



FILIPINA COMFORT WOMEN STATUE

Manila, Philippines

14.565861, 120.984000



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Executive Summary

Filipina Comfort Women was a statue erected on 8 December 2017 along Baywalk, Roxas Boulevard, in Manila. The contestation began days after the statue's installation with a request for background information by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). Japanese Minister for Internal Affairs and Communication Seiko Noda later regretted the statue's installation by Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte. In April 2018, the statue was taken down and then moved to its artist Jonas Roces's studio in Antipolo, Rizal. In August 2018, the artist reported the statue as stolen.

Introduction

Filipina Comfort Women stood along Baywalk in Manila for less than five months between December 2017 and April 2018. It commemorated the Filipino ‘comfort women,’ or *lolas* (grandmothers), who were forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II.¹ The issue of comfort women to this day presents a key point of tension between Japan and countries occupied by the Japanese Empire, with Japan shying away from accepting full legal responsibility for the suffering of comfort women,² and strongly opposing statues depicting these atrocities.³

The monument was removed on April 27, 2018, by the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) to make way for a drainage improvement project.⁴ Although it was intended that the statue be moved to Baclaran Church in August 2018, the statue’s artist, Jonas Roces, reported it as stolen on August 22, 2018, after failing to meet up with Teresita Ang See of the Tulay Foundation, the group that commissioned the statue, at the statue’s intended new site.⁵

Background

The Philippines under the Japanese Empire: 1941-1945

Japan’s complicated legacy within the Philippines can be traced back to its three-year occupation of the country during World War II. On December 8, 1941, the Japanese Army began its invasion of the Philippines, launching its main attack on December 22.⁶ Following defeats in Bataan and Corregidor, the Allied forces surrendered on May 8, 1942, marking the beginning of Japan’s occupation of the Philippines.⁷

Japan’s occupation was almost immediately marked by atrocities inflicted on the Allied forces and the local population. Following the Japanese Army’s victory, Allied survivors were forced to undertake the Bataan death march, during which thousands of soldiers died.⁸ Resistance efforts were met with similar violence and cruelty. When the United States invaded the Philippines in

¹ Cody Cepeda, “74 years on, Filipino comfort women are still fighting a war,” *Inquirer.net*. September 16, 2019.

² Hankyoreh, “25 years of progress on comfort women issue ‘wiped out’ by new agreement,” *Hankyoreh*. Dec 30, 2015.

³ Jake Adelstein, “‘Gesture of healing’: South Korea and Japan reconcile on World War II sex slaves,” *Los Angeles Times*. December 28, 2015.

⁴ ABS-CBN News, “Government removes ‘comfort woman’ statue in Manila,” *ABS-CBN News*. April 28, 2018.

⁵ Johnna Villaviray Giolagon, “The mystery of the missing comfort woman statue,” *Vera Files*. August 27, 2019.

⁶ Huber M. Thomas, “The American Bataan Campaign December 1941 to April 1942,” *Army History*, No. 21 (Winter 1991/1992), 1-13. 1991.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Michael Norman and Elizabeth M. Norman, “Bataan Death March,” *Britannica*. April 2, 2021

1944, the Japanese Army mounted a suicidal defence of the country, reducing cities to rubble.⁹ Werner Gruhl estimated that there were around 500,000 Allied Asian-Pacific war deaths in the Philippines during the Japanese occupation.¹⁰

Central to this case study is the Japanese Army's practice of forcing Filipino women to work as 'comfort women.' The term 'comfort women' is derived from the Japanese term *ianfu*, which combines the Chinese characters for 'comfort or solace' (*ian*) with 'woman' (*fu*).¹¹ However, in recent years, there has been a larger demand to start referring to 'survivors of wartime female slavery system' instead of 'comfort women' as Manila-based attorney Romel Bagares argues the term 'hides the untold abuse the victims suffered under the Japanese Imperial Army and denies the victims the dignity they deserve.'¹²

Like in their campaigns in China and Korea, the Japanese Army forced thousands of Phillipino women to work in military brothels called 'comfort stations,' where they were forced to engage in sexual intercourse with Japanese soldiers.¹³ They lived in deplorable conditions and were beaten if they protested, as testified by Narcisa Claveria, who was a 'comfort woman' for 18 months, stating that 'they flayed us with horse's whip' and that the building was heaving 'with crying.'¹⁴ Maria Rosa Henson, another survivor, testified to the brutal treatment suffered by Japanese soldiers:

I was forced to stay at the hospital which they have made as a garrison [...] The Japanese soldiers were forcing me to have sex with several of their colleagues. Sometimes 12 soldiers would force me to have sex with them and then they would allow me to rest for a while, then about 12 soldiers would have sex with me again. There was no rest, they had sex with me every minute.¹⁵

Maria Rosa Henson's testimony is equally evidence of the systematic and organised nature of the 'comfort woman' system: these were government-sanctioned military brothels instituted as a key aspect of the Army's operations, thus justifying present attempts by women's groups to secure a true admission of legal responsibility from the Japanese government.

By the time of the Japanese Army's surrender on August 15, 1945, about 1,000 Filipinas had

⁹ Ishaan Tharoor, "Manila was known as the 'Pearl of the Orient.' Then World War II happened," *Washington Post*, February 19, 2015.

¹⁰ Werner Gruhl, *Imperial Japan's World War Two: 1931-1945*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers. 2007.

¹¹ Cheryl D.Meyer and Julie McCarthy, "Why These World War II Sex Slaves Are Still Demanding Justice," Pulitzer Center. December 7, 2020.

¹² Julie McCarthy, "Why These World War II Sex Slaves Are Still Demanding Justice," *NPR*, DEcember 4, 2020.

¹³ Cheryl D.Meyer and Julie McCarthy, "Why These World War II Sex Slaves Are Still Demanding Justice," Pulitzer Center. December 7, 2020.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Maria R. Henson, "Summary of Narration," By Lila Pilpina, Inc., *Testimonies of the Victims*, Asian Women's Fund, (September, 1992).

been forced into sexual servitude. They were part of the estimated 200,000 women who were victimised in several parts of Asia occupied by Japan, prominently Korea but also Singapore, Myanmar, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia and Taiwan.¹⁶ Three-quarters of the Philippine ‘comfort women’ died during the war, with only 10 of them alive as of June 19, 2019. Those who survived continue to suffer from post-traumatic syndrome, psychiatric instability, sexually transmitted diseases and infertility.¹⁷

For decades, the survivors of the ‘comfort women’ system did not share their stories. But by the early 1990s, testimonies started to emerge in a series of lawsuits against Japan. South Korean women were the first to organise themselves into a national movement, adding the term to the jurisprudence of human rights for women in wartime. They aimed to make Japan offer a public apology and financial compensation for their suffering.¹⁸ As in Korea, the ‘comfort woman’ system greatly marked a generation of Filipino women, who also started to fight for admission of full legal responsibility, as well as compensation from the Japanese state. In 1994, the organisation Lila Pilipina was founded to represent surviving Filipina ‘comfort women’ in their fight for justice.¹⁹

The case of ‘comfort women’ during Japanese occupation has mainly been condemned by international organisations such as the UN, which has issued different reports on the issue, the first one being the ‘Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its causes and consequences’ by Radhika Coomaraswam after an investigation developed from 1994 to 2003. A common topic of these reports is the denunciation of the ongoing impunity of those who perpetrated sexual slavery during World War II and the lack of legal responsibility from the Japanese state.

Japanese Apologies and Compensation

Since the conclusion of WWII, the Japanese government has made several efforts to atone for the crimes committed by the Japanese Empire, issuing several apologies and paying reparations to surviving comfort women. When Lila Pilipina petitioned the court in Tokyo for Japan to apologise and provide compensation, it was ruled that all such claims had been resolved in the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty.²⁰ Yet, as Herbert Bix wrote in *Hirohito and the Making of Japan*: ‘Virtually the only reparations that Japan would ever have to pay — a mere 1.02 billion

¹⁶ Julie McCarthy, “Why These World War II Sex Slaves Are Still Demanding Justice,” *NPR*, DEcember 4, 2020.

¹⁷ Cheryl D.Meyer and Julie McCarthy, “Why These World War II Sex Slaves Are Still Demanding Justice,” Pulitzer Center. December 7, 2020.

¹⁸ Julie McCarthy, “Why These World War II Sex Slaves Are Still Demanding Justice,” *NPR*, DEcember 4, 2020.

¹⁹ Cheryl D.Meyer and Julie McCarthy, “Why These World War II Sex Slaves Are Still Demanding Justice,” Pulitzer Center. December 7, 2020.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

dollars worth of goods and 'services' spread out over many years — were to the Philippines, Indonesia, Burma, and (later) South Vietnam.²¹ According to Nelia Sancho, formerly of the Asian Women's Human Rights Council, none of these reparations were directed towards Japan's system of sexual slavery during World War II.²²

Several Japanese Prime Ministers have since offered their apologies for the atrocities committed under the 'comfort women' system. In 1993, the Japanese government issued the Kono Statement, the first admission that the Japanese military was at least indirectly involved in the operation of 'comfort stations.'²³ Although a far cry from a true admission of guilt and legal responsibility, it was the first time the government had acknowledged and apologised to the 'comfort women' who had been ignored for decades up to this point: 'The Government of Japan would like to take this opportunity once again to extend its sincere apologies and remorse to all those, irrespective of place of origin, who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.'²⁴

In 1995, the Japanese government founded the Asian Women's Fund with the goal of giving reparations to surviving 'comfort women' by soliciting private donations. The last payments to the Philippines were made in the early 2000s, with the Japanese government claiming that 211 women received funds.²⁵ In the case of surviving 'comfort woman' Narcisa Claveria, she received the equivalent of around \$10,000 from the fund.²⁶

However, this initiative has been criticised as yet another effort by the Japanese government to evade responsibility for the 'comfort woman' system. For there to be true 'atonement,' a sincere apology should be accompanied by state compensation, as opposed to what is effectively a charitable contribution from the people of Japan. Japan's continued aversion to making an admission of legal responsibility has been criticised as 'apology fatigue,' with Carol Gluck of Columbia University arguing that former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's position on the issue 'is not one of apology, nor is it one of recognition of the coercion of the comfort women.'²⁷ The Japanese government has supported this notion through the establishment of memorials to Japanese soldiers and military officials who perished in the Philippines during World War II.²⁸ This aversion to admitting responsibility continues to inform Japan's reaction to depictions of the

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Yohei Kono, "MOFA: Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono on the result of the study on the issue of "comfort women"," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. August 4, 1993.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Cheryl D.Meyer and Julie McCarthy, "Why These World War II Sex Slaves Are Still Demanding Justice," Pulitzer Center. December 7, 2020.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Sharon Cabusao-Silva, interview by Zacharie Mouillé, October 14, 2021.

'comfort women' issue.

Japan-Philippines Relations

Japan's relations with the Philippines today have been heavily shaped by their occupation of the island country during World War II. After the Philippines was granted independence in 1946, Japan paid relatively few reparations, as evidenced by clause 14 in the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty, which states:

It is recognised that Japan should pay reparations to the Allied Powers for the damage and suffering caused by it during the war. Nevertheless it is also recognised that the resources of Japan are not presently sufficient, if it is to maintain a viable economy, to make complete reparation for all such damage and suffering and at the same time meet its other obligations.²⁹

The two countries developed strong relations despite the Philippines Government's failure to secure a more substantial commitment from Japan to pay reparations. Since formally establishing diplomatic relations in July 1956,³⁰ and after the signing of the Philippines-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (PJEPA) in 2008, Japan has become one of the Philippines' major trading partners, ranking second in its export market and second out of its import suppliers. Furthermore, Japan is one of the Philippines' largest investors, ranking as the fourth largest contributor of foreign investment.³¹

In addition to building strong direct economic ties, Japan's influence on the Philippines manifests itself most strongly in the role it plays in the Asian Development Bank (ADB), headquartered in Manila, which invests in countries in Asia to promote social and economic development in the region.³² Japan is one of the largest shareholders in the bank, controlling about 15.571% of the shares,³³ which is why every president of the bank since its formation in 1966 has been Japanese.³⁴ As such, the Philippines has become strongly reliant on maintaining economic ties with Japan due to the large amount of investment it receives both directly and through the ADB. Keeping this in mind is vital when looking into the rationale for the Filipino government's handling of the 'comfort women' issue.

²⁹ *Treaty of Peace with Japan*. New York: United Nations Treaty Series: Treaties and international agreements registered or filed and recorded with the Secretariat of the United Nations. Volume 136. 60-62. 1952.

³⁰ Embassy of Japan in the Philippines, "65 Years of Friendship: Japan and the Philippines," Embassy of Japan in the Philippines. 28 May, 2021.

³¹ Republic of the Philippines Department of Trade and Industry. "Philippines-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (PJEPA)." Republic of the Philippines Department of Trade and Industry. N.d. Accessed 22 September, 2021

³² Asian Development Bank. n.d. "Who We Are," Asian Development Bank.

³³ Asian Development Bank, "2020 Asian Development Bank Annual Report," Asian Development Bank. 75. n.d. Accessed September 22, 2021

³⁴ Asian Development Bank, "Past ADB Presidents," Asian Development Bank. n.d. Accessed September 22, 2021.

History of the Contestation

Installation of the Statue

Filipina Comfort Women was installed on December 8, 2017, along Roxas Boulevard, on Manila Bay.³⁵ The bronze statue, depicting a blindfolded woman in traditional Maria Clara attire,³⁶ and covered by a coral vine, known locally as the *cadena de amor*,³⁷ was commissioned by Manuel Chua of the Filipino-Chinese group Tulay Foundation.³⁸ According to Sharon Cabusao-Silva, the coordinator for Lila Pilipina at the time of writing, Manuel Chua was a Filipino-Chinese businessman descendant from a victim of World War II who organised a fundraising campaign among his friends and other supporters of the ‘comfort women’ campaign.³⁹ This included groups such as Memorare, ‘an organisation of descendants of American victims of World War II in the Philippines’ and Kaisa Para sa Kaunlaran (Unity for Progress), ‘an organisation of Filipino-Chinese advocates... who are... working closely with... Wha-Chi guerillas’, descendants of a unit ‘which helped the Filipino guerilla army fight the Japanese during World War II.’⁴⁰ Lila Pilipina was also closely involved, with the *lolas* themselves considerably influencing the design of the statue: rather than representing the ‘comfort women’ with a lovely figure of the female form, the *lolas* ‘suggested having something to cover the body of the statue,’ which was how the idea of the *cadena de amor* was incorporated into the statue’s design.⁴¹ Following his death, the National Historical Commission of the Philippines (NHCP) sought approval from Teresita Ang See of Tulay Foundation, a key leader of Kaisa, who enthusiastically agreed to the installation of the statue.⁴² The base of the statue lists the different donors and involved parties, including Manuel Chua, Tulay Foundation and Lila Pilipina.⁴³ The backside of the base includes a plaque with the statue’s title and the name of its sculptor, Jonas Roces.⁴⁴ The statue’s unveiling was attended by NHCP chairman Rene Escalante and acting executive director Ludovico Badoy, who was acting as representative of Mayor of Manila Joseph Estrada, among others.⁴⁵

Immediate Contestation by Local Authorities

The statue’s installation was almost immediately met with opposition by the Department of

³⁵ Ai Balagtas See, “Manila ‘comfort woman’ statue raises thorny issue with Japan,” *Inquirer.net*. December 20, 2017.

³⁶ Ryomaandres, *Manila Filipina Comfort Women Statue 2017*, Wikimedia Commons. 2017.

³⁷ Sharon Cabusao-Silva, interview by Zacharie Mouillé, October 14, 2021.

³⁸ Aie Balagtas See, “‘Comfort woman’ statue not an insult vs Japan,” *Inquirer.net*. December 26, 2017.

³⁹ Sharon Cabusao-Silva, interview by Zacharie Mouillé, October 14, 2021.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Aie Balagtas See, “‘Comfort woman’ statue not an insult vs Japan,” *Inquirer.net*. December 26, 2017.

⁴³ Ryomaandres, *Manila Filipina Comfort Women Statue pedestal backside*. Wikimedia Commons. 2017.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Jose Rodel Clapano, “DFA questions Manila execs on comfort woman statue,” *Philstar Global*. December 18, 2017.

Foreign Affairs (DFA). Four days after the statue was erected, in a letter marked 'Extremely Urgent,' the DFA formally asked officials of Manila City Hall and the NHCP to provide background information about the decision-making process that led to the installation. The DFA made clear that their concerns with the installation were closely tied to Japanese-Philippines relations, reading: 'Taking into account the sensitive nature of the 'comfort woman' issue both domestically and bilaterally with Japan, the department requests for background information regarding the monument.'⁴⁶ According to the Rappler, a period ensued in which 'Manila City Hall and the NHCP had been pointing fingers on who should answer for the erection of the statue, allegedly without permits.'⁴⁷ Edward Serapio, secretary to Manila Mayor Joseph Estrada, denied that a permit was or could be issued.⁴⁸

Japanese Response to the Installation

The Japanese response to the statue's installation reflects their continued policy of denying full legal responsibility for the 'comfort women' system during World War II. Japanese Internal Affairs and Communication Minister Seiko Noda, in a meeting with Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte, expressed regret at the statue's installation: 'It's regrettable for this kind of statue to suddenly appear.'⁴⁹ In response to this statement, Duterte, in an interview with local news outlet MindaNews, stated that he 'cannot stop the relatives or even the comfort women still living from their freedom to express what they are expressing through the statue.'⁵⁰ Most importantly, Duterte removed the Philippines government from all responsibility regarding the next steps to be taken with the statue, explaining that any decision to remove the statue lay solely in the Mayor of Manila, Joseph Estrada, and maintaining that the government was 'blind and deaf' about the monument's installation.⁵¹ Reactions from Japan were not limited to the Government, with local press expressing outrage at the statue's depiction of a contentious aspect of Japan's history. For example, on 26 December 2017, Hideki Yoshimura, Sankei Shimbun's Singapore Bureau Chief, alleged that there was a degree of Chinese interference in the erection of the statue, claiming that the only invited media outlets were Chinese (such as Xinhua News Agency), and that listed donors include 'a Chinese guerrilla who fought against the Japanese during the occupation period, as well as the Filipino-Chinese group Tulay Foundation, Inc..' He concludes that 'China has thus driven a new wedge into the friendly postwar relations between the two countries.'⁵²

⁴⁶ ABS-CBN News, "Duterte says 'comfort woman' statue a 'constitutional right'," ABS-CBN News. January 18, 2018.

⁴⁷ Pia Ranada, "Duterte won't act on comfort woman statue," Rappler. January 11, 2018.

⁴⁸ Paterno II R. Esmaguél, "What's wrong with this statue of a comfort woman in Manila?" Rappler. December 6, 2017.

⁴⁹ Kyodo News, "Japan voices regret to Duterte over 'comfort women' statue," ABS-CBN News. Jan 10, 2018.

⁵⁰ ABS-CBN News, "Duterte says 'comfort woman' statue a 'constitutional right'," ABS-CBN News. January 18, 2018.

⁵¹ MindaNews, "Duterte on 'Comfort Women' monument: it's freedom of expression," MindaNews. January 16, 2018.

⁵² Hideki Yoshimura and Sankei Shimbun, "Foreign Ministry Didn't Know: Chinese Hand Seen in Comfort Women Statue in Manila," JapanForward. December 26, 2017.

Removal, Planned Move and ‘Mystery’ of the Stolen Statue

In the days leading up to the statue’s removal, Teresita Ang See was alerted about the presence of a crane behind the statue, leading her to ask a police official to watch over the statue.⁵³ After a week, however, they received notice from the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) that the statue would be removed to make way for construction that would affect the area where the statue was installed.⁵⁴ On April 27, 2018, the statue was removed by the DPWH ‘to give way for the improvement of Roxas [Boulevard] Baywalk Area.’⁵⁵ Backtracking his previous position, President Duterte defended removing the statue, stating that ‘we can place it somewhere else. If you want to place it on private property, fine, but do not use – because that issue, in so far as I am concerned, *tapos na iyan* (that’s over).’⁵⁶ The removal and Duterte’s subsequent statement drew criticism from several groups, namely Gabriela Women’s Party, who had previously requested the Philippines government to reject Japan’s request to remove the statue.⁵⁷ Following the removal, the group filed House Resolution 1859, calling for a probe into this incident and made a strong statement opposing the move: ‘Such removal of the statue violates existing laws and blackens the memory of abused comfort women who died without even getting a formal apology from the Japanese government for the historical injustice which they suffered.’⁵⁸ Lila Pilipina tried to inquire with then-mayor Joseph Estrada, but he declined to comment on the issue.⁵⁹

Following the removal, the statue was moved to the artist Jonas Roces’s workshop in Antipolo.⁶⁰ The city government retained the pedestal and the marker, claiming that it was government property.⁶¹ The statue was then intended for a move to a new site on the grounds of Baclaran Church in Pasay City on August 18, 2019, but the artist ‘never showed up’ with the statue, according to Teresita Ang See.⁶² Ang See explains that Tulay Foundation sent Roces a letter on August 22, formally demanding the return of the statue, as the group had commissioned and already paid for the statue.⁶³ After receiving the letter, Roces called Ang See to inform her that the statue had been taken from his workshop by unidentified men.⁶⁴ The convoluted circumstances surrounding the disappearance of the statue have forced Ang See to consider

⁵³ Sharon Cabusao-Silva, interview by Zacharie Mouillé, October 14, 2021.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ ABS-CBN News, “Government removes ‘comfort woman’ statue in Manila,” ABS-CBN News. April 28, 2018.

⁵⁶ ABS-CBN News, “Let’s not insult Japan: Duterte backs removal of ‘comfort woman’ statue,” ABS-CBN News. April 29, 2018.

⁵⁷ Xinhua, “Women’s group urges Philippine leader to stand firm on ‘comfort women’ issue,” Xinhua.net. January 17, 2018.

⁵⁸ ABS-CBN News, “Gabriela seeks House probe on removal of ‘comfort woman’ statue,” ABS-CBN News. May 10, 2018.

⁵⁹ Sharon Cabusao-Silva, interview by Zacharie Mouillé, October 14, 2021.

⁶⁰ Aie Balagtas See, “Artist hurting over banished ‘Comfort Woman’ statue,” Inquirer.net. May 6, 2018.

⁶¹ Sharon Cabusao-Silva, interview by Zacharie Mouillé, October 14, 2021.

⁶² Johnna Villaviray Giolagon, “The mystery of the missing comfort woman statue,” Vera Files. August 27, 2019.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

pressing charges of *estafa* (fraud) against Roces.⁶⁵

Despite the statue's disappearance, plans by the newly formed 'Flowers for *Lolas* Campaign' to install a new memorial dedicated to Filipino 'comfort women' ultimately materialised on August 25, 2019, in the form of a large granite monument – intended to be the base of the missing statue – on the grounds of Baclaran Church bearing a plaque honouring 'the victims of military sexual slavery and violence during the Second World War.'⁶⁶ This effort was led by the women's groups Lila Pilipina, the Gabriela Women's Party and Kaisa Para sa Kaunlaran.⁶⁷

During efforts to find a second site for the statue, Lila Pilipina was involved in the disappearance of another statue depicting the 'comfort women' issue. On December 28 2018, a replica *Statue of Peace* depicting a 'comfort woman' seated next to a vacant chair was unveiled in a private facility for the elderly in San Pedro, Laguna, drawing immediate comparisons with the statue on Roxas Boulevard.⁶⁸ The installation was a joint effort between the cities of San Pedro and Jecheon City, South Korea.⁶⁹ The statue drew criticism from the Japanese Embassy in the Philippines in a statement: 'We believe that the establishment of a comfort woman statue in other countries, including this case, is extremely disappointing, not compatible with the Japanese government.'⁷⁰ On December 30, just two days after its unveiling, the statue was removed.⁷¹ Following a statement by Lila Pilipina about the removal, the then-mayor of San Pedro, Lourdes Cataquiz, refused to comment on the statue's removal.⁷²

Decision-Making Processes

Determining who was behind the decision to remove the statue continues to be shrouded in uncertainty due to conflicting information from the different stakeholders. Ultimately, despite initial assurances by Duterte that the issue of the statue was not one of national policy, the decision to remove the statue appears to have been taken by the Philippines government, seeing as the DPWH is an executive department of the government. Furthermore, Duterte would later defend the decision to remove the statue, providing further evidence that the government had the final say in the removal of the statue. Although these decision-makers are elected officials, any change in the dynamics surrounding the 'comfort women' issue is unlikely to come from the

⁶⁵ Marc J. Cayabyab, "Charges mulled over missing 'comfort woman' statue," Philstar Global, September 1, 2019.

⁶⁶ Kyodo News, "New 'comfort women' memorial unveiled in Manila," ABS-CBN News, August 26, 2019.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ GMA News Online, "Palace Says Laguna Statue Part of Freedom of Expression," GMA News Online, GMA Network Inc., January 1, 2019.

⁶⁹ Manila STV, "Laguna City removes South Korean Statue," Manila STV, January 3, 2019.

⁷⁰ Manila Shimbun, "Japanese Gov't Disappointed over Laguna Statue," Daily Manila Shimbun, December 31, 2018.

⁷¹ Manila STV, "Laguna City removes South Korean Statue," Manila STV, January 3, 2019.

⁷² Sharon Cabusao-Silva, interview by Zacharie Mouillé, October 14, 2021.

ballot box due to Japan's influence over the issue.

The decision to remove the statue was primarily influenced by Japan and their reaction to the statue's installation. As was explained in the background section, the Philippines government has good reason not to strain relations with the Japanese over the issue of comfort women due to their strong economic ties and Japan's position within the Asian Development Bank. The removal came just a week before the Asian Development Bank summit held in Manila.⁷³ Japan's response is consistent with its continued policy of evading the recognition of legal responsibility for Japan's 'comfort women' system during World War II and viewing any representation of 'comfort women' as a direct political attack rather than merely a historical memorial. Japan's strong influence over decisions in the Philippines relating to the 'comfort women' issue would be difficult to stamp out, as much of their policy regarding this issue is closely aligned with Japanese electors' views.

Comparatively, the Philippines government paid little attention to women's groups and the 'comfort women' themselves, who sought only to install a historical reminder of their plight during World War II. Despite this, the combined efforts of these groups allowed them to install a new memorial on the grounds of Baclaran Church. Although this was ultimately an unsatisfying solution due to the statue's disappearance and the new site being less visible than Roxas Boulevard, the move is evidence of the ability of grassroots initiatives to overcome powerful decision-makers and foreign influences. As Gabriela is a political party, more deep-seated change surrounding this issue can be made if the women's party gains more power in government.

Dynamics to consider in the decision-making process are the effect of foreign influence on the 'comfort women' issue, the perspective of women's groups and surviving 'comfort women', and the blurring of the lines between historical contestations and political conflict.

Summary and Conclusions

The contestation surrounding the removal of *Filipina Comfort Women* demonstrates the continued conflict between Japan and women's groups across Asia in the latter's fight for a true admission of legal responsibility and compensation. Ultimately, the removal exemplifies Japan's influence over many Asian countries, offering it a great deal of leverage in how these contestations are dealt with. Despite Japan's significant influence over the issue, the incident was evidence of the ability of grassroots women's groups to come together and craft effective solutions to contestations, allowing 'comfort women' to tell their story and remind the

⁷³ Sharon Cabusao-Silva, interview by Zacharie Mouillé, October 14, 2021.

Philippines of the countless atrocities they suffered through the new memorial on the grounds of Baclaran Church.

Research contributed by Zacharie Mouillé and Anna Farronay

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About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at the European Association for History Educators (EuroClio) in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

Contact information

Paula O'Donohoe
Program Director

Institute for Historical Justice &
Reconciliation
contestedhistories.org

EuroClio - European Association of
History Educators
Bankplein 2, 2585 EV
The Hague, The Netherlands
+31 70 3817836
contestedhistories@euroclio.eu

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