

I Was a Comfort Woman

—A Record by Guiying Lei, Victim of the “Comfort Women” Policy

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Landed in an Impasse

At the end of 1941, I encountered an elderly woman on the street. She said to me, “I’ll show you a place, where you will have food to eat. What you need to do is just work for them.” So I followed her to a place called “Gaotaipo.” It was a comfort station run by a Japanese man named “Yamamoto.” As a little girl, I was not aware of what this station actually was. Later, I was abducted in this place and not allowed to leave.

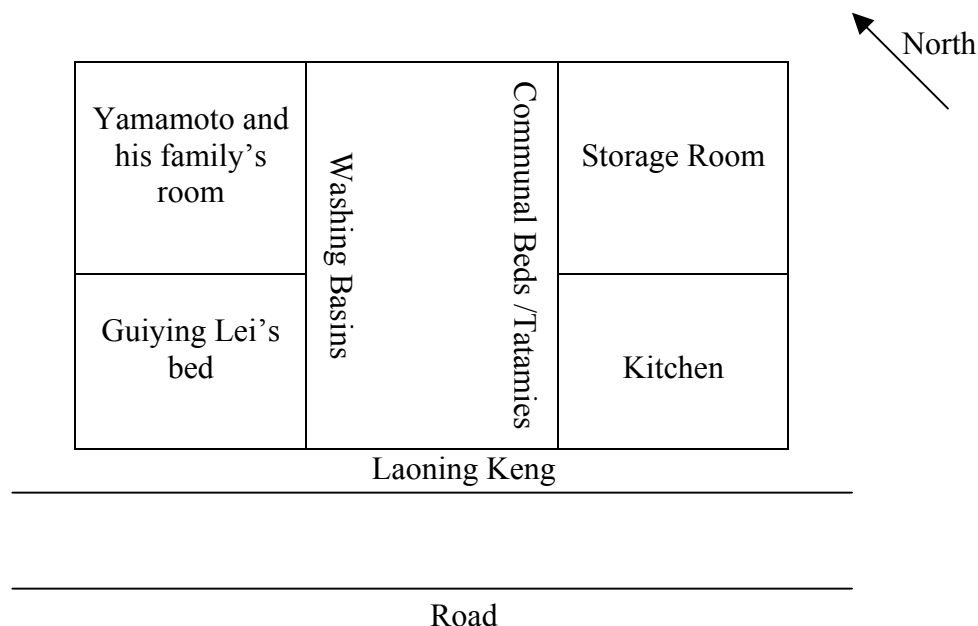
In the beginning, my job was to take care of Yamamoto’s children and do the housework. Yamamoto was a businessman who mainly dealt with vegetables. From time to time, he would get a ride from the Japanese army to Shanghai and bring back necessities such as sugar and soy sauce. These goods and materials were mainly prepared for the Japanese army.

Yamamoto’s wife worked for another comfort station called “Taolu”. “Taolu” used to be a big house owned by a local noble family in Tangshan. The Japanese took it over in the war and turned it into a comfort station. The owner of Taolu was Japanese too. His name was Tenbuku, and thus that station was also called “Tenbuku Club”. In Tangshan, there was another comfort station called the “Daili Building.” We usually called it the “Big Building.” The comfort station in Gaotaipo has since been removed. Now it is the Tangshan Credit Cooperative¹. The two comfort stations, the Daili Building and the Tenbuku Club, are now both used as army stations.

The Gaotaipo comfort station had two rooms at each end, consisting of a kitchen and a storage room at one end, and two bedrooms at the other end. The front door faced the southwest, while the backdoor the northwest. During the most “prosperous” time, there were 13 girls living in this place², all Chinese, of which the oldest was 20, while most were about 17 to 18. They all wore kimonos. Every girl’s hair was well decorated with flowers. Through a girl with the same family name as me in the Tenbuku Club, I learned there were a lot more girls in that place and most of them were Japanese prostitutes. More Japanese soldiers went there rather than our place.

¹ The current address is 61 West Tangshan Street, Nanjing.

² According to Lei, comfort women in this place did not have individual names or special titles. They were all called “girls”.



A Sketch of the Gaotaipo Comfort Station (Based on Lei's Description)

The communal bedroom was about 25 square meters. On the ground were many lampwick grass tatamies lined up by the wall. Separated by nontransparent blinds, each tatami shared a small independent "room." Tatamies were about 20 centimeters higher than the floor, so we didn't need to take off our shoes when entering the room. This was a little different from the traditional Japanese set-up. On the other side of the room was a row of washing stands and towels. A comfort woman's life was practically based on these simple facilities.

The Gaotaipo Comfort Station was guarded rigidly by two Japanese soldiers, although not armed. I remember that they wore some strange hats with two "rabbit ears" hanging down. I was the only girl who was allowed to go outdoors because I took care of Yamamoto's two children. About half a year later, my first menstrual cycle came. Yamamoto and his wife came to me and said "Congratulations!" At that time, due to the lack of girls, I was forced to become a comfort woman. One day, a Japanese soldier dragged me onto the communal bed and ripped off my pants. In my violent resistance, I hurt my wrist, of which you can still see the scar now. Then the Japanese soldier pushed his knees against my belly, and the butt of his bayonet against my head. I was raped.

The Japanese soldiers would come in groups of more than ten during the most "prosperous" time; whereas in the quieter season, about five or six together. I could tell that among them were also some generals because the guards saluted to them. They all wore boots and carried bayonets or swords. They sometimes came in daytime and sometimes nighttime, but no one ever stayed overnight.

Comfort women were like sexual slaves. For the whole day we had nothing to do except for eating and sexually "serving" the Japanese soldiers. Some girls even died from extensive sexual abuse. One time, many Japanese soldiers violated one girl consecutively for a very long time, making her belly completely swell up. Older girls tried to rub her belly to ease her discomfort, but only saw a lot of liquid and blood coming out of her

body—she died. While guarding the forest, a young guy who became my husband later saw the Japanese burning the dead girl’s body on a stack of firewood.

The Japanese soldiers often made us do some crazy things, such as swallowing their penis. Any resistant attitude would be faced with wild physical violence. The scars on my hands and my head are evidence.

Although I’d found some used condoms when I cleaned up the room, Japanese soldiers usually didn’t care whether girls became pregnant or got sexually related diseases. Usually, they wouldn’t compensate us with money or food stamps, though some gift giving did happen. For example, there was one time when we were playing together, I saw some girls with golden rings on their fingers. They told me the rings were from the Japanese soldiers, which they received after “sleeping” with them. Things like that happened extremely rarely. What would happen to the girls completely depended on the soldiers’ moods. Anyhow, these small gifts can’t be mentioned in the same breath with the wounds the Japanese left us.

All the girls started smoking. I did too and it took me long time to quit. Some girls were even addicted to opium. They sometimes smoked in the latrine, and sometimes sneaked out to smoke. There was a secret backdoor I told them about.

Escaping and Getting Revenge

Yamamoto had a boy and a girl. The boy was called “Hasuro”, about six years old when I was there. The girl was even younger, named “Nobu”. I often brought them to see live shows. Sometimes they threw change to the actors if the show was exciting. The children were too young to reach the actors, so I helped them to. Therefore, they liked me and treated me with some canned fish. Yet, this couldn’t compensate for the torture I suffered in the comfort station.

After my leg was wounded by the Japanese, I made the decision to escape. One afternoon when I wasn’t being obedient to the Japanese soldiers, I was then treated with bashes and kicks. One guy wildly stabbed my left leg with a bayonet. I fainted right in the act. I survived the torture, yet my left leg became lame, whereas the Japanese who did this to me just left without any sympathy. I thought to myself that I would be tortured to death sooner or later if I stayed there, so I decided to escape. As the children’s nanny, I had the possibility to run away.

On one morning at the end of 1943, while everybody was still asleep, I sneaked out from the backdoor of the house. I ran as fast as I could to Ligangtou without looking back once, and after that, I never went back again. I brought a few necessities with me, but only a small bottle of purple salt³ has been kept till today. I saw girls using it in the comfort station. My mother also taught me a little bit of knowledge of Chinese medicine,

³ Our examination indicates the “purple salt” was potassium permanganate. Whether it was from 60 years ago needs professional assessment.

so I made my mind up that this purple powder must be useful. Another item I had was a food tin, but we recycled it later.

Now, my son has grown up. My grandchildren and great grandchildren are growing healthily. I have no worries now, so I want to speak out about the Japanese crime in the war. Regardless of being compensated or not, I want to protest this chapter of my life. My son often says to me, “It wasn’t your fault that you were a comfort woman. It’s only fair to let the world know and get revenge.” A little while ago, I learned that there was a Korean comfort woman survivor⁴ coming to Nanjing to point out the former site of a comfort station. Her braveness encouraged me to stand up and fight for justice against the Japanese imperialism too.

Victim:

Guiying Lei, 78, the only comfort woman victim survivor who has spoken out about her experience in Nanjing.

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[Updated note: Lei passed away on April 25, 2007]

⁴ The incident of Yongxin Piao (朴永心, aka Pak Yong-sim) coming to Nanjing in November 2003 to point the former site of the comfort station