

A Historical Perspective on the Japanese Sex Trade

Seiko Hanochi

Abstract

Providing a brief historical perspective on the evolution of international trafficking in Japan, the article emphasizes the importance of the state in establishing the sex trade as an entrenched social institution. Drawing attention to the crucial influence of American military presence in Japan and other Asian countries, the article hints at the crucial role played by the sex trade in an "orderly and efficient" industrialized nation.

Précis

En fournissant une brève mise en perspective historique de l'évolution de la traite internationale des blanches au Japon, l'article met en relief l'importance de l'état japonais dans la transformation du commerce des faveurs sexuelles en une indéracinable institution sociale. Attirant l'attention sur l'influence cruciale de la présence militaire américaine au Japon et dans les autres pays asiatiques sur toutes ces questions, l'article fait comprendre le rôle prépondérant inévitablement joué par le commerce des faveurs sexuelles dans une nation industrielle «ordonnée et efficace».

The state must maintain order in society. Therefore, it requires a mechanism to guarantee that no one—especially no male subject of a patriarchal state—becomes rebellious. The provision of "leisure" has long existed, from the time of the Roman Empire, which provided *panem et circenses* to its citizens, until that of the American military's RAA (Recreation and Amusement Association).

Seiko Hanochi, M.A., is a Ph.D. candidate in International Studies at the Meijigakuin University in Japan. A member of the Project for the Empowerment of the Victims of Trafficking in Women in Asia and the program co-ordinator of the Asian Research Exchange on New Alternatives, the author is the former Secretary General of the Beijing JAC (Japan Accountability Caucus-Beijing).

Such institutions are founded upon sex and violence and, in view of the role they play in supporting the agenda of the state, privatized sex industries and the state regulated brothel system must be considered part of the state. The clandestine institution of sex industry and brothels serves the purpose of satisfying male sexual desires in a setting of violence against women. This "safety-valve" guarantees a certain form of gender division of labour, a maintenance of patriarchal supremacy, and an assurance of effective, systemic male production, as well as a prolific system of female reproduction by the people of the polity.

The institution must be supported by the material conditions of the time. Commercial prostitution and military prostitution are the two forms of sex trade existing in modernizing and modern states, whose own main functions are industrial and military ones. The sex industry has to be maintained and transformed in a way which satisfies all parties concerned, in terms of co-operation among class and political groups, as well as between gender groups, and especially in the interests of state and business.

Thus, it is interesting to trace the development of the sex industry in Japan, which came to exist as an integral part of the modernizing process of the Japanese state and society. A tacit acceptance of this institution by many Japanese women, made possible a transformation of the traditional Kuruwa into the Meiji state-regulated, "public" brothels, which were then abolished following Japanese military defeat in 1945. Most recently, the internationalization of the 1970s has caused the modern sex industry to flourish on a global scale. In making a transition from the public brothel to the global sex industry, the institutional setting of modernizing Japan experienced a process of great change.

The "Public Brothel" System

Enclosed by high walls, the "Kuruwa" facilitated prostitution practised under regulation by the Tokugawa Shogunate. Women were kept in bondage and trained to behave in accordance with strict ritual, while customers were served in accordance with their ability to pay. Thus, the Kuruwa became a salon for rich bourgeoisie men, who felt themselves treated en par with samurai and feudal lords. The formal abolition of the traditional Kuruwa facilities saw the state combining a domestic system with the exportation of commodified women and children (Hanochi 1998, a). The dismantling of the Kuruwa was a removal of cultural obstacles, which resulted in the growth of a modern sex industry capable of exploiting foreign women, those who could not have been successfully integrated into the Kuruwa culture. The modern brothels were profitable institutions, safety-valves providing "leisure" activities for the military and working male subjects of a Japanese state engaged in military expansion, as well as import-substitution and export-oriented production.¹

Japanese military preparation and economic growth required male subjects to concentrate their productive activities on strengthening the state's military and economic capabilities. At the same time, Japan had to guarantee an enlargement of its population. The female members of the family were to concentrate on activities geared towards reproducing a Japanese male population prepared to serve the state, through military efforts and industrial production. The public brothel served to satisfy male "leisure" demands, while minimizing any disturbance of the family's reproductive activities. (Okoshi 1997, 139–50).

An important element of the global sex industry in Japan was its international character. In 1885, the "Karayuki-

Chart 1: Historical Structure of Sex Industry in Japan

	<i>1868-1945 Meiji State Construction and Military Defeat of Japan, WW II</i>	<i>1945-1975 Military Defeat of Japan, Defeat of the United States in the Vietnam War</i>	<i>1975-1995 Military Defeat of the United States, UN Women's Conference</i>
<i>Salient Features of the Sex Trade</i>	Karayuki-san-Comfort Women	Kiseng-Tourism	Japa-yuki-san
<i>Material Existence</i>	Militarization of export- oriented Japanese prostitution (a)	U.S. military-base prostitution and sex tourism (b)	Emergence of global economy, globalization of sex industry (c)
<i>Function</i>	Prostitution as a safety- valve, ensuring industrial production and family reproduction	Development of modernized sex industry for consumption by male society	Increasing national competitiveness in global sex industry
<i>The Feminist Movement</i>	Abolitionism	Abolitionism, anti-sex tourism	Anti-sex industry, post- colonial feminism
<i>Underlying Values</i>	Despotic, familial state (d)	Consumerism in military and civil society (e)	Competition on a global scale (f)
<i>Institution</i>	Regulated sexual slavery (including state-run military sex slavery)	Legally approved national sex industry	Legalized and/or legally approved global sex industry
<i>National Level</i>	Kuruwa system	Baisyun Bousihou system	Baisyun Bousihou system
<i>International Level</i>	1921 Abolitionist Convention (g)	1949 Abolitionist Convention (h)	UN Conference on Women (Mexico-Beijing) (i)

san"² trade began and gave an international dimension to the Southeast Asian sex industries, which had, until then, been largely domestic. The colonial male from the West needed an RAA-like system, acting as an incentive, to convince him to stay in the colonies. Such a system could only function if supplied with women from poorer countries, of which Japan was still one. Thus, the Japanese rural regions which provided the work-force for nascent industry also provided the "Karayuki-san." Although the sweatshops were filled with over-exploited young girls, the income earned by being sold to those brothels serving the colonial male population, in comparison to that earned through cheap labour employment, was irresistible. Also, the traffickers appealed to the economic interests of the girls' fathers. In turn, the "Karayuki-san" contributed to the national income by way of their remittances. In 1904, some even made donations to the state of more than \$5,000, thereby supporting the Japanese military efforts in a war with Russia (Yamazaki 1995, 23-40).

The military dimension of the Japanese state had been developing prior to World War II, a period in which increased invasion, colonization, and expansion of territories were accompanied by the development of brothel-like institutions of sexual slavery for the military (Kin 1997). Growing military forces made possible and "necessary" the development of such institutions, which became known as "comfort stations" (correctly translated as "leisure-providing stations.") The infamous case of the "Comfort Women" was the last phase of the state-regulated military brothel system, in which the state ran stations directly and used police and military forces to mobilize women and girls as sexual slaves. State power was employed to create these institutions of international sexual slavery (Ishikawa 1993).³

From Military to Commercial Sex Industry

The defeat of Japan in 1945 led to a dismantling of the "comfort stations," a shutting down of the brothel system

which had existed specifically to serve the military and was run by the Japanese state. In preparing for the arrival of occupying forces, one of the first steps taken by Japanese government authorities was to instruct the owners of government-regulated public brothels to form an association of "comfort institutions," ostensibly to protect women from potential sexual assault at the hands of occupying forces' personnel. In this way, the Japanese government replaced state-run, military sexual slavery with state-regulated, private military sexual slavery. The occupying forces took the initiative and regulated sex industry in the vicinity of the military bases, by establishing on- and off-limits institutions and guidelines concerning periodical health tests, as well as other measures, to protect personnel from venereal diseases (Women Eros Committee 1977).

All military sexual industry created in South Korea and the Southeast Asian countries where American bases were established had similar regulatory systems. The sexual slavery implemented by the state, dependent upon abductions and forced labour, was not imitated by U.S. forces. Instead, a regulated system of slavery facilitated by local sex industry emerged. When the Vietnam War triggered an expansion of American military presence in Asia, increasing demands led to the development of international trafficking. Military base sex industry emerged as an important foundation of the sex industry's globalization (Yamada 1996).⁴

Particularly in Japan, the 1950s and 1960s bore witness to a period of industrial recovery and rapid growth. The modernization of Japanese society encompassed all sectors of the Japanese economy, including the leisure industry. In 1956, the abolition of traditional public brothels facilitated the growth of modern sex industries. In addition to illegal brothels, a variety of industries including cabarets, clubs, love hotels, Turkish baths, and massage parlours developed. The latter were technically tolerated as part of the leisure industry, whereas prostitution was formally forbidden. It was practised under the aus-

pices of a "free love" shared by the woman employee and her customers. According to government policy, the sex industry was considered part of the service industry, classified as a service provided to individual customers. It was partially financed under a 1963 law, which awarded "financing and other support measures to small and middle industries." This government support, intended for industrial development, funded the modernization of the Japanese sex industry.

Another consequence of economic growth and the development of leisure industries was a rapid growth in tourism. Following the liberalization of tourism, the Japan-Korean Treaty of Friendship was signed in 1965, laying the ground for Japanese sex tourism in South Korea. This expansion extended to various Southeast Asian countries, especially the Philippines and Thailand. Whereas the military-run brothels had facilitated a globalization of civilian and military customers, it was only at this later stage of economic development that the massive international trafficking of women and children as sex workers into Japan began. Similarly, after the Vietnam War, the defeat of United States forces caused the military sex industry to turn its attention to sex tourists. The shift to reliance upon Japanese sex tourists began in Thailand, and later spread to the Philippines, with the closing of American military bases in Southeast Asia at the end of the Cold War. This development of international ties to the sex industries of the Philippines and Thailand also facilitated the countermovement of bodies, in the form of trafficking into Japan.

The Global Sex Industry

The emergence of a strong yen was another consequence of the American defeat in Vietnam and, by the 1980s, the currency's strength had affected the structure of Japanese international trade. The growing service industry relied not only on tourism, but also on the import of foreign commodities, including women and children. The globalization of the sex trade expanded the national scope of the Japanese sex in-

dustry. Trafficking networks mainly involved the Philippines and Thailand, but expanded according to trends in the global economy. For example, the Mexican Financial crisis of 1994 caused an expansion of this network into Latin American countries, with women and children from Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina being trafficked into the Japanese sex market. The end of the Cold War and an economic crisis in the former Communist countries provided occasion for women and children from Russia and Eastern European countries to be traded as well.

According to statistics from the year 1991, the Japanese sex industry had an income comparable to the military budget, amounting to 1 percent of the nation's GNP. The annual earnings of the industry can be broken down as follows:

Cabarets and clubs:	2,200 billion yen
Soap-land baths:	190 billion yen
Adult video rental:	130 billion yen
Telephone sex:	100 billion yen
Date clubs:	80 billion yen
Love hotels:	13.3 billion yen ⁵

Illegal prostitution is not included in these official statistics, but is estimated to have an income of 500 billion yen.⁶

At present, the global sex industry is an integral part of the global leisure service industry. Commonly considered to be illegal, the sex industry can in fact be regarded as an industry which deals in commodities, i.e. persons. In fact, the criminal nature of the commodification of women's bodies is so serious exactly because it is conducted as a legitimate industrial activity. As the aforementioned statistics indicate, the officially recorded components of the sex industry constitute a considerable part of the Japanese national income.

However, a much larger component is hidden from the public eye. Through prostitution, the illegal global sex industry exploits women who are trafficked into Japan, ensnaring them in a system of slavery. The victims of this sexual slave system face numerous problems,

depending upon their origin, as well as the local reality. However, reports of their slavlike conditions show that both the civil society and the state contribute to their enslavement. Civil society classifies foreign, trafficked women at the lowest level of a hierarchy of sex workers employed in the Japanese sex industry. The women receiving the highest most social standing and earnings are the Japanese girls, often university or high school students who practice occasional prostitution by way of "telephone clubs." Next are the women entertainers of "deluxe" bars and cabarets, who are also mainly of Japanese origin. Lowest are the trafficked, "illegitimate" women working in lower class cabarets, "soap-land bath" and clandestine brothels. Most are of Asian background, but the globalization of sex trading also provides for the presence of women from Latin America and Eastern Europe. Since it is the more vulnerable part of the migrant work force which is excluded from the formal economy, a racist stratification characterizes the division of labour within the sex industry.

The initial influx of Filipina and Thai women trafficked into Japan were considered "artists," and could legally remain in the country. The majority of women from the Philippines, however, have entered Japan on tourist visas, and work in sex industry establishments as illegal "over-stayers," completely lacking in the protection and social benefits guaranteed for legal employees. Not only are they overworked and forced to shoulder huge debts, including exorbitant travel and living expenses, but they work under threats of denunciation and repatriation. As for the Thai women, they lack the English skills of the Filipina women, and are without common meeting places, i.e. the Catholic churches where Filipina women can exchange information and seek support. Thus, the traffickers and sex institution owners prefer the more vulnerable Thai women, which explains an increase in the number of Thai trafficked into the country during the eighties, and a decrease in the Filipina presence. A recent increase has been

reported in women trafficked from South Korea, a country gravely affected by the economic crisis of 1997 and by the consequent IMF policies.

The worldwide feminization of poverty is accompanied by a feminization of migrant labour forces, especially evident in industrialized regions, of which Japan is one. This process, combined with the shrinking of demand for manual labour in such regions, has resulted in an increase in the number of women working in the informal and black sectors of the global economy.

Conclusion

The Japanese state has been sensitive to international criticism, ratifying international conventions and abolishing the state-regulated brothel system. It has also, however, supported the modernization of a sex industry which has replaced the brothels, and has only paid lip-service to the feminist movements. An introduction of the concepts behind the right to prostitution has only further divided these movements and the emphasis on the commodification of women's bodies has created clandestine conditions ideal for the sustenance of the sex industry's great black market profits. The internationalization of the Japanese leisure industry has led to an expansion of sex tourism, in turn encouraging an influx of trafficked women and children from nations where the Japanese are already known as tourists, and where the networks feeding sex tourism had established structures ideal for trafficking.⁷ ■

Notes

1. See (a) in Chart 1.
2. *Kara* generally means 'Southeast Asia' and *Yuki* means 'going.' In the Meiji era, women who were trafficked to these areas were called *kara-yuki-san*.
3. See (b) in Chart 1.
4. See (b) in Chart 1.
5. See (c) in Chart 1.
6. cf. "Baibaisyun to torikumu kai news" (The News of the Committee Opposed to Prostitution) no. 93, Tokyo: 1991. On the Public Brothel Institution and prostitution in modern Japan: cf. Yuki Fujime, "Kindai Nihon no Koushou-Sei to Baishun" (The Public Brothel System and Prostitution in

Modem Japan), *Gender no Nihon-Shi* (The History of Gender in Japan) 1, Tokyo, 1994.
7. See (h) in Chart 1.

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