

Overcoming Double Erasure: Japanese “comfort women”, nationalism and trafficking.

Morita Seiya translated by Caroline Norma

Women of Japanese nationality have been erased in relation to the history of the wartime ‘comfort women’. For many decades after the war the existence of military ‘comfort women’ as a whole was ignored, and Japanese women, too, were ignored, at least in respect of their status as victims of wartime sexual violence. As we know, this deadlock over the history of the so-called comfort women was broken in the 1990s by survivors publicly testifying about their experiences, specifically those from North and South Korea. These women spoke widely about their experience of violence and abuse at the hands of the Japanese military, and campaigned for the restoration of their human dignity, compensation for their suffering, and for the Japanese state to take responsibility for apology and reparation. It was this bravery that gradually turned invisibility into visibility for the former ‘comfort women’, and led to the restoration of their individual subjectivity and dignity as survivors. This achievement was attained not on the basis of just one public action; it took years of persistent campaigning, and not just by survivors. Many individuals and organisations supported their work.

This successful work was undertaken, moreover, in the face of dogged opposition from powerful political forces that sought to again make invisible the existence of former ‘comfort women’ as survivors of wartime sexual violence. The struggle of survivors and their supporters was waged in the knowledge that any small relaxation in their persistence of efforts would lead, again, to the suffering of survivors being consigned to the dustbin of history. On this basis, in an extremely

pressurised environment, and in the face of continuing intimidation and threats, they continued daily efforts at the front line of political struggle.

In the midst of this hard-fought struggle between erasure and visibility, however, the former ‘comfort women’ of Japanese nationality were doubly erased. Local women interned in comfort stations from countries and areas invaded and colonised by imperial Japan were typically the victims of both racism and sexism, and they endured this double oppression within the context of war as the most violent of settings, and at the hands of the military, as the most violent of institutions. As a result, they suffered a fate of the most brutal kind. However, in the case of the Japanese ‘comfort women’, in the absence of colonial racist discrimination, no discrimination was recognised as exercised against them. We might expect sexist discrimination to be recognised even in the absence of racism, but, inexplicably, in the case of multiple intersecting oppressions, it seems that the absence of any oppression except sexism renders the fact of multiply experienced oppressions no longer recognisable. Oppression, discrimination and violence all become matters of no historical consequence. This is the unique mechanism operating at the base of sexist discrimination. Usually only in combination with forms of oppression and discrimination experienced also by men does sexism become clearly recognisable. At the same time, and strangely, when sexism is thus recognised, it is then equated with, or subordinated to, other forms of oppression and discrimination, and no longer

recognised on its own terms. In this way, rather than a direct violent expression of sexist discrimination, rape is rendered merely violence. Similarly, rather than sexist discrimination exercised through relations of power in the workplace, sexual harassment is rendered mere illegal sexual conduct. While a black youth being brutally murdered by a white person is recognised as the most despicable form of hate crime, innumerable women are murdered by men each year, but no-one names the phenomenon gender-based hate crime. Each one of these crimes is just individually labelled a murder over and over. Unless some other form of oppression or discrimination is pertinent to the crimes, moreover, none of them are seen as manifesting any type of oppression or discrimination in the first place. For example, in the case of child pornography, its violation of human rights is recognised on the basis of the relationship of power that exists between adults and children. But for pornography involving adults, no such violation is recognised, and the material is merely deemed a hobby or expression of free speech. Its existence is defended even by leftists and human rights advocates.

Because of this unique mechanism operating at the base of sexist oppression, the victimisation of former ‘comfort women’ of Japanese nationality specifically has never been recognised as an historical harm because racist discrimination did not feature. Japanese women have always been excluded from the category of victim in relation to military sexual slavery.

Another reason for the double erasure of Japanese ‘comfort women’ is their widely assumed involvement in Japan’s pre-war legalised sex industry as ‘prostitutes’. It was the case that most Japanese women who went abroad into comfort stations during the war had been in some form of prostitution beforehand. In Japan’s male dominant culture, prostitution is not perceived as systematised sex discrimination or exploitation; at worst, it is

seen as a necessary evil. Sometimes it is held up as something to be celebrated, even in the current day. The problem with this is that prostitution escapes attribution to the men who are its customers, its entrepreneurs, and its whole-of-society male supporters. Rather, it is seen as wholly the problem of individual women in prostitution, and these women are seen as ‘prostitutes’ who are sullied and no longer eligible for marriage and normal womanhood. In a Japanese culture that upholds the Madonna/whore sexist division of women, ‘prostitutes’ were the ones sent abroad to service the sexuality of conscripts and officers, and buffer their wholesale raping of local women. This task was held up as their essential wartime mission, and the women were viewed as nothing more than a sexual resource who were collectively suited to be used in this way.

However, most women in Japan’s pre-war sex industry were the daughters of poor families, were trafficked, and were direct victims of violence and exploitation. But because male dominant societies see systems of prostitution as necessary, even if poverty (i.e., relations of economic dominance), trafficking or violence are deeply implicated in the prostitution of these daughters, these things often escape recognition. Like the Midas touch that turns everything to gold, for the institutions that undergird male dominant societies, things like violence and oppression don’t exist, and instead are rendered freedom, free choice, or some other legitimate concept like ‘work’.

These mutually intertwined mechanisms rendered the Japanese ‘comfort women’ invisible. This invisibility arises from the fact of prostitution being a bedrock institution of male dominant society that is considered a necessary evil, or even fortunately necessary. Confronting the invisibility of the Japanese ‘comfort women’, therefore, involves confronting one of the pillars of male dominant sexist culture.



Nishino Rumiko. & Onozawa Akane. & "Sensō to Josei e no Bōryoku" Risāchi Akushon Sentā, editor. (2015). *Nihonjin "ianfu" : aikokushin to jinshin baibai to.* Tokyo Gendai Shokan.

The book edited by the Violence Against Women in War Research Action Center (VAWW-RAC) titled *Japanese 'comfort women': Nationalism and trafficking* is the first instance of a written work that confronts this double erasure of Japanese comfort women. The book is the joint work of 13 authors from Japan and South Korea. As longstanding activists in the 'comfort women' advocacy movement, the authors for three years contributed to a project team specifically convened to examine the history of the 'comfort women' of Japanese nationality. They constructed a three-dimensional picture of these women in history through examining a wide range of primary sources, including pre-war police and court records, military documents and other public records, as well as innumerable media articles and memoirs, testimonies and interviews of victims, and various reports.

The book comprises three parts, covering how

the women were recruited, how they were treated, and how they fared after the war. But the content of each section is not strictly demarcated, and information about recruitment appears in the second section, and information about local conditions of women's internment in the first. I will review each section in turn, but with the understanding that information common to the sections is found across the whole monograph.

With regard to how Japanese women were recruited for comfort station internment, and how they were moved into the stations, the authors reveal that, just as the Japanese military (or Home Ministry) ordered the recruitment of women in the colonies and conquered areas, the same was done in Japan. This was undeniably an action of the Japanese state, and a policy of it. The entities that acted upon these orders and actually recruited and trafficked the women abroad were private sector businesses and individuals. The funds used to entrap the women in prostitution abroad through debt bondage were illegal in international law at the time, and were outlawed even in Japanese domestic law. In spite of this, advanced loans were able to be used in this way on the basis of official sanction by Japan's home ministry and military. However, because the legal exemption was not known about in some parts of Japan (because the military believed its arbitrary legalising of the military prostitution system might bring into disrepute the name of the emperor, it implemented the policy in some secrecy), regional police in Japan sometimes found themselves dealing with the contradiction as part of their official duties.

For example, in a January 1938 case, a Wakayama policeman named Tanabe detained three men who had been picked up for recruiting women to send abroad in the local restaurant district. However, these three men testified that they were not predators, but merely acting on a request from military high

command (army general Sadao Araki) to recruit barmaids for Shanghai comfort stations. They had already trafficked 70 women to the stations, and for this purpose had received certification from police stations in both Osaka and Nagasaki. When Wakayama police checked this story with their Osaka and Nagasaki counterparts, they found it generally checked out. In the end, Tanabe released the trio on the basis that he was able to confirm their story about military comfort stations, and because Osaka police had been able to pass on their permit relating to barmaid recruitment. Accordingly, with involvement by the state and the military, what had originally been criminal conduct no longer had such a quality (p. 92).

VAWW-RAC's book records various means by which private brokers recruited women for comfort stations. First was through offering women who were already debt bonded or subject to other horrific contracts of servitude inducement to encourage their agreement to go abroad. These women had often been sold into prostitution as children by their parents. The military could buy out their debt contracts, or could guarantee an individual's manumission from prostitution within a period that compared favourably to the conditions they faced in the civilian sex industry. This arrangement for the recruitment of women was the least heinous of the tactics used. Those Japanese women who were recruited this way early on, and who managed to return home to Japan before the war intensified, tend to recall relatively favourably their experience of the comfort stations. But this favourable recollection is wholly a product of the inhuman conditions in which they were interned in civilian prostitution, and the lack of hope for the future that tended to accompany debt bondage in Japan's peacetime sex industry. It does not detract from the historical fact of their status as victims of wartime sexual violence.

A second means of recruitment involved recruiters directly approaching impoverished

households and buying their daughters. This was a standard trafficking technique. For example, one trafficker recalls making sure local rice dealers accompanied him whenever he approached impoverished households because, even more than offering money, families would respond to the immediate prospect before their eyes of having that day's meal taken care of. Negotiations over how many bags of rice the daughter was worth would be conducted on the spot (p. 164).

A third means of recruitment involved whole businesses moving abroad as military comfort stations in the case of high-class geisha restaurants catering to military officers.

Fourthly, using the same technique that was widely used against local women outside Japan, women would be tricked into entering comfort stations abroad on the ruse they were being recruited as nurses and the like. This kind of manipulation, which is a well-known form of forced recruitment, was not uncommon for Japanese women. For example, officer Gengo of the 59th division garrisoned in Shandong's capital Jinan recalls a day in 1941 when 200 Japanese women from the 'continental comfort squad' of the Patriotic Women's Association visited the area. *They came with the intention of cooking for the troops and the like, but instead they were forced into military prostitution. In another example, a girl who had just graduated from school in Kyushu and had been recruited for administrative work with the military was forced into prostitution in a station for officers. She had relayed this story in tears (p. 117).*

Even though, formally, the military at the time did not admit to going so far as to trick women into travelling abroad, no record exists of the military taking any action to suppress such activity. In fact, the illegal manipulation of women to travel abroad had become an easier crime to undertake after the military had legalised the recruitment of women for cross-

border trafficking into comfort stations. After all, it is very difficult to differentiate among those who are in prostitution abroad on the basis of free will, and those on the basis of fraud.



Painting by a South Korean comfort station survivor submitted as part of an application for the UNESCO Memory of the World Register. The picture envisages the execution of the Showa emperor.

recruited from Japan’s sex industry, their agreement to travel abroad was secured on the basis of one other important strategy, in addition to the provision of debt relief and limited contracts of comfort station internment. This was nationalism, and it explains the VAWW-RAC book sub-title, which refers to the trafficking of Japanese women into military comfort stations that was crucially organised on the basis of their ‘love of country’. Many Japanese survivors after the war talked about having agreed to go abroad ‘for their country’ or in the belief they would be interred in Japan’s Yasukuni Shrine if they died while serving the military. But their hopes were betrayed. In this regard, the former Japanese comfort woman Yamanaka Keiko said the following:

If Mr Yokoi was a sacrifice of war then so was I. I went for the sake of the emperor, but it ended up being really just for the army. But that’s what we were told [that we were going for the sake of the emperor], dammit. I want the welfare ministry to know that I agreed to go thinking I would be treated the same as a veteran when I got back, since I wouldn’t be able to get married after the war (p. 26).

For people who are socially subordinated in peacetime society, war and nationalism hold out the hope of being treated as equal members of the nation if they work hard. This hope is alluring. It led, for example, before the war, to *burakumin* leaders being co-opted in efforts towards militarism. However, as Clausewitz writes, war is just the continuation of politics by other means. As a thoroughly sexist state in peacetime, imperial Japan was unlikely to treat women as equals in war. On the contrary, in wartime this inequality escalated to the point of heinousness. The existence of huge numbers of comfort women in battle zones manifested the extreme end of the aggravated inequality that was enacted in wartime. The problem with this is not the post-war unequal treatment of former ‘comfort women’ after their contribution to the

For the women mentioned above who were

nation in war, but, rather, the fact they were made into 'comfort women' in the first place. This is problematic for being a typically standard way of enacting female inequality. It is for this very reason that the women found themselves after the war ignored, and left out of consideration of historical memory.

With regard to the way Japanese women were treated as 'comfort women' once they had moved abroad, it is first necessary to note that their treatment, compared to that of Korean women, was relatively tolerable, and this was the case particularly for Japanese women who entered stations catering to officers rather than rank-and-file recruits. They were generally older than Korean victims, and had a better chance of eventually leaving the stations. Racist discrimination was exercised in extreme terms by the military, and the amount of the advance loans and payments made to Japanese victims while in the stations were generally higher. However, this creation of hierarchy and rank among a population that was subject to exactly the same form of wartime sexual violence represents nothing more than a strategy of divide and rule. Nishino Rumiko writes the following in this regard:

The provision of special privileges to Japanese comfort women worked to obscure the discrimination, victimisation and sexism that these women were nonetheless subject to. The superiority complex that came with being a comfort woman of Japanese nationality came on the flipside of the discrimination and contempt that was shown Korean comfort women. This construction of privilege based on ethnic hierarchy worked against the Japanese comfort women in that their own experience of discrimination was thereby concealed (pp. 130-131).

Additionally, in comparison to victims recruited from the Korea peninsula who were, stereotypically, young virgins untouched by venereal disease, from the outset Japanese

women were sourced from the sex industry (p. 132). It was believed that Japanese troops encountering pure Japanese female youth in the stations would be demoralising and therefore counterproductive. This consideration did not arise out of respect for Japanese women but, rather, the Madonna/whore dichotomy that was maintained for the Japanese female population who were divided by status into wholesome young women and mothers, and prostitutes. Each group served a different purpose as a sex-based 'resource'. (It might be parenthetically noted that today's LDP government and the business world in Japan use similar language in reference to women.) In other words, the former group served a reproductive function in birthing and bringing up new imperial soldiers, and the latter functioned as a physiological resource in servicing the sexuality of soldiers.

The conditions in which Japanese women were interned in wartime comfort stations were hardly better than horrendous. One former 'comfort woman' testified that, 'after each one I raced to the bathroom to douche. When I would return to the room, there would be another waiting. It was just man after man after man' (p. 124). Another commented that, 'I served around 30 per day. I wore not even a dressing gown. I just lay on the mattress and waited for them'. A third former 'comfort woman' testified that she was led around by the Japanese military from one front line to another, and in total spent eight years interned in comfort stations in various locations. She 'returned home with absolutely nothing but one free public transport ticket' (p. 127).

Among the recruitment tactics described above, the first-mentioned scheme of recruitment was noted as comparatively less heinous, and the second-mentioned tactic involving trafficking was noted as revealing the operation of domestic schemes of female sexual exploitation in Japan. In relation to such schemes, a Japanese survivor of a Taiwan-

based comfort station, Shirota Suzuko, has noted of her time in civilian prostitution in Japan that her debts would not decline, even after half a year's internment in a brothel (p. 129).

Lastly, in regard to the post-war experiences of Japanese former 'comfort women', it must be first noted that the vast majority of Japanese returnees of wartime comfort stations never surfaced publicly, and their experiences never entered the historical record (p. 136). Japanese society after the war, which manifested a climate that had persisted widely and over a long historical period, orchestrated their silence. This climate held prostituted women and victims of sexual assault in contempt, and oversaw discrimination against them. Because there were so few survivors able to give testimony, it was difficult to confirm particular characteristics and historical patterns among their experiences, given the recorded pool of these experiences was so shallow. Accordingly, it has been necessary, in the case of the former 'comfort women' of Japanese nationality, to present individual case studies in the most sympathetic way possible. This is also the approach of the VAWW-RAC book.



Shirota Suzuko. (1971). *Mariya no sanko*. Tōkyō: Nihon Kirisutokyōdan Shuppankyoku.

Among the case studies presented is the abovementioned example of Shirota Suzuko. Her post-war experience involved returning from abroad as the 'third wife' of a Japanese man, but then leaving his household to enter the sex industry in Hakata catering to occupying American troops. After this, in 1955, as a result of incidentally reading about a women's welfare facility in the *Sunday Mainichi*, Shirota exited prostitution and entered a women's residential facility called Jiairyō. It was at this facility that Shirota became a Christian. Next, after suffering a range of illnesses and after a number of hospitalisations, Shirota moved to a public welfare residential facility for women, Izumiryō.¹ Lastly, Shirota moved to the Chiba-based Kanita Women's Village, and it was there

she spent her last years. Since becoming a Christian at the previously facility, Shiota had begun testifying as to her wartime experience as a ‘comfort woman’, and it was while she was based at Kanita that she recorded the precious testimony of her life that is featured in the biography *Maria no sanku* published in 1971. Also while at Kanita she expressed the strong desire to have a memorial constructed to ‘comfort women’ who did not survive the war. She is recorded as commenting that, ‘I’m the only one able to speak out [as a former ‘comfort woman’]. No one who survived [a comfort station] would ever speak out about such an embarrassing experience’ (p. 217). In line with her wishes, in 1986, a memorial to former ‘comfort women’ was erected at the top of the hill on which Kanita sits. Shiota spent her final days in Kanita’s aged nursing care wing, and is recorded as saying that, ‘all I ever wanted was to live my life in a quiet hospital room. I prayed and prayed for it every night. Now God has answered my prayers!’ Shiota passed away in 1993 (p. 219).

event held at Kanita Women’s Village in Chiba prefecture to commemorate deceased Japanese comfort women.

Other comfort station survivors of Japanese nationality discussed in the VAWW-RAC book remained overseas after the end of the war. One woman from Nagasaki at age 19 or 20 was lured to the South Pacific on the ruse of paid work, but was interned in a comfort station in Singapore. According to part of her testimony recorded in tears, Japanese soldiers were repatriated at the end of the war, but women interned in comfort stations were not even informed of the end of the war, let alone repatriated. She remained in Singapore after marrying a kind-hearted local man. She never returned to Japan out of concern that returning to her hometown in Japan might have involved hardship for her family if neighbours found out about her wartime experience and discriminated against her family as a result (pp. 220-221).



Newspaper report of 2012 memorial

This experience of military prostituted women being left abroad after the war is unfortunately common in the case of Korean and Chinese women, and the VAWW-RAC book shows its occurrence also for women of Japanese nationality.

The end of the war did not spell the end of the Japanese government’s ‘comfort women’ policy. After the war, it deployed the same policy for the sake of occupying forces in Japan. It feared suffering the same fate as had been inflicted by Japanese troops against colonised and invaded populations in the war who suffered rape and pillage. Via a directive issued by the head of the security agency in the Home Affairs Ministry, sex industry entrepreneurs operating around domestic military bases in Japan were required to establish comfort stations. Thereby commenced the ‘Recreation and Amusement Association’ (RAA) system of prostitution, which, in spite of common misunderstanding,

was an organisation operating not throughout Japan but was limited to the Tokyo metropolitan area (pp. 225-226). In this instance, too, it was prostituted women who were organised to enter the venues, and again the inducement to 'serve the country' was used against them. The puppet government of the time had not changed a bit. Still, for these men, women were nothing more than a sexual resource to be used in the exercise of statecraft.

In spite of the long post-war history of democracy in Japan, right-wing and conservative politicians in Japan to the current day have not extricated themselves from such thinking. There continues to be the public statements of Osaka mayor Hashimoto, for example, as well as the endless arguments of the conservative right. These men have fundamentally not changed. As such, the history of the 'comfort women' is not yet a historical problem of a bygone era; it remains today a problem of utmost seriousness.

In conclusion I would like to cite analysis by Hirayama Kazuko advanced in her thesis examining the RAA system of post-war Japan.

Roughly seventy years after the wartime defeat, the system enacted by Article 9 of the Constitution that was embraced by the Japanese people is being hollowed out in the name of 'leaving behind the post-war regime' by the second Abe Shinzou government. In the guise of 're-interpretation', the system is being snuffed out. But those of us who examine the historical human rights violations of the wartime and post-war 'comfort women' systems know that, in the event of war, the Japanese

military (i.e., the state) will not only fail to protect its female citizens, but will push us forward in sacrifice to its own protection. In light of this grievous history, it is incumbent upon us (both men and women) to forge ideas and practices that overcome the Madonna/whore division of women (in which good women are protected and other women sacrificed), which is rhetoric used endlessly in the process of militarisation.

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Notes

¹ Translator’s note: This facility is still in operation in Tokyo, and continues to prioritise women survivors of prostitution among its cohort intake. Its director is active in anti-prostitution and pornography campaigning.