

Opinion – Justice for World War II Comfort Women in Taiwan’s Partisan Human Rights Calculus

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/04/30/opinion-justice-for-world-war-ii-comfort-women-in-taiwans-partisan-human-rights-calculus/>

THOMAS J. WARD, APR 30 2024

On May 10, 2023, the last Taiwanese woman to have been part of Japan’s World War II Comfort Woman System died surrounded by family members. The announcement of her passing, as per the family’s request, was withheld until May 23, 2023 following her memorial services. The delay in the public announcement was said to reflect the deceased’s resistance to being memorialized as “Taiwan’s last surviving comfort woman” – her life was more than that. She had come forward in 1992 and, along with 57 others, was recognized as having been a bona fide victim of the Japanese Imperial Army’s World War II Comfort Women System. The existence of this had become public in Taiwan through the February 1992 release of three telegrams by Japanese Diet Member Itoh Hideko, affirming that on March 12, 1942 the Imperial Army command in Tokyo had received a request for shipping permits for fifty Taiwanese Aborigines who had been conscripted “at the behest of the Southern Region Headquarters” of the Japanese Imperial Army for transport to and deployment in a “Comfort Station” in Borneo.

Seoul and Beijing have made the Japanese Military’s World War II round-up of Korean and Chinese women and girls for sexual enslavement a “cause célèbre,” following former Korean Comfort Woman Kim Hak Soon’s August 14, 1991 sharing of her heinous experience of sexual slavery under Japan. For its part, Taiwan chose to handle its grievances against Japan in a more nuanced way than did its neighbors. With the island of Kinmen (Quemoy) located just 10.2 Kilometers off the coast of the Chinese Mainland, Taiwanese live with the threat of Mainland China seizing all or part of their territory at any time. In recent years, Taiwan finds succor in Japan, an increasingly overt guarantor and protector of the island’s future.

Taiwan’s quest for justice for the victims of the Comfort Women System and their families is also blunted due to a Post-World War II divide within Taiwan’s Han Chinese population, the ethnic origin of 98% of its citizenry. The Han Chinese who arrived following World War II are still viewed with justifiable suspicion by the descendants of the much earlier Han migrations, which date back to the 1662 defeat of the Dutch military forces occupying Taiwan by Ming dynasty loyalist Zheng Chenggong (1624–1662), better known as Koxinga (郑成功). Zheng fiercely opposed the Qing Dynasty’s takeover of the Mainland in 1644 and he and his son Zheng Jing established Taiwan as their outpost of resistance to Manchu (Qing) rule. During the two hundred and thirty years of the Qing’s Dynasty’s claim of sovereignty over Taiwan, Manchu leadership never managed to fully establish itself as the ruling power. Even Mao Zedong advocated for Taiwan’s independence from 1928 until 1943.

Following World War II, Chinese interest turned to the annexation of Taiwan. On February 28, 1947 soldiers under the command of Nationalist China President Chiang Kai-shek and Governor-General Chen Yi fired into a crowd of Taiwanese protesters, killing one, wounding others, and alienating those who witnessed this unwarranted action. In the months that followed some 18,000 to 28,000 Taiwanese resisters to Chiang faced death at the hands of Chiang’s forces. This did not cease when Chiang assumed the reins of power of the island following his defeat on the Mainland.

Chiang Kai-shek’s assumption of the island’s leadership and his declaration of martial law ushered in what Taiwanese refer to as the “White Terror.” Chiang oversaw the arrest, imprisonment, torture, and even execution of thousands who opposed his authoritarian rule. Two streams of KMT Party repression, “the 228 Incident” followed by

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the forty-year “White Terror” serve as the rallying cry for the Democratic People’s Party (DPP), now led by President William Lai. For many Taiwanese, the Chiang’s four decades of brutal repression forbode what would await Taiwan’s young democracy should a new generation of Mainlanders, led by Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party, ever take charge of their homeland.

In Cihu Park in the North of Taiwan, villages and neighborhoods throughout the island have relocated 150 of the more than 1000 statues honoring Chiang’s rule. Efforts are intensifying for the eventual removal of all Chiang statues including Taipei’s Chiang Kai-shek Memorial with its 6.3 meter statue of Chiang. Chiang’s statues are only rivaled by Mao’s 2000 statues that continue to provide political décor for the Chinese Mainland.

Taiwan’s DPP has chosen to downplay and largely dismiss the Comfort Women Issue, seeing it as an obstacle to maintaining their critical alliance with Japan. On the other hand, Chinese Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT), beginning with President Ma Ying-jeou, have expressed remorse for the Chiangs’ repressive rule but, in some ways, still find justifications for this chapter of Taiwanese history. They herald the termination of Japan’s occupation of Taiwan from 1895 to 1945, reminding fellow citizens of Japan’s forced induction of Taiwanese men into the Japanese military and its creation and implementation of the Comfort Women system, which immured 2,000 Taiwanese women of both Han and Aboriginal origins in harrowing rituals of daily sexual abuse and rape at the hands of the Japanese military, which upended the victims’ prospects for marriage, family, and any semblance of a normal life in Taiwanese society following Japan’s surrender.

Nonetheless, the calls for justice for the Taiwanese victims of the system have never gained the traction that they did in Korea and Mainland China. While state-funded museums and historical sites have memorialized the brutalities associated with Chiang’s rule, the Comfort Women issue has had a far less galvanizing impact on Taiwan’s citizenry. The sole Comfort Women Statue in Taiwan is not government-sponsored but instead was established by a Taiwanese civil society organization. The Taipei-headquartered Ama Museum, meant to pay homage to Taiwanese comfort women, only lasted from December 2016 to November 2020 when it was forced to close because of both COVID and a lack of funding; however, it did manage to reopen in November 2021.

Comfort Women supporters would do well to seek ways to incorporate this tragic chapter of history and its victims’ testimonies in the broader Taiwan Human Rights narrative. In 2008 and again in 2017 Taiwan’s President William Lai, Taiwan’s recently inaugurated President from the DPP, spoke out in favor of seeking justice for Taiwan’s comfort women. Now, as Head of State, he has the opportunity to live up to that commitment and reconcile both the disparate human rights foci of the DPP and KMT and foster mature, mutually respectful, and more frank dialogue with Japan on this topic, which has been lacking.

*This article is based on Dr. Ward’s recent presentation at Columbia University Law School’s forum “The Legacy of Asian-Pacific WWII Comfort Women” in February 2024 where he spoke as a subject expert on the political divides within discourse on the Comfort Women issue in Taiwan.

About the author:

Thomas J. Ward serves as Professor of Peace and Development at HJ International Graduate School for Peace and Public Leadership in New York City. He is co-author of *Park Statue Politics—World War II Comfort Women Statues in America* (E-International Relations 2019), and was a 2013 Fulbright Scholar and a 2016 Foreign Ministry Visiting Research Scholar at Taipei’s Institute of Modern History. His books and articles have been published by *Paragon House*, *East Asia Quarterly*, the *International Journal of World Peace*, *Journal of Asia Pacific Studies*, *Japan Focus* and *The Washington Times*.