

# Suffering in Silence: Unearthing the Truth of the Comfort Women System's Legacy through Testimonies of Chinese Comfort Women

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## Abstract

The system of comfort women, established by the Japanese military during World War II, subjected countless women to sexual slavery and exploitation. While some recognition has been accorded to South Korean comfort women through the redress movement, Chinese comfort women's stories have remained largely hidden from the world. The socio-political issues surrounding the documentation and acknowledgment of comfort women have played a pivotal role in the suppression of Chinese comfort women's narratives. These issues range from historical tensions between China and Japan, the stigmatization of victims within their societies, and the lack of a comprehensive redress movement on behalf of Chinese survivors. The aim of this paper is to expose the comfort system as a system of prostitution in war zones and shed light on the untold stories of Chinese women who suffered as comfort women during the Japanese occupation. While the experiences of South Korean comfort women have gained international attention through the redress movement, the struggles of Chinese women have largely been excluded from post-war narratives, overshadowed by various socio-political complexities. This paper seeks to address this historical oversight and bring attention to the harrowing experiences endured by Chinese women in Japanese military comfort stations. This research employs a combination of archival studies and oral history interviews to piece together the untold stories of Chinese comfort women. By examining primary and secondary sources, the paper aims to reveal the atrocities perpetrated against these women and the long-lasting impact on their lives.

**Keywords:** Chinese comfort women; Rape; Sexual slavery; Torture.

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## Background

Between 1932 and 1945 (the end of the Second World War), a system of institutionalized prostitution was established by Imperial Japan with the help of the Japanese government. This institutionalized mass rape was carried out by establishing 'comfort stations' or war brothels, which were first set up by the Japanese military forces during their war with China. The first few brothels were opened for soldiers and other officers in and around Shanghai in 1932 (Hicks et al., 44). Setting up comfort stations around the Japanese army bases was a strategically planned effort to satisfy the needs of young soldiers and commanders. Women were forced to live like livestock in small compartments with only a bamboo mattress on which they had to perform their duties. Given Japan's organized approach to military prostitution, the Japanese Army personnel stated that the existence of such comfort stations was necessary to prevent rape and reduce venereal disease among the Japanese troops. Comfort women were often referred to as 'public toilets,' clearly reflecting their status and position in society (Watanabe, 19-31). Japanese soldiers used euphemistic names to refer to comfort stations, such as "The Imperial Guest House," "Entertainment Facility," "Soldiers' Paradise," "Happy House," and "Japan-China Friendship House," which further highlight the absurdity and wickedness of these men.

Japanese forces were infamous for illegally occupying land and turning Chinese properties such as schools, houses, public bathing places, motels, banks, and even places of worship into their sexual slavery stations. For camps where the terrain was not suitable for building a comfort station, or where the population of comfort women was very sporadic, mobile comfort stations were used (Bellows 73-96). These comfort stations on wheels were very similar to vehicles like trains or carriages, and the Guangdong Army reportedly had many of these trains. According to information gathered from the testimonies of comfort women, most of these stations barely had any basic means of living, let alone any 'facilities.' They were devoid of doors, and sometimes even walls were missing. Curtains were used to provide a temporary partition, and many stations did not even have beds; women were raped and forced to sleep on earthen floors. Some of the huts had approximately ten rooms, each divided with a temporary door or curtained with straw mats. In order of preference, Korean and Japanese women were most sought after, followed by Chinese and, lastly, South Asian women, who were generally darker in complexion and hence not desired (Hicks 47). Yamada Seikichi, the head of the China Detachment Army Comfort Facilities, also revealed that as soon as these comfort

women were recruited, they were examined by officers, and their photographs were taken along with relevant details of their family registry. They were also forced to write a pledge of service along with a consent form signed by their guardians. This process of registration was usually carried out for women who were transported from Japan to China, not for the local Chinese women who were mostly abducted (Qiu et al. 88). The history of prostitution in Shanghai goes back to the 1880s when the city was a regular Japanese Navy base. The Japanese army emulated the navy's wrongdoings and began establishing comfort stations. Lieutenant-General Okabe Naoyabura wrote in his diary about the animalistic behavior of the soldiers, who regularly went on quests to hunt for women in nearby villages, and how difficult it was to control the troops when they were not engaged in battle. As a result, Okamura allowed the creation of comfort stations, and the drafting of women began with the support of the Japanese government. Records maintained during the Nanjing Massacre, where thousands of Chinese locals were brutally murdered, burned, and buried, indicate that the Japanese military had already started its treacherous plan of enslaving Chinese women (Hicks 45).

### **Who were the Comfort Women?**

The term "comfort women" can be understood as an English translation of the Japanese euphemism "ianfu" (Hicks 19). These comfort women came from various nationalities, including Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Filipino. Most of the women were lured by job offers such as working in restaurants, as nannies, in industries, and so on. Many of them were enticed to leave their homes to earn money and provide financial aid to their families. At the same time, some women were attacked, kidnapped, and brutally raped in front of their families, forcefully captured, and threatened at gunpoint. Roughly 80% of comfort women were of Korean origin because, since 1920, the Korean Peninsula was under Japanese control. Most of the data related to comfort stations was procured from the hotlines that were established in 1992 to gather information about the status of comfort women, especially in Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka (17). These statistics revealed crucial data related to the age of the women offering services, most of who were aged between 14 and 18. This licensed prostitution did not only destroy the bodies of comfort women internally but also made them develop a strong feeling of hatred towards men and sex in general. As most women were aware of the importance of chastity and the intensity of abuse they would be subjected, they preferred to take their own lives by either stealing the pistols of their customers and shooting themselves or drinking cyanide.

The very title is ironic considering the horrors and torture these “comfort women” endured at the hands of the Japanese military. Details about these comfort women and how they were recruited and treated appeared in memoirs, novels, photographs, articles, films, and legal documents written during the war. However, the issue only gained attention after the rise of the comfort women’s redress movement in the early 1990s. The condition of comfort women stationed at the front was the worst. They resided in poorly constructed huts that were buildings in name only, and the tropical jungle posed a threat from wild animals. However, it was not lions and tigers that these women dreaded but humans, particularly the military, especially when they came in troops. Given the scarcity of women, these men were too numerous, and since they considered this their last chance to indulge in pleasure before entering the battlefield, they were drunk with passion. If comfort women, after performing sexual acts for hours straight, looked weak or mechanical, the men would become hostile and aggressive.

### **Nature of the Comfort Women-system through the eyes of survivors**

In the famous work, “Chinese Comfort Women: Testimonies from Imperial Japan’s Sex Slaves,” Peipei Qiu, along with Su Zhiliang and Chen Lifei, conducted in-person interviews with twelve former comfort women over ten years (1998-2008). However, by the time the book was published, seven out of these twelve women had passed away. Aware that the interviews would be difficult for the women to process, the interviewers were highly cautious of the questions they asked. It wasn’t only the torture that these former comfort women suffered but also the post-war neglect, humiliation, and social stigma to which they were subjected that made the situation more delicate and difficult to talk about. Most comfort women were from rural areas where people had strong feelings towards the subjects of virginity and chastity, and that was one of the reasons why these victims preferred to hide their trauma based on the lives they led during the war (Bukh 686-92). For instance, even though evidence shows the existence of many comfort stations near Yunnan Province, the number of victims who came forward to share their stories was negligible. Yuan Zhulin, one such comfort woman who revealed her identity, was not only exiled from Wuhan but also forced to live on a deserted farm in Heilongjiang Province for almost twenty years. When she was invited to represent Chinese comfort women at the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery in 2000, Zhulin had mixed feelings about the situation. Her anguish and anxiety were so intense that she decided she would not participate in the proceedings because it involved retelling

the brutal things the Japanese did to her. However, through Chen Lifei's constant support and kind words, she was finally able to overcome her fear and delivered a powerful speech in court. Therefore, keeping in mind their mental condition, both Su and Chen made efforts to conduct these interviews in comfortable spaces where the survivors would feel at peace.

Regarding the questions during the interview, three common questions were asked of these twelve survivors, which were related to their experiences both during and after the war ended.

These included:

1. The survivors' lives before the invasion: family and personal history.
2. How did she end up as a comfort woman? How many people were involved in the process, and were there any witnesses? How did these comfort stations operate? What was the treatment like, and how did her life as a comfort woman end?
3. Is she married or does she have any children? What kind of relationship does she share with her family members, friends, and relatives? Does she feel any strain in the relationships she has with them because she was once a comfort woman? Has she experienced any psychological trauma? What kind of life is she currently living? (104)
4. Even though the questions were definite and designed efficiently, the interviewers ensured that no specific time was allotted to any survivor so that the entire process was flexible. Both Suh and Chen wanted to make sure that the interview was modeled like a conversation, complying with the expectations and needs of each interviewee. The interviewers also undertook the responsibility of personally verifying every detail shared during each survivor's oral retelling of their experiences. Verification included the location of the comfort station, collecting data in the form of testimonies from local people/probable witnesses, and ultimately cross-checking the details mentioned during the interview with local historical records available from government bodies.

## **Eastern Coastal Region**

### **Lei Guiying**

One of the first interviews conducted was with former comfort woman Lei Guiying who, at the tender age of thirteen, was forced into sexual Slavery.

Coming from a village called Guantangyan, Lei was raised by a single mother who was abducted by a group of men while on her way to work. Lei stated that such abductions were common during those days because men who were too poor to afford a proper wedding would often snatch random women to marry them. Before her disappearance, Lei's mother entrusted her to a neighbor along with some money, but since the woman herself had a big family to feed, she sent Lei to another family as their "child-daughter-in-law." Even though Lei was not aware of the actual meaning of the term, she had little choice in the matter. Soon, Lei was moved to Wang-jiabian Village near Tuqiao Town and started living with her husband, who was much older than her. She recalled being nine years old when the Japanese came to raid her village (Qiu et al. 108). People, scared for their lives, started digging holes in the ground to escape the attack. Lei and her mother-in-law hid in a small hole and refused to stay in a bigger hole with her sisters-in-law, stating that if the Japanese found her, she would risk the entire family's lives as well. Lei ran away to Tangshan, where she would beg with only a bowl and a pair of chopsticks in her hand. One day, she was approached by an old lady who offered her meals in exchange for some work, and Lei, having no job or home, readily agreed to the kind offer. It was only much later that she found out it was a military brothel, also known as a comfort station.

During the initial days, she worked as a nanny and maid. Lei recalled sleeping in a storage room next to a kitchen. Adjacent to this was a huge room where thirteen girls lived. Even though none of them could speak Japanese properly, they were dressed in Japanese robes with flowers in their hair. Lei also recounted horrible incidents, such as one where one of her companions had been raped continuously, which led to her belly becoming enormously swollen. Upon seeing this horror, the older girls massaged her abdomen, causing blood and fluid to gush out and cover the entire floor. Lei witnessed a murder where one of the girls was burned on a pile of firewood after being tortured to death. She herself was a victim of this torture, as she was once stabbed by a soldier's bayonet, a wound that crippled her. Realizing that she would soon be killed if she didn't escape Gaotaipo, Lei sneaked out the back door of the brothel and left for her mother's house. This was how her life began to change, and ever since her escape, she hasn't been to Gaotaipo. After she turned seventeen, Lei married, and since she was unable to bear a child, she adopted a destitute child and brought her home from a local police station. At the time of the interview, Lei had three great-grandchildren, and it can be concluded that she was living a fairly good life. When Lei had a stroke in 2007, she was moved to Jiangsu Province Traditional Chinese Medicine Hospital,

where many people came to visit her to offer their support and love. People whom she had never met made donations for her medical treatment, but unfortunately, Lei passed away soon after she fell into a coma, at the age of seventy-nine.

### **Zhou Fenying**

After capturing Nanjing, the Japanese army began occupying areas adjacent to it. In 1938, the troops approached Rugao, a settlement 280 kilometers east of Nanjing, and started setting up comfort stations in and around it. This is where Zhou was abducted and kept to serve as a comfort woman. Zhou's family was living in utmost poverty, and under such circumstances, the only plausible solution for her parents was to give her away. However, finding another family that would take her in was rather difficult since most families preferred to adopt boys who would lend a helping hand in farm work and agriculture. Girls, on the other hand, were often treated as "money-losing goods" and hence not desirable. As soon as she turned five, Zhou was sold to the Ni family who lived in Yangjiayuan. As a child-daughter-in-law, Zhou was responsible for taking care of the family, along with her mother-in-law, who was married to a man who had an affair with another woman and therefore rarely stayed at home. Zhou was considered one of the most desirable girls in the area, and her husband, being aware of it, took great care of her. By the time she got married, Zhou had already turned nineteen, and it was two years after their marriage that the Japanese invaded Rugao.

Zhou recalls the day the troops barged into their village. Along with her sister, she ran for their lives and hid behind a millstone in a nearby courtyard, only to be caught. Not only did the soldiers tie their feet so they couldn't run away, but they also loaded them into wheelbarrows held together with strong ropes to eliminate any chance of escape. When Zhou opened her eyes, she found herself staring at a hotel called Zhongxing Hotel, which she knew would be her "home" for some time. She realized she wasn't alone; there were twenty more girls who had been abducted from nearby villages. Each girl was assigned a number, which was printed on a white cloth. It was only later that Zhou realized the number was based on the attractiveness of the girls, and to her surprise, she was given the number one. Her incessant crying agitated a soldier, and as a result, he pushed his bayonet against her chest and snarled to express his displeasure. Zhou recalls the fear she felt, so much so that she passed out, and when she woke up, she realized she had been raped (119).

In the comfort station where Zhou worked, Japanese troops visited every seven days. To prevent herself from getting hurt, she followed every order the officers gave, and if she showed any sign of displeasure, the torture would begin. Checkups were scheduled by the managers of the station to check for the spread of any venereal diseases, and before the station opened for service, every woman had to ensure the availability of condoms, whether new or reused. Zhou served as a comfort woman for three months and only managed to escape with the help of Mr. Yang, a clerk working in the nearby town government. This gesture of kindness was not entirely selfless, as Mr. Yang had hopes of making Zhou his concubine. After Zhou reached her home, instead of being welcomed and comforted by her family, her mother-in-law banished her from the household because she feared the widespread gossip that would follow her daughter-in-law's appearance. However, Zhou's husband accepted her with open arms and said, "Fenyong was kidnapped by the Japanese troops, but this was not her fault" (Qiu et al. 119).

Filled with fury and seeking revenge, Jincheng decided to join the Chinese army and fight the Japanese oppressors who had raped his wife. It was only years after he left home that Zhou was informed by the local government that Jincheng had joined the First Regiment of the New Fourth Army. He passed away while fighting in the Battle of Guxi in Taixing County a year later.

Suffering from poverty, Zhou considered getting married again, and after a local man proposed to her in 1943, she started a new chapter in her life. Years later, when her second husband died, Zhou revealed her painful past to her grandsons, who expressed their sympathy. With the help of her son, Zhou sent letters to the Rugao City Women's Federation, the Association for Research on the Nanjing Massacre, and the Jiangsu Province Academy of Social Sciences. Zhou also expressed her respect for Lei Guiying at her death and promised to fight for the cause until her own demise in 2008.

## **Central and Northern China**

### **Yuan Zhulin**

Born in Wuhan City, in the province of Hubei in 1922, Yuan Zhulin's story was no different from that of other comfort women who were sold off as child brides due to acute poverty and recession during the war. At the tender age of fifteen, Zhulin married Wang Guodong, a chauffeur, and start-



ed living a relatively better and more peaceful life. However, this peace did not last very long, as in 1938, the same year they got married, the Japanese military invaded Wuhan City. Since the city where Zhulin's husband was posted was very close to Wuhan, the family lost all hope of him ever returning alive. As a result, to get rid of Zhulin, who had become a "burden" on her in-laws, she was forced to marry another man named Liu Wanghai. From this marriage, she gave birth to a child, the only child she ever had. However, due to neglect and poor living conditions, the baby died soon after her birth. Working as a maid in local households, Zhulin felt her life turning around when she was offered a job as a cleaning woman in a hotel in Hubei Province (133). Leaving her new family behind with hopes in her eyes, Zhulin boarded a ship down the Yangtze River. Upon reaching Ezhou, these women were greeted by Japanese soldiers who took them to a nearby temple, which Zhulin later realized was a comfort station. When reality dawned upon these women, they shouted, "This is not a hotel, I want to go home." They were thrashed and forced to enter the station by the soldiers, who carried weapons like bayonets and spears.

As soon as the women entered, they were forced to take off their clothes for a medical examination, after which each of them was assigned a Japanese name; Zhulin was named Masako. With her "new" name written on the door of her room, Zhulin said that she felt her identity slipping away bit by bit. She recalled her first day at work when she was ruthlessly raped by ten men, one after another. She stated that the pain she felt in her lower abdomen was so terrible that she felt as if her organs had been sliced with knives repeatedly, preventing her from even sitting up. Zhulin narrated how she had heard that Japanese soldiers were supposed to buy tickets to enter the station, but she assured that she had never received any payment from them (134). In terms of the functionality of the comfort station, each soldier was assigned thirty minutes with a comfort woman, but the same rules didn't apply to soldiers and commanders of higher ranks, who would often spend the entire night at the station.

These women were not permitted to take leave even during their menstruation and were often forced to consume some white pills which, according to the proprietor, would "make their pain go away." Since Zhulin and others were not aware of the side effects of the pills, they would often discard them, which soon led to her pregnancy. Aware of the hell that awaited both her child and her, Zhulin decided to escape with one of the girls, but unfortunately, they were caught as soon as they left the premises. Both of them were hit violently until blood gushed from their heads, and as a result of this torture, Zhulin lost her child.

Soon after this incident, Zhulin met an officer named Nishiyama who took an interest in her and pitied her for the poor condition she was in. With his help, Zhulin was able to visit her parents' home, where she found out that her father had already died due to starvation. After the Chinese War of Resistance officially ended in 1945, Nishiyama presented Zhulin with an offer to leave with him for Japan. However, Zhulin declined his request and decided to look for her mother instead, in the hopes of finding some familiar ties. It was after the Japanese surrender that Zhulin was able to reunite with her mother, and they both decided to leave the past behind and build a new future by working together. In 1946, Zhulin adopted a little girl of two months and named her Cheng Fei. Zhulin recalls seeing the woman who tricked her into this sexual slavery, and to get her revenge, she reported the woman to the local police. But to her surprise, Officer Luo said, "Forget it. Those things are hard to investigate," words which chill her heart to this day (136).

Life with her mother was rather peaceful until one day at a meeting when Zhulin's mother discussed the atrocities and living hell her daughter had been through. This enraged the members of the meeting so much that they shouted phrases like "A whore working for the Japanese" to humiliate both Zhulin and her mother. The situation worsened in 1958 when the Neighborhood Committee officials chased Zhulin and her family away by ordering them to go to the remote northern province of Heilongjiang. They did so by confiscating her official documents, residence booklet, and food purchase card, which she required daily. After moving to Mishan, conditions worsened as doing farm work in that terrain was of no use due to the extreme cold. The only thing Zhulin's family could get their hands on was soybean dregs, which are not generally consumed by humans, only by horses and cows. However, with the help of a section chief named Wang Wanlou, Zhulin was able to return to Wuhan with special permission.

Zhulin was worried about her deteriorating health condition, especially because her body had suffered constant torture and beatings during the prime of her life. She had trouble sleeping, even after consuming sleeping pills repeatedly for days. She blamed the unjust invasion of Japanese troops, which had separated her from her first husband, and recalled having nightmares every day about the comfort station where she was held hostage. After suffering a stroke in 2006, Zhulin died at the age of eighty-four.

A noteworthy observation is that almost all these survivors were forced to

become sex slaves either to save themselves or their families from dying at the hands of the Japanese military. Such testimonies negate Japan's claims that the recruitment of these women was systematic and not coercive in any way. Even though some officials attempted to make women sign an "agreement," the widespread unawareness of the meaning of these contracts made the "consent" look like a ploy (Hicks 15). Tan Yuhua, born in 1928 in Shilang Township of Hunan Province, narrated the events that she used to see almost every day, describing the horror of it. She said,

One day, I saw the Japanese soldiers capture a villager named Qiu Siyi, tie him to a wooden frame, and let an army dog maul him to death. The Japanese army dog was huge; it looked like a wolf. I also saw a woman captured by the soldiers, but I didn't know her name. She had attempted to escape but failed; the Japanese soldiers buried her alive. Another girl who was also buried alive looked very young, like a teenager. A soldier shoveled dirt onto her body; he stopped in the middle of his task and laughed until she died. I didn't know the girl's name" (Qiu et al. 141).

Recalling her painful past, Yuhua told the interviewer the details regarding her abduction. The soldiers held her father at the end of a sword and threatened to kill him if she didn't join them. Along with two other girls, Yuhua was taken to the "Jade Star House" in Zhuliang-Qiao (144). A similar situation happened to Huang Youliang, who set out to a rice paddy on the outskirts of the village, having no clue what was about to befall her. After hearing repeated screams, she raised her head only to find a troop of soldiers marching toward her. Scared for her life, Youliang dropped her belongings and ran toward the mountains, but she couldn't outrun the soldiers. One soldier grabbed her arm, and another moved his hands over her body, trying to rip off her clothes. The entire troop was "laughing like crazy" while witnessing the torture. In an attempt to escape, Youliang bit the hand that was fondling her, but the others held up their bayonets, almost on the verge of attacking her. It was at this moment that another Japanese officer yelled at them, and with a smile on his face, he approached her, uttering the words, "Don't be scared." After this, the rest of the men left, and just when Youliang heaved a sigh of relief, the officer pulled her into his arms. She stated,

I struggled to get away and he let me go. I thought I was free, so I put on my clothes and carried the baskets home. I didn't notice that the Japanese officer followed me to my home. He stopped me at the door, carried me into my bedroom, and ripped off my shirt and skirt. He left afterward. The following day, more Japanese soldiers came to look for me (160).

Youliang offered further details about the conditions inside the comfort station where she was forced to live and mentioned that she never underwent any medical examination, unlike the other women mentioned in this paper. She stated that she knew one pregnant woman named Chen Youhong, who died very soon after her pregnancy was revealed to the comfort station owners and the soldiers. Refusing to do what they expected of her, she was beaten until her private parts were severely damaged, after which she died due to severe blood loss (161).

In the film titled "The Apology" directed by Tiffany Hsiung, Grandma Cao narrated her experience as a comfort woman to the interviewer Zhang Shaun Bing, who authored the book "Women in the Comfort Station." Residing in Yu Xian County, 250 miles south of Beijing, Grandma Cao was eighteen when she was abducted by the Japanese troops. Neighbors who saw the events revealed that Grandma Cao tried to escape the soldiers by rubbing mud and coal on her face, but unfortunately, they still picked her. When her father protested and tried to protect her, he was beaten brutally. Plagued with the fear of being shot dead, her father gave up and let the Japanese have their way with his daughter. She returned to her home after two years of misery, torture, and a profound sense of loss. She recalls with tears in her eyes:

I gave birth to two children, one girl and one boy. I had to strangle my baby. It was conceived at the comfort station. When the baby died, it impacted me greatly. I almost died giving birth. I was so scared I gave birth in the field. I had the baby on my way home. I had to throw it away. I was damaged so badly that I could never bear any more children" (*The Apology* 57:40-58:37).

Haunted by their past, these comfort women could never truly move on from the trauma they faced during the prime years of their lives. Additionally, Japan's lack of effort to apologize for their mistreatment of women further aggravated the situation and made the comfort women issue a humanitarian concern.

## Conclusion

As discussed in the paper, the narratives of these Chinese comfort women are not only about hatred or misery. They are about the basic loss of human rights and the agency over one's own body. Not only were they taken as merely "war supplies," but they were also traded from one place to another. After the war ended, they were labeled as "prostitutes" by

society and discarded as outcasts of the very communities in which they were born. The patriarchal society treated them as collaborators with the Japanese and persecuted them on account of disloyalty. It was only with the psychological support of the interviewers and the people around them that they could speak up and share their wartime experiences.

The interviewers approached the survivors with the utmost caution, mindful of the deep emotional scars that recounting their traumas could reopen. The women hailed from rural areas where societal attitudes towards virginity and chastity added to their reluctance in sharing their pasts. This paper serves as a crucial testament to the unimaginable suffering endured by Comfort Women, shedding light on a dark chapter in history. By preserving these stories, the authors pay homage to the survivors and advocate for acknowledgment, justice, and the prevention of such atrocities in the future.

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