

A Continuum of Violence: Karayuki-san, Comfort Women, and Sex Tourism in Japan

Jessica Zhu, Stanford '24

Abstract: From the late 1800s to the mid-1900s, thousands of Japanese women were trafficked to foreign countries and employed at brothels. Called "karayuki-san," they were the foundation of Japan's pre-World War II economic expansion into Singapore and Southeast Asia, fueling growth both in their new countries and at home. This network of karayuki-san brothels across the Asia Pacific made it easy for the Japanese government and military to then, during World War II, set up the notorious system of comfort women and comfort stations. In Japan's post-war economic boom, sex again became a central part of growth and development, with corporate sex tourism causing investment in the sex industry of hot springs resorts to skyrocket, which has in turn contributed to increased rates of sex trafficking in Japan. This paper argues that these three periods of history form a continuum of Japanese society using sexual violence against women as a means to an end. From the pre-war karayuki-san brothels to the comfort stations of World War II to the hot springs resorts today, Japan has continuously used women as collateral damage: sexual exploitation of, and violence against, women has been seen as a "necessary evil" for national development, justified in the name of furthering Japan's growth and power.

Content warning: This paper discusses sexual violence. Readers are advised to take this into account before proceeding.

At nineteen years old, Kikuyo Zendo left her home in Okayama, Japan. She was the youngest of eight children and had first traveled there to live with an older sister after their parents' early deaths. The Zendos were poor: half worked as farmers, the other half as merchants. So when a woman who wove straw mats with Kikuyo's sister told her about a job working at a hotel in Kobe, Kikuyo followed her, hoping to make some money. But when they arrived in Kobe, there was no hotel. Instead, a man named Egawa drove her, her sister's friend, and around five or six other women to a pier, where they boarded a ship. From there, they were taken first to Singapore, then to Malaysia, where they were forced to work at a "station," or brothel. "I was tricked, all of us were," Kikuyo recounted decades later as a woman in her 70s. "We were all in tears as we got off the boat. But we knew they wouldn't let us go home. It didn't help if we fought or cried. There wasn't any hope of going home" (Imamura, 1975). The master of the station told Kikuyo that she owed a debt of 600 dollars to the sailors who had hidden her on their boat. The money earned from each of her clients was split 60:40 between her and the master, but saving up enough to buy her freedom was impossible. Kikuyo was trapped (Imamura, 1975).

From the late 1800s to the mid-1900s, thousands of Japanese women like Kikuyo were trafficked to foreign countries. The Japanese public called them *karayuki-san*: "Kara" meant China or "foreign countries," so "*karayuki-san*" first came to designate those who worked abroad during the Meiji Restoration. But job opportunities for Japanese men were limited in foreign countries, so the majority of those traveling abroad were women, many of whom were trafficked to or employed at Japanese brothels. The term "*karayuki-san*" thus took on a new meaning: Japanese women who went to work abroad as prostitutes (Hirakawa and Shimizu, 1999, p. 19-20). Some went voluntarily, others tricked and trafficked like Kikuyo. But for all, it was never a wholly free choice — even those who travelled abroad voluntarily often did so under immense economic pressure. These women were the foundation of Japan's pre-World War II economic expansion into Singapore and Southeast Asia, fueling growth both in their new countries and at home by increasing the demand for and consumption of Japanese goods abroad. Japanese scholars Hitoshi Hirakawa and Hiroshi Shimizu refer to this era as "the *karayuki*-led economic advance," paying tribute to the ways in which *karayuki-san* were essential for, and at the vanguard of, Japan's nascent economic development.

This network of *karayuki-san* brothels across the Asia Pacific made it easy for the Japanese government and military to then, during World War II, set up the notorious system of comfort women and comfort stations. Around the year 1932, after Japanese units were first dispatched to Shanghai for an assault known as the First Shanghai Incident, military comfort stations began to be established in China by the Japanese navy. The army soon followed in their footsteps with its own comfort stations, citing a number of objectives: preventing soldiers from sexually assaulting and raping local women, reducing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases among its troops, and improving military discipline (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 43-47). At these stations, women who were trafficked from Japan and Japan-occupied territories like Korea and China

were raped and abused by military soldiers and officials, often for long hours, suffering extensive physical and mental health problems. Decades after the war's formal close, the legacy of comfort women still haunts Japanese and Asian collective memory, casting an uncomfortable shadow over efforts of transitional justice and reconciliation between Japan and the countries that it occupied during World War II. Since the 1990s, former comfort women have started to speak openly about their memories of exploitation and violence, and dozens have filed lawsuits against the Japanese government to demand compensation and an official apology. Reactionary and nationalist movements have flared up in response, defending Japan's history and asserting that the country committed no war crimes during World War II, rendering an apology unnecessary. To date, the Japanese government has still not issued an apology or provided reparations that survivors have deemed satisfactory.

In Japan's post-war economic boom, sex again became a central part of growth and development. Prostitution and trafficking scholar Caroline Norma writes that for the past few decades and still today, "[w]hite collar Japanese working men are internationally renowned for their corporate sex tourism and after-hours client-entertaining in sex industry venues" (Norma, 2019, p. 1). At many companies, for example, financially subsidized and often mandatory business trips called *ian ryokou*, *shaiin ryokou*, *shokuba ryokou*, or *shanai ryokou* take employees to hot springs resorts every year. These resorts are hubs of prostitution: in 1991, they were so popular that *ian ryokou* were the most common reason for which people traveled within the country (Norma, 2019, p. 100-101). According to the testimonies of some wives, hostesses and prostitutes are "foisted upon" the men at these hot springs and are unrefusable due to peer pressure from coworkers and superiors (Norma, 2010, p. 103). Sex tourism abroad is also prevalent: the number of Japanese men travelling abroad doubled between 1987 and 1992 to reach 12 million, with one survey reporting that one in five admitted to having bought sex with women abroad (Matsui, 1993). This increase in corporate demand for prostitution, and the institutionalization of *ian ryokou*, have caused investment in the sex industry of hot springs resorts to skyrocket, which has in turn contributed to increased rates of sex trafficking in Japan, sometimes of underage girls (Norma, 2019, p. 104).

This paper argues that these three periods of history form a continuum of Japanese society using sexual violence against women as a tool for national development, with women being trafficked and raped to support Japan's political and economic advancement. From the pre-war *karayuki-san* brothels to the comfort stations of World War II to the hot springs resorts of the 60s and today, Japan has continuously used women as collateral damage: sexual exploitation of, and violence against, women has been seen as a "necessary evil" (when it is even considered an evil), justified by the government and by the public in the name of furthering Japan's growth and power. With the *karayuki-san*, it was economic development in Singapore and Southeast Asia; with the comfort women, it was military success in the Greater East Asia War; and with sex tourism, it is corporate fraternity and economic growth.

This continuum is specifically characterized by the intention of using violence against certain targeted classes of women as a “safety valve” for the redirection of both male violence against broader groups of women, and also male discontentment and frustration about their own exploitation — a legitimization of certain kinds of violence that attempts to prevent violence in other places. Race and class are also deeply interwoven into the fabric of this trend, with impoverished Japanese women being trafficked at higher rates, and with imperialism and racism causing Japanese men to view women in China, South Korea and Southeast Asia as inferior, less pure and more inherently sexual — thereby justifying their subjugation. The history of these three phenomena are inextricable from one another, each stage laying the foundation for the next, together building a patriarchal and violent society.

Karayuki-san: Broken then Betrayed (c. 1970 - 1940)

“From the late 1800s to early 1900s, there were tens of thousands of women who were smuggled in. They carried out their role as the front troops of Japan, helping the economy and cooperating in war. Only to be betrayed.”

— Shohei Imamura, narrating in his film “Karayuki-san, The Making of a Prostitute” (Imamura, 1975)

Karayuki-san led the way for Japan’s accelerating economic expansion into Singapore and Southeast Asia. An estimated 6,000 worked in Southeast Asia during the peak of their activity in the early 1900s, with around 600 in Singapore alone. Many other early Japanese immigrants to these new regions were also often in “improper trades” connected to the karayuki-san, such as brothels and sex trafficking. For instance, out of just 1,835 Japanese residents in the Strait Settlements in 1906, 852 were karayuki-san and 113 were brothel keepers (Hirakawa and Shimizu, 1999, p. 20). As these migrants settled down in their new homes, they catalyzed a domino effect of economic growth fueled by demand for Japanese goods: “[the karayuki-san] needed Japanese foods, Japanese beverages, Japanese clothes, and many other Japanese goods. Their demand was met by the queer Japanese sundry-goods stores ... As the Japanese goods were also sold to non-Japanese customers by such stores, they became widely known. The prosperity of [Japan’s] Southeast Asian trade today ... was in fact developed by these sundry-goods retailers, behind whom there was a shadow of the Japanese prostitutes” (Koji and Michinori, 1919, p. 101-2). The success of the Japanese sundry stores also led to the growth of retail and wholesale shops, shipping and warehouse companies, and banks, which in turn generated yet more economic growth and development (Hirakawa and Shimizu, 1999, p. 22). Aside from sundry stores, karayuki-san also invested their money into plantations in Southeast Asia, typically rubber estates, which bolstered local economies. The bulk of their earnings, though, was remitted back to Japan in support of their families, leading to domestic economic growth as well (Hirakawa and Shimizu, 1999, p. 20). The contribution of karayuki-san to Japan’s

economy was so powerful that when Chinese immigrants launched a boycott against Japanese goods in response to rising competition between China's and Japan's light manufacturing industries, the karayuki-san were included in the boycott because of the strong perception that "they were at the front of Japan's overseas development" (Imamura, 1975). The role of the karayuki-san in Japan's public consciousness was perhaps best encapsulated by Iheji Muraoka, a self-proclaimed pimp boss, who said that "[t]he ex-convict abductors must make the women work hard. They are to send money to the women's family twice a year. It will help their parents. The government will collect tax from them. Ex-convicts will be rich and rehabilitated. Women can pay duty to their parents. And our homeland will become wealthy" (Imamura, 1975).

Japan's economic success prior to World War II was, therefore, impossible without the karayuki-san. They immigrated overseas first, encouraged Japanese business in their wake, invested in local economic development in Southeast Asia and sent earnings back home to their families. But as Japan continued to modernize and grow, the karayuki-san turned into a source of national embarrassment. In 1892, for instance, a petition sent to the Japanese government from a samurai and 36 other emigrant laborers in Thursday Island, Australia asked for karayuki-san to be expelled from the island, complaining that "due to the people (women and men) involved in prostitution our migrant labourers (dekasegi-in) are at times called ignorant dark skinned savages or subjects of a country of prostitutes" (Mihalopoulos, 1993, p. 43). Sasaki Shigetoshi, the samurai, continued that the prostitution of the karayuki-san put Japan at a state of "underdevelopment," hindering the country's progress toward modernization and Westernization (Mihalopoulos, 1993, p. 44). Of course, the demand was partly incited by the racist attitudes of other Australian inhabitants; but rather than defending the karayuki-san, Japanese immigrants abandoned them instead, relegating the women to collateral damage in the pursuit of a better, more "Western" international reputation.

As embarrassment of the karayuki-san grew amongst Japanese nationals abroad, the Japanese government caved to its people's demands: in 1920, the Acting Japanese Consul-General, Yamazaki Heikichi, abolished the system of licensed prostitution of karayuki-san in British Malay (Hirawaka and Shimizu, 1999, p. 27). Suddenly out of a legal job, the karayuki-san found themselves stuck: there were few options for alternative work, they didn't have the money to return home and their government had provided them with no compensation or support after the outlawing of their occupation. Many had been trafficked unwillingly or pressured to travel abroad, but they still relied on their employment as karayuki-san for survival. "Our homeland sucked up the women's profits," Imamura said in his documentary, "then banned them, claiming them indecent for the nation." Many karayuki-san died without ever stepping foot in Japan again; their graves are often not even marked with stones, but with pieces of wood (Imamura, 1975).

This paper argues that the willingness to leave the karayuki-san behind stemmed largely from the marginalized populations that made up the women who went abroad. Like Kikuyo Zendo, most karayuki-san came from impoverished families in rural Japan. As Japan

industrialized and urbanized, those living in poor fishing and farming villages found themselves facing a deadly combination of extreme agrarian poverty, overcrowding, and falling levels of productivity (Warren, 1989, p. 4). During the Tokugawa period, increasing rates of taxation also forced peasants in areas of rural southern Japan such as Amakusa and Shimabara to turn over 50 percent of their harvests to the government. Even after the Meiji Restoration, taxation remained a burden that forced many peasant-farmers off of their land (Warren, 1989, p. 5). One of the only ways to escape these worsening conditions, especially for daughters who had few occupational choices, was to leave Japan and work abroad (Warren, 1989, p. 4). In an anonymous interview, for instance, a former karayuki-san recalls stowing away on a ship bound for Singapore at 16 years old, working upon arrival at a brothel to support her sick father and siblings. Every day, up to 49 clients came. “I’d do it in the late morning, from 9 a.m.,” she said. “It would go on until around 3 a.m. at night. I cried and cried” (Miyazaki, 2020).

Across rural Japan but especially in those villages of Amakusa and Shimabara, which were closest to the Chinese mainland and to the port of Nagasaki, young women were thus often forced to migrate, or were sold by their parents into prostitution. In a patriarchal society where female infanticide was common, and where women had no say legally or socially in family matters, peasant families viewed “the exchange of a daughter, who was regarded as an object to be invested in or sold,” as a worthy transaction that gave them “the only guarantee of a possible future” (Warren, 1989, p. 6). While some, like Kikuyo, willingly left home themselves — though they were often lied to about the jobs that they were chasing — many were also trafficked by their families as a result of both agrarian poverty and patriarchal norms. The line between who was trafficked and who had voluntarily travelled abroad was blurry; class and gender intersected deeply in the tragedy of the karayuki-san.

First the honored vanguard of Japanese expansion and then the embarrassment that was left behind and forgotten, karayuki-san embodied the exploitation of women as collateral damage in the path of national progress. Despite being initially praised by the public for their contributions to Japan’s growth, they were tossed aside immediately once they were not only no longer useful, but also threatening to Japan’s public image as a modern and Westernizing power. Stranded in foreign countries with no hope of returning home, the karayuki-san were among the first victims of this trend in Japanese history: one that exploited violence against women as a tool for national progress.

Comfort Women: Rape, a ‘Wartime Benefit’ for Japan (c. 1932 - 1945)

“The military leaders there assume that the soldiers’ sexual desires are impossible to restrain and set up comfort stations so that the soldiers will not rape Chinese women. Rapes, however, are committed quite frequently.”

— First Lieutenant Hayao Torao, writing in a report for the Japanese military (Yoshiaki, 1995, p.

Her story was an eerie echo of Kikuyo's. It was 1943, and Mun Pil-gi was an 18-year-old girl living in Japan-occupied Korea. Although she had entered school at age nine, her father had withdrawn her and burned all her textbooks, raging that "women who study become foxes." So Mun stayed at home, doing housework, spinning thread, and helping her parents with the fields and store that they owned. Still, she longed to study. So, when a Korean man told her that he could take her to a place where, he promised, she could go to school and earn a lot of money, she went with him. Like Kikuyo, Mun never reached that alluring place. When she got off of the truck that had taken her from her village, she found herself in Pusan, where she was put on a train to northeastern China and forced to work in a military comfort station there (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 104-5).

Problems abounded for the Japanese military as they launched their invasion into China: soldiers were raping local women, sexually transmitted diseases were spreading among the troops due to the use of civilian brothels, and the wretched conditions of the army's barracks were stirring up discontent. The solution that was reached borrowed from the memory and legacy of the *karayuki-san*. A system of "comfort stations," military-run brothels where women from Japan and Japan-occupied territories were trafficked to, was designed by the Japanese military to provide sexual "comfort" to soldiers and to improve military discipline.

The Japanese government's intention of using sexual violence against comfort women as a deterrance for sexual violence against local Chinese women, a twisted attempt to reduce anti-Japanese sentiment, again reflects the relegation of certain subjugated populations of women to "collateral damage" for the greater national good. Okabe Naosaburō, who was Chief of Staff of the North China Area Army from November 1944 until the end of World War II, wrote in his "Written Notification of Warnings on the Treatment of the Local Population by Military Units and Personnel" that "the trigger causing such potent anti-Japanese sentiment [in occupied parts of China] is the widespread diffusion of news about rapes committed by Japanese military personnel in various areas," citing the formation of several Chinese self-defense organizations that were seeking revenge for Japanese crimes, particularly rapes, through violence and even murder (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 54-55). Notably, the military's motivation behind preventing the rape of local women was not to protect them, but to reduce anti-Japanese sentiment among occupied peoples, which stood in the way of their imperial goals. First Lieutenant Hayao Torao explicitly confirmed this in his report "Phenomena Particular to the Battlefield and Policies Toward Them," which stated that "[t]he essential purposes of these stations are to ... prevent rapes that damage the honor of the Imperial Army" (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 67). Ironically, but perhaps predictably, the comfort stations did not even reduce rapes of local women: there were no occupied areas in which rapes stopped, even when comfort stations were available to soldiers (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 66). Japanese scholar Yoshimi Yoshiaki writes that "[i]t is impossible to prevent rape on the one hand while officially sanctioning sexual violence on the other," noting also that the lack of severe punishments for soldiers who committed rapes contributed to this prevalence of sexual violence (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 66). Nevertheless, the Japanese government's

attempt to reduce rapes of local women by allowing soldiers to instead rape *selected groups* of women reflects the assumption that women's bodies can be traded and exploited in the name of the greater good, in this case military success, just as rural families sold their daughters into prostitution for economic gain during the age of the karayuki-san. The military's goal of reducing anti-Japanese sentiment also illustrates the ways in which women were sacrificed for the sake of national advancement: like how the karayuki-san were exploited for economic expansion and then left behind once they came to be seen as an embarrassment, the rape of comfort women was justified in the name of supporting Japan's occupation of China and furthering its global power.

Reducing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), too, was another objective which comfort women were sacrificed for. The long hospitalization and recovery periods for STDs at the time — 91 days for gonorrhea and 76 from syphilis — presented serious issues for both the stationed troops and the domestic Japanese government, as infected soldiers who returned home would spread the STDs there (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 69). Soldiers were thus prohibited from going to civilian brothels, where it was supposed that most STDs originated; instead, comfort stations were established as an alternative that the military thought it could better control and regulate with proper hygiene rules and practices (Yoshiaki 70). But, as with the aim of reducing rapes of local women, this endeavor failed as well. Almost all comfort women became infected with STDs, an issue that First Lieutenant Hayao Torao attributed, at the time, to the recruitment and trafficking of women who were already prostitutes in Japan or Korea to the comfort stations. But Yoshiaki counters that “[w]hether the comfort women brought to China were a source of infection or not is highly debatable. Women with no history of prostitution should be seen as victims who were infected {by troops} rather than as sources of infection” (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 71). Since many comfort women were trafficked through deception and violence or were sold by their parents, it is likely that the spread of STDs in the stations originated from already-infected soldiers, rather than from the women brought to China. Many comfort women were also selected from the local Chinese civilian population. Regardless of where the STDs originated, though, the philosophy behind using comfort stations to reduce their spread was still inherently exploitative: given the vast population of soldiers who were already infected, it was inevitable that the comfort women would become infected as well. Despite this fact, the military threw the trafficked women in harm's way to protect and strengthen their soldiers. The health of the comfort women, on the other hand, was given little thought: an oral history testimony from a woman stationed at the Shijiazhuang comfort station recalls that Chinese girls still in school were rounded up — “their genitals were still underdeveloped, so they became torn and infected. There was no medicine except something to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and Mercurochrome. They got sick, their sores became septic, but there was no treatment” (Kaneda, 1998). For both the personal health of the troops, and the efficacy and cohesion of the military, comfort women were sacrificed as collateral damage with no regard for the health consequences that they themselves suffered.

Perhaps most emblematic of this idea was the military's final objective in designing this violent system: to provide "comfort" to their soldiers, giving the stations their notorious name. In waging its aggressive war, Japan required that its soldiers remain in the field for long periods, living in bleak conditions that gradually incited anger and frustration among the troops. Their human rights were violated, and they lived under the heel of strict commanding officers who exercised harsh and arbitrary discipline (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 73). As a result, officers began to lose control over their soldiers, with one staff officer in the 11th Army complaining that "they were unable to assert their authority over older enlisted men" (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 74). To ameliorate this crisis, military doctors advised that wholesome comfort and entertainment facilities such as libraries, theaters and gyms be built; instead, the system of comfort facilities was established to offer soldiers "sexual comfort" from the wretched realities of their everyday lives. This goal was explicit and primary above others: the second article of the comfort station regulations of the 3rd Independent Mountain Artillery Regiment stated that the comfort stations were built to "pacify and moderate the troops' brutal temperament and to aid in the promotion of military discipline," and stations were brought even to areas where there were few civilians and thus few local rapes and little threat of STD transmission (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 73). In pursuing this objective, the military was somewhat more successful than it was with the former two. One soldier stationed in China recounted that at the comfort stations, he and the other men "would be holding down [their] penises as [they] ran in ... They all wanted to be freed from the stress of the singular experience of having walked the line between life and death ... [They] thought there was no sense of fulfillment that burned so intensely as this" (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 74). Rape even became seen as a "wartime benefit" among the Japanese military. In the military tribunals that were set up to prosecute Japanese war crimes after World War II, many on trial for rape said that prior to departing for China, they were told by returning soldiers that sex was one of the good things about the war, and that this caused incoming soldiers to be "seized with the desire to rape" (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 191). Whether this desire was released upon local civilian women or women in comfort stations was seemingly immaterial to them. In giving the soldiers access to sex with women as compensation for their harsh living conditions, the military thus furthered the idea that men's suffering, especially when tied to the state and its aims, should be prioritized over women's suffering to the point that violence against women was justified if in service of aiding men. Evidently, these societally held notions added to the historical continuum of sacrificing women and using sexual violence against them for national objectives. The system of comfort women was viewed as a "necessary evil" among the Japanese military, reflecting that even though they recognized the brutality that was faced by the women trafficked to the brothels, they felt that it was more important to prioritize the furthering of Japan's invasion of China.

Like with the *karayuki-san*, the economic class of the comfort women played an important role in their exploitation. Agents in occupied territories took advantage of widespread poverty to convince young girls into going with them to seek better employment opportunities elsewhere. In Korea, for example, Japan's colonial policies meshed with an already patriarchal

culture to make receiving an adequate education impossible for women: a 1930 survey found that only eight percent of Korean women were literate, compared to 36 percent of men. Tricked by promises of good work in places like “factories,” many girls went willingly with Japanese agents to escape their oppression at home (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 105). Sometimes, the crushing cruelty of poverty also meant that even if the young women themselves did not want to go with the agents, they would be sold into service by their parents, who were often also deceived about the true nature of the work that their daughters would be doing. One Japanese couple called the Kitamuras, for example, worked as comfort station operators and bought 22 Korean women in 1942 for sums of between 300 and 1,000 yen to the girls’ parents. The women and their families were told that the work would encompass tasks such as visiting the wounded in hospitals and rolling bandages; the enticement of “plenty of money, an opportunity to pay off the family debts, easy work, and the prospect of a new life in a new land” was often too alluring to be turned down. Many comfort women were thus sold into the system by their own parents, their fates sealed by the trap of poverty — a cruel echo of the *karayuki-san*’s origins too (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 105-6).

Race and imperialism also played large roles in determining which populations of women were targeted for trafficking. The poverty in Korea that enabled many women to be exploited was heavily shaped by Japan’s colonial policies, which kept women uneducated and impoverished. Knowing this, Japanese agents purposefully targeted Korean women: since Korea was considered a colony of Japan, international law that banned human trafficking was inapplicable there, as well as in Taiwan (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 157). Because the same could not be said of mainland Japan, most comfort women trafficked from Japan were chosen from prostitutes already working in brothels, since this made it easier for the military to sidestep the international treaty that forbade the buying and selling of women and children — technically, the prostitutes were not being “sold” (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 100). In contrast, “all of the Korean girls are said to have been tricked into going along” (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 102). While this disparity does not mean that the trafficked Japanese women were any more or less victimized in comfort stations than Korean women, it does reflect how imperialism impacted which specific groups of women were targeted in different places. Women trafficked in China, too, faced the impact of imperialism. The Japanese military enlisted local Chinese leaders to help them in gathering up women, hoping for cooperation with occupied villages and territories. But these occurrences were typically coerced: it was impossible to defy army orders, and Japanese garrisons claimed that the women were needed for the safety of the village. Many of the rounded-up women were thus not prostitutes, but instead local women brought to the comfort stations by force and without their consent (Yoshiaki, 1995, p. 120). Ironically, this meant that to reduce the rapes of local women, the Japanese military hand-picked several local women to be raped themselves.

A rhetoric of Japanese racial supremacy supported this trafficking of Korean and Chinese women. After contact with the West first introduced the concept of race to Japan in the late nineteenth century, political leaders used it to amass support for a variety of nationalist aims (Fukurai and Yang, 2018, p. 533-534). Legal scholars Hiroshi Fukurai and Alice Yang write that in World War II, this manifested in “the killing of hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians such as women, children and babies during the Nanjing massacre; the exploitation of Chinese, other Asians, and Allied POWs as laboratory subjects in biochemical human experiments by Unit 731 military doctors; the brutal suppression of indigenous resistance against the puppet state Manchukuo in China,” and of course — “the systematic sexual enslavement of nearly 200,000 Asian women and the establishment of comfort stations throughout Asia,” among other atrocities (p. 534).

The plight of both the Korean and Chinese trafficking victims demonstrates how racism and imperialism influenced how Japan chose which women to target. Imperial policies and power made it easy for women in occupied territories to be exploited, and views held by many Japanese people about racial superiority meant that it was easy to sacrifice the humanities of Korean and Chinese women for the sake of Japanese men and the Japanese nation’s progress. The devastation of the comfort women thus grants clarity to both the use of sexual violence against women in service of national goals, and the ways in which race and class were intertwined with this exploitation.

Post-War and Modern Sex Tourism: Corporate Compensation (c. 1960 - Present)

“The imperative to exchange sex for survival, or its possibility whether real or not, rules women’s inequality, hence women’s lives, worldwide. In prostitution, virtually all of women’s and girls’ options are precluded except for this one, making her consent to it, or choice of it, fraudulent and illusory.”

— Catharine MacKinnon, feminist legal scholar

Tanaka Michiko was 20 years old when she was first trafficked into a Tokyo geisha house. There, she was forced to strip by the owner of the house until, one day, she found herself facing obscenity charges levied against her by the police. She then returned to her hometown of Nagano, where, after a failed suicide attempt, she saw no choice but to become a hot springs resort geisha out of economic destitution. At this new geisha house, Tanaka was held in debt bondage, earning no money during the first four months of her work because it was all taken from her as board and debt repayment. She was forced to strip for groups of men and was raped by customers even during menstruation and after contracting syphilis. This sexual violence occurred every night for a couple of months, making her so physically tired that she began to inject methamphetamine in order to stay awake. As her health deteriorated, Tanaka eventually ran away with one of her customers (Norma, 2019, p. 106).

Though it is unclear whether the customers who raped Tanaka were on *ian ryokou* trips, the hot springs resort where she worked was exactly like the ones frequented by those corporate getaways. It is likely that many men on *ian ryokou* do come into contact with prostitutes, since the trips are the primary drivers of both sex industry investment in hot springs areas, and human trafficking to them (Norma, 2019, p. 106). Thousands of women and girls were, and continue to be, kidnapped and brought to these resorts, many underage or debt-bonded like Tanaka. In 1963, for example, police found six underage girls being prostituted at a hot springs resort in Ibaragi (Norma, 2019, p. 104). Violence abounded at these resorts: other than the inherent sexual violence of rape that the trafficked victims suffered with each new customer, many hot springs geisha were also injured or killed by patrons, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. Newspaper reports show that in 1969, a geisha was strangled to death by a male guest, and that in a separate incident, four men were charged with sexual assault for the gang rape of a bar hostess during an *ian ryokou* trip that had been sponsored by the men's employer (Norma, 2019, p. 105). One interviewed woman recalled a primary school friend who had died at age 17 from the health consequences of an STD that she had contracted after being trafficked to a hot springs resort in Sapporo, where she was forced to work for three years (Norma, 2019, p. 100). Thousands of young Japanese women still fall victim to the commercial sex industry today: around 170,000 junior high and high school girls are currently engaged in prostitution, and around 300 cafes employing 5,000 teenage girls nationwide let older men chat with girls in school uniforms for about 50 dollars per hour (Campbell, 2019).

Here, again, the violent sexual exploitation that the women of these hot springs face is seen as secondary to the objective of the *ian ryokou*: increasing corporate bonding and fraternity, which then drove economic progress. The trips were so institutionalized and celebrated in Japanese corporate culture during the early decades of high-speed growth that British journalist Lesley Downer described them as the “ultimate bonding experience,” as business associates could “bathe together, eat together, get drunk together ... and sleep all together in one big *tatami* [mat] room” (Norma, 2019, p. 103). Other than simply improving company relationships, these trips also used their unique atmospheres to dissolve traditional workplace hierarchies, allowing employees to bond with their superiors and escape from the typically stringent rules of corporate life. In a highly capitalist and economically exploitative society that extracted massive amounts of labor from its workers, these trips came as a welcome break. Many men, especially those who had lived in poverty during World War II, said in interviews that they should “work like crazed animals,” “give up one's life for one's work,” “expect death at work,” and “die on the job in fulfilment of true Japanese manhood” (Norma, 2019, p. 55). Though these expectations were deeply entrenched in Japanese society post-World War II, it was still inevitable that the economic exploitation of employees would incite discontent and resentment among workers. In response to these economic conditions, the compensation thesis was developed by feminist analyses of the global sex industry's post-war explosion to posit that “Japanese men were supplied with women in prostitution as ‘comfort’ to compensate for having been made into

‘corporate slaves’ in the years of high growth” (Norma, 2019, p. 24). Like during World War II, when sexual violence against comfort women was used to mollify soldiers about their poor living conditions, post-war Japanese men’s access to hot springs resorts and other similar establishments also served as a “safety valve” for men’s anger about capitalist exploitation in corporate Japan. Norma writes that “[a]s a result of their acquiescence to group-based corporate prostitution practices, and therefore participation in male bonding across the worker-management divide, these men forewent the class-based solidarity needed to wage resistance to corporate domination” (p. 25). The next stage of the historical continuum that this paper identifies is thus clear: sexual violence against women employed at and trafficked to hot springs resorts was overlooked because their exploitation helped corporate Japan sustain itself through increasing fraternity among male employees and through diverting anger about economic exploitation toward sexual violence and “comfort.” The geisha and hostesses who suffered at these resorts were simply collateral damage in the broader objective of Japan’s post-World War II high speed growth.

The legacy of *karayuki-san* and comfort women is even more explicit in another facet of post-war Japan’s corporate culture: sex tourism to locations like South Korea and Thailand. In the early 1970’s, it became common for Japanese white-collar men to prostitute South Korean women as hostesses, or *kisaeng*, either during business trips or as part of bonuses awarded as prizes for reaching sales targets. In 1971, for instance, Japan accounted for 41.5 percent of South Korea’s tourists, encompassing nearly half a million people by 1973. These were 94 percent male, and according to a survey done by the South Korean Ministry of Tourism, 80 percent of them cited “*kisaeng* parties” as what was most impressive about their trips to Korea. A 1973 newspaper article estimated that 5000 *kisaeng* were working each night in Seoul, and that there were 200,000 nationwide who were being prostituted by foreign men, overwhelmingly Japanese, as part of sex tourism into the country (Norma, 2019, p. 131). Given that South Korean women made up the largest proportion of trafficked comfort women during World War II, the historical context of this phenomenon cannot be ignored. The *kisaeng* party trips were underscored by ideas that “Korean women were racially and economically subordinated to Japanese men” (Norma, 2019, p. 133), a conception built in part through South Korean women’s subjugation at comfort stations, which sacrificed their health and well-being for Japanese men’s sexual pleasure and the Japanese military’s imperial success. In Thailand, the historical impact of the *karayuki-san* is also clear. Japanese men are today the leading international consumers of commercial sex in Southeast Asia, with 720,000 traveling to Thailand in 2003 alone (Yokota, 2006, p. 1). A survey of interviews conducted with several of these men reveal how deeply feelings of racial superiority run in the exploitation of Southeast Asian women. More than half of a group of 30 respondents said that they felt a feeling of intense freedom while traveling in Thailand that made them eager to explore “exotic” things (Yokota, 2006, p. 8). Most also said that Thai women were more desirable than Japanese women, and that they were willingly engaged in prostitution and enjoyed their work (Yokota, 2006, p. 9). Some also identified a “sense of superiority” to

Southeast Asian women who were “economically, racially, and socially of lower class than Japanese men ... Some respondents appeared to regard Thai women as sexual commodities” (Yokota, 2006, p. 9). These sentiments demonstrate how Thai and Southeast Asian women are objectified and exoticized, seen as inherently more sexually promiscuous and thus less “pure” than Japanese women. It is not a coincidence that modern sex tourism centers around the same places where karayuki-san first migrated prior to World War II. The memory of those women, who were also sexually exploited in foreign lands, contributes to the idea that Japanese men are sexually “freer” in regions of Southeast Asia, and that the people of those areas are inherently more sexual than women of mainland Japan.

Modern sexual practices of corporate Japan form the next step in the historical continuum that this paper identifies. Access to sex with women is awarded to men in return for loyalty to and participation in corporate Japan, reflecting the notion that sexual violence against women is a “necessary evil” for the advancement of Japan’s economy. Women like Tanako, whose mental and physical health are devastated by the violence that they suffer through, are sidelined in favor of national progress.

Conclusion

For at least the past century, Japan’s economic and military progress has relied on the subjugation of women. Sexual violence against certain groups of women, targeted for their race and class, has been explicitly used in the pursuit of various national goals. The historical continuum that encompasses the karayuki-san, comfort women, and modern sex tourism reflects Japanese conceptions of women’s bodies as disposable—willingly traded and exploited in return for economic growth or military success. These three eras in history cannot be viewed in isolation from each other; the underlying philosophies behind each one built and reinforced the frameworks that allowed the following ones to exist. Preventing the cycle from continuing thus requires not just an uprooting of patriarchy, but also the dismantling of class-based and racial oppression, which intersect with gendered violence to relegate specific populations of women to the bottom of the social hierarchy.

References

- Campbell, Charlie. "The Sexual Exploitation of Young Girls in Japan Is 'On the Increase,' an Expert Says." *TIME*, 29 October 2019, [https://time.com/5712746/japan-sex-trafficking - prostitution/](https://time.com/5712746/japan-sex-trafficking-prostitution/).
- Hirakawa, Hitoshi and Shimizu, Hiroshi. *Japan and Singapore in the World Economy : Japan's Economic Advance Into Singapore 1870-1965*. Routledge, 1999. EBSCOhost, <https://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/12921010>.
- Imamura, Shohei. "Karayuki-San, The Making of a Prostitute." Icarus Films, 1975. <https://docuseek2-com.stanford.idm.oclc.org/cart/product/1759>.
- Fumihiko Yokota. "Sex Behaviour of Male Japanese Tourists in Bangkok, Thailand." *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2006, pp. 115–131. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4005503.
- Kaneda, Kimiko. "Testimonies of the Victims: Testimony I Kimiko Kaneda (South Korea)." *Atonement Project of the Asian Women's Fund*, 1998, <https://www.awf.or.jp/e3/oralhistory-00.html>.
- Matsui, Yayori. "The Sex Tourist's Yen." *New Internationalist*, July 1993, <https://newint.org/features/1993/07/05/sex>.
- Mihalopoulos, Bin. "The making of prostitutes: The Karayuki-san." *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 25:1, 41-56, 1993, <https://www-tandfonline-com.stanford.idm.oclc.org/doi/pdf/10.1080/14672715.1993.10408345?needAccess=true>.
- Miyazaki, Kohei. "Rare interview tapes with Japanese 'karayuki-san' prostitute in Singapore surface." *The Mainichi*, 30 December 2020, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20201230/p2a/00m/0na/016000c>.
- Norma, Caroline. *Comfort Women and Post-Occupation Corporate Japan*. Routledge, 2019.
- Tsukuda Koji and Kato Michinori. "Nanyo no Shin Nihonjin Mura [New Japanese Villages in the South Seas]." 1919.
- Warren, James Francis. "Karayuki-san of Singapore: 1877 — 1941." *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 62, no. 2 (257), 1989, pp. 45–80. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41493135.
- Yoshiaki, Yoshimi. *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*. Columbia University Press, 1995.