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*To Bear in Silence: How the Erasure of 'Comfort Women' in Taiwan Leads to the Dismissal of
their Tragedy*

Sofia Monteleone

Taiwan is a nation with a history littered with secret atrocities hidden from public disclosure by the past powers occupying the island. While most tend to be familiar with massacres committed and later censored by the Kuomintang during their occupation of Taiwan, another atrocity was committed years earlier under Japanese colonial rule, although with much less global recognition. This was the introduction of “comfort women,” women who were forced or tricked by the Japanese colonial government to serve as sex slaves for their soldiers in the second Sino-Japanese War. These women hailed from all of Japan’s colonized or occupied areas across East Asia, from “Korea, Taiwan, China, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia).”¹ The disappearances of these daughters, wives, and sisters, were hidden and censored from the public, obscuring their tragedy. In this paper, I intend to explain who Taiwanese “comfort women” are, including how they attempted to give voice to their experiences, as well as explain the factors that contributed to the silencing of their voices, including how they have been caught as a political tool between multiple fighting powers, the identity politics surrounding Taiwan as a nation, and the economic and educational disparity between lower and upper-class women.

It is crucial to understand what exactly “comfort women” were in the context of Taiwan to understand how their part of the historical narrative has been exempted to serve as a political tool. In summary, they were sex slaves to the Japanese army during the second Sino-Japanese war. Japanese soldiers had been raping villages wherever they were stationed, so to control and

¹ Hayashi Yōko, “Issues Surrounding the Wartime ‘Comfort Women,’” *Review of Japanese Culture and Society*, vol.11/12 (1999-2000): p.56

institutionalize their actions, as Japanese lawyer Dr. Hayashi Yōko (1956-) explains, “the army’s administrative body furnished soldiers with ‘comfort women’ to ‘dispose of their sexual desires’ and to prevent sexually transmitted diseases,”² however, this only transferred the victims of rape to the women of their occupied colonies, who were often deceived or forced into this “job.” Historian Shogo Suzuki (~1977-) notes that many women “[believed] they would be working as kitchen assistants, nurses, waitresses, or performing other domestic tasks,” while others were “forcibly collected or allocated the task by local authorities,” and others still were “sent overseas as nurses only to be forced to serve as ‘comfort women’ upon arrival.”³ In stark contrast to the young, sexually inexperienced women forcibly recruited from the colonies, Japanese “comfort women” were drafted as middle-aged prostitutes. This highlights an institutionalized hypocrisy recognized by the Japanese government, as they chose not to subject their own young daughters to their system, but would subject the daughters of their colonies.⁴ When the war finally did end, the “comfort women” were either executed, ordered to commit ritual suicide with soldiers, killed in trenches, or abandoned and left to find a way to return home by themselves.⁵ If they made it back to Taiwan, they faced a culture with no love for them and began living under the new KMT government that preferred to silence them to further their own political agenda.

In Margaret Mitsutani’s article “Fifty Years of Silence: Three Taiwanese Women” (2001), published in the award-winning *Mānoa* literary journal, which includes American and international contemporary works with original translations, she translates accounts from three former Taiwanese “comfort women” detailing their suffering during and after their “employment.” These three women, Gao Baozhu (~1921-?), Chen Tao (1922-?), and Lu Manmei

² Ibid., 55

³ Shogo Suzuki, “The Competition to Attain Justice for Past Wrongs: The ‘Comfort Women’ Issue in Taiwan” *Pacific Affairs*, vol.84, No.2 (1011): p.226

⁴ Yōko, “Issues Surrounding Wartime ‘Comfort Women,’” 56

⁵ Ibid., 55

(~1921-?), while all taken at very young ages (seventeen, nineteen, and seventeen respectively), came from different backgrounds and had vastly different experiences at the hands of the Japanese army.

Gao Baozhu received a Japanese education and was deeply loyal and patriotic to the Japanese government. She was taken to Guangdong, then Hong Kong, and finally Burma. When the war ended she was told to go home but had no money to get herself there. With the help of a soldier, she was taken to Vietnam; she then stayed there to earn money to go home but was robbed of all her possessions. She managed to find someone to send a telegram to, which allowed her to contact her family and return home. She had been in service for over three and a half years but lost track of how long it took her to return to Taiwan. Upon her return, she was greeted with a culture of shame and could only find jobs that kept her indoors. Her relatives refused to contact her and she became an alcoholic to cope with her experience. She still expresses herself as firmly Japanese, stating she did what she did because she was loyal to Japan, but that she has suffered without any help from her former government.

Chen Tao was told she would be working as a nurse, but instead was stationed in multiple comfort stations, from Saigon to Singapore. She was told to sleep with at least ten men a day, although sometimes it was more than twenty. She attempted to run away but was dragged back by a warden. From details in her report, it appears she served for about a year and a half. She escaped with help from a head nurse at a field hospital, and returned to Taiwan, supporting herself by becoming a seamstress. She later married, but due to her traumatic experience became infertile, and after her husband died was left with no job or a way to support herself.

Lu Manmei came from a poor, uneducated family, and was recruited by a Japanese policeman who offered to give her a job. She was stationed at Hainan Dao where she was forced

to have sex with upwards of twenty men a day, resulting in a pregnancy that eventually, at eight months of growth, allowed her to be sent home, where the baby would die shortly after its birth. She was trapped there for about a year and a half. Back in Taiwan, her status as a former “comfort woman” left her isolated from romantic and platonic relationships.

The demographic difference between these women highlights Japan’s indiscriminate and far-reaching selection of “comfort women.” Gao Baozhu was highly nationalistic towards Japan, yet lost her dignity, economic foundation, and familial relationships because of the government. Chen Tao was robbed of her fertility, ruining any chance of forming a family of her own in the future. Her account revealed how women were imprisoned, tracked down, and dragged back if they attempted escape. All these women served at young ages for no more than four years, yet in this seemingly short amount of time endured intense changes to their minds, bodies, and statuses. In the period when this article was published, two women were impoverished, with Lu Manmei living off welfare and Chen Tao being homeless. Gao Baozhu and Lu Manmei both begged the Japanese government to think of them when considering reparations, showing the desperation of these women who have not received justice even into their old age.

Despite their attempts to speak out about their experiences, Taiwanese “comfort women” were silenced by both the Japanese government, who occupied Taiwan from 1895 to 1945, as well as the Kuomintang, who stayed in power from 1949 to the end of martial law in 1987. Only when martial law ended were they able to finally bring the issue to the world stage through social activism. It should be noted that these victims do not want to be called “comfort women,” with many openly rejecting the term in interviews and accounts, yet the name assigned to them by their patriarchal oppressors continues to be the most accepted term about them.⁶ This epitomizes

⁶ Ibid.

a historical precedent when it comes to bringing justice for “comfort women”: others would rather ignore the wishes of these women for the sake of their convenience.

Both the Japanese after leaving Taiwan, as well as the Kuomintang during their occupation, silenced the voices of “comfort women” to further their political agendas. Initially, the Japanese government denied the forced employment “comfort women,” and as Dr. Hayashi Yōko explains, “the Japanese government [was] still insistent that although it admitted the involvement of the Japanese Army, there was no evidence that the women had been forcibly recruited or subjected to forced prostitution against their will.”⁷ Thanks to pushback they would eventually admit to their crimes, but their original denial silenced the voices of their victims and portrayed them as willing or desperate prostitutes. The Japanese Ministry of Education then hid the existence of “comfort women” from history books to preserve their reputation to their citizens. As Dr. Suzuki Shogo explains, “[they] viewed the inclusion of the ‘comfort women’ issue in Japanese historical textbooks as unpardonably masochistic and detrimental to fostering a sense of nationalist pride among Japan’s youth.”⁸ Just as how the Japanese army administration originally created the system of “comfort women” due to the barbaric reputation they received from soldiers aggressively raping conquered areas, this continued to institutionalize injustices to protect Japanese interests.

Once Japan retreated from Taiwan and the Kuomintang settled in, they gave the “comfort women issue” no space to demand justice due to the Kuomintang’s political, and economic need for Japan in the Cold War.⁹ The Kuomintang entered Taiwan into a new age of censorship and repression where speaking out about injustices could be a death sentence, as seen from the victims of 2-28; I believe that for “comfort women” this meant that due to the changing political

⁷ Ibid., 58

⁸ Suzuki, “The Competition to Attain Justice for Past Wrongs,” 229

⁹ Ibid., 231

landscape, their leaders silenced their tragedy to gain favor on the world stage at the expense of women's ability to gain justice.

In addition to their silencing due to politics, many Taiwanese "comfort women" experienced social isolation and degradation as a result of their experiences. If and when these women returned to Taiwan they were brought face to face with a culture that showed no sympathy for their experiences, instead shaming them for something they had no choice in. Former 'comfort woman' Gao Baozhu (1921-?) spoke of her experience, stating "back in Taiwan, I was so ashamed of having been a 'comfort woman' that I didn't want to show my face outside. People hired me for jobs that can be done in the house, and so somehow I've managed to live for the last fifty years."¹⁰ Survivors had to return to a largely patriarchal society, which alongside the physical, mental, and emotional effects they had suffered through, likely contributed to why it took them almost fifty years to bring their experiences to light.

An often overlooked factor that likely contributed both to the selection of Taiwanese "comfort women" to be forced into the system, as well as a factor behind their struggles to have their voices heard, was their access to economics and education. This may have determined whether or not she would be selected as a 'comfort woman,' as well as informed her response to the plight of "comfort women" after the war. Historians Hong Yuru and Ko Ikujo contend that Taiwan's education was based on a Japanese "strategy of cultural integration" and "assimilation for political control" which attempted to force Taiwan to adhere to Japanese cultural components by giving more value to those who adapted to be the most 'Japanese.'¹¹ Yuru and Ikujo continue by arguing that education was viewed by ordinary families as a means to "mobilize economic

¹⁰ Margaret Mitsutani, "Fifty Years of Silence: Three Taiwanese Women," *Mānoa*, vol.13 no.1 (2001): p.177

¹¹ Yuru Hong and Ikujo Ko, "Taiwanese Female Students in Japan Under Colonial Rule" *Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies*, Vol.41, no.2 (2010), p.39

and human resources to face various restrictions and discrimination under colonial rule.”¹² Well-off families were more easily able to afford the kind of social mobility that education afforded, to an extent allowing their children to become more acceptable in the eyes of the colonialists. While it would be easy to assume that upper-class Taiwanese women who could afford to receive a Japanese education would be spared in the selection of “comfort women,” this was not necessarily the case. Gao Baozhu recalls her shock at being forced into servitude by stating, “I could never have imagined it. But I had gotten a Japanese education, so I obeyed, thinking I had to do what the government told me to do.”¹³ Her higher education, which had groomed her assimilation and obedience to the Japanese government, should have been her key to a wealthy, stable life, but she was not spared the fate of her less-educated counterparts.

The attempt to find social mobility through academic study resulted in specific choices in fields and majors for women. One of these popular fields of study among Taiwanese women was medicine and pharmacy: their association with high-status occupations allowed women to become key in strategies for social mobility.¹⁴ Yet, according to the account of Lu Manmei, who did not have an education, a Japanese policeman recruited her through the offer of working as a nurse.¹⁵ The Japanese army using nurses as a pretense for recruitment preyed on the idea that they were associated with social and economic mobility, in turn preying on poor families. I believe that since many of the women forced to be “comfort women” came from poorer backgrounds without much access to education, this may have contributed to them initially being prevented from taking legal action against the Japanese or using official means to bring their

¹² Ibid., 52

¹³ Mitsutani, “Fifty Years of Silence: Three Taiwanese Women,” p.176

¹⁴ Ibid., 48

¹⁵ Mitsutani, “Fifty Years of Silence: Three Taiwanese Women,” p.178

situation to light. They had neither the money nor resources to resist the systems of oppression they were put in after their experience.

There is another demographic of women essential to understanding the perspective of these Taiwanese women. The term ‘comfort woman’ is more commonly associated with Korean women because they were the first group among the women affected to speak out against the Japanese government. This came to a head in the 1990s when Professor Yun Jeong Ok at Iwha Women’s University published a series of articles on “comfort women” from a culminated ten years of research, which sparked activists to make demands towards the Japanese government to take responsibility for their colonization and give reparations to “comfort women.”¹⁶ With the movement quickly gaining traction and support, survivors of sex slavery began coming forward with their accounts, resulting in a lawsuit against the Japanese government on the basis of human rights.¹⁷

Both Korea and Taiwan have had their issues surrounding “comfort women” brushed aside for the sake of economics and politics. As Dai-Sil Kim-Gibson declares in her novel “Silence Broken,” which uses testimonies of Korean “comfort women” to expose the truths of Japanese sex slavery, the “infamous 1965 treaty between Japan and Korea was a clear expression of the government’s priorities. Economic interests outweighed human rights, especially women’s rights,” which Taiwan experienced similarly as the Kuomintang needed Japan as a trade partner in the cold war.¹⁸ Additionally, a layer of racial bias is at play in how these women were able to achieve justice, as it took half a century for Korean women and other Asian women such as

¹⁶ Yōko, “Issues Surrounding Wartime ‘Comfort Women,’” 56

¹⁷ Ibid., 57-58

¹⁸ Dai-Sil Kim-Gibson, *Silence Broken*. (Parkersburg, Iowa: Mid-Prarie Books, 1999) 7

Indonesians and Filipinos to bring their issue to light, as compared to the Dutch women in the Dutch Indies who quickly received a trial and reparations.¹⁹

A question exists: Why were Korean women able to bring a voice to their experience much earlier than Taiwanese women? I believe this was due to the culture of repression that Taiwan experienced under the Kuomintang via censorship laws becoming deeply rooted in Taiwanese society, as well as the lesser number of Taiwanese women that were “employed.” As Dr. Suzuki points out, “the issue continues to enjoy relatively greater domestic societal attention, largely due to the fact that it has become an important (if not exclusive) focal point for Korean nationalist narratives.”²⁰ Dr. Suzuki continues by stating that similarly to Korea, “state-sponsored nationalism in Taiwan has been based on narratives of victimization by Japan.”²¹ This seems as though it would be helpful in attaining justice for Japan’s crimes, but unlike Korea, Taiwan immediately experienced a slough of horrors under the Kuomintang’s bloody regime. Due to this, much of Taiwan’s focus on attaining justice has been focused on obtaining justice from Chiang Kai Shek’s Republic of China, leaving many of the victims of Japan’s crimes sidelined and prevented from becoming key to a nationalistic Taiwanese struggle as victims had become in Korea.

When it comes to the demands on human rights violations, the identity politics surrounding Taiwan and its relationship with mainland China, officially the People’s Republic of China, have taken precedence over seeking reparations for Taiwanese “comfort women.” After martial law ended, many victims of Kuomintang brutalities were able to attain justice and unearth previously heavily censored events, such as the massacre of 20,000 Taiwanese in order to remove potential opposition to Chiang Kai-Shek’s rule after the 2-28 riots in Taipei. Yet, as

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Suzuki, “The Competition to Attain Justice for Past Wrongs,” 230

²¹ Ibid.

Dr. Suzuki argues, those affected by these murders allowed their “strong sense of betrayal by Chiang Kai Shek’s repressive policies” which resulted in them “effectively crowding out the ‘comfort women’ issue.”²² It should be noted that the vast majority of victims of the 20,000 murders in the wake of 2-28 were men; Suzuki suggests that while these deaths were horrific, Taiwan’s focus on them over “comfort women” could be “a product of a patriarchal view of history which sees women’s rights to be of marginal importance.”²³ Even though both this massacre and the “comfort women issue” are equally traumatic for the associated victims, one is viewed as more traumatic in Taiwan’s cultural consciousness.

Taiwan’s political culture shifted to debates on “Taiwanese” identity as nationalistic to the Chinese mainland or a newly independent Taiwan, bringing with it a historical narrative depicting Taiwan as a nation under constant foreign domination. This pushed for a united Taiwanese identity as a result of the shared suffering from Dutch, Japanese, and Kuomintang occupations.²⁴ While this shaded version of history should allow for the exploration of victimization under Japanese colonialism, because Taiwan’s sociopolitical focus remains squarely on creating a Taiwanese identity separate from mainland China, whether it be PRC or ROC, they have seemingly dismissed their history with Japanese war crimes.²⁵ Aside from a lesser interest in “comfort women” due to this political debate, the trauma suffered at the hands of Japan is something shared by both mainland China and Taiwan, albeit in different ways, which may be a contributing factor to why the Japanese have been less discussed in this clash of identity. Yet for “comfort women,” like their intentional silencing in the past, this means their struggles continue to be disregarded in favor of a different political problem.

²² Ibid., 234, 240

²³ Ibid., 233

²⁴ Ibid., 237

²⁵ Ibid.

The silencing of the 'comfort women', while an injustice on its own, is indicative of a larger pattern of women's injustices being swept away in the political consciousness in favor of issues pertaining to men. Whether it be the education system being taken advantage of in order to force desperate women to become sex slaves, the revisionist history created afterward as the Japanese attempted to shift the blame for their actions, or the Kuomintang's repressive policies hiding "comfort women" in order to use Japan as leverage, these perceptions of women have shifted and changed in order to hide their existence for another power's political priority. While justice for "comfort women" in Korea has become a nationalistic rallying cry, in Taiwan the issue has been shoved aside in order to define their own sense of nationalism. These Taiwanese women who have been given the 'comfort' label through no will of their own have lived in a world where their history was dictated by men in power and a history that cares more about receiving justice for their 'Taiwanese'-ness rather than their 'woman'-hood. The seal of silence has been broken on these atrocities, and with women defying the secrecy and censorship attributed to their experiences, now demanding justice for the crimes against more than their national identity, but also their shared experience as women.

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