

JAPANESE MILITARY PROSTITUTION 1932-1945: AN OVERVIEW

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I. Problems Regarding Sources

A comprehensive and accurate coverage of the whole scope of Japanese military prostitution is unlikely to be achieved. The same could be said about military prostitution in other countries but this is usually because formal organisation and records are limited or lacking. In the case of Japan, however, there was a high degree of organisation and detailed records were kept, as with other types of military activity, but the great bulk of these were destroyed at the end of the war along with most confidential material. The scale and complexity of the system are daunting. The most serious estimates of the total number of 'comfort women' — the official designation — is about 80,000 Koreans¹ and perhaps 20,000 others, including Japanese, Taiwanese and women of the occupied areas. Conditions varied greatly over the vast geographical range and the long time-span.

The earliest sources available were war reminiscences of uneven value, being produced for popular reading or literary interest, with personal identities usually concealed, though this type of source led to some serious research by K. Senda on the basis of interviews. The next major source was testimony by former Korean and Filipina comfort women for the purpose of litigation against the Japanese government which, as with any such material, has to be evaluated in the light of its purpose. It is recognised that there are some weaknesses in detail due to the age of the litigants and the half century that had passed since the events being recalled.² The Korean group represents a special sample, on the one hand having returned to Korea, unlike many others, and on the other having few or no social ties to inhibit their self-revelation. This last factor has prevented the identification of former comfort women in Taiwan and most other areas.

Whatever doubts there may be on details, the impression made by these classes of evidence accords well with the authentic archival documents, approaching 200, which have been discovered and published since 1992. These only survived by random chance but provide a wide range of evidence on the functioning of the military prostitution system, implicating not only the armed forces but the Foreign Ministry and the prewar and wartime Home, Colonial and Great East Asia Ministries as well. There are also a few valuable Allied (mainly United States) reports on the subject made around the end of the war. Additional valuable material has been obtained and published as a result of hotlines set up by women's groups in Japan which obtained over 300 responses covering numerous aspects of the subject.³ Thus although completeness is hardly obtainable the qualitative character of the system is well demonstrated.

II. Motives for Establishing the 'Comfort Woman' System

The basic motives for establishing the system need little elaboration as these are familiar enough to anyone conversant with the facts of military life or grass-roots military history. The stress of combat and the tensions of a strictly regimented life universally incline troops to seek a sexual outlet, either in the form of rape or use of the camp-follower type of woman who always seems to become available under the disruption of wartime conditions. These outlets involve such serious problems as the breakdown of discipline and the spread of venereal disease, so most or all armed forces have to cope with the resulting situation, often by measures such as military-organised or supervised brothels.

As soon as the Japanese armed forces during the Second World War became aware that conflict was going to be prolonged and widespread, they adopted a devastatingly pragmatic and thorough approach to the problem — a pattern rather characteristic of Japanese society. As one War Ministry directive puts it:

Care must be taken in regard to suitable living conditions and comfort facilities. In particular the psychological influence received from sexual

comfort stations is most direct and profound and it must be realised how greatly their appropriate direction and supervision affect the raising of morale, the maintenance of discipline⁴ and the prevention of crime and venereal disease.

The same kind of point is made from the soldier's point of view by the compiler of the most comprehensive study of the war reminiscence literature.

To the soldier in the front line, ever surrounded by the sound of guns, wrapped in smoke stinking of death and not knowing when death would come... a visit to a comfort station was no doubt the only form of relief. It was the only kind of individual act in which one was 'liberated'. Theirs was a grim prison-like existence, subject to random arbitrary punishments by mad dogs of NCOs, their eardrums daily ringing from blows. The comfort station was where they were at least temporarily 'liberated' from the savagery of the unit.⁵

Elsewhere the author describes it as their 'oasis'.

It is true that there were some initial doubts or scruples among the civil authorities. A directive from the Police Bureau of the Home Ministry dated 23 February 1938 on 'Procedure for Women Traveling to China' concedes the need for travel by women for work in 'restaurants, cafes, houses of assignation or the like' but cautions:

If proper control is lacking in such recruitment of women, this will not only injure the dignity of the Empire and the honour of the Imperial Forces but will have an undesirable effect on the home front... while there is no assurance that this will not conflict⁶ with international treaties on traffic in women.

Guidelines were laid down: women must be professional prostitutes, over 21 years of age and free from venereal disease. Police had to check their terms of employment to prevent traffic in women or their abduction.

However, such restraints were obliterated by the progressive takeover of the organs of control by the military, culminating in

General Tojo's appointment as jointly Prime Minister, War Minister and Home Minister. Ideologically anything could be justified which was held to serve the cause of the 'sacred war for the New Order in Greater East Asia' and was sanctioned in the name of the divine Emperor, an absolute authority transcending all other considerations.

III. Recruitment of 'Comfort Women'

Although none of the documentary evidence bears directly on methods of recruitment, there is a great deal of testimony among wartime recollections, the cases put by the litigants and one source from the administrative side. The system has been described as 'something that might logically have been expected to occur' in Japanese society of the time, with its attitude of superiority to other Asians and its patriarchalism centered in the Emperor system.

More specifically, the 'comfort system' was the natural outgrowth of the licenced prostitution system developed in Japan and introduced into Korea as its colony. In superseding the earlier feudal pattern of virtual bondage, prostitution was restricted to the form of a contract system, whereby women were employed by licenced brothels on the basis of a loan, usually to their families, to be worked out over a period usually amounting to some years. This formed the basis of much of the military prostitution system, though later giving way to more arbitrary methods.

The situation following Japan's seizure of Manchuria in 1931 at first followed the 'camp follower' pattern rather than the 'comfort women' system of later years. In the spirit of 'trade follows the flag', the forces were followed by a swarm of fortune-hunters, inevitably including licenced brothel-keepers and their staff. To many of the latter a move to the continent seemed a welcome release from the stagnant scene of Japan or Korea in the Great Depression. Business was so much better that debts normally needing years to pay off could now be cleared in months, enabling women in this pursuit to open their own businesses. Such was the rush to this sexual El Dorado that in the interests of health and order the authorities had to restrict the flow by a system of permits, extended later to occupied China.⁸

The first establishment of 'comfort stations' by direct military initiative occurred as a side-effect of the invasion of Manchuria. In 1932 a clash occurred in Shanghai between nationalist troops and Japanese marines stationed there, leading to army intervention. One of the commanders, Lieutenant-General Okamura, later confessed in memoirs, "though with embarrassment," that he was the original proponent of comfort stations for the Army. After numerous rape cases by Japanese troops, he sought a solution 'following local naval practice' by arranging with the governor of Nagasaki to send a contingent of 'comfort women'. Rape reports then ceased, providing a precedent for later times.⁹ The earlier existence of naval 'comfort stations' in Shanghai, with the first recorded use of the official term, is confirmed by a surviving report by the Consulate-General there dated December 1932.¹⁰

These continued to operate, apparently employing licenced prostitutes from Japan, but there was no further call for army comfort stations until the end of 1937. Following the notorious Rape of Nanking, the problem of order and discipline was raised only too starkly, above all because of hostile criticisms from the international community. Besides, the prospect of a long-term war presented the threat of widespread venereal disease. In the longest military campaign at that time, the Siberian Intervention of 1918-22, the equivalent of one out of seven divisions was incapacitated by venereal disease. So Shanghai again became the starting point for a now continuous and rapidly expanding system of military-supervised prostitution.

The Special Service Branch, in charge of undercover or irregular operations, asked contacts in the parasitic trading community to obtain a supply of women as soon as possible. This time they found few brothels in the same area of northern Kyushu which were willing to release their inmates. A few Japanese prostitutes who had worked off their loans and were free to travel were recruited but much larger numbers were needed. Resort was had to the Korean mining community of Kyushu where young girls were enticed with substantial cash advances to accept what they were told were cooking or laundry duties for the troops. They were shipped from Nagasaki and listed as so many units of 'war supplies' because regulations did not allow for a more appropriate

category.¹¹ This classification remained common and impeded later investigations.

What happened to this first batch of young Korean girls, tricked into service in comfort stations along with the seasoned Japanese volunteer prostitutes? Dr. T. Aso an army medical officer in the Shanghai base hospital, with a background in gynecology was instructed early in 1938 to examine about 100 women who were to work in a new 'recreation centre'. The group consisted of about 80 young Korean women and 20 more mature Japanese. His report states:

Among the Koreans there was very little indication of venereal disease, but among the Japanese, although free from acute symptoms at present, were all extremely dubious... The Koreans presented a pleasing contrast, being in the main younger and unsophisticated... Care needs to be taken with the more jaded type of woman, whom I have repeatedly examined for syphilis and found clearly branded with a past history of venereal disease by the scars of bubo excisions on the groins. These are really dubious as gifts for the Imperial Forces.¹²

Dr. Aso's report clearly established the superiority of the young Korean virgin over the mature Japanese prostitute as the preferred comfort woman for the Imperial Forces. From now there was no turning back. Although Japanese of a professional background continued to be used, they were increasingly swamped by Korean girls who had to be of a non-professional background to make sure they were healthy. The problem was that suitable Korean girls were unwilling to volunteer for service.

Lacking genuine volunteers the authorities called in the police as well as the civil administration in a process which was called in the euphemism of the day 'official mediation', that is, intimidation.

One large-scale example of this of which an account survives relates to the mass recruitment of Korean comfort women for the forces in Manchuria in mid-1941 in anticipation of possible war with the Soviet Union. The commanding officer of the logistics division was sent to Seoul to demand that the Government-General provide 20,000 comfort women within 20 days. In the

light of experience and reckoning in terms of soldiers' pay rates, fees and frequency of demand, one comfort woman was calculated as needed for 35 to 45 men. The Government-General set out quotas for all provincial, county and municipal authorities, to be filled under police supervision. This meant that a police officer would accompany the local Korean headman as he visited the poorer families in his area. The girls were told: "There are jobs in the forces like laundry and cooking. There's no danger and you can earn a lot of money. It's work with no worries."¹³ With the police officer present the girls "volunteered."

The recruitment of comfort women was also involved in the series of labour draft measures passed under the National General Mobilisation Law, particularly the Women's Voluntary Labour Service Ordinance of 1944. Females from the age of 12 were drafted for war industries in Korea or Japan, the usual practice being that those with primary or higher qualifications were employed in industry while others were diverted to military prostitution. Some diversion also occurred for punitive reasons. One result was that the term Voluntary Service Corps became a synonym for comfort women in Korea — forced labourers were all assumed to have been comfort women.

When quotas could not be met, even with police intimidation, then arbitrary seizures, similar to slave hunting were carried out. The most vivid account of these expeditions comes from S. Yoshida, a former official of the National Labour Service Association in the western Japanese city of Shimonoseki. He has published graphic and detailed accounts of such expeditions to South-western Korea for the seizure of both male labourers and comfort women.

Yoshida's diary of 30 May 1943 preserves the text of an order from Western Army Headquarters. Two hundred women aged 18 to 29 were required. They could be either married or single but must not be pregnant and of course must be free of venereal disease. As prescribed in the labour laws their terms of service were to be one year but this was "voluntarily" renewable. They were to receive an advance payment of 20 yen and a monthly wage of 30 yen which was twice a private soldier's pay.¹⁴

Methods of recruitment in the the occupied areas included the full range of measures seen in Japan and Korea, the best docu-

mented case being the forced prostitution of a number of Dutch internees in comfort stations in Semarang, Java, which led to the only war crimes trials relating to this type of offence.¹⁵

IV. Organisation and Conditions.

Despite the uneven nature of the sources, a remarkable picture emerges of the vast and dense network of sexual services pervading virtually all Japanese occupied areas from the Siberian frontier in the north to the Solomon Islands in the southeast and Burma in the southwest. It was an integral part of the army and navy logistics systems, depending wholly on them for transport, supply, medical and other arrangements. As in all components of the forces, supervision was exercised by the army Kempeitai or the Naval Special Police, control usually being delegated to local unit commanders or to the civil administration, so that there were great variations in conditions according to local preferences or resources. Direct management by the forces, as in the pioneer Shanghai comfort stations, was exceptional, generally confined to remote forward areas. In more stable areas, management was in the hands of private operators (occasionally retired officers), sometimes in a contractual arrangement with the forces, sometimes classified as paramilitary with equivalent rank.

A typical example is a unit stationed in the Guangzhou area, where the adjutant was responsible for general supervision, the paymaster for accounts and the medical officer for hygiene. Fees, hours of service and medical procedures are prescribed in great detail.¹⁶ A less direct form of supervision involving the utilisation of existing civilian brothels is illustrated by a Special Service Branch report dated Hankou 1940. This notes that, although there were only 200 to 300 registered prostitutes in the city, the actual number was estimated at over 3,000 and as these were widely scattered they presented problems for order and for the health of the Imperial Forces. It was therefore planned to concentrate them into twenty red-light areas where they could be registered and classified. A venereal disease inspection centre had already been opened to cater for them.¹⁷

A number of sets of regulations survive which indicate that basic guidelines were laid down in an attempt at standardising

procedures. These procedures had to be adapted to local conditions which varied with respect to things such as the ethnic groups employed and currencies used. The most basic set of rules was framed for the first regular comfort station in Shanghai and was preserved in a photo by Dr. Aso. The basic points were that visitors must hold a comfort station leave pass, pay at reception and receive a ticket and condom; the charge was two yen; the ticket showed the number of the room to be visited; time allowed was 30 minutes and must not be exceeded; visiting hours were 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. for privates and 1:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. for non-commissioned officers.¹⁸ In this case commissioned officers would have had separate arrangements, though in other cases they used the same facilities, with different hours.

The most elaborate surviving sets of regulations come from a unit in Okinawa and a United States intelligence translation of regulations for comfort stations in Manila. The former adds a ban on visiting unauthorised brothels; fees were 3 yen for officers, 2.50 yen for non-commissioned officers and 2 yen for privates, the time allowed being 40 minutes for all; condoms were compulsory; medical examinations were held three times a month and a form is prescribed for reporting the results; infected women could not work until cured, treatment being obtained from local doctors and paid for by the proprietor; the woman had one day off per month; the proprietor had to maintain discipline and the dignity of servicemen; the women (to prevent possible jealousy) were to be treated as 'common property, not to be appropriated' and could not be taken out of the premises.¹⁹

The Manila regulations are still more meticulous. They contain extremely detailed procedures for application to establish a comfort station; women could apply for permission to be released or dismissed if unsatisfactory; they received half the takings, were forbidden to work while menstruating and could not be kissed; fees for Filipinas were less than for Japanese nationals, which included Koreans and Taiwanese — a racial distinction often occurring elsewhere; hygiene precautions were spelled out in similar detail, though an appended police report on 25 clubs indicates that these were poorly observed.²⁰

Where standards set out in these regulations were observed, conditions might have been tolerable, at least to women capable

to adapting to prostitution at all, but it is clear that conditions were often much worse. Among other variables, much would depend on the ratio of women to men in a given area. A United States report on a comfort station in north Burma indicates that 22 women there serviced an average of about 100 men per day, which was many fewer than the 20-30 men per day which was the average for most comfort women, most of the time.²¹ Frequently women had to service far greater numbers of men; there are many descriptions of long queues of men waiting to be serviced with a fast rate of turnover being maintained for long periods of time. Again despite the intent that order should be maintained, comfort women were often subject to violence, with sometimes fatal results. Although treatment for venereal disease was standard procedure, there are repeated reports of comfort women being abandoned if sick and occasionally being shot.

Their ultimate fate was equally varied. Large numbers were repatriated to Korea or Japan from the more stable areas, but many died from enemy action or disease. Comfort women in Burma and Micronesia were included in the mass suicide of troops in hopeless situations. Others were abandoned and survived overseas. Some married and led more or less normal lives but the health of most of those identified had been permanently impaired. Very few were ever able to bear children.

ENDNOTES

- 1 K. Senda, Jugun Ianfu to Tenno, *Military Comfort Women and Emperor*. Kyoto, 1922, 28.
- 2 T. Ito, Jugun Ianfu. Joshi Kinro Teishentai, *Military Comfort Women and Womens' Voluntary Labour Corps*. Nagoya, 1992, 158
- 3 Jugun Ianfu 110 Ban Henshu linkai [Editorial Committee for the Military comfort Women] Tokyo, 1992, 168
- 4 Y. Yoshimi, Jugun Ianfu Shiryoshi [Reference Material for Military Comfort Women] Tokyo, 1992, 168.
- 5 I.M. Kim Tenno no Guntai to Chosenjin Ianfu, *The Emperor's Forces and Korean Comfort Women*. Tokyo, 1976; 12th impression 1992, 104.
- 6 Yoshimi, Shiryoshu, *op. cit.*, 102-4

- 7 Ito, Jugun lanfu, *op. cit*, 74-75.
- 8 Yoshimi, Shiryoshi, *op. cit*, 123-9.
- 9 Y. Suzuki, Jugun lanfu Naisen Kekkon, *Military Comfort Women Japanese-Korean Marriages*. Tokyo, 1992, 52-53.
- 10 Yoshimi, Shiryoshu, *op. cit*, 89-90.
- 11 Senda, Jugun lanfu, *op. cit*, 16-19.
- 12 Y. Suzuki, Chosenjin Jugun lanfu, *Korean Military Comfort Women*. Tokyo, 1991; 3rd impression 1992, 25-26.
- 13 Senda, Jugun lanfu, *op. cit*, 23-6; Suzuki, Chosenjin, 32.
- 14 S. Yoshida, Watakushi no Senso Hanzai: Chosenjin Kyosei Renko, *My War Crimes: the Forced Draft of Koreans*. Tokyo, 1983; 4th impression 1992, 101.
- 15 L. de Groot, *Berechting Japanese oorlogsmisdadigers in Nederlands-Indie 1946-1949*. Den Bosch, 1990
- 16 Yoshimi, Shiyoshi, *op. cit*, 285-9.
- 17 *ibidem*, 240-3.
- 18 Kim, lanfu, *op. cit*, 47-8.
- 19 R. Nishino, Jugun lanfu, *Military Comfort Women*. Tokyo, 1992, 232-8.
- 20 Allied Translator and Interpreter Section, Supreme commander for the allied Powers, Research Report: *Amenities in the Japanese Armed Forces*. Tokyo, 1945. 9-12,28-36.
- 21 *ibidem*, 18.