



# Military Occupation and Prostitution Tourism in Asia

by Tono Haruhi

I was born in a small village near Sasebo, and spent my childhood in Yokosuka before Japan's economic growth. From the nearby hills we could see the American military base, and the presence of prostitutes on the base was quite common. Seeing the human rights of Japanese women violated by the American military wounded my childish national pride, and that anger later caused me to turn to the problem of prostitution tourism in Asian countries today.

In the course of my research on prostitution tourism, I came across one fact which linked all of those countries. It had to do with American military aggression in Asia during the Korean and Vietnam wars. Prostitution zones were established and then expanded through Rest and Recreation centers and, after the withdrawal of US troops, these zones became areas for prostitution tourism. Today, wherever the US military goes, they have prostitutes on their bases. I saw that the rise and fall of prostitution went hand in hand with American military strategy in Asia.

## Rest and Recreation

When the Vietnam war escalated and the American forces were making great efforts to infiltrate Asia, R&R centers were built for soldiers in Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines,

Korea and Taiwan. In order to relax and enjoy their short vacations after gruelling combat, these soldiers squandered their dollars on momentary pleasures of Asian women flown over on warplanes to these zones. In Saigon, a center of R&R activity, there were 400,000 prostitutes. Those women were chased from their homes on farms into Saigon by the



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“strategic village” policy, and sold their bodies from one to three dollars a night.

### Consumption Culture

Nakhon Ratchasima, which was at the time of the Vietnam war the largest US air base in Thailand, is located at the entrance to the northeast region, the poorest area of Thailand. Most of the shops are now closed, but it is easy to imagine the time when the massage parlors were open for business. They lined both sides of a big, wide road, their paint chipped and their neon signs broken. This street is like a memento left behind by the US army. There are no cars and few people; only

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rickshaws roll up and down the street in the blazing sun. “Consumption culture”, which is more peculiar to military bases in general than to America in particular, forced its way through this quiet farming village like a flood. In its wake, it left not only the town in ruins, but the huge base itself: given over to the Thai air force, it was never used, and weeds grow thick over the ground.

Most of the women who were here have gone south to Bangkok or Pattaya Beach in search of prostitution tourists. The women who remain work for Thai soldiers or those tourists who wander up from Bangkok. The ubiquitous massage parlors have names like Ginza and Osaka, showing clearly the extent of the contribution of Japanese men.

In Thailand, base prostitution now exists in a different form. Pattaya Beach, which has degenerated into all sorts of decadence, has made its name as a mecca of prostitution tourism. Pattaya is called “the island of dreams”; here, soldiers have a wider selection of goods and women to buy than at Olongapo City in the Philippines. For several days after arriving at port, troops carry on their boisterous merry-making, and in five days they drop more than a million dollars.



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### Women as Currency

There are many circumstances which oblige Asian countries to promote tourism. About the time of the Vietnam war, the Asian countries had begun measures to industrialize. In the 1970s, these countries, struck by the end of the Vietnam war and the oil crisis, turned their attention to tourism, an industry without smokestacks, in order to secure foreign capital needed for their industrialization. In newly industrializing Asian countries, tourism promotion has become a national policy. The mainstay of tourism in these countries is prostitution. Here, women are sacrificed for the sake of acquiring foreign capital.

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