

Women and War in Modern East Asia

Last taught: Spring 2005

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This course was designed to encourage students to think broadly about women in society and specifically about the contradictions in East Asian societies at war in the twentieth century. The class was intended to disrupt any idea that war is a male pursuit and that women are historically less important in war. We assumed from the beginning that women do experience war differently than men. Their specific experiences of war are most striking in the cases of civilian death, rape and torture, refugee status and home front activities. Women are often perceived to be the ones who play supporting roles encouraging men in war; they stay behind and support their husbands, fathers and brothers as they make war to defend national honor. As we learned, however, they can also take up arms and fight in conflicts of national importance or work in movements for peace.

The class examined cases of women and war in three East Asian countries: China, Japan, and Korea. As we looked at these experiences of women and war in 20th century East Asia, we also had opportunities to talk about the historiography of war, particularly concepts of victory and defeat, national culpability and national honor.

The course was broadly divided into four categories: women as combatants, women on the home front, women as victims of war, and women as opponents of war. In each of these themed sections, we looked at some theoretical perspectives of women and war before going on to examine specific cases of women in violent situations. In two of these sections, students read additional materials and prepared a final paper comparing different primary and secondary works about the topics.

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Themes (with some suggested readings and films)

Part I: Combatants

This theme touches on the questions of how women as agents of war disrupt the standards of what is considered feminine in society. In this section we looked primarily at cases from China. We learned about women involved in the national revolution in the 1920s and 1930s by reading Xie Bingying's autobiography, *A Woman Soldier's Own Story*. We also learned about women on the Long March (1934-1935) in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

Other material:

Excerpts from *China in Revolution* on the Nationalist Revolution in China (for background)
Film *Morning Sun* on the Chinese Cultural Revolution
Helen Young, *Choosing Revolution: Chinese Women Soldiers on the Long March*

Part II: The home front

In this part of the course we thought about how the ideals of a society become less or more flexible during war. What role do ideas of defending "home and hearth" play in a wartime

society? In this section we looked at cases from China and the example of Song Meiling, Japanese women during the 1930s and 1940s, and Korea , including excerpts from Lousie Yim's autobiography, *My Forty Year Fight for Korea* (NY: Wym, 1951).

Other possible readings:

Excerpts from Cook and Cook, *Japan at War*

Excerpts from: Elizabeth Bumiller, *Secrets of Mariko*

Excerpts from *Women and War: Personal Accounts of Forty Japanese Women*. (Tokyo: 1986)

Excerpts from Mayling Soong Chiang (Song Meiling), *We Chinese women*

Part III: Victims

In what ways are women particularly vulnerable in war situations? The modern history of East Asia provides many examples of women as victims. We looked at two aspects of WWII in Asia: The Rape of Nanjing and the issue of comfort women. These two issues provided a good context to talk about issues of historical memory.

Readings and other materials:

Robert O. Wilson's letters home from: *Eyewitness to Massacre: American Missionaries Bear Witness to Japanese Atrocities in Nanjing*

Yang, Daiqing, "The Challenges of the Nanjing Massacre," from *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography* (2000) p. 131-179.

Film: *In the Name of the Emperor* (on Japanese wartime atrocities)

Film: *Senso Daughters* (on comfort stations)

Keith Howard, ed. *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*

Yuki Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women*

Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During WWII*

Part IV: Opponents of war

Do women's roles as mothers "naturally" lead to pacifism for women? In what ways did the wartime experiences shape the pacifist visions of some women in East Asia? We examined Japanese women's pacifist movements that were born out of the wartime experiences of the Japanese most notably the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945.

Readings and other materials:

Film: *Hiroshima, A Mother's Prayer* on women's peace movements in Japan

Excerpts from: Ruth Ann Keyso, *Women of Okinawa: Nine Voices from a Garrison Island* (Cornell University Press, 2000)