

Sexual Violence in Wartime and Peacetime: Violence Against Women in the 20st Century

Seiya Morita, translated and with an introduction by Caroline Norma

Abstract: *In this article, translated and abridged (with an introduction) by Caroline Norma, Morita advances a view of the “comfort women” system not simply as an isolated war crime, but as an extreme symptom of institutionalised, pervasive and persistent violence against women that extends to peacetime as well as wartime. Norma argues that Morita’s paper, first published in 1999, prefigures a “feminist turn” in interpretation of the comfort women system that has more recently been embraced by Yoshimi Yoshiaki, Kim Puja and other scholars and activists. Both Norma and Morita argue that the comfort women system can only be understood in the context of ingrained societal attitudes towards women, and that it is therefore closely related to phenomena such as pornography and the commercial sex industry. For both scholars, campaigning for recognition of wrongs committed against comfort women in the past is thus intimately linked to efforts to abolish institutionalised violence and discrimination against women in the present.*

Keywords: *Comfort women, sexual violence, feminism, patriarchy, pornography, sex industry*

Translator’s Introduction

While not yet fully understood outside the borders of Japanese academia, the country’s

top historians of the military “comfort women” scheme of the Second World War achieved a research paradigm shift in the second decade of the twenty-first century. This shift was perceptible in the 2018 English-translated monograph *Denying the Comfort Women: The Japanese State’s Assault on Historical Truth*,¹ and reached full shape in two subsequent volumes: the first by Kim Puja 2018 (written with co-author Kim Yon) and the second by Yoshimi Yoshiaki in 2019. This shift of the past three years relates to how the ‘comfort women’ scheme is epistemologically understood. In other words, what do we consider the scheme to have historically comprised? In early work in the 1990s, including by Yoshimi, it was understood to comprise an extraordinary wartime scheme of trafficking and forced detention of women for military sexual slavery, very much distinct from “regular” peacetime commercial prostitution. Now, however, it is differently understood as a scheme of prostitution perpetrated by the Japanese military and others (such as military manufacturers) in service of war-making, overlapping with (as well as intensifying and brutalizing) sex work as conducted during peacetime.² There is a world of difference between these two conceptualisations, as will be explained. Comprehending the difference is important because, as with much historical endeavour, ultimately riding on the judgement as to what the scheme fundamentally comprised are the prospects of preventing such a human rights violation arising again.

When, in the 1990s and 2000s, the “comfort women” system was understood as a wartime

scheme of trafficking and forced detention of women for military sexual slavery, its antidote was judged to be broad but sincere efforts against militarism, colonialism, racism and ill-defined “sexism”. While these efforts are not rendered futile under the new paradigm, they are not the logical endpoint of decision-making arising from its insights. Instead, prostitution is. In other words, in the scholarship of Japan’s historians, the wartime scheme is newly conceptualized as a system of military prostitution with origins and connections to civilian systems of prostitution in peacetime. On this different understanding, efforts to prevent any similar scheme of human rights violation emerging in the future turn on questions about peacetime tolerance of the sex industry and its customers. Peacetime tolerance of prostitution, in other words, heralds possibilities of sexual violence arising in war.

Women formerly outside the victim category when the wartime scheme was conceptualized as trafficking and forced detention for military sexual slavery, such as military brothel internees, now find themselves classed as “comfort women” under the new paradigm. Kim Puja in her 2018 monograph calls for victims of Korea’s colonial-era licensed prostitution districts, who were exploited by Japanese military men garrisoned in the peninsula before and during the war, to be recognised as “comfort women”. She reasons that ““prostitutes” of the colonial [Korean] licensed quarters, as well as the “comfort women” of the wartime comfort stations, were subjects of daily sexual violence, and so should both be seen as sexually enslaved’ (2018, p. 215). Kim further finds direct historical links between, firstly, the development of settlement-era prostitution districts catering to Japanese male migrants in pre-colonial Korea, and, secondly, colonial-era prostitution districts, and, finally, the wartime comfort stations that operated on the Korean peninsula (p. 212). This continuity and similarity between semi-civilian,

military, and wartime schemes of prostitution brings into new consideration large populations of women in commercial sex industries as victims of Japanese military enslavement, and as therefore part of the movement for redress over war crimes perpetrated against the former “comfort women”.

Before now, these populations were seen, especially by South Korea-based advocates, as wholly separate and far removed from the narrow population of “comfort women” deemed victims of military sexual slavery. But Kim newly argues against the drawing of such distinctions as historically inaccurate and unrealistic. She writes that interest in, and voices calling for, justice for women prostituted in colonial-licensed districts, and others sexually exploited during Korea’s years of occupation, haven’t been heard in the context of the justice movement, in contrast to campaigning on behalf of narrowly acknowledged ‘comfort women’ for whom restitution has been pursued in relation to both the Japanese government and its military (p. 213). In conjunction with co-author Kim Yon she highlights Japanese military patronage of Korea’s colonial licensed prostitution districts before and during the war, and, on this basis, urges reconsideration of the currently popular view of comfort stations as unique and different, and as excluding venues established by civilians (even if for patronage by the Japanese military). In other words, Kim sees brothels operating in occupied Korea as ultimately functioning in the same way as comfort stations, even if the Japanese military did not originally establish them. Their function was nonetheless one of sexually enslaving colonised women for the sexual use of Japanese military men. She explains that,

[i]f we define comfort stations as places that the military set up, managed, recruited for and used, then we can’t say licensed-district venues qualify as comfort stations. But, given that colonial Korea

was a rear end base for perpetrating the war for the Japanese military, and considering the militarisation of Korea at the time, licensed brothels operating under these circumstances have a great deal in common with comfort stations, and should be seen as having existed on a continuum with them. They played the same role in the interests of the Japanese military as comfort stations in overseeing the sexuality of troops. On this basis, we need to see women in these venues as “comfort” women and see their situation in light of broader military policies of sexual control, sexual violence and the general conditions of the occupation of Korea (pp. 153-154).

Kim’s discussion shows the extent to which Japan-based advocates of justice for the former “comfort women” have changed their thinking, and campaigning goals, in a direction different from those of advocates in Korea. This change was reflected in an exhibition held over two years from 2017 by the Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace called “The Silence of Japanese ‘Comfort Women’: State-Controlled Sexuality”. This exhibition was the first of its kind to link Japan’s historical legalized prostitution system to the wartime scheme, and to highlight military sexual slavery victims of Japanese nationality who were usually trafficked in wartime stations from civilian brothels.³ Since this time, there have been escalating intellectual and activist efforts in Japan directed towards forging an understanding of *prostituted* victims of the Japanese military as equally deserving of historical recognition as “comfort women”.

Perhaps surprisingly, Japan’s most well-known and authoritative historian of the “comfort women” system, Yoshimi Yoshiaki, shares the view. As is widely known, Yoshimi (along with Hayashi Hirofumi) uncovered the archival documents that forced the Japanese government in the early 1990s to begin

investigating the country’s wartime history in relation to the “comfort women”. He then authored a major book on this history in 1995 that was released in English translation in 2002.⁴ While this comprehensive work did not dismiss Japanese and other prostituted victims of comfort stations, its historical framing of the wartime scheme reflected the “forced trafficking” paradigm that Kinoshita Naoko observes generally of the early-period scholarship to which the book belongs (2018).⁵ However, in 2019, Yoshimi published a second monograph that offers an entirely different view of the context and origins of the military scheme, as can be gleaned just from its title: *Kaishun suru teikoku: Nihongun “ianfu” mondai no kitei* [*The Empire of Prostitution: Foundations of the Japanese Military “Comfort Women” Problem*]. The book’s discussion overturns the historical context in which the military scheme has been viewed to date: Yoshimi describes this context as reflecting the nature of the modern “prostitutor” Japanese state which oversaw large-scale systems of sexual trading of women both domestically and in its colonies before the war, and which persisted in this commitment in an extreme way during the war in its support for the creation of the military sexual slavery system. After the war and occupation, moreover, the state failed to reform itself in the transition to democracy, and so persists into the present as a “prostitution nation” through subscribing to the idea of women’s freely chosen sexual exploitation. Yoshimi explains that:

Japanese government efforts to retain the system of sexual trading it had created and supported continued even as the imperial state fell, the country succumbed to allied occupation, and the government was made to dismantle its former licensed prostitution system because of concerns expressed by GHQ [i.e., the US General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers] about sexual slavery. But even after having experienced

these events, the Japanese government and its military continued to evade responsibility for its past and supported the continued operation of prostitution businesses in Japan on the basis of women willingly having chosen to sell themselves. A major reason for the continuing failure to resolve the problem of the military “comfort women” in the present relates precisely to this fact (p. 245).

Significantly, in concluding his monograph, Yoshimi refers to South Korea’s current anti-prostitution laws, which criminalise the sex industry entrepreneurs and customers. He compares the Japanese state’s continuing adherence to the idea of “free choice” in relation to prostitution unfavorably to these measures taken by the South Korean state, even while the Japanese government did enact its own *Prostitution Prevention Law* in 1958 (p. 247). Yoshimi writes that the Japanese government’s failure to even consider laws similar to those introduced in South Korea reflects its continuing commitment to overseeing the trafficking, pimping, detention and sexual exploitation of female citizens.

These recent books by Kim Puja and Yoshimi Yoshiaki transform understanding of existing historical ideas of the Japanese military “comfort women” scheme so profoundly that the phrase “paradigm shift” accurately describes their impact. They do, however, have scholarly precedent and context, and, to explain this intellectual history, the translation below of an article published in 1999 written by Morita Seiya is important. Nearly twenty years prior to the paradigm shift in historical research on the “comfort women” scheme of the Japanese military, Morita described male domination of women in peacetime as prefacing the sexual violence that soldiers perpetrated in war.⁶

As to why Morita formulated such unorthodox views of the so-called “comfort women” system

twenty years’ ago, when the system was still conceptualized globally as a militaristic and imperialistic crime of trafficking, is actually not difficult to discern. Morita had been, from the mid-1990s, both translating the anti-prostitution theoretical work of American feminist theorist Catharine MacKinnon, as well as composing his own analyses in Japanese following a similar framework. Subsequent to the article’s publication, moreover, Morita cofounded the Anti-Pornography and Prostitution Research Group (APP), which continues today as a major hub of research and activism against Japan’s sex industry.⁷ From early on, Morita had been involved with the Violence Against Women in War Research Action Center (VAWW-RAC; formerly VAWW-NET) group, and, over three issues between the years 2014 and 2015, VAWW-RAC’s newsletter *Vaurakku Tsūshin* carried articles by Morita about the harms of pornography and sexual violence.⁸ He delivered lectures to VAWW-RAC members on related topics, and continues to be centrally involved in campaigning against prostitution in Japan, which is these days linked to the “comfort women” advocacy movement. His anti-prostitution perspective in “comfort women” campaigning enjoys greater support and up-take these days—twenty years after Morita began theorizing such a perspective—because of growing concern in Japan since 2016 about harms sustained by young women in the country’s sex industry, as represented by groups like Colabo, Lighthouse and People Against Pornography and Sexual Violence (PAPS). Morita’s intellectual and activist contribution to Japan’s movement in support of justice for the former “comfort women” is well captured in his article translated below, which still represents, even twenty years later, leading edge thinking on not just the “comfort women” historical scheme but all systems organizing female sexual slavery in wartime and in “peacetime”.

Originally published in Japanese as Seiya Morita, “Senji no seibōryoku, heiji no

seibōryoku”, special edition titled “Bōryoku no jidai to riri [The Age of Violence and its Ethics]”, *Yuibutsuron Kenkyū Nenshi*, Vol. 4, Aoki Shoten, 1999.

Wartime Sexual Violence and the Japanese Military “Comfort Women” Problem

The problem of military men’s sexual violence against women in wartime is still today sometimes discussed in gender-neutral terms. In this discussion, military men perpetrate violence because they are treated as inhuman fodder in military machines, and so soldiers regain their personal subjectivity by treating Japanese “comfort women”, or female citizens of an opposing country, as sex objects. While this argument is somewhat persuasive, it overlooks the core of the problem. That is, why there exists a relationship between opportunities for restoring personal subjectivity and perpetrating violence against women, and why this violence must take a specifically sexual form. Even if we were to think that the inhuman treatment of soldiers paralyses their morality, or causes them to become uninhibited, or exacerbates and expands the cruelty of their violence, why would women particularly be their targets? And, again, why would their violence take a sexual form?

However, if, as Clausewitz says, “War is the continuation of politics by other means”, then the violence that unfolds against women in wartime, especially of a sexual kind, can certainly be conceived as a continuation, “by other means”, of the violence and abuse (including of a sexual kind) that women experience in peacetime. The “other means” is state power and militarism (wielded in contexts of national unity, state emergency, and climates of contempt of other nations) that causes the sexual violence of peacetime to be perpetrated in more extreme, comprehensive, cruel, indiscriminate, and more systematic ways. The lower women’s status in any given

society, or the more women are treated by men in peacetime society as sex objects, the more likely the comfort and personal subjectivity of soldiers in wartime will be achieved through violence, especially of a sexual kind, against women. But this outcome is ultimately structured by *peacetime* arrangements in which men are, on a daily basis, achieving personal subjectivity through dominating women, especially through sexual dominance.

Around the pre-1945 Japanese military “comfort women” scheme, there is continuing and serious conflict today between those who decry it and those who defend it. This history is complex and incorporates various issues including Japan’s emperor system, Japan’s war of aggression, colonialism, ethnic discrimination, and sexism. But those who defend the “comfort women” scheme (who name their own historical viewpoint a “liberal conception of history”, but who are fundamentally conservative or right-wing revisionists, and so here will be referred to as “historical revisionists”) specially emphasise its sexual aspects. For them, though, raising these sexual aspects is not for any purpose of emphasizing ubiquitous problems of sexual violence and discrimination, but, conversely, to promote a view of sexual matters as purely personal, and a matter of individual morality, and so not relevantly matters of state compensation or discussion in compulsory school history books. Historical revisionists claim the Japanese military wasn’t involved in the “comfort women” scheme, and that it was arranged merely by private operators. They claim romantic relationships grew between the “comfort women” and soldiers, and no moral judgements based on contemporary values should be cast about the system because it existed at a time, different from today, when Japan incorporated a licensed prostitution system. The problem is transposed as one merely of individual wrongdoing or immorality. However, given the existence of the licensed prostitution system in pre-war Japan, which can

be understood as operating as a state-endorsed system of industrialised sexual abuse, the efforts of historical revisionists to defend the system amounts to legitimizing a wartime scheme of sexual abuse on the basis of a peacetime scheme of sexual abuse.

For the women’s movement that has been deeply involved in campaigning over the “comfort women” issue, the sexual aspects of the scheme are also important, but from a perspective exactly opposite to that taken by historical revisionists. This perspective sees continuity between peacetime and wartime. In other words, what the Japanese military did on the battlefield was what ordinary Japanese men were already doing on a daily basis (and are doing still today), even if in more extreme, cruel, and large-scale terms, and with less inhibition and shame. From this point of view, the licensed prostitution system that historical revisionists refer to in defense of their views is differently an historical gauge of the criminality by which ordinary men of the time should be judged. For example, Suzuki Yūko, a scholar deeply involved in the “comfort women” issue and its campaign movement, asserts the following.

The pre-war Japanese military was systematically and organizationally involved in planning and operating the “comfort women” policy and scheme during the China and Pacific wars. The reason why the sexual slavery policy of the Japanese military (i.e., the “comfort women” scheme) was so quickly and easily introduced and implemented by military command was largely because of the pre-existing and prior sexual slavery scheme of licensed prostitution that operated domestically in pre-war Japan.⁹

Ōgoshi Aiko, a Japanese feminist scholar, similarly writes:

The level of atrocity of the sexual violence that Japanese military men perpetrated

against women on the battlefield and against the “comfort women” during the Second World War, and the extent to which this violence was perpetrated shamelessly in an atmosphere of tolerance [i.e. social acceptance in Japan before and during the war], is explained only by the individual internalization of such sexual values at the time, regardless of the unmatched repressiveness of the Japanese military machine or the level of horizontal violence that permeated its ranks and crushed its enlistees.¹⁰

Of course, especially in the case of Korean “comfort women”, the inhuman, violent and shameless treatment of Asian “comfort women” also reflected the “continuation by other means” of peacetime tendencies of ordinary Japanese men towards ethnic discrimination, Asian xenophobia, and imperialistic hubris.

Further, the approach of the post-war Japanese male ruling elite to engaging with the “comfort women” issue is to tackle it in the same way peacetime sexual violence is dealt with as a problem of the ‘universal man’. Instead of admitting state responsibility and paying official compensation when taken to court by Korean and other wartime survivors, the Japanese government blurred the chain of responsibility by creating a condolence charity scheme called the Asian Women’s Fund. Of this fund, Wakakuwa Midori writes in the following scathing terms.

The recent situation is, as far as I can see, redolent of the typical approach taken universally in male-dominant society towards so-called shameful misconduct. Plaintiffs are calling for research into the facts of their wartime human rights violations and investigation of who was responsible for them, as well as elucidation of official knowledge of state-perpetrated crimes, and an official apology and payment of compensation on the basis

of this research being undertaken and responsibility taken for its results. Just as in any human rights violation crime, victims are appealing for their humanity to be recognized, and their dignity restored. As to how human dignity can be restored for the former “comfort women” is, of course, a matter for discussion, but the need for such discussion is not yet acknowledged by Japanese government officials, and hasn’t been from the outset. They seem to, still today, stand on the side of the sex-buyer, and so do not acknowledge the wrongdoing that is necessary for apologizing for its violations. They pay money through a third party to make the shame slink away, to quiet its proponents, and to have the problem consigned to the dustbin of history. The process allows for the creation of a bureaucratic smokescreen that justice has been served and the issue dealt with.¹¹

Wakakuwa follows up this analysis with the following critique of the problem from the point of view of ordinary male Japanese society.

The actions of the state do not go beyond those prompted by the personalities of the individuals who make up the state. In relation to women’s human rights, and especially those relating to problems of sexuality, if the state cannot adopt respectful or insightful behavior in relation to such things, this is because the country’s ruling men have little awareness of the problem.¹²

If we relegate the “comfort women” problem to one unique to wartime that bears no relation to peacetime society, or attribute it to the extraordinary actions of a militarist state in pre-war Japan, then we will be unable to understand its true heart and reach true resolution. This problem casts light on, and is deeply connected to, the peacetime violence and abuse of women, including that which

continued into Japan’s post-war era.

Peacetime Violence against Women: Domestic Violence

The second-wave feminist movement has come to grasp everyday problems of rape, domestic violence, prostitution, sexual harassment, pornography, incest, and femicide as occurring in a patterned and systematic way, rather than randomly, and as so pervasive and continuous that they might be described as occurring as part of a gendered war. In other words, just as war is described as “the continuation of politics by other means”, for women, politics in peacetime (i.e., sexual politics) is a “continuation of war by other means”. In this formulation, of course, the “politics” being referred to are not only those of parliament, government, and judiciary but they also relate to the realm of the “personal is political”.

How is violence in war distinguishable from everyday forms of violence? Fundamentally, this difference arises from the fact that the former is the organized perpetration of violence against the citizens of an opposing country at the will of a state. Putting this difference aside for the moment, though, how is everyday peacetime violence different from that perpetrated in war? Before anything else, this difference arises in relation to the size and scale of the violence, but there are other differences relating to the fact that violence in war has a highly continuous, systematic and organized nature, and the fact that laws are mostly rendered inoperable in war, and no-one responds to cries from victims for help in war, perpetrators are not punished, and victims suffer unending fear and hopelessness. However, the more we learn about the nature of violence against women in peacetime societies, the more we can see it as having aspects extremely similar to these evident in wartime.

Especially in America where gun ownership is permitted, looking just at its means, the difference between violence in wartime and violence in peacetime doesn't appear too great. In America, there are two million domestic violence reports against women lodged with police each year (and the real number of incidents likely exceeds this number multiple times), and around 1500 women are killed by their partners each year. This number is around 30-40 per cent of all murdered women in the United States. If, for example, the citizens or soldiers of one country were to yearly kill 1500 citizens of another country, everyone would call it a war. Just going on the number of victims alone, there is every reason to call violence against women a war.

But what about other characteristics of the violence of war? That is, what about its above-mentioned continuous, systematic and organized nature? America's most famous radical feminist Andrea Dworkin was herself a former "battered woman", and wrote of the experience in the following way.

Eventually I waited to die. I wanted to die. I hoped the next beating would kill me. When I would come to after being beaten unconscious, the first feeling I had was a sorrow that I was alive. I would ask God to let me die now. My breasts were burned with lit cigarettes. My husband beat my legs with a wood beam so that I couldn't walk.¹³

These circumstances are fundamentally the same in Japan. A survey report released by the Tokyo Metropolitan government in March 1998 on "violence against women" describes as many as 33 per cent of female respondents reporting having experienced physical violence from husbands or boyfriends. Twenty per cent reported sexual violence. Japan, which outlaws gun ownership, produces far fewer fatalities of domestic violence, but action on the problem by police and the judiciary, and comprehension of

it among the public, is more than ten years behind that of the US. In Japan the silence surrounding victims of domestic violence and their wails of despair are even higher than those in America.

Peacetime Violence against Women: Rape, Prostitution, and Pornography

Peacetime conditions of the war against women arise out of violence that is more than just domestic. Rape, prostitution and pornography are further forms of violence against women that take a sexual form, and which are interrelated and linked.

The pioneer American radical feminist Robin Morgan coined the aphorism "pornography is the theory, rape is the practice".¹⁴ In today's society, where pornography, which frequently incites rape and all manner of sexually abusive behavior, is being produced, sold and consumed in huge volume, the possibility that women's status, lives, and safety are currently guaranteed is as nonsensical as saying the status, lives and safety of Jews were guaranteed during the time when Europe was flooded with anti-Semitic propaganda.¹⁵ Be that as it may, today we nonetheless need further elaboration of Morgan's aphorism.

Firstly, rape generally (according to the common wisdom of male-dominated society) and centrally involves penile insertion into the vagina, but the sex crime that pornography provokes is not limited to this act. It encourages, assists and incites acts that do not technically meet the definition of rape, including forced obscenity and public groping-type sexual assaults and sexual harassment, as well as acts of child sexual abuse. Therefore, Morgan's aphorism might be more accurately amended to read, "pornography is the theory, and sexual violence and abuse, including rape, is the practice".

Secondly, we might re-formulate Morgan's aphorism to view pornography as theory, rape as practice, and prostitution as lesson. Pornography, which fuses sexual pleasure with domination and violence, hugely encourages sex buying, which is a practice that facilitates pornography's enactment on the real bodies of real women. Even further, sometimes men who have learnt closely the lessons of domination and abuse of real-live women will progress to "battlefield operations" in the form of perpetrating sex crimes. The ideology that justifies prostitution, that it protects good women from rape (which was the same argument used to justify the "comfort women" scheme during wartime), does not just function to create a sexist division and scheme of control over women who are divided into Madonnas and whores, it also distracts from the role prostitution plays in instructing men in sex crime perpetration.

Thirdly, pornography is not merely a theory, but, as Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin repeatedly argue, itself comprises one practice of sexual abuse and rape. In the same fashion, prostitution also comprises more than a sexual lesson; it enacts sexual abuse through its perpetration. Men try out things they've seen in pornography on prostitutes.

Fourthly, in converse terms, we can approach rape and prostitution from the opposite direction not just as sexual lessons and practices but as, in themselves, comprising a theory as well as a behavioral model for bystander men. Men hear from other men about their real-life experiences of raping and prostituting women, or see these things, or find out about them, and learn about their conduct. They thereby develop a strong impulse towards perpetration of such behaviours. This is the case on the battlefield, where soldiers learn about rape from the rapes other soldiers commit.

Fifthly, sometimes pornography is made of real-

life rapes and acts of prostitution. Japanese military men raped Chinese women¹⁶ in invaded areas and in comfort stations and took photographs of their crimes. In peacetime, too, rapists photograph their victims, and commercial pornographers coerce and rape their victims in the process of making pornographic films.

In this way, sexual violence, including rape, as well as prostitution and pornography, each comprise theory, lessons and practice, and are each closely interlinked. In peacetime, too, they generate a state of fear among women akin to that experienced in war. This can be gleaned in part from the following example of survivor testimony from Linda Lovelace (nee Marchiano) who attracted huge public attention when she appeared in the 1970s hard-core pornography film *Deep Throat* (whose story is based on the idea of a woman having a clitoris in her throat) said the following at the same above-mentioned Minneapolis municipal hearing in the 1980s.

It all began in 1971. I was recuperating from a near-fatal car accident at my parents' home in Florida. A girlfriend of mine came to visit me with a person by the name of Mr. Charles Traynor. He came off as a considerate gentleman, asking us what we would like to do and how we would like to spend the afternoon and opening doors and lighting cigarettes and all so-called manners of society...

Here comes the biggest mistake of my life. Seeing how upset I was with my home life, Mr. Traynor offered me his assistance. He said I could come and live at his home in Miami. The relationship was platonic, which was fine with me. My plan was to recuperate and then go back to New York and live. I thought then he was being kind and a nice friend. Today I know why the relationship was platonic. He was incapable of a sexual act without inflicting some type of pain or degradation upon a

human being...

In my book *Ordeal*, an autobiography, I go into greater detail of the monstrosity I was put through, from prostitution to porno films to celebrity satisfier. The things that he used to get me involved in in pornography went from a 45 automatic 8 shot and M-16 semi-automatic machine gun to threats on the lives of my family. I have seen the kind of people involved in pornography and how they will use anyone to get what they want.¹⁷

An overarching framework for female sexual abuse is constructed out of the close and mutually reinforcing connections that exist between pornography, prostitution, rape and child sexual abuse. In its most blatant and violent form, this female sexual abuse looks remarkably like that violence perpetrated against women in wartime. Even in the case of more indirect, tepid and “peaceful” forms of abuse, moreover, in aggregate, as a system, they nonetheless establish the structure of male dominance and, whether in times of war or peace, comprise a base and a hotbed for more extreme and violent abuses.

The Structural Similarity of Legitimising Ideologies

Continuity between sexual abuse in peacetime and that of wartime arises not just out of the factors mentioned above, but also the similarity of the legitimizing ideologies that promotes the two.

For example, the sexually liberal scholar Kaku Sechiyama states openly his opinion that the film *Deep Throat* produced the good social effect of making people less ambivalent about fellatio.¹⁸ This kind of statement is difficult to distinguish from similar claims made about the Japanese military ‘comfort’ women that they produced the good social effect of boosting

troop morale. Similarly, the famous libertarian Miyadai Shinji’s praise of well-known pornographer Yamashita Baksheesh’s violent rape films for having a cathartic effect is surely no different from the arguments of those who defend the wartime scheme on the reasoning that “comfort women” prevented military rape.¹⁹

The pro-prostitution arguments of sexual liberals are structurally similar to historical revisionist defenses of the “comfort women” scheme that legitimate its historical operation. Of course, historical revisionists completely deny the possibility that “comfort women” faced overt violence and coercion, which makes the fallacy and criminality of their arguments a very serious matter. However, if we focus just on how both sets of arguments are rhetorically justified, we see war and peacetime schemes legitimated by similar ideological claims. If conservatives justify wartime sexual abuse in the name of the nation state and public order, liberals justify peacetime sexual abuse as the individual pursuit of free will and self-determination. These two justifications are less counterposed on the basis of the political stripe of their respective proponents than they are separated merely in terms of a theoretical division of labor—one addressing wartime and the other peace.

Historical revisionists say that calling the “comfort women” sex slaves is discriminatory and insulting, and fails to account for their personal subjectivity. Sexual liberals (proponents of peacetime “sex work”) similarly claim that emphasizing the sexist and violent nature of prostitution stigmatizes and demeans sex workers, and denies their personal subjectivity.²⁰

Historical revisionists argue, too, that critics of the “comfort women” system draw on skewed examples of atrocities when, in fact, many women enjoyed the work. Similarly, sexual liberals suggest most sex workers enjoy their

work, and anti-prostitution feminists unfairly raise only the worst of its examples.²¹

Historical revisionists further suggest that it was the soldiers who were pitiable, because they did not know whether they would live from one day to the next. These men were worse-off than the “comfort women”, they suggest, and in fact the “comfort women”, in contrast, were able to valiantly exercise their personal subjectivity.²²

Historical revisionists suggest the “comfort women” made an important contribution to the war effort in preventing rapes in battle-zones and through sexually attending to pitiable soldiers, and they suggest women felt proud about this contribution. Sexual liberals, too, argue that sex work prevents rapes in peacetime, and affords disadvantaged men comfort, so makes a great contribution to society for which sex workers feel proud.²³

Further, in the same way that historical revisionists justify the “comfort women” scheme on the basis of the sexuality of Japanese men of the time, sexual liberals today justify peacetime prostitution on the basis of the sexuality that is exercised by ordinary men in contemporary Japan, which they endorse.²⁴

Neither proponents of sexual liberalism nor “sex work” theory can fully condemn the wartime “comfort women” scheme. At most, they can criticize the scheme’s operation as having been sometimes violent or coercive. For example, Miya argues:

...There are so many feminists who lump the women all into the one category described as the “commodification of sex”, which suggests they were all victims of sexual violence, when there were both comfort women who were trafficked and coerced as sex slaves during wartime with no chance of escape, and women who entered prostitution willingly and freely as sex workers.²⁵

In this formulation, the problem is confined to the Japanese military’s taking of women by force, rather than the “comfort women” system itself. There were certainly Japanese women who applied to enter comfort stations out of feelings of patriotic duty,²⁶ and, according to Miya’s argument, these “comfort women” were self-willing, freely choosing sex workers. That these women were used sexually by soldiers does not amount to any form of sexual abuse, in her analysis, and represents merely the exercise of sexual self-determination between two equal parties. In the absence of narrowly defined “force” (as defined by historical revisionists) military prostitution is an act of free-will and choice that has no violent or sexist nature. This is a division-creating argument that separates narrowly defined victims of coercion from other women who do not fit the definition, and places them in opposition to each other. The latter is a victim worthy of pity, but the former is a freely acting “sex worker”.

Interestingly, far right cartoonist Kobayashi Yoshinori asserts exactly the same thing. He attacks Yoshimi, an historian whose research centrally focuses on the “comfort women” problem, as follows:

In fact, Yoshimi Yoshiaki is an adherent of extreme Marxist feminism, and believes that, without exception, all women in prostitution are victims of male sexual violence and economic disparity.²⁷

Kobayashi’s reference to “Marxist feminism” amounts to little more than a show of ignorance on his part (in fact, most Marxist feminists these days have succumbed to ideas of prostitution as “sex work” rather than male sexual violence), but the core of his argument is exactly the same as the claims of sexual liberals like Miya and Miyadai. That is, except for cases of coercion according to very narrowly defined ideas of “force”, prostitution is an activity undertaken freely and purposely and occurs in the absence of subjugation and

victimization.

Structural links between the wartime “comfort women” system and peacetime systems of prostitution are evident not just in the ideologies used to defend them, but also in the self-justifications of sex buyers who defend their sex purchasing. In other words, people who attempt to legitimize sex buying, and men who periodically buy people for prostitution, are more likely to defend the “comfort women” system and express agreement with historical revisionist ideas about its history.

For example, Ikeda Eriko offers the following analysis of a survey undertaken among 140 3rd-year Japanese male university students on the topic of prostitution.

Something becomes obvious when student responses to the prostitution questionnaire, and the report on the “comfort women”, are lined up side-by-side. A minority of male students who expressed pro-prostitution views concurrently expressed sympathy with historical revisionist ideas about the “comfort women”. No students denied the historical existence of the “comfort women”, but they did express doubt that all victims were telling the truth, their memories weren’t tinged by fantasy, and that financial gain didn’t drive their claims of victimization. These responses were influenced by the historical revisionist idea that the former ‘comfort women’ could be dismissed as mere prostitutes.

Students who said things like, “I’m somewhat persuaded by Kobayashi Yoshinori’s claim that the comfort women weren’t taken by force”, “People say the Japanese military was involved, but how do we know they weren’t involved in a good way? The women earned huge amounts of money, didn’t they?”, also agreed with Kobayashi’s ideas about prostitution in their responses to the survey. They compared women in today’s brothels, who are supposedly

professionals and exist to reduce sex crime, to the “comfort women”. Male students who thought that “it is no-one’s business to interfere in prostitution arrangements between two people who are mutually consenting” also said the following about the “comfort women”:

“I have no idea about what the comfort women are asking for. If Japan pays compensation money to those women it’ll no doubt come out of taxes. I am a very selfish person, so I can’t see why my money should go to compensate something I didn’t do”.²⁸

The ideas that the male students articulate here are not just those of the right-wing historical revisionist cartoon producer Kobayashi but also those of sexual liberalism itself.²⁹

Conclusion

The 20-century “age of extremes” was concurrently an age of raging violence against women. However, amidst it all there developed a movement of feminists and survivors, and this movement achieved many things. Women are no longer beings merely battered and silent. Nonetheless, the eradication of violence against women is still a long way off, and feminism weathers storms of severe attacks and backlash from armies of both conservatives and liberals. The struggle for the eradication of sex discrimination, with likely a history as long as human civilization, is a task important to the history of mankind as a whole. It is surely misguided to expect the second wave feminist movement, only thirty years into its struggle, to have already resolved the problem.

Whether future generations of women will look back on the 21st century’s sex discrimination and violence against women as a product merely of a barbaric lost age, or as something they continue to face in the present, remains to

be seen.

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.

Seiya Morita lectures at Kokugakuin University in Marxist political economy, and is the translator of Catharine MacKinnon and David Harvey’s work into Japanese. His most recent book is a translation and commentary of an unpublished Marx manuscript from 1866. For over a decade, Morita has campaigned against prostitution and pornography in Japan via two organisations: the Anti-Pornography and Prostitution Research Group (APP) and People Against Pornography and Sexual Violence (PAPS). His textbooks on Marxist political philosophy attract a growing following, as do his regular public lectures on the topic.

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Notes

¹ Nishino, Rumiko; Kim, Puja; Onozawa, Akane (trans. Robert Ricketts), "Sensō to Josei e no Bōryoku" Risāchi Akushon Sentā. *Denying the comfort women: The Japanese state's assault on historical truth*. (London: Routledge, 2018).

² Onozawa, Akane. *Kindai nihon shakai to kōshō seido: Minshūshi to kokusai kankeishi no shiten kara*. (Tokyo: Yoshikawakōbunkan, 2010).

³ See [here](#).

⁴ Yoshimi, Yoshiaki, & O'Brien, S. G.. *Comfort women: Sexual slavery in the Japanese military during World War II*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

⁵ Kinoshita, Naoko. "Ianfu" mondai no gensetsu kūkan: Nihonjin "Ianfu" no fuka shika to genzen. (Tokyo: Shohan, 2017).

⁶ See also Morita's later piece, 'Overcoming Double Erasure: Japanese "comfort women", nationalism and trafficking,' *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, Vol. 15, No. 21, (2017).

⁷ See Norma, Caroline and Morita, Seiya, "[Feminist Action Against Pornography in Japan: Unexpected Success in an Unlikely Place](#)," *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*: Vol. 4: Iss. 4 (2020).

⁸ Morita, Seiya (2014-2015), "Poruno to sei-bōryoku higai [Pornography and the harms of sexual violence, parts I, II and III]," *Vaurakku Tsūshin*, Nos. 6-8.

⁹ Suzuki Yūko, *Sensō sekinin to jendā [Wartime Responsibility and Gender]*, (Tokyo: Mirai-sha, 1997), p. 116. See also Yūki Fujime, "'Ianfu' kōshō ron hihan [Criticising the argument that "comfort women" were prostitutes in the context of state-regulated prostitution]", *Onnatachi no 21-seiki*, Vol. 16, 1998.

¹⁰ Ōgoshi Aiko, *Tōsō suru feminizumu e [Toward a Militant Feminism]*, (Tokyo: Mirai-sha, 1996), p. 209.

¹¹ Wakakuwa Midori, "Jūgun ianfu mondai/jendā-shi no shiten kara [The problem of the Japanese military comfort women from a perspective of gender history]", *Rekishi to shinjitsu [History and Truth]*, (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1997), p. 175.

¹² Wakakuwa, "Jūgun ianfu mondai/jendā-shi no shiten kara", pp. 175-176.

¹³ Andrea Dworkin, "Living in terror, pain", *Life and Death: Unapologetic Writings on the Continuing War against Women*, (New York: The Free Press, 1997), p. 53.

¹⁴ Robin Morgan, "Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape", *Take Back the Night*, ed. by Laura Lederer, (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1980).

¹⁵ [Editor's note: it should perhaps be noted that pornography may also be abusive of men, though Morita's focus here is on abuse of women.]

¹⁶ [And women from other Asian societies (editor's note)]

¹⁷ MacKinnon & Dworkin, *In Harm's Way*, pp. 60-61.

¹⁸ Sechiyama Kaku, "Yori yoi sei no shōhinka wo mezashite [Toward a better commodification of sex]", in *Feminizumu no shuchō [Feminism's Claims]*, Keisō Shobō (1992), p. 77. It is symbolic that Hashizume Daizaburō, after publishing a chapter in the same edited volume with Sechiyama where he endorsed prostitution in an old-fashioned, crude way, afterwards went on to become a follower of far-right cartoonist Kobayashi Yoshinori.

¹⁹ See quote from Miyadai in Ueno Chizuko and Miyadai Shinji, "Media/sekkusu/Kazoku [Media, sex, and family]", *Ronza*, August 1998. This published dialogue between Ueno and Miyadai is criticized in my contribution: Morita Seiya, "Ueno/Miyadai taidan ni miru seiteki riberarizumu no airo [The Achilles heel of sexual liberals revealed in Ueno and Miyadai's conversation]", *Ronza* (September 1998).

²⁰ For example, Miya Yoshiko, "Sei no jiko kettei to feminizumu no aporia [Sexual self-determination and feminism's aporia]", in Miyadai Shinji, "*Sei no jiko ketti*" *genron [Principles of "Sexual Self-Determination"]*, (Tokyo: Kinokuniya Shoten, 1998).

²¹ "Those who put prostitution in a framework of 'sexual exploitation' through describing it as

‘sexual slavery’, ‘rape’ or ‘sexual violence’ always take their evidence from the worst circumstances. For example, the enforced prostitution of Asian women and the trafficking and sexual exploitation of children (‘child prostitution’)...They confront people, inevitably, with the idea that prostitution is always the result of coercion and that payment puts victims in a position of slavery where anything can be done to them” (Miya, “Sei no jiko kettei to feminizumu no aporia”, pp. 88-89).

²² “The majority of prostitution occurring these days is very different from the old stereotype of vulnerable and weak women being bought by powerful men. On the contrary, this stereotype is more likely to be responsible for marginalizing sexually disadvantaged people who would be unable to have sex unless they could purchase sexual services” (Miyadai Shinji, “Jiko kettei genron: Jiyū to songeki [Principles of self-determination: freedom and dignity]”, *Sei no Jiko Kettei Genron*, p. 264). “These old guys go down on their knees before young high school girls and exist just to be sponged off for pocket-money, and so it’s actually the girls who are the ones in the superior position over them” (Miya, “Sei no jiko kettei to feminizumu no aporia”, p. 96).

²³ “Sex workers, who do the work of healing, soothing, and sexually counselling physically or psychologically disabled people, or people who have no opportunity for sex, are proud of their work, have self-respect, and are not victims. They are subjective proponents of their own ‘sexual self-determination’” (Miya, “Sei no jiko kettei to feminizumu no aporia”, pp. 90-91). As can be seen in the quote, Miya Yoshiko conceives of the category of “victim” in extremely individualistic and subjective terms. She also appears to believe that victims retain no self-respect or pride in themselves. This is surely an anti-victim approach.

²⁴ “Those feminists who loudly proclaim ‘love and sex must go together’, and if this means they just become sloths during sex as passive recipients, then surely they’re responsible for pushing men and their husbands towards so-called ‘prostitution buying!’” (Miya, “Sei no jiko kettei to feminizumu no aporia”, p. 102). In this statement, Miya appears to believe that feminists too should actively adhere to the sexual values of contemporary male dominant society and sexually service men in order to satisfy them. Also, Miyadai, across the breadth of his work, suggests that prostitution is necessary for those men who have developed fetishistic sexualities as a result of pornography use, so they can find need fulfillment for these proclivities by using prostitutes. If there really are such men who have developed specific sexual preferences through pornography use, then we need to first criticize pornography, and not simply turn in the opposite direction towards arguments that justify prostitution. This example, too, shows similar patterns of logic to the arguments of revisionists that cite Japan’s pre-war licensed brothel system in justification of the “comfort women” system.

²⁵ Miya, “Sei no jiko kettei to feminizumu no aporia”, pp. 103-104. I suspect that Miya, if asked, could not actually identify any “feminists” she purports to refer to here. As far as I know there are no feminists who lump together “comfort women who were...sex slaves” together with “women who entered prostitution willingly and freely as sex workers”. Feminists merely point out that the wartime “comfort women” system and the licensed brothel scheme of the same era, as well as the prostitution systems that continue in an unceasing fashion today (including those of a “voluntary” nature!), are inextricably intertwined, and structurally continuous. This claim neither lumps together all these systems, nor subsumes into one category all their victims and survivors.

²⁶ Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Jūgun ianfu [Japanese Military Comfort Women]*, (Tokyo, Iwanami

Shinsho, 1995), pp. 88-89.

²⁷ Kobayashi Yoshinori and Takeuchi Yoshikazu, *Kyōkasho ga oshiekanenai jigiyaku [Risks of Self-Hate in the Lessons of History Schoolbooks]*, (Tokyo: Bunka-sha, 1997), p. 27.

²⁸ Eriko Ikeda, “Hikitsugareru kaishun ishiki [Legacies of the sex-buyer mentality]”, *Onnatachi no 21-seiki*, Vol. 16, 1998, p. 25.

²⁹ See D. Leidholdt □ J. G. Raymond (ed), *The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism*, (London: Pergamon Press, 1990); *Michigan Journal of Gender □ Law*, Vol. 1, 1993; Sugita Satoshi, *Danken Shugiteki Sekushuariti [A Criticism of Androcentric Sexuality]*, (Tokyo: Aoki Shoten, 1999).