

The Pros and Cons of Comfort Women Park Statues

Written by Thomas J. Ward and William D. Lay

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THOMAS J. WARD AND WILLIAM D. LAY, DEC 7 2018

**This is an excerpt from *Park Statue Politics: World War II Comfort Women Memorials in the United States*.
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The United States remains the most important ally of Japan and of Korea. The Japanese and Korean economies have so rapidly developed not only because of the remarkable entrepreneurial spirit of these two gifted populations, but also because the United States opened its markets and accepted the restrictions placed upon America's own manufacturers as they entered Japanese and Korean markets. Over time, the economies of Japan and Korea have emerged as the economic powerhouses they are today. These two crucial American allies in Asia are now engaged in a war of memory, and America is a new battleground in that war. Those lobbied by Korean or Japanese interest groups have been identified as decision-makers or parties with leverage. Politicians who are contacted by comfort women advocacy groups have been chosen because they can introduce or offer support for legislation for the creation of a memorial in the town, city or state where they serve.

Because two conflicting narratives exist on the objectivity and propriety of these memorials, political leaders have found themselves approached and pressured by both sides. They must choose whether to honor the victims as wished by the Korean advocates or prevent the approval of a memorial that, they have been convinced, will unfairly demean Japan. This scenario has repeated itself dozens of times in the United States since 2010. The decision taken by a municipality, regardless of how small it may be will have an impact on relations between Korea and Japan, and, when the resolution to establish a memorial is accepted, it also understandably stirs a bitter reaction towards the United States in certain parts of Japan, including very possibly the leadership of Japan's ruling party.

The Pursuit of Justice for Unpunished Crimes

We will examine this in greater detail in the later sections of the book, but let us begin by seeing this from the perspective of "leverage" and the role that leverage plays in the ongoing debate over Japan's treatment of the comfort women. In negotiations, we examine the leverage that each side possesses in the process. Leverage leads the opposing side in a conflict to recognize the importance of reaching a settlement. When the treatment of women and girls by the Japanese military came to the surface in the 1990s, it led to a groundswell of righteous rancor towards Japan, especially on the part of Koreans. A large portion of the women conscripted to serve as *ianfu*, or comfort women, during WWII came from Korea.

The first recourse that the victims sought beginning in the early 1990s was through the court system. Yet, during the 14 year period between 1991 and 2005, few courts ruled in these women's favor and, if they did, they were struck down on a higher level of the justice system both in Japan and in the United States.

This prompted intensification of civil society activity. One of the most important of such actions was a demonstration that has taken place every Wednesday in front of Japan's embassy in Seoul, Korea beginning on January 8, 1992. The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (the Korean Council) has led these demonstrations. The Korean Council is the principal Korean civil society organization (CSO) dedicated to addressing the comfort women issue. The Korean Council's demonstrations have called upon the government of Japan to admit its official role in the creation and implementation of the system and to accept responsibility. The Korean Council has

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demanded that the Japanese government offer official compensation to survivors, take legal action against any surviving Japanese officials who helped to organize and implement the comfort women system, and also agree to teach about this shameful chapter of national history that destroyed the lives of tens of thousands of women in the official textbooks used in Japanese schools as a way to condemn and discourage such actions from ever recurring in the future.

For decades, most Japanese maintained their reserved demeanor on this topic with inimitable Japanese politeness. Most Japanese, after all, had a different understanding of this chapter of history than Koreans had. The Japanese had been taught the official Japanese account of historical events – that the comfort women had acted voluntarily as professional prostitutes servicing the military. They had been treated and compensated well for their work and were portrayed as having fulfilled a patriotic duty.[i]

The Korean Council persevered with its understanding of events, using a growing volume of evidence uncovered in previously inaccessible government archives in Japan and the United States. The Korean Council's supporters also successfully lobbied for the appointment in 1994 of a special rapporteur to the United Nations Human Rights Commission to investigate the comfort women issue. In 1999 the findings of this extensive UN investigation led to a sharp rebuke of Japan for having engaged in massive violations of women's rights. The year 2007 even saw the passage of a non-binding resolution by the United States House of Representatives calling upon Japan to recognize its culpability.

Yet the acts most impactful on Japan's demeanor on this topic were not based on investigations or legislation. On the occasion of its 1000th Wednesday demonstration on December 14, 2011, the Korean Council erected the statue of a comfort woman directly across from the Japanese embassy in Seoul. The Japanese abandoned their reserved demeanor. They condemned this action and launched a formal protest against Korea, arguing that the statue impaired Japan's dignity and constituted a violation of guidelines and protocols that a host country should follow when welcoming an embassy from a member of the community of nations with which it engages in diplomatic relations.[ii]

The first memorial to provoke an official response from Japan was created in 2010 not in Seoul but on the grounds of the Palisades Park Municipal Library in New Jersey. Although Palisades Park represents a community of only 20,000, more than half of whom are of Korean heritage, this symbolic act led to formal visits to the office of the mayor, both by the Japanese Consulate in New York and by members of the Japanese Diet (Japan's parliament). Diet members challenged the historical accuracy and fairness of the allegations that the comfort women system represented a crime against humanity. Without effect, they argued that the women had been volunteers who were well compensated.[iii] In establishing a memorial in Palisades Park and in erecting a statue in front of the embassy of Japan, Koreans, intentionally or not, had established powerful leverage that helped to bring a Japan, which famously cringes at humiliation, to the bargaining table.

Still today, every time a new statue or memorial is erected, whether in Korea, the United States, or Europe, it embarrasses Japan. It provides one additional point of leverage for the Korean Council and other CSOs which call upon Japan to accept responsibility and resolve the problem. For Korea, the problem is about justice for the comfort women and restoration of Korea's dignity as a nation. For Japan, the problem is about what they view as unfair national humiliation and a significant loss of "face." In either case, we should be clear that at this stage, the Korean Council, whether the problem is resolved or not, has no intention of seeing the statues come down. The statues and memorials may have never been erected if the problem had been solved earlier, but, now that they are in place, they are thought to represent an important piece of history.

The Ongoing Proliferation of Comfort Women Memorials in the United States

At least a dozen memorials have been established in the United States with a few statues remaining in mothballs, waiting for a permanent home in a park or in some other prominent venue in the town or city where Koreans attempt to erect them. Comfort women memorials have been set up in New Jersey, New York, Virginia, Maryland, Michigan, Texas, Georgia, and California. New Jersey, New York, and California each have three.

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The highest profile memorial in the United States is the memorial established in Glendale, California, with the support of the Korean-American Forum of California. It is an exact replica of the statue near the Japanese embassy in Seoul. The Glendale statue resulted in lawsuits and, as in the case of exhibits in New York, New Jersey, and Virginia, led to formal protests from the government of Japan. The memorials stir sharp reactions from Japan because they universally state in their inscriptions that the women were *abducted* by the Japanese military, even though, based on their testimonies, most Korean and Taiwanese women have explained that they were lured by false promises of education and careers in fields such as nursing, food services, entertainment, and clerical work. They also point to the memorial's assertion that there were "more than 200,000" comfort women. In this text we clarify that the estimates set by fair-minded researchers, who have reviewed archival evidence on the comfort stations and Japanese troop deployments and also heard and examined testimonies from the comfort women and from the Japanese military who have come forward, is between 50,000 and 200,000.

Notes

[i] C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 71.

[ii] *Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations*, Vienna, April 18, 1961, *United Nations Treaty Series*, vol. 500, http://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9_1_1961.pdf, emphasis added.

[iii] *Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations*, Vienna, April 18, 1961, *United Nations Treaty Series*, vol. 500.

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Thomas J. Ward serves as Dean of the University of Bridgeport's College of Public and International Affairs. An honors graduate of the Sorbonne and a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Notre Dame, he did his doctoral studies in Political Economy and International Education at the Catholic Institute of Paris and De La Salle University in the Philippines. He teaches graduate courses in International Conflict and Negotiation and Political and Economic Integration. A former Fulbright scholar, he has lectured at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, and has been a Visiting Research Fellow at Academic Sinica in Taipei. His research on the comfort women issue has been published in *East Asia* and *Asia Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*.

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