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Review of *The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory* by Kevin Blackburn


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## Kevin Blackburn, *The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2022. 224 pp. ISBN: 978-9813251861 (paperback). £31.

Singapore-based historian Kevin Blackburn counts among a small group of anglophone scholars who have systematically expanded Second World War studies beyond the Eurocentrism of previous decades towards an Asian locus. While their entry point is typically via the experiences of the allied forces, the geo-cultural context encompasses Japanese imperialism, the Japanese occupation years, and experiences of civilians under Japanese rule. This draws attention to neglected colonised Asian populations and imperial subjects. A selection of books across Blackburn's prolific career serve to illustrate this shift. His work, co-authored with Karl Hack, *Did Singapore Have to Fall?* (Routledge, 2004) and *Forgotten Captives in Japanese Occupied Asia* (Routledge, 2008) position Singapore as the nexus of the fallen empire and draws attention to the experiences of capitulating allied troops taken prisoners of war. Again, with Karl Hack, *War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore* (NUS Press, 2012) alerts us to the very different experiences of wartime occupation for Singapore's diverse ethnic communities viewed through the contested politics of national and communal memorialisation. *The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory* (NUS Press, 2022) is the latest exemplary contribution to this lineage and its value has already been recognised, winning the 2023 Singapore Book Award for Non-Fiction.

Different from the typical empirical research of gendered civilian experiences of the conflict, and based on empirical data gleaned from various sources, the book is as much an in-depth account of these marginalised women's experiences as a critical interrogation of why their history was suppressed. The book is equally a brilliant exploration of Singapore's national self-construction through wartime histories and the range of resources, voices and positions that process involves. Blackburn's scholarly approach is conceptually, geopolitically grounded, providing situated analyses of the local reception and politicisation of memories. The book explores Singapore's comfort women's comparative silence regarding their sexual exploitation in the early 1990s – a time when there was widespread politicisation of this issue by women in other Asian societies.

The related international controversy and Singapore's reaction to it, analysed in Chapter 1, unravels several strands of the ensuing argument where patriarchal ideals of chastity, acceptance of military strategies for expending sexual energies, community rejection of returning comfort women after the war and national sentiment all combined to silence their stories. More specifically 'masculinist' recollections by prominent figures who failed to recognise these practices as enslavement set the tone. Blackburn notes in particular how former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's minimisation

of the involvement of Singaporeans hampered their disclosure by deflecting attention to other Asian women brought to Singapore. Indeed, as Blackburn demonstrates, masculinist representations have continually obscured this history in Singapore. Were the stations run by the military or by private operators? Were the women brought for this activity? Were they enslaved? Was their silence, for some of them, due to fear of social stigma and loss of hard-won social status? To what extent did the government's desire to keep Singapore out of the East Asian history wars aid their 'disappearance' from history? By aligning his critique with feminist interpretations of the Korean state's silencing of similar accounts, Blackburn gives shape and form to Japanese-occupied Singapore's military sex industry.

Building on extensive research including oral interviews conducted by Japanese and fellow Singaporean scholars, chapters 2-4 uncover a complex story of abduction and rape including gang rape of young women, deceptive recruitment, varied practices of procurement, and the different treatment of Japanese versus Chinese, Malay and Eurasian comfort women. They also uncover the enslavement and trafficking of other Asians – Koreans and Indonesians – into Singapore, including the notorious Comfort Corps and circulation of women from Singapore to stations elsewhere in Java, Malaya and Thailand. We are confronted with a linguistically and culturally diverse landscape of sexual exploitation. Multiple maps documenting the physical locations of known comfort stations in peninsular Malaya and Singapore substantiate their prevalence. The distribution of comfort stations, including elaborate *ryotei* modelled after geisha houses for the Japanese military hierarchy or the most basic facilities where ordinary soldiers lined up (sometimes 30-50 at a time) suggest a complex taxonomy. Diaries and oral accounts of sex workers, brothel-keepers, clients, and enslaved comfort women disclose the day-to-day operation of these establishments and the degree of agency (or not) of the women concerned. Many of these accounts convey a bleak picture of dehumanising and violent procedures imposed on enslaved young women, often drugged to withstand the pain. Knowledge of these activities and their locations defamiliarise many touristic sites of the contemporary city.

Chapters 5-6 examine factors that determined the choices former comfort women made after the war. Societal prejudices and patriarchal ideas of morality, internalised by the women, sometimes trapped them in sexual servitude. What were the institutional responses? In post-war Singapore, 'prostitution' was seen as a Japanese legacy, discussed at official levels with various proposals for segregating, restricting, and rehabilitating former comfort women. A new Girl's Training School at Pasir Panjang, established for reintegrating former sex workers met with varied degrees of success. Resuming the initial line of inquiry, Blackburn's discursive tactic of identifying and positioning his sources is amplified by exploring why Singapore's feminist movement and various ethnic-language-newspapers failed to bring these stories to light.

Chapter 7 explores popular mediums of disclosure such as tourism, theatre and television and the ways in which activism and interest from elsewhere in Asia produced a new awareness of local comfort women's stories. Recognition of Singapore's centrality to the history of comfort stations forced the government to engage with transnational controversies leading eventually to the acknowledgement and conservation of specific 'dark heritage' sites. The conclusion deftly situates the study in the broader Asia-wide debates on this subject, in the face of right-wing nationalist opposition to their exposition in Japan. It confirms Blackburn's demonstration (in his many publications) of Singapore's continual entanglement in broader historical processes and the impossibility of an insular and hegemonic national discourse.

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## Terry Smyth, *Captive Fathers, Captive Children: Legacies of the War in the Far East*. London: Bloomsbury, 2022. 244pp. + xv. ISBN: 978-1350194298 (hardback). £82.08.

The once 'forgotten army' of British Far East Prisoners of War (FEPOWs) has received increasing attention from academics and journalists in recent years. Stories of their experiences of captivity have been represented in scholarly literature and documentary films, as well as memoirs, biopics, and other cultural artefacts. Their heroic sacrifices have been commemorated at the UK's National Memorial Arboretum, while their maltreatment at the hands of their captors is depicted at numerous sites scattered throughout the short-lived Japanese wartime empire. This 'memory boom' owes much to the work of ex-POW associations whose membership was initially drawn from the ranks of war veterans but now primarily comprise the children and family members of the FEPOWs.

The author of *Captive Fathers, Captive Children*, Terry Smyth, is the son of a FEPOW. As such, he is personally invested in the project which is self-evidently cathartic. His acute awareness of his own subjectivities and sensitive handling of the topic turns out to be its strength. The focus of his study is not so much the FEPOWs' experiences of captivity (the subject of a single chapter, Chapter 1) but their post-war lives and the effect that this had on their children and families, collectively known as the Community of Far East Prisoners of War or COFEPOW (to which he devotes six chapters).