



STATUE OF PEACE

Seoul, South Korea

37.57548, 126.9798



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Executive Summary

The Statue of Peace in Seoul, South Korea, is among the most iconic and contested statues dedicated to 'comfort women', a euphemism for women who were sexually exploited by the Japanese military during the Second World War. Since its unveiling in 2011, the statue has been a source of ongoing contention in Japan-South Korea relations and has resulted in a proliferation of replica statues around the world. This case study examines the emotive power of public monuments to convey historical injustices and their potential for impacting diplomatic relations at the highest levels of government. This case also brings to the fore the power of activists and communities to use local public spaces to send messages that reverberate internationally.

Introduction

On December 14, 2011, a life-size bronze statue of a seated young girl was installed across the street from the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, South Korea. Supported by a local civil society organization, the statue was one of the first to commemorate the 'comfort women,' women and girls compelled to provide sexual services for the Japanese military during World War II. The statue serves as a physical representation of both activists' and survivors' demands for an official apology and compensation from the Japanese government. Conversely, the Japanese government protests the location of the statue and argues that the statue hinders diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan.

Background

The term 'comfort women' is used to describe women and girls who were recruited to work in so-called 'comfort stations' to provide sexual services to the Japanese military during World War II. Estimates vary, but many scholars agree that as many as 200,000 women were impacted by the system. Most of these women came from the Korean Peninsula, a Japanese colonial holding at the time, but many were from other countries under Japanese control during the Second World War, including China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and the Dutch East Indies. While some women volunteered, notably sex workers, many women testified that they were coerced into sexual slavery.¹ Although Japan originally contested the use of the term 'slavery' in reference to the 'comfort women', in 1996, the former UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Radhika Coomaraswamy, stated unequivocally that she considered 'the case of women forced to render sexual services in wartime by and/or for the use of the armed forces a practice of military sexual slavery.'² The 'comfort women' were subjected to physical and sexual violence in 'comfort stations', and for those survivors who were able to return to Korea after the war, many felt alienated by society and carried a profound sense of guilt, helplessness and shame.³

On 14 August 1991, Kim Hak-soon, a former 'comfort woman', became the first survivor to speak publicly of her ordeal, and her testimony helped pave the way for other women to come forward.⁴ On January 14, 1992, victims and their supporters convened the first of many gatherings to demand redress, which would continue every Wednesday afternoon outside the Japanese

¹ Alice Yun Chai, "Asian-Pacific Feminist Coalition Politics: The 'Chōngshindae/Jōgunianfu' (Comfort Women) Movement," *Korean Studies* 17 (1993): 70-72. For additional information, see Sarah Chunghee Soh, "From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the "Comfort Women" *Social Science Japan Journal* 3, no. 1 (2000); C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Post-Colonial Memory in Korea and Japan*, (University of Chicago Press, 2008); Christine M Chinkin, "Women's International Tribunal on Japanese Military Sexual Slavery," *American Journal of International Law* 95, no. 2 (2001). It should be noted that some Dutch women living in Indonesia (and imprisoned by the Japanese in concentration camps) are included in this group. See Janene Pieters, "Dutch Comfort Women also want apology from Japan over WWII war crimes," *NLTimes.nl*, December 28, 2015.

² Radhika Coomaraswamy, "Report on the Mission to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Republic of Korea and Japan on the Issue of Military Sexual Slavery in Wartime", Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, UN Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights, 53rd Session, January 4, 1996.

³ Jeewon Lee, Young-Sook Kwak, Yoon-Jung Kim, et al, "Psychiatric Sequelae of Former 'Comfort Women', Survivors of the Japanese Military Sexual Slavery during World War II" 15(4), *Psychiatry Investigation* 336, 2018.

⁴ Alice Yun Chai, "Asian-Pacific Feminist Coalition Politics," 79.

Embassy in Seoul. These protests became known as the 'Wednesday Demonstrations', and in August 2019, protesters marked the 1,400th gathering.⁵

The unveiling of the State of Peace, sponsored by the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, occurred during the 1,000th Wednesday Demonstration on December 14, 2011. Cast in bronze, the statue of a young 15-year-old girl sits with her hands on her lap, wearing a full-length hanbok, a traditional Korean dress. The girl has roughly chopped hair, unlike the long, braided style common at that time, to evoke the experience of those who had their hair forcibly cut. According to one of the artists,⁶ the hairstyle also represents many women's sense of alienation from their families and Korean society as a result of their sexual exploitation. A small bird on the girl's shoulder serves as a symbol of the women's quest for 'freedom and peace.'⁷ The girl is barefoot, with her heels hovering slightly above the ground to represent 'the life stories of those women who couldn't have their presence properly recognised on this land and who couldn't live an ordinary and comfortable life', an empty chair adjacent to the girl commemorates the deceased and invites passers-by literally to sit in a 'comfort woman's' place.⁸ Former 'comfort women,' like Ahn Jeom-sun, visit the statue regularly.

Originally, Kim Seo-Kyung and Kim Eun-sung, the two artists who produced the statue, planned to create a simple memorial stone that would rest in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, "but we heard that the Japanese government was against the memorial stone being built, and this offended us as artists," stated Kim Seo-Kyung.⁹ The Statue of Peace, gaze never leaving the Japanese Embassy, sits side-by-side with the protesters who assemble every Wednesday outside the embassy building. One survivor said, 'I demand that the ambassador of Japan tell the Japanese government to apologize before we all die.'¹⁰

The Japanese government has apologized for the 'comfort women' system, however, the apologies have not come without controversy. After Kim Hak-soon's testimony and in response to the intensifying situation, Japanese Prime Minister, Kiichi Miyazawa, apologized directly in an address to the Korean National Assembly and again to President Roh Tae Woo during state visit talks.¹¹ In 1993, Japanese government officials acknowledged the participation of administrative personnel in the systematic forcible 'recruitment' of women to work at 'comfort stations' in a

⁵ Soo-Yeon Kim, "1,400th Protest Rally against Japan's Wartime Sex Slavery Set for This Week," *Yonhap News Agency*, August 13, 2019.

⁶ Lee Woo-Young, "Comfort Women Statues Resonate with Koreans," *Korea Herald*, March 3, 2016.

See also Boram Park, "Girl Statue Should Remain to Conjure Up Japan's Wartime Atrocities: Creator," *Yonhap News Agency*, September 1, 2018.

⁷ *Korea Times*, "Deciphering Symbolism of Girl Statue," *Korea Times*, September 6, 2016. See also "My Little Statue of Peace Around the World", a 40-page brochure detailing the creation and meaning of the statue.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Sol Han and James Griffiths, "Why this Statue of a Young Girl Caused a Diplomatic Incident," *CNN*, February 10, 2017.

¹⁰ Gregg Benzow, "Korea's Former 'Comfort Women' Hold 1000th Protest," *DW*, December 14, 2011.

¹¹ *New York Times*, "Japan Apologizes on Korea Sex Issue," *New York Times*, January 18, 1992. Norma Field (1997) defines an ideal historical apology as a truthful acknowledgement of events that demonstrates penitent regret and includes material compensation. Although Japan has issued apologies, they are often criticized as being insufficient. For more information on the history of apology and contestation in Japan, see Norma Field "War and Apology: Japan, Asia, the Fiftieth, and After," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 5, no. 1 (1997); and Jennifer Lind, *Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics*, (Cornell University Press, 2008).

landmark apology.¹² Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono extended the government's 'sincerest apologies and remorse to all those, irrespective of place of origin, who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.'¹³ The Kono Statement admitted that 'administrative/military personnel directly took part in the recruitment' of women for the purpose of working in 'comfort stations', and they did so 'under a coercive atmosphere'. In 1995, Japanese Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama, a progressive from the Socialist Party, marked the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War by recalling 'scars of war'. Murayama said, 'I offer my profound apology to all those who, as wartime comfort women, suffered emotional and physical wounds that can never be closed.'¹⁴

However, there are those in Japan, such as former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who believe the Japanese should not be 'predestined to apologize.'¹⁵ While academics largely agree that the majority of former 'comfort women' were systematically and often coercively recruited by military forces from occupied wartime territories,¹⁶ some 'liberal' historians have asserted that many of the so-called 'comfort women' were not forced labourers, but prostitutes who voluntarily joined the military camps to provide sexual services to soldiers.¹⁷

Abe, who served his first term as Prime Minister in 2006, stated in 2007 that 'There is no evidence to prove there was coercion, nothing to support it.'¹⁸ Abe's remarks triggered international criticism, including from Japan's close ally, the US. A US State Department spokesman said that the US 'certainly would want to see the Japanese continue to address' the issue of 'comfort women' and 'to deal with it in a forthright and responsible manner that acknowledges the gravity of the crimes that were committed'.¹⁹ These differing perspectives on the 'comfort women' and their experiences set the backdrop for the statue's unveiling in 2011.

History of the Contestation

The placement of the statue across the street from the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, at 6 Yulgok-ro, Junghak-dong, Jongno-gu, was not contested by local authorities.²⁰ However, the Japanese ambassador to Seoul protested the installation to the Korean government, citing a violation of the 1961 Vienna Convention.²¹ Under paragraph 2 of Article 22 of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, the 'receiving State' of a diplomatic mission is 'under a special duty to take

¹² Norimitsu Onishi, "Abe Rejects Japan's Files on War Sex," *New York Times*, March 2, 2007. See also James Sterngold, "Japan Admits Army Forced Women into War Brothels," *New York Times*, August 5, 1993.

¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono on the Result of the Study on the Issue of 'Comfort Women'", August 4, 1993.

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Statement by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama on the Occasion of the Establishment of the 'Asian Women's Fund'", July, 1995.

¹⁵ *New York Times*, "Statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan," *New York Times*, August 14, 2015.

¹⁶ Chai, "Asian-Pacific Feminist Coalition Politics," 70. See also Chunghee Sarah Soh, "The Korean 'Comfort Women': Movement for Redress," *Asian Survey* 36, no. 12 (1996): 1228-1229.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Norimitsu Onishi, "Abe Rejects Japan's Files on War Sex," *New York Times*, March 2, 2007.

¹⁹ Norimitsu Onishi, "Japan Leader Who Denied State Role in Wartime Sex Slavery Still Apologizes," *New York Times*, March 27, 2007.

²⁰ Sang-hun Choe, "Statue Deepens Dispute Over Wartime Sexual Slavery," *New York Times*, December 15, 2011.

²¹ Adam Taylor, "The Statue of a Wartime Sex Slave Outside Japan's Embassy in South Korea Could Be a Problem," *Washington Post*, December 29, 2015.

all appropriate steps to protect the premises of the mission against any intrusion or damage and to prevent any disturbance of the peace of the mission or impairment of its dignity.²² During a news briefing, the day before the statue was to be installed, Cho Byung-Jae, a Korean Foreign Ministry spokesperson, stated that while 'We have conveyed Japan's concerns to the council... a former 'comfort woman' victim passed away even today, leaving only 63 survivors. In this situation, we in the Foreign Ministry are not in a position to tell the victims to change or scrap the plan to erect the monument.'²³

The statue was installed just three days before a weekend summit meeting between Korean President Lee Myung-bak and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda in Kyoto, Japan. Activists hoped that the 'comfort women' issue would make it to the agenda. One survivor, Kim Bok-dong, urged 'President Lee [to] call on Japan to correct the wrongs of the past so that things which need apologies can receive them, and compensation can be given.'²⁴ After underscoring the shared role as 'allies of the United States and shared 'interests such as peace and prosperity of East Asia,' President Lee broached the topic of the 'comfort women' and spoke of the 'true bravery' required to find a solution. Noda noted previous 'humanitarian efforts' and his willingness to 'explore ideas from a humanitarian point of view.' 'On the issue of construction of the statue in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul,' the protocol commits to record, 'Prime Minister Noda expressed his regret to the President over the construction and requested its early removal.'²⁵

Decision-Making Processes

Over the next few years, Japan-Korea relations soured, in large part due to their contested history. Both countries elected leaders with firm and conflicting views about the past: Shinzō Abe, with his history of downplaying Japanese involvement in the 'comfort women' system, was awarded a second non-consecutive term as Prime Minister, and in Korea, Park Geun-hye took a tough stance on the apology issue as a newly elected president. However, despite their differing views, in 2015 the two leaders came together to address the long-standing "comfort women" issue in hopes of achieving a 'final and irreversible resolution.'²⁶

On 28 December 2015, the Foreign Ministers of Japan and Korea held a joint press conference. Japan's Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida said the sexual exploitation of women by the Japanese military 'was a grave affront to the honour and dignity of large numbers of women and the government of Japan is painfully aware of the responsibilities in this regard'. Kishida added that Prime Minister Abe 'expresses anew his most sincere apologies and remorse'. Japan promised JPY 1bn, or \$8.3m, from the national budget to provide for the 46 remaining former 'comfort women'. Among other concessions, Japan requested the removal of the Statue of Peace from its location in

²² "Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations", Art 22, para 2, April 18, 1961.

²³ "Statue of 'Comfort Woman' Erected Outside Japanese Embassy in Seoul," *Japan Times*, December 15, 2011.

²⁴ BBC, "Korea 'Comfort Women' Put Up Statue at Landmark Rally," *BBC*, December 14, 2011.

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-Republic of Korea Summit Meeting (Summary)", December 18, 2011.

²⁶ Sang-hun Choe, "Japan and South Korea Settle Dispute Over Wartime 'Comfort Women,'" *New York Times*, December 28, 2015.

front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. The Korean government agreed to 'consult' the activists and former 'comfort women' about the possible removal of the statue.²⁷

The 2015 fund was met with scepticism because survivors were not consulted, and the prevailing feeling was that Japan had still stopped short of acknowledging direct responsibility. Civil society organisations and activists argue that it is necessary for the Japanese government directly and officially to compensate surviving 'comfort women' rather than deferring such responsibility to a specially created fund or transferring the money to this group of women by other means. A public opinion poll found that only 25 percent of Koreans endorsed the agreement.²⁸ The Korean Council called the agreement 'shocking' and an example of 'humiliating' diplomacy for giving too much for too little.²⁹ The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zaid Ra'ad Al Hussein, said during the 31st session of the Human Rights Council in 2016 that 'It is fundamentally important that the relevant authorities reach out to these courageous and dignified women; ultimately only they can judge whether they have received genuine redress.'³⁰

President Park's willingness to consider relocating the comfort woman statue caused particular anguish and frustration. A Korean nun attending a 'Wednesday Demonstration' that followed the announcement expressed to the media that 'The removal of the Girl of Peace Statue is a condition that is completely unacceptable... I chose to be here because I want to protect the statue until the end.'³¹ Ultimately, after the new South Korean President, Moon Jae-in was elected, he decided to review the agreement in response to the public backlash. On November 21, 2018, Korea effectively ended the 2015 agreement when it shut down the Japanese-funded 'comfort women' foundation responsible for distributing the promised funds.³²

Proliferation & Provocation

Following the appearance of the Statue of Peace in Seoul, activists took inspiration from the statue and more monuments in the same and similar likenesses began proliferating around the world. On 28 December 2016, Youth Make Peace, an activist group, installed a replica of the bronze statue of the girl and an empty chair on a sidewalk near the Japanese consulate in Busan, a major Korean port city. The date marked the one-year anniversary of the controversial 2015 deal struck by the Abe and Park governments.³³

When a Busan district office noted that the organisers had failed to secure permission from the city to install the statue, it was removed by the police. Protesters took videos of the police action

²⁷ Sang-hun Choe, "Japan and South Korea Settle Dispute Over Wartime 'Comfort Women,'" See also "'Comfort Women': Japan and South Korea Hail Agreement," *BBC*, December 28, 2015; Taylor, "The Statue of a Wartime Sex Slave Outside."

²⁸ Celeste Arrington, "Can Japan and South Korea 'Resolve' the Question of Japan's Korean Sex Slaves During WWII?," *Washington Post*, DC, January 13, 2016.

²⁹ Sang-hun Choe, "Japan and South Korea Settle Dispute Over Wartime 'Comfort Women,'".

³⁰ "Statement by Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, to the Human Rights Council's 31st Session", UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, March 10, 2016.

³¹ "The Two Sculptors behind the Girl of Peace Statues," *Innerview, Arirang Culture*, March 16, 2016.

³² Hyunmin Michael Kang, "South Korea Decides to Dismantle 'Comfort Women' Reconciliation and Healing Foundation," *Diplomat*, November 27, 2018.

³³ "Seoul Faces Dilemma Over 'Comfort Women' Statue in Busan," *Korea Herald*, January 3, 2017.

and posted them on the internet. Within hours, the city's website had crashed and officials were 'overwhelmed' with phone calls and visits.³⁴ Adding to the tense domestic situation, the Japanese consulate issued a complaint to the Busan city government and requested the statue's removal. The Japanese ambassador in Seoul, Yasumasa Nagamine, issued a complaint to Korea's Vice Foreign Minister Lim Sung-nam, citing a contravention of the Vienna Convention.³⁵ The Japanese government viewed the Busan statue to be in direct violation of the 2015 agreement and its commitment to 'resolving' the issue, and in the first week of 2017, Japan withdrew two diplomats from Seoul and suspended economic projects with Korea.³⁶

At a news conference two days after the statue's removal, the Mayor of Busan apologised for the police action and promised to reinstall the statue. 'This is an issue between the two nations,' Park said, 'and I realize it's too much for a local office like mine to handle.'³⁷ On 31 December 2016, Youth Make Peace held a ceremony celebrating the return of the Statue of Peace to its location near the Japanese consulate.³⁸ Conversely, Japanese officials were left dissatisfied and noted that "[The statue will] have an unfavourable impact on the relationship between Japan and South Korea."³⁹ The Japanese diplomats wouldn't return to Seoul until April 2017, three months later, in order to address shared concerns over North Korea.⁴⁰

Like the statue in Busan, other statues dedicated to the 'comfort women' can be found in cities such as Wisent, Germany,⁴¹ San Francisco, USA,⁴² the Taiwanese city of Tainan,⁴³ and many more. In response to the Wisent statue, Japan's Foreign Minister stated that 'These activities related to the building of comfort woman statues in Germany, the United States, and other locations are contradictory to the Japanese government's position, and we feel such moves are very regrettable.'⁴⁴ Despite Japan's repeated objections, by 2017, an estimated 40 statues honouring the 'comfort women' were standing in parks and on sidewalks around the world.⁴⁵ In 2020, a replica of the original Seoul statue was installed in the German capital of Berlin, complicating relations not only between Germany and Japan but also between the federal government of Germany and the municipal government of Berlin.⁴⁶

Summary and Conclusions

The Statue of Peace in Seoul underscores the emotive potential of statues and monuments to keep

³⁴ Sang-hun Choe, "'Comfort Woman' Statue Reinstated Near Japan Consulate in South Korea," *New York Times*, December 30, 2016.

³⁵ "Seoul Faces Dilemma Over 'Comfort Women' Statue in Busan," *Korea Herald*, January 3, 2017.

³⁶ Han and Griffiths, "Why this Statue of a Young."

³⁷ Sang-hun Choe, "'Comfort Woman' Statue Reinstated Near Japan Consulate in South Korea," *New York Times*, December 30, 2016.

³⁸ "Seoul Faces Dilemma Over 'Comfort Women' Statue in Busan," *Korea Herald*, January 3, 2017.

³⁹ Sang-hun Choe, "'Comfort Woman' Statue Reinstated Near Japan Consulate in South Korea," *New York Times*, December 30, 2016.

⁴⁰ Motoko Rich, "Japan Envoy, Recalled Over 'Comfort Woman' Statue, Is Returning to Seoul," *New York Times*, April 3, 2017.

⁴¹ Stefan Gruber, "'Trostrfrau' mahnt zum Frieden," *Mittelbayerische Nachrichten*, March 12, 2017.

⁴² Christine Hauser, "It Is Not Coming Down: San Francisco Defends 'Comfort Women' Statue as Japan Protests," *New York Times*, October 4, 2018.

⁴³ Brigit Katz, "Taiwan Unveils Its First Statue Honoring 'Comfort Women,'" *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 17, 2018.

⁴⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Press Conference by Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida," March 10, 2017.

⁴⁵ Associated Press, "First 'Comfort Women' Statue in Europe Is Unveiled in Germany," *South China Morning Post*, March 9, 2017.

⁴⁶ Timothy W. Ryback, "Does Berlin Need a Sex Slave Statue?," *Financial Times*, April 23, 2021.

narratives and stories alive in the public imagination. Amplified through the life-size representation of a 15-year-old girl, the Statue of Peace and similar statues give physical expression to historical injustice. The 'comfort women' statues point to the intersectionality of memory in the public space, and how the interests of distinct groups – political actors, non-governmental actors, victims and citizens – can both overlap and diverge. The statue, and its fellow monuments around the world, have also created and exacerbated deep rifts between Japan and South Korea on the international stage.

The 'comfort women' statues in public spaces have served to commemorate the suffering of thousands of women; they have also touched off state conflicts between Japan and its neighbours. The 'comfort women' statues underscore the power of the public space to commemorate history and provide both conflict and catharsis to those involved, regardless of formal resolution.

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. 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.

The Contested Histories project 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, and, 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 EuroClio - European Association for History Educators 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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