
Overcoming the Past: Japan's Involvement and Denial of the 'Comfort Women' System

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In 1937, the Second Sino-Japanese war was taking place. Japan pushed deep into Chinese territory, capturing Nanjing, and massive numbers of lives were lost during the ensuing massacre. The Japanese military was responsible for the lives of an estimated 40,000 to 300,000 lives¹. Estimates of these casualties vary widely because an undetermined amount of killings were kept secret and also, after the Japanese surrender of 1945, many documents were never recovered. Along with the high number of casualties, high estimates of rape occurred. The Japanese government developed a system where this war crime was not seen as an act of cruelty but as a way to establish 'comfort stations' for soldiers across occupied Japanese territories. Needless to say, the Japanese government was developing organized prostitution and rape, which was sanctioned by their government. The Japanese government was trying to establish these stations for their soldiers to stay calm and relax themselves throughout the war, with the help of women's services. In reality, these women were forced or tricked into participating in these stations as 'comfort women'. Despite this unsettling method of forced sexual involvement of Asian Women, the Japanese government is unwilling to accept full responsibility even though there are documents that prove their involvement in the establishment of these 'comfort stations' across occupied Japanese territories.

According to Hayashi Hirofumi, the 'comfort women' system was established for many reasons. First, the Japanese military wanted to prevent Japanese soldiers from committing rape. It was a system to countermeasure the amount of rape already occurring. However, in reality, the system was only a regulated form of sexual violence and its results were not decreasing the amount of rape cases. The second reason was to provide "comfort" to soldiers and officers. It was an intense period of war, and the military authorities thought this was a necessary form of relaxation in order to keep their soldiers focused and on the battlefield longer. Next, the 'comfort stations' were developed to prevent the spread of venereal disease. According to Hirofumi, in 1941, a major in the medical division was released to investigate local hygiene conditions. He reported:

"We must pay the strictest attention to ensuring that on no account are rapes allowed to occur, as this will cause the natives to mistrust the discipline of the Japanese Army. Because they were living under harsh conditions, many of the natives did engage in prostitution. However, since there is a great deal of venereal disease in Bangdong and elsewhere, it was necessary to have the village headmen recruit comfort women, ensure that the women are rigorously checked for venereal disease, and set up comfort houses"².

'Comfort stations' were also developed to protect military secrets and prevent espionage. Oppression of human rights was becoming a serious problem and certainly a characteristic of the Japanese Army. According to Hirofumi, "While they were looting food, fuel, and other goods, soldiers raped, or 'looted' women"³.

¹ Levene, Mark, and Penny Roberts. *The Massacre in History*. New York: Berghahn Books, 1999. pg. 223-234.

² Hirofumi, Hayashi. 1998. "Japanese comfort women in Southeast Asia." *Japan Forum* 10, no. 2: 211. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 8, 2015).

³ Ibid, 215.

Emma Reynolds stated, “‘Comfort women’ is a translation of the Japanese euphemism, *Jugan Ianfu*, (military ‘comfort women’), referring to women of various ethnic and national backgrounds and social circumstances who became sex slaves for the Japanese troops before and during World War II”⁴. Reynolds stated the number of ‘comfort women’ who served is difficult to determine. However, estimates are ranging from 80,000 to 200,000, of whom close to eighty percent were thought to have been Korean⁵. The women who were recruited ranged in age. According to Chinese legal groups, some of the girls were as young as twelve years old⁶. Victims also included teenagers to women in their thirties, including both married women and mothers⁷. Hirofumi stated, “According to the testimony of a Malayan woman, after killing her brother, Japanese soldiers abducted her, raped her and forced her to become a comfort woman. Similar cases were reported in other Japanese-occupied territories in Southeast Asia”⁸.

Recruitment employed various methods. The most common forms of recruitment were by fraud and human trafficking. In Korea, there were also cases of abduction. Hirofumi asserts, “It is certain that both the Japanese Army and officials of the Government-General of Korea (Chosen-Sotokufu) were involved in the recruitment of ‘comfort women’ in Korea. Similarly, officials of the Government-General of Taiwan were involved in recruiting ‘comfort women’”⁹. It is important to consider that Korea had been a Japanese colony and the “the system of trafficking women was already widespread”¹⁰. In 1937, close to the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the number of brothels and human-traffic brokers shifted their business in Korea to the involvement of Japanese military ‘comfort stations’. Without having to resort to violence, the Japanese Army was able to invest through these brokers.

A second method was to “entrust the recruitment of ‘comfort women’ to ex-karayuk-isan”¹¹. This method was common in Malaya where regular prostitutes may have also been exploited. In Indonesia and the Philippines, the common method was to approach the local leaders in providing ‘comfort women’. The fourth technique involved the recruitment through advertisements in newspapers. It is unsure if the job description was clear on the true nature of the job. However, a case in Singapore suggested a woman attempted to end her services because the job was much harsher than originally expected. The soldiers in charge responded by tying her to the bed and forcing her to continue her services¹². The fifth method involved the recruitment through a combination of fraud and the other methods. Women were misled at the early stages of recruitment and were heavily deceived as to what these women were getting themselves into. By the time these women arrived to their stations, their transformation into ‘comfort women’ was nearly inevitable and was greatly affected by the use of force. Hirofumi also asserted that there are many known cases of women being raped and then forced into being ‘comfort women’¹³. The last method was the recruitment through forcible abduction. There are many cases of Japanese soldiers forcing their way into people’s houses, gang-raping, and abducting women, which resulted in these women becoming ‘comfort women’. It was noted by Hirofumi that “the army frequently resorted to violence in order

⁴ Reynolds, Emma. 2012. "China's Oldest World War II Sex Slave - Forced to be a 'Comfort Woman' for Japanese Soldiers - dies at 91." *Chinese American Forum* 28, no. 2: 31-33. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 25, 2015), 32.

⁵ Reynolds, Emma, “China’s oldest World War II sex slave”, Pg. 32.

⁶ *Ibid*, 32.

⁷ Chieko Kuriki, Chicago Tribune. 1992. "Cruel 'Comfort'." *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current File)*, Mar 29, 1. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy1.library.eiu.edu/docview/1703951378?accountid=10705>.

⁸ Hirofumi, Hayashi, “Japanese comfort women in Southeast Asia”, 213.

⁹ *Ibid*, 213.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 213.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 213.

¹² *Ibid*, 213.

¹³ *Ibid*, 214.

to recruit ‘comfort women’¹⁴. The recruitment consisted of women coming from many different ethnic groups, including Chinese, Taiwanese, Malays, Filipinos, Thais, Burmese, Vietnamese, Dutch, Japanese, and Korean. By 1942, it was possible that comfort houses had been set up in almost every city where Japanese troops were stationed. No matter what ethnic group these women came from, these women were stripped of their identity to serve their purpose to the men in the army, and, as a result, their human rights were severally violated.

Details of these women were not entirely known to the public because the Japanese military destroyed many records regarding the ‘comfort stations’. According to the article written by Chieko Kuriki, “In documents and court testimony in a 1982 trial, former Japanese Imperial Army soldiers related that the Japanese military visited villages in Korea to recruit or otherwise obtain woman”¹⁵. In the film “In the Name of the Emperor: The Rape of Nanjing”, it was stated women ranging from 20 to 40 years old were deceived by well-paying jobs or forced out of their homes and into these ‘comfort stations’. According to a survivor in the film, she had given birth three times and was still required to work while pregnant. After the war ended in 1945, many Korean ‘comfort women’ remained abroad due to the strict morals set on women influenced by Confucianism in Korea. The experiences of these women are horrific, and it is difficult to imagine how each of these women felt after the war. Lee Kyong Ok described her experience: “It would be better being a soldier and killed during the war than being alive as a comfort woman”¹⁶. According to Kim Hak Sun’s story:

“When she was 17, Kim was offered a ‘well-paid job’ by Japanese police who visited her village. When she reported to the meeting place, she was forced to get into a military truck with another local woman. They were told they would be killed if they tried to escape. The truck traveled north. After four days, they arrived in China at night. Kim was left alone in a dark room. Suddenly a Japanese soldier took her to an officer’s room that was divided by curtains. She was told to take off her clothes. When she did not comply, she was kicked and stripped”¹⁷.

Kuriki continued, “Kim went to the next room to see the other woman. She told Kim that they should die. They cried together. Three other Korean women who were there told him there was no way to escape. The best was to do what they were told”¹⁸. Kim stated she had to ‘attend’ around ten to twenty Japanese soldiers a day. Even though her life was extremely difficult, she realized she had to live. Kim did think of escaping, as every woman would. Fortunately, her opportunity came when she met a Korean man, who was a civilian supplier to the brothel. She had asked that man to take her out and he agreed. At age nineteen, she married this man and became the mother of two of his children. Sadly, one child died of illness at the age of four. Kim’s husband blamed her past for the death of their child. In 1950, the Korean War broke out and Kim’s husband went off to war because he was associated with the military catering service. Tragically, her husband died during the war, and her second child had died due to drowning. Kim’s tragic story demonstrates the difficulty former ‘comfort women’ had to endure after the war ended. As the years passed, these struggles continued into the present day. For example, Yin Yulin was identified as China’s oldest known sex-slave. In the book, *Unfolding the ‘Comfort Women’ Debates*, Yulin described her ‘comfort station’ experience:

“After that initial time [of raping me at my house], the Japanese soldiers stationed in the blockhouse on top of nearby Mount Yangma came to my house frequently and raped me...Every day two or three Japanese soldiers came down the mountain to rape me at my home, which left me constantly terrified.... Frightened of the rapes while having no place to hide, my body was always

¹⁴ Ibid, 214.

¹⁵ Chieko Kuriki, “Cruel ‘Comfort’”.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

trembling with fear. What a horror!. The Japanese soldiers also took me by force to their stronghold on Mount Yangma, where they raped me"¹⁹.

Yulin traveled to Japan twice after her sex-slave identity was revealed. She testified as a victim, but both courts refused to accept her claims²⁰. As described from Yin Yulin's story, her claims were not accepted by the courts and this further proves how difficult it is for survivors to come out with their stories. Yulin's story raised doubts but also shed light on this atrocity committed by the Japanese government.

Stories of former 'comfort women' have continued to unfold through a series of interviews in the book, *Can You Hear Us?*. One woman by the name of Do-ah Kang, revealed her story as a woman from Daepyong-myon moving from Taiwan to Balikpapan in Borneo. Kang was the oldest of ten siblings and would cook and clean the house, while trying to support their family. Her family encouraged her to "go to where they say" in order to raise money for the family. After much thought, Kang decided to leave for this "work opportunity" in hopes of raising enough money to send back to her family so that they could live a happy life. Most of the people found out from the town offices that these were opportunities to make money. Kang was deceived when she first arrived in Taiwan. Kang started off doing housework and chores in the house she was taken to, but was shocked when she was forced to 'service' a soldier a little after a month of her arrival. From there, Kang's pain continued, as she was forced to 'serve' many men a day. Kang stated, "Several from the first day. I don't know. I might have fainted. I cannot remember who and how many came in and violated me"²¹.

Each woman's story is unique and different in its own way, yet these stories hold many commonalities in their experiences. Many, if not all of the women, had to continue 'serving' Japanese soldiers after enduring massive amounts of pain from the damages. In the untold narratives, a woman identifying herself by the name of "Boo" described, "I felt excruciating pain down there. It was torn actually. The doctor who came, knew about that. He did not seem to be concerned, though. He applied medicine on it and said it'll be okay in a week. By then I was told to take in the soldiers again. They would beat me if I didn't. The boss would also call me all kinds of names"²². In another experience, a woman identifying herself as "Aoo" described her experience as a fourteen-year old serving in these stations located in Yenji, Manchuria, and Chungjin. 'Aoo' was only fourteen when taken, but her body was not fully developed. She was first examined; describing how she was forced to open her legs and have an instrument resembling a "duckbill" inserted between her legs. It wouldn't go in, so she was not sent to serve the soldiers. Since she could not serve the soldiers, she would be beaten by the head "master" of the station. 'Aoo' stated, "I was beaten because I could not service the men properly. I was the most inexperienced and underdeveloped girl"²³. When 'Aoo' turned 15, she began to service the Japanese soldiers and, therefore, no longer had to suffer beatings. 'Aoo's' story displays the hostility 'comfort women' had to endure at these stations. Kang, 'Boo', and 'Aoo' spoke about their thoughts they had about refusing to service the soldiers and fleeing, however, either their location was a major disadvantage to them or the fear of being killed held them back. As time passed by, the women had not seen a cent of what they were promised. False promises of money being sent back to their families were also told.

¹⁹ Kimura, Maki. *Unfolding The "Comfort Women" Debates: Modernity, Violence, Women's Voices*. 1st ed. 2016 edition. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

²⁰ Reynolds, Emma, "China's oldest World War II sex slave", 31-32.

²¹ Park, In-Hwan. *Can You Hear Us?: The Untold Narratives of Comfort Women: A Collection of Oral Narrations of Japanese Military Comfort Women*. Seoul, Korea: Commission on Verification and Support for the Victims of Forced Mobilization under Japanese Colonialism in Korea (2014): 59.

²² Ibid, 113.

²³ Ibid, 90.

In other forms of stories, the book *Comfort Women* was published by Nora Okja Keller. This fictional story deals with the difficulties former 'comfort women' had to endure after the war ended, and the difficulties their families had to endure from their past. Although a fictional book, the story accurately portrays the difficulties former 'comfort women' had to go through, restarting their lives and trying to regain a sense of identity, which was stripped from them during their time in 'comfort stations'. Throughout this fictional story, some similarities can be seen from the untold narratives by former 'comfort women'. For example, 'Aoo' passed away four months after the interview was given. Until 2005, the sister of 'Aoo' was the only one who knew of the story. In 2005, the daughter of 'Aoo' found out through a report to a committee. Similar to the fictional book, the daughter described her mother as "easily startled, and bounced to her feet in her sleep, and light a cigarette. She would change channels or turn TV off, if she saw a program about 'comfort women'. The daughter thought her mother acted weird, but didn't know the reason why. When the daughter heard about her mother's old suffering, she beat her chest, "What suffering my mother had. How could I not know about it until now"²⁴.

After liberation, it was difficult for many of these women to decide what to do. Many returned back to their homes, not knowing whether to explain to their parents of what occurred. Possibly because of the feeling of being ashamed of themselves, many women decided not to share their stories and instead attempted to restart their lives. When Kang returned home, her mother was still alive but her father had passed away. Kang stated her family was holding a memorial service for her because her family believed she was dead. Her family was very poor, so she had to sell items such as fish in order to support her family. Life after liberation was a struggle for these women. Many of these women decided not to marry. 'Boo' stated, she could not bear the thought of engaging in any more intercourse due to the amount of pain she still suffers from her time as a 'comfort women'. Even after sixty years, her pain does not go away. Physical and mental pain are burdens for these women, and their attempts to move on from the 'comfort stations' were delayed by constant reminders of their past, proving to be extremely difficult to truly move on from these atrocities.

In an "Open letter in support of historians in Japan", scholars have explained the importance of the exploitation and suffering of former 'comfort women'. Scholars have also stressed the importance of the numerous documents found that demonstrated the military's involvement "in the transfer of women and oversight of brothels". The testimony taken by the victims further solidifies the case being made by these victims. However, nationalism further delays and insults the dignity of these former 'comfort women'. Denial is equally unacceptable, and although the precise numbers subjected to this atrocity remain uncertain, documents have revealed the exploitation carried out by the Japanese Empire. The scholars concluded, "Since the equal rights and dignity of women lie at the core of the 'comfort women' issue, its resolution would be a historic step toward the equality of women and men in Japan, East Asia, and the world"²⁵.

In addition to the open letter, a joint statement was created by associations of History Scholars and Educators on the 'comfort women' issue. The statement further strengthened the open letter's argument by listing a few problems within the 'comfort women' issue. The Kono statement, was an official acknowledgment indicating the involvement of the Japanese Army, with their establishment and operation of military brothels, including forceful recruitment tactics. However, according to these associations, these statements were not based on the testimony of Seiji Yoshida. The joint statement stressed the violations enacted by the Japanese government were a violation of

²⁴ Ibid, 101.

²⁵ "Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan." Letter. 2015. See: https://networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/japan-scholars-statement-2015.5.4-eng_0.pdf

human rights and the regulations being followed are institutionalized by discrimination between the colonizer and the colonized. The associations involved concluded the dignity of these victims continue to be trampled by denial, as if these women had not endured enough hardship. Furthermore, “by continuing to take the irresponsible stance by denying the facts of wartime sexual slavery in the Japanese military, certain politicians and sections of the media are essentially conveying to the rest of the world that Japan does not respect human rights”.²⁶

In response to the open letter, Moteki Hiromichi, Secretary General of the Society of Dissemination of Historical Fact, asked if the letter was written “without radical prejudice and misunderstanding about the real facts”.²⁷ Hiromichi asserts that Japan is being falsely accused for the ‘comfort stations’, with no verified evidence. Hiromichi also concludes that scholars have ignored the counter evidence and did not check the laws and regulations which were then applicable.²⁸

Along with denials stemming from inside the Japanese government, ways of compensating the victims have come into question. In an article published by the *Chicago Tribune* in 1992, three Korean women were seeking to file lawsuits in order to seek compensation because they were forced to serve as prostitutes by the Japanese government. According to the article, Foreign Prime Minister Michio Watanabe, has made it clear that Japan is not willing to pay any compensation to the Korean woman who served as prostitutes during World War II. His stance and statements reflect Japan’s position and states, “The issue of war reparations was settled in 1965 when Japan normalized relations with South Korea”.²⁹ The Japanese government is taking a strong stand. Watanabe did express that Japan is “seeking other ways to apologize, but won’t pay compensation”.³⁰ It is a difficult situation with everyone involved, and the Japanese government is standing their ground by saying that war reparations were settled in 1965. The Japanese government’s involvement with the ‘comfort women’ stations may have been questionable in 1965, but in 1992 for the first time, new documents were discovered proving the Japanese military forcing Korean and other Asian women into these stations, legalizing their own form of prostitution in order to serve Japanese troops during the war.

The ‘comfort stations’ bring much controversy through various stories from former ‘comfort women’ and denials from the Japanese government. Deniers, such as Hiromichi have stood by their argument that there is no existing evidence indicating government involvement. However, it is addressed that new documents have been discovered proving the Japanese government’s involvement in the ‘comfort stations’. Unfortunately, these documents were not discovered before 1965 when the war reparations and relations with South Korea were normalized. After much denial from the Japanese government, it is an important step to accept responsibility from what was done to these former ‘comfort women’. From the former ‘comfort women’ testimonies, it was difficult for these women to restart their lives after the war. There are no official figures available to say as to how many women served as ‘comfort women’ during the war. Although the Japanese government continues to deny its involvement, it is still important for these officials to show empathy for these women and to bring forth some form of compensation to the women involved in the ‘comfort stations’. Compensation varies because of the severity of the situation, but issuing no compensation is worse than little while also denying the regulation of these ‘comfort stations’. Therefore, action needs to be taken by Japanese officials in order to right their wrong.

²⁶ "Joint Statement by Associations of History Scholars and Educators in Japan on the "Comfort Woman" Issue." Letter. 2015.

²⁷ "Some Observations About "Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan"" Letter from Moteki Hiromichi. 2015.

²⁸ "Some Observations About "Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan"" Letter from Moteki Hiromichi. 2015.

²⁹ "Japan Refuses to Compensate 'Comfort Girls'." 1992. *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current File)*, Feb 21, 1.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy1.library.eiu.edu/docview/1696391464?accountid=10705>.

³⁰ N.a., “Japan Refuses to Compensate ‘Comfort Girls.’” n.d.

Denials only set back justice, and acceptance of responsibility will lead to a starting point in the already long healing process these former 'comfort women' have to endure.