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COMFORT WOMEN: SEXUAL SLAVES
OF THE IMPERIAL JAPANESE MILITARY

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*The bandits of the Eastern Sea...
Are the same shameless ones who have tampered with the history books.
Three hundred thousand wronged souls surround Japan,
Wanting only to report the facts around the world:
Their blood has not dried in sixty years.*

Joseph Lo, *The Rape of Nanking*, tr. Bernard Cleary

Thirty million Chinese were brutally killed during the Japanese occupation of China that began in 1931 and officially ended with the surrender of Japan on August 15, 1945. But little had been written and published about the atrocities the Japanese military committed as it forced Japan's neighbours to surrender sovereignty. With the 1996 publication of James Yin and Shi Young's collection of shocking photographic evidence, public pressure mounted for the Japanese government to admit and accept responsibility for the human rights violations it committed against its neighbours, especially women and non-combatants, during its 14 year occupation.¹ This historical evidence, combined with testimonies of survivors, demonstrates that the Japanese military systematically dominated, abused and denigrated women as sex slaves in organized brothels during this period. The atrocity of recruiting and holding women as sexual slaves was a gross human rights violation that remains unresolved. The Japanese government has apologized to these women and their communities for enslaving them as "comfort women". However it has not assumed legal responsibility, nor has it made any effort to prosecute

the perpetrators or provide compensation. The story of the “comfort women” will remain a dark chapter in Japanese history until the government fulfils its obligations.

Comfort Women

Surviving comfort women, not active participants in war, were nevertheless its tragic victims. The personal testimonies of these victims, forced into sexual slavery during Japan’s invasion and occupation of Asia, especially Korea, were suppressed for complex reasons until the early 1960s. First, it was almost impossible for these women to speak out. Upon liberation in 1945, they returned to their home communities where sexual chastity and fidelity in marriage were expected virtues. Speaking out would have sullied their reputations further by bringing dishonour to the instigators and to any others who could have corroborated their story. Next, government documents that might implicate the military were destroyed or censored until the early 1960s. Finally, bystander members of the United Nations looked the other way while the United States and its allies lessened Japan’s war reparations in order to enlist it as a capitalist ally in the Cold War. This necessarily involved burying the comfort women’s stories.

In 1962, Senda Kako, a Japanese journalist, researching the war came across a previously censored photograph of women whom he was told were “P” women, a vulgar designation for persons who provided sexual comfort. In 1969, Ito Keiichi published a document from the late 1930s detailing the regulations of comfort stations in Shanghai. In 1976 Senda Kako published a book, verified by comfort woman survivor Kim Ilmyŏn, that also substantiated Keiichi’s publications with further documentary evidence and her personal testimony. As international awareness grew so did the confidence of the women. Three women filed a lawsuit in Tokyo in 1991 which in turn prompted a United Nations investigation after the lawsuit was deemed hopeless. Japanese law provided many loopholes, including a 20-year Civil Code statutory limitation preventing victims of torture from suing perpetrators.²

Without including the thousands of girls and women raped by Japanese soldiers incidentally, it is estimated that between 139,000 and 200,000 were held captive as comfort women. From those numbers it is estimated that 116,000 survived the war and that 58,000 were still living

in the early 1990s.³ Yet only a brave few came forward to offer their often horrific personal testimonies, most of which were published in the 1990s. One Korean woman testified that she and 40 others in her village received draft notices from the Japanese government. Little did the women know that their names were only a few in a book compiled for conscripting women into sexual service for Japanese soldiers. This woman and others testified that they endured endless lines of Japanese soldiers relentlessly forcing themselves upon them. The women had little time to eat or sleep and little regard was paid if the women were bleeding, sick, pregnant, or recovering from a drug-induced miscarriage. Their testimonies⁴ describe some of the indignities they endured and the long-lasting after effects they suffered. Many women and girls entered this service with feelings of betrayal since collaborators of both sexes had signed them up using a combination of coercion and an appeal to the women's sense of duty. And so, the girls and women signed up for "hospital" or "factory" work having been told that if they refused, mothers needed at home would have to go in their stead. Once they arrived at a comfort station, the women were allotted a small mattress in a four-by-six foot cubicle in a sea of identical cubicles. They would faint from exhaustion, only to be revived and further abused. Fainting allowed only momentary escape and many women attempted flight and even suicide, but were caught or revived only to endure worse treatment. One woman reported that she was brought to by a lit cigarette placed under her nose, and when she regained consciousness, the lit cigarette was forced into her vagina. Many became sterile after contracting venereal diseases and after receiving "medical treatments" concocted from arsenic. The women who survived returned home physically disfigured and psychologically damaged, bringing home with them feelings of shame and violation, and the inability to love, marry and have children.

While relatively few women have spoken out, their testimonies have brought forth an abundance of investigation and documentation. Because the Japanese military kept meticulous records, photographing every comfort woman, and established regulations governing comfort stations,⁵ it is now known that stations existed wherever the troops served, including Japan. Military records confirm that although the majority were Korean women, Japanese, Taiwanese, Chinese, Filipina, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Burmese and Dutch girls and women were also recruited and then forced into sexual slavery. The Japanese command

had its own reasons for establishing comfort stations.⁶ It claimed they would prevent the outrage that would be caused by the rape of Chinese wives, thereby fostering better relationships with conquered populations. The service would grant soldiers some respite from the battlefield and maintain their morale while precluding the danger of possible espionage that unregulated sexual relations could bring. Another practical rationale was that the stations would prevent the spread of venereal disease.

It is also important to note that the imperialist Meiji system of that time, with fascist overtones, imposed a patriarchal social structure – in the family, women were subordinate to men. In order to reinforce and protect the imperial family structure, the government legalized prostitution to satisfy the lust of men. The military comfort system was a variation of the legal system, but this military system coerced and deceitfully recruited women. An estimated 80 thousand of these women died during allied counter attacks.⁷

According to military records, the first confirmed comfort stations were established in Shanghai, following the Manchurian incident, the staged street fight between five Japanese monks and Chinese workers, triggering the invasion. After the Japanese Chief of Staff received reports of sexual assaults committed by his soldiers, comfort stations were established, ostensibly aimed at “preventing unregulated rape”, but in reality meant to serve as institutions for legalized rape. The Chinese were understandably outraged. After the invasion of Nanking and the news of mass rape spread from China to the international community, the expansion of the comfort station system increased steadily and rapidly even though reports of raping and looting continued.⁸

Rape of Nanking

The Japanese invasion was termed the Rape of Nanking because of the widespread atrocities committed by the military – rape, looting, mass murder and arson. Yet the chief instigators and perpetrators of the crimes against humanity were never charged, as allied prosecutors looked the other way.⁹ General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of Allied Powers, struck a secret deal with Shiro Ishii. Emperor Hirohito had established a biological warfare program, with Ishii in command. In exchange for his immunity and that of all his subordinates and superiors,

including the Imperial Household, Ishii agreed to turn over all records detailing the biological program to General MacArthur.

Following this “top secret deal” some Japanese men were rounded up, tried and hanged as war criminals. General Iwane Matsui was one such man, falsely accused and tried as the “Butcher of Nanking”.¹⁰ He commanded the forces of Nanking for a mere three days, but was relieved of his command when he expressed anger toward Prince Asaka for allowing mass brutality, against his, Matsui’s, orders. The Emperor then transferred General Matsui to a figurehead position in China, and subsequently appointed Prince Asaka in his place for the remaining five and a half weeks of the Nanking Expedition. General Matsui was old and sick, yet spoke out forcefully against the atrocities. Sadly he was ridiculed and later tried as a war criminal while the actual instigators and the perpetrators of the Nanking Massacre received immunity. Evidence corroborating Matsui’s innocence was suppressed during the Cold War. From military documents unsealed after Emperor Hirohito’s death, it is clear that Matsui was telling the truth and that the Emperor, the Imperial Family and their closest collaborators were the chief instigators and perpetrators but were granted immunity in exchange for their secret biological warfare program – under the guise of preventing the spread of communism.¹¹

Chinese journalist accounts and photographs of Japanese atrocities were published by western news agencies in 1937 and 1938. In 1995 these accounts, together with personal testimony of the survivors of Nanking, and photographs and military documents of the comfort stations were published to mark the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II. The documents and photographs published in 1995 and after reveal a brutality that cannot simply be attributed to lack of democracy, or the military actions of fascist soldiers, or the Emperor’s fear of communism – four hundred historical photographs speak of an attitude of power and intimidation.¹²

A 1937 picture of a howling baby covered in blood, sitting alone amid the rubble of a Shanghai railway station after Japanese bombing, tragically illustrates the vulnerability of the non-combatant. Another photograph depicts the beheading of civilians while Japanese soldiers cheer and take pictures for souvenirs. Another shows a Japanese soldier exposing the breasts of an elderly woman. And another reveals the looming shadow of a soldier as he forces three nude spread-eagled

female rape victims to pose for the camera. Several photos show lone female victims forced to pose spreading apart their own genitalia. Still others reveal how officers instructed new recruits to learn and practise proper bayonet procedure on live prisoners tied to poles. A diary of a Japanese corporal reveals how he and other soldiers, out of sheer boredom, sought out Chinese civilians and either buried them alive, pushed them into fires, or beat them with clubs for entertainment. Another account details that burial alive often meant that victims were bound hand and foot then planted neck deep with their heads exposed. Some were then crushed by passing horses or tanks, jabbed with bayonets or soaked with boiling water.¹³

It is tempting to blame Japan's military abuses in Nanking on its lack of democracy at the time. But this explanation does not account for the fact that western democratic nations engaged in the "war on terror" continue to commit abuses against women. And, misogyny and brutality are still taught and reinforced in military academies of democratic countries today. New recruits who fail to measure up are called sissies, wimps, faggots, cunts or lays.¹⁴ The Rape of Nanking is one of the most dramatic examples of the wartime abuse of women, a phenomenon that occurs across cultures and political systems – the abuse of women in militaristic and wartime contexts.

Human Rights

During the 1990s the United Nations Human Rights Commission conducted several investigations for the purpose of establishing whether or not the Japanese government was liable for the comfort system it reportedly established and systematized prior to and during World War II. Gay J. McDougall, appointed Special Rapporteur, submitted formal reports, one in 1996, and another in 1998. In these reports McDougall recommended the government of Japan accept and admit legal liability for the victims of the comfort stations it managed during the Second World War. According to McDougall, those who systematically recruit women for sexual slavery or slavery-like practices, or those who commit acts of rape during armed conflict, commit crimes against humanity. Moreover, McDougall reminded Japan that slavery for any purpose has been recognized internationally as a crime against humanity since the end of the 19th century.¹⁵ Japan argued that it had never ratified the 1926

treaty prohibiting slavery and looked for loopholes in international law. Nevertheless, McDougall's report concluded that the Japanese government was liable for crimes against humanity. In addition, she rejected the Japanese government's argument that the peace treaties and reparation agreements signed between Japan and Asian governments following World War II exempted Japan from further prosecution and liability. She further argued that the failure of Japan to admit legal liability for the mass rapes and its institutionalized comfort station system has prevented other nations from admitting and accepting liability for crimes of a sexual nature committed more recently.¹⁶

However, Japan has not fully accepted McDougall's recommendations. Japan only established an Asian Women's Fund and issued apology letters to the comfort women. But opposition groups in Japan feared that even these largely symbolic gestures would make the government appear too apologetic, especially the placing of a "comfort women" reference in middle school text books. The objectionable reference was the simple statement that "women were made to accompany the military as comfort women and were treated horribly".¹⁷ Meanwhile, private donations supported the Asian Women's Fund. And the official letters to the women employed the least sincere wording to convey apology and were carefully worded to avoid liability.¹⁸ The fund, the apology letters and the absence of restitution have angered comfort women and their advocates, who view the government as having shrugged off responsibility. Adding insult to injury, a recently published Dutch government report reveals that the comfort women issue was deemed a war crime – but that only those Japanese who perpetrated crimes against women of *European* descent were tried; furthermore, only their Dutch victims were compensated.¹⁹

In 1980, human rights activists petitioned the Japanese government to take responsibility for 81,222 victims suffering ill-health due to pollution. The government ceded to their demands and admitted liability for these victims and future victims and has entitled them to government financial aid.²⁰ In contrast, financial compensation for 50,000 surviving comfort women was shrugged off in 1998 as a personal matter for the consciences of private citizens. Therefore, it is not surprising that many comfort women were infuriated with the government's failure to set up social programs or financial aid programs to alleviate their suffering, which has not diminished with time.

Where Responsibility Lies

The Japanese government has a responsibility to disclose the truth surrounding the issue of the comfort women. The government's failure so far to accept legal responsibility for the crimes of the Imperial Japanese military not only bestows impunity on those responsible for the crimes but also sets a terrible precedent. With its acknowledgement, Japan can increase its moral standing among other nations. Remembering the atrocities and identifying the actors involved will take courage but may stand to prevent such atrocities in the future.

The Japanese Government would be well advised to accept the United Nations Special Rapporteur's recommendations. Japan's claim that it has paid war reparations and that those responsible have been prosecuted and hanged is insufficient. As mentioned, the reparations that Japan made were minimized and chief instigators and perpetrators were granted immunity in a secret deal. In addition recent documentary and photographic evidence gives reason to re-examine the actions of the Japanese military in World War II.

Prosecuting the long line of soldiers who used the comfort stations would not be practical or particularly helpful. But prosecuting the military personnel and their civilian collaborators who established the comfort stations, and forced women into them would send a clear signal to Japanese society and the rest of the world – women, as full persons, are protected under international law. They are not at men's disposal for comfort and pleasure, nor are they to be abused.

The rights of women transcend the culture they live in, whether that of Japan in World War II or that of a western democratic nation today. Japan's culture did and does not absolve Japan of its responsibility for the atrocities against the comfort women between 1931 and 1945. Modern societies, too, need to be vigilant of women's rights, especially in the context of war.

The Japanese government has taken legal responsibility for the victims of environmental pollution but has taken only moral responsibility for the comfort women, and that too only in symbolic fashion. One reason the Japanese government has not acceded to compensation for comfort women is that people looked the other way during the war crimes trials, making justice for the victims elusive. Unfortunately, the cost of prosecuting the real instigators, perpetrators and collaborators today may be prohibitive. Moreover, evidential documents that could convict

the criminals have most likely been lost, destroyed, or tampered with, and those with first-hand knowledge may have been murdered or falsely accused and executed like Iwane Matsui. There simply may not be enough evidence for trials.

However, this legal quandary should not prevent the Japanese government from providing social programs and financial aid to ensure that surviving comfort women wherever they reside spend the rest of their lives in dignity. Nor should it prevent the Japanese government from admitting that a secret agreement was made between Shiro Ishii and Douglas MacArthur, and putting that fact in school textbooks, along with historical pictures, testimonies and diaries of the comfort women.

NOTES

- 1 James Yin and Shi Young, *The Rape of Nanking: An Undeniable History in Photographs*, ed. Ron Dorfman and Shi Young (Chicago: Innovative Publishing Group, 1996), p. xiii.
- 2 Keith Howard, ed., *True stories of the Korean Comfort Women: Testimonies Compiled by the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan and the Research Association on the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan* (New York: Cassell, 1995), pp. v–vii; 2–11, 193.
- 3 George Hicks, *The Comfort Women: Japan's Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), p. 19.
- 4 Sangmie Choi Schellsted, ed., *Comfort Women Speak, Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military* (New York: Holmes & Meier Science and Human Rights, 2000), pp. 7–105.
- 5 George Hicks, *The Comfort Women: Japan's Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), pp. 72, 83, 107.
- 6 Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during World War II*, tr. Suzanne O'Brien (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 65–75, 94, 180.
- 7 Keith Howard, ed., *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women: Testimonies Compiled by the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan and the Research Association on the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan* (New York: Cassell, 1995), pp. 15–23.
- 8 Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*, tr. Suzanne O'Brien (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 43–51.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

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- 10 James Yin and Shi Young, *The Rape of Nanking: An Undeniable History in Photographs*, ed. Ron Dorfman and Shi Young (Chicago: Innovative Publishing Group, 1996), p. xi.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 282–302.
- 12 James Yin and Shi Young, *The Rape of Nanking: An Undeniable History in Photographs*, ed. Ron Dorfman and Shi Young (Chicago: Innovative Publishing Group, 1996), pp. xi, 10.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 138, 139, 158 159, 168, 170, 178, 192, 194, 202, 203.
- 14 Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), p. 207.
- 15 Sangmie Choi Schellsted, ed., *Comfort Women Speak, Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military* (New York: Holmes & Meier Science and Human Rights, 2000), p. 141.
- 16 *Ibid.* pp. 151–52
- 17 Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*, tr. Suzanne O'Brien (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 24.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 175–76.
- 20 Yoshiro Hoshino, "Japan's Post-Second World War Environmental Problems" in *Industrial Pollution in Japan*, ed. Jun Ui (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1992), pp. 65–75.