

Gender, Dehumanization, and Sexual Violence in Regards to the Greater East Asian War

Often times when studying history's atrocities, events are simplified into simplistic black and white. Events are isolated and given little to no context portrayed as blemishes on a greater record. However, that is not how history plays out, things are muddled and interconnected, so when dealing with a heavy topic such as Comfort Women, the cultural context, the views of the society and its leaders throughout time, as well as the views of the victims themselves must be taken into account. Societies do not commit atrocities on a whim, the Comfort Women and the actions of the Japanese government during the war in regards to sexual violence are not random, but rather a buildup of cultural beliefs and attitudes towards women, and foreigners. In this essay, I will analyze the cultural attitudes that led up to the institution of the Comfort Women system and attempt to answer the question of what culture and behavior led to the mass government-mandated sexual violence. However, to do this I will also examine the attitudes around Korean women, who were the majority of the Comfort Women, and the testimonials of Chinese women. Through examination of Japanese laws and rhetoric towards women, examination of Korea's political views on sex and gender, as well as testimonial evidence, I believe will answer the question in regards to what culture and behaviors led to mass government-mandated sexual violence.

Following the Battle of Sekihighara and the establishment of the Tokugawa Shogunate, Japan went into a period of isolationism, lasting more than 200 years. Only ending in 1853 when Commodore Perry came to force open Japanese borders. Following this was the Meiji Restoration which promised to make a lot of fundamental changes to Japanese society, and restore power to the emperor, and eradicate the caste system. The end of the rigid caste system and institution of a more democratic system on the surface seemed to give power back to the

people. Though the Constitution of 1889 made it was clear that despite the promises made in the Charter Oath this could not be farther from the truth. Following this legislation was also passed in 1890 that prevented women from being in political parties or going to political meetings.

Nolte and Hastings' book, *Recreating Japanese Women*, makes the case that this decision was based on one trying to weaken the People's Rights Movement that had many rural women decrying the patriarchal family structure, as well as taking the responsibility of taking care of the young and old off of the government and putting the responsibility into women's hands. Stating directly,

"In the two decades between 1890 and 1910, the Japanese state pieced together a policy toward women based on two assumptions: that the family was an essential building block of the national structure and that the management of the household was increasingly in women's hands. The family relieved the state of responsibility for the old, young, and ill; taught acceptance of one's proper place in the social hierarchy; and performed as a more efficient economic and productive unit than the individual"¹.

Japanese women did the majority of industrialized work so to make the argument of frailty made in western nations wouldn't make sense in Japan's cultural climate. An argument did need to be presented though and the Meiji reformers were interested in keeping power firmly in the hands of the ruling class while making it seem like radical changes were being made. The patriarchal family structure and putting the responsibility of family health solely on women, allowed the government to not make policy changes to help the sick, old, or children, but rather put that responsibility on women. The government also needed to keep encouraging them to provide economic labor, which they benefited from. Like its said above, women were seen as a productive unit for the nation rather than an individual. This idea coincides with what Tokutomi IIChiro states in his pre-war justification, "In Nippon, the nation is valued first, then next the

¹ Nolte, S. H., & Hastings, S. A., "The Meiji State's Policy Toward Women, 1890–1910" in *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945* (University of California Press 1991) 171.

family, and last the individual”². This can be seen in the basis of the law, the Meiji leaders believed that by placing the burden on women they could achieve what was good for the sake of their vision, while also maintaining the patriarchal family structure. Women in the Meiji Restoration were a means of production for the nation and caretakers for the family. This attitude of seeing women as a means of production rather than an individual may have contributed to how women were treated during The Greater East Asian War. Sarah Soh states in this regard, “Since Korea was under Japanese colonial rule from 1910 to 1945, Japan chose to use Korean women as sex laborers while urging Japanese women to marry young and bear many children to fulfill ‘the national mission of motherhood.’”³ The Japanese government had a vested interest in keeping women in this role of production this evident by the fact that Japanese women weren’t given the vote until 1946 and not formally until 1947. Also, the fact that women were expected to be educated, work full-time and care for their children, parents, the sick, and the old within their families. It is clear that women’s place in Japanese society was service and sacrifice for the nation and family. The place of women in such a thankless and inferior status may have led to the Japanese military leader’s institutionalization of sexual slavery, as they saw the role of women as servant/producers for the nation and expected sacrifice along those lines.

The vast majority of comfort women came from Korea so it is also important to document the cultural views around women in Korea. Scholar Sarah Soh documents the attitudes towards the women in Korea in her article, “The Korean “Comfort Women”: Movement for Redress”. She states,

“In the traditional Korean patriarchy, the sexual culture condoned, if not encouraged sexual freedom for men (infidelity if married), while women’s sexuality was rigidly

² “Commentary on the Declaration of War,” in *Sources of Japanese Tradition, Volume Two*, eds. Tsunoda Ryusaku, Wm. Theodore de Bary, and Donald Keene (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 293.

³ Soh, C. S.. The Korean “Comfort Women”: Movement for Redress. (*Asian Survey*, 36(12) Dec., 1996), 1228.

controlled by standards of virginity/chastity. Unmarried women had to maintain their virginity until marriage and widows were expected to be chaste. Regardless of the individual circumstances, women who lost their chastity were considered sullied, made to feel ashamed, and likely to be ostracized even by their own families.”⁴

Women in Korea faced patriarchal ideals about sex, and unmarried women were expected to maintain their virginity. Women bore the responsibility for their virginity and even if raped they were considered not pure. Even widows were not expected to practice sexual freedom and remain chaste. Women who were raped or had consensual sexual relations outside of marriage were looked down upon. Soh also notes a recent trend that further illustrates how Korea views sex and sexual violence,

“In recent years, young male criminals in South Korea have taken advantage of this traditional view by raping women in front of members of their families in order to ensure that the robbery would not be reported to police. The media refers to these raping robbers as “family-destroying criminals” (kajong p’agoebom) because of the shattering impact of their behavior on the viability of the family; the raped woman is now sullied in the eyes of her husband, herself, and other members of the family, which may eventually break up under the psychological strain”⁵

The culture around women and sex in Korea is very conservative, the fact that a family will not report a robbery because they don’t want public shame almost paints a perfect picture for the exploitation of women and the institution of mass sexual violence. Of course not every family in Korea acts this way or holds this belief, but if this has become such a major trend it reasonable to address it as such. A standard method of recruitment for the Comfort Centers was to lie to poor Korean women and tell them they would be getting factory jobs or something along those lines and then sending them to Comfort Centers. A society in which women bear the brunt for sexual violence would be convenient in covering up the mass sexual violence perpetuated as this poor women even if they did survive sexual slavery would not likely speak about it, as it could risk them being outcasted from their homes and communities. These women would have to bear all

⁴ Soh, 1229.

⁵ Soh, 1230.

the shame for the violence committed against them and Japan's institution of sexual slavery would remain hidden. Largely this is what happened, Soh details,

"In the sexual mores of the Korean patriarchal family, then, it is understandable that the survivors of sexual slavery wished to conceal and forget their tragic past lives as "comfort women," if only to avoid the shame they would bring to their families. Some of these women actually committed suicide, and the aging survivors were resigned to keeping their deep han (resentment and anger) to themselves until 1991 when Kim Hak-sun came forth to testify to her life as a "comfort woman."⁶

Now this is not to put the blame on the victims or Korea as a whole. It is rather possible evidence that Japan, seeing that their colonial territory had very traditional patriarchal views towards women and sex, took advantage of those policies. Who's to say had Korea had more open views on women and sex, that Japanese military would believe that they would be able to cover up a crime of such a magnitude. However, what we do know is that for many years the Comfort Women and their stories were not told due to shame and fear of the backlash the women would face due to traditional patriarchal values.

The Comfort Women system was instituted in reaction to the Rape of Nanjing in which there was mass sexual violence towards Chinese women and murder of men, women, and children. Yoshida's *The Making of the Rape of Nanjing*, documents the buildup as well as the event, giving examples of how remorseless the soldiers were, "The inmate boasted to Kaji that he had performed beheadings and committed rape during his service in the military in 1932."⁷ A frightening reaction to taking human life and causing trauma and suffering. Its sociopathic to brag about yet this attitude wasn't uncommon during the war. For example, a Buddhist monk who joined the war believed that religion could transcend even the war itself yet, "When he volunteered for military service, he thought he'd be willing to pray for the Chinese dead. But could not do so when he came to the battlefield."⁸ This level of dehumanization is essential to

⁶ Soh, 1230.

⁷ Yoshida Takashi, *The Making of the Rape of Nanjing*, (New York, Oxford Press 2006) 23.

⁸ Yoshida, 22.

understanding the sexual violence that occurred in Nanjing. The book, *Chinese Comfort Women*, states,

“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.”⁹

The sexual violence seen in Nanjing and the Chinese Comfort Women can also be seen under this lens. As it was a performative act in order to desecrate the nation. When they violated these women, they did not see human beings but rather a way to further desecrate China and humiliate its people, a way to vent the frustration of the war (of course this is all based on my findings and limited research I have done). There is documentation of this an example coming from a Chinese comfort women named Li, who was murdered, “The squad leader vented his rage on Li. He ripped off her clothes, pushed her to the ground, poured a bucket of cold water through her nose and mouth, stomped repeatedly on her abdomen, and then let a military dog maul her to death.”¹⁰ This is only one example of the many accounts of the brutal sexual violence and murder committed by the Japanese soldiers. Violence of this type was committed all over China happened. Takashi Yoshida documents how Kosaka and Oya viewed the China, Kosaka more focused on anti-Japanese sentiment was frustrated by anti-japanese slogans, whereas Oya noticed the droves of unburied Chinese corpses and that the civilians were hiding. Some many corpse that Oya could not drive through and had to be careful not to step on them. The levels of sexual violence are more understandable when put in the context of the dehumanization of the Chinese.

Cultural context is essential in understanding atrocities. The mass scale sexual violence and the institution of the comfort women makes more sense when put in the context of how

⁹ Qiu PeiPei, Zhiliang Su, & Lifei Chen, *Chinese Comfort Women: Testimonies From Imperial Japan's Sex Slaves*, (Oxford University Press New York 2013) 23.

¹⁰ Qiu PeiPei, Zhiliang Su, Lifei Chen, 68.

women were viewed as productive units in Japanese society, the victim-blaming in Korea, and the dehumanization of the Chinese people during the war. What happened in Nanjing, and the institution of Comfort Women was not a hiccup in Japanese history or an isolated incident, it was a buildup of cultural views and the mass dehumanization of a people resulting in horrific violence and sexual exploitation.

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