

An Unforgettable Ordeal: Chinese ‘Comfort Women’ in World War II

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ABSTRACT

Using methods including analyzing firsthand testimonies, images, and secondary sources, this paper explores the multiple factors that resulted in the silence of Chinese comfort women survivors in both wartime and the postwar period: shame culture, patriarchy, and lack of political and cultural support for comfort women. Due to both patriarchy and related shame culture and a lack of political, cultural, and international support for survivors, few Chinese women spoke up about their experience within the comfort women system prior to the redress movement beginning in 1991; in the 1990s, societal and government support for comfort women increased, leading many comfort women to not only share their experiences but seek justice in the process. To begin, this paper provides an overview of essential historical context, including Japanese colonialism, the establishment of “comfort women” systems, Chinese comfort women’s suffering, and the post-war struggles and ongoing plight of victims and survivors. Next, this paper argues that due to shame, culture, and patriarchy; the lack of political, cultural, and international support for comfort women; and the mental and physical trauma that they experienced, comfort women survivors refused to speak up or seek justice for decades during and after World War II. Finally, this paper investigates key differences between the Cultural Revolution and redress movement, analyzing why comfort women spoke out during the latter period but largely remained silent during the postwar period from 1945 to 1990.

Introduction

“I was nineteen, with a wonderful prospect in life. And now, my youth, my virginity, and my dignity were all buried at this comfort station.”¹

In March 1938, Japanese troops occupied Rugao, a small city in Jiangsu Province in the north of the Yangtze River Delta Region and came to kidnap girls and young women to render sexual services for the Imperial Japanese army. In time, this system became known as “comfort stations” and these women as “comfort women”. Japanese troops forced comfort women to provide sexual support for the army. Zhou Fenying, born in 1917, a young woman known for her good looks, became a target. When the Japanese abducted her, she was about twenty-one. Zhou clearly remembers the day when Japanese troops conquered Yangjiayuan Village where she lived. Unable to escape, both she and her cousin Wu Qun were captured and brought to the nearby town of Baipu, a division of Rugao City in Jiangsu Province. There, the Japanese troops locked them inside of the Zhongxing Hotel with other girls who had been kidnapped from nearby villages. All were scared to death.²

¹ Qtd. in Lai, Graceia, Hui-ling Wu, and Ju-fen Yu. *Chen Mo De Shang Hen: Ri Jun Wei an Fu Li Shi Ying Xiang Shu* □ □ □ □ □ : □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ (Silent Scars: History of Sexual Slavery by the Japanese Military--A Pictorial Book). Translated by Sheng-mei Ma. N.p.: Shang Zhou Press, 2005.

² Qiu, Peipei, Su Zhiliang, and Chen Lifei. *Chinese Comfort Women: Testimonies from Imperial Japan's Sex Slaves*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 90-91

As Zhou Fenying recalls, “[e]ach of the girls in the comfort station was given a number[,] printed in red on a piece of white cloth... People said that the numbers were given based on the looks of the girls; I was made number one.”³ Indeed, the Japanese troops did not show any respect to the girls; these kidnapped Chinese girls were seen as products instead of humans, labeled and categorized by numbers on their clothes. Zhou Fenying also emphasized that the girls at the comfort station had no freedom at all; their lives were similar to those in prison. In fact, they experienced starvation and terrible sanitation. On the first day Zhou Fenying saw Japanese soldiers approaching the hotel, she became very frightened. As she said, she “could not stop crying” and her mind “fell into a trance”⁴. The Japanese soldier raped her after she almost passed out. For months to come, soldiers assaulted her regularly. The Japanese soldiers’ mistreatment and abuse would haunt Zhou Fenying for the rest of her life.

Inspired by Zhou Fenying’s compelling story and others like hers, this paper explores the history, pain, and significance of the comfort women system, and utilizes a feminist lens to investigate Chinese comfort women’s suffocating struggles and their silence about those struggles, both during and after World War II. Due to both patriarchy and related shame culture and a lack of political, cultural, and international support for survivors, few Chinese women spoke up about their experience within the comfort women system prior to the redress movement beginning in 1991; in the 1990s, societal and government support for comfort women increased, leading many comfort women to not only share their experiences but seek justice in the process.

To begin, this paper provides an overview of essential historical context, including Japanese colonialism, the establishment of “comfort women” systems, Chinese comfort women’s suffering, and the post-war struggles and ongoing plight of victims and survivors. Next, this paper argues that due to shame, culture and patriarchy; the lack of political, cultural, and international support for comfort women; and the mental and physical trauma that they experienced, comfort women survivors refused to speak up or seek justice for decades during and after World War II. Finally, this paper investigates key differences between the Cultural Revolution and redress movement, analyzing why comfort women spoke out during the latter period but largely remained silent during the postwar period from 1945 to 1990.

Historical Context: Twentieth Century China, Japanese Colonialism, and the Comfort Women System

To keep pace with Western industrialization, the Meiji Empire of the late nineteenth century aimed to evolve into a modern military power. As a result, the Japanese began to advance their imperial ambitions and expand throughout Asia by promoting the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere, which aimed to form an economic and military bloc of Asian nations against Western manipulation and overseas imperial power. Their purpose was to avoid the fate of China: suffering at the hands of the West. Between 1931 and the end of the Second World War in 1945, the Japanese government and the Japanese Imperial Army launched a series of invasions of China. With their importation of Western ideas and science, Japanese superiority had successively emerged in Japanese minds. According to the political slogan *Hakkō ichiu* (□ □ □ □), meaning “all the world under one roof”,⁵ they believed that the Emperor of Japan was to rule an empire, not just the islands, but also many conquered lands so that they were superior to other Asian races. Invoking this great ideology of Japanese superiority and nationalism, they began their invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and, by 1941, occupied much of the coast and North China Plain. During the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), part of World War II, the Japanese government and the Japanese Imperial Army forced over 200,000 women into sexual slavery in rape centers, cruelly referred to as “comfort stations,” throughout Asia. A common name given to those victims was “comfort women” (“□ □ □”, pronounced *ianfu* in Japanese). Japanese troops established comfort stations in order to set up a systemic “military brothel” to satisfy the soldiers’ sexual appetites during wartime. Thus, the majority of these “comfort women” came from China, Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines and other Asian

³ Qiu, Su, and Chen, *Chinese Comfort Women*, 91.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Hakkō ichiu* (□ □ □ □): “eight crown cords, one roof”, i.e. “all the world under one roof”

countries under Japanese control. For almost a century, these victims suffered-- first from wartime trauma and, after the war, from long standing ignorance, misconceptions, and silence around their traumatic experiences.

Japanese Colonialism

The Japanese spread notions of racial superiority and purity within Japan, and later, across Asia. As a cultural anthropologist who researches race, ethnicity, and immigration in Japan, Takezawa Yasuko examines how textbooks and other official writings of the Early Meiji Period “exalted” the Japanese people in *Translating and Transforming 'Race': Early Meiji Period Textbooks*; in an example of this prevalent racial superiority one textbook read: “as for the European race, ... its culture is the most progressed, and they are the most powerful [.].As for the Asian race, its power has generally declined, with the exception of our Yamato race [minzoku] ...”.⁷ According to his study, dominant Japanese ideology in the Early Meiji Period presented China as a half-civilized country and Europe and America as civilized societies, which, in part, caused widespread Japanese discrimination against Chinese and other Asian foreigners in the 1900s. After adopting Western cultures and ideas, the Japanese began to emphasize the difference between themselves and the Chinese and increasingly exalted themselves--the Japanese people. For example, on the night of September 18, 1931, an explosion destroyed a section of railway tracks near the Chinese city of Mukden, also known as Shenyang. The Japanese, who owned the railroad, broadly and swiftly blamed the Chinese for this incident and used it as an excuse to fully invade and control Manchuria despite widespread speculation that this incident may have actually been caused by the Japanese simply as pretext for their subsequent military action.⁸ Attacked by a well-trained and organized Japanese Imperial Army, the Chinese Army fell into panic and had no power to resist. The local Japanese Army controlled the new state within 100 days.



Figure 1. The image shows the Japanese troops gathering outside of Mukden, Manchuria, September 1931.⁹

The Establishment of the “Comfort Women” System

The large-scale rape of Chinese comfort women by the Japanese military occurred when Japan expanded its network of influence in Manchukuo, Nanjing, Shanghai, and beyond. The military sought to satisfy soldier’s sexual desires

⁶ Yamato race (□ □ □ □) is the race that has been living since ancient times in the Japanese Islands.

⁷ Takezawa, Yasuko. "Translating and Transforming 'Race': Early Meiji Period Textbooks." *Japanese Studies* 35, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 5-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10371397.2015.1041219>.

⁸ "The Mukden Incident of 1931 and the Stimson Doctrine." U.S. Department of State. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/mukden-incident>.

⁹ Swift, John. "Mukden Incident." Encyclopedia Britannica. Last modified September 11, 2020. Accessed May 17, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Mukden-Incident>.

while minimizing various risks. In order to prevent both the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) among the Japanese military forces in newly occupied territory and the leaking of military secrets via soldiers' contact with Chinese civilian women, the first military comfort station was established in Shanghai, China in 1932. The Japanese believed that official comfort stations would prevent rape and reduce the spread of STDs by enacting strict rules and limiting soldiers' sexual activity outside these official stations. With the expansion of Japanese colonialism and militarism, the demand for comfort stations increased. After 1937, Japan relied increasingly on comfort women who were not Japanese, they started to recruit a large number of women from Korea, Philippine and other regions, which revealed their aggression in war since many victims in the comfort stations were from Japanese colonies. The majority of "comfort women" were systematically coaxed and brought to the comfort stations; in other words, the "comfort women" system constitutes coercive sexual labor. In the book *Chinese Comfort Women*, survivor Lei Guiying, born in Guantangyan and forced to become a comfort woman in 1937, describes her fateful and traumatizing experiences as follows:

Having neither a job nor home, I wandered the streets of Tangshan begging. An old woman said to me: "Girl, I know a place where you can have meals to eat. You just have to do some work." She told me the place was called Gaotaipo. It was owned by a Japanese couple named Shanben¹⁰. I didn't know that place was, in fact, a military brothel until much later. I had no idea that it was a comfort station, nor did I know what a comfort station was at that time. ...I turned thirteen in 1942 and I began menstruating that year. Mrs. Shanben smiled at me. "Congratulations!" She said, "You are a grownup now." I remember that it was a summer day and a lot of Japanese troops came to the Shanbens' house. I saw them picking out good-looking girls and mumbling something. Mrs. Shanben told me to change into a Japanese robe that had a bumpy sash at the back and to go to that large room. Before I could figure out what was going on, I was pushed over to the Japanese soldiers. I was frightened. A Japanese soldier pulled me over, ripped off my clothes, and threw me on the wide bed. I resisted with all my strength. My wrist was injured during the fight and the wound left a scar that is still visible now. The Japanese soldier pressed my belly with both of his knees and hit my head with the hilt of his sword while crushing me under his body. He raped me.¹¹

Chinese Comfort Women's Suffering

In November 1937, the Japanese Army began a full-fledged invasion of China beyond Manchukuo. This led to a dreadful war involving the destruction of villages and widespread rape, including both random rapes and systematic rape via the comfort women stations. In the documentary *Twenty Two* (二十二, *Er Shi Er*), which tells the stories of 22 comfort women, one survivor named Li Meijin, recalls some of her saddest memories and reflects: "at night, when you slept at that room, you could hear people screaming from rape. When [a Japanese soldier] touched me, I would scream 'Mum! Dad', just scream. The Japanese soldiers would rape any girl they could find, so vicious".¹² Li Meijin vividly described horrible wartime scenes. Galvanized by hatred of the Chinese, the Japanese soldiers defeated the enemy army by day and brutally raped Chinese women by night in similarly motivated demonstrations of conquest and victory.

¹⁰ "Shanben" is the Chinese pronunciation of the two characters used to write the Japanese surname "Yamamoto."

¹¹ Qiu, Su, and Chen, *Chinese Comfort Women*, 85-86.

¹² *Twenty Two*. Directed by Ke Guo. 2015.



Figure 2. Comfort Women in Yunnan Province, 1944 National Archive.¹³

The testimony of Zhao Runmei, another victim, serves as firsthand evidence of the sufferings of comfort women. In April 1941, the Japanese Army attacked her village. She describes the fateful event as follows: “A Japanese soldier who saw me forced his way into the house, and he struck down my parents who tried to protect me...He raped me in front of my parents, who were seriously injured.”¹⁴ From Zhao Runmei’s oral testimony, the public could gain an impression of a horrible and inhumane image. In a demonstration of superiority, aggression, and male power, the Japanese soldier raped Zhao in front of her family. Runmei’s situation is not unique; many victims as well as their families experienced this since they knew they were powerless to resist the Japanese army. If they fought back or tried to protect the victims, they would be killed with guns or bayonets.

Post-War Struggles and the Ongoing Plight of Victims

During the postwar period, comfort women survivors faced many challenges including infertility, mental trauma, lack of understanding from their country and communities, and limited financial support. Even though the Second World War ended in 1945 in China, the end of the war did not bring those women who suffered in the ‘comfort stations’ systems justice. Most of the Chinese ‘comfort women’ survivors continued living in bad conditions in which the atrocities they experienced were not understood or acknowledged by the public.

In her book *War and Rape: Law, Memory and Justice*, professor Nicola Henry claims in that in both the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials, “rape did not fit the dominant discourse of post-conflict justice, nor did it conform to the political will of the victors.”¹⁵ By stating this idea, Henry indicates that people usually do not count systematic sexual enslavement or rape as a byproduct of war, the criminal does not get punished. Additionally, Henry notes that in many cases, the absence of gender justice implied that the victims of the comfort women system were largely overlooked by a judicial process that sought justice for many other victims of non-gender-based crimes and violence. In *Chinese*

¹³ Winfield, Jamie. "The Comfort Women of World War II." History of Yesterday. Last modified September 20, 2020. <https://historyofyesterday.com/the-comfort-women-of-world-war-ii-9d6a650d785b>.

¹⁴ Terazawa, Yuki. "The Transnational Campaign for Redress for Wartime Rape by the Japanese Military: Cases for Survivors in Shanxi Province." *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 3 (2006): 133-45. Accessed May 30, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40071186>, 135

¹⁵ Henry, Nicola. *War and Rape: Law, Memory and Justice*. N.p.: Routledge, 2012.

Comfort Women, Peipei Qiu utilizes the example of Wang Gaihe's experience in order to indicate the lonely and struggling long-term outcomes of comfort women survivors. In the spring of 1942, Wang Gaihe was captured and tortured to the point of unconsciousness. Her legs were broken, and her teeth were knocked out.¹⁶ She had to spend several years bedridden with injuries. In her old age, Wang had a lonely and meager life, "depending on a small pension of about sixty yuan from the Chinese government, along with the produce from a 0.13-hectare plot of land."¹⁷ Throughout her sorrowful life, she was constantly bothered by the pain of her old injuries and nightmares brought on by memories of the war. Now, Wang says: "I want to see justice done for my torture while I am still alive."¹⁸ However, she passed away on December 14th, 2007, without having attained that longed-for justice; until today, social activists are still attempting to gain justice from the Japanese government.

Shame Culture, Patriarchy, and Gender Roles

The rape and the comfort station system were a gender-based violence linking to the deep-rooted oppression of women in patriarchal society. To begin, patriarchy is a social system in which men hold primary power and dominate roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property. For example, women's sexuality was strictly controlled, and they were considered inferior to men at home and in society as a whole. Some patriarchal societies are also patrilineal, meaning that property and title are inherited via the male lineage. In many traditional Asian societies, it was acknowledged that the family line as well as wealth and property would be carried on solely by the male line. The traditional Chinese moral values were results of the fundamental principles of Confucius. This led to further constrictive gender roles and standards for women.

Back in the Western Zhou Dynasty (1100 BC–771 BC), in ancient China, women's role was clearly depicted in influential, widely-read books including the *Book of Odes* (诗经, *Shi Jing*). According to the *Book of Odes*, for example, women were not allowed to meddle with affairs of the state. Phrases such as "women have long tongues" (妇□长□, *fu you chang she*) and "there is no public place for women" (妇□□□, *fu wu gong shi*) limited women to the home and private life, while men dominated public, political life, laying the groundwork for rigid gender roles which have persisted throughout much of Chinese history.¹⁹ If women broke or ignored the norms, then they would have difficulty finding a good husband or obtaining a favorable reputation, and without participating in public political life, women depended on men to deal with external affairs. Accordingly, everything was male dominated; women's place was one of subordination to men. Therefore, records showed that in Western Zhou Dynasty, women were already required to follow strict social norms such as the "three subordinations"²⁰ and the four virtues²¹ (□从□□, *sancongside*).²² These terms first appeared in the *Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial* (仪礼, *Yi Li*) and in the *Rites of Zhou* (周礼, *Zhou Li*), which were written to set basic standards for maiden and married women in ancient China but ultimately deprived women of their personal freedom; women were placed under the control of men's power and authority throughout their lifetimes.

¹⁶ Qiu, Su, and Chen, *Chinese Comfort Women*, 155.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Goldin, Paul Rakita. *The Culture of Sex in Ancient China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002.

²⁰ The "three subordinations" were "obedience to the father and elder brothers when young, obedience to the husband when married and obedience to the sons when widowed".

²¹ The "four virtues" were: firstly, "women's virtue," meaning a woman must act in compliance with the ethical code; secondly, "women's speech," meaning a woman must not talk too much and take care not to bore people; thirdly "women's countenance," meaning a woman must take good care of herself in order to please the opposite sex; fourthly, "proper merit," meaning a woman must willingly do all household chores

²² Fu, Wen. "Doctrine of Confucius and Mencius — the Shackle That Keeps Women in Bondage." *Peking Review*, March 8, 1974, 16-18. Accessed May 30, 2021. <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1974/PR1974-10c.htm>.

instructed to take up the responsibilities of wives as well as mothers and asked to bring honor to their families.²⁸ In order not to bring dishonor to their families, many women decided not to speak up, and thus, tried to forget their dreadful past as ‘Comfort Women’. As Qiu elaborates, “Confucian social conventions demand that, at all costs, a female remain a virgin until marriage, even if that means risking her life; hence, a survivor of rape was deemed impure and was regarded as a disgrace to her family.”²⁹ It was apparent that based on the basic rule designated to women, any woman who lost her virginity before marriage was unacceptable in the society, comfort women included. If a woman lost her virginity for any reason, she could be disliked or even abandoned by her family. A powerful culture of shame helped further enforce those narrow gender roles.

Just as patriarchy and narrow gender roles defined women’s lives in ancient and modern China and other Asian countries, patriarchy and these narrowly defined gender roles played out in wartime too. In this context, Japanese troops dominated women sexually as an act of both war and violence. In normal times, women were already vulnerable; in the wartime comfort women system, women were almost “powerless” to speak up. Not unlike China, Japan was also a typical patriarchal society, with patriarchal systems and primogeniture prevailing for a long time. Men, especially the eldest son, held dominant positions in both the family and the society. The privileged position of Japanese men is reflected in almost all aspects of political, economic and social life. Especially after the Meiji Restoration, a political revolution in 1868, with the continuous expansion of Japanese militarism, the social status of soldiers was significantly higher than that of other men. In this case, engaging prostitutes and keeping mistresses, as was commonly accepted in Japanese society, had become an indispensable part of men's lives, and was even regarded as a symbol of male competence and honor. Even in times of war, this consciousness had not changed in the slightest. It was generally believed that women could go without sex for long periods of time, while men could not, and some even believed that sexual gratification could improve the effectiveness of the military. This understanding undoubtedly provided the social basis for the sexual indulgence of Japanese soldiers and the formation of the comfort women system. In the words of Timothy Brook, a historian who specialized in the study of China:

Men of fighting age were shot or conscripted for labor because they were, or stood in for, the soldiers of the nation. Women of childbearing age were raped or forced into prostitution because they were, or stood in for, the body of the nation. So rape was widely performed as a gesture of conquest, but not simply as a release for male sexual starvation; it was an act of humiliation. Japanese soldiers performed this act on the bodies of Chinese women, but the target of the humiliation was Chinese men: it was proof of their impotence in all ways.³⁰

In this regard, women had been seen as targets who men could easily show their superiority to. During wartime and conflict situations caused by armed forces, women were particularly endangered because of physical safety as well as sexual violence when they were already subjected to discrimination in terms of peace. Although social activists started to criticize the old-fashioned systems, typical gender roles still persisted in many regions of Asia until the 1900s and during World War II and were exaggerated by and within the comfort women system. Comfort women were compelled to obey a series of rules. Just like patriarchy, strict gender roles, and shame culture constricted women’s lives in society more broadly, these rules at the comfort stations attempted to further regulate, control, and dictate women’s behavior. If women were vulnerable even in society at large, they were additionally vulnerable within the comfort station system. If comfort women resisted, they would be tortured harshly, or even to death. Mao Yinmei [a Korean former comfort woman who was originally named Park Cha Sun] (1922-2017)’s testimony illustrates how comfort women were treated in the comfort station. She says that:

²⁸ Arnold, Fred, and Liu Zhaoxiang. "Sex Preference, Fertility, and Family Planning in China." *Population and Development Review* 12, no. 2 (1986): 221-46. Accessed May 27, 2021. doi:10.2307/1973109.

²⁹ Qiu, Su, and Chen, *Chinese Comfort Women*, 5.

³⁰ Qiu, Su, and Chen, *Chinese Comfort Women*, 23.

[M]aybe it was July, in Hanko, where the Japanese stayed, they had the Koreans and Japanese all locked up together. There were doors, doors everywhere, and we were all locked up together. Once locked inside, no one could get out. We all stood up facing the wall, with guards at the entrance. You couldn't escape, or they would beat you to death. They took their time (playing with other women), they came one after another.³¹

In this case, it is obvious that comfort women were additionally vulnerable during war. According to the eyewitness account of Song Fuhai, who worked as a janitor at the comfort station in the Town of Xinying, Hainan Island, in 1940, a platoon chief named Kawaoka established the following rules for the Chinese comfort women:

- Comfort women are forbidden to go out or escape; any violator and all her family members will be decapitated.
- Comfort women must unconditionally respect and obey the Japanese military personnel.
- Comfort women are under the absolute control of the two supervisors. Those who disobey will be severely punished.
- Comfort women must unconditionally satisfy the needs of the military men of the detachment at any time.³²

Based upon the rules, phrases like “absolute control” and “unconditionally satisfy” clearly specify the status of women in comfort stations. Japanese soldiers did not regard comfort women as humans; they locked and controlled these women and took advantage of them for sexual desire.

In the comfort women system, women's autonomy was drastically more limited than in general society. Those rules were designed to control women's behavior, speech, and ultimately speech by threatening both their and their families' safety. An anonymous survivor, describes her suffocating experiences in the comfort station:

The life of comfort women was this--during the day doing laundry of soldiers' clothes, cleaning the barracks, and some heavy labor such as carrying ammunition, and at night being the plaything for the soldiers. There were days when I was made to serve scores of men beginning in the morning. When I resisted--even just a little--I was beaten by the supervisor, pulled by my hair, and dragged around half-naked. It was a subhuman life.³³

In her testimonies, she points out the tiring life of comfort women and claims that that was a “subhuman life”. The only option was to follow the orders, or the supervisor would torture them. The supervisor and the Japanese soldiers did not see comfort women as humans at all; they were laborers and playthings. Women had no dignity in the comfort stations. This survivor's testimony was published in 1984, which marked the first time a newspaper addressed this issue. Even though Matsui's article did not trigger significant attention from the public, readers could begin to become aware of how miserably those comfort women had been treated. Locked in the comfort station, women were treated inhumanely. Based upon Tan Yuhua's first-hand testimony, who was born in 1928 in Yaojiawan, Shillong Township, Yiyang County, Hunan Province, the Japanese soldiers threatened the comfort women's freedom and safety. Therefore, women had to obey the rules to avoid torture as well as further mistreatment. Yuhua recalls her memory of many comfort women losing freedom: “We were not allowed to go out. An armed guard always stood at the entrance of the house watching the women. He would catch and beat anyone who attempted to escape. I was

³¹ *Twenty Two*. Directed by Ke Guo. 2015.

³² Qiu, Su, and Chen, *Chinese Comfort Women*, 58~59.

³³ Nozaki, Yoshiko. "The 'Comfort Women' Controversy: History and Testimony." *The Asia Pacific Journal* 3, no. 7 (July 6, 2005). <https://apjif.org/-Yoshiko-Nozaki/2063/article.html>.

completely listless at this time, unable to think or speak properly”.³⁴ Another victim Zhou Fenying, speaking to interviewers of her wartime experiences in 2007, sixty-nine years after she was kidnapped in 1938, describes how Japanese soldiers regarded comfort women as merely playthings who could please them and must listen to their orders. She recounts that: “The Japanese officers made me follow their orders. If I obeyed they sometimes gave me a small gift, but if I showed even the slightest unhappiness they would yell at me. I was forced to do whatever they told me to”.³⁵ If the women in the comfort stations were not able to please the soldiers, they would be mistreated. Hence, the Japanese soldiers were incredibly possessive by showing their control and power over women so that the comfort women system was a gender-based violence and extra manifestation of patriarchy through limiting women’s freedom and torturing their minds as well as bodies.

Lack of Political, Cultural, and International Support for Comfort Women During the Postwar Period

Patriarchy, narrow gender roles, and shame culture persisted postwar, making it additionally difficult for comfort women to come forward and share experiences of sexual trauma and male violence, aggression, and abuse of power. Most communities did not understand the reality of what comfort women experienced, and there wasn’t an open culture that empowered communities or victims to address male power abuses, sexual violence and trauma, and other aspects of comfort women’s experience. In the documentary *Twenty Two*, actress Li Xiuping, Li Ailian’s daughter-in-law, illustrated Li Ailian’s ongoing difficulties due to the war atrocities:

There were also villagers who judged her, but most of those of her age have passed away. The younger generation doesn’t know much about it. It was not until reporters came to interview them that some villagers started to understand. Who were captured by the Japanese and what happened to them afterwards. But they don’t know any details, nor do they have any thoughts about it. Nowadays people don’t talk about what happened years ago. So my mother-in-law doesn’t think about her past any more.³⁶

Most people had no idea that Li Ailian, born in 1928 in Wuxiang County, Changzhi City, Shanxi Province, experienced the comfort women system firsthand as a young woman. When she returned to society, Li Ailian lacked social support and attempted to conceal her traumatic background. In this way, she would also avoid bringing shame and a bad reputation to her family if anyone found out about her misfortune and awful experience during wartime. Indeed, many women decided not to speak to their families or friends about their miserable past since people usually did not understand or sympathize with them. In the contemporary social and cultural context, many women were worried that their terrible experience within the comfort women system--specifically losing their virginity, often by rape, and otherwise being sexually and violently assaulted by Japanese invaders--would bring blame upon their beloved ones. Unable to overcome the horrible memories and emotional distress, some victims receded into insanity or committed suicide. Tragically, many women committed suicide rather than be judged or criticized for the painful reality that Japanese soldiers had taken away their dignity and virginity before marriage, which was extremely damaging for women in a traditional, patriarchal society.

Lasting Effects of Mental and Physical Trauma

³⁴ Qiu, Su, and Chen, *Chinese Comfort Women*, 111.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁶ *Twenty Two*. Directed by Ke Guo.

Having struggled with mental trauma throughout their lifetimes, many victims were not willing to speak up or defend themselves publicly, which could mean re-living that trauma and risking their reputations. For example, Zhao Runmei, born in 1925, says in the book *Chinese Comfort Women* that she “suffered a ‘nervous disorder’ that inhibited sexual relations, and this combined with her failure to conceive a child prompted her first husband to divorce her”.³⁷ Owing to the atrocities she suffered from war, Zhao Runmei experienced strong mental and physical disabilities and was not able to give birth to children, which prompted the failure of her first marriage. Even though she later married another man who knew she had been raped by Japanese soldiers and was much more considerate and understanding of her past traumas, Zhao Runmei’s past remained as a nightmare throughout her life, which she could never overcome. Ultimately, her experience represents a typical case of rural women who had been subjected to comfort women system, many of whom continued to suffer from psychological issues stemming horrible sexual violence. Many survivors also developed the problem of infertility, which brought many troubles since giving birth to children was considered one of the most essential jobs of women.

Besides mental issues, physical damage accounted for many survivors’ post-war struggles. Li Meijin, born in 1926, talks about her experiences in the documentary *Twenty Two*; she recounts how the Japanese soldiers would find Chinese people wherever they hid when Japanese attacked the Chinese villages. Speaking to the physical trauma she suffered, she describes:

We walked until we couldn't walk anymore. The kids couldn't walk at all. We walked until our legs hurt, then they hit our legs with their rifles. My legs still hurt so much now because of that. I can't even walk well now. It hurts every time I kneel down. Those Japanese were very cruel. They beat me all over my body. I was hurt everywhere.³⁸

Suffocating pain and physical trauma bothered Li Meijin throughout her life, a constant reminder of the miserable memories. Moreover, many of the survivors lived in rural areas, where people were less aware of mental health issues and did not have comprehensive access to supportive infrastructure and resources. Because those survivors of the “comfort women” system received little support from their rural communities, they became isolated, lonely, and increasingly misunderstood. Besides the insufficiency of support within local communities, comfort women survivors also lacked government support, which made seeking justice much more difficult.

Cultural Revolution

In addition to a lack of cultural and social support, comfort women also lacked government support; in fact, during the Cultural Revolution, the Communist Party often criticized comfort women, using rhetoric that characterized them as traitors to their country. To begin, the Cultural Revolution was launched by Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Communist Party of China, as a movement to preserve Chinese communism by eliminating remnants of capitalism and traditional elements of ancient Chinese society. In the process of eliminating the ‘Four Olds’³⁹ (旧思想 i.e., old ideas, customs, culture, and habits of mind), 1.5 million people were killed, and millions of others suffered imprisonment, seizure of property, torture, or general humiliation. In the turbulent years from 1966 to 1968, what remained of old religious practices, old superstitions, old festivals, old social practices such as traditional weddings and funerals, and old ways of dress were violently attacked and suppressed. Visual evidence of old things was destroyed, and there was an orgy of burning of old books and smashing of old art objects.⁴⁰ Indeed, in the political climate during the Cultural

³⁷ Terazawa, “Cases for Survivors in Shanxi Province”, 135

³⁸ *Twenty Two*. Directed by Ke Guo.

³⁹ The ‘Four Olds’ refer to Old ideas (*Jiu Si Xiang* 旧思想), Old Culture (*Jiu Wen Hua* 旧文化), Old Habits (*Jiu Feng Su* 旧风俗), and Old Customs (*Jiu Xi Guan* 旧习惯)

⁴⁰ Durdin, Tillman. “China Transformed by Elimination of ‘Four Olds.’” *The New York Times*. Last modified May 19, 1971. <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/05/19/archives/china-transformed-by-elimination-of-four-olds.html>.

Revolution, the government encouraged the campaign called Red Guards to attack capitalists and eliminate the ‘Four Olds’ from a communist society. Thus, this kind of movement led to the rise of inner conflicts among different groups.

By destroying the ‘Four Olds’, the government could minimize reminiscence of Old China and, instead, promote communist ideology. Meanwhile, the government strongly supported critics of others and self-criticism. People gathered in assemblies to publicly criticize those who were against communism. In this case, many people saw comfort women survivors as Japanese’s spies, so those survivors suffered further critique and incrimination; some even committed suicide as a result. For example, a villager in Baoting and Miao Autonomous County, Hainan Province demonstrated the plight of Granny Huang Yufeng. Granny Huang Yufeng was a beauty when she was young, so the Japanese asked her to wash their clothes at their stronghold. After the war and during the Cultural Revolution, people had a negative attitude towards her because some spread a rumor saying she married a Japanese soldier. Therefore, people considered her as a traitor working for the Japanese. Back then, women like her were called ‘Japanese whores’.⁴¹That was before they were referred to as ‘Comfort Women’”. People were attacking those former comfort women by labelling them with bad titles such as “professional prostitute” and questioning the validity of their testimonies. Tragically, this was a prevalent phenomenon during the Cultural Revolution due to political and sexual prejudice; many comfort station survivors were seen as immoral; their actions were understood not as trauma, or violence experienced against their will, as betrayal to their nation. Thus, from these details readers could get a sense of how terrible those comfort station survivor's situations were. Another survivor--Lu Xiuzhen, born in 1917, in a village north of the Miaozhen River on Chongming Island--reminisces that “People in my village believed that a person defiled by Japanese soldiers would bring bad luck and could not produce anything good. They said I could not even grow things well in the fields. I lack education and have no knowledge of medicine, so it’s hard for me to tell if my infertility was due to the damage caused by the Japanese soldiers”.⁴²According to her testimony, because of ignorance and lack of knowledge, ordinary people could often link defilement with inauspiciousness to comfort women survivors, further alienating them from their communities. Besides, the public imposed their hatred of Japanese soldiers on Chinese women and comfort women survivors, which amplified comfort women’s suffering and forced them to be quiet or cover up their experiences and identity. Yuan Zhulin, born in Wuhan City, Hubei Province in 1922 was accused by her neighbors and the public of having “slept with” Japanese soldiers and was forcibly sent to the north to perform hard labor. She talked in the book *Chinese Comfort Women* about how children in the neighborhood chased her and called her a whore working for the Japanese. Then, in 1958, she was ordered by the Neighborhood Committee⁴³ to go to the remote northern province of Heilongjiang. Despite the humiliation that she felt from children, Yuan Zhulin was accused of working for the Japanese in a brothel. Nevertheless, that information was not accurate since no one understood what Yuan had truly gone through. They only captured the word “Japanese” and then saw Yuan as a traitor of the country.

Redress Movement

Prior to the redress movement of the 1980s and 1990s, international and domestic social, political, and cultural postwar conditions caused many survivors to suffer in silence and injustice. One major change between World War II and the redress movement was the evolution of more respectful language to refer to comfort women. Before the redress movement, the Japanese military officially called the comfort facilities *ianjo* or *ianshisetse*, terms which usually referred to military comfort stations but sometimes referred to private brothels as well. Yoshiaki Yoshimi, a professor of Japanese modern history at Chuo University, discovered a key document in 1991, “Gun Ianjo Jugyofu-to Boshu ni kansuru Ken”(“Matters concerning the recruitment of women to work in military comfort stations”), that showed a range of terms that the Japanese military used to refer to comfort

⁴¹ *Twenty Two*. Directed by Ke Guo.

⁴² Qiu, Su, and Chen, *Chinese Comfort Women*, 101.

⁴³ A Neighborhood committee has played a vital role in governing local life in China since the establishment of the People's Republic.

women.⁴⁴ In fact, women were called *ianfu* (comfort women), *shugyofu* (women of indecent occupation), *shakufu* (women serving sake), and *tokushu-ianfu* (special kind of comfort women)⁴⁵. All these terms were disrespectful because they hardly conveyed the real situation of comfort women.

However, these conditions began to change in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the redress movement started. In the late twentieth century, however, people started to use a newer term, “military comfort women,” for academic, formal, and advocacy purposes. “Military comfort women” is a translation of the Japanese term *jugun-ianfu*, meaning comfort women *serving in the war*, a more precise term, often preferred by feminists and academics, acknowledging that comfort women were part of, and victimized by, Japanese military strategy and infrastructure.⁴⁶ During the redress movement, people began using and encountering the term military comfort women more frequently, as more people focused on, talked about, and studied the experiences of these women. The fact that there wasn't even a single or respectful term to refer to these women before the redress movement shows a long-standing ignorance of comfort women and their experiences during and after the war.

Until 1991, the comfort women survivors remained in the shadows because of the deep shame and guilt that they felt as a result of their experiences. They did not wish to be further stigmatized but rather to live their lives quietly and as best as they could. Nevertheless, the power of defining comfort women survivors in a more respectful way allowed them to be more comfortable in talking about their past in public because they could feel a sense of acceptance by society. After the success of feminists' movements in the 1980s in Korea, more former comfort women spoke of their experiences for the first time, and the issue became international, forcing the Japanese government to recognize comfort women as a significant part of Japan's unresolved war issues.⁴⁷ Kim Hak Sun, one of the victims who had been forced into comfort stations in the early 1930s, came forward and publicly identified as a former comfort woman. After hearing her stories and other survivors' like hers, some Korean and Japanese women voluntarily formed groups to elevate the issues and experiences of comfort women to “the status of a political movement within the global context of feminist and grassroots politics”.⁴⁸ In this reframing, the sexual violence against comfort women during World War II was defined as a denial of basic human rights--a clear issue that many people could support.

⁴⁴ Yoshimi, Yoshiaki. *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during World War II*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

⁴⁵ Nozaki, "The 'Comfort Women' Controversy".

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Qiu, Su, and Chen, *Chinese Comfort Women*, 162.



Figure 3. The first demonstration of the redress movement in the United States. Korean women were wearing traditional Korean clothing and protesting against Japanese war crimes.⁴⁹

The endeavor to seek justice for the victims of the Japanese military's comfort women system eventually gained attention in China too. Even though the Chinese government was not enthusiastic about helping comfort women survivors gain justice and public sympathy, many local Chinese supporters and activists played crucial roles in doing research and interviewing comfort women, laying the foundations for further historical research as well as spreading the message globally in order to focus more attention on comfort women's issues. Thus, an international movement to obtain Chinese comfort women's redress gained momentum and became highly active as more people became aware of the situation and stories of comfort women survivors.

Unlike during the Cultural Revolution, people in the 1990s were more sympathetic towards comfort women survivors. In her paper *The Transnational Campaign for Redress for Wartime Rape by the Japanese Military: Cases for Survivors in Shanxi Province*, professor Yuki Terazawa explains one possible reason for this phenomena: "after it became clear that the Chinese government would not interfere, the Chinese press and citizens felt more secure in expressing their interest and support [for comfort women]".⁵⁰ By saying this, the author situates the social phenomenon of the redress movement within the broader political climate. Due to the stability of Chinese society wherein there were no conflicts between nations, people became more open-minded and so it was easier to accept the history of comfort women survivors; the perception among ordinary Chinese people changed. In this case, a series of articles published in local newspapers and more supporters began voluntarily raising funds and sending gifts. During the redress movement, people began using the term comfort women more frequently, as more people focused on, talked about, and studied the experiences of these women. The fact that there wasn't even a respectful term to refer to these women before the redress movement shows a long-standing ignorance of comfort women.

Conclusion

⁴⁹ Lee, Jungsil, and Dongwoo Hahm. *Tracing 28 Years of the Redress Movement Led by the Washington Coalition for Comfort Women Issues. Japanese Military Sexual Slavery*. De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110643480-008>.

⁵⁰ Terazawa, "Cases for Survivors in Shanxi Province".

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