

Dissonant heritage, interpretation and connection in War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul, South Korea

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of heritage interpretation in its preservation and its relationship with the tourism industry. Specifically, it focuses on the case of the comfort women, who were victims of sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army during the occupation of the Korean Peninsula. The critical analysis centres on the exhibition at the War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul, South Korea, which is dedicated to their story. The main objective of this paper is to evaluate the feasibility of establishing a connection between the heritage and the visitor in situations where dissonances surrounding the heritage and imperfect message transmission exist. Additionally, the paper aims to highlight the museum's use of emotion in delivering the interpretation to achieve the desired outcome of establishing a connection with the visitor, preserving the heritage for future generations, answering to sustainable heritage practices.

Keywords: interpretation, dissonant heritage, comfort women, museum, sustainable heritage practices

Introduction

“The paradoxes of indirect knowledge haunt many of us who came after. The formative events of the twentieth century have crucially informed our biographies, threatening sometimes to overshadow and overwhelm our own lives. But we did not see them, suffer through them, experience their impact directly. Our relationship to them has been defined by our very ‘post-ness’ and by the powerful but mediated forms of knowledge that have followed from it” [Hirsch 2012, p. 106].

These sentiments are eloquently captured in the words of Eva Hoffman, as quoted by Marianne Hirsch in her work *The Generation of Postmemory*. They aptly describe how past events, even when not personally lived through, can have a profound influence on the present. Preserving and managing the heritage is vital for commemorating history, educating future generations, fostering social cohesion, and promoting tourism and sustainable development. Wilson [2023, p. 105] points out that “the representation of our individual and collective histories can be used to promote ‘social sustainability’ of our futures” and that in order to safeguard the cohesion of present and future societies, it is imperative to confront the historical legacy. Sustainable heritage practices involve an interdisciplinary and holistic

approach that balances the preservation of cultural significance with the needs of present and future generations, balancing social, environmental, and economic dimensions. However, the inherent challenges posed by the heritage related to trauma require innovative and sustainable heritage practices to ensure their long-term preservation. It can also present opportunities for reconciliation, healing, and the promotion of peace. By integrating sustainable heritage practices, it can mitigate the adverse impacts of war and suffering and harness the potential of these sites for socio-economic development.

Nonetheless, the nature of heritage, especially the difficult one, can create significant dissonance for those who encounter it. Cultural institutions, such as museums, grapple with the challenge of effectively presenting heritage to their audiences. The more complex the heritage, the more intricate the issues that arise when deciding how to communicate it to visitors. The manner in which they present their content directly impacts the understanding of past events, sometimes even serving as the sole source of such knowledge. However, heritage and the institutions responsible for its preservation are influenced by various factors, ranging from the personal agendas of heritage heirs to the historical policies of national governments. Consequently, the interpretation of heritage is subject to modifications and moderations, often leading to a profound dissonance for visitors and distorting the essence of the issues being presented.

This research centres on the utilization of interpretation by the museum as a cultural institution to establish a connection between the heritage and the visitor, with the ultimate goal of safeguarding the preservation of the legacy. For the case study served the Museum of War and Women's Human Rights in Seoul, South Korea¹ and the heritage of comfort women, who were victims of the Japanese army during the occupation of Korea (1910-1945). The enduring presence of this heritage in the personal and public life of contemporary Korean society makes it a suitable subject for investigation.

The difficult heritage and interpretation

To comprehend the complexities and uncertainties surrounding the comfort women issue, it is important to highlight that it occupies a significant position within

¹ The research project, which culminated in a master's thesis, was conducted over several months in 2021 at the War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul, South Korea dedicated to the history of comfort women.

the intricate interplay of past events, collective memory, historical narratives, and cultural heritage.

Assman [2008, p. 57] points out that “while fairly recently people were convinced that the past was closed and fixed and the future was open to change, we are now experiencing that the past is constantly changing, and the future proves to be heavily determined by the past”. This approach highlights the formidable challenge of ascertaining the veracity of past and its deep interconnection with the present and the future also exemplifying the challenges associated with heritage. Banaszkiewicz and Owsianowska [2015, p. 8, own translation] encompass them, stating that “the first, and most important characteristic of heritage is the fact that it always belongs to somebody. Someone owns it, someone passes it, someone receives it. The heritage then always exists in the optic of interpersonal relations, and if so, it is always under the dynamic process of negotiating meanings and applying values”. Furthermore, the complexity of the heritage intensifies when contemplating its association with trauma. In numerous instances, memories serve as the sole remnants of past distress as “this dimension of heritage is often more lacking in tangible remains than practically any other” [Tunbridge, Ashworth 1997, p. 129]. The memories of the endured suffering, transmitted from one generation to another, often constitute an integral aspect of the heirs’ self-perception. Consequently, determining the precise nature and course of events becomes exceedingly challenging. Its presence in the cultural institutions necessitates navigating potential conflicts within the community of survivors or their descendants, as well as potential confrontations with the broader audience.

In order to facilitate the effective communication of heritage to the audience, the process of interpretation emerges as an indispensable tool. According to Sharpley and Stone interpretation provides a “link between the attraction and its visitors; it is the process by which a place, an event, a history, a building, a collection of items or, more generally, what may be referred to as ‘heritage’ is accorded meaning which is then communicated by one means or another to the visitor [...] without interpretation [heritage] may remain meaningless to the visitor” [Sharpley, Stone 2009, p. 113]. The authors draw upon Tilden’s approach, which portrays interpretation not solely as a means of providing information to visitors, but as a conduit for establishing a profound connection between the visitor with their social and personal realities, thereby enriching the overall experience. While interpretation

has the potential to greatly enhance the visitors' experience, it must be acknowledged that it can also introduce distortions to the heritage presentation by being selective, biased, and manipulative, particularly in the context of sites that embody highly emotive content related to suffering, cruelty, or death. The authenticity of the heritage and the manner in which it is interpreted play a pivotal role in shaping the visitors' engagement and consumption of the heritage. Heritage tourism, despite its focus on the past, is subject to the ongoing process of modernization, akin to other industries. This modernization not only influences the format in which heritage is presented but frequently impacts its content as well. This phenomenon is observable in cultural entities, notably museums, which "[...] became ironically the institutions most clearly committed to representing mechanisms of change" [Crane 2006, p. 99].

In particular, when examining the realm of difficult heritage, such as the past marked by atrocities like war, the space for open discussion and the consideration of diverse historical perspectives is often limited. In the context of war, individuals are typically divided into victims, who strive for recognition of their pain and suffering, and perpetrators, who may either attempt to bury themselves in a sense of guilt or, conversely, refuse to acknowledge their responsibility.

As emphasized throughout this study, difficult heritage elicits intense emotional responses. Cultural institutions, including museums, has adeptly capitalized on this fact, harnessing its potential at various levels. The purpose of evoking emotions is twofold: first, to elicit a visceral response among those who personally lived through the experiences or maintain a significant personal connection to them, second, to engender emotional engagement among subsequent generations who may lack a direct individual connection to the depicted events but are nevertheless part of the communal lineage. Furthermore, emotions are aimed at arousing a reaction among individuals encountering the heritage, who exist outside the immediate community and may be encountering these historical narratives for the first time. The portrayal of the comfort women's narrative within cultural institutions, including museums, exemplifies this comprehension of heritage.

Smith [2021, p. 304-305] noted that "museums and heritage sites are places where people go to feel". In the case of the comfort women's story, these emotions are notably intense, revolving around compassion, injustice, pain, death, shame, and vulnerability. Such emotive elements serve as potent tools in shaping visitors' understanding and perception of the past events. Moreover, these emotional

encounters within the museum context can have a lasting impact on the visitors' perception of reality beyond the confines of the museum walls contributing to the preservation of the heritage.

The comfort women

For the case study of this paper served the history of comfort women. The term refers to women who were later identified by the United Nations as victims of sexual slavery by the Imperial Army of Japan in the first half of the 20th century. The women were gathered and placed in locations known as comfort stations to provide sexual services for the soldiers of Imperial Army. This heritage primarily relies on the memories of survivors who, for many years, remained silent. Consequently, it is understandable that it is enveloped in controversies. Recognizing the inherent characteristics of memory, it becomes apparent that testimonies from victims are often incomplete and inconsistent. Furthermore, a notable dearth of verifiable evidence renders the establishment of a definitive, mutually agreed-upon version of the story nearly impossible. Additionally, especially in the East Asian context the "official or popular narratives of collective memories are not just collages of individual recollections and testimonies but collective reworking of the past through which subjects of memories are constantly re-defined" [Seo 2008, p. 370]. As a result, the responsibility for shaping this heritage rests not only with the victims themselves but also with those tasked with managing it, particularly on a national level.

The comfort women issue serves as a means for contemporary South Korea to maintain a victimized image on the international stage, particularly in relation to Japan. Moreover, it has the potential to significantly impact the national identity of Koreans. Hana Jun titled her research on national identity and affective historical empathy in students as "I think the comfort women are us". Considering South Koreans, she highlights that the comfort women legacy "[...] is still an emotionally involved issue for the majority of [...] people" [Jun, 2020, p. 8]. The involvement of the issue in politics permeates various aspects of the state's functioning, including education and public spaces. Commemorative monuments and museums dedicated to this heritage are prevalent not only in South Korea provoking a broader discussion on how to portray difficult heritage in public spaces, catering to both the local community and visitors.

Addressing the comfort women issue poses a challenge, as its nature is characterized by fragility, controversy, and ongoing reassessment. David Schmidt in 2000, researching Japanese Imperial Army during Pacific War argued that “the comfort women issue remains one of the least understood atrocities of the XX century” [Schmidt 2000, p. 5]. Despite the considerable passage of time and the flourishing body of research on the subject since Schmidt’s statement, the comfort women issue persists as a formidable challenge.

The use of the euphemism comfort women itself sparks a contentious debate, serving as the initial point of contention. The term comes from its Japanese origin: *Jugun Ianfu* (kor. *Chonggun Wianbu*) where *ju* (kor. *Chong*) stands for following; *gun* (kor. *gun*) for military; *ian* (kor. *wian*) for comfort and entertainment; and *fu* (kor. *bu*) for an adult female providing sexual service. It means then that the comfort women term refers to female adults who provide sexual services following military troops to comfort and entertain them. The term focuses on the perspective of preparators, and it might indicate volunteer character of the procedure. While the term comfort women is widely employed, victims and their advocates prefer an alternative designation: sex slaves. [see Soh 2009, p. 30].

Despite the considerable passage of time since the operation of comfort stations and the public disclosure of the issue in the early 1990s, the memory of comfort women remains vivid within contemporary Korean society. Furthermore, the matter is not overlooked at the political level, and its unresolved status, along with other contentious historical issues, significantly impacts bilateral relations between Korea and Japan. “It is important to notice that the establishment of the Comfort Women as the core symbol of the atrocities committed as a result of Japanese imperialism was possible not only due to the brutal nature of the event itself, but also as a result of the new dynamics of the post-democratization Korean society” [Seo 2008, p. 374] as well as the feminist movement. The issue has persisted within the realm of human rights and women’s rights discourse, maintaining its relevance to this day.

Research study

Interpretation for connection

The phrase “Interpretation for connection” encompasses the unique bond that can be forged between the visitor and the heritage through the process of interpretation. Despite the existence of dissonances, particularly in cases where the heritage is intertwined with trauma and suffering, and where message

transmission is imperfect, the potential for establishing a connection remains. The present research undertaking endeavors to substantiate this hypothesis through a critical analysis of the exhibition held at the War and Women's Human Rights Museum² in Seoul, South Korea, which is dedicated to the topic of comfort women. The legacy associated with human suffering during times of war is inherently complex, as it is intricately entwined with the dynamic victim-perpetrator relationship. Consequently, maintaining objectivity in this context becomes a challenging endeavor [see e.g. Ramseyer 2022]. For victims, preserving the memory of the past is of utmost importance, not only for their own benefit but also for future generations, while simultaneously sharing their narrative of suffering with the global community. However, in order for the story to be effectively heard and appreciated, it must convey a clear message that enables an uninterrupted connection with the recipient. It is thus evident why numerous dissonances arise when discussing heritage that is intertwined with trauma.

In her book titled *Emotional Heritage: Visitor Engagement at Museums and Heritage Sites* Laurajane Smith [2021 p. 310] aptly concludes with a statement that serves as a fitting foundation for describing this research endeavor: "People, and how and why they use past in the present are central to understanding the phenomenon of heritage". In cultural institutions, such as museums, this how and why is contained within the interpretation, that applies the meanings to the heritage and builds the experience [see Mikos v. Rosshrscheidt 2019, p. 62, own translation]. The process of interpretation plays a pivotal role in facilitating the interaction between heritage and the visitor.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the heritage of comfort women and its presentation within the museum space, it is pertinent to invoke two principles of interpretation articulated by Tilden. Firstly, Tilden [1977, p. 9] asserts that "Information as such is not Interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon the information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information". Secondly, he states that "the chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation". These observations bear significant relevance when examining the case of comfort women, leading to the conclusion that heritage

² The research involved conducting multiple visits to the War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul, South Korea, with the aim of critically analyzing the interpretation presented by the museum. Specifically, two components were selected for examination: the audio-guide narrative and the visual materials in the permanent exhibition.

managers, through the interpretation of specific information, aim to provoke certain reactions in visitors that, ideally, foster a connection between the heritage and the visitor.

Prior to delving into the intricacies of interpretation, it would be beneficial to visualize the process of establishing that connection, where the heritage message is transmitted from the affiliated institution to the visitor. The process of building connection with the visitor through interpretation, particularly in the context of traumatic and painful heritage, is susceptible to various dissonances, making flawless transmission unattainable. As a result, the message received by the visitor can be significantly distorted, impeding the establishment of a meaningful connection with the heritage. To mitigate this, interpretation must not only evoke desired reactions but also overcome potential obstacles. Additionally, the role of the visitor should be acknowledged, not merely as a passive recipient but as an influential participant in the interpretive process. In cases where the desired communication effect is achieved, or conversely, when it falls short, heritage managers consider further modifications to the interpretation based on visitor reactions and individual characteristics. A notable example of such customization is the divergence between the content presented in the local language for native visitors and the content presented in English or other languages for foreign visitors. This exemplifies how the interpretation is constructed and reconstructed to cater to the specific needs of the visitor, thereby acknowledging their active role in the interpretive process. However, it is important to acknowledge that at times, in pursuit of desired reception, especially when the heritage pertains to traumatic events, the interpretation may exert excessive control, depriving the visitor of their active participation. It can be visualized as follows.

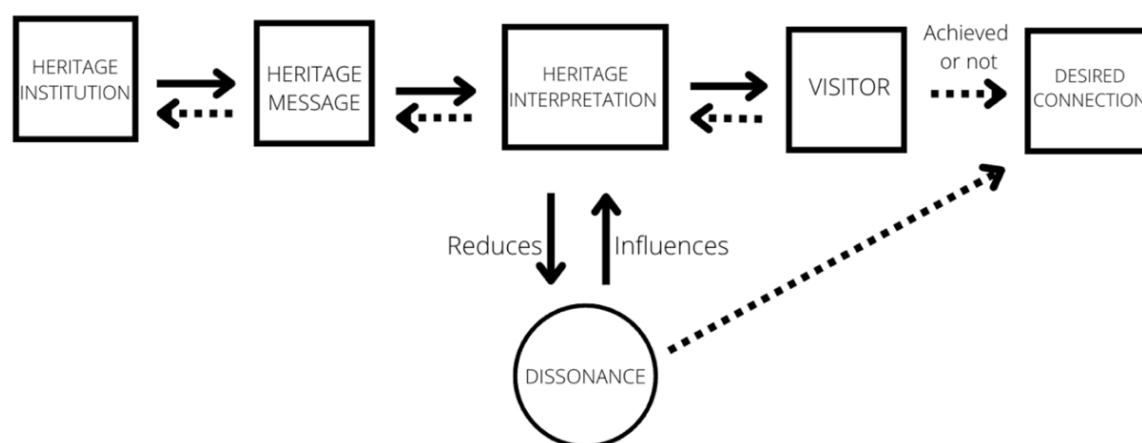


Fig.1. Heritage transmission in the museum

Source: own study³

In order to effectively mediate the heritage product, the key to success lies in mitigating all potential dissonances to ensure seamless communication that remains undisturbed in pursuit of the ultimate goal. A crucial element, previously mentioned in this study, plays a significant role in achieving this objective: emotions. The theory emphasized by Laurajane Smith [2021, p. 39], stating that “museums and heritage sites are places where people go to feel”, proves valuable in eliciting the desired response from visitors through the incorporation of an emotional component. By harnessing emotions, visitors can forge a personal connection with the heritage being presented. When visitors approach the museum with an expectation of experiencing emotions, the subsequent emotional engagement provides fertile ground for the assimilation of the transmitted message as an integral part of their own being. The heritage associated with suffering, death, and pain inherently aligns with the aforementioned statement of Smith. It is intrinsically intertwined with emotions. Cultural institutions responsible for heritage management have adeptly capitalized on this reality, employing diverse methods and techniques to enhance the visitor’s experience. These endeavors ultimately serve to facilitate the desired outcome of establishing a profound connection between the visitors and the heritage.

³ As a reference for the diagram served the Schematic diagram of Harold Lasswell’s act of communication. Source: Harold Lasswell, *The Structure and Function of Communication in Society*, [in:] *The Communication of Ideas, a Series of Addresses*, Institute For Religious And Social Studies, New York, Distributed by Harper [Ann Arbor, Mich, 1948].

The War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul

The museum, located in Seoul, is dedicated to the comfort women story, and serves as a headquarter to the 'Butterfly Foundation' started by the victims and focused on helping women and children amidst war. Three primary categories of targeted tourists can be identified:

1. Koreans, who seek to reaffirm the official narrative and foster the remembrance of comfort women as a significant element of national identity.
2. English-speaking foreigners, for whom the heritage serves as an educational tool and narrative conduit to introduce historical events.
3. Japanese visitors, for whom the museum assumes the role of an understanding mentor, aiming to challenge and correct the potentially distorted historical narrative they have been exposed to throughout their upbringing. The museum seeks to provide a space for re-evaluation and a means to broaden their understanding of the comfort women issue.

The museum is also open for the researchers, activists, or individuals with a personal connection to the comfort women issue, who approach the heritage with a distinct perspective and purpose. The primary objective of the museum is to preserve and disseminate the narrative of the victims, ensuring its continued presence and wider recognition.

Exhibition analysis

Fairclough [2013, p. 30] in his theory, explains how social institutions are formed according to the norms of, what he calls, "ideological-discursive formations that create institutional subject". The author highlights an important characteristic of "ideological-discursive formations", stating that they have "the capacity to 'naturalize' ideologies", i.e., to win acceptance for them as non-ideological "common sense". This perspective can be significant in understanding the role of interpretation when it comes to heritage. Following Fairclough, it can be analogically stated that cultural institutions, such as museums, create interpretation, according to the norms and ideologies represented by the heritage heirs, to convince the visitor about the authenticity and universality of the heritage. Conducting the descriptive analysis then, would focus only on what is offered by the accountable institution without

searching for motivations and reasons behind it. However, this critical approach “involves how social structures determine properties of discourse, and how discourse, in turn, determines social structures” [Fairclough 2013, p. 30]. When approaching the topic of heritage and its possible dissonances, this bidirectionality is always present. The heritage influences the visitor, while the visitor influences the heritage. Or rather, the interpretation of the heritage created by accountable facilities affects the visitor just as the visitor affects the interpretation and, in result, further modifications of it.

By employing a critical approach, it becomes possible to analyse the interpretation at the War and Women’s Human Rights Museum in Seoul, South Korea, and gain a deeper understanding of how it is curated to elicit emotions that shape the visitor’s connection, or lack thereof, with the heritage of comfort women⁴. In an endeavour to scrutinize the content and provide illustrative examples, this study aims to elucidate how the interpretation strategically employs emotions to influence the visitors’ reception, shape their final perception, and foster the desired connection with the heritage in order to ensure its preservation.

The analysis of the exhibition was organized into distinct categories, namely the creation of an immersive atmosphere, the personalization of the victims, portrayal of brutality, the emphasis on contrasts, and the active engagement of the visitor.

The creation of an immersive atmosphere

When analysing the exhibition, it is pertinent to commence with the atmosphere, as it permeates the entire visitor experience and sets the tone for the overall exhibition. Both the audio and visual components employ various techniques to establish this atmosphere. Notably, the non-textual aspects play a significant role. Firstly, the choice of a female voice to narrate the audio-guide from the outset invokes an emotional response in the visitor, fostering a sense of empathy towards the victims and serving as an initial step in establishing the desired connection. Another noteworthy example is the modulation of the reader’s tone, which remains calm and sensitive throughout the exhibition, emphasizing compassion and affection towards the victims. The reader also employs variations in volume, silence, and pauses, creating a sense of fleeting moments that are vulnerable and fragile, thus evoking a softened perspective

⁴ This paper emerges from an examination, drawing on researcher’s experience as a visitor to critically evaluate the content of the presented message. The observations were primarily centered on the experience of a foreign visitor, utilizing the English version of the exhibited materials.

in the visitor and preparing them for further reception. Additionally, the careful selection of words deserves attention, as the choices made effectively capture the visitor's attention. For instance, phrases such as "soundless cry", "breaking free", "bravery of speaking out", "spreading hope", and "rest and feel warmth" resonate with the visitor and contribute to the overall impact of the exhibition.

The visual component also serves as a compelling example, particularly in terms of scenography. While it may be tempting to perceive the exhibition surroundings merely as decorative elements, the scenography plays a crucial role in shaping the content and influencing the general atmosphere. Elements such as lighting, interior arrangements, sound, or even the absence of sound contribute to the backdrop against which the heritage message is conveyed. In certain areas of the museum, the toned and dim lighting evokes emotions such as sadness, anxiety, and even fear, while brighter areas elicit feelings of understanding, admiration, and hope. The interior design helps visitors relate to the conditions experienced by comfort women, such as the basement exhibition or the gravel road outside. Sound also plays a significant role, with victim's voices, gentle music, sounds of footsteps, and crying creating an almost spiritual atmosphere that profoundly affects the visitor's emotions.



Fig.2. Basement exhibition

Source: own photograph taken in the War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul

The personalization of the victims

One of the strategies employed in the museum's interpretation to foster a personal and intimate connection between the visitor and the heritage is the portrayal of the victims as figures akin to family or friends. This approach

is implemented through various techniques in both the audio and visual components of the exhibition. In terms of the audio-guide narrative, a significant aspect is the deliberate use of names, which plays a pivotal role in shaping the visitors' understanding of the victims and perpetrators by providing clear and unambiguous designations. Beginning with the comfort women themselves, the reader predominantly refers to them as "victims" and *Halmonis*, a term commonly used in Korean culture to address grandmothers and elder women. By utilizing the term *Halmonis*, which evokes emotions associated with care, compassion, and the passage of time, a familial bond is established between the comfort women and the visitor. Furthermore, the audio-guide emphasizes that the term comfort women originated from the perpetrators and obscures the true nature of their plight, which was that of sex slavery and systematic rape. Another example pertains to the naming of the acts perpetrated against women in the comfort stations. The audio-guide consistently refers to these acts as rape, violence, and torture, thereby underscoring their criminal nature.

Regarding the visual aspect, the exhibition showcases personal belongings of the victims, such as drawings and handwritten testimonies. This inclusion serves to evoke greater compassion by enabling visitors to engage with the survivors on a deeper level. These personal artifacts are strategically placed throughout the exhibition, ensuring that the connection with the victims is maintained throughout the entire visitor experience.

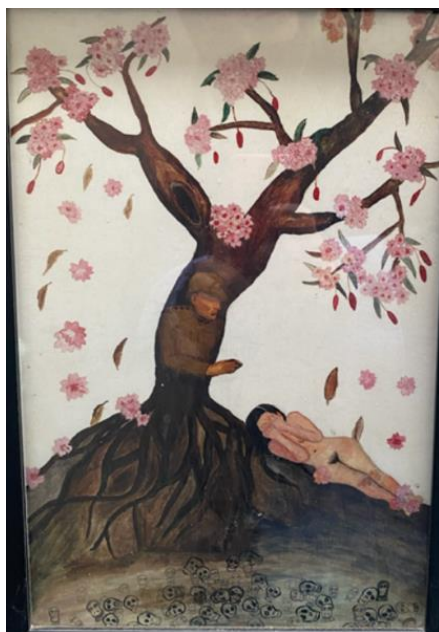


Fig.3. Drawing by one of the victims

Source: own photograph taken in the War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul

The portrayal of brutality

The interpretation employs specific strategies to present certain aspects of the content in a harsh and sombre manner, aiming to elucidate the tragedy experienced by the victims and the heinous nature of the crimes committed by Japanese soldiers.

Within the audio component, this process of brutalization is evident in the use of evocative adjectives that underscore the immense suffering endured by the victims, such as “painful”, “nightmare-like”, “traumatized”, and “shameful”. Additionally, the interpretation employs terms and phrases that directly address the atrocities perpetrated, including “violence”, “torture”, “rape”, “rape centres”, “constant control and surveillance”, “massacre”, and “abuse”.

The visual component also conveys a sense of brutality, particularly through the display of photographs depicting the violated comfort women and items related to the functioning of the comfort stations. These exhibits are presented in an unembellished manner, emphasizing the dehumanization of the comfort women and their objectification by the perpetrators. For instance, examples of this technique include the exhibition of tickets for services distributed to soldiers, condoms, as well as a drawing depicting the layout of the comfort stations with lines of soldiers waiting for their turn. Such visual narratives can elicit shock and prompt strong condemnatory judgments within the Japanese audience.

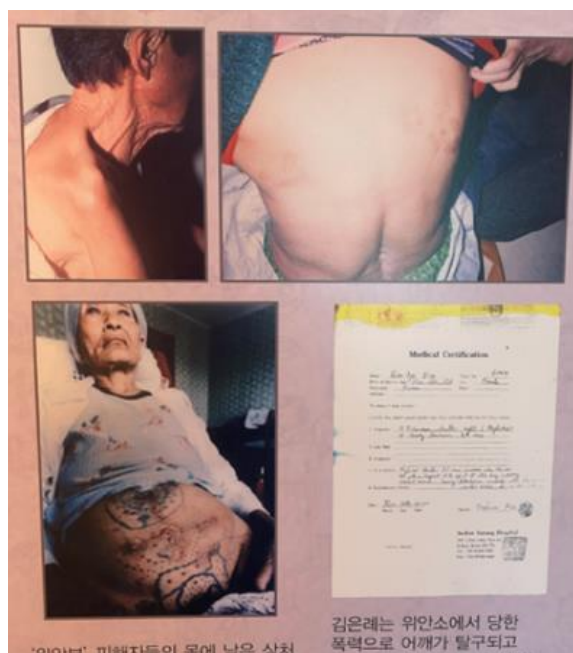


Fig.4. Photographs of one of the victim's wounds

Source: own photograph taken in the War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul

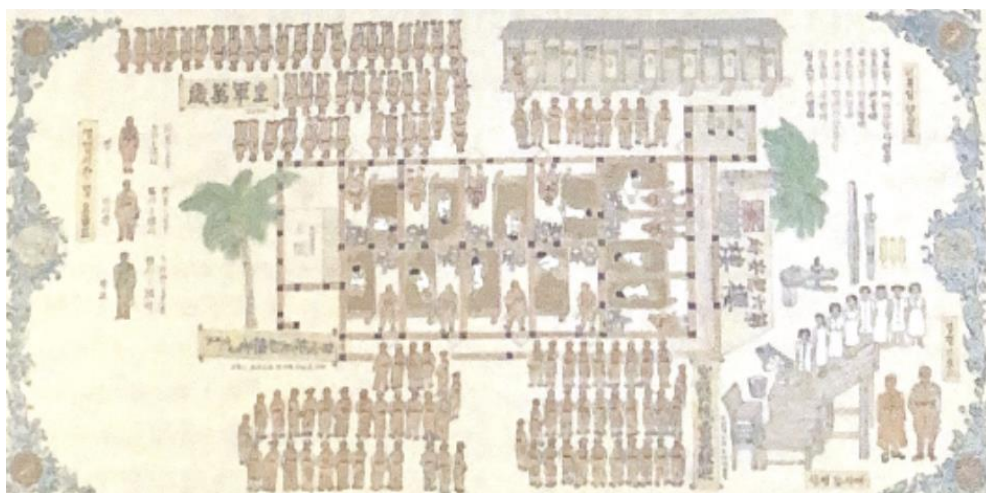


Fig.5. Drawing of the comfort station structure by one of the victims

Source: own photograph taken in the War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul

The emphasis on contrasts

Throughout the exhibition, the use of contrasting concepts serves to simplify the narrative for the visitor, prompting a clear distinction between truth and falsehood, right and wrong, as well as victims and perpetrators.

The audio-guide narrative employs a dichotomous approach, employing starkly contrasting terms to describe the individuals involved in the historical events. The victims are portrayed as “victims”, “innocent”, and “brave”, while the perpetrators are depicted as “violent”, “brutal”, and “inhumane”. These black and white characterizations aim to emphasize the moral clarity of the situation.

In the visual components of the exhibition, another form of contrast is evident, which is prevalent in nearly every aspect of the display. This contrast is observed in the juxtaposition of images of the victims, presenting them in a “young versus old” perspective. The exhibition showcases the survivors both as they appeared before their experiences in the comfort stations-young, innocent girls and as they are now, elderly women marked by fragility and vulnerability. These dual images, portraying youthful innocence and aged, grandmother-like figures with signs of hardship, seek to foster a personal connection between the victims and the visitor. This effect is achieved through close-up portraits or displays of face and hand casts, further accentuating the intimate bond with the audience.



Fig. 6. Young girl's shadows, suggesting the lost youth.

Source: own photograph taken in the War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul



Fig. 7. Face and hands casts of one of the survivors

Source: own photograph taken in the War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul

The active engagement of the visitor

Despite the limited interactive forms of visitor participation offered by the museum, the few that do exist prove highly effective in eliciting emotional responses and fostering a personal connection with the victims. These interactive elements also provide visitors with a sense of contributing to the preservation of the heritage.

The audio-guide employs a rhetorical style of dialogue with the visitor, employing numerous suggestive questions and straightforward statements that directly address

the visitor's experience. For instance, phrases such as "Can you hear their cry for help, how they whisper to you?" and "You can almost hear their cry behind the smiles, a soundless cry filling the basement" evoke a sense of emotional connection and empathy. Furthermore, statements like "With your support, you can be a hopeful flower to the Halmonis" and "Your attention and participation is desperately needed to end such war that makes women and kids major victims" emphasize the visitors' potential role in bringing about positive change. The audio-guide also encourages visitors to reflect on their own actions, asking questions such as "What steps will you take to join us to end violence against women all over the world?" and concluding with sentiments like "Please, try to feel strong empathy for them" and "Hope you will find the meaning of peace and liberation here".

The visual content of the exhibition also incorporates interactive elements that engage the visitor. For example, the act of placing flowers between the bricks inscribed with the names of deceased victims carries deep symbolic meaning, akin to visiting a grave. This gesture conveys sentiments of respect and nostalgia. Another interactive feature involves a replica of the "Peace statue". Visitors are invited by the audio-guide reader to sit on an empty chair next to the statue of a girl and watch videos commemorating the "Wednesday Movement"⁵. Visitors are even encouraged to take photographs with the statue, further fostering a personal and intimate experience with a figure reminiscent of a friend or family member.



Fig. 8. 'Memorial Hall' where a visitor can place a fresh flower
Source: own photograph taken in the War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul

⁵ Wednesday Movement – weekly demonstrations in front of Japanese Embassy in Seoul calling for the resolution for comfort women. Held since 1992.



Fig.9. The 'Peace Statue' with an empty chair for the visitor

Source: own photograph taken in the War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul

It is evident, therefore, that the museum employs a range of techniques that are closely tied to the emotional dimension in order to shape the visitor's experience. The overarching objective appears to be capturing the visitor's emotions and forging a connection with the subject matter of the museum, namely the heritage of comfort women. However, despite the skilful and captivating nature of the interpretation, which at times may even overpower the visitor, making active participation challenging under the sway of intense emotional influence, dissonances still arise.

In light of these observations, it is pertinent to return to the previously proposed message transmission diagram as a means of summarizing these findings. The aforementioned analysis can be applied to the specific case under investigation in this research project. In essence, it can be distilled into a concise conclusion: The War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul, as a heritage institution, endeavours to convey the message of comfort women's heritage through the interpretation presented in its exhibition, with the ultimate aim of establishing a connection between the visitor and the heritage. However, the research findings demonstrate that this communication process is far more intricate than initially perceived. Dissonances inevitably arise and impact the interpretation, prompting efforts to mitigate them and avoid an unsuccessful outcome. Despite employing various strategies to reduce dissonances, as detailed in this research project, the very

nature of the comfort women's heritage and the interpretation disseminated through the prevailing public narrative engender multiple dissonances that hinder effective communication. It should be acknowledged that while the War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul employs numerous techniques to alleviate dissonances and achieve the desired connection, the interpretation provided leaves limited room for the visitor's individual thoughts and conclusions. Nonetheless, complete elimination of dissonances remains elusive, and the attainment of the final goal is always susceptible to risk.

Summary

The significance of interpretation in the context of challenging heritage, its transmission, and the establishment of a connection with the visitor, regardless of temporal or spatial distances, plays a crucial role in preserving the heritage for the present and future. As Wilson [2023, p. 112] aptly states, "exhibitions, displays and heritage sites provide a location where witnesses to the past can be formed who will testify to the abuse of power and recognize the suffering of others to create sustainable democracies and communities in the present". This observation holds true in the case of comfort women, reflecting the profound and universal value of women's rights. For many years, victims of these atrocities remained silent due to the perceived "shameful" nature of their past experiences. This sentiment resonates with contemporary victims of sexual crimes, who can relate to the enduring sense of shame even in the 21st century, much like it was eighty years ago when comfort stations were in operation, or even three decades ago when the issue gained public attention. The power of strong female solidarity serves as a crucial element in the interpretation process, aiding in the establishment and maintenance of a connection with the visitor.

Moreover, a broader dimension of universal human rights comes into play, with a focus on giving voice to those who have experienced injustice and harm. This aspect is intricately linked to the efforts aimed at redefining the legacy of World War II, which for many years remained overshadowed by various mechanisms that sought to adapt it to prevailing political needs. This redress provides an opportunity for previously silenced narratives to seek resolution. To reinforce this notion, it is pertinent to quote the testimony of Jan Ruff-O'Herne⁶, a former comfort woman, during the United

⁶ Jan Ruff O'Herne (1923-2019) – a Dutch-born Australian who grew up in Dutch colonized Indonesia, one of the handful of survivors of non-Asian descent.

States Congressional Hearing in 2007: “Many stories have been told about the horrors, brutalities, suffering of [...] women in Japanese prison camps. But one story was never told, the most shameful story of the worst human rights abuse: [...] The story of the “Comfort Women” [...]. For fifty years, the “Comfort Women” maintained silence; they lived with a terrible shame, of feeling soiled and dirty. It has taken 50 years for these women’s ruined lives to become a human rights issue. I hope that by speaking out, I have been able to make a contribution to world peace and reconciliation, and that human rights violation against women will never happen again” [O’Herne, United States Congressional Hearing, House Hearing on Protecting the Human Rights of Comfort Women, 2007].

The testimony underscores the value of heritage and its significance for contemporary societies. The conducted research has contributed to a realization of the importance of heritage in shaping national identity and attitudes toward the wider world, despite the presence of dissonances. Recognizing this significance serves as a foundation for ongoing and future studies and in-depth research on the subject of heritage and its dissonances in relation to memory, history, and the past.

Additionally, the growth and modernization of cultural institutions, along with evolving narratives surrounding historical atrocities, can serve as catalysts for reevaluating concepts associated with heritage. In the case of the comfort women issue, there is a particular need for further analysis that strives to approach it in a more objective manner, mitigating avoidable dissonances. Paradoxically, these challenges have the potential to become assets. The most contentious aspect of comfort women being sexually exploited can serve as a catalyst for public campaigns and educational programs that address sexual abuse and raise awareness regarding the nuances of victimhood. Numerous aspects of dissonant heritage and its accompanying interpretations, driven by their continuously evolving nature to meet current needs, remain open for future research and investigation.

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Trudne dziedzictwo, interpretacja i więź w *War and Women's Human Rights Museum* w Seulu

Abstrakt

Artykuł analizuje rolę, jaką interpretacja dziedzictwa pełni w jego ochronie. Skupia się na przypadku kobiet zwanych w polskim dyskursie „pocieszycielkami”, które były ofiarami niewolnictwa seksualnego przez Cesarską Armię Japońską podczas okupacji Półwyspu Koreańskiego. Praca podejmuje wyniki krytycznej analizy wystawy w *War and Women's Human Rights* w Seulu w Korei Południowej, która jest poświęcona historii „kobiet pocieszycielek”. Głównym celem tego artykułu jest określenie, czy dzięki interpretacji dziedzictwa proponowanej przez instytucje kultury, takie jak muzea, możliwe jest nawiązanie więzi między dziedzictwem a odbiorcą w sytuacjach, gdy istnieją dysonanse związane z charakterem dziedzictwa i transmisją przekazu. Dodatkowo, artykuł ma na celu ukazanie sposobu w jaki emocje wykorzystywane są w kreowaniu interpretacji dziedzictwa, aby nawiązać więź z odbiorcą i tym samym zapewnić przetrwanie dziedzictwa i zachowanie go dla przyszłych pokoleń w odpowiedzi na zrównoważone praktyki dziedzictwa.

Słowa kluczowe: interpretacja, trudne dziedzictwo, kobiety pocieszycielki, muzeum, zrównoważone praktyki dziedzictwa