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Government, the Military and Business in Japan's Wartime Comfort Woman System

By Hayashi Hirofumi

This article deals with the Japanese Imperial Government's and Military's involvement in the wartime military comfort woman system (1931-1945) and presents new archival evidence documenting the use of comfort stations by Japanese businessmen as well as soldiers. [1]

I. The Government-Military Chain of Command

In pre-war Japan, the emperor was head of state and had authority over the government. The competence of the cabinet was considerably limited by the fact that this prerogative of supreme command rested with the emperor. The military had considerable political power, and the emperor himself played an important role in the actual process of politics and decision-making. There are several studies that document, clearly and in detail, the role of the emperor. These include the works of Professors Yamada Akira and Herbert P. Bix. [2] I briefly summarize their findings here.

At the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in July 1937, the Government-Military Liaison Conference was set up and became the organ for decision-making on important matters of state politics. Matters of particular importance were decided at meetings of the Imperial Conference attended by the emperor himself. The Imperial Conference, comprising the emperor, members of the military, and leading cabinet ministers, was an organ that had no basis in the constitution, but came to act as the main decision-making body of the state.

Both the Chief of the Army General Staff and the Minister of War were authorized to act on behalf of the emperor in directing troop movements. The former attended to military matters like operations by the armed forces, while the latter was in charge of state-related military affairs such as the budget. However, orders concerning important military operations and appointments of high-ranking personnel were issued by the emperor.

In peacetime, the highest unit in the military hierarchy was the division. However, in wartime armies could be established above the

division level, and if necessary regional armies could be created above these. When the Pacific War broke out, for example, three area armies were brought under the command of Imperial General Headquarters: the China Expeditionary Army, the Southern Army and the Kwantung Army. The Southern Army, in charge of the occupation of Southeast Asia, was divided into four individual armies: the 14th Army, the 15th Army, the 16th Army and the 25th Army. Each of these armies was comprised of several divisions. Similarly, the China Expeditionary Army included the North China Area Army, the 11th Army, the 13th Army and the 23rd Army with the North China Area Army in turn subdivided into the 1st Army, the 12th Army and others. In this hierarchy, the Emperor was at the top, followed by Imperial General Headquarters, area armies, armies, divisions, (brigades), regiments, battalions, and finally companies.

Total war is not only a matter of military activity. It involves a nationwide mobilization including the economy, labor, education, local government and other institutions. Looking at local government, for example, prefectural governors were appointed from among the ranks of Home Ministry officials as were key positions in the prefectural administrations. The Police Bureau of the Home Ministry had complete control over police administration in the prefectures. It is important, therefore, to bear in mind that the conduct of war was not a purely military effort, but involved mobilization of all administrative organs at the national and local levels.

Ohmynees

On March 13, "Comfort womens" hold the 500th rally in front of Japanese Embassy.

Korean former comfort women protest in 2002.

II. Comfort Stations and the Character of Sexual Violence Throughout the Empire

The first comfort stations were set up in Shanghai, when Japan began its push into China following the Manchurian Incident of 1931 and the establishment of Manchukuo. From 1937, when Japan embarked on full-fledged war with China, the Japanese army began setting up comfort stations in other parts of China. In 1940, when Japanese troops advanced into Indochina, the first comfort stations in Southeast Asia were established. The landing of troops on the Malay peninsula and the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 mark the outbreak of the Asia-Pacific War. By May 1942, the military advance was complete and Japanese occupied territory reached its maximum extension throughout the Asia Pacific. With Burma and the Andaman-Nikobar isles, Indian possessions in the West, Indonesian islands to the south near Australia, and the Solomon and Marshall Islands group in the East, large parts of the Pacific were brought under Japanese rule.

The comfort station system would expand throughout the war. But already in September 3,1942, at a meeting held at the Ministry of the Army, a section chief reported that "the number of comfort facilities which have been set up are 100 in North China, 140 in Central China, 40 in South China, 100 in South East Asia (Nanpo), 10 in the Southern Seas (Nankai) and 10 in Sakhalin, which makes a total of 400." Comfort women in South East Asia consisted of many different nationalities and ethnicities. They included mainland Chinese, Taiwanese, Overseas Chinese, Malays, Thais, Filipinas, Indonesians, Burmese, Vietnamese, Indians, Eurasians, Dutch, Timorese, Japanese, Koreans and natives of the Pacific islands. There may also have been Laotians and Cambodians. [3]

Dutch ex-comfort women in
front of the Japanese Embassy,
The Hague,The Netherlands,
September18, 1998. Photograph
by Chunghee Sarah Soh.

If one plots the geographical distribution of the comfort stations set up by the Japanese military on a map of the occupied territories, it immediately becomes clear that they spanned more or less the whole occupied area. Toward the end of the war, as Japan started to prepare for a decisive battle in the homeland against the Allied offensive, more and more Japanese troops were stationed on the isles themselves. Comfort stations were also set up in Okinawa and other parts of Japan at that time. [4]

Patterns of two main types can be made out in the acts of sexual violence committed by the Japanese military in different regions. Taking China as an example, the first pattern is characterized by the systematic establishment of comfort stations in urban areas. Women from Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, the Philippines and other parts of the empire, as well as from Japan, were sent as comfort women to these stations, which were set up by the quartermaster corps. These Type-1 comfort stations were most common in areas where Japanese military rule was relatively well established and the rape of local women was kept in check by the military police in order to win the support of the local population.

Soldiers in queue at comfort station

Type-2 stations were mostly found in rural areas where strong anti-Japanese resistance was encountered and the local population as a whole was considered anti-Japanese by the army. In these areas, not only were massacres, mistreatment and looting rampant, but the rape of local women by soldiers went unchecked. The appalling acts of sexual violence perpetrated by the Japanese army in Shanxi Province in North China can be regarded as representative of this pattern. There Japanese troops routinely abducted women, confined them and repeatedly raped them. Japanese troops frequently forced village leaders to provide them with women. The overwhelming majority of victims in this type of case were local Chinese women.

Behavior was, in fact, often a mix of these two types. Soldiers of the Imperial Army, while making use of comfort stations in relatively stable urban areas, committed atrocities ranging from massacres to rape when sent out to pacify areas where strong resistance was encountered. In other words, sexual violence against women at comfort stations took place alongside the rape of local women. [5]

The situation in the various regions of Southeast Asia was similar to that of China, but different regions had local characteristics. [6] In the Philippines, behavior was mostly of the second type, since local guerillas put up strong anti-Japanese resistance and the islands eventually became a focus of the war due to a counteroffensive by US forces. An overview of accounts told by victims of sexual violence in the Philippines shows that reports of abduction and rape during confinement outweigh cases of women forced to work in systematized comfort stations. [7]

Protest in front of the Japanese embassy
in the Philippines, August 2004

On the Malay Peninsula, on the other hand, the situation remained comparatively stable and no counter attacks by Allied forces took place before the end of the war. Here, the comfort stations run by the military administration were maintained until the very end, and although several cases of Type-2 behavior were reported, it seems that sexual violence of Type 1 was prevalent. [8]

Both the Home Ministry and other ministries dispatched officials to the military administration and government officials played important roles in the military occupation. In fact, it is clear that the Japanese occupation of Asian territories was not enforced only by the military, and it would be no exaggeration to say that government officials were actively involved in the administration of comfort stations. The sexual violence perpetrated by the Imperial forces occurred throughout the occupied territories. The victims of this violence were women from Korea, Taiwan, China, Southeast Asia and the Pacific region. The extent and systematic character of this sexual violence make it impossible to explain these acts as transgressions committed by a handful of criminals in the military ranks. In fact, the huge number of cases and their occurrence throughout the occupied territories amply demonstrate that both the Japanese military and organs of the Japanese government, in other words the Japanese state as a whole, were actively involved.

III. Examples of State Involvement

Three former comfort women at the
House of Sharing, South Korea

Two specific examples demonstrate the character of state involvement in these crimes. The first is a 1938 Home Ministry document regarding the dispatch to Tokyo of a staff officer of the 21st Army from southern China on a mission to recruit comfort women. [9] This officer, accompanied by a section chief of the Ministry of War, made a request to the Police Bureau of the Home Ministry that women be recruited. The Police Bureau, in the name of the Chief of the Bureau, ordered prefectural governors to select appropriate officials to handle the recruitment process and to provide assistance. The Office of the Army General Staff itself was also deeply involved in this operation. Each prefecture accordingly selected officials to find women to be sent to China; each of these women would, of course, have been issued the necessary identification papers before leaving. These tasks were the responsibility of the police. Thus orders came down from the governor to the chief of the police bureau, and then to chiefs of police stations who mobilized a number of police officers.

In other words, the recruitment and transfer of the women was systematically organized not only by the expeditionary forces and the Office of the Army General Staff in Tokyo, but also involved the administrative machinery of the state. All levels of administrative structure, central as well as local, were involved in these operations.

The Governor-General of Taiwan was requested to provide similar services, and a comparable prefectural and police network was doubtless set up, as reported in the 1938 Home Ministry document.

The method utilized the system of regulated prostitution that had been created earlier for the military and applied it in Japan and its colonies including Taiwan and Korea. However, this approach was not applied in occupied areas such as China, the Philippines and other parts of Southeast Asia.

My second example draws on Taiwan Colonization Company (TCC) documents relating to comfort stations on Hainan Island, China. [10] These comfort stations were under the Navy's control, and planning for them took place at a joint meeting of the Army, Navy and Foreign Ministries. They jointly sent a request via the Government-General of Taiwan to TCC, asking that comfort stations be established and comfort women recruited. In April 1939, the head of the Research Section of the Taiwan Government-General asked the director of TCC to dispatch 90 comfort women to Hainan. According to the documents, TCC thought it inappropriate to carry out the task itself; instead, its subsidiary Fukudai Company was ordered to do the job. Accordingly, a contract was concluded between the two companies by which TCC provided funds to Fukudai for loans to the proprietors of comfort stations. This contract was signed by the president of TCC, Kato Kyohei, who was previously a high-ranking executive of the Mitsubishi Zaibatsu and was appointed president of TCC at the behest of the then Prime Minister, Hirota Koki. TCC was a semi-governmental company established with assistance from the Government-General of Taiwan, the War and Navy Ministries, and the Foreign Ministry. It is clear from these documents that the establishment of comfort stations involved not only the military, but also the Foreign Ministry, the Government-General of Taiwan, and semi-governmental bodies such as the Taiwan Colonization Company.

IV. Documents Proving Use of Comfort Stations by Businessmen

Former comfort women Tomasa Salinog, left, and Lee Young-soo

Although Japanese military comfort stations were used predominantly by military personnel, they were by no means the only people to frequent these facilities. Individuals connected with Japanese businesses that moved into areas occupied by the military also made use of them.

The following discussion centers on a collection in the Department of Documents at the Imperial War Museum in London. It seems reasonable to presume that these documents were captured from Japanese troops by the British in the Burma Theatre. [11] The cover of the collection reads: "Rules and Regulations, Unit 3629, 1943". This was the 51st Field Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion, then stationed in Mandalay in central Burma. The documents concern rules and regulations laid down by the Mandalay Garrison Headquarters and others. Four of the documents relate to comfort stations. It is worth noting that Mandalay, an important hub for troop movements in the area, was a collection and transportation base for the military. Many of those stationed there were non-combat troops in communication and supply units.

The most significant document of the four is "Regulations for Garrison Comfort Stations" published by Mandalay Headquarters on 26 May, 1943. These regulations are remarkable for the exceptional facilities they afford to the personnel of trading companies. The following provisions are of particular interest here:

> Article 2: While comfort stations are in principle for the use of Japanese military personnel and civilian army employees, Japanese residents of Mandalay are, for the time being, permitted to visit these stations after 24:30 as long as it causes no hindrance to use by military personnel and civilian employees, and provided that certain rules are strictly observed. Entry is strictly forbidden before 24:30.
>
> a. There must be no interference with the recreation of military personnel and civilian army employees.
>
> b. The rules must be obeyed and public morals upheld.
>
> c. Prior booking before the time of arrival is strictly forbidden.
>
> d. Fees are according to officers' rates.
>
> e. Anyone violating one of the above rules will be permanently barred.
>
> Depending on its nature and extent, a violation could lead to a ban extending to all personnel of the violator's company or even to all Japanese residents. Japanese residents of the hinterland who are unable to visit during the regulated period will be permitted to enter a comfort station on condition that the president of the Japanese society issues an appropriate certificate.

Appendix I to these regulations consists of a "timetable and fees for the use of comfort stations". The accompanying remarks include the sentence, "Trading company personnel must strictly observe Article 2". This clearly indicates that the article was primarily

aimed at members of trading companies, rather than ordinary members of the Japanese community in the region. Many private companies were operating in Mandalay at the time, using it as a base for activities in the central northern regions of Burma. The proviso given in Article 2 shows that trading company personnel returning from the interior were treated to exceptional conditions; they were provided access to comfort stations at hours usually closed to civilians. This is evidence of the strong ties that must have existed between the Japanese military and trading companies, and particularly between the quartermaster corps of the Mandalay Garrison and trading companies operating locally.

Interpreters for U.S. Army Intelligence with released
Korean comfort women in Myitkyina Burma, August 1944

Burma was placed under Japanese military administration after being captured from the British. Although Burma became "Independent" in August 1943, it remained under de facto Japanese occupation. Throughout the occupation period, Japanese companies continued to move into areas protected by the Japanese army and played an important role in the military administration. At the time Burma was taken, the Japanese military confiscated properties held by Britain and other Allied nations as well as those of their citizens. Some came under the direct management of the military, while others were run by several designated private companies. In this way, private Japanese firms played a crucial role in maintaining the Japanese regime in the region. [12]

There is at present insufficient documentation to identify which companies made use of military comfort stations in the area. Instead, I present the results of research into the private companies that maintained resident representative offices in Mandalay, and which, therefore, had potential access to the facilities.

One example is the Burma Commodity Distribution Cooperative, which handled such products as sugar, salt, coal, matches, tobacco, textiles and miscellaneous goods. This organisation was initially set up by five companies: Mitsui-Bussan (Mitsui & Co. Ltd), Mitsubishi-Shoji (Mitsubishi Corp), Nihon-Menka (Nichimen Corp), Ataka-Sangyo, and Sanko. Later others joined the cooperative: Tomen (Tomen Corp), Kosho, Senda-Shokai, Kanegafuchi-Shoji (Kanebo), Maruei, and Daimaru. Another eleven firms carried out wholesale business under the organization, one of whose branch offices was in Mandalay.

The purchasing, collection, storage and delivery of rice in the region was taken care of by the Japan-Burma Rice Cooperative, similarly established by Mitsui-Bussan, Mitsubishi-Shoji and Nihon-Menka. Cotton cultivation, collection and manufacturing were carried out by the Japan Cotton Association comprising Nihon-Menka, Kosho, Fuji-Boseki (Fuji Spinning), and Chuo-Boseki. In this case, operations in the Mandalay area were taken care of by Chuo-Boseki. The timber industry was managed by the Japan-Burma Timber Cooperative involving Mitsui-Bussan, Mitsubishi-Shoji, Nihon-Menka, and Ataka-Shokai. This operation ran four sawmills in the Mandalay area.

Other companies operating in the Mandalay area included Takasago Beer, which ran a brewery that was later converted into a miso and soy-sauce factory when raw materials came into short supply, and Nichinan-Norin-Kogyo, which ran a match factory. Mitsubishi-Shoji took care of the purchase of tannic materials for tanneries in the area, and Kanematsu-Shoten handled leather goods for sale to Nihon-Genpi.

Baldwin Mines, located to the northeast of Mandalay, were an important source of lead, zinc, copper and other metals. They were officially under the direct control of the Japanese military, but in effect under the management of Mitsui-Kozan (Mitsui Mining). There were many other mines, factories and businesses of other types whose management was commissioned to Japanese firms.

This list demonstrates that many Japanese companies, and particularly the most powerful trading companies, were involved in the purchase and distribution of commodities and the management of various industries in the occupied territories. In Burma, Mitsui-Bussan, Mitsubishi-Shoji and Nihon-Menka seem to have had the closest relations with the army. Many of the employees of these companies posted to central northern Burma would have visited Mandalay. If Japanese companies indeed took advantage of their relationship with the military and made use of the comfort stations, then they too must be held accountable for their role in the comfort woman system.

Conclusion

Solidarity rally for former comfort women, Los Angeles

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the establishment and development of the military comfort women system involved not only every section of the Japanese military, but also the administrative machinery of state at every level. Further, it should not be overlooked that private Japanese companies were accomplices in the running of the system.

This is a revised and expanded version of an article that originally appeared in Nature-People-Society: Science and the Humanities, No. 33, July 2002. Hayashi Hirofumi is professor of politics at Kanto-Gakuin University and the Research Director of the Center for Research and Documentation on Japan's War Responsibility. His books include Okinawasen to Minshu *(The Battle of Okinawa and People, Otsuki Shoten, 2001) and* Ianfu, Senji Seiboryoku no Jittai: Chugoku, Tonan-Ajia, Taiheiyo Hen *(The Comfort Women and Wartime Sexual Violence: China, Southeast Asia and the Pacific, Ryokufu Shuppan, 2000). His homepage in Japanese and English contains articles and documents on the comfort women, war tribunals, the Korean War and other war issues. Posted at Japan Focus on January 26, 2006.*

For discussion of related issues see Yoshiko Nozaki, The "Comfort Women" Controversy: History and Testimony. See also the August 4, 1993 Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "On the Issue of Wartime Comfort Women".

Notes

[1] The first half of this paper was presented at the "Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery" held in Tokyo on 8 December 2000. The full paper is based on a talk delivered at the "International Conference on Japanese Crimes Against Humanity" on 29 November 2001 at the University of California, Riverside and subsequently revised and developed.

[2] Yamada Akira, Daigensui Showa Tenno [Grand Marshal Emperor Showa], Tokyo, Shinnihon-Shuppansha, 1994 , Yamada Akira, Showa Tenno no Gunji Shiso to Senryaku [Emperor Showa's Military Thought and Strategy], Tokyo, Azekura Shobo, 2002 and Herbert P. Bix, Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan, New York, HarperCollins, 2000.

[3] Hayashi Hirofumi, Japanese Comfort Women in South East Asia, July 22, 1999 at [www32.ocn.ne.jp/~modernh/13eng.htm] This article contains extensive documentation on the composition, recruitment, and nature of the comfort woman system in Southeast Asia and other areas under control of the Japanese military.

[4] Concerning Japanese military comfort women and comfort stations, see Yoshimi Yoshiaki, Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during World War II, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000; also Yoshimi Yoshiaki and Hayashi Hirofumi (eds.), Nihongun Ianfu [Japanese Military Comfort Women],Tokyo, Otsuki Shoten, 1995; Yoshimi Yoshiaki (ed), Jugun Ianfu Shiryo-shu [Documents on Military Comfort Women], Tokyo, Otsuki-Shoten, 1992; and Yuki Tanaka, Japan's Comfort Women: Sexual slvery and prostitution during World War II and the US Occupation, London: Routledge, 2002.

[5] See Kim Puja & Song Yo-ok, co-editors, Ianfu, Senji Seiboryoku no Jittai: Nippon, Taiwan, Chosen Hen [The Actual State of Comfort Women and Wartime Sexual Violence: Japan, Taiwan and Korea], Ryokufu Shuppan, 2000; Nishino Rumiko & Hayashi Hirofumi, co-editors, Ianfu, Senji Seiboryoku no Jittai: Chugoku, Tonan-Ajia, Taiheiyou Hen [The Actual State of Comfort Women and Wartime Sexual Violence: China, Southeast Asia and the Pacific], Ryokufu Shuppan, 2000.

[6] Hayashi, Hirofumi, "Japanese Comfort Women in Southeast Asia", Japan Forum, Vol.10, No.2, 1998;

[7] On the Philippines, see Dan P. Calica, Dan Nelia Sancho, (eds), War Crimes on Asian Women: Military Sexual Slavery by Japan

during World War: The Case of Filipino Comfort Women, Manila, The Task Force on Filipina Victims of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, 1993; and Asian Center for Women's Human Rights, From the Depths of Silence: Voice of Women Survivors of War, Quezon City, Asian Center for Women's Human Rights (ASCENT), 2000; Maria Rosa Henson, Comfort Woman. A Filipina's Story of Prostitution and Slavery Under the Japanese Military (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

[8] On comfort stations in Malaya, see Hayashi Hirofumi, "Marei Hanto no Nihongun Ianjo" [Japanese Military Comfort Stations on the Malay Peninsula] in Sekai [World], March 1993, " Singapore no Nihongun Ianjo" [Japanese Military Comfort Stations in Singapore], in Senso Sekinin Kenkyu [Report on Japan 's War Responsibility], No.4, June 1994.

[9] This document is preserved in Keisatsu Daigaku [the Police Academy] in Tokyo .

[10] The files of Taiwan Takushoku Kaisha [Taiwan Colonization Company] are preserved in the Taiwan Provincial Documents Board, Taiwan.

[11] Hayashi Hirofumi, " Burma Mandalay no Nihongun Ianjo Kitei" [Regulations on Japanese Military Comfort Stations in Mandalay, Burma], in Senso Sekinin Kenkyu [Report on Japan 's War Responsibility], No.6, December 1994.

[12] See e.g. "History of Military Administration in Burma", and "Records of regional industries under the Southern Army Administration", at the Library of the National Institute for Defense Studies, Defense Agency, Tokyo.

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