

Zhang Gaixiang, Chinese survivor (1925-2014)

Interviewed by: Zhang Shuangbing in September 1996

BACKGROUND: The Imperial Japanese Army invaded Shanxi Province, in north China, in September 1937, soon after the outbreak of full-fledged warfare. From 1937 to 1944, the Japanese army launched a series of "mop-up" campaigns to wipe out the resistance activities led by the Chinese Communist Party in Shanxi and the nearby provinces. Japanese soldiers' sexual violence escalated during these military operations. They frequently killed women who dared to resist rape and kidnapped a large number of local women, taking them to randomly placed comfort facilities. Jingui Village, Yu County, Shanxi Province was at the center of the Wu River region controlled by the Japanese forces. The Japanese troops set up strongholds on top of the mountain where Jingui Village was located, which was about 25 kilometers from the Xiyan Stronghold in the south and 20 kilometers from the Wenchuan Stronghold in the southwest, controlling over 70 villages. More than 100 Japanese troops stationed in these strongholds at first. Later the Jingui stronghold became a training center for new recruits, and the number of troops increased to as many as 500. The large number of the Japanese troops constantly assaulted local people and many women of Jingui Village were sexually violated. Zhang Gaixiang, who revealed her wartime experience to local researcher Zhang Shuangbing in September 1996, was one of these women.

Testimony:

The horrible things the Japanese troops did were really difficult to talk about. During the war the Japanese troops built a fort at Jingui Village and many Japanese soldiers stationed here. They did bad things whenever they saw a woman. We were all scared to death, because these Japanese devils were very cruel and they did what they wanted recklessly. If you dissatisfied them in a slightest way, you would suffer terrible torture. Women who were good-looking all covered their face with ash, but this still could not protect them from the dirty hands of the Japanese devils. Many women in my village were raped by the troops. Those devils even directly went to the women's homes and raped them right there. The Japanese troops also kidnapped women and took them to their blockhouse when they saw goodlooking ones. They would detain the women there and gangrape them for days or weeks. Sometimes the Japanese devils also ordered the puppet village head to submit women. I was one of the women submitted.

I remember that was in the afternoon of an early summer day in 1942. The Japanese army ordered Jingui Village to submit two women to them. As the day turned dark the puppet village head still could not find a woman to submit, but if he missed the deadline, the entire village would be punished the following day and suffer from the Japanese brutality. Who would not be terrified by the horror?

I was a newlywed at that time and lived at my parents' house. I and the village head's niece were close friends and we often hung out together. That day, I happened to be visiting the house of the village head's niece. The Japanese devils saw the two of us when they came to force the village head to round up women. They then captured us and wanted to take us to their place. The village head was extremely angry, but he had no way to stop the Japanese. Coerced by the Japanese soldiers, we were taken away and locked in two separate rooms. Several Japanese soldiers gangraped me that night until the daybreak.

We were released the following day, but because the Japanese troops were stationed right in our village, we had no place to hide ourselves from them. The Japanese soldiers would abduct us anytime they wanted and rape us in a house under their fort. Beside the two of us, another woman named XXX (her name is omitted to protect the victim's privacy) in the village was also abducted. The Japanese soldiers would drag us out of our homes anytime they wanted. We tried to escape and hide at our relatives' houses in other villages. However, the Japanese soldiers chased me to my relative's house to catch me, and beat my relatives up for their helping me to hide.

I was subjected to more brutal abuse after I was recaptured. The Japanese soldiers locked me up in a house (a "comfort station") at the east end of the village, where several other women from different villages were detained. Japanese soldiers came to rape us day and night, and they did not allow us to wear clothes. At some nights I was taken to the blockhouse on the mountain where the Japanese troops lived. The Japanese soldiers set up a room right below the blockhouse, which looked different from our houses in the village. The bed was made of wood and the room was lightened with candles, much brighter than the oil lamp at my home. Several Japanese soldiers lived in that room. I was beaten and raped by them ruthlessly, and then sent back to the house in the village where I had been detained with the other women. I was brutalized one day after another like this. My family was very worried about me and begged the head of the Association for Maintaining Orders¹ to plea to the Japanese troop and finally got me released.

Having no place to escape, I and the other women and girls in the village continued to be raped by the Japanese devils. In an attempt to change the situation, my parents urged the puppet village head to take me and his niece who had also been raped to make a complaint to the central stronghold at Xiyan Village. However, the Japanese troops in Xiyan Village were the same as those in Jingui Village, who had abducted and raped the women in their village in the same way. The military officers at the Xiyan stronghold did not care to listen to us at all. We were scolded at and kicked out. Angry at our complaint, the Japanese devils in Jingui Village aggregated their sexual violence against us.

After those failed attempts, we decided to flee to faraway places. I sneaked out of the village at midnight and ran to a relative's home remote from Jingui. By that time, the Japanese soldiers' torture had already damaged my mind and I could not think clearly. Although my mental condition improved a little after treatment, I have not been able to live a normal life ever since. I was divorced more than once. I had a daughter with my first husband, but he abandoned me because I had been raped by the Japanese devils. I had a second daughter in my second marriage, but unfortunately my second husband died early due to illness. After his death I had no means to support my family and was unable to take care of my children as I was constantly ill. I had no choice but to leave my daughters to other people and married a man in the deep mountains. I was abandoned by him not long after the third marriage. I am grateful that my current husband is kind to me, but the wartime damage to my brain was severe, and I have not been able to live like a normal person.

My heart is filled with indignation when I think of what the Japanese devils did to me. It has been more than 60 years since Japan's defeat, but they never paid attention to our reparations.

¹ Zhian weichi hui, a puppet organization set up by the Japanese forces at the occupied areas to assist the Japanese military control.

They did so many evil things but don't seek ways to rectify them – can this be called human behavior? Now the redress has been raised but the Japanese government denied it. This kind of government is too dangerous and we must not give-in when dealing with it. We must record the facts of our sufferings clearly and let them know that they are responsible for the damages Japan's aggressive war has caused us.

Recorded by Zhang Shuangbing in September 1996; translation by Peipei Qiu