

Chapter 4: Comfort Stations were Neither Illegal Nor Evil but Necessary in Battlefields

Comfort stations were necessary

Scholars who criticize Ramseyer regard the comfort women system as evil: is this really true?

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, all armies have only three options concerning their soldiers' sexual activity in warzones, even today: ignoring rapes, ignoring the use of prostitutes or establishing military brothels to control soldiers' sexual behavior. All of these of course would infuriate feminists because they violate "women's human rights." In time of war, however, ignoring any of these three options would be terrible policy. There were no other choices other than these three to choose from. The Japanese army chose the third option.

Japanese military comfort stations were established from the 1930s to the early 1940s for the prevention of venereal diseases and rapes by soldiers. Comfort stations were establishments for prostitution and these stations agreed to abide by the Japanese army's strict hygienic measures and contraceptive management and can be viewed as part of logistics. The U.S. Army also considered the comfort stations as an "amenity" of the Japanese army. ⁽⁴²⁾

Not even Yoshimi, not to mention Hata, would raise an objection to this explanation. Both have given the same explanation while describing in more detail than Ramseyer how comfort stations were established.

The difference is whether military brothels were necessary and functional, which directly guides thinking on whether they were evil or a "necessary evil".

Hata stated that they were necessary and showed how other foreign militaries dealt with "sex in the battle zone."

Rape hindered occupation and governance

Certainly, “*Senjo Seikatsu ni Okeru Tokui Jiko (Peculiar Matters in Life on Battlefronts)*” written by Hayao Torao, First Surgeon Lieutenant and Professor at Kanazawa Medical College, says that the problem of rape by Japanese soldiers was serious for a number of reasons, including psychological reasons. Moreover, as suggested by “*Shina Jihen no Keiken yori Mitaru Gunki Shinsaku Taisaku (Measures for the Promotion of Military Discipline Based on the Experience from the Sino-Japanese Incident)*,” rape was such a great problem that it triggered resistance by local residents and hindered occupation and operational performance.⁽⁴³⁾

Yoshimi avers that comfort stations were unnecessary. The reason he gives is that rape by Japanese soldiers occurred even after the establishment of comfort stations.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Yoshimi quotes Okamura Yasuji, who can be regarded as the inventor of the comfort women system:

At present each army corps was accompanied by a comfort women group, as if the latter constitutes a detachment of its quarter-master corps. But rape acts did not disappear in the Sixth Division, even though it was accompanied by a comfort women group.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Yoshimi says that in order to prevent rape, Japanese soldiers should have been severely punished.

Highly effective for prevention of sexually-transmitted diseases and rape

However, severe punishment for rape would turn soldiers to commercial sex services, which would spread venereal diseases in the Japanese army and occupation areas.

Comfort stations probably had a considerable effect on the prevention of venereal diseases. The main source of venereal diseases in battlefields was brothels. Prostitutes underwent regular medical examination by Japanese army-assigned army surgeons. Thus, venereal diseases dramatically decreased.

According to “*Senji Junpo (Wartime Report)*,” in 1939, the rate of venereal disease infection of comfort women at comfort stations in Kwangtung City was 28% and it was 1% to 2% outside the city. Thus, thorough preventative measures taken at comfort

stations and allowing infected comfort women to recover right away, the spread of infection was suppressed.

The reason for the high rate of infections at comfort stations in Kwangtung City is that soldiers used sex services other than comfort stations and spread diseases. That is why the rate of infection was fairly high in comfort stations in urban areas and extremely low in suburban districts, where commercial sex services were unavailable.

In Hong Kong, due to the spread of venereal diseases, the Office of the Governor-General, Hong Kong Occupied Territory, decided to consolidate the comfort stations in the city into one location for careful management.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Comfort stations were the most powerful measures for preventing venereal diseases.

Now, let's turn our eyes to rape. Okamura reflected that "acts of rape did not disappear, even though accompanied by a comfort women group."

Okamura goes on:

As in 1932 during the Shanghai Incident some acts of rape were committed by Japanese military personnel, I, Vice Chief of Staff of the Shanghai Expeditionary Force, following the example of the Japanese naval brigade, asked the governor of Nagasaki Prefecture to send comfort women groups. As a result, sex crimes totally disappeared, which made me very happy.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Which statement is in fact correct? Reading them as meaning "rape did decrease but was not eliminated" make them consistent. Pointing to data that supports your argument while ignoring data that does not support your argument is called cherry picking, which is what Yoshimi did.

In fact, the recognition that providing comfort stations would decrease rape was shared across the Japanese army. For example, Kinbara Setsuzo, Chief of the Medical Affairs Section, Medical Affairs Department, Ministry of War, pointed out in his "*Rikugunsho Gyomu Nisshi Tekiroku (Summary of the Army Operation Log)*": "610 cases of crime in the south. Many rapes, especially by those in units diverted from China. Comfort facilities insufficient. Insufficient supervision caused the problem."⁽⁴⁸⁾ There are other reports like this.

With respect to common sense, comfort stations prevent rape and the spread of venereal diseases. They were necessary and produced expected effects.

However, in order to prevent people with common sense to reach this obvious conclusion, Yoshimi and his followers emphasized that rapes did not disappear, by which they concluded that the establishment of comfort stations was evil. While Yoshimi and his followers could present good alternatives to comfort stations, they don't.

This is the "ostrich burying its head in the sand." When faced with a reality they would rather not see, "ostriches" bury their head in the sand so that they will not see it, shutting their eyes to reality. However, inconvenient reality will not go away. It is all right to criticize comfort stations but specific alternative measures should be made clear. Otherwise, the reality that comfort stations were necessary does not change.

In battlefields, rapes occurred on a daily basis. Soldiers suffered from venereal diseases. How serious a problem it was is beyond our imagination.

Comfort stations were legal by international as well as domestic laws

It is now our understanding that comfort stations were necessary and effective. So we wonder whether they were in fact legal. The answer is "Yes."

Both Hata and Ramseyer say that the comfort women system was an extension of Japan's licensed prostitution system. The two systems were similar in terms of an up-front advance, term of service and the relationship between a woman and her manager. As far as licensed prostitution was legal, the comfort women system was also legal. While the latter had the involvement of the Japanese army, neither domestic nor international law stated that if the military was involved then it was illegal.

One problem is that international law at that time said women were permitted to prostitute themselves only after they turned 21 years old. The Japanese law at the time allowed prostitution for women 18 years old and over for Japan proper, 17 years of age for Korea and 16 years of age for Taiwan. Therefore, regarding the International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children, Japan reserved

its right to raise the minimum age to 21 years old for some time and did not apply minimum age restrictions to its colonies for the time being.

Yoshimi says that Japan “made use of” the delay in the change in age restriction for the comfort women system but Japan had already changed it before the Japanese army set up its first comfort station. If he intends to assert that it was delayed for establishing comfort stations, he is incorrect.

By postponing the change of minimum age for prostitutes, the Japanese army was able to accept women 17 years or older from Korea and 16 years or older from Taiwan to work as comfort women without violating international law. Yoshimi, who wants to make prostitution illegal under all circumstances, set his eyes on the transportation of women. He claims that ships were regarded as “mainland Japan” and transportation by ships from Korea and Taiwan to battlegrounds is a violation of international law, which is pathetically weak logic.

Why do ships have to be regarded as “mainland Japan”? Korea and Taiwan should be regarded as “Japan” including ships that are owned by Japan. Within the Japanese empire, the minimum age is 17 years old for Korea and 16 years old for Taiwan. Thus, transporting 17 year old or older Korean comfort women and 16-year old or older Taiwanese comfort women by ship is not illegal.

In the first place, the International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children does not include any provisions concerning a case like this. Transportation of legal prostitutes cannot be considered illegal in this respect, either. If this was illegal, then this should have been pointed out by foreigners who were also aboard those ships—this would have been an issue a long time ago. Plainly stated, the comfort women system does not infringe on Japanese domestic or international law.

Nonetheless, Yoshimi often claims that the comfort women system is “human trafficking” and illegal. A careful reading reveals that what he refers to as “human trafficking” does not fall under human trafficking by the domestic law of those days. Rather, what he calls “human trafficking” is based on his own definition.⁽⁴⁹⁾

He argues that prewar Japanese law was defective and “in such a legal situation, trafficking and detainment of women went unchallenged.”

Regardless of his subjective view that the law was defective, the law is the law whether defective or not and anything that does not infringe on the law is neither trafficking nor detainment. What is actually human trafficking is not determined by Yoshimi but the laws of those days.

Yoshimi lacks an extremely fundamental knowledge of the principle of intertemporal law: Whether something was illegal at the time is determined by applying the laws at that time. Applying one's own definition will make "human trafficking" illegal, which may be convenient, but it is not the kind of thing a historian should do and is not scholarship either.

Considering moral issues of the comfort station system

The comfort women system was necessary, effective and not legally problematic. Still, some doubt that it was morally correct. For those people, let me give you an example.

Here is an excerpt from *Comfort Women* written by Yoshimi:

According to the recollections of an employee of the South Manchurian Railway's Fushun coal mine, invading Soviet troops robbed [him] of such valuables as his watch and pen, and then at night pounded on the doors of the company housing demanding liquor and menacing [residents] with shouts of "Send out the women!" Then in mid-August, the authorities in charge of the coal mine established a dance hall and other comfort facilities, and "gathered together prostitutes from the city and women like that from among the refugees who had fled from other regions...and outfitted comfort facilities for Soviet troops." [Omitted] According to Hayashi Iku's oral history, in an entry in the end of September, a certain settler group, on the orders of its deputy chief, presented fifteen young women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one to Soviet troops for "the troops' comfort". Thus Japanese people provided young women as sacrificial offerings to Soviet troops as well.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Here, one encounters various moral issues. In response to Soviet soldiers' demand for women, the first question is whether it is alright to collect "women like prostitutes"? In such time of danger, why collect "women like prostitutes"? This is discrimination because everybody is equal.

In the first place, why offer women to comply with their demand for women? Is this not discrimination against women? It is technically possible to say that there must have been other options such as giving away valuables or entertaining the soldiers with food and drink.

What can we conclude about the morals of women who thought that it was alright to let “women like prostitutes” deal with and become victims of Soviet soldiers whereas they themselves did not volunteer? Also what about the morals of men who only offered women rather than something else?

More than anything else, what about the morals of the Soviet military, as well as the Soviet government at the time? Japanese civilians met the challenge from the Soviets on their own initiative.

What we would do in a case like this is to think “what would we have done in that situation?” We would consider if it was wartime or peacetime.

We would likely reach the same conclusion drawn by the deputy chief of the settlers group. In peacetime, we would seek a way for everyone to escape harm because we all want to avoid harm. Thus, based on wishful thinking, we would come up with several utopian ideas and disregard reality.

However, this happened in wartime. Soviet soldiers may do harm at any time. In a situation like this, it is impossible to avoid harm and the best possible strategy is to minimize casualties. They had absolutely no means by which to defend themselves and had to deal with Soviet soldiers, who were notorious for armed rape and massacre. What other measures could they have taken?

Ostrich’s neglect does not save people

Given the position of the deputy chief, who had to make decisions in wartime, he may have given consideration to the comfort women system. Clearly, Yoshimi thinks from the perspective of an irresponsible outside third-party and makes an issue of offering young women. If he had been the deputy chief, what would he have done? What I want is the answer to that question.

Incidentally, European countries invaded by the German army and by the Soviet army, which defeated and chased out the Germany army, and Southeast Asian countries occupied by the Japanese army were going through the same thing. During wars prior to World War II, the same thing happened. The heads of occupied towns and villages made the same decision as the Japanese deputy chief. Is it possible to pursue morality in such circumstances?

While it may be a little bizarre, it is possible to replace Soviet soldiers with Japanese soldiers, Japanese women with comfort women and the with Okamura Yasuji. If Okamura considered the morality of the comfort women system, what will be the result?

Those who think of comfort stations as evil lack awareness of wartime and a sense of the parties involved. Some people discuss the comfort women system as casual onlookers during peace time and abundance of universal human rights. They take the “ostrich’s neglect” attitude.

If people continued to maintain the “ostrich’s neglect” during wartime, soldiers with guns will chase women around and venereal diseases will run rampant in soldiers’ barracks, eventually threatening the health of residents in occupied areas. How can one protect “women’s human rights” in such a situation?

Notes

(42) Asian Women’s Fund, ed. *Collection of Materials Relating to the Wartime Comfort Women Issue: Government of Japan Survey Vol. 5*, Allied Translation Interpreter Section, Supreme Commander of Allied Powers, “Research Report Amenities in The Japanese Armed Forces,” 15 November 1945 https://www.awf.or.jp/pdf/0051_5.pdf

(43) Hayao Torao “*Senjo Seikatsu ni Okeru Tokui Jiko* (Peculiar Matters in Life on Battlefronts),” Okabe Naozaburo, Chief of Staff, Northern China Area Army “*Gunjin Guntai no Tai Jumin Koi ni Kansuru Chui no Ken Tsucho* (Notes for Military Personnel in Relation to Citizens in the Area),” June 27, 1938, “Communication from army adjutant *Shina Jihen no Keiken yori Mitaru Gunki Shinsaku Taisaku* (Measures for the Promotion of Military Discipline Based on the Experience from the Sino-Japanese Incident),” September 19, 1940 *Jugun Ianfu Shiryo-shu* (A Collection of Documents on Military Comfort Women) pp. 228 - 233, 209 - 211 and 164 - 170

- (44) Yoshimi Yoshiaki *Comfort Women* (Iwanami Shinsho, 1995), p. 44
- (45) Okamura Yasuji *Taisho Shiryo: Senjo Kaiso Hen (General Okamura Yasuji Materials: Battlefield Recollections)*, (Hara Shobo, 1970), pp. 302 – 303
- (46) “*Senji Geppo* (Wartime Monthly Report)” Office of the Governor-General, Hong Kong Occupied Territory, April 1942, Suzuki Yuko, Yamashita Yon’e and Tonomura Masaru ed. *Nihongun “Ianfu” Kankei Shiryo Shusei (Collection of Materials Relating to the Japanese Military “Comfort Women”) Vol. 1* (Akaishi Shoten, 2006), p. 341
- (47) Okamura, op. cit., p. 302
- (48) Kinbara Setsuzo, “*Rikugunsho Gyomu Nisshi Tekiroku* (Summary of the Army Operation Log)” *Nihongun “Ianfu” Kankei Shiryo Shusei (Collection of Materials Relating to the Japanese Military “Comfort Women”) Vol. 1*, p. 309
- (49) Yoshimi Yoshiaki “*Ramseyer Ronbun no Nani ga Mondai ka* (What the Problem is with the Ramseyer Article),” *Sekai* (Iwanami Shoten, May 2021), pp. 128 - 129
- (50) Yoshimi Yoshiaki *Comfort Women* (Iwanami Shinsho, 1995), pp. 206 - 207