



WARTIME LABOURER STATUE

Busan, Republic of Korea

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Executive Summary

First installed amidst clashes with local authorities on May 1, 2018, the Wartime Labourer Statue in Busan, Republic of Korea (South Korea), symbolises one aspect of the trauma left by Japanese colonialism. Initially planned to be erected in front of the Japanese Consulate General in the city, activists ignored the authorities' order to stay away from the diplomatic mission during heated tensions between the two nations. After being forcibly removed and relocated twice, the statue stands 100 metres away from the Consulate by the Statue of General Jeong Bal. This case study examines the role of civic action in establishing a visual representation of a colonial legacy, as well as the position of the authorities who, though mainly in agreement with the activists' goals, opposed the confrontational placing of the statue in front of the Consulate out of realpolitik considerations.

Introduction

Located in Busan, the second-largest city in South Korea, the Wartime Labourer Statue stands by the statue of General Jeong Bal – a garrison commander who died fighting against the 1592 Japanese invasion of Korea – in the Dong District near the Japanese Consulate General. The bronze statue, sculpted by Kim Seo-Kyung – one of the sculptors of the Statue of Peace depicting a Comfort Woman who sits in front of the Consulate – was originally organised to be installed adjacent to the Statue of Peace by a coalition of civic groups named the Busan Movement Headquarters for Social Reform and Elimination of Accumulated Ills (Busan Movement). Their plan to erect the Wartime Labourer Statue on May 1, 2018, was stopped by the local police force and physical altercations occurred. Since then, the location of the statue was the centre of contestation between activists and various authorities, with a resolution reached in 2019.

Background

The Japanese Empire and Korean forced labourers

Korea was a former colony of Japan from its annexation in 1910 until the latter's defeat in WWII in 1945. The occupation left numerous traumas and legacies, including but not limited to violent suppression of independence movements and systematic discrimination by the Japanese against the Koreans, the implementation of forced industrialisation policies and the use of forced labourers in Japan. In what some scholars such as Shin Gi-Wook and Michael Robinson call 'colonial modernity,' Japan's colonial project in Korea left a semblance of 'modernity,' including the foundations for an industrial economy and its accompanying social complexities.¹ The nascent capitalism, which, to a large degree, was forced onto the predominantly agricultural Korean economy, rapidly developed in the 1930s when Japan set itself on course to invade China and eventually expand the theatre of war to the Pacific.² Investment from Japanese and Korean industrialists increased to facilitate industrialisation across the Korean Peninsula and Manchuria. During the decade, while approximately 600,000 Koreans migrated to Northeast China, around 700,000 migrated to Japan.³ In the late 1930s, the exodus of Korean labourers from the Peninsula increased further. In 1938, Japan faced a labour shortage for war-related industries such as munitions production and mining. The government thus enacted the 1938 National Mobilisation Law, and in 1942, guidelines were issued to local governments to 'recruit' Korean workers from the Peninsula.⁴ Exact figures are difficult to calculate, but some statistics approximate the number of Korean workers forcibly mobilised to work in Japan through state conscription or private 'hiring'

¹ Gi-Wook Shin, and Michael Robinson, eds. *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, Harvard East Asian Monographs; 184. Leiden; Boston, 1999, 11.

² Carter J. Eckert, *Offspring of Empire: The Koch'ang Kims and the Colonial Origins of Korean Capitalism, 1876-1945*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991, 49.

³ Soon-Won Park, "Colonial Industrial Growth and the Emergence of the Korean Working Class." In Shin, Gi-wook and Michael Robinson, eds. *Colonial Modernity in Korea*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999, 135.

⁴ Kemeng Fan, "The Judicial Remedy's Unfulfilled Potential: Curing the Pain of Historical Atrocities in the South Korean-Japanese Context," *The Georgetown Journal of Legal Ethics* 33, no. 3 (2020): 461 – 485, 464.

to more than 800,000 between 1939 to 1945.⁵ Of this number, approximately 440,000 were working in coal and metal mines.⁶ Their work was vital to the Japanese; approximately half of the coal used by Japan during the Pacific War was dug by Koreans.⁷ Predictably, these forced Korean labourers were treated worse than Japanese labourers: they were subject to much more coercive means of mobilisation, and Korean miners' death rates were approximately 20% higher than Japanese miners.⁸

1965 Treaty on Basic Relations Between Japan and the Republic of Korea

Similar to other historical disputes between Japan and its former colonies, including South Korea, the question of the Japanese Empire and Japanese companies using forced labourers (in this case, Korean forced labourers) remains contentious. The main cause of conflict between the two nations regarding forced labourers and financial compensation lies in the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations Between Japan and the Republic of Korea (1965 Basic Treaty) and the Agreement on the Settlement of Problems Concerning Property and Claims and the Economic Cooperation Between the Republic of Korea and Japan (Claims Agreement).⁹ This treaty normalised diplomatic relations and included a payment of \$300 million in grants and \$200 million (approximately \$2.8 billion and \$1.85 billion respectively today, or €2.65 billion and €1.75 billion) in loans from Japan for South Korea's industrialising efforts. It is Article II of the Claims Agreement, however, which continues to create problems between the two nations regarding the question of forced labourers. The Article stipulates that:

Problems concerning property, rights, and interests of the two High Contracting Parties [South Korea and Japan] and their peoples (including judicial persons) and the claims between the High Contracting Parties and between their peoples, including those stipulated in Article IV(a) of the Peace Treaty with Japan signed at the city of San Francisco on September 8, 1951, *have been settled completely and finally*.¹⁰ [Emphasis added]

Furthermore, Article II formalises that 'no contention shall be made concerning the measures on the property, rights and interests of either Contracting Party and its nationals.'¹¹ Essentially the Japanese maintain that even if a Korean forced labourer seeks compensation or an apology from the Japanese state or company, the Claims Agreement annuls such claims as these matters from the colonial period have legally been finalised.

Recent court cases of Korean forced labourers

⁵ Soon-Won Park, "Colonial Industrial Growth and the Emergence of the Korean Working Class," In Shin, Gi-wook and Michael Robinson, *Colonial Modernity in Korea*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999, 135.

⁶ Hisaki Naitou, "Korean Forced Labour in Japan's Wartime Empire," In Paul H. Kratoska's *Asian Labor in the Wartime Japanese Empire: Unknown Histories*. Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005, 95.

⁷ William Donald III Smith, *Ethnicity, Class and Gender in the Mines: Korean Workers in Japan's Chikuho Coal Field, 1917-1945*, PHD Thesis, University of Washington, 1999, 223.

⁸ Ibid, 224.

⁹ Kemeng Fan,, "The Judicial Remedy's Unfulfilled Potential: Curing the Pain of Historical Atrocities in the South Korean-Japanese Context," *The Georgetown Journal of Legal Ethics* 33, no. 3 (2020): 461-485, 466.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Despite Article II of the Claims Agreement, former forced labourers have made a few attempts to seek compensation from Japanese actors in the colonial period, to various outcomes. In 1997, two Korean plaintiffs filed a suit against New Nippon Steel in Osaka for the use of forced labour; the case was dismissed in 2002 by a local court, and the city high court dismissed an appeal a year later.¹² Despite this, following a 2005 truth commission report on the joint talks held by the two countries in the 1965 Treaty, two more plaintiffs filed a suit against New Nippon Steel at a district court in Seoul. Like in Osaka, the district court dismissed the suit, and the Seoul High Court rejected their appeal. During the same period, Korean plaintiffs also unsuccessfully filed suit against Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Corporation. However, in 2012, the Supreme Court of South Korea overturned the Seoul High Court's decision and remanded the case to a lower court. A year later, this court granted each plaintiff compensation of 100 million Korean Won (KRW) and 80 million KRW, respectively.¹³ This was ratified in 2018 when the Supreme Court upheld the judgement of the lower court's order for New Nippon Steel to pay 100 million KRW to four plaintiffs.¹⁴

Statues of Forced Labourers

Despite these landmark developments in compensating victims of Japanese imperialism, the same district court rejected a group of 85 plaintiffs seeking compensation from Japanese companies in 2021.¹⁵ Nonetheless, with the rise of these high-profile court cases in both South Korea and Japan, the issue of forced labourers came to the fore in the media and broader civil society. Against this backdrop, in 2016, a Korean labour organisation erected a statue of a forced labourer outside the Tanba Manganese Mining Museum in Kyoto prefecture, Japan. Following this, in August 2017, a labour organisation and civic groups erected the first forced labourer in South Korea in Incheon.¹⁶ Plans for statues in Jeju Island and Busan were already in the making.¹⁷

History of the Contestation

Prior to May Day, 2018

The Busan Movement began fundraising in 2017 to install a bronze sculpture of a forced Korean worker in their city. Their goal was to place it outside the Japanese diplomatic mission in Busan – the Consulate General – together with the Statue of Peace, erected in late December 2016.¹⁸ The authorities, although they did not contest the decision to make the statue, did make it clear that they were not supportive of the civic group's choice of location for political reasons. In May 2017,

¹² Ibid, 470.

¹³ Seokwoo Lee, "The Views of Korean International Law Scholars Regarding the 2012 Supreme Court Decisions on Compensation for Forced Labor," *The Korean Journal of International and Comparative Law* 2, 2 (2014): 193-201, 194.

¹⁴ Seokwoo Lee, and Seryon Lee, "Yeo Woon Taek v. New Nippon Steel Corporation," *American Journal of International Law* 113, no. 3 (2019): 592–99, 592.

¹⁵ Tong-hyung Kim, "Seoul court rejects slave labor claim against Japanese firms," *AP News*, June 7, 2021.

¹⁶ Labornet Japan, "A statue of wartime labor drafts unveiled in South Korea," *Labornet Japan*, August 22, 2017.

¹⁷ J-Cast News, "慰安婦像の次は「徴用工像」仁川で韓国初、他都市も..." *J-Cast News*, August 8, 2017

¹⁸ Yonhap News Agency, "Civic groups vow to erect statue for forced labor victims near Japanese consulate," *Yonhap News Agency*, April 13, 2018.

the then-spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Cho June-Hyuck, stated that 'it is not desirable to build sculptures near diplomatic missions in view of international courtesy and customs related to their security.'¹⁹ This was in line with the South Korean government's conservative attitude towards Korean citizens organising the installation of statues symbolising Japanese colonial crimes outside the Japanese Embassy and its consulates throughout the country. Particularly in Busan, the erection of the Statue of Peace had already caused a minor diplomatic crisis between the two countries when Japan temporarily recalled its entire diplomatic mission from South Korea.²⁰

This response did not deter the Busan Movement. Since their establishment, the group had been promoting the installation of a Wartime Labourer Statue by the Japanese Consulate to urge the Japanese government to resolve its colonial crimes. The group even began one-person protests in front of the consulate to raise public awareness of the issue.²¹ On January 24, 2018, members of the Busan Movement held a rally in front of a model bronze statue of a labourer holding a pickaxe and vowed to erect a similar statue in front of the Japanese Consulate General.²² Starting in February, they increased their fundraising activities and worked to raise awareness to erect a Wartime Labourer Statue on May Day, stating that they would 'persuade' any opposition.²³

In April, the Busan Movement intensified their activities to ensure the successful installation of the Wartime Labourer Statue. On April 3, the group called on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Busan City Government, and the police to 'guarantee the Movement to establish the worker statue.'²⁴ On April 23, they organised a conference the following day to condemn the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which had continued to oppose the installation in front of the consulate. They accused the Ministry of being 'one-sided' and 'only looking at Japan's side of the argument' – that such statues violated the Vienna Convention, which ensures 'peace' at diplomatic missions. These accusations came after the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated its disapproval of the installation location on April 16, which was 'highly likely to cause diplomatic problems.'²⁵ They instead proposed alternative locations such as a historical museum, which were consistently rejected by the Movement. In contrast, the local district authority – the Dong District Municipal Office – announced that they would not block the group's installation of the Wartime Labourer Statue. Despite this, they installed six large plant plots on the proposed site of the statue – almost certainly an attempt to deter its erection, which were removed after the Busan Movement lodged complaints.²⁶

¹⁹ Yonhap News Agency, "S. Korea says 'forced labor' statues near Japan missions 'not desirable.'" *Yonhap News Agency*, May 2, 2017.

²⁰ Luu Chieu, "Japan recalls diplomats from South Korea over 'comfort woman' statue," *CNN World*, January 6, 2017.

²¹ Yeong-dong Kim, "일제 강제징용 노동자상 건립을 보장하라," *Hankyoreh News*, April 3, 2018.

²² Yeong-dong Kim, "부산 강제징용 노동자상 건립 본격 추진," *Hankyoreh News*, January 25, 2018.

²³ Translated by author. *Ibid.*

²⁴ Translated by author. Yeong-dong Kim, "일제 강제징용 노동자상 건립을 보장하라," *Hankyoreh News*, April 3, 2018.

²⁵ Translated by author. Kim, Yeong-dong, "외교부, 대화 없이 일본총영사관 앞 노동자상 설치 반대만," *Hankyoreh News*, April 23, 2018.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

May Day 2018

On the night of April 30, the Busan Movement mobilised to prepare to install the Wartime Labourer Statue on May Day. However, they quickly discovered that the Busan Metropolitan Police had set up a cordon 100 metres away from the Consulate, restricting gatherings of people.²⁷ On the night of April 30, around 100 members of the Busan Movement confronted the police and tried to move the Wartime Labourer Statue to the front of the Consulate but faced strong resistance.²⁸

On the morning of May 1, they tried to get through the heavily guarded area again but failed to break through the lines of police.²⁹ Physical altercations peaked when activists set up iron scaffolding around the 1.2-ton statue to make its moving easier. The police refused to budge and called on the participants to disband, saying that the gathering was illegal. Around twenty activists holding onto the Wartime Labourer Statue were quickly pushed away by the police, which prevented the activists from reaching the Consulate. In the afternoon, a press conference was held by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, five political parties, and the Busan Movement near the Consulate. Around 5,000 citizens attended. The City deployed 3,000 police officers.³⁰ Eventually, the police acquired the Statue, and the Busan Movement announced on May 2 that they were to temporarily erect it on the pavement around 40 metres away from the Japanese Consulate. The authorities stated that the Wartime Labourer Statue would not be moved from this location 'in light of public sentiment towards the victims of forced labour.'³¹

However, this compromise did not satisfy any actor involved. The Busan Movement was still adamant that the statue should be erected in front of the Consulate. The Busan City Government had concerns over 'road management' – the statue had taken up space on a pavement. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs still opposed the statue's installation in front of the Consulate, citing diplomatic concerns. The current location was perhaps too close to the Japanese diplomatic mission for their liking.³²

The issue of the statue obstructing pedestrians became central throughout May 2018, with the Ministry of Land requesting the Busan City Government to take 'appropriate measures.' A local official from the Dong District Municipal Office stated that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs likely sent the order to the Ministry of Land to give to Busan.³³ On May 31, the police forcibly removed the statue off the pavement amidst clashes with protestors and relocated it to the National Memorial Museum of Forced Mobilisation under Japanese Occupation in Busan, where it was installed in the

²⁷ Yeong-dong Kim, "부산 시민단체 '강제징용 노동자상 건립대회 보장하라," *Hankyoreh News*, April 30, 2018.

²⁸ Kyodo News, "S. Korean police, activists clash over forced labour statue." *Kyodo News*, May 1, 2018.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Yeong-dong Kim, "강제징용 노동자상, 세우려는 자와 막으려는 자," *Hankyoreh News*. May 1, 2018.

³¹ Translated by author. Yeong-dong Kim, "부산시민단체 '강제징용 노동자상 일본총영사관 근처 세운다," *Hankyoreh News*. May 2, 2018.

³² Yeong-dong Kim. "강제징용 노동자상, 어디로 갈거냐?" *Hankyoreh News*, May 3, 2018.

³³ Yonhap News Agency, "Ministry asks Busan to take measures on forced labour statue near Japanese consulate," *Yonhap News Agency*, May 7, 2018.

lobby.³⁴ On June 5, then-Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon clarified the authorities' reasoning for seizing the statue: 'if the labourer's statue is to be installed, there must be permission from the road management agency, but it was installed in breach of such procedures. That is illegal.'³⁵

This prompted the Busan Movement to take legal action to return the statue into their hands. On June 19, a judicial review determined it ought to be returned to the civic group. On July 4, the Busan Movement announced they had decided to temporarily keep it in the Korean Confederation of Trade Office Unions. Authorities clarified that the statue would be removed immediately if placed near the Japanese diplomatic mission.³⁶ In December, the Movement again pledged to erect it near the Consulate sometime in 2019.³⁷

Contestations in 2019

Nine months later on March 1, 2019, the Wartime Labourer Statue was forklifted to Ssamji Park, around 100 metres from the Japanese Consulate to the applause of activists. On the centennial anniversary of the March 1 Movement of 1919 – a monumental demonstration for Korean independence against Japanese colonialism – the Busan Movement held the Busan Citizens' Congress in the park to commemorate Korea's history against Japanese colonialism and the return of the Wartime Labourer Statue. Activists confronted police outside the Consulate, wanting to move the Statue nearer to the Japanese diplomatic mission. However, unable to get through the guarded area, the Congress decided to keep the Statue in the park near the statue of General Jeong Bal – a garrison commander who died in 1592 fighting against the Japanese invasion of Korea in the Imjin War 1592-1598.³⁸

Talks ensued between the Busan Movement and the Dong District Municipal Office regarding this temporary placement. On April 11, both sides formally announced that they had agreed to establish the Statue in Ssamji Park. However, on April 12, the Busan City Government rejected the Dong District Municipal Office's decision, declared the statue illegal, and removed it again.³⁹ This angered activists who held a rally on April 14 in Ssamji Park to condemn the City Government's removal of the Statue.⁴⁰ The Busan Movement then occupied the City Hall on April 15 in protest.

Decision-Making Processes

In response to such actions and broader public criticism from the city, Busan City Council announced that they would organise a roundtable meeting on April 28 with 100 residents to

³⁴ Yonhap News Agency, "Statue symbolising forced Korean labourers removed from controversial site," *Yonhap News Agency*, May 31, 2018.

³⁵ *Yonhap News Agency*, "PM says statue of forced labourer removed because it violated law," *Yonhap News Agency*, June 5, 2018.

³⁶ Yonhap News Agency, "Local government to return forced labour statue to civic group." *Yonhap News Agency*, June 19, 2018.

³⁷ Yonhap News Agency, "Civic groups vow to erect statue in honour of forced labour victims near Japanese consulate." *Yonhap News Agency*, December 26, 2018.

³⁸ Young-dong Kim, "3·1운동 100돌...부산서 일본영사관 앞 강제징용 노동자상 재설치 시도," *Hankyoreh News*, March 1, 2019.

³⁹ Young-dong Kim, "부산시 노동자상 기습 철거...시민단체 강력 반발," *Hankyoreh News*, April 12, 2019.

⁴⁰ Kwang-soo Kim, "강제징용 노동자상 왜 치우나" 부산시에 불난 시민단체," *Hankyoreh News*, April 15, 2019.

consult on the issue of the worker's statue.⁴¹ They initially agreed to hold this meeting and finalise the statue's location by May 1.⁴² Furthermore, the authorities returned the statue to the Busan Movement on April 24, who re-installed it where it stood prior to the sudden removal in Ssamji Park.⁴³ However, despite the seemingly promising willingness of both sides to discuss their issues, the roundtable meeting was cancelled as there were disagreements on whom to select for the 100 participants.⁴⁴

Despite the collapse of the roundtable meeting, in September 2019, the Busan City Council, composed of elected representatives, passed a partial amendment related to road occupation permits which expanded the scope of legal facilities occupying roads and or pavements. The law that limited such facilities to specific vendors and market awnings could now be applied to commemorative and historical statues, including the Worker Statue. This laid the groundwork for further legal protection. Civil society groups including the Busan Movement welcomed this council decision, stating that 'another basis for legalisation of the two monuments [the other being the Statue for Peace] has been created.'⁴⁵ However, so far, the ordinance has only been applied to the Statue of Peace, and the status of the Wartime Labourer Statue is not yet fully secure, though the authorities have not attempted to remove it since April 2019.⁴⁶

It is important to reiterate that the South Korean authorities at every level of governance did not oppose the idea of erecting the forced labour statue, and indeed similar statues have been installed in other cities since 2017 without causing contestations such as in Ulsan in 2019.⁴⁷ It was the Busan Movement's desire to place the statue in front of the Japanese Consulate that raised concerns at the national level, due to their already-tense relations with their neighbour. Similarly, the city government, which had already experienced the struggles over the Statue of Peace, did not want to deal with further Japanese diplomatic pressure. Instead, they faced frustrated civic groups composed of their residents.

Summary and Conclusions

The Wartime Labourer Statue in Busan provides a case of contestation where the content of the statue itself is not especially controversial – the Korean authorities and their activist counterparts both agree on the need to remember the history of forced labourers of the colonial period. As has been examined, the contestation was around the location of the statue. To the dismay of the Japanese mission, the Busan Movement campaigned and fought (literally) to erect the statue in front of the Japanese Consulate. In light of the diplomatic crisis which ensued after the 2016 erection of the Statue of Peace in the same location and the then-tense relations between the two

⁴¹ Young-dong Kim, “노동자상 건립 정면충돌 부산시-시민단체, 노동자상 반환 합의,” *Hankyoreh News*, April 17, 2019.

⁴² Seong-hyo Yun, “부산 '노동자상' 설치, 28일 '100인 원탁회의'서 결정,” *Oh My News*, April 19, 2019.

⁴³ Soon-jun Hong, “부산 강제징용 노동자상 시민단체에 반환...설치 장소 28일 결정,” *SBS News*, April 24, 2019.

⁴⁴ Kwang-soo Kim, “고비맞은 부산 강제징용 노동자상,” *Hankyoreh News*, April 28, 2019.

⁴⁵ Translated by author. Bo-seong Kim. “불법적치물 취급 부산 소녀상·노동자상 합법화 길 열려,” *Voice of People News*, September 6, 2019.

⁴⁶ Bo-seong Kim, “부산 노동자상 '모욕' 논란 일장기 사라졌다,” *Oh My News*, May 24, 2022.

⁴⁷ Young-dong Kim, “'3·1운동 100돌'...부산서 일본영사관 앞 강제징용 노동자상 재설치 시도,” *Hankyoreh News*, March 1, 2019.

nations, the South Korean authorities rejected the Busan Movement's plans and actively sought to relocate the statue.

Today, the statue stands only 100 metres from the original intended location and is now a part of the locality's public space. Together with the other statues in South Korea and Japan, it symbolises the traumatic history of the Korean nation and workers who, for the most part, did not receive financial compensation nor an apology of great significance. Together with the Statue of Peace, the Wartime Labourer Statue is not only a reminder of colonial atrocities committed by the Japanese Empire but also of the troubled legacies inherited by both societies, which have yet to be resolved. The Japanese state maintains that these issues were resolved in 1965, whilst Koreans and other victims of Japanese aggression continue to call on Japan to recognise its past crimes formally. However, it also demonstrates a divide between certain actors in South Korean society, such as the Busan Movement, and government authorities. The former would argue the latter are ultimately too concerned with realpolitik. Globally, the importance of historical justice and reconciliation continue to fluctuate in the face of 'pragmatic problems' such as trade issues and regional power dynamics. For civic groups such as the Busan Movement, this will prove to be an ongoing challenge, but at the very least, their statue still stands.

It is appropriate to briefly mention a recent development. Interestingly, this contestation now has a new actor. An activist group called the Comfort Women Fraud Settlement Group, which denies the existence of the Comfort Women issue and other colonial crimes committed by the Japanese Empire, held a rally in Busan on April 21, 2022. Several participants gathered outside the Statue of Peace and the Wartime Labourer Statue, calling for them to be taken down.⁴⁸ On May 18, a make-shift structure made of metal scaffolding was placed behind the Wartime Labourer Statue. Draped over one side was the flag of Japan next to the flag of South Korea and a sign labelling the street 'Reconciliation Street' – as opposed to the nickname 'Anti-Japan Street', which had come to the fore in the years of contestation. The actor responsible for hanging the flag of Japan has not come forward yet. A member of a local civic group, Citizens' Action to Protect the Statue of Peace, said, 'Another act of insulting the Statue of Peace and the Wartime Labourer Statue has taken place... I wonder who the people are who want to make such a hideous reconciliation, even though Japan has no remorse.' He further criticised the local police, who 'are always present' yet 'neglected the installation of such a structure.'⁴⁹ An unknown individual took down the Japanese flag on May 24.⁵⁰ This shows that there are conflicting opinions on said crimes even in a society such as South Korea, where there is a seeming consensus between officialdom and broader society regarding Japan's historical abuses. Nonetheless, these conflicting opinions and interpretations of historical legacies have manifested in public spheres, with one side struggling to erect the Wartime Labourer Statue and the (new) other side modifying the statue to symbolise their ideas.

⁴⁸ Bo-seong Kim, "부산까지 간 일본군'위안부' 시위 반대단체," *Oh My News*. April 22, 2022.

⁴⁹ Translated by author. Bo-seong Kim, "부산 강제징용노동자상에 '일장기' 모욕 행위," *Oh My News*, May 18, 2022.

⁵⁰ Kim Bo-seong, "부산 노동자상 '모욕' 논란 일장기 사라졌다," *Oh My News*, May 24, 2022.

On 6 March 2023, the South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin announced that the Government is setting up a fund for the victims of forced labour, into which private citizens and corporations from South Korea and Japan could donate.⁵¹ While it is uncertain whether Japanese companies will pay into the fund, and face no legal obligation to do so, this measure is openly designed to try and heal the divide between Japan and South Korea over the issue of forced labour. At present forced labour campaigners reject the fund and request recompensation and an apology from the Japanese government. As of March 2023, the Wartime Labourer statue remains in place.

Research contributed by Bronwen Bernstein and Gareth James

Last updated October 2023

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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.

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To cite this publication:

Contested Histories, "Wartime Labourer in Busan, Republic of Korea", *Contested Histories Case Study #409* (October 2023), Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) at the European Association of History Educators (EuroClio), retrieved from [link], [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Contested Histories is funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

