

Reconstructing the History of the “Comfort Women” System: The Fruits of 28 years of Investigation into the “Comfort Women” Issue in China

Zhiliang Su, translated by Edward Vickers

Abstract: Since 1991, scholars from all over Asia have sought to reconstruct the history of the Japanese military’s “comfort women” – that is, to recover the facts relating to this system of sexual slavery – by analysing documentary records and interviewing survivors. As a result, an international consensus has emerged concerning the status of this system as a wartime atrocity involving large-scale violation of human rights, for which Japan ought to apologize. However, within Japan many persist in denying responsibility for the invasion [of China and associated atrocities]. Therefore, no effort should be spared to pass on the memory of this history to future generations, through discussing this atrocity of sexual slavery in school textbooks, applying for a [UNESCO] Memory of the World inscription, producing documentary films, or building museums, memorials and so forth. Other Asian countries thus continue their intense disputes with Japan over the nature and scale of the comfort women system, and the appropriate terminology for describing it.¹

Key words: comfort women; China; sex slaves; Japanese military; comfort stations; historical memory

Translator’s Introduction

Professor Su Zhiliang of Shanghai Normal University, China’s leading historian of the “comfort women” system, has played a prominent role in international efforts over the past decade to press for the inscription of the “Voices of the Comfort Women” Archive on UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register. As I note in my own paper for this Asia Pacific Journal special issue,² those efforts were championed by the Chinese state until a sudden change of stance in mid-2018 (shortly after the original Chinese version of this article was drafted). At the same time, substantial public funding was channeled into historical research and the construction of related museums or memorials in Nanjing and Shanghai, with Su himself installed as founding director of both.

The readership for the original Chinese version of this article can be presumed to have included government officials, as well as reviewers for the government’s research funding agency. While presenting much telling detail on the history of the ‘comfort women’ system, it thus also offers insights into the political and ideological parameters of related scholarship on the Chinese mainland, where endorsement of ideological orthodoxy is expected of historians working in such a politically sensitive area.

However, Su Zhiliang’s record as a historian, educator and campaigner reveals him as a cosmopolitan scholar with an agenda of his own. Originally a historian of modern Shanghai, he spent two years in the early 1990s as a

visiting scholar at the University of Tokyo. It was there that he first encountered scholarship on the ‘comfort women’ issue, which was then just beginning to attract widespread public notice in Japan and Korea (he was in Tokyo in 1991 when Kim Hak-sun made her famous statement - mentioned in his first paragraph). On returning to China, he and others, including his wife, Chen Li-fei, began investigating the history of the comfort women system there. While he alludes to this work in the present paper, he omits to mention that it was conducted, for the most part, without public funding, and in a context of official apathy (at best) towards efforts to publicise the plight of Chinese comfort women. Su has a record of testing the boundaries of ideological correctness; he once edited an innovative series of world history textbooks for Shanghai high schools that was summarily withdrawn from circulation in 2007, following public criticism from Party leftists of its excessively liberal vision.³

In this paper, Su scrupulously acknowledges the pioneering work of Japanese researchers in exposing and documenting the ‘comfort women’ system - even while he repeatedly emphasises the historical responsibility of the Japanese state. This position is consistent with longstanding official orthodoxy in China, which mandates stern criticism of the Japanese authorities (portrayed as an “imperialist” entity with “traces of feudalism”) for their militarism and criminality, while prohibiting blanket condemnation of the Japanese “people”. Although the rise of anti-Japanese nationalism in recent decades has seen this principle often honoured more in the breach than the observance, both Su’s academic work and the museums with which he is associated highlight the prominent role of Japanese researchers and activists in bringing ‘comfort women’ to public attention.

However, in common with publicly-sanctioned Chinese accounts of this phenomenon (e.g. in

museums), this paper also cordons off discussion of the history of comfort women from any wider consideration of the trafficking or sexual subjugation of women in contexts other than the fourteen-year “War of Japanese Aggression”. The section here entitled “Time and Space” begins with a declaration that “the history of the comfort women system begins in 1932 in Shanghai”. This may be correct in the narrow sense that this was when and where the Japanese authorities began formally designating brothels as comfort stations for military personnel. But a footnote on the same page explains that, before it was commandeered by the military, the first comfort station, the Dai-ichi Salon, in fact began in the 1920s as a commercial enterprise, modelled on similar establishments in Japan, serving Japanese expatriates. Moreover, the extensive involvement of the Japanese state in establishing and managing the comfort station network, which Su convincingly documents here, reflects the ingrained chauvinism of a patriarchal regime that had long sanctioned the exploitation for sex of women and girls domestically as well as overseas.

Even while asserting the temporal and spatial boundedness of the comfort women system, this paper thus contains evidence indicating how that system needs to be understood in a broader context of institutions and cultural assumptions underpinning women’s sexual exploitation, under varying conditions of coercion or brutality. The connections between early comfort stations in Shanghai and the pre-existing sex industry there are particularly suggestive in this regard, implying potential for the sort of paradigm shift in Chinese historiography - towards a more strongly transnational and feminist perspective - identified by Norma in recent work by Japanese and Korean scholars (see her translator’s introduction to the paper by Morita in this special issue).

Transnational feminism, however, has not

prospered in contemporary China. Feminist activists, along with most autonomous civil rights advocacy groups, have found their scope for activism, and for collaboration with foreign organisations (except when sanctioned or mediated by the party-state itself), drastically curtailed.⁴ Any attempt to extend criticism of Japan's exploitation and brutalisation of women during wartime to an investigation of the underlying attitudes that made this seem acceptable would lead, inevitably, to questions about how prevalent such attitudes remain in China today. Since that is a debate which the Communist Party remains unwilling to countenance, it is hard for Chinese scholarship on the comfort women system to draw conclusions extending much beyond boilerplate denunciations of Japanese state culpability. Nonetheless, the invaluable work that Su and others have performed in tracing the nature, evolution and extent of the comfort women system in China provides ample material for those able and willing to connect debate over the abuse of women in war to a more thoroughgoing feminist critique.

Edward Vickers, Fukuoka, March 2020.

In the 27 years since August 14, 1991,⁵ when Korean former "comfort woman"⁶ Kim Hak-sun spoke out about her experiences, the Japanese military's comfort women system, a criminal apparatus perpetrating inhuman sexual slavery, has become more and more widely known. Thanks to the efforts of historians, lawyers and many others, there is now widespread international awareness of this phenomenon. But truly resolving this problematic legacy of the Second World War requires further efforts from international society. In the academic field of History, I feel that the comfort women issue still receives insufficient emphasis in both research and taught programmes. In this paper, I survey, and reflect upon, the progress

to date of research into Japanese military comfort women and highlight some important issues that remain.

Reconstructing the History of Japanese Military 'Comfort Women'

We find oblique mention of comfort women in the verdicts of the Tokyo Far Eastern Military Tribunal, for example in a judgement issued on November 4, 1948, which states that "while occupying Guilin, the Japanese military committed rape, plunder and all sorts of violence. They used the pretext of recruiting women factory workers, and forced those women into working for the army as prostitutes...".⁷ However, because of the haste with which these trials were conducted, difficulties with collecting evidence and efforts at concealment by the Japanese authorities, the comfort women phenomenon was never treated as a distinct category of criminal act or subjected to proper judicial investigation.

Since 1991, research into the history of the comfort women has undergone a fraught and complex recovery. Difficulties facing researchers result from both the action of defeated Japanese forces in destroying many related documents, and reluctance on the part of the victims themselves, often reinforced by social opprobrium, openly to discuss their experiences. And today, most of the victims have already passed away.

Despite such difficulties, in Korea, mainland China and Taiwan, the Philippines, East Timor, Indonesia, Holland and elsewhere, brave victims of the comfort women system have come forward to give their testimony. Support has also come from local human rights organizations, from the United Nations Human Rights Commission and other international bodies (which have issued related declarations and judgements), and from historians and legal professionals who have conducted exhaustive

investigations into the issue. These various efforts have yielded a considerable quantity of historical documentation, gradually bringing the secrets of the comfort women to light.

The group led by Professor Yoshimi Yoshiaki (吉見義明) of Chuo University in Japan has compiled archives, published collections of documents, and undertaken related research. Matsuoka Tamaki (松岡環), Nishino Rumiko (西野瑠美子) and others have interviewed Japanese veterans and studied their diaries. Other pioneering Japanese scholars include Kawata Fumiko (川田文子), Senda Kako (千田夏光), Matsui Yayori (松井耶依), Kim Irumyoun (金一勉), Suzuki Yuko (鈴木裕子), Kim Puja (金富子) and Nakahara Michiko (中原道子).⁹ In 1993, the Japanese Government issued the “Kōno Statement”, acknowledging official responsibility for the comfort women system and the need for reflection. However, through devices such as the establishment of the “Asian Women’s Fund”, the Japanese government has subsequently sought to evade the issue of state responsibility, prompting protests from various Asian countries. In December 2015, the Japanese and South Korean Governments hurriedly concluded an agreement “irrevocably” resolving the comfort women issue, but its blatant insincerity aroused strident opposition from victims and from the Korean public. This in turn contributed to the subsequent change in administration in South Korea, following which that agreement has been shelved.

In South Korea, civil society groups - with active support from government - have investigated victims’ experience and offered them support, for example by establishing the “House of Sharing”, a nursing home for surviving comfort women.¹⁰ Since January 8, 1992, there have been weekly “Wednesday Demonstrations” outside the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. Their aim is to demand full investigation of the forceful recruitment of comfort women and other acts of the Japanese

military during the Asia-Pacific War, as well as a formal apology and legal compensation for the victims. On December 14, 2011, at the 1000th Wednesday Demonstration, the street in front of the Japanese Embassy was renamed “Peace Street”, and a “Statue of a Young Girl” was unveiled there. Since then, many more such statues have been erected within South Korea and overseas.¹¹

On the Chinese side, too, many efforts have been made to commemorate comfort women and seek justice for them. For example, in the three years from 2015 a further twelve victims of Japanese military sexual slavery were identified in Hunan Province.¹² We have also striven to locate and collate documents relating to the Japanese Occupation. In the 120 published volumes of “Selected Confessions of Japanese War Criminals from the Collection of the Central State Archives”, there is much testimony from soldiers and officials concerning looting, rape, and the establishment of comfort stations.¹³ Documents in the Jilin Provincial Archives concerning the Kwantung Army include many relating to comfort stations.¹⁴ Much of this evidence is presented in work in Chinese by myself and others, as well as in the co-authored book *Chinese Comfort Women: Testimonies from Imperial Japan’s Sexual Slaves*.¹⁵

Some Key Issues in Comfort Women History

Time and Space

The history of the comfort women system begins in January 1932 in Shanghai. At that time, the commanders of a special unit of the Japanese marines designated a number of businesses run by local overseas Japanese as

comfort stations. These included “Dai-ichi Salon”, the “Inn of the Triple Blessings”, the “Little Pine Pavilion” and the “Inn of Eternal Happiness”. The naval comfort station Dai-ichi Salon at 125 Dongbaoxing Road operated from January 1932 to August 1945, longer than any other comfort station.¹⁶ Five of its rooms are still entirely preserved. On January 28, 1932, the Japanese navy instigated the “128 Incident”.¹⁷ Thereafter, as military conflict spread, the Japanese government sought to enhance support for troops stationed in China. The prevalence of rape and sexual assault by Japanese troops against women in conflict zones was adversely affecting public opinion both within China and overseas, so senior officers of the expeditionary force in Shanghai sought to recruit women from Japan to staff military-supervised brothels. The officer mainly responsible for implementing this initiative was a senior staff officer called Okabe Naozaburo (岡部直三郎). In a diary entry for March 14, 1932, he wrote “Currently, our troops are molesting women all over the place, and news of all sorts of immoral behaviour is emerging. In order to solve our soldiers’ sexual issues, we have to actively pursue this kind of approach.”¹⁸ Following discussions, Okabe and colleagues submitted a report to their superior, Okamura Yasuji (岡村寧次). Okamura promptly wired Nagasaki Prefecture requesting the authorities there urgently to recruit women to form “comfort women units” to establish “comfort stations” in Shanghai’s occupied zone.¹⁹

On July 7, 1937, following the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, total war broke out between Japan and China. The Japanese army command thereafter rapidly expanded the system of comfort stations, accelerating their transition from commercial brothels into a system essentially based on the sexual enslavement of women. From Heilongjiang to Hainan Island, and from Liaoning to Yunnan, ‘comfort stations’ were established throughout occupied China - extending across 22 provinces, including Jilin, Shanxi, Hubei, Guangdong, Hebei and Guangxi.

After the 1941 Pearl Harbour attack expanded the theatre of conflict, comfort stations followed the Japanese advance across the Pacific and Southeast Asia, also extending to colonised or semi-colonised territories such as Okinawa, Taiwan and Korea.

In short, the comfort women phenomenon spans the period from January 1932 to the end of the war in August 1945, extending to all the territories occupied by the Japanese army.

Connections to the Japanese Government and Military

Supplying comfort women and establishing comfort stations for the troops was a basic function of the Japanese military during the Second World War. Therefore, under the slogan of “Prioritising the War above Everything”, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs and Justice; the police apparatus; local government bodies, as well as the military itself, were obliged to cooperate in supporting the establishment of comfort stations. Rather than talking simply of “links” between the Japanese government and military, and the comfort women system, it is thus more accurate to see them as its “midwives”.

There is considerable evidence, for example, indicating involvement of the diplomatic corps in sending Japanese and Korean comfort women to China. In the autumn of 1938, when battle was still raging around Wuhan, the Japanese Foreign Ministry and the military were already collaborating to establish comfort stations in the city. On September 28, the Japanese Consul-General in Shanghai addressed a cable to a ministry official in Tokyo entitled “A framework for urgently managing the traffic of our nationals into Hankou following the occupation”. In this, he stated, “As for non-residents coming to Hankou, we must consider the commercial ability and business status of the applicants, but no limits

are imposed on the construction of comfort stations". This reflects the priority accorded by consular staff to the construction and management of comfort stations. On February 3, 1939, the Japanese Consul-General in Hankou cabled the Ministry regarding "the management of arrivals", noting that "there are already 20 military comfort stations (including comfort stations approved by the military depot, the military police and the central command)".²⁰ The Japanese Consulate-General in Shanghai had already begun undertaking surveys of comfort stations in the mid-1930s. On 16 April, 1938, the Consulate-General in Nanjing convened a joint meeting with the army and navy to discuss the management of local comfort stations. It was decreed that "when the military establishes comfort stations, details regarding the native places, addresses, names, ages [of comfort women], and any births and deaths, etc. must be provided to the Consulate".²¹

The evidence thus demonstrates incontrovertibly that the Japanese state, from top to bottom, was involved in operating the comfort women system.

Following the outbreak of total war in 1937, the Shanghai Expeditionary force and the Army of the Central China Front directly mandated the construction of comfort stations. At that time, the commander in Central China was General Matsui Iwane (松井石根), and his Chief of Staff was Tsukada Osamu (塚田攻). This order was dated December 11, 1937. In his diary entry for that day, the Chief of Staff of the Shanghai Expeditionary Force wrote: "Received a document relating to the construction of comfort facilities from the Army of the Central China Front".²² From this we know that, even before the occupation of Nanjing, the Army of the Central China Front was already instructing the Shanghai Expeditionary Force to construct comfort stations. We also know that a related order was shortly afterwards issued to the 10th Army at Jin Shan Landing (金

山卫登陆).²³ A staff officer ordered the troops to secretly recruit local women, and a comfort station was established on December 18.²⁴ In order to ensure the rapid construction of comfort stations in the Shanghai area, the General Staff Headquarters of the Shanghai Expeditionary Force required the head of its Second Section, Lieutenant Colonel Chō Isamu (張勇) to supervise the work. On December 19, the Chief of the General Staff wrote, "Ordered Colonel Chō rapidly to establish 'girls houses'".²⁵ On December 28, he recorded, "Since the illegal behaviour of Japanese troops is becoming more and more outrageous, the Second Section gathered together unit leaders to transmit the orders of the Staff [to the troops]".²⁶

On March 4, 1938, the Japanese Central Command (大本营) issued a secret order (No. 745) to the Chiefs of Staff of the Northern and Central China Armies, concerning the recruitment of comfort women and construction of comfort stations. It ordered that the work of recruiting 'comfort women' should always be carried out under the 'control' of expeditionary forces; each force should appoint dedicated personnel to take charge of this matter; and recruitment of women should be coordinated with local police.²⁷ This document, authorized with the stamp of a Minister in the Army Ministry, demonstrates that, apart from the military itself, the regular bureaucracy and police were also involved in running the comfort women system. In particular, it shows the leading role of the Army Ministry. On September 19, 1940, that ministry issued to every division a set of educational materials entitled "Methods for maintaining troop morale based on the experience of the China Incident", stating that "in dealing with behaviour such as plunder, rape, arson and the killing of captives", it was considered that "sexual comfort stations have an extremely large influence on the spirit [of the troops]", so that "serious consideration must be given to comfort facilities".²⁸ From the perspective of

the Japanese government and military commanders, the functions of comfort stations included maintaining military morale and discipline, and preventing rape.²⁹

In 1940, after a tour of inspection in northern China, the head of the Army Medical Bureau recorded in his report that:

Life on the front line in China is generally tough. We must therefore consider the provision of spiritual comfort to troops and officials. I heard a unit commander say that incidents of desertion and violence without any clear cause are rife, demonstrating the need to establish for the troops some sort of spiritual support. A regimental commander demanded the dispatch of “comfort brigades”. This is especially necessary for those who have spent three years away from home. They urge the army to take rapid measures.³⁰

On September 3, 1942, at a meeting of Army Ministry section heads, one indicated that it was necessary, on the basis of the existing network of comfort stations, to add “comfort facilities for those besides officers on the following scale: Northern China - 100 stations; Central China, 140; Southern China, 40; the Southern Region, 100; the Southern Seas, 10; Karafuto (Sakhalin Island), 10; Total: 400”.³¹

Two historical documents found in Jilin show that the funds spent by the Japanese Army on the running of comfort stations were extremely large. A document of the Manchurian Central Bank, recording a March 1945 telephone call with the Foreign Investment Unit of the bank’s Treasury Department dated, mentions spending 252,000 Japanese yen for purchasing comfort women, approved by the Kwantung Army on behalf of Unit 7990 in Xuzhou. The recipient of these funds is listed as the “Anshan Branch

Headquarters” of the Manchurian Central Bank. The document further states that these funds should be treated as “public”, and that although the amount exceeded the standard limit on deposits, in this case the limit should be waived, and the funds managed as public money for military use. The document goes on to list a further three similar transactions: 50,000 yen on 17 November, 1944; 150,000 on December 16, and; 80,000 on January 24, 1945.³² These add up to 532,000 yen spent by Unit 7990 on “purchasing comfort women” in just four months. Using military funds to run the comfort women system was thus regarded as entirely routine, further underlining the role of the Japanese government and army in operating this system of sexual slavery. Such funds were used mainly by the police in occupied China and Korea for recruitment and dispatch of comfort women, to pay military engineers to repair comfort station buildings, to establish medical inspection facilities for the military [for monitoring the spread of venereal disease], and for paying comfort station guards.³³ Funds assigned for “purchasing comfort women” were not used to pay the women themselves. Studies undertaken amongst survivors in China and South and North Korea indicate that most barely had enough to live on, let alone any salary or remuneration.

From historical materials, we can learn that ultimate responsibility for establishing and managing comfort stations lay with the highest levels of the Japanese military. This responsibility was generally exercised jointly by staff officers as well as medical and administrative units, while at lower levels units responsible for military logistics or the management of soldiers’ bars often set up special offices for running comfort stations. These were sometimes referred to as the “Special Office”, or simply as the “Comfort Women Office”. For example, the Third Section of the Kwantung Army’s General Staff was responsible for comfort women, while Unit

7331 in Shanghai established a “Comfort Women Office”.³⁴ The Logistics Department of the 11th Japanese Army in Wuhan also established a “Comfort Women Office” staffed by two officers, two corporals and four other ranks; their duties were to manage the comfort women and supervise the comfort stations. Whenever a new comfort woman arrived at any of the local privately-run comfort stations, this Office along with the comfort station manager would inspect her photograph, residence documents, police permit, local government identity papers, medical records and so forth.³⁵

Types of ‘Comfort Stations’

Besides those established and run directly by military units themselves, there were comfort stations run by locally-resident Japanese or Korean civilians, and others run by Chinese collaborators. Amongst these, those run directly by the military best typified the essential brutality of Japanese state-sponsored sexual slavery, and included comfort stations operated at squadron, brigade and other levels of the military hierarchy.

There were also comfort stations that had originally been private brothels, but were taken over and run by the Japanese military or authorities of the puppet governments.³⁶ While usually these did not brand themselves as such, they henceforth operated as comfort stations for exclusive military use.

Among the victims of systematic military sexual exploitation, there were also a considerable number who did not work in formal comfort stations, and in China especially this phenomenon was relatively common. The war criminal Akita Matsuyoshi (秋田松吉) testified that from February 1940 to May 1941, the Third Squadron of the 43rd Regiment, stationed in Zhang Qiu County, Shandong Province, forced five local women to work as comfort women. “The fifteen of us [sexually

abused] these five Chinese women for a period of one year and five months”, he stated.³⁷ In Shanxi Province, amongst 70 victims who have come forward, the vast majority were captured and assaulted in this way.

The Scale of the Japanese Military ‘Comfort Women’ System:

Through prolonged investigation and research, we have demonstrated that the extent of the Japanese military comfort women system far exceeds earlier estimates. For example, in Shanghai the existence of at least 172 Japanese military comfort stations has been confirmed; in Nanjing, at least 70, in Hainan, 67, and several dozen in Wuhan. And these represent only the tip of the iceberg.

The archives of Jinhua City, Zhejiang Province, contain a Japanese document entitled “The membership and regulations of the Jilin Association of Jinhua”. Dated April 1944 (though transcribed the following January), this relates to the local Korean Association, and was obtained by a Chinese intelligence officer. This short list of around 200 individuals features many involved in the running of local comfort stations. It documents the existence of at least 11 comfort stations, and includes the names of 8 “comfort station bosses”, 7 “managers” and as many as 126 “comfort women”, the latter accounting for 60% of all the names on the list (the youngest only seventeen). Altogether, the number of those involved in the comfort station system was 141, or an astonishing 67.19% of those listed,³⁸ illustrating the sheer scale of the system of sexual slavery established by the Japanese military.

Were Comfort Women Compelled, or Was This a Commercial Enterprise?

For a long time, Japanese rightists seem to

have been playing an absurd competition to determine “who is the most right-wing?” Their games of political one-upmanship have attracted a lot of public attention. On March 5, 2007, when the U.S. Congress passed a resolution blaming Japan for operating a system of sexual slavery during wartime, Japan’s then Prime Minister, Abe Shinzo, stated that:

This resolution of the American Congress is not based on facts. Although it has passed, I will not apologise. In the strictest sense, there is no proof of compulsion. There is also no way of checking the oral testimony [of victims]. Maybe some did not become military comfort women of their own volition, but were indeed forced into this by middle-men. But there were no officials who barged into homes and kidnapped people.³⁹

In May 2013, Mayor Hashimoto Toru (橋下徹) of Ōsaka publicly stated that during wartime “the existence of the comfort women system was necessary”; he even suggested that American soldiers stationed in Japan should make full use of the Japanese sex industry. In January 2014, the new director of NHK appointed by Abe made the nonsensical statement that the comfort women issue “exists in all countries”.⁴⁰

After the Japanese government and military established the comfort women system to promote the effectiveness of their military machine, many women from occupied or colonised societies were forcibly recruited. Across all affected regions of Asia, tens of thousands of surviving documents prove that women were forced or deceived into becoming comfort women, and thereby denied their human rights and subjected to unspeakable suffering.

In Wu District of Meng County, and other parts of Shanxi Province, as Japanese forces engaged in a fierce struggle with the 8th Route Army,

women from local villages were often detained in blockhouses that served as “legal rape centres”. Those victims brave enough to testify have revealed that at least 70 women were subjected to such treatment. In various parts of Hainan Island, Japanese troops also brought captured women to their military bases and treated them as sex slaves. In Chengmai, for example:

As soon as any pretty young woman was captured she was taken to the base as a “comfort woman” and used for the enjoyment of the troops. Every squadron of the Japanese army established its own “comfort station”. The “comfort station” of the squadron occupying Jinjiang was established in the home of Chen Guozong next-door to the Jinjiang Pleasure Hall, and accommodated over 30 “comfort women”. The entire residence comprising several hundred square metres of floor space was given over to the “comfort women”, while the family of Chen Guozong were forced to move to another residence. Iron wire was used and guards were posted to ensure that the women could not escape and that outsiders could not enter. The “comfort station” of the squadron stationed at Shifu contained more than 20 women, and was similarly guarded.⁴¹

In areas of China occupied by the Japanese army, it was extremely common for women to be captured in this way and forced to work as “sex slaves” for the military.

While some ‘comfort women’ literally died of shame, a few were even killed and eaten by Japanese troops. Ebato Takeshi (絵鳩毅) (originally named Ishiwata Takeshi - 石渡毅), an officer in the Machine Gun Squadron of the 111th Regiment of the 54th Brigade of the army’s 59th division, testified that in Su Ke Village in Shandong, the army forced one woman to become an officer’s comfort woman. After they had been stationed in the village for

a long time, food became more and more difficult to come by, until eventually the officer killed and ate her. Moreover, having lied to his comrades about the provenance of the meat, all of them ate some, and he sent the remainder to Brigade headquarters.⁴²

Among the duties of military personnel assigned to manage comfort stations was calculating the numbers of officers and men who used them. In the Jilin Archives are documents relating to two February 1938 reports presented by Ōki Shigeru (大木繁), Commander of the Military Police under the Central China Expeditionary Force, to his own Army Staff. One of these is a report on the comfort station situation in 9 districts, including Nanjing. It states that in 8 of the 9 (apart from Ningguo, where poor transport caused special difficulties), comfort stations had already been established. The document records that in Wuhu the number of comfort women had increased by 84 over the previous period. Amongst 109 comfort women, there were 48 Japanese, 36 Koreans and 25 Chinese. Meanwhile, the 109 comfort women in Zhenjiang had to serve 15,000 soldiers - a ratio of one woman to 137 men. The document clearly records that over ten days in mid-February, 8,929 officers and men visited Zhenjiang comfort station, an increase of 3,195 over the previous period. In this area, therefore, on average one comfort woman had to service 82 men within the space of ten days. In Danyang, because for a time there were only six comfort women, this constituted a severe shortage, and the report clearly states the urgent need “to locally recruit comfort women”.⁴³ In Commander Ōki’s other report, it is recorded that in the Huzhou comfort station there were 11 Chinese women and 29 Koreans. When the Kuwana Brigade advanced to Huzhou, troop numbers were already depleted, but a “special comfort station” was nonetheless opened [to cater for the increased demand]. In the Wuxi area, a need for an increase of twenty comfort women was also reported.⁴⁴

How the History of ‘Comfort Women’ is Remembered

For more than twenty years, researchers from various countries have undertaken the difficult and slow process of surveying victims of the comfort women system, including Korea (South and North), the Chinese mainland, the Taiwan region, the Philippines, East Timor, the Netherlands and Indonesia.⁴⁵ The number of confirmed survivors who have been identified is: S. Korea - 239; N. Korea - 209; Chinese mainland - 250; Taiwan - around 50; Indonesia - several hundred; the Philippines - over 100; East Timor - several dozen; Japan - around ten; and several in the Netherlands.

In the Chinese mainland, provinces and municipalities where survivors have been identified include Heilongjiang, Jilin, Beijing, Hebei, Henan, Shandong, Shanxi, Anhui, Jiangsu, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Hubei, Hunan, Guangxi, Yunnan and Hainan. In Li Pu, Guangxi, Wei Zhaolan was captured by Japanese troops and taken to Ma Ling Comfort Station, where she was raped and fell pregnant. After escaping and returning home, she gave birth to a “Japan boy”, Luo Shan-xue. In recent years, mother and son have travelled to Shanghai, Nanjing, Tokyo, Ōsaka and elsewhere to testify about their experiences. They still live in the same mountain village [they also feature in the documentary film *Thirty-two*].

As time passes, the survivors are steadily passing away. At the time of writing, only 18 identified victims remain on the Chinese mainland,⁴⁶ two in Taiwan, 30 in Korea and one in the Netherlands (Jan Ruff O’Herne, the best-known Dutch survivor, lives in Australia [but passed away in 2019]), several dozen in the Philippines, and over one hundred in Indonesia.

A Basic International Consensus

In international society, a fundamental consensus has emerged regarding the comfort women issue. As early as 1996, the United Nations Human Rights Commission conducted an independent investigation into this matter and produced a report. On April 1 of that year, the UN legal expert Radhika Coomaraswamy submitted her report “on violence against women in wartime, its causes and consequences”. Her report recommended that the Japanese Government: 1. acknowledge legal responsibility under international law for the establishment of comfort stations; 2. compensate every individual subjected to sexual slavery; 3. make all relevant documentation publicly available; 4. formally apologise to all victims; 5. ensure the relevant historical facts were accurately reflected in school textbooks; 6. punish war crimes.⁴⁷

Similarly, the International Labour Organisation, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and other organisations issued reports condemning Japan’s operation of a system of sexual slavery. Following its own investigations, in 1993 an ICJ report made seven recommendations, including issuing an apology, offering compensation and establishing an international commission of enquiry. Since 2007, the national assemblies of the USA, Canada, the Netherlands, the EU, the Philippines, South Korea and other countries have issued resolutions condemning the Japanese government’s failure to acknowledge its historical responsibility.

The governments of more and more countries have taken steps to ensure that this inhumane historical episode is recorded in textbooks and taught in classrooms. These include China, South Korea, Canada and certain states or districts in America. A certain amount of content remains in some Japanese senior high school texts, but there has been a clear decline in this respect since the 1990s.

How to Remember This Terrible History

The day in 1991 when Kim Hak-Son exposed the sexual violence of the Japanese military - August 14 - has formally become an international “Comfort Women Commemoration Day”, and is now marked annually in various countries. Reporters and filmmakers have produced publications and documentary films recording the experiences of comfort women, including the mainland Chinese films *Thirty-two* and *Twenty-two*,⁴⁸ Taiwan’s *The Secret of the A-ma* [Grandmothers] and *The Song of the Reeds*, or *The Comings and Goings at one Comfort Station* produced by CCTV in China.⁴⁹ Films such as *Twenty-two* have contributed significantly to raising consciousness of the comfort women issue.

The purpose of establishing historical museums is to preserve and extend memory of the past. In April 2017, the first ever conference of comfort women museums was held in Tokyo. It was noted there that such museums now exist in Korea, the Chinese mainland, Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines and the Netherlands. In mainland China, we have the Sun Wu Military Club Exhibition Hall (2009), the Exhibition Hall at the Site of the Longling Dongjiagou Comfort Station in Yunnan (2010), the Liji Alley Comfort Station Memorial Museum in Nanjing (2015), and the Chinese Comfort Women Historical Museum on the campus of Shanghai Normal University (2016). The Liji Alley exhibition has preserved eight rooms formerly occupied by comfort women, including the Korean Pu Yong-sum, who visited the site in 2003.⁵⁰ America and Canada have also established comfort women museums.

The Campaign for Inscription in UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register

UNESCO’s “Memory of the World Register” is an excellent way to preserve the memory of humanity. In 2014, China submitted two applications for inscription, relating to the Nanjing Massacre and Comfort Women. Due to opposition from the Japanese government, the comfort women application was unsuccessful. The UNESCO committee then suggested that, since other countries were also involved in the comfort women issue, a joint application should be submitted. As a result, on May 31, 2016, China joined with civil society groups from eleven countries or regions, including South Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, East Timor, Japan, the Netherlands, Britain, Australia, the USA and the Chinese region of Taiwan to submit a joint application to the Memory of the World Register, entitled “Voices of the Comfort Women”. This included numerous and varied documents, numbering 2,744 in all, falling broadly into two categories - relating to the history of the comfort women phenomenon itself; and to the investigations and protest campaigns undertaken to secure recognition for victims. Despite the existence of gaps and omissions in the documentary record (for reasons noted above), this collection nonetheless precisely fulfils the requirements for inscription in UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register.

However, in order to confuse matters, Japanese rightists submitted their own collection of “Japanese military records” purporting to demonstrate the strictness of Japanese military

discipline. And while these applications were being reviewed, the Japanese government threatened to withdraw from UNESCO if the “Voices of the Comfort Women” application was approved. Facing such pressure, UNESCO resorted to proposing “dialogue” between those behind the two comfort women-related submissions. Those of us in the International Alliance [relating to the “Voices of the Comfort Women” application] have already written to the UNESCO Director General indicating our willingness to engage in dialogue. The struggle over how to evaluate and remember wartime sexual violence thus remains intense and unresolved.

Historians should strive to maintain an impartial perspective, arrive at cool and rational judgements, and express them cautiously. But we also have a responsibility or mission to distinguish between good and evil, condemn criminal acts and guide people towards goodness. The Japanese military’s comfort women system - a war crime involving the sexual enslavement of women - like the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews or the Nanjing Massacre, is an instance of inhuman wartime violence that should be carved into the memory of humanity and used to instruct future generations, in order to guard against the repetition of such violence.

This article is a part of **The Special Issue: The ‘Comfort Women’ as Public History**. See [the Table of Contents](#).

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Please also see the supplementary issue to this special issue, [Academic Integrity at Stake: the Ramseyer Article](#), edited by Alexis Dudden.

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Notes

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² Edward Vickers, “Slaves to Rival Nationalisms” (2021), in this issue of Japan Focus.

³ For more on Su’s travails as a history textbook editor, see Edward Vickers and Yang Biao, ‘Shanghai’s History Curriculum Reforms and Shifting Textbook Portrayals of Japan,’ *China Perspectives* 2013, No. 4 (December), 29-37. And for a fuller analysis of Su’s role in promoting commemoration of ‘comfort women’ in China and internationally, see Edward Vickers, ‘Commemorating “Comfort Women” Beyond Korea: the Chinese case,’ in Frost, Schumacher and Vickers (eds), *Remembering Asia’s World War Two*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 174-207.

⁴ See Vickers, 2019 op. cit., p. 198.

⁵ Translator’s note: this paper was first published in Chinese in 2018.

⁶ Translator’s note: in his original text, Su uses quotation marks every time he refers to “comfort women”. Here I have removed these quotation marks from subsequent instances of this term.

⁷ Zhang Xiao-lin (张效林) (trans.), 『远东国际军事法庭判决书』(Judgements of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East). (Beijing: Qunzhong Publishing House (群众出版社), 1986), p. 490.

⁸ The major works of Yoshimi Yoshiaki (吉見義明) on the comfort women include: 『從軍慰安婦資料集』(Collected Documents on the Military Comfort Women) (Tokyo: Otsuki Shoten [大月書店]. 1992) (edited); 『隨軍慰安婦』(The Comfort Women who Followed the Military) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten [岩波書店], 1995) [published in English by Columbia University Press in 2002, under the title *Comfort Women*]; 『共同研究日本軍慰安婦』(Collaborative Research into

Japanese Military Comfort Women) [co-edited with Hayashi Hirofumi] (Tokyo: Otsuki Shoten (大月書店), 1995).

⁹ The Japanese scholar Matsuoka Tamaki (松岡環) has collected diaries and other testimony from over one hundred elderly Japanese military veterans. Centering mostly on Nanjing, these document incidents including rapes of Chinese women and the construction of military ‘comfort stations’. [Here Su proceeds to list Chinese translations of several of Matsuoka’s major works]: 松岡环著，新内如、全美英、李建云译：《南京战·寻找被封闭的记忆——侵华日军原士兵102人的证言》（上海辞书出版社2002年版）；松岡环著，沈维藩译：《南京战·被割裂的受害者之魂——南京大屠杀受害者120人的证言》（上海辞书出版社2005年版）。Matsuoka has also collaborated with the researcher Nishino Rumiko on fieldwork in various parts of China, including Hainan, Yunnan, Nanjing and Shanghai. Their joint publications include: 『従軍慰安婦』(Military Comfort Women), (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten [明石書店], 1992); 『従軍慰安婦と十五年戦争』(Military Comfort Women and the Fifteen-year War), (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten [明石書店], 1993); 『女性国際戦犯法廷全記録』(Complete Proceedings of the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal) [co-edited] (Tokyo: Ryokufu Shuppansha (绿風出版社), 2002); 『戦場の“慰安婦”——拉孟全滅戦を生き延びた朴永心の軌跡』, (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten [明石書店], 2003).

¹⁰ The House of Sharing obtained its land through a donation from a Korean philanthropist, and has been supported by public donations, the Korean Buddhist Jogyejong (曹溪宗) Foundation, and other sources. It was initially established in 1992 and relocated to the outskirts of Seoul in 1996. It combines the functions of a care facility and a historical museum devoted to the ‘comfort women’ issue.

¹¹ Countries that have erected comfort women statues include Canada, the United States, China, Australia and Germany. A comfort woman statue in the Philippines was taken down in 2018 [but another statue has since been erected in a private compound in the Philippines - translator’s note]. See Okamoto (岡本) et al, 『<平和少女像>はなぜ座り続けるのか』(Why [the campaign for] erection of ‘Peace Statues of a Young Girl’ continues) . (Yokohama: Seori Shobo (世織書房), 2016).

¹² These survivors are Yang Gen-zhen (汤根珍), Liu Ci-zhen (刘慈珍), Peng Ren-shou (彭仁寿), Peng Zhu-ying (彭竹英), Luo Mian-hua (罗锦华), Ling Fang-zhen (凌芳贞), Zhang Si-zhen (张四珍), Chen Mei-ying (陈美英), Liu Nian-zhen (刘年珍), Yang Jia-Lan (杨桂兰), Xu Ai-zhen (余爱珍) and Wu Feng-zhen (吴俸贞).

¹³ Central Archives of the People’s Republic of China. Selected Confessions of War Criminals of the Japanese Invasion from the Collection of the Central Archives [中央档案馆藏日本侵华战犯笔供选编], 120 volumes, (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company (中华书局), published 2015-2016).

¹⁴ Jilin Provincial Archives (吉林省档案馆), 『铁证如山——吉林省新发掘日军侵华档案研究』(A Mountain of Ironclad Proof: Research into Jilin Province’s newly-discovered documents relating to the Japanese Invasion) [Volume 1. (Changchun: Jilin Province Publishing Group, 2014).

¹⁵ Works in Chinese include: 『Su Zhiliang (苏智良) 《慰安妇研究》(Comfort Women Research), (Shanghai Bookstore [上海书店], 1999); Su Zhiliang 『日军性奴隶』(Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military), (Beijing: People’s Publishing House (人民出版社), 2000); Chen Li-Fei (陈丽菲) 『日军“慰安妇”制度批判』(Critique of the Japanese ‘Comfort Women’ System) (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company [中华书局], 2007); Zhang Shuang-bing (张双兵) 『炮楼里的女人——

山西日军性奴隶调查实录□(Women of the Blockhouse - Records of an Investigation into Japanese Military Sex Slaves of Shanxi), (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House□江苏人民出版社), 2011); Su Zhiliang and Chen Li-fei□“慰安妇”与性暴力□(“Comfort Women” and Sexual Violence), (Jinan: Shandong Pictorial Publishing House□山东画报出版社), 2015); Su Zhiliang, Chen Li-Fei and Yao Fei (姚霏) (Proof: The Secrets of Shanghai's 172 Japanese Military Comfort Stations)□证据：上海172个日军慰安所揭秘□, (Shanghai: Shanghai Jiaotong University Publishing House□上海交通大学出版社), 2018); Su Zhiliang and Zhang Jian-jun (张建军)《南京日军慰安所实录□(Records of the Japanese Military Comfort Stations of Nanjing), (Nanjing Publishing House□南京出版社), 2018); Qiu Peipei, Su Zhiliang and Chen Lifei, Chinese Comfort Women: Testimonies from Imperial Japan's Sexual Slaves, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁶ The Dai-Ichi Salon, originally called Dai-ichi (“first” in Japanese), in fact began as an early Kashizashiki (貸座敷) [an establishment that rented out rooms to private parties] opened by an overseas Japanese entrepreneur. This so-called Kashizashiki was a kind of traditional Japanese business that, apart from serving customers with food and drink, also provided girls or women for their (sexual) enjoyment. We cannot be certain regarding the nationality of all the customers of such an establishment, but they were mostly Japanese, and included soldiers and ordinary members of the Japanese expatriate community. The name Dai-ichi appears on the “Record of Overseas Japanese in Shanghai”□上海日侨人名录□for 1920, and was originally managed by a certain Shirokawa. Originally located on Baoshan Road, it later moved to Dongbaoxing Road.

¹⁷ Translator's note: A brief conflict between Imperial Japanese and Republic of China forces during which Shanghai was bombed by the Japanese navy. The conflict petered out in early March, with a formal truce in May that mandated the demilitarization of Shanghai.

¹⁸ Okabe Naozaburo (岡部直三郎), 《岡部直三郎大将の日記□(The Diary of General Okabe Naozaburo), entry for March 14, 1932. (Tokyo: Fuyo Shobo (芙蓉書房) 1982), p. 23. (In Japanese)

¹⁹ See Su Zhiliang, Chen Li-fei and Yao Fei, op. cit..

²⁰ Kawata Fumiko (川田文子), 《皇军慰安所の女たち□(Women of the Imperial Army's Comfort Stations) (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo (筑摩書房), 1993), p. 222. (in Japanese)

²¹ Yoshimi (ed.) 1992, op. cit., p. 179.

²² Editorial Committee for Compiling the History of Wartime Nanjing (Editorial Committee) (南京戦史編集委員会): 《南京戦史資料集□(Collected Documents relating to the History of Wartime Nanjing)□(Tokyo: Kaikosha (偕行社), 1989), p. 211. (in Japanese)

²³ Translator's note: site of a battle with the Chinese forces on November 5-10, 1937.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 411.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 220.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 228.

²⁷ Yoshimi (ed.) 1992, op. cit., p. 105.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 168.

²⁹ Yoshimi (1995), op. cit., p. 37.

³⁰ Army Ministry Logbook □陸軍省業務日誌□, in the collection of the School of Hygiene of the Army Medical Corps (陸上自衛隊衛生学校藏). (in Japanese)

³¹ Ibid.

³² Telephone Records relating to the ‘Comfort Women’ Procurement Fund of the Anshan Branch of the Manchurian Central Bank 满洲中央银行鞍山支店“慰安妇”采购资金电话记录 〔March 30, Kangde Year 12 (康德12年) (i.e. 1945), in the Jilin Provincial Archives (吉林省档案馆).

³³ See Aso Tetsuo (麻生徹男), 《上海より上海へ》(From Shanghai to Shanghai), (Fukuoka: Sekifusha, 1993) (English translation published in 2004 by Eastbridge Books); Kako Senda, 〔従軍慰安婦〕(Military Comfort Women), (Tokyo: Futabasha 双葉社), 1973); and Nishino Rumiko, 1993 (op. cit.).

³⁴ Yoshimi (ed.), 1992 (op. cit.), p. 271.

³⁵ See Yamada Seikichi (山田清吉). 《武漢兵站》(Military Post at Wuhan) (Tokyo: Tosho Shuppansha (图书出版社), 1978) (in Japanese).

³⁶ [i.e. the Japanese-sponsored regimes of Wang Jing-wei (based in Nanjing) and of former Qing Emperor Pu Yi in Manchukuo (Manchuria).]

³⁷ Statement of Akita Matsuyoshi (1954) 秋田松吉1954年呈供自述 (Tokyo: Central Archives, unpublished document) (中央档案馆藏) (in Japanese).

³⁸ Jinhua City Archives (金华市档案馆藏): 《抄呈金华鸡林会会则及名簿文》(Transcription of the membership and regulations of the Jilin Association of Jinhua), January 30, 1945. Archive number: L001-001-636-020.

³⁹ 韩国慰安妇问题对策协议会 (Korean Association for Addressing the Comfort Women Issue): 〔不可擦掉的历史, 日军“慰安妇”〕(History that cannot be erased: Japanese Military “Comfort Women”) 〔Chinese translation (details of publisher not provided), p. 68.

⁴⁰ Sankei Shimbun 産経新聞 January 27, 2014.

⁴¹ Oral testimony of Zhu Yongze transcribed by Lei Dinghua (朱永泽口述雷丁华整理): 《金江、石浮“慰安所”见闻》(Testimony regarding the Shifu [Ishiu] “Comfort Station” in Jinjiang) 〔in Fu Heji (符和积) (ed.), 1996. 〔铁蹄下的腥风雪雨——日军侵琼暴行实录〕(Stinking winds and biting blizzards - Records of Atrocities Committed by Japanese Troops during the invasion of Hainan Island) 〔Sanya: Hainan Publishing House (海南出版社), 1996), Appendix, page 99.

⁴² Statement of War Criminal Ebato Takeshi (绘鸠毅): “Japanese soldiers not only raped ‘comfort women’ but killed and ate them” 战犯绘鸠毅自述: 日军强征慰安妇并杀掉吃肉 〔People’s Daily 人民日报〕September 5, 2014.

⁴³ Central China Expeditionary Force Military Police Commander Ooki Shigeru (华中派遣军宪兵队司令官大木繁): 《关于南京宪兵队辖区治安恢复状况调查之件 (通牒) 》(Regarding the matter of restoring order in the Nanjing Military District (Official Note)) 〔昭和十三年 1938〕February 28. In the Jilin Provincial Archives (吉林省档案馆藏).

⁴⁴ Central China Expeditionary Force Military Police Commander Ōki Shigeru (华中派遣军宪兵队司令官大木繁): 《关于南京宪兵队辖区治安恢复状况调查之件 (通牒) 》(Regarding the matter of restoring order in the Nanjing Military District (Official Note)) 〔中支宪高第二四一号〕, 昭和十三年 1938 〕February 29. In the Jilin Provincial Archives (吉林省档案馆藏). (In Japanese.)

⁴⁵ The Japanese military comfort women system also extended to Burma (Myanmar), but the Burmese authorities or scholarly community has conducted almost no related research.

⁴⁶ Mainly in Hainan, Hunan and Shanxi.

⁴⁷ Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its Causes and Consequences. (Geneva: United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 1996). UN Doc.E/CN.4/1996/53.

⁴⁸ The film *Twenty-two* 二十二, directed by Guo He (郭柯), for which Su Zhiliang acted as consultant, was released to cinemas all over China on August 14, 2017. Within a month, over six million people saw the film, with ticket sales reaching 170 million renminbi – a new record for a Chinese documentary film.

⁴⁹ The documentary *The Comings and Goings at One Comfort Station* (一座慰安所的去与留), broadcast on December 17, 2016 on the CCTV News Channel, discussed the issue of whether the building of Shanghai’s “Ocean House” (海乃家) comfort station ought to be preserved, showing highly varying responses from officials, local citizens and students. This broadcast attracted considerable public notice.

⁵⁰ The second Comfort Women Museums Symposium is due to be held in China in 2018.

[Translator’s note: this event was cancelled at short notice by the Chinese authorities - see article by Vickers in this special issue.]