

**Implications of Structural Injustice Theory in Relation to Responsibility for and Impact on,  
Reparations in the Korean ‘Comfort Women’ Case**

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### **Abstract**

In this dissertation, I develop a normative argument for contemporary actors' responsibilities in the Korean 'comfort women' case, rooted in the understanding that present structures are a continuation of historical structures that enabled these injustices. Building on Catherine Lu's work, I argue that this case should be analyzed through a dual lens of traditional interactional injustice and Iris Marion Young's structural injustice. While the traditional interactional model presupposes an identifiable perpetrator causing harm directly through their intentional actions, the structural injustice approach acknowledges those injustices that arise from the accumulation of individuals' actions that are mostly well within rules and norms. Drawing on Young's social connection model of responsibility and Alasia Nuti's conceptualization of de-temporalizing injustice, responsibilities for contemporary actors can be identified. To discharge these responsibilities, classical reparations, such as sincere state apologies and financial compensation, should be supplemented with collective action. Drawing on successful Korean examples, such as the 2024 protests, I propose focusing on forming a common identity in collective action as well as a sense of urgency. This proved successful in the past and could be used to aim action toward the Korean government, as a powerful actor, to demand institutional changes, for instance in rape law.

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“I must bear the pain I have experienced with my heart, but I must continue to raise awareness and fight so that many people can become aware of this problem and work together to solve it.

Our descendants should not suffer the same damage as I did. It is difficult, but let’s work together.”

- Gil Won-ok

## Introduction

An increasing number of people view historical structural injustices as unfortunate past events that are both irrelevant for the present and for them (Memo, 2025). This dissertation challenges that perception by providing a strong normative argument for contemporary responsibilities for historical structural injustices by viewing the present as a *continuation* of the past. As a Korean, the Korean ‘comfort women’<sup>1</sup> case seemed especially appropriate for this analysis. During the Asia-Pacific War (1932-1945), an estimated 50,000 to 300,000 young women (Chongshindae Institute, 2017), predominantly from Korea, were apprehended by the Japanese military and forced into sexual slavery to provide Japanese soldiers with ‘comfort’ (Min, 2003; Soh, 1996). Traditionally, this case has been examined with interactional frameworks of injustice and models of responsibility based on liability that focus on holding blameworthy perpetrators accountable. However, in this dissertation, I argue that the Korean ‘comfort women’ case should be understood as one of interactional as well as structural injustice, and that this carries powerful implications for how we conceptualize contemporary responsibilities and reparation claims. While Catherine Lu (2017) engages with Iris Marion Young’s (2011) structural injustice theory in relation to the ‘comfort women’ case, she does not examine how this framework informs contemporary responsibilities in depth, nor does she explain what her theory means in practice for the ‘comfort women’. My thesis seeks to fill these gaps by applying the structural injustice framework more comprehensively and proposing practical pathways through which contemporary actors might discharge their responsibilities.

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter referred to as ‘comfort system’. The term ‘comfort’ is highly misrepresentative of the victims’ experiences, but since the terms ‘comfort station’, ‘comfort woman’, and ‘comfort women system’ are regularly used by scholars and activists in the field, I chose to follow the Korean Council and other scholars in using quotation marks around these terms.

I consequently posit following research questions:

*How can structural injustice theory contribute to understanding responsibility for injustices and reparations in the Korean ‘Comfort Women’ case and how can this framework inform practical implications on reparations?*

To answer these questions, this dissertation is divided into four parts. In the first part, I provide general background information on the Japanese ‘comfort system’ as well as the development of activism in this case, which will serve as the foundation of this paper. In the second part, drawing on Catherine Lu’s (2017) analysis of the ‘comfort women’ case and Iris Marion Young’s (2011) structural injustice model, I posit that this case is one of both interactional and structural injustice. While the interactional approach aims to identify clear perpetrators and victims through intentional actions, the structural approach identifies unjust background conditions that enabled injustices, in this case connected to colonialism, gender, and class. The third part focuses on attributing moral, legal, and political responsibility. For an in-depth analysis of responsibilities connected to the ‘comfort women’ case, I introduce the liability model of responsibility, which seeks to assign blame, contrasting it with the social connection model of responsibility, which assigns political responsibility to all those who are, by their (in-)action, connected to unjust structures. Building on this, I apply Alasia Nuti’s (2019) framework of de-temporalizing injustice to hold contemporary actors responsible in the ‘comfort women’ case. The final part explores the practical implications of this argument. I posit that backward-looking reparations based on the liability model of responsibility, according to the UN reparations framework, should be fulfilled in addition to Young’s call for forward-looking collective action based on the social connection model of responsibility. Specifically, I recommend using successful Korean examples of powerful movements as a blueprint for collective action against unjust structures.

## **Part I: Historical Background & Redress Movements**

From 1932 until 1945, framed as an effort to expand Japanese influence and counter Western imperialism in Asia, Japan engaged in the Asia-Pacific War (Min, 2003). During this period, the Japanese government established a ‘comfort women system’, cited as the ‘largest and most elaborate system of trafficking in women in the history of mankind, and one of the most brutal’ (Tanaka, 2001). The ‘comfort system’ involved large-scale procurement of women from various Asian countries, primarily from Korea, to provide ‘comfort’ through forced sexual labor to Japanese soldiers stationed abroad (Yoshimi & O’Brien, 2000). What distinguishes this system from other prostitution operations was the unprecedented number of women involved<sup>2</sup>, its vast geographical scope and scale of the system procuring women as well as its long duration over roughly fourteen years (Soh, 2000; Tanaka, 2001). The system developed in three main stages. In the first stage (early 1930s), military brothels were mostly civilian-run establishments where military personnel were provided with commercial sexual entertainment by predominantly Japanese women. During the following stage of the war (late 1937-1941), when Japan invaded Nanjing, ‘comfort stations’ were built by the military more systematically (Yoshimi & O’Brien, 2000). This stage was the turning point from mostly professional Japanese prostitutes to initially kidnapping Chinese locals and then Koreans as ‘comfort women’. In the last stage, following the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the efforts intensified to move Korean women to various distant places of Asia and Oceania, following the Japanese troops (Soh, 2000). The system of regulated prostitution evolved from sexual entertainment centers staffed by mainly professional Japanese prostitutes into purely practical facilities where soldiers could release their sexual urges quickly, using mostly young, non-Japanese women. The system now allowed sexual enslavement with women often recruited deceitfully, if not directly kidnapped (Soh, 2000).

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<sup>2</sup> Numbers are estimated to be between 50,000-200,000 (Min, 2021).

Especially after the Nanjing incident in 1937<sup>3</sup>, which involved Japanese troops mass raping local women, the ‘comfort system’, using predominantly non-Japanese women was established systematically and justified as means to reduce the reoccurring sexual violence in occupied territories. This was by no means out of concern for the civilian population and humanitarian motives but rather a threefold strategic concern. Japanese military leaders were concerned that 1) the antagonism of local civilians towards their occupiers would be fueled by mass rapes, 2) that sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) would spread if sexual behavior was not controlled, and finally, 3) they saw the ‘comfort system’ as a fit method for leisure provided to the soldiers who oftentimes would not get the time off to go home to their families. However, it is important to note that these measures massively failed to prevent sexual violence by Japanese soldiers or disease outbreaks and the spread of STDs remained high, which continued to deplete the army of healthy soldiers (Tanaka, 2001).

In this second stage of the ‘comfort system’, starting in 1937, initially mainly Chinese locals were procured to render sexual services in the ‘comfort stations’, but it became clear quickly that this angered the local population on top of their occupation and added to hostility towards the Japanese occupiers. This prompted a change from ‘recruiting’ local Chinese women to trafficking women from occupied and colonized territories (Tanaka, 2001). It is believed that about 80% of all ‘comfort women’ were Koreans, due in part to Korea’s status as a Japanese protectorate (1905-1910) and finally as a Japanese colony (1910-1945), making them more vulnerable to exploitation. Racial prejudices and patriarchal norms further contributed to their victimization (Soh, 2000). Regarding Korean women as primary targets to work in the ‘comfort stations’, the Army

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<sup>3</sup> In 1937, Japan stationed more than a million troops in China and started its full-scale invasion into the country. Upon a three months long battle in Shanghai, the Japanese Central China Area Army advanced toward Nanjing in November 1937. On the way to Nanjing as well as after entering the city, soldiers of this army committed a number of atrocities, including looting, massacre, arson, and mass rape. This incident prompted Japanese military officials to instruct commanders of every military contingent to set up comfort stations (Tanaka, 2001).

headquarters used recruitment agencies, who would either travel to Korea themselves or employ labor brokers in Korea to ‘recruit’ women. Often, with the support of local police, these labor brokers used dubious methods such as deception, intimidation, violence, and in extreme cases kidnapping (Tanaka, 2001). Only upon arrival at their destinations, these women realized the reality of their captivity and purpose. This shows how the procurement of Korean women was not an exclusively Japanese endeavor but rather included different actors on different levels from both Japan and Korea, but all under the watch of the Japanese military.

The conditions within the comfort stations were brutal. If they refused to obey orders, the women were regularly tortured, maimed, or killed (Tanaka, 2001). While the remaining Japanese women, primarily serving high ranking officers, had better accommodation and conditions, the Korean ‘comfort women’ endured harsher conditions, confined in small rooms with minimal furnishing (Soh, 2000; Tanaka, 2001). The general regulations for the ‘comfort stations’ were very strict, regulating rates<sup>4</sup>, business hours, sanitary conditions, regular VD exams, and so on. The frequency of forced sexual encounters often left the ‘comfort women’ with little to no time for sanitation which, in combination with many soldiers disregarding mandatory condom use, increased the risk of spreading STDs and increased the pain and humiliation of the women who had to endure this. On active battle days, the women were forced to serve up to 40 soldiers in a single day, with only one day off a month (Tanaka, 2001). Physical abuse, STDs, malnutrition, injuries from military attacks, or other circumstances resulted in the death of most of the ‘comfort women’. Many others either committed suicide or were executed by Japanese soldiers in attempts of erasing evidence of the systematic sexual abuse (Min, 2021). The remaining Korean survivors

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<sup>4</sup> Former ‘comfort women’ recall many soldiers handing them stamps that the soldiers previously purchased from the Japanese military for access to the ‘comfort stations’ to certain regulated rates. The ‘comfort women’ themselves were not paid for the services, nor were the stamps tradeable for anything once the soldiers gained access to the stations (Tanaka, 2001).

returned to Korea after 1945, although many of them were also simply left behind in the locations they had to serve (Min, 2021). Upon their return home, the suffering of the returning survivors continued because of humiliation, stigmatization, and ostracization as a result of gender hierarchies as well as sexual double standards in Korea. A woman's chastity, marriage, and childbearing/raising was emphasized in the patriarchal customs in Korea at the time- often deemed more important than her life. Victims of sexual abuse, even well into the 1980s, often refrained from reporting the abuse because of the stigma that the patriarchal society attached to sexual victims, highlighting how grave the stigma must have been in 1945 and after. Survivors of the 'comfort system' recall that family members and their communities regularly reacted extremely harshly if they reported or found out what had happened to them. Often, they were unable to lead a normal life upon their return ((Min, 2003; Soh, 1996). One Korean 'comfort woman' experienced being 'not treated like a normal human being by my relatives' (Korean Council and Korean Research Institute 1993, 163, as cited in Min, 2021) while another recounted her family calling her a 'disgrace to our family' and that she has 'created a problem' (Min, 2021, 166). This shows how the suffering continued well after the initial abuse and how the women were portrayed as shameful, problematic, and inferior.

With the shift from a military dictatorship to a democratic government in South Korea<sup>5</sup>, the redress movement advocating for justice for the victims of Japanese military sexual slavery gained support. After decades of isolation and marginalization, in 1990, the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (Korean Council) was founded by 37 Korean women's organizations and put forward seven demands including a sincere and official apology by Japan and compensation for the victims. The Korean Council also helped the first 'comfort woman' Kim Hak-soon to ever come forward to speak about her experiences which further encouraged 239

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<sup>5</sup> From here on 'Korea'. Because of limited information on 'comfort women' in North Korea, my dissertation focuses only on South Korea.

more Korean ‘comfort women’ and other Asian nations’ ‘comfort women’ to come forward (Min, 2021). In 1992, professor emeritus Yoshiaki Yoshimi uncovered historical documents in Japan’s War Ministry archives, proving not only that the Japanese military government had knowledge of the ‘comfort stations’ but actively planned, established, and operated them (Min, 2021; Yoshimi & O’Brien, 2000). In 1993, Japanese politician Yohei Kono, on behalf of the Japanese government, issued an apology to the ‘comfort women’ as well as acknowledging that the Japanese Army coerced many of them into working in the ‘comfort stations’ (Hayashi, 2008). His statement sparked hopes that the ‘comfort women’ issue would be resolved quickly, though the emerging neo-nationalism in both the Japanese government and citizens in the mid-1990s led to a rejection of these efforts (Min, 2021). For example, then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe denied in early 2000 that the military was responsible for the abduction and coercion of women for the ‘comfort system’. While he later did say that he would uphold the 1993 Kono Statement, he neither took back any past comments nor did he reprimand any members of the government who openly denied military involvement in the procurement of ‘comfort women’ (Hayashi, 2008). In 1995, the Asian Women’s Fund was established by the Japanese prime minister and with donations from Japanese citizens, the aim was to financially compensate the ‘comfort women’. The fund was heavily criticized as ‘sympathy money’ instead of official compensation from the Japanese government in addition to an official apology from the Japanese emperor<sup>6</sup>. Only seven out of the 200 Korean victims had accepted the money, but as a result were shamed by organizations that felt these seven women betrayed their cause by accepting the money (Min, 2003), highlighting the tensions and struggles inside the movements as well.

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<sup>6</sup> The 1889 Meiji Constitution placed the emperor into the center of all of Japan’s modern institutions and its modern polity. After World War II, the status of the emperor changed from enjoying full sovereignty to being a symbol of the Japanese state (Baker, 2019; Jones, 2023). While the status of the emperor changed significantly after 1945, he is still seen as the symbolic head of the state, explaining the significance his apology has.

In 2015, a bilateral agreement between Japan and Korea allocated one billion yen (€7 million) from Japan to Korea who in turn would provide the victims with medical care and compensation (Min, 2021). The agreement included an apology, however, this apology has been deemed as ‘fall[ing] short of meeting the demands of survivors’ who ‘deserved an unequivocal official apology’ (United Nations, 2016). This apology followed many previous apologies that were seen as insincere and insufficient. Further heavy criticism was voiced, especially from the Korean Council and the victims themselves, as they were not consulted in the 2015 agreement whatsoever. The agreement further stated that the ‘comfort women’ issue would be seen as completely resolved with the payment, though independent UN human rights experts stated that this issue is not to be seen resolved as long as ‘victims [...] remain unheard, [...] expectations unmet and their wounds left wide open’ (Min, 2021; United Nations, 2016). Since 1991, several lawsuits were filed against the Japanese government, many of them being dismissed, although more recent cases were successful in Korea (Columbia Law School, n.d.). Since the mid-1990s, the redress movement has gained support globally, including from the UN, EU, US, and many international human rights organizations (Min, 2021). An impressive movement has been ongoing for more than 30 years, called the Wednesday demonstrations (수요시위), organized weekly by the Korean Council. The inaugural demonstration was held in 1992 in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, when Kiichi Miyazawa, then Japanese prime minister, visited Korea. The Japanese government has yet to accept and fulfill the following seven demands made by the Korean Council: 1) Admission of the sexual slavery system as a war crime, 2) Disclosure of documents, 3) Delivery of an official apology, 4) Payments to the victims, 5) Punishment of those that are responsible, 6) A record of the system in history textbooks, and finally 7) Building of a memorial monument and an official archive.

## **Part II: Injustice**

This part outlines relevant theories of injustice and applies them to the Korean ‘comfort women’ case with the aim to establish a link between the injustices and moral, legal, and political responsibility for them. Building on Catherine Lu’s analysis of the ‘comfort women’ case and Iris Marion Young’s conceptualization of structural injustice, I argue that it is one of interactional *as well as* structural injustice. The interactional approach focuses on injustices with identifiable wrongdoers and victims that involve intentional actions- here Japan as perpetrator and the Korean ‘comfort women’ as victims. However, it overlooks colonial-, class-, and gender-based patterns of harm that the structural injustice framework addresses (Lu, 2017). The necessity of incorporating both frameworks in the ‘comfort women’ case becomes clear in Part III, where I argue for contemporary actors’ political responsibility.

### **Interactional injustice approach**

Contemporary interactional frameworks of injustice seek to distinguish between clear perpetrators (individuals or institutions) and victims (Lu, 2017). Young (2006) observes that the standard model of injustice generally involves a perpetrator whose actions, usually not deviating from moral or legal baselines, cause harm and might therefore require compensation from the perpetrator. Indeed, directness of the harm and usually the deviation from accepted norms and practices are determinants of injustice in this approach.

In the context of the ‘comfort women’ case, interactional injustice theory is useful when examining the direct and intentional actions carried out by a number of actors. The Japanese military and its leading figures, the wartime government, Japanese, and Korean labor brokers, brothel owners, as well as Japanese soldiers can be argued to have deviated from moral and potentially legal baselines and that their direct actions caused certain injustices. For instance, the Japanese government and military apparatus have been proven to have planned, executed, and

maintained the ‘comfort system’ and therefore directly caused egregious human rights violations (Min, 2021; Yoshimi & O’Brien, 2000). But not only the institution’s actions have caused harm. Individual soldiers have caused serious harm through their actions, for example, by abusing, mutilating, and murdering ‘comfort women’. Furthermore, labor brokers who have, often under false pretenses or even outright force, recruited, coerced, and abused Korean women can be attributed clear moral and/or legal wrongdoing. In Part III, I will connect the interactional injustice approach and attribution of responsibility, especially under the liability model of responsibility.

But what about injustices that do not involve obvious deviations from laws, norms, and practices, including those that occurred after the ‘comfort women’ returned home? There are certainly cases without clear perpetrators that deviated from moral or legal baselines, yet apparent injustices occurred or were reproduced. For example, one survivor reported her story with much hesitation and difficulty out of fear that her brothers and their wives could react negatively, which is precisely what occurred and added on to her stress and suffering (Min, 2021). This example makes apparent that a strictly interactional framework of injustice is largely insufficient as neither the brothers nor their wives deviated from moral or legal baselines. The Korean societal norms of the time placed women in a subordinate position; she was expected to remain chaste, devoted to her husband and any deviation from this- regardless of the circumstances- was seen as shameful (Choi, 2012, 139).

### **Structural injustice approach**

The term structural injustice was coined by Iris Marion Young in the 2000s who was concerned with applying a structural lens to injustice issues. Her structural injustice approach focuses on how individuals perpetuate injustices as well as how different structures (economic, political, social) generate injustices (McKeown, 2021). More specifically, Young (2011, 52) explains that ‘structural injustice exists when social processes put large categories of persons under a systematic threat of

domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time as these processes enable others to dominate or have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising their capacities'. This, as opposed to the interactional model of injustice, is not at the fault of one identifiable perpetrator but rather because of the accumulation of the actions of many (individuals and/or institutions). These actions are not aimed at harming others but rather happen through the pursuit of the individual's own 'particular goals and interests, for the most part within the limits of accepted rules and norms' (Young, 2011, 52). According to Young (2011, 2-64), the consequences of four features of 'social-structural processes' lead to structural injustice: 1) 'Objective Constraints'- material and institutional infrastructure, shaped by laws and social rules, enabling some and constraining others; 2) 'Considering Position'- Young draws on different thinkers to establish an account of an individual's position as a determinant of their opportunities in terms of interactions; 3) 'Structures Produced in Action'- internalized position-related behaviors of individuals that draw on society's rules and resources and therefore reproduce structures. 4) 'Unintended Consequences'- vulnerabilities and oppression as consequences of social structural processes for those marginalized in the structures (Young, 2011, 52-64; McKeown, 2021, 3). Her approach to injustice fills the gap that occurs in the interactional approach when trying to assign responsibilities for macro background structures, such as colonialism. This is not to say that the traditional interactional approach should be entirely abandoned or that the structural injustice framework can only be applied to injustices with no identifiable perpetrator. It is rather that the two should be applied together when there are injustices with identifiable perpetrators as structural injustice is often an important component in the production of these injustices (Lu, 2017; Young, 2004). This applies precisely to the 'comfort system' where the makers of the system and the actors that directly implemented it are supported by international and social structures, including colonialism, gender, and class (Lu, 2017; Min, 2003).

### *Colonialism, Gender, and Class*

Applying a structural lens to *colonial injustice*, for instance, can acknowledge that Japan did not deviate from ‘given institutional rules and accepted norms’ (Young, 2006), as colonialism was, by international law, largely legitimate and a common practice of the time. A structurally unjust international colonial system, rooted in racialized prejudices and hierarchies, enabled Japan to colonize Korea. Those hierarchies served as fundamentally flawed background conditions that created and mediated patterns of domination, which in turn allowed the subjugation of the Korean people (Lu, 2017). To reiterate, Young argues that ‘structural injustice exists when social processes put large categories of persons under a systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time as these processes enable others to dominate or have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising their capacities.’ (Young, 2011, 52) This normalized domination helps explain why mostly *Korean* women were disproportionately targeted for the ‘comfort system’, rather than women from countries not colonized by Japan. Moreover, international treaties on banning traffic of women and girls (1925) provided a convenient legal loophole that allowed Japan to exempt its colonies from the treaty, providing further background conditions for Japan to mistreat and dominate its colonial subjects, depriving them of virtually all opportunities (Lu, 2017).

But not only did the colonial system enable injustices, *gendered oppression* in both the colonizer, as well as the colonized state created an uneven vulnerability *among* the colonized (Min, 2021).<sup>7</sup> Japan’s history of public prostitution dates back to the Edo Period (1603-1868) and continued into the Meiji Period (1868-1912). In these periods, the family, with the patriarch as its head, was subordinate to the state both legally and ideologically, to reinforce Confucian values.

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the intersectionality of the ‘comfort women’ case, see Min (2003), “Korean ‘comfort women’: the intersection of colonial power, gender, and class.”

Within this system, the importance of Japanese women laid in their childbearing potential and their ability to produce future loyal subjects to the state (Kimura, 2016). This aspect of the Japanese patriarchal system carried the notion that women were no more than a tool to serve the Japanese state. This notion was transplanted from the historical precedent of public prostitution in Japan to the military sexual slavery system in the Asian and Pacific War (1932-1945) (Min, 2021). This fundamentally flawed and structurally unjust perception of a woman's role mediated and justified the systematic subjugation of women under the 'comfort system'. The underlying logic of a woman regarded simply as a 'tool', in this case for the Japanese state, socially positioned them to be at much higher risk to be marginalized. Recalling Part I, Japan's aim was rather pragmatic; not to intentionally harm the women, but to provide Japanese soldiers with 'comfort' and morale, lower STD rates, and decrease sexual violence around the military stations. Structurally unjust social processes connected to, in this case, gender therefore perpetuated the vulnerability of women. Moving away from the Japanese example, especially upon their return to Korea, the victims' suffering of shame, isolation, and poverty continued not only as a direct result of the sexual slavery but also because of Korean patriarchal ideology, misogyny, and (sexual) double standards between men and women (Lu, 2017). While gender equality is now an integral part of international agreements such as the SDGs (United Nations, 2015), they were not always the norm. These structures of misogyny and patriarchal ideology placed some colonized in a more precarious position than others. Gender hierarchy came with, for example, notions of chastity which were used to 'control and restrict a woman's body, treating it as the property of her husband' (Choi, 2012, 139). The emphasis on a woman's main role as wife and mother was further reproduced through familial expectations to marry and bear children. At the same time, the victims were unable to speak up about what had happened to them due to the stigma and shame associated with the violation of these social norms, further increasing their hardship (Min, 2003). The story of the survivor whose

family shamed her for having experienced sexual slavery and disclosing it, illustrates how the interactional injustice approach fails to grasp the entirety of the injustice and ascribe any kind of responsibility to anyone. The structural injustice approach, on the other hand, allows a look behind the curtain and questions the very background conditions of injustices. It provides a basis to ascribe political responsibility for a harm that would otherwise be in a responsibility vacuum. A more detailed account of the concept of political responsibility will follow in the subsequent Part III.

Lastly, *class discrimination* further heightened the vulnerability of some colonized over others. The dire economic situation, that Korea was forced into by Japan, played a role in the heightened vulnerability of rural, poor Korean women (Tanaka, 2001). With the declaration of Korea as a protectorate of Japan in 1905, Japan stripped Korea of all diplomatic power and autonomy in internal affairs. The most disastrous change was the new landownership system which resulted in many small Korean farmers losing their land to either Japanese farmers or the Japanese Oriental Development Company (Hwang, 2010). At the time, Korea was a highly agricultural country, with 80% of the population working in agriculture. Consequently, this new landownership system changed Korean society drastically, putting an incredible number of Koreans out of work and into bitter poverty with unemployment rates up to 85% (Tanaka, 2001). Forcing Korea to export most of its rice to Japan during Japanese rice shortages at the end of the 1910s, moved the problem from Japan to Korea, further exacerbating their situation. This oftentimes left parents desperate to send their children off to work in cities or outside of the country, making them susceptible to exploitation by labor brokers. Furthermore, Tanaka (2001) notes how labor brokers would disproportionately target poor households to procure young Korean women. While the interactional framework allows to ascribe moral and potentially legal responsibility to agents such as the labor brokers who were actively involved in procuring *women*, it omits the fact that they were mostly *poor* women and therefore fails to grasp the entirety of the injustice, as well as omitting other potentially responsible

agents. Injustices connected to the ‘recruitment’ of the women is no longer only connected to the labor brokers or the military officials who contracted them, but examines how the structural economic deprivation of Korean families added onto the marginalization and heightened vulnerability of poor women.

In the previous two sections, I examined two models of injustice and argued for the inclusion of the structural injustice approach to complement the traditional interactional model. This highlighted the role of unjust background conditions in the injustices that occurred in the ‘comfort women’ case. While the structural injustice approach allows a broader approach to diagnosing the injustices that occurred, it is impractical when it comes to assigning responsibility. The interactional approach benefits from clear rules of causality to assign responsibility but this is not the case for the structural injustice approach. If injustices stem from structures rather than a clear perpetrator, then how can anyone be held responsible- after all, it is no one’s direct fault. To answer this question, I will introduce two models of responsibility: the liability model and the social connection model.

### **Part III: Responsibility**

Iris Marion Young (2011) suggests that recognizing and judging an event as an injustice inherently implies a responsibility of some kind. By applying Young’s structural injustice approach to the ‘comfort women’ case, I built the foundation to examine and assign responsibility for injustices that do not necessarily have a clear perpetrator doing harm to a clear victim/ group of people. Relevant unjust background conditions have been highlighted that placed young, poor, Korean women in an especially vulnerable situation to be apprehended for the ‘comfort system.’ When it comes to assigning responsibility, it is indeed easier and common practice to seek out a clear line of causality between perpetrator, harm, and victim – which Young calls the ‘liability model’ of responsibility (Young, 2011, 97). But when structures and systems allow and inform laws, norms, and practices that place some people under a systematic threat of subjugation, but

simultaneously enable others to access unfair opportunities, then we need a system of assigning responsibility that goes beyond pure liability. For this purpose, I will introduce Young's 'social connection model' of responsibility (Young, 2011, 96), which is activated by her structural injustice model of injustice, contrasting it with the liability model of responsibility, that is activated by the interactional model of injustice. Contrary to the liability model which seeks to assign blame for injustices, the social connection model seeks to assign political responsibility to remedy these injustices (Young, 2006). They are inherently different when it comes to their purpose, which is precisely why they can supplement each other.

### **Liability model**

What Young (2011) refers to as the liability model of responsibility is the most common model when it comes to determining and assigning responsibility. Rooted in legal reasoning, this model aims to find someone guilty or at fault for certain harm. It is therefore backward-looking; it seeks to assign blame, consequently singling out- it is strictly personal. Legal responsibility is determined by three main criteria. Firstly, to be able to find someone guilty or at fault, and therefore responsible for remedying the harm or to be punished, a *causal connection* between the harm and the action of an identifiable perpetrator must be established. Both the legal system and a sense of moral right depend on clear rules of proof and causality. Secondly, it must be shown that the action was performed *voluntarily* and thirdly, that the actor had sufficient *knowledge* and understanding of the situation. The idea of the liability model of responsibility is frequently shared when it comes to both legal and moral responsibility; similar to finding an agent legally responsible, moral responsibility presupposes causal connection between harm and agent, intent, and adequate knowledge of the situation and therefore its consequences (Young, 2011, 97–99). There are differences between fault liability and strict liability, with the latter holding agents accountable even when the outcome was not intended or if the harm was caused by someone that was under the

command of the agent- Young includes both in her liability model of responsibility (Honoré, 2002; Young, 2004).

In the Korean ‘comfort women’ case, there is substantial evidence of the Japanese military’s active involvement in building and operating the ‘comfort stations.’ A clear line of causality, knowledge, and intent are evident, making the liability model of responsibility appropriate to assign blame. And just as we hold individuals responsible despite several constraints, we can also hold states responsible for their actions; despite constraints such as democratic processes, markets, and global institutions (McKeown, 2024). In fact, McKeown (2024) raises the point that corporate agents can be argued to have *less* constraints than individuals because of their power<sup>8</sup>, and therefore have more leeway. Corporate agents, such as states, can therefore be blamed for injustices, but because those claims for reparations, in the Korean ‘comfort women’ case have not been met, a ‘responsibility deficit’ incurred; more specifically, a ‘retrospective responsibility deficit’ (List & Pettit, 2011, 165; McKeown, 2024, 189). This responsibility deficit transcends the lifetime of the administration of the time due to the state’s continuing existence, even through change (McKeown, 2024). This remaining responsibility deficit is still not addressed properly by Japan and leaves gaps in terms of what is expected from victim organizations and what is delivered by Japan. The Tokyo Trial could have been a way to discharge this responsibility, but the international community failed to put the Korean ‘comfort women’ case on the agenda. After Japan’s defeat in World War II, the allied powers established the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, commonly known as the Tokyo Trial. Similar to the Nuremberg Trials in Germany, 28 Japanese political and military leaders were prosecuted for planning and waging war in the Asia-Pacific region and the subsequent atrocities that were committed. The Tokyo Trial aimed at settling accounts between states for war

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<sup>8</sup> McKeown distinguishes power into systemic power, dispositional power, and episodic power. Systemic power relates to an agent’s place in the power hierarchy of social structures and dispositional power relates to the capacity an agent has to act. Episodic power refers to actual exercises of power (McKeown, 2024, 185).

crimes and crimes against humanity, including Japan's mistreatment of *other* states' colonial subjects, but it notably excluded Japan's mistreatment of its *own* colonial subjects (Totani, 2009; Lu, 2017). This is yet another example of how these injustices are deeply embedded into structures and unjust background conditions and how those influence responsibility and reparation claims significantly, as I will show in more detail in Part IV.

### **Social Connection Model**

The social connection model of responsibility, coined by Iris Marion Young, assigns shared political responsibility to 'all agents who contribute by their actions to the structural processes that produce injustice' (Young, 2006, 102) to remedy them through collective action. The fact that people are connected (even beyond political borders) through 'structural social processes' (Young, 2004, 102) is sufficient to claim that there is a responsibility for justice for them. While the liability model seeks to assign blame, the social connection model is strictly non-blameworthy (Young, 2011). The aim of the social connection model is precisely to *overcome* structural injustice by assigning responsibility, not *blaming* individuals for past structural injustice and is therefore more forward-looking. Although they are different in their aim, they do share a reference to causes of harm; in the social connection model, these causes are structures producing unjust outcomes. Accordingly, the following five features are connected with the social connection model: 1) not isolating, 2) focus on background conditions, 3) more forward- than backward-looking, 4) shared political responsibility, and 5) collective action to discharge responsibility (Young, 2011, 104–113). This theory of responsibility through social connection assumes that even those who are oppressed have a responsibility to overcome structural injustice- not because they are morally blameworthy, but because they have a responsibility to oppose injustice. This resistance to injustice and transformation of structures should manifest in collective action, taking part in group efforts, which is precisely what *political responsibility* refers to. Thus, to transform and rectify unjust background

conditions, not only the beneficiaries of them, but various agents in different positions are responsible for working together (Lu, 2017; Young, 2011).

When it comes to structural injustice, it is difficult, often even impossible, to trace a causal connection that is necessary for the liability model of responsibility. While it is possible to pinpoint agents who actively contribute to structures and structural processes, it is often impossible to determine how their individual actions directly cause harm to others (Young, 2011), in this case the ‘comfort women’. For example, under the new landownership system, Japanese farmers who purchased Korean-owned farms can be argued to have increased Korea’s dire economic situation. But concluding that the farmer has caused and should therefore be blamed for the procurement of *poor* Korean women would be misguided. Yet, under the social connection model, they can be held politically responsible because their actions contributed to injustices ‘indirectly, collectively, and cumulatively’ (Young, 2011, 96). Young’s (2011, 80) alteration of Hannah Arendt’s interpretation of moral, legal, and political responsibility assigns political responsibility to those doing, or not doing, something that indirectly contributes to an injustice. In the case of the Japanese farmers taking over Korean farms under the new landowner system, we can ascribe political responsibility by examining their connection to the injustices. To do so, I will firstly clarify what is meant with ‘connection’. Because Young is rather ambiguous on the definition of connection, I will draw on McKeown’s convincing interpretation of connection as the ‘reproduction of unjust structures through individual’s action’ (McKeown, 2018, 500). In this case, economic exploitation functions as the unjust structure. The Japanese farmers cannot, under the liability model of responsibility, be blamed for any of the unjust outcomes of those structures. But by buying a piece of land, regardless of reason (e.g. Japan’s insufficient production of rice at the time), they perpetuated structural conditions which conditioned the actions of, for example, the labor brokers who apprehended poor,

rural Korean women for the ‘comfort system’. Thus, under the social connection model, they bear political responsibility.

Young’s social connection model extends our understanding of responsibility beyond liability, and I have shown how this can be applied to the ‘comfort women’ case. I have also shown how, under the liability model of responsibility, contemporary actors, in this case Japan, can and should be held accountable for past interactional injustices. Does the same hold for the structural injustices where most of the involved actors are no longer alive? None of the young people of today’s Japan or Korea were involved in the grievous human rights violations, how could they hold any kind of responsibility? This is a valid objection, and yet, they can and should still be held politically responsible without being blameworthy. This is because structural injustice should be de-temporalized, as I will now explain.

### ***De-temporalizing Historical-Structural Injustices***

Catherine Lu (2017), hints at how we can build a bridge from history to present times. She explicates how *not* acknowledging structures at the core of the injustices and contemporary responsibility for those structures can lead to reproduction of structural injustices (Lu, 2017, 157). Similarly, Jeff Spinner-Halev (Spinner-Halev, 2012) makes an account of what he calls ‘enduring injustice’. Enduring injustices are *radical* injustices such as exile, discrimination, terror, and cultural dispossession, that have not been properly addressed and provided with a solution and continue to have detrimental effects on victims (Spinner-Halev, 2012, 7). Alasia Nuti (2019) expands on this and makes it even more explicit by providing a model of thinking about ‘historical-structural injustices’ as being reproduced through different means, shaping the background conditions for current injustices. Unlike Spinner-Halev, Nuti does not limit injustices that can endure over time to *radical* injustices but acknowledges that there can also be ‘*banal*’ dimensions to them (Nuti, 2019, 13). They are banal not because they *are* trivial but because they *seem* so.

Banal because they are not directly seen; they play in the background, they are routinized, and so deeply ingrained that they become normalized in habits, expectations, and stereotypes. But they also significantly interplay with and contribute to the radical dimensions of injustice when ‘systematically performed over time’ (Nuti, 2019, 42). Nuti acknowledges that circumstances have changed since the original injustices, such as the ‘comfort women’ case, and emphasizes that these changes are crucial to understand how structures and injustices evolve. Nuti gives an account of these injustices as being ‘de-temporalized’, meaning that they continue and evolve as do the underlying social structures. De-temporalizing injustice therefore refuses to view past and present as conceptually separate and views history and injustices as made up of long-term structures. Those long-term structures do not end with certain events- they are embedded in the present (Nuti, 2019, 8). The unjust past manifests and is reproduced not just in civil society but also in formal institutions, or in the background structures and conditions in which those institutions operate. Nuti’s account of historical-structural injustice therefore gives us an understanding of why some past injustices do not simply remain in the past but are ingrained in and ‘reproduced into the fabric of our societies (and international order), both at the macro- and a micro-level’ (Nuti, 2019, 51).

Connecting this back to the social connection model of responsibility, the ‘comfort women’ case and the core question of contemporary actors’ responsibility, I stated earlier that contemporary actors can and should be held responsible both for the interactional injustice experienced by the ‘comfort women’ and the underlying structural injustice. When historical unjust background conditions, such as the discrimination of women due to gender hierarchies and their subsequent heightened vulnerability to violation, are seen as ongoing, then contemporary unjust background conditions can be understood as a continuation of historical injustices instead of entirely new ones. Nuti (2019) uses stereotypes as a powerful example of the significant connection of historical injustices and present structural processes and how they continue to shape people’s interactions.

Stereotypes, defined as a generalized image of an individual that is not based on the individual's characteristics, but rather on their membership to a group (bpb, n.d.) pose an interesting example for the continuation of structures for two reasons, according to Nuti (2019, 36): 1) stereotypes have been proven to have 'pervasive and damaging effects' in individual's lives but only recently have political theorists started to examine their influence on sustaining inequalities (Anderson, 2009) and 2) stereotypes are part of the banal dimension of injustices and therefore component of structural injustices. Nuti (2019) further argues that stereotypes were systematically used to justify historical injustices.

Applied to Korea, during the colonial era, both Japan and Korea shared the view that women are merely a tool to the state and sexual objects (Lu, 2017) which played a significant role in the justification of the structural subjugation of women under the 'comfort system'. Although specific stereotypes may have evolved, the underlying logic persists. For instance, especially young Korean men tend to support the same dichotomy of the 'good' and 'fallen/bad' woman which reinforces gender hierarchies in an attempt to dominate women by praising those who are obedient to the rules and stereotypes placed on them meanwhile shaming those who are not (H. W. Jung, 2023). Those stereotypes are 'normalized structural processes of interaction [which] should be regarded as mechanisms whereby historical injustices are reproduced' (Nuti, 2019, 38). Indeed, these 'new' stereotypes are virtually the same stereotypes that put Korean women in a much more precarious situation and evidently led to great harm for them in the past. In Part II, I provided the example of a 'comfort woman' who was shamed by her family, because she opened up about what was done to her in the 'comfort stations' and therefore openly broke with the stereotype of a 'good' woman (Min, 2003; Soh, 1996). Still today, shame, as a salient example of gender hierarchies and sexual double standards, is used as a powerful tool in Korea that both silences survivors of sexual violence and paradoxically gives them credibility in court- provided they display feelings of shame. This

derives from prevailing social norms and stereotypes in Korean society, where the virtue of female chastity is a deeply ingrained value (Park, 2024). The underlying logic suggests that if a woman is willing to come forward with a claim of sexual violence despite the shame associated with being a victim of sexual violence, her claim must be genuine. For instance, a court noted in one case, that it was improbable that the victim would make false claims of sexual violence that would induce shame on her and risk public exposure and disgrace (Park, 2024). However, this logic becomes exclusionary when survivors do not express the feeling of shame expected of them. In a 2017 case, a court dismissed a sexual harassment claim because the victim found the incident rather disgusting than shameful for her (Park, 2024). This example of the reproduction of the banal dimensions of injustices in contemporary Korean society serves as the foundation for responsibility claims of any actor that participates in them by their (in-)action.

Class also remains a significant underlying background condition that made young Korean women from poor families more vulnerable to be coerced into the ‘comfort system’ than other women (Min, 2003). There is ‘no doubt’ (Min, 2003, 951) that Japanese military and police deliberately targeted poor farming families from rural areas who were the most powerless, due to their economic status (Keith 1995, 18, as cited in Min, 2003). This pattern of discrimination due to economic status and class is still highly visible in contemporary Korean society. Kim and Alexy (Kim & Alexy, 2024) argue that ‘at the roots of cruelty and predation against the weak lies the system of social inequality’ due to socio-economic status which manifests as structural violence in institutions such as schools, the workplace, or the military.

This illustrates how structures such as gender and class hierarchies did not remain in the past but are continuously affecting how different groups in society are positioned towards each other and how this leads to continuing injustices. Having built the bridge from past to present, we can now conclude that because structures, such as gender and class hierarchies, are being reproduced,

responsibilities for contemporary actors to change those structures can be assigned. The social connection model gives us a good understanding of who to assign these responsibilities to; everyone who is, by their (in-)action, connected to these structures. These connections are not limited by borders or to regions- they touch all of us in some way or another.

#### **Part IV: Reparations**

In the previous part, I presented compelling arguments for contemporary actors' responsibilities in the 'comfort women' case. Naturally, the next question is how these responsibilities can be addressed. In this part, I offer insights into potential approaches. The first section addresses the backward-looking moral responsibility of the Japanese state under the liability model of responsibility. It considers the claims made by victim organizations and draws on the UN framework for reparations. The second section shifts the focus to the forward-looking political responsibility under the social connection model of responsibility, exploring meaningful ways this responsibility can be discharged.

#### **Reparations Under the Liability Model of Responsibility**

Interactional injustices, activating the liability model of responsibility, would rely on interactional justice models to redress past wrongs. As a form of corrective and rectificatory justice, interactional justice is backward-looking. It refers to past 'wrongful conduct or unjust interactions, and [...] undeserved harms and losses or injuries arising from wrongful conduct or interactions' (Lu, 2017, 33) and aims at the settling of accounts between the involved agents. This means that in cases, such as the 'comfort women' case with living survivors, required action to address interactional injustices is quite straight forward; reparations in the form of official acknowledgement, sincere apologies, and financial compensation to the individual victims must take place (Lu, 2018). Under general terms, reparations refer to measures that provide 'a range of material and symbolic benefits to victims or their families as well as affected communities'

(OHCHR, n.d.) in order to redress gross violations of human rights. According to the United Nations (n.d.), reparations involve 1) Restitution- restoring the victim to the condition prior to the violation/had the violation not taken place; 2) Compensation- as financially covering for quantifiable harm, e.g. loss of earning but also for moral damage; 3) Rehabilitation- includes providing access to medical, psychological, legal, and social aid; and 4) Satisfaction- ending any continuing violations, truth seeking, apologies, memorials, as well as judicial sanctions, for example (OHCHR, n.d.). This closely aligns with the demands of the Korean Council. Specifically, this would include direct payments from the Japanese state to individual victims, a full and sincere apology, including from the emperor, inclusion of the ‘comfort system’ in school curricula, as well as the construction of public memorials. While these demands, along with the UN framework for reparations, adequately address state-based reparations on the liability model, they do not address underlying unjust background conditions. Moreover, Japan’s ongoing refusal to engage fully and sincerely with these demands has led to lasting negative impact in the region, especially between Japan and Korea, which in turn impacts activism efforts. It raises a critical question: How can we work towards a better future when wrongful conduct from the past is not addressed, and relationships not repaired? Here, political responsibility under the social connection model of responsibility, and collective action as a way to discharge it, becomes relevant for Japanese citizens; while not blameworthy, they can come together to apply pressure on the government and demand accountability.

### **Discharging Political Responsibility Under the Social Connection Model**

While reparations are often the most tangible manifestation of redress for victims (Hamber, 2006), they insufficiently address persisting structures which continue to reproduce structural injustices. The persistence of those unjust background conditions therefore necessitates a form of forward-looking action (Young, 2006; Lu, 2017; Nuti, 2019). In Part III, I outlined the

responsibility for this forward-looking action with Young's social connection model of responsibility and will present some potential pathways to discharge this political responsibility. Given the limited scope of this dissertation, I primarily address a specific subset of possible action with a focus on Korea. Future research could build on this foundation by exploring additional recommendations for discharging political responsibility beyond the Korean context.

Young (2006) argues that only collective action can discharge this forward-looking responsibility because it is precisely the accumulation of the actions of many different agents that produces unjust outcomes. The ultimate goal of discharging this responsibility is to change the very structures and processes which produce a number of injustices (Young, 2006). State institutions are useful tools for this as they are inherently more powerful than an individual in their ability to transform structures and because they have more 'elbow room' to act (Nuti, 2019, McKeown, 2024). States are not only powerful through their executive, legislative, and judicial power but also because they can communicate certain values through their actions (Brettschneider, 2012). For instance, the Korean state cannot eradicate structures of gender hierarchies and discrimination itself, but it can address them in powerful ways through funding of certain organizations or public campaigns- and we as individuals can come together to discharge our political responsibility, and pressure governments into action. This is necessary as agents with an 'inherent capacity to influence' are usually not the ones initiating structural change but it is rather by pressure of social movements that substantive action is initiated (Nuti, 2019). In Japan, because of the continuing refusal of the Japanese government to follow the demands made by the Korean Council and victims themselves, civil society should come together and put pressure on their government. Structures, such as the Wednesday demonstrations in Korea are already in place and could be utilized by the Japanese population as well.

In Korea, movements like the Candlelight Protests<sup>9</sup> in 2016 (J. K. Jung, 2023) or the immediate response in form of widespread demonstrations following the martial law incident in 2024<sup>10</sup>, ending with the impeachment of President Yoon Suk-yeol (BBC, 2024) showcase the country's powerful civil society and what they can achieve in collective action. These protests were of impressive size and longevity and can therefore serve as a blueprint for other movements connected to class and gender as well. (Chae et al., 2020) argue that social movements, such as the 2016 or 2024 protests 'allow the actors involved to make sense of their socio-economic environments, to construct collective meanings of their actions, and to pursue alternative ways of life'. These movements are also often grounds where participants form a common identity, based on feelings of solidarity which are pushed through framed narratives by movement activists (Chae et al., 2020). Lessons can be learned from these cases; already-known practices and rituals could be picked up (such as the use of candles in protests, or the spreading of information on social media). These familiar methods, combined with the construction of a common goal and identity, have the potential to reach a broad mass (Jung, 2023).

The 2024 protests are particularly noteworthy, as they were driven by a strong sense of urgency. Korean people were acutely aware of the consequences of the previous time martial law was declared and this historical awareness as well as the threat of a backsliding of democracy led to their collective action (Duster, 2024). This sense of urgency holds potential for other causes as well, for instance, to challenge structures based on gender and class. However, a sense of urgency in this case presupposes individuals to be aware of these structures. It must be made visible that current

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<sup>9</sup> Then-President Park Geun-hye (2013-2017) was accused in 2016 of abusing her power; accusations included coercion, corruption, and the leaking of governmental secrets. Quickly, massive protests erupted, known as the Candlelight Protests, which lasted over six months and culminated in the president's successful impeachment (Chang & Park, 2021; J. K. Jung, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> End of 2024, then-President Yoon Suk-yeol announced unexpectedly that he would impose martial law after continuing fights over a budget bill. Immediately, South Koreans gathered in the streets concerned about a backsliding of democracy. The last time martial law was imposed was under authoritarian rule in 1980, culminating in the violent suppression of protests in Gwangju (BBC, 2024).

unjust structures are precisely those structures that enabled the ‘comfort system’ in the first place and that similar injustices are still possible- because of these enduring structures. The challenge is therefore to make people aware of these structures and to create a willingness to act- a sense of urgency can serve as a motivator. To achieve this, interest groups could collaborate with researchers to design campaigns that educate the public on the connection between structures and injustices, fostering a sense of political responsibility. Once urgency is recognized, we are likely to see mobilization and collective action to push for change. Specifically, this could be aimed at the government, demanding a change in rape laws or to limit the influence of chaebols<sup>11</sup> and would be a powerful signal from the population to the Korean state- and vice versa, if enacted.

A powerful Korean example of an individual seeing and acting on political responsibility<sup>12</sup> is Gil Won-Ok, whom I quoted in the very beginning, who advocated tirelessly for victims of sexual violence and especially for uncovering the truth about the ‘comfort system’ until her passing in February this year at the age of 97. After opening up about her victimization under the ‘comfort system’, she joined others in the fight for human rights, especially those of women. ‘Grandma’ Gil participated in the Wednesday demonstrations almost every week, visited the UN Human Rights Council President in Geneva, and traveled around the world to join others in raising awareness on

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<sup>11</sup> Chaebols (e.g. Samsung, Hyundai, SK Group, LG) are large family-controlled conglomerates in South Korea who wield significant influence over the economy and politics. As part of the 1961 development strategy of General Park Chung-hee, chaebols were heavily subsidized to improve the economy and to this day, the close connection between government and these conglomerates remains. Although once instruments for massive economic growth, they now contribute more to socio-economic inequality by being involved in corruption scandals and unfair monopolistic practices than to social progress (Albert, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> On individual action: Because of limited resources such as time and energy, individuals must decide which structural injustice to act on. For this purpose, Iris Marion Young (2004, 127) provides four ‘parameters of reasoning’: power, privilege, interest, and collective ability. She argues that if someone has a specific power in relation to a structural injustice, this might be the injustice they want to focus on as they are in a better position to make a change there. Secondly, if an individual benefits from an unjust system, this is the injustice they should address. Thirdly, if an individual is already part of a collective, it makes sense to focus their resources through that collective to push for change. Lastly, it may be more effective to work on issues that one is passionate about. This includes both personal interest but also being directly affected by injustice. Additionally, Brooke Ackerly (Ackerly, 2018) provides five principles of politically responsible action in her book *Just responsibility : a human rights theory of global justice*: intersectionality, connections, collective- and self-advocacy, solidaristic network building, learning process.

the issue of the ‘comfort women’ case (Kyeonhyang Sinmun, 2025). As a co-founder of the butterfly foundation, which supports victims of women’s rights violations as well as advocating for them all over the world (Women and War, n.d.), Gil Won-ok is an impressive example of activism that connects people and has meaningful impact; ‘It is difficult, but let’s work together.’

### **Conclusion**

In this dissertation I have outlined how structural injustice theory can contribute to understanding responsibility for injustices and reparations in the Korean ‘comfort women’ case and how this framework can inform practical implications on reparations. After giving a detailed account of the historical background conditions of the ‘comfort women’ case in Part I, relevant theories on injustice were presented in Part II, namely the interactional model of injustice and the structural injustice model. Where the interactional framework presupposes an identifiable perpetrator and victim that are connected through direct and intentional actions, the structural framework focuses on unjust background conditions and structures, in this case connected to colonialism, gender, and class, to which individuals contribute without malicious intent (Young, 2011). Although the interactional and structural model of injustice differ in several ways, I argued that they should both be applied to the ‘comfort women’ case. The importance of incorporating the latter model becomes evident in Part III, where I argued for contemporary actors’ political responsibility in the ‘comfort women’ case. I built up to this argument by applying Iris Marion Young’s (2006) framework of the social connection model of responsibility which assigns political responsibility to everyone connected by their (in-)action to unjust structures. To build a bridge from past to present, I supplemented this with Alasia Nuti’s (2019) framework of de-temporalizing injustices and structures. In Part IV, I introduced the concept of reparations and offered some insights into how responsibilities of contemporary agents can be addressed. Firstly, as a liable actor, the Japanese state should deliver what organizations and victims have demanded, including direct

payments and a sincere apology. However, classical reparations address mostly backward-looking claims and do not necessarily address the structures and unjust background conditions that still enable injustices, thus going beyond the traditional understanding of reparations is needed. For this purpose, I have drawn on Young (2006), who advocates collective action to discharge political responsibility arising from the social connection model. Specifically, I recommend using successful examples of collective action as blueprints for future action with a focus on creating a common identity and a sense of urgency as a driver. I suggest that the collective action should be aimed at the state as a powerful actor to demand changes in rape law, for example.

However, for any collective action in this case to be effective and sustainable, it is crucial that intersectionality, also beyond colonialism, gender, and class, is taken seriously. While this dissertation did not explicitly engage with intersectionality as a theoretical concept due to its limited scope, it can serve as a strong foundation for future research on how collective action can meaningfully address overlapping forms of injustices due to unjust background conditions, beyond the Korean context as well.

Ultimately, (historical) structural injustice theory allows us to recognize how the historical past influences the present and that structural change requires not only institutional accountability, but also collective political will. This paper has provided a strong normative argument for all members of society to work together in collective action to change unjust structures. When responsibilities are taken up, relationships can be repaired and can pave the way for a more just future.

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