

stephanie  
chou



comfort girl

慰安婦

Generations of Chinese  
spoke of it only in whispers.

A secret so taboo, that its  
thousands of innocent  
victims were viewed with  
shame even by their own  
families.

That changes tonight.

friday april 5, 2024 | JOE'S PUB at The Public Theater



Stephanie Chou  
*Comfort Girl*

Album Preview Concert  
Friday, April 5, 2024 | 7pm

JOE'S PUB at The Public Theater  
425 Lafayette Street, New York, NY

*Comfort Girl* is an exploration of the lives of Asian 'comfort women', 慰安婦, a cruel euphemism for the women who were abducted and forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese army during WWII. There were over 200,000 young women, mostly from China, Korea, and Southeast Asia. Lured by false promises of work or kidnapped, and shipped far away from their families, they were kept in terrible conditions. Many died or were killed during the war. The few who survived stayed silent about their horrifying ordeal, because it was seen as shameful, and even considered treason.

*Comfort Girl* is a tribute to these young women's incandescent courage and indomitable spirit, not only during the War but also afterward—when, in a cruel irony, they returned home to families who didn't always welcome them back with open arms. Based on survivor testimony, the piece gives voice to women and survivors who were silenced for 50 years. Survivors only started speaking out publicly in the early 1990's, and fewer than 10 known Chinese survivors are alive today.

The piece has sparked public dialogue on a formerly taboo subject that still resonates globally for women today.

***“A stunning work that not only shines light on a dark chapter of history but also feels inspirational for contemporary listeners.”*** – *DownBeat*

*Comfort Girl* had its world premiere in March 2019 at Joe's Pub. Tonight we will preview the recorded album version - the full realization of the piece!

The album will be released later this year!

Originally commissioned by the American Composers Forum, with additional support from Lower Manhattan Cultural Council; Jerome Hill Artist Fellowship; OPERA America; the American Opera Project.

Tonight's concert is supported by a 2023 grant from Chamber Music America's Artistic Projects program, funded through the generosity of The Howard Gilman Foundation, for the *Comfort Girl* studio recording.

Cover photo by John Abbott

*Comfort Girl*

Composed and arranged by Stephanie Chou

Stephanie Chou    voice, alto saxophone

Lito Villareal    voice

Andy Lin    erhu, viola, violin

Kelly Lin    piano

Dave Hertzberg    bass

Ronen Itzik    drums, percussion

Nina Zoie Lam    narration



## Song Translations

### 滿洲姑娘

李香蘭 - 滿洲姑娘

滿洲姑娘 (1938)

詞：孫翹 王默然 曲：鈴木哲夫

奴是二八滿洲姑娘， 三月春日雪正融  
迎春花兒將開時  
奴去出嫁呀 啊親愛的郎君等著吧

銅鑼花鼓響叮噹 華麗的花轎把奴迎  
半喜半羞心兒跳  
等奴出嫁呀 啊親愛的郎君等著吧

雪呀冰呀涼的風呀 吹到北國的天邊去  
美麗的婚服已做好  
滿洲的春天快來呀 啊親愛的郎君等著吧

### “Manchurian Girl”

Originally “Manshu Masume” in Japanese, hit song from 1938

Lyrics by Akiji Ishimatsu; Music by Tetsuo Suzuki

Chinese version recorded by Li Xianglan

I'm a 16-year-old Manchurian girl; It's April, spring time, the snow is melting

Ying Chun flowers are starting to bloom

I'm going to be married, ah. Dear Lang Jun, please wait for me

Wedding gongs and drums ding-dong. An ornate flower sedan welcomes me, to pick up the bride

Half happy, half ashamed, my heart beats.

I'm dreaming of my wedding day, ah. Dear Lang Jun, please wait for me

Snow! Ice! Cold wind, ah! Blows to the Northland's horizon (Russia)

My beautiful wedding dress is already sewn

Manchurian springtime (my new chapter in life), please hurry!

Dear Lang Jun, please wait for me

## 回家

By Stephanie Chou

Ai 吔，救救我  
我想回家，我只想回家  
需要回家，我想要馬上回家  
不能夠承受  
讓我走！幫助我！讓我回家！  
一去，我永遠不再回頭。  
想家人，心疼，太丟臉。  
Will he ever take me back?

## “Go Home”

By Stephanie Chou

Ah, Save me!  
I want to go home, I only want to go home  
I must go home, I have to go home right now  
I can't take it!  
Let me go, help me please, let me go home!  
Once I go, I'll never look back  
As I think of my family, my heart hurts, I'm so ashamed.  
Will he ever take me back?

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### Other Translations

慰安婦 (Wèiān Fù)	comfort women
髒 (Zāng)	dirty
丟臉 (Diūliǎn)	to lose face; shameful
花姑娘 (Huā Gūniáng)	flower girl; derogatory way to refer to the comfort women
回家 (Huí Jiā)	go home
Cho'ben (Japanese)	military provisions, supplies; used to describe and categorize the women
Pii	derogatory word used to refer to women



## **Where They Are Now**

It has only been since the 1990's --nearly 50 years after WWII ended-- that public awareness on the comfort women developed. Victims started speaking out, requesting a formal apology and compensation from the Japanese government. Since then, many survivors have stepped forward, feeling it important to fight for justice before they pass. There are fewer than 10 comfort women alive in China today, all in poor health and dwindling in old age. There are similarly few survivors left in Korea, Indonesia, Taiwan, Philippines, and elsewhere.

Recently there has been a dramatic increase in research and activism, resulting in international dialogue and some progress towards their goals. Some compensation was given to victims through the Asian Women's Fund, though many criticize that the funds came from private donors. Many are enraged that the Japanese government has not issued a formal apology nor fully admitted the extent of what happened, suggesting the women were 'paid prostitutes' rather than 'sex slaves.'

Revisionism/denialism has occurred since the end of WWII. It persists today: in 2021 there was global outrage over a Harvard University professor's comments about comfort women volunteering for their roles. In 2017, the first-ever video footage of comfort women stationed in China was made public.

Despite increased activism, awareness still needs to be raised about this important subject. In countless interviews conducted since the 1990's, the survivors say they all wish for two things: for a formal apology from the Japanese government fully acknowledging what happened, and for their stories to be told to younger generations so that their experiences will not be forgotten - and so that history is never repeated. They hope we will not turn a blind eye towards atrocities of this kind in our own time.

Their words are even more urgent now, as time runs out for the survivors to see justice served in their lifetime, and sex trafficking is still a major global issue.



## Composer's Note

The story of the “comfort women” has been largely overlooked. Most people in Western cultures do not know about this tragic crisis, and even fewer know about the trials the survivors faced after the war: physical and psychological trauma, shame and disgrace from their families, and little recognition or apology from their abusers -- even over 70 years later. I was shocked when I first learned about the “comfort women” when I was in my mid-20’s, and was even more surprised to discover their story is vastly unknown, even among Asian-Americans. Given that so few people in the west know this history, I felt this important story needed to be told, and that music would be a way to give voice to these women who were silenced for so long.

Most of the public discussion has focused on Korean, Indonesian, and Dutch women. However, of the 200,000+ victims, more than half were Chinese girls, imprisoned in their own homeland for months or years, as war raged throughout Japanese-occupied China. I chose to explore the lives of Chinese comfort women in particular, not only because of my Chinese heritage, but also because it seemed their stories were at great risk for being lost forever.

I wrote *Comfort Girl* with the intention of increasing awareness of this sad chapter in history, and celebrating these women’s bravery and resilience. By bringing together music aficionados, theater/opera lovers, activists, historians, students, those interested in Asian culture/art, and more - I hope to create a musical experience that inspires social change. Learning more about the past will inspire us to change the future.



## **Additional Thoughts**

Many survivors say they “were never comfort women.” They want their story known and passed on to younger generations, so that history is not repeated.

“Our worst fear is that our painful history during World War II will be forgotten.”  
—A “Comfort Woman” survivor

Lian’s story is just one possibility. In reality, 90% of the women were killed in the stations or committed suicide. Of the few who escaped, some never made it home, some hid in deserted areas for years, and some were even recaptured and returned to other comfort stations. Those who made it home weren’t always accepted by their families, and were shamed into silence for over 50 years.

Of the 200,000+ victims, more than half were Chinese girls. There are fewer than 10 survivors alive in China today.

Their story is still relevant, as survivors continue to fight for justice, and trafficking remains a global issue.

Rape has been used as a weapon of war for centuries and continues to happen now. We must stop it.

## How You Can Help

Please consider donating to Comfort Girl to help us bring it to larger audiences. Your contribution will go towards live performance expenses, getting the studio recording out to a wider audience, and the development of Comfort Girl into a larger chamber opera (currently titled Jade Star Hotel). You will simultaneously support new music and help the legacy of the comfort women live on.

You can make a contribution at the merchandise table or online at [www.stephaniechoumusic.com/about-comfort-girl/](http://www.stephaniechoumusic.com/about-comfort-girl/)

Donate Here:



Please sign up for our mailing list to receive updates on the release of the Comfort Girl studio album

<http://www.stephaniechoumusic.com/contact>



## Learn More

### Articles

“Comfort Women” Wikipedia Article

“China’s Comfort Women” by Lucy Hornby, *The Financial Times*

“Jan Ruff-O’Herne” - Wikipedia Overview

“The Forgotten Ones” 2001 transcript of interview with Jan Ruff O’Herne and her daughters, Carol Ruff and Eileen Mitton

### Books

*Chinese Comfort Women: Testimonies from Imperial Japan’s Sex Slaves*  
(*Contemporary Chinese Studies*)

by Peipei Qiu (Author), Su Zhiliang (Contributor),  
Chen Lefei (Contributor)

The Comfort Women: Japan’s Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the  
Second World War by George Hicks

### Films

*Fifty Years of Silence*

Directed by Ned Lander, Documentary Film, 1994, English - about Jan  
Ruff O’Herne

*The Apology*

subtitles - about three survivors

*Twenty-Two*

Directed by Ke Guo, Documentary Film, 2015, Chinese  
with subtitles - about the 22 remaining Chinese survivors (at the time of  
filming; many have passed since then)

*Spirit’s Homecoming*

Directed by Cho Jung-rae, Historical fiction about two Korean friends, 2016,  
Korean

### Organizations

Washington Coalition for Comfort Women Issues,  
([www.comfort-women.org](http://www.comfort-women.org))

Comfort Women Justice Coalition (SF),  
([www.remembercomfortwomen.org](http://www.remembercomfortwomen.org))

The Apology Campaign, (Women’s Human Rights Education Institute)

The Asian Women’s Fund Dignity Project

United Nations Convention on the Non-Applicability of Statutory Limitations to War  
Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity

Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Sexual Slavery by Japan

Justice for Comfort Women UK

Amnesty International Australia’s Justice for “Comfort Women” Campaign

Taipei Women’s Rescue Foundation

For more resources please visit:

[www.stephaniechoumusic.com/about-comfort-girl](http://www.stephaniechoumusic.com/about-comfort-girl)

<http://www.stephaniechoumusic.com/learnmorecomfortwomen>

## Biographies

**Stephanie Chou** is a composer, saxophonist, singer, and bandleader based in New York City. She blends Chinese musical influences with Western jazz and pop to create a unique and vibrant musical world. Chou has performed at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Alice Tully Hall, B.B. King's, Joe's Pub, Miller Theater, at music festivals throughout the US. Her music creates immediate cross-cultural connections.

Her quintet combines saxophone and vocals in Mandarin/English with Chinese violin(erhu), viola, and a jazz rhythm section. Her debut album *Prime Knot* featured trumpeter Marcus Printup (Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra). *C for G* is her ballet commissioned and choreographed by former American Ballet Theatre principal ballerina Susan Jaffe. Her second album, *Asymptote*, focused on jazz reinventions of classic Chinese folk songs and featured jazz musicians Kenny Wollesen and John Escreet, and erhu virtuoso Andy Lin.

Chou believes in the power of music to create social change. *Comfort Girl*, her 80-minute song cycle exploring the lives of Asian “comfort women” abducted into sexual slavery during WWII, is not only a groundbreaking fusion of East-West musical traditions, but has also sparked public dialogue on a formerly taboo subject that still resonates globally for women today. *DownBeat* called it, "A stunning work that...shines light on a dark chapter of history." *Comfort Girl* was commissioned by the American Composers Forum and premiered at Joe's Pub at the Public Theater. A studio recording will be released in 2024, and it's been commissioned as an opera by the American Opera Project.

She's received grants and commissions from: Jerome Foundation, American Composers Forum, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, OPERA America, New York State Council on the Arts, MAP Fund, Chamber Music America, and more. As an educator, Stephanie has presented many clinics/masterclasses on blending culture and music. Stephanie holds a BA in Mathematics from Columbia University. She completed graduate studies in Music Composition at City College of New York.

***“One of New York’s most socially relevant and ambitious jazz talents”***  
***“A Mighty, Harrowing New Suite...a phanstasmagorical song cycle”***  
*- New York Music Daily*

<http://www.stephaniechoumusic.com/>



**Lito Villareal** - Composer, Singer, Voice Over Artist, Producer, Actor Lito Villareal grew up in the Philippines. After winning the Grand Prize for the International Urban Song of the Year Award for the Gospel Music Association's Seminar in the Rockies, Lito decided to move to the United States. He composed the music for two of the Philippines' biggest musical hits: CS. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and *Little Mermaid*, which won the Aliw Award for Best Musical and for the world premiere of CS. Lewis' play *The Horse and His Boy*. As an actor and performer, Lito has been in *Les Miserables*, the Los Angeles Premiere for Stephen Sondheim's *Passion, Sweeney Todd, Once On This Island, Joseph the Dreamer, Godspell, The Wiz, An Evening with Stephen Schwartz: A Wicked Tribute* and the 2018 Academy Awards. Lito moved recently to New York because "That's what Dreamers do!"

**Andy Lin** - Taiwanese-American violist and erhuist (Chinese violin), Dr. Andy Lin, is recognized as one of the most promising and active performers who specialized in both western and eastern instruments. Praised by *The New York Times* "Taiwanese-born violist Andy Lin... is also a virtuoso on the erhu, and he gave a brilliant performance." Andy is the artistic director and co-founder of the New Asia Chamber Music Society. His recent appearances have included an erhu solo collaboration with world renowned pianist Lang Lang and the Orchestra of St. Luke's at Lang Lang's "The Disney Book" live in concert at the Radio City Music Hall in New York City, and a Triple Concerto by Paquito D'Rivera at the Festival PAAX GNP in Mexico.

<https://www.andylin6strings.com/>

**Kelly Lin** - born in Taiwan, is an active piano performer who began her musical studies at an early age on the piano, violin, viola, and erhu. Dr. Lin has made regular appearances at Carnegie Hall, Trinity Church on Wall Street, Lincoln Center, and Merkin Hall. From summer 2014-present, Dr. Lin has been the piano faculty and accompanist for the Berkshire Summer Music, the Westminster Piano High School Camp, 4string Music Festival, and QM International Music Center. She is currently a collaborate pianist at the Juilliard School, Mannes at the New School, Manhattan School of Music, Columbia University, and Young Concert Artist.

Dr. Lin received full scholarships while getting her BM, MM, and AD at University of Southern California as a piano performance major, studying with John Perry. In 2015, she received her Doctorate of Musical Arts in piano performance at Rutgers University with Daniel Epstein, where she also received full scholarship with a teaching assistantship, while balancing a busy schedule as a solo pianist, accompanist, piano teacher, and chamber musician.

**Dave Hertzberg** is an upright and electric bassist who is active in a wide array of genres ranging from cumbia to klezmer. He is a longtime member of pianist Pablo Mayor's renowned Colombian band Folklore Urbano, which combines influences from folkloric Colombian traditions, salsa and jazz. Hertzberg also plays with and composes for the Shul Band, a group whose repertoire includes ancient Jewish liturgical melodies, energetic horas and klezmer-influenced original works. As a guitarist, he serves as musical director for Jewish services throughout the tri-state area, and is an active music educator in Westchester, NY.

**Ronen Itzik** - A native of Jerusalem, Israel, drummer Ronen Itzik relocated to the United States in late 2000. After completing degrees at Berklee College of Music and Florida State University, he established a reputation as an in-demand drummer and sought-after recording artist in New York City. He has incorporated his unique background and knowledge of diverse musical styles into performances at venues such as the Village Vanguard, Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Blue Note and Bimhuis. His numerous international appearances include jazz festivals in Israel, Germany, Korea, Spain, Belgium, Colombia, Canada and Ukraine. He has performed and recorded with jazz greats Lee Konitz, Gary Burton, Kenny Werner, Roy Hargrove, Marcus Roberts, and Arnie Lawrence among many others. Ronen has been an adjunct professor at Penn State University since 2022 teaching drum set, ensemble, and big band.  
<https://www.ronenitzik.com/>

**Nina Zoie Lam** - Former modern dancer turned musical theater performer for 25 years; now a theatre director, dramaturg and educator. Nina received her BA from Brown University in Art and Theater. She is a co-founder of National Asian Artists Project, a non profit organization whose mission is showcasing works of Asian American theater artists through performance, outreach and educational programming. Thrilled for the opportunity to work with this group of artists and take part in the story telling of 'Comfort Girl'!





Memorial in Shanghai Normal University, China

[www.stephaniechoumusic.com](http://www.stephaniechoumusic.com)