agents (Soh, 2008).

Historical perspective/empathy challenges the intelligibility of past mentalities. Regarding the perpetrators, it is important to understand the ideological ecosystem that legitimized exploitation as a military necessity. Soh (2008) warns against the simplistic reduction of the phenomenon to the category of “war crime”, lest it be circumscribed to a militarized parenthesis, obliterating its deep socio-cultural roots. Simultaneously, it obliges us to rescue the subjectivity of the victims, refusing their crystallization as passive icons.

Finally, the ethical dimension problematizes contemporary responsibility in the face of trauma (Peter Seixas, 2012). Currently, UN experts denounce that survivors face a chronic deficit of justice and reparation (UN, 2026). Contemporary reparation is thus grounded in the premise that current structures inherit historical injustices, demanding lasting institutional transformations (Bruckmann, 2025).

In this way, the system of military sexual slavery constitutes a privileged *locus* for assessing the conceptual interdependence of *The Big Six*: significance manifests in memorial dispute; evidence, in the fragmentation of sources; continuity and change, in the reconfiguration of culture by the State; causality, in the structure-agency dialectic; historical perspective/empathy, in the refusal of anachronism and passivity; and the ethical dimension, in the normative challenge that the past directs to the present.

2.2. Global design of the teaching intervention

The pedagogical intervention conceived for this purpose complies fully with the stipulations of Portuguese law. Accordingly, this section does not purport to offer an exhaustive methodological blueprint. Its sole objective is to provide a general indication of how the subject may be pedagogically explored. The aim is to suggest a viable didactic orientation, rather than to prescribe a fixed or universal approach to its treatment in the classroom. It should be emphasized that this section does not claim empirical results derived from an already implemented and evaluated intervention. Instead, it only

aims to outline an intervention design, structured to develop historical thinking, ethical sensitivity and civic understanding among students.

The intervention is structured into three 100-minute blocks, designed according to a chronological and conceptual progression that articulates the genesis of Japanese expansionism, the institutionalization of the sexual slavery system and its legacy of silencing and transnational memory.

The first session problematizes the accelerated modernization of Meiji Japan as a precondition for Imperialism, starting with an iconographic source that depicts cosmopolitan Japan at the end of the nineteenth century. The case study of the Five Charter Oath (1868), which set the stage for Japan's modernization and the testimony of Xia Shuqin, a survivor of the Nanjing Massacre (1937), along with the collaborative exploration of a digital resource, allows students to construct collaborative synthesis charts that mobilize the concepts of Westernization, Nationalism, Expansionism, Colonization, Imperialism and Massacre, enabling a smooth transition to the second session.

The second session focuses on the Nanjing Massacre and the institutionalization of sexual slavery within the Japanese Empire as a military logistical solution. In group work, students explore a digital resource that maps the "comfort stations". Following the guide established by the teacher, the students examine the quantitative scale of the phenomenon, performing an exercise in historical significance to grasp its full scope. Finally, the third session will address the breaking of the post-war silence and Japan's current stance on the issue that has been under examination. The 2015 agreement, along with the 1996 and 1998 UN reports, play a pivotal role, culminating in the analysis of the "Peace Girl" statue (Seoul, South Korea) and the observation of a Wednesday demonstration from 2019, mobilizing the concepts of "continuity and change", as well as the "ethical dimension" of the issue.

The pedagogical intervention explicitly outlines, in each session, a set of operational objectives situated predominantly at the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (analysis, evaluation and creation) (Anderson et al., 2001), deliberately moving away from mere fact memorization. The underlying pedagogical intent is to develop competencies understood as "complex combinations of knowledge, skills and attitudes" (PASEO¹, p. 9). The didactic itinerary are not limited to conveying historical content about the Japanese Empire but rather aim to mobilize students toward critical thinking, data collection through the exercise "Map to Humanize", testimonies from survivors and active citizenship and ethical awareness through the analysis of evidence and completion of the corresponding worksheets.

1 *Perfil dos Alunos à Saída da Escolaridade Obrigatória*, in portuguese. This document is the overarching reference framework for the Portuguese education system, established by Decree-Law No. 55/2018.

These pedagogical decisions are aligned with the PASEO framework, particularly the competency areas of “Critical thinking and creative thinking”, through “observing, analyzing and discussing ideas” (p. 24); “Information and communication” (“researching, describing, evaluating and validating information by cross-referencing different sources”, p. 22); and “Interpersonal relationships” (“working in a team, negotiating and accepting different points of view”, p. 25). The choice of a sensitive topic - military sexual slavery - further reflects the humanist principle (A) of the PASEO (p. 13) and the value of Citizenship and participation (p. 11).

Accordingly to the LBSE², the objectives fulfill Article 2, No. 4 (“the education of free, responsible, autonomous and supportive citizens”) and Article 9, Subsection a) (“the development of reasoning, reflection and scientific curiosity [...] that constitutes the appropriate cognitive and methodological support for the possible pursuit of further studies”). Furthermore, by addressing this particular issue, the pedagogical intervention corresponds to the provisions of Article 3, Subsection c) (“ensuring the civic and moral education of young people”) and Subsection d) (“ensuring the right to difference [...] consideration and appreciation of different forms of knowledge and cultures”).

Each session is introduced by guiding questions, which serve as the pillars of the instructional sequence, with the aim of promoting problem-based learning grounded in the temporal progression of the issue under study. Students are presented with questions that require them to draw on prior knowledge, analyze sources and construct well-substantiated responses.

Guiding questions fulfill three primary functions: to problematize the issue at hand, inviting reflection and analysis that should culminate in a substantiated response based on information drawn from the evidence. They serve as a guide for the instructional sequence designed for each session and are therefore also hierarchically organized according to both the degree of complexity and a chronological perspective that lends significance to student learning. Finally, they also serve a metacognitive function. By revisiting these questions at the end of each session, the plan allows students to verify whether they have successfully answered them, thereby becoming aware of their own learning process.

The formal content of the pedagogical intervention is organized hierarchically and sequentially across the three sessions. The first corresponds to the historical context of the Meiji reforms and Japanese expansionism leading up to Nanjing; the second, to the institutionalization of the military

2 *Lei de Bases do Sistema Educativo*, in portuguese. Is the fundamental, overarching legal document that establishes the general framework for the entire Portuguese educational system. It is the “mother law” of education in Portugal, defining the principles, goals, structure and organization of education from early childhood through to higher education. All other educational legislation, curricula and school policies must align with its provisions.

sexual slavery system and its respective geographic dispersion; and, finally, the third, to the post-war silence, the emergence of denunciation and the struggle for Justice and Memory. This temporal and thematic progression adheres to the principle of sequentiality and the increasing degree of complexity within each session. Each of these content blocks is subsequently broken down into numbered topics within the columns that make up the lesson plan; accordingly, this decimal coding facilitates cross-referencing with both strategies and assessment.

Furthermore, the selection of these contents reveals three key pedagogical choices. First, the rejection of ethnocentrism and Official History - the content addresses Japanese history but with an emphasis on the victims and survivors of a sexual slavery system resulting from Japanese Colonialism and Imperialism. The focus is placed on deliberately silenced voices. Additionally, the contents are organized around key concepts, made explicit in the analysis of evidence, which are decoded (or “unpacked”) as the session progresses. Finally, the contents of the pedagogical intervention are not limited to conceptual and procedural dimensions but also include an axiological dimension, inviting students to engage in exercises on Ethics and Human Rights.

Assessment is exclusively formative and continuous, aimed at regulating student learning - particularly in real time - and enabling the provision of feedback to students. Accordingly, assessment instruments focus on oral participation and the quality of argumentation; capacity for synthesis and logical structuring in task execution (as in the cause/consequence chart); collaborative work and the critical use of digital platforms; and structured written production (via worksheets), which include exercises on historical significance, continuity/change and the ethical dimension.

2.3. Ethical and Deontological Issues

Pedagogical intervention on this issue places the teacher within the territory of *Difficult Knowledge* (Britzman, 1998), insofar as it constitutes a social trauma marked by oppression, gender violence, systemic sexual exploitation, political silence and historical revisionism. The difficulty, however, resides above all in the affective and epistemological domains (Zembylas, 2019).

Teaching traumatic themes presents the teacher with the ethical dilemma of reconciling the deontological duty of historical truth with the safeguarding of students’ psychological well-being (Monteiro, 2005). The classroom is configured as a space for ethical intervention and civic education

(Seiça, 2003), yet confronting this Difficult Knowledge challenges deep-seated convictions about History, Gender and power, threatening students' self-image. When faced with conceptually and emotionally violent content, students may manifest reactions of resistance, shock or desensitization (Zembylas, 2019), demanding sensitive and regulated pedagogical mediation.

In the didactic transposition, the teacher must assess whether exposure to explicit testimonies and archival images fulfills a formative function or whether, analogously, it descends into a performativity of suffering that dehumanizes the victims (Seiça, 2003). A naive multiperspectivist approach proves inadequate, as it risks acritically juxtaposing the victim's narrative with Japanese revisionist negationism, thereby fostering obstacles to understanding historical complexity (Grever, 2019).

Hesitation in addressing the theme, even under the guise of laudable prudence, often reflects an affective resistance on the teacher's part when faced with the discomfort of sexual violence and the fear of ideological divisions. Yet the effect also constitutes the key to disrupting this resistance. By acknowledging their own unease, the teacher adopts a "pedagogy of discomfort", tolerating ambiguity and welcoming students' emotional reactions (Zembylas, 2019). Commitment to History demands scientific rigor and respect for student autonomy prevents the teacher from imposing moral conclusions. Instead, the teacher must create conditions for students to develop their own ethical conscience through source analysis (Seiça, 2003).

Although the LBSE (Assembly of the Republic, 1986) assigns the school a formative and civic mission, it falls to the teacher to make the ethical decision regarding the use of sensitive sources. Articulation with the educational community materializes in prior information to parents/guardians about the objectives and ethical framework of the didactic sequence, a strategy that safeguards professional autonomy, builds bonds of trust and legitimizes History as a space for critical thinking (Seiça, 2003). Didactic transposition thus requires navigating a balanced path between affective resistance and historical fact, honoring duties toward students, the profession and society from a reflective and committed teaching identity (Seiça, 2003; Zembylas, 2019).

Conclusion

This work is designed to foster that the system of military sexual slavery of the Japanese Empire (1937-1945) is not a marginal episode of Contemporary History, but a structural phenomenon where Nationalism, Expansionism, Colonialism and Imperialism institutionalized gender-based violence. The historical analysis, grounded in essential historiographical works, seeks to develop several interconnected core areas. The first is the instrumentalization of the female body as a war logistics resource; the active silencing by the Japanese State through the destruction of evidence; the persistence of state revisionism; and the critical significance of survivors' accounts as essential primary sources that fill the archival void left by the deliberate destruction of wartime documents by Japanese authorities after 1945.

The didactic proposal seeks to develop these cores through a pedagogy using the Big Six of historical thinking. The methodological choices, including cross-analysis of antagonistic primary sources, collaborative work with digital mapping platforms, as well as exercises in historical perspective/empathy, continuity and change and the ethical dimension are not arbitrary. They constitute a rigorous didactic translation of the concepts of the *Big Six*, articulated with the principles of PASEO and the precepts of the LBSE.

The advantage of this intervention lies in its capacity to decenter the History curriculum from its usual Eurocentric axis, confronting students with a crime against humanity whose diplomatic and memorial consequences prevail until the present day. The proposal addresses historical content and its broader pedagogical objective is twofold: to promote historical thinking skills and to stimulate ethical reflection in the face of human suffering. These two dimensions are not pursued in isolation. Historical knowledge provides the necessary empirical foundation, ethical reflection. In turn, it derives from the critical examination of that knowledge, particularly when students confront the gap between official silences and survivor narratives. Civic responsibility emerges as the logical extension of this process. Understanding the past's enduring impact on the present, recognizing the vulnerability of historical memory to revisionism and acknowledging the ongoing relevance of human rights as a framework for justice. This work contributes to a historical education that neither takes refuge in neutral factualism nor prescribes predetermined moral conclusions, but instead equips students to engage critically with the past while assuming an informed and reflective stance toward their civic responsibilities in the present.

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