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THE APOLOGY

A FILM BY
TIFFANY HSIUNG



THE APOLOGY A film by Tiffany Hsiung

Best Documentary, Busan International Film Festival 2016
World Premiere, Hot Docs Film Festival 2016
Audience Award Winner, Cork Film Festival 2016

"A landmark film for its subject matter and the sensitivity with which Hsiung approaches it, THE APOLOGY is one of the best films ever produced by the NFB." —Digital Journal

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SHORT SYNOPSIS

Winner of the 2016 Best Documentary award at the Busan International Film Festival, *The Apology* follows the personal journeys of three former “comfort women” who were among the 200,000 girls and young women kidnapped and forced into military sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II.

Seventy years after their imprisonment in so-called “comfort stations,” Grandma Gil in South Korea, Grandma Cao in China, and Grandma Adela in the Philippines are facing their twilight years. After decades of living in silence and shame about their experiences of institutionalized rape and sexual slavery, in *The Apology* they speak intimately with Hsiung (herself a sexual assault survivor), and give their first-hand accounts of the truth for the record, seeking apology and the hope that this horrific chapter of history not be forgotten.

LONG SYNOPSIS

The Apology follows the personal journeys of three former “comfort women” who were among the 200,000 girls and young women kidnapped and forced into military sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II. Some 70 years after their imprisonment in so-called “comfort stations”, the three “grandmothers”—Grandma Gil in South Korea, Grandma Cao in China, and Grandma Adela in the Philippines—face their twilight years in fading health. After decades of living in silence and shame about their past, they know that time is running out to give a first-hand account of the truth and ensure that this horrific chapter of history is not forgotten.

As the film unfolds, their history and the struggles that have shaped them and continue to impact their lives come into view. Intimate scenes of daily routines and affectionate exchanges with friends and loved ones provide a glimpse into how they have managed to carry on despite their traumatic experiences. These moments also reveal the many complex choices the grandmothers have had to navigate throughout their lives – and continue to navigate—as survivors. It becomes painfully clear that the past lives on, along with the challenges the inheritors of their legacy will continue to face.

Gil Won-Ok, or “Grandma Gil”, as she is affectionately known among a well-established network of activists, has been attending weekly demonstrations in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul for years. Despite her age and declining health, Grandma Gil remains a key spokesperson in the movement for an official apology from the Japanese government. Her exhausting travels eventually take her to

the hallowed halls of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva to deliver a petition with over a million signatures on behalf of her fellow survivors.

Grandma Cao lives in a remote village surrounded by mountains in rural China, where what happened to hundreds of local girls after they were kidnapped has long been an open secret among the old-timers. Fiercely independent, Grandma Cao insists on living alone despite the protests of her loyal daughter, who has been unaware of her mother's story. It is only when a historian requests her testimony of her experiences that Grandma Cao agrees to break decades of stoic silence about her painful past.

In Roxas City, Grandma Adela manages to find solace, camaraderie, and a sense of freedom as part of a support group for other survivors. Though she found love after the war, she carefully hid the truth about her past from her husband. Now widowed, she is wracked with feelings of guilt for not sharing her secret. She resolves to tell her children, but remains unsure whether unburdening herself after all these years will make up for withholding the truth from the love of her life.

Whether they are seeking a formal apology from the Japanese government or summoning the courage to finally share their secret with loved ones, their resolve moves them forward as they seize this last chance to set future generations on a course for reconciliation, healing, and justice.

BACKGROUND TO THE FILM

What historians now call the Asia-Pacific War began on September 18, 1931, when the Imperial Japanese Army invaded northeast China. This marked the beginning of Imperial Japan's attempts to colonize first China and then the rest of East and Southeast Asia as a way to expand its empire and acquire resources. Over the course of that war, which ended in 1945 with the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan by the United States, historians and United Nations researchers estimate that between 200,000 and 400,000 women and girls were mobilized through forced recruitment, kidnapping, false employment offers, or sale by families or employers to service Japanese soldiers in either makeshift or established brothels protected, supervised, and regulated by the military—brothels that the Japanese military euphemistically referred to as “comfort stations”. A small number of Japanese women were mobilized for this purpose, but the vast majority of the so-called “comfort women,” ranging from 11 to 33 years old, were taken from either established colonies, such as Korea and Taiwan, or newly occupied or invaded countries, including China, the Philippines, Indonesia, and many other countries where the Japanese military had

advanced. The victims were either enslaved in local brothels or trafficked to “comfort stations” in foreign lands, where they were held for as many as four years.

Every victim’s experience was unique, but survivor testimonies and eyewitness accounts reveal common threads. Victims were held against their will, under threat of death for attempting escape. They were raped by as many as 30 soldiers a day—regardless of menstruation, pregnancy, or illness—and subjected regularly to other forms of physical and psychological abuse, as well as torture. They were injected with toxic chemicals to treat STIs, underwent involuntary hysterectomies in some cases, and, if discovered pregnant, were subjected to forced abortions. These and other horrific conditions led experts in the UN human rights system to later refer to the “comfort stations” as systemic military sexual slavery.

According to historians, only about a third of those taken into Japanese military sexual slavery survived. Many died in the “comfort stations”; others were killed in bombings or by Japanese soldiers at the war’s end. Of those who survived, some testified that they managed to escape, but most said they were abandoned upon Japan’s surrender in 1945, left to fend for themselves. Without resources, and suffering from physical and psychological trauma, they either found their way home or established new lives in what for many were foreign cultures. The survivors mostly kept silent about their experiences, paralyzed by stigma-related shame and unsupported by Allied Forces such as the US military, which although it administered Japan’s surrender and was—according to investigative reports, eyewitness testimony, and historical research—aware of the military sexual slavery system, did not address it as a war crime. Instead, the history was swept under the rug and the survivors struggled with the after-effects of their experiences on their own.

This silence wasn’t broken until some 46 years later. In the late 1980s, South Korean women’s organizations became aware of the “comfort women” and started raising questions to Japanese officials, who repeatedly denied Imperial Japan’s involvement. Then, with support from these organizations, Kim Hak-soon became the first woman to publicly testify about her experience as a “comfort woman”, in 1991. Following her disclosure, other survivors from both within and without South Korea came forward, organizations were formed to support the survivors, and a transnational “comfort women” redress movement emerged. They appealed to the courts, lobbied governments and the United Nations, and initiated weekly protests outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul that started in January of 1992 and continue to this day. These and other activities spanning over two decades have generated significant political and civil society support worldwide. This has included official government resolutions passed by

the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, the European Parliament, South Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan, as well as resolutions passed by the United Nations (see Further Reading below for links to resolutions).

The Japanese government's responses have ranged from statements questioning the validity of their testimonies to apologies for the victims' suffering, apologies that the survivors and their supporters say fail to acknowledge the government's involvement and responsibility. Japan has additionally attempted to establish informal financial support mechanisms, which most of the survivors have rejected for similar reasons.

Most recently, on December 28, 2015, the Japanese and Korean governments announced that they had reached a "final, irreversible" resolution to the "comfort women" issue. Many survivors, however, have rejected the agreement on the grounds that they were not consulted on the terms of the deal and that the terms are unacceptable. Rather than settle the issue, the government-brokered agreement has only fueled the movement's quest for the official apology and justice for which the elderly survivors have been fighting for 25 years.

FURTHER READING (ENGLISH LANGUAGE)

Web Resources

Amnesty International Australia's Justice for "Comfort Women" Campaign

<http://www.amnesty.org.au/comfort>

South Korean Ministry of Gender Equality and Family's E-Museum for Japanese Military Sexual Slavery

<http://actionforpeace.net>

Website for the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan

<https://www.womenandwar.net>

Website for the House of Sharing, South Korea

<https://www.houseofsharing.org>

Women's Active Museum on War and Peace, Japan

<http://wam-peace.org/en/>

Books

Henson, M.R. (1999). *Comfort Women: A Filipina's story of prostitution and slavery under the Japanese military*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Kim-Gibson, D.S. (1999). *Silence Broken: Korean comfort women*. Parkersburg, Iowa: Mid-Prairie Books.

Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (1995). *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women: Testimonies*. London: Cassell.

Qui, P. (2013). *Chinese Comfort Women: Testimonies from Imperial Japan's sex slaves*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

Ruff-O'Herne, J. (2008). *Fifty Years of Silence*. North Sydney, N.S.W.: William Heinemann.

Yoshimi, Y. (2000). *Comfort Women: Sexual slavery in the Japanese military during World War II*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Reports

Coomaraswamy, R. (1996). Report on the mission to Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Republic of Korea and Japan on the issue of military sexual slavery in wartime. UN Doc.E/cn.4/1996/53/Add.1.

<https://politicsoftrauma.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/coomaraswamy-un-report1.pdf>

Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (2009). A shadow report on the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, 44th session. *Japan's violation of the convention and responsibility regarding the "comfort women" issue*.

http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngos/ComfortWomen_Japan_cedaw44.pdf

McDougall, G. (1998). Contemporary forms of slavery: systemic rape, sexual slavery, and slavery-like practices during armed conflict. Final report. Appendix: An analysis of the legal liability of the government of Japan for "comfort women stations" established during the Second World War. UN Doc.E/CN.4/Sub.2/1998.

https://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/demo/ContemporaryformsofSlavery_McDougall.pdf

Taiwan Women's Forum (1993). *A report on Taiwanese comfort women*.

<http://newcongress.yam.org.tw/women/comfw.html>

Women's International War Crimes Tribunal 2000 for the Trial of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery (2000). *Summary of findings*.

<http://home.att.ne.jp/star/tribunal/>

Resolutions and Statements

Canadian House of Commons, Motion 291

<http://www.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?DocId=3151109&Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2#OOB-2228066>

European Parliament Joint Resolution

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=MOTION&reference=P6-RC-2007-0525&language=EN>

Philippines House Committee on Gender Equality, House Resolution 124

<http://news.abs-cbn.com/nation/metro-manila/03/11/08/house-committee-backs-bill-japan-apology-comfort-women>

South Korea, Views Summary

<http://archive.alpha-canada.org/learn/DPRK.htm>

United States House of Representatives, House Resolution 121

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/110th-congress/house-resolution/121>

UN Resolutions

[E/CN.4/SUB.2/RES/2000/13; E/CN.4/Sub.2/1995/38;E/CN.4/1996/53/Add.1](https://www.un.org/development/desa/secretariat/peacekeeping/2000/13/E/CN.4/SUB.2/RES/2000/13;E/CN.4/Sub.2/1995/38;E/CN.4/1996/53/Add.1)

MEET THE FILMMAKERS



Tiffany Hsiung (writer and director) is an award-winning filmmaker based in Toronto. Her approach to storytelling is driven by the relationships she builds with people.

Since 2009, Hsiung has been documenting the lives of survivors of military sexual slavery during World War II, inflicted by the Japanese Imperial Army, for her first feature-length film, *The Apology*. For the past six years, Hsiung has been advocating in communities and universities across North America for the grandmothers (survivors known as “comfort women”), as they fight for justice, by sharing their stories. Her most recent presentation at the United Nations in New York brought to light one of history’s greatest and unresolved injustices on the world stage for human-rights issues.

Hsiung’s work is grounded in cross-cultural and intergenerational themes and is intended to inspire younger generations and viewers to learn about their own culture—and social responsibility—in the global community.



Anita Lee (producer) is an Executive Producer at the National Film Board, Canada’s 12-time Academy Award®-winning public producer of documentaries, digital media and animation. Anita leads the development and production of NFB studio productions as well as domestic and international co-

productions for the Ontario Studio. She is a multi-award-winning producer with 20 years’ experience in the industry, and the founder of the Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival. As NFB producer from 2005 to present, she worked on some of the most acclaimed and inventive productions in recent NFB history, including Sarah Polley’s *Stories We Tell*, which garnered international recognition and was named Best Non-Fiction Film by the New York Film Critics Circle in 2013. Prior to joining the NFB, Anita produced a slate of independent films that premiered at festivals including TIFF, Sundance and Berlin before receiving theatrical releases.



Mary Stephen (editor) is an accomplished film editor, best known as Eric Rohmer's long-time collaborator. Initially an assistant to Cécile Decugis (the editor for Godard's *Breathless*) since *The Aviator's Wife* (1981), Stephen became Rohmer's Chief Editor in the early 90s with *A Tale of Winter* and all the subsequent Rohmer films up to the last one, *The Romance of*

Astrea and Celadon.



Lesley Barber (composer) is one of the most exciting and respected young composers working in music today. She composes for film, theatre, chamber and orchestral ensembles and is also a conductor, pianist, producer, and multi-instrumentalist. Lesley has composed for Yo-Yo Ma, written film scores for Academy

Award-winning feature films like Kenneth Lonergan's *You Can Count on Me*, worked with Mira Nair on the Emmy Award-winning *Hysterical Blindness* and scored several films for Patricia Rozema (*Mansfield Park*, *When Night is Falling*), Wayne Wang, Boaz Yakin, Mary Harron, and the award-winning children's classic, *Little Bear*, with Maurice Sendak.



FILM CREDITS

THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA PRESENTS

"THE APOLOGY"

AN NFB STUDIO PRODUCTION

DEVELOPED IN ASSOCIATION WITH
ALPHA EDUCATION SCHOOLS WITHOUT BORDERS AND MU FILMS

PRODUCTION COUNTRY	CANADA
RUNNING TIME	104 MINUTES
YEAR	2016
SOUND DESIGN	DANIEL PELLERIN
MUSIC BY	LESLEY BARBER
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY	TIFFANY HSIUNG
EDITOR	MARY STEPHEN
ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS	CHRIS KANG DEANN BORSHAY LIEM
PRODUCED BY	ANITA LEE
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY	TIFFANY HSIUNG

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Icarus Films
32 Court Street, Floor 21
Brooklyn, NY 11201
(718) 488-8900
mail@IcarusFilms.com
www.IcarusFilms.com

