
Despite the large volume of existing scholarship on the Second Sino-Japanese War from 1931 to 1945, Chinese Comfort Women remains the first and only English-language monograph to study the suffering of Chinese sex slaves. Combining academic research into the ‘comfort women’ system and first-hand accounts by twelve survivors, this book powerfully delivers its central argument that the comfort women system was a war crime. In addition, by highlighting the importance of class, patriarchy and nationalism, it also reveals the complexity of this issue, shedding some new light on the understanding of the agonies women underwent due to war atrocities.

This book contains three parts. The first introduces the basic context of the comfort women system in China; the second presents the recollections of twelve Chinese survivors of ‘comfort stations’. They were selected according to their geographical locations, experiences, age at abduction, year of abduction and the length of enslavement; the last recounts the postwar struggles shared by many of the comfort women, which shows that their suffering did not stop with the end of the war.

The book successfully demonstrates that comfort women were by no means voluntary prostitutes as right-wing Japanese media, scholars and government have claimed. It is argued that the nature of the ‘comfort system’ renders it a war crime against humanity. By examining a vast amount of eyewitness evidence from survivors, governmental archives and diaries, the authors show: firstly, that comfort stations were approved by the Japanese army and constructed systematically throughout the war; secondly, that the majority of the comfort women were abducted by Japanese troops, suffering coercion and violence and thirdly, that many comfort women experienced extreme physical and mental abuse, ranging from inhumane living conditions, continuous rape, witnessing the torture or murder of close family members, to being buried alive or mutilated.

Moreover, the authors strongly emphasise the intersectionality of gender and class in relation to the women’s miseries. Most of those who ended up in the comfort stations were from lower-class families, as was also the case for Korean comfort women.¹ In those lower-

class families, girls were the first to be dispensed with when families experienced difficulties. Many comfort women had been sold as child brides before their abductions and they did not receive necessary care and protection from their host families. Desperate to make their own living, some women from the poorest families were tricked by false job offers fabricated by Japanese troops. This aspect of class has often been absent from previous studies of Chinese comfort women published in Chinese. This has restricted our understanding of the exploitation of lower-class women.

This book also contributes to the discussion of China’s patriarchal social structure that prolonged the miseries of these comfort women after the defeat of Japan in 1945. In China, chastity was considered more important than life to women, especially in some remote conservative areas. Research into comfort women from other Asian countries has established that many survivors faced discrimination and poverty after the war because of the stigma attached to sex outside marriage. Chinese comfort women survivors had similar experiences, most lived in extremely difficult situations after the war. Some were unwilling to get married due to a sense of shame, unable to bear children, and/or unable to make a basic living. Physical pain and nightmares haunted them, as well as derogatory words. Yuan Zhulin’s story exemplifies this. She was considered a Japanese army whore and sent to a rehabilitation farm in Heilongjiang to do hard labour for seventeen years because her mother recounted her wartime suffering at a ‘Tell Your Sufferings in the Old Society and the Happiness in the New’ meeting. The actions of local people and government after the end of the war made the comfort women’s suffering lifelong, even though their miseries were initially caused by the Sino-Japanese War.

Although the authors warn of the viciousness of the Japanese militants’ conduct, readers may still find the unimaginably brutal treatment of Japanese militants towards Chinese sex slaves in this book disturbing. The authors reveal that the cruelty of the Japanese militants was due to nationalist education in Japan, which taught that ordinary Chinese people were “worse than pigs” (p. 195). Therefore, treating Chinese people as sub-human became a symbol of their loyalty to the emperor. The outlining of this mentality not only helps us to gain a better understanding of the past, but also remains a strong indicator of the danger of nationalism rising up all over the world today.

Since the early 1990s when Korean and Southeast Asian comfort women survivors began courageously speaking out about their sufferings, much research has been done to unearth the previously neglected and disturbing truth about the war. This book has finally brought the experiences of Chinese comfort women back into the picture. It is an indispensable contribution to the field of gender studies, war studies, and East Asian studies.

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