Women, the State, and War: Understanding Issue of the "Comfort Women"*

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Introduction

With the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the new millennium, the world is about to enter a new stage of international relations. While old centers of power such as the US and Russia retain significant influence in global affairs, new centers of power such as China and EU are becoming increasingly important in determining the course of events in the world. The map of the global distribution of power is rapidly shifting, yet policymakers of the world have failed to clearly make sense of the new global situation and thus they lag behind in adopting effective strategies to cope with potential threats to global security and uncertainties that underlie global affairs.⁽¹⁾

Japan is by no means exempt from the need to search for new strategies to deal with the changing international environment. Its latest attempt to adapt to its changing environment is manifested in the public discussion over the revision of the Constitution, article nine, in particular. So far, the direction of the current debate on the revision of the Constitution suggests that Japan is slowly moving toward adopting a more active stance in the maintenance of security in East Asia.⁽²⁾ In my view, no matter how politicians like to phrase it, and regardless of the fact that the Defense Agency will remain an agency, not a full-fledged ministry, the newly emerging policy orientation is an attempt to fortify Japan's military role in East Asia. And recent opinion polls indicate that the Japanese public welcomes this move.⁽³⁾

⁺ The title of this paper is inspired by Kenneth Waltz' Man, the State, and War.

The author would like to thank Tomita Mari for her extensive research assistance.

There are many reasons why the pacifist attitude is disappearing and the vision of militarized Japan is gaining support among the Japanese public. One obvious reason is the generation change. Those who were born after the end of World War II, namely persons under fifty-five years old, comprise over 70 percent of the population. This means that the population with first-hand experience of war is rapidly shrinking in size. What is even more problematic is that history education is insufficient in Japanese schools. Not only is Japanese history often elective in high schools, but also, because of the broad scope of the subject (dating back to the stone age), the most recent period of Japanese history is often taught either cursorily or skipped altogether. Furthermore, when the most recent period of Japanese history is taught, many aspects of the last war such as atrocities committed by the Japanese military in Japan's neighboring nations are not examined with sufficient care and time. A history textbook written by a group of rightwingers and approved by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology since January 2001) recently will certainly give a momentum to this tendency. As a result, post-war generations either have no knowledge of the last war or when they do, their knowledge is limited to the 'facts' controlled by the government.

My contention is that the Japanese need to know more about what happened during the last war before they decide on new security strategies. Thanks to those who galvanized the courage to come out and tell the world of their experiences and those who tirelessly pursued war-time records that are often hard to obtain, we now have the advantage of reading about those who were severely victimized during the last war. The story of 'comfort women' had been one of the least known stories of the crimes committed by Japan during the war, but which drew sudden attention in recent years. However, while we are beginning to share detailed knowledge of *how* the Japanese military abducted these women and abused their bodies, we have yet to understand *why* these events happened.⁽⁴⁾ Thus Wakatsuki Yasuo notes:

Many records have been published (on the inhuman activities of the Japanese military) and even now it is not rare that the mass media makes a report on new findings. However, there seems to be very few explanations on *why* the Japanese military resorted to such cruelty. We often see words such as *hansei* (repentance) and apologies but I believe that investigation of causes is even more important (Wakatsuki 1995a: 127, emphasis and translation mine).

This paper attempts to answer why Japan established the system of 'comfort women' and abused women's bodies during the China War and the Pacific War (henceforth 'the War'). Contrary to what many Japanese like to believe today, I begin my analysis with the assumption that the way how the Japanese fought these wars is not independent of the characteristics of the Japanese as individuals, the structure of the Japanese state or its ideology.⁽⁵⁾ In addition, the policies which the Japanese government adopted during the War were deeply influenced by Japan's international environment. Therefore, my approach to the question of 'comfort women' requires examination of different aspects of Japanese politics and policymaking. I will first look at the characteristics of the Japanese state in relation to its decisionmaking, and finally, the nature of the international environment and its impact on Japanese policies.

Before I present my views, I need to state what this paper is not about. First, while we still face a need for new evidence and reliable records on the operation of comfort stations, this paper does not attempt to reveal new historical evidence. Fortunately, as of today, there are numerous records of personal memories, information collected and documented by those who conducted interviews of witnesses and archival research, the most notable work of which is a collection of official documents compiled by Yoshimi Yoshiaki (Yoshimi 1992). Yet, few have attempted to theorize why Japan established the system of comfort women. Thus, while this paper is an attempt to build upon the work of predecessors, its main goal is to move a step further, that is, to theorize issues related to 'comfort women'. Second, the paper does not attempt to seek out general causes of the War. Finally, I do not intend to make a grand claim that all women are victims of wars. For example, as we will see in this paper, while large numbers of women in areas the Japanese military occupied were victimized, women were also victimizers in the sense that there were women who supported the conduct of war behind the lines, if not in the front lines, as factory workers and mothers of future soldiers.

Definition and 'Facts'⁽⁶⁾ about 'Comfort Women'

Before presenting my analysis, I must state what I mean by 'comfort women.' The term refers to 'women who were forced to offer sexual services to officers and soldiers at Japanese military comfort stations during the period of war' according to the definition provided by the Asian Women's Fund (Asian Women's Fund 1995: 8, translation mine). Comfort stations indicate sites where comfort women worked for the Japanese military. Because the operation of comfort stations was highly systematized, as we will see below, the term comfort women system is used to mean the whole of comfort women, officers and local merchants who were in charge of running the service, and rules and regulations concerning their use.

I use the term 'comfort women' with some reservation.⁽⁷⁾ The reason is, as many have pointed out (Ishikawa 1994: 46, Park 1993: 21, Yoshimi 1995: 10-1), the term 'comfort women' gives an impression that the activities of victims were based on their choice, preference, or love and does 'not in the least reflect the suffering, such as multiple rapes on an everyday basis and severe physical abuse, that women victims had to endure during their forced prostitution and sexual subjugation and abuse in wartime' (UN 1996: 4). Similar problem is associated with the Japanese term, $J\bar{u}gun Ianfu. J\bar{u}gun$ implies that women voluntarily followed the military. *Ianfu* is the original Japanese term for 'comfort women' and thus, faces the same problem stated above. The Korean

equivalent, *Jung(Chong)shindae* (voluntary service corps), is also problematic in the sense, *Jung(Chong)shin*, again, signifies voluntary action.

Provided that a majority of the women who became 'comfort women' became so without their consent, it is more appropriate to call them military sexual slaves as Coomaraswamy recommended (UN 1996: 4).⁽⁸⁾ However, because the term sexual slaves may include a variety of forced sexual labor such as prostitutes who could not escape licensed brothels in Japan before World War II, the term 'comfort women' is used in this article to clarify the object of this research. Because of the problems associated with the use of the term, it is more appropriate to use the term with quotation marks but for reasons of readability, I will omit the quotation marks henceforth. To be sure, this does not mean, of course, that I accept the implications of this term.

Because recruitment (or abduction) of comfort women was done secretly and official documents related to the establishment of comfort stations were mostly destroyed before the end of World War II, the actual number of comfort women is unknown. The most broadly-cited number is calculated by Hara Zenjirö, a retired army officer, who estimated the number at 80,000 (Mahara and Senda 1992: 88). Yet, some estimate that the number was much larger. For example, based on the assumption that a woman was assigned to a military unit of 50 soldiers, Hicks estimates that the number was 139,000 at most (Hicks 1994: 19). Kim estimates that 170,000 to 200,000 (Kim 1976: 79) Korean women were abducted. A more conservative estimate was offered by Hata Ikuhiko. Hata's estimate was 60,000, assuming that the entire number of soldiers was 3,000,000 and that one comfort woman was provided to every 50 soldiers. If one includes an 'attrition rate' of fifty percent into the calculation, however, the number of comfort women will increase to 90,000. However, Yoshimi objects to this calculation (Yoshimi 1995: 78-9). He states that the assumption of one comfort woman per 50 soldiers is unconfirmed. By citing an example of the Kwantung Army which tried to summon 20,000 women for 800,000 some soldiers, Yoshimi suggests that there may have been cases in which one comfort women was given to a unit of 40 soldiers. At the same time, a record indicates that the 21st army assigned one woman per unit of 100 soldiers (Yoshimi 1995: 78). Moreover, Yoshimi doubts the assumption that there was no additional recruitment of comfort women, because the rate of 'death, suicide, illness, injury, end of contract terms, etc.' was high among comfort women. Thus Yoshimi assumes an attrition rate of fifty percent. The result of Yoshimi's calculation is that the number of comfort women was between 45,000 (assuming one comfort woman per unit of 100 soldiers) and 200,000 (assuming an attrition rate of 100 percent and one comfort woman per unit of 30 soldiers) (Yoshimi 1995: 78-80).

Comfort women came from vast areas where the Japanese military invaded. Official documents indicate that comfort women comprised a variety of nationalities and ethnic groups such as Japanese, Koreans, Taiwanese, Chinese, Philippinas, Indonesians, Vietnamese, Burmese, and Dutch (Yoshimi 1995: 11). However, women of other nationalities may well have been made into comfort women. For example, Australian official documents record statements by an Australian nurse who claimed Japanese soldiers demanded that she and other nurses become comfort women (Yoshimi 1992: 565-73). From a veteran's statement, Nishino confirmed that there were white Russian comfort women (Nishino 1992: 21).

There are no official documents that indicate the ratio of women of different ethnicities. However, many agree that the ethnic composition of comfort women is said to be mostly (about 80 percent) women from the Korean Peninsula (henceforth Korean women) (Hikosaka, 1991: 37, Kim 1976: 18, Nishino 1992: 20).⁽⁹⁾ Indirect sources such as statistics on venereal diseases indicate that over 50% of women who 'infected' soldiers were Koreans (Yoshimi 1995: 82).⁽¹⁰⁾ While the exact share of Korean women is unconfirmed, existing records indicate that their share was significant and thus I will proceed with the assumption that a majority, or at least a large number of comfort women, were Koreans.⁽¹¹⁾

The year when the first comfort station was established by the military is unknown. The first case of comfort station that appears in official documents is the one established in Shanghai in 1932 (Yoshimi 1992: 183-5). Sasaki Motokatsu, a military postmaster, also recorded that comfort stations existed in 1932 at the time of the First Shanghai Incident (January to May 1932) (Sasaki 1973: 247). Testimony offered by a former army officer Yamada Seikichi (quoted in Hikosaka 1991: 38) also confirms that the Japanese army established its first comfort station in 1932. However, Yamada states that the station was modeled after those of the navy, implying that comfort stations existed before 1932. However, comfort stations appear to have been rare before the Nanking Incident (Hikosaka 1991: 40). After Nanking Incident, many comfort stations were established (Yoshimi 1995: 22, 25).

According to Yoshimi, official documents of the governments of Japan, US, and the Netherlands indicate that areas where the existence of comfort stations was confirmed include China, Hong Kong, Macao, French Indochina, the Philippines, Malay Peninsula, Singapore, British Borneo, Dutch East India, Burma, Thai, Eastern New Guinea, Okinawa Islands, Ogasawara Islands, Hokkaidō, Kurile Islands, and Sakhalin (Yoshimi 1995: 11). However, Yoshimi doubts that this list exhausts the areas where the Japanese military established comfort stations. According to memoirs written by veterans, comfort stations were seen in territories mandated to Japan such as Saipan in the Mariana Islands and Truk in the Carolines Islands, as well as in the US territory Guam Island (Yoshimi 1995: 77). Moreover, comfort stations were established in areas within the Japanese mainland such as Kyūshū and Chiba prefecture (Yoshimi 1995: 77).

What has been most controversial on the issue of comfort women is the question whether they were just brothels run by private citizens near bases and front lines, or were they established through direct control of the military. Contrary to some writers such as Kamisaka Fuyuko (Kamisaka and Hata 1996, Uesugi 1994) that the state or the Japanese military had not taken direct control over the establishment of comfort stations, there are ample documents and testimony that indicate direct involvement of the military (Yoshimi 1992: 105-7, 164-70,195-6, Nishino 1992: 27-31, Hikosaka 1991: 62-5). Therefore, this paper begins with the assumption that the state or the military was directly involved in the establishment and operation of comfort stations.⁽¹²⁾

Problems

Rape and abuse of women's bodies in time of war is a universal phenomenon and therefore it is not unique to the Japanese military. This association of war and sexual violence goes back as far as recorded history. Most recently, extensive occurrence of rape in Bosnia has been reported.

However, not all militaries institutionalize rape as the Japanese military did. In contrast to ordinary rape which is a violation of women's bodies on an ad hoc basis, abuse of comfort women was about the institutionalization of rape involving systematic recruitment or abduction of women on a large scale. Unlike ordinary rape, it also involved the establishment of sites, namely, comfort stations, where soldiers could visit comfort women regularly. As we have already seen, the number and ethnic composition of comfort women indicate that recruitment of comfort women was done on a large scale both numerically and geographically. Moreover, the recruitment of comfort women was done systematically, utilizing the existing network of brothels and pimps which was established under the Japanese colonial rule (Kim 1980: 216-26). What is most important on the institutionalization of rape is that it involved decisions made by military leaders as well as the tacit approval of non-military government decisionmakers. Comfort women were not prostitutes but they were victims of rape because most cases of recruitment were not based on the voluntary consent of the women but involved either coercion or deception (Hikosaka 1991: 54-57, Nishino 1992: 94, 113, 118, 120, 136-43).⁽¹³⁾

To be sure, the establishment of comfort stations is by no means unknown in militaries other than the Japanese military.⁽¹⁴⁾ If we take a long historic view, for

example, Romans took sex slaves to the front line. Napoleon is said to have taken prostitutes to battlefields (Morozumi 1991: 168-9). In the late 19th century, the British army is also known to have made use of sexual services of local women in India (Hicks 1994: 30). Mahara states that military-run prostitution commonly existed both in Europe and US until World War I (Mahara and Senda 1992: 97). As examples of military prostitution during World War II, the often-cited *Prostitution Homosexualität Selbstverstümmelung-Probleme der deutschen Sanitätsführung 1939-45* (Prostitution, Homosexuality, Self-Mutilation: Problems for German Public Hygiene Control 1939-45, Franz Seidler, Neckargemünd 1977) stated that in the eastern occupied areas, Soviet areas in particular, Germans had established comfort stations and women were often forced to work.⁽¹⁵⁾

Nevertheless, with the possible exception of the Nazis, the systematic operation of comfort stations and the explicit involvement of top decisionmakers seem unique to the Japanese military and thus the issue requires serious attention. Another unique aspect of the operation of the comfort women system was that the Japanese military used Korean women as their preferred sex slaves instead of Japanese women or women from other areas. Thus, two questions need to be answered. First, why did Japan institutionalize rape? Second, why were Korean women the most common victims?

(To be continued to the next issue)

Notes

- The lack of new strategies is in part due to a lack of dominant paradigm that explains the nature of post-Cold War global affairs. Instead, policymakers face diverse views, such as 'The Clash of Civilizations?' (Huntington 1993) 'Jihad vs. McWorld' (Barber 1995) and 'Structural Liberalism' (Ikenberry 1996).
- (2) Calder notes that it is 'unlikely' but 'not inconceivable' that Japan may go nuclear (Calder 1996: 64).
- (3) An opinion poll taken by the Liberal Democratic Party in August 1997 showed that 76 percent

of respondents supported revision of the Constitution. Among those who supported the revision, 25.8 percent desired that the Constitution make a clear statement on the constitutionality of the Self Defense Forces and 33.3 percent wanted to eliminate the contradiction between the Constitution and the SDF's participation in UN peace keeping forces (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 6 August 1997). More recently, an opinion poll showed that 67 percent of the respondents agreed to change the Constitution so that it would clearly stipulate possession of defense capabilities (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 25 April 2001).

- (4) For detailed description of conditions in comfort stations, see for example, Henson (1995), Howard (1995), Kawada (1987), Mun (1996), and Nishino (1992).
- (5) It seems to me that many Japanese like to think that the war was caused by factors unrelated to ordinary Japanese, such as the monopoly of the state apparatus by the military.
- (6) Note that some of these 'facts' are not completely reliable due to the secret nature of the operation of comfort stations.
- (7) Kusaka misunderstands the reason why many prefer to use the term with quotation marks. His understanding is that the quotation marks are attached to obscure the meaning of the words, analogous to using the term 'so-called'. However, as I note in the text, most people use quotation marks with the implication that 'comfort women' is a misnomer (Kusaka 1996: 112).
- (8) The similar term 'sexual slavery' was used in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights held in June 1993, for the first time as an official UN term.
- (9) In this paper, when I use the term Korea, I mean Korean Peninsula.
- (10) Based on records of medical examinations of comfort women done by the military stationed in Nanking, Yoshimi speculates that there may have been much larger numbers of Chinese women who became comfort women than is currently thought (Yoshimi 1995: 11).
- (11) An important question, which is outside the scope of this paper, remains regarding the ethnic composition of comfort women. Both Korea and Taiwan were ruled by Japan when the system of comfort women was established. However, existing literature seem to suggest that there were far fewer Taiwanese women than Koreans. Why is that? One answer may be that the Taiwanese population was much smaller than that of Koreans. According to the census taken in 1930, there were 2,239,554 women in Taiwan whereas there were 10,294,739 women in Korea. Although these data include Japanese who emigrated to these areas, the data should roughly reflect the vast difference in the size of local Korean and Taiwanese female populations (Sörifu 1983: 416).
- (12) In addition to Yoshimi's collection of official papers, Takasaki edited a collection of 100 journals of soldiers many of which clearly indicate involvement of the military in the establishment of comfort stations (Takasaki 1994).
- (13) Some, however, strongly hold that there were no cases of kyösei renkö (abduction or forced recruitment). For example, Uesugi maintains that 'comfort women' were never abducted

because there is no statement on kyösei renkö in research papers published by Japanese and North and South Korean governments in 1992. He admits that the Japanese chief cabinet secretary did state that the final report on comfort women clarified 'the direct involvement of kempei (military police) etc.' but Uesugi claims that this statement is provided with a political intention to maintain friendly relationship with South Korea and lacks historical foundation (Uesugi 1994: 63). His reasons, however, are weak, First, he criticizes Senda Kako's book Jügun Ianfu which claims that Japan's China-based Kwantung Army ordered the Korean military regime to recruit Korean women to become comfort women. Uesugi rejects the involvement of the Japanese military in the recruitment of comfort women because 'in the long run, the public would have found out that these women were recruited to become comfort women and in such an event, the military regime would lose credibility and social disorder would occur. Therefore, it is absolutely impossible that the military regime, through its administrative organization, recruited comfort women'(Uesugi 1994: 64, translation mine). Moreover, Uesugi states that the testimony offered by Yoshida Seiji, a former head of a mobilization bureau in Shimonoseki, that he deceived and abducted women in 1943 and 1944 based on commands he received from the military to mobilize women for sexual services is unfounded because there is no military record left to prove such commands.

Even if there were some cases that women chose to become comfort women for economic reasons, these women should not be blamed. Mahara and Senda's insight suggests that it is Japan's colonial policy that forced women to become comfort women. According to Mahara and Senda, Koreans were discriminated against in terms of education under the Japanese colonial government. For example, Japanese children received free education whereas Koreans had to pay tuition in schools separate from those for Japanese. Therefore, many Koreans could not go to school and thus remained uneducated. As a result, Senda states that they were prone to becoming victims of deception (Mahara and Senda 1992: 85). It is also possible that these children had no choice but to take whatever jobs were available to them, including 'services' advertised by those who recruited comfort women.

- (14) Nishino is one of the few researchers who contend that the accompaniment of comfort women was unique to the Japanese military (Nishino 1992: 65).
- (15) I rely upon Hata (1992) for the summary of this book. All the works which refer to the German case of military prostitution (Hata 1992, Hicks 1994, Uesugi 1993) rely on Seidler's case. A statement by Monica Bingen on Nazi-related prostitution is not based on historical evidence (Satō 1993a: 24). The only evidence so far is a testimony offered by a former army officer, Suzuki Shögorō who witnessed Polish comfort women who were abducted to Siberia after the invasion of Poland by Hitler and Stalin in 1939 (Uesugi 1993: 166). Therefore, the existence of military prostitution 'under orders from central command' (Hicks 1994: 31) established by foreign militaries needs to be confirmed further with additional records.

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(These references include those for the second half of this article to be published in the next issue.)