



'COMFORT WOMEN' MEMORIAL

New Jersey, United States

40.84651, -73.99706



Image by the Wander Women Project, courtesy of the owner.

Executive Summary

A 'Comfort Women' Memorial stationed outside of Palisades Public Library in New Jersey was unveiled in 2010. The monument paid homage to the more than 200,000 South Korean women who were victims of sexual exploitation (also termed 'sexual slavery') by Imperial Japanese forces before and during World War II. Though the Korean-American community in New Jersey celebrated a growing remembrance of the harm that many Korean women suffered, the monument sparked controversy in Japan. During multiple diplomatic visits and through a petition to the White House, the Japanese government attempted unsuccessfully to have the memorial removed. This case study raises questions about memorialisation in a nation not directly involved in the event from the past.

Introduction

In October 2010, a 'Comfort Women' Memorial honouring the lives of women who endured sexual exploitation under Imperial Japanese forces was established on the grounds of a public library in Palisades Park, New Jersey. The Comfort Women Memorial was the first of its kind in the United States.¹ The growing Korean-American community in the area celebrated the monument, but the Japanese government raised official opposition. Japan sent delegations on multiple occasions to negotiate the removal of the monument with former Mayor Frank M. Rotundo.² The establishment of this monument prompted the proliferation of similar memorials across the United States in New York, Virginia, Maryland, Michigan, Texas, Georgia and California.³ After a decade of contestation, as of July 2022, there have been no further talks of removal and the monument still stands on its original site.

Background

Japanese Imperial Rule, 'Comfort Women,' and Contemporary Diplomacy

The role of 'comfort women' in the years before and during World War II is heavily contested. Most narratives contend that women were forced or pressured to serve Japanese soldiers on the frontline in military brothels. Estimates conclude that between 50,000 to 200,000 women, many of them Korean, were recruited under this system between 1931 and 1945. Women's organisations in South Korea did not begin fighting for recognition of their collective trauma until the 1980s.⁴

The Japanese government was slow to acknowledge their involvement in the issue, instead deflecting blame to private contractors, whom they claim were responsible for the recruitment process.⁵ However, after incriminating documents and firsthand accounts of the Imperial Japanese forces' direct involvement in the programme emerged,⁶ the Japanese government issued the Kono Statement in 1993. The statement admits that 'The then Japanese military was, directly or indirectly, involved in the establishment and management of the comfort stations and the transfer of comfort women.'⁷

¹ Mary M. McCarthy, "US Comfort Women Memorials: Vehicles for Understanding and Change", *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, no. 275 (2014): 1.

² Thomas J. Ward and William D. Lay, "The Comfort Women Controversy: Not Over Yet", *East Asia*, no. 33(4) (2016): 261.

³ Thomas J. Ward, and William D. Lay, *Park Statue Politics: World War II Comfort Women Memorials in the United States* (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2019), 9-12.

⁴ Min, Pyong Gap, Thomas R. Chung, and Sejung Sage Yim. "The Comfort Women Issue and the 28-Year Redress Movement," in *The Transnational Redress Movement for the Victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery*, ed. Pyong Gap Min, Thomas R. Chung, Sejung Sage Yim (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020), 1-2.

⁵ Chunghee Sarah Soh, "The Korean Comfort Women: Movement for Redress," *Asian Survey*, 36 no.12 (1996): 1234.

⁶ Kazuko Watanabe, "Trafficking in Women's Bodies: Then and Now: The Issue of Military 'Comfort Women,'" *Women's Studies Quarterly* 27 no. 1/2 (1999).

⁷ 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,'" *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, August 4, 1993.

In 1995, former Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama apologised for the role Japan played in coercing 'comfort women.' Murayama promised support for the surviving 'comfort women' from the Japanese government, including medical expenses and welfare programmes.⁸ On July 19, 1995, the Asian Women's Fund was established in order to provide these resources.⁹ In 2001, former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi also noted and expressed regret for 'comfort women's' 'immeasurable and painful experiences.'¹⁰

However, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe contradicted previous attempts at reparations and apologies. In 2007, Abe claimed that there was no evidence that Japanese soldiers had coerced 'comfort women.' His comments came as a response to former South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun's assertion that Japan should be more earnest in its apologies. In response, demonstrators surrounded the Japanese Embassy, leaving behind the heads of decapitated dogs in protest.¹¹

Further issues arose in 2014. The Japanese Foreign Ministry pressured the publishing company McGraw Hill to remove paragraphs about the 'comfort women' from its educational textbooks; McGraw Hill refused.¹² That same year, Abe and Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga announced their intent to review and potentially revise the Kono Statement.¹³ Abe then retracted his earlier claim and said that his government would not revise the statement.¹⁴

In 2015, Japan and South Korea came to a new agreement partially facilitated by the Obama Administration.. Abe issued a formal apology, and the Japanese government granted 8.3 million USD (approximately 7.8 million Euros as of July 2022) to a Korean fund that assisted former 'comfort women'. Though both governments had agreed to enter a new diplomatic era, many victims maintained that they had not been consulted on the matter. A change in leadership further complicated the South Korean position.¹⁵

Most contemporary contention rests with right-wing Japanese denials that 'comfort women' were pressured or coerced into their position. Though some recent reports originating both in Japan and the United States contend that 'comfort women' engaged in the process willingly, the academic community has disputed and disproved most of these claims.¹⁶

Growing Korean American Influence in the United States

⁸ T.R. Reid, "JAPANESE LEADER APOLOGIZES TO COMFORT WOMEN, BACKS PLAN FOR RECOMPENSE," *Washington Post*, July 19, 1995.

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Measures Taken by the Government of Japan on the Issue of 'comfort women,'" *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*.

¹⁰ Associated Press, "Japan's PM denies 'comfort women' coerced," *NBC News*, March 1, 2007.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Jeannie Suk Gersen, "Seeking the True Story of the Comfort Women," *New Yorker*, February 25, 2021.

¹³ BBC News, "Japan to review lead-up to WW2 comfort women statement," *BBC News*, February 28, 2014.

¹⁴ Reuters Staff, "Japan's Abe says won't alter 1993 apology on 'comfort women,'" *Reuters*, March 14, 2014.

¹⁵ Jeannie Suk Gersen, "Seeking the True Story of the Comfort Women," *New Yorker*, February 25, 2021.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Immigration from South Korea to the U.S. increased from 1965, when the Immigration Act eradicated a quota system which had privileged Western Europeans in comparison with other immigrant groups. The US Census Bureau reported that in 2015 there were circa 1.8 million Korean Americans in the U.S.,¹⁷ with more than a quarter residing in southern Los Angeles, New York and New Jersey. When the memorial was unveiled in 2010, Korean Americans comprised 52% of the total population in Palisades Park, New Jersey, forming a large base of the local constituency.¹⁸

Perhaps accordingly, the United States government has taken several diplomatic actions on behalf of the Korean American community. In July 2007, the House of Representatives passed the HR121 bill, a move widely supported by the Korean American community.¹⁹ The bill urged the then-Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, to make a public apology and recognise 'historical responsibility for its Imperial Armed Force coercion of young women into sexual slavery ['comfort women'] during its colonial and wartime occupation of Asia'.²⁰ The United States has also served several times in the past as a buffer between Japan and South Korea, two important political and economic allies.²¹

First U.S. Comfort Women Memorial Erected in New Jersey

Under former Mayor Frank M. Rotundo and then Deputy Mayor Jason Kim, a stone monument was installed at the Palisades Park Public Library. The one square meter stone monument is engraved with an image of a Korean woman crouched down on the ground in front of a Japanese soldier against the backdrop of the sun.²² The inscription beside the motif reads:

In memory of the more than 200,000 women and girls who were abducted by the armed forces of the Government of Imperial Japan 1930–1945 known as 'Comfort Women.' They endured human rights violations that no peoples should leave unrecognized. Let us never forget the horrors of crimes against humanity.²³

The Korean American Civic Empowerment (KACE) - then known as the Korean American Voters Council (KAVC) - covered the cost of the monument at just over \$2,000. KACE is a prominent organisation in the United States that commits itself to informing the American public about issues

¹⁷ United States Census Bureau, "Asian Alone or in any Combination by Selected Groups" (2015). Please note that this is an estimation.

¹⁸ New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, "Table DP-1. Profile of General Characteristics: 2010: Geographic Area: Palisades Park Borough," in *2010 Census of Population and Housing*.

¹⁹ Orhon Myadar & R. A. Davidson, "Remembering the 'comfort women': geographies of displacement, violence and memory in the Asia-Pacific and beyond," *Gender, Place & Culture* 28, no.3 (2020): 360.

²⁰ Kinue Tokudome, "Passage of H.Res. 121 on "Comfort Women", the US Congress and Historical Memory in Japan" *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 5 no.8 (2007): 1-2.

²¹ Jeannie Suk Gersen, "Seeking the True Story of the Comfort Women," *New Yorker*, February 25, 2021.

²² Jung Kyung-min, "Memorial to comfort women unveiled," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, October 30, 2010.

²³ Thomas J. Ward and William D. Lay, "The Comfort Women Controversy: Not Over Yet", *East Asia*, no. 33(4) (2016): 261.

of 'comfort women' and advocates for the instalment of 'comfort women' memorials.²⁴

The monument was designed by Steve Cavallo, who is the art coordinator for the Palisades Park Public Library. Cavallo recalls that his involvement with the project began after a discussion with summer interns working for KACE, who happened to be canvassing signatures for the memorial outside the Palisades Park Library.²⁵ When designing the memorial he was mindful to utilise some of the former comfort women's testimonies, emphasising that, 'They [the 'comfort women'] were not just being raped but that they were being beaten by the soldiers...the officers were far worse than the average soldier.'²⁶

About a hundred people were there to celebrate the unveiling on October 23, 2010. The then director of KACE, Kim Dong-chan, held a speech at the event, recalling that 'in 2007, our grassroots movement of Korean Americans helped get the resolution on comfort women to pass in the House [of Representatives] but because the Japanese have continued to ignore it, the issue has been in danger of being forgotten'. His hope is that the monument serves to memorialise the suffering of women under Imperial Japanese rule.²⁷

History of the Contestation

Upon its completion, the monument received relatively little attention internationally, especially in Japan. It was not until the establishment of the *Statue of Peace* in Seoul in December 2011, and the subsequent international controversy,²⁸ that memorials of Comfort Women gained global recognition.²⁹ A critical moment in Japan occurred when journalist Akiko Okamoto, then member of Japan's largest conservative organisation the Nippon Kaigi, published an article on the Palisades monument in the conservative *Seiron* magazine in May that same year.³⁰ She claimed in her article that the children of Japanese immigrants in the U.S. were being bullied due to the memorial. Despite protests from Japanese anthropologist Tomomi Yamaguchi that such comments were made without substantive evidence, this was one of the first pieces which spoke out against the memorial and highlighted the issue for Japanese people.³¹ Shortly after, backlash against 'comfort

²⁴ Thomas J. Ward, and William D. Lay, *Park Statue Politics: World War II Comfort Women Memorials in the United States* (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2019), 53.

²⁵ Jung Kyung-min, "Memorial to comfort women unveiled," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, October 30, 2010.

²⁶ Andrew Schmertz, "Comfort Women Memorial Stays in Palisades Park, Despite Objection From Japanese Government," *NJ SpotlightNews*, July 23, 2012.

²⁷ Jung Kyung-min, "Memorial to comfort women unveiled," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, October 30, 2010.

²⁸ For more information please see Institute of Historical Justice and Reconciliation, "Contested History in Public Spaces, Principles, Process, Best Practices: An International Bar Association Task Force Report," (2021): pgs 175-198.

²⁹ Tomomi Yamaguchi. "The History Wars and the Comfort Women Issue: Revisionism and the Right-wing in Contemporary Japan and the U.S." *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 18 no.6 (2020): 6.

³⁰ Tomomi Yamaguchi. "The 'History Wars' and the 'Comfort Woman' Issue: The Significance of Nippon Kaigi in the Revisionist Movement in Contemporary Japan," in *The Transnational Redress Movement for the Victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery*, ed. Pyong Gap Min, Thomas R. Chung, Sejung Sage Yim (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020), 241.

³¹ Akiko Okamoto, "Beikoku no Hōjin Shitei ga Ijime Higai, Kankoku no Ianfu Hannichi Senden ga Man'en suru Kōzu." (Japanese children in the U.S. are victims of bullying: the system of permeation of the anti-Japan PR by South Korea.) *Seiron*, May 2012: 126-133 reported in Tomomi Yamaguchi. "The History Wars and the Comfort Women Issue: Revisionism and the Right-wing in Contemporary Japan and the U.S." *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 18 no.6 (2020): 6.

women' memorials and narratives intensified following the victory of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Abe Shinzo's second appointment as Prime Minister in December 2012.³²

Physical Attacks on the Monument

On October 26, 2012, a one meter long stake with the words 'Takeshima is Japanese Land' was found at the Palisades memorial. This stake referenced the ongoing dispute between South Korea and Japan over the sovereignty of small islets located in the East Sea, also referred to as the Sea of Japan, which started in 1952 and gained traction over the following years.³³ Mayor Rotundo reassured the community that the city was investigating and would take appropriate measures on the basis of a hate crime if applicable. In addition, he stated that the 'memorial was public property but not one in which people could trespass and do whatever they wanted by displaying their personal opinions'.³⁴ Similar incidents occurred earlier in June 2012, when a Japanese activist by the name of Nobuyuki Suzuki staked the Peace Statue in Seoul in a similar manner, also with reference to the territorial disputes.³⁵

Japanese Requests for Removal

On May 1, 2012, the Consul General of Japan in New York, Shigeki Hiroki, visited former Mayor Rotundo to negotiate terms for the removal of the monument.³⁶ Hiroki said that the memorial was a 'stumbling block' in U.S.-Japan relations. During the meeting, Shigeki read two documents aloud: the 1993 statement³⁷ from the then Chief Cabinet Secretary, Yohei Kono, which indicated his acknowledgement of Japan's involvement in the coercion and suffering of 'comfort women'; and a 2001 letter³⁸ addressed to the victims from former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi that detailed an official apology.³⁹ Mayor Rotundo claims that the Consul General proceeded to offer 'trees, a youth exchange program between the two countries and books for the public libraries to improve the relationship between the two countries'.⁴⁰ Japanese officials have not confirmed the statement and denied that they offered these gifts in exchange for agreement.⁴¹ The Borough officials declined the request, after which the delegation left.⁴²

³²Tomomi Yamaguchi, "The 'History Wars' and the 'Comfort Woman' Issue: The Significance of Nippon Kaigi in the Revisionist Movement in Contemporary Japan," in *The Transnational Redress Movement for the Victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery*, ed. Pyong Gap Min, Thomas R. Chung, Sejung Sage Yim (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020), 241.

³³ Krista E Wiegand, "The South Korean-Japanese security relationship and the Dokdo/Takeshima islets dispute," *The Pacific Review*, 28 no.3 (2007): 347-366.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ Nobuyuki Suzuki, a Japanese activist committed similar acts of terror in the War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul and the Patriot Yun Bong-gil Memorial in Kanazawa, Japan. Due to these events the R.O.K. has banned his entry into the country.

³⁶ Alexis Dudden, "Korean Americans Enter the Historical Memory Wars on Behalf of the Comfort Women," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 10 no.54 (2012).

³⁷ 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, 2015.

³⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Letter from Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to the former comfort women", 2001.

³⁹ Kirk Semple, "In New Jersey, Memorial for Comfort Women Deepens Old Animosity," *New York Times*, May 18, 2012.

⁴⁰ Thomas J. Ward and William D. Lay, "The Comfort Women Controversy: Not Over Yet", *East Asia*, no. 33(4) (2016): 261.

⁴¹ Kyung Lah, "Forgotten faces: Japan's comfort women," *CNN World*, June 15, 2012.

⁴² Kirk Semple, "In New Jersey, Memorial for Comfort Women Deepens Old Animosity," *New York Times*, May 18, 2012.

Later in the year, on May 6, four representatives from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Furuya Keiji, Yamatani Eriko, Takemoto Naokazu and Tsukada Ichiro, organised a follow-up meeting to discuss the monument's removal. Former Mayor Rotundo recalls that the LDP members attempted to convince Palisades Park authorities that 'the comfort women were a lie, that they were set up by an outside agency, that they were women who were paid to come and take care of the troops.' Furthermore, the Japanese delegation disputed the legitimacy of the plaque with the inscription 'In memory of the more than 200,000 women and girls' and made claims that the numbers were incorrect.⁴³ In response, the former mayor remembers thanking the delegation for visiting, but, once again declined their request.⁴⁴ Four South Korean lawmakers visited the monument the following Wednesday to thank the former mayor for rejecting a request and placed flowers by the memorial.⁴⁵ The unfolding contestations were captured in detail by an influential article in *The New York Times*,⁴⁶ which highlighted the monument's existence to a wider audience.⁴⁷

After unsuccessful rounds of negotiations, a petition, which called for the removal of the 'Comfort Women' Memorial in Palisades Park, was started on the White House's official website.⁴⁸ The petition was advertised by Eriko Yamatani and Keiji Furuya, who were part of the delegation sent to negotiate talks for the removal in Palisades Park. The petition reads:

We strongly request President Obama to remove the monument and not to support any international harassment related to this issue against the people of Japan' and that 'over the past few years it has come to light that many of the original charges were false or completely fabricated. Yet despite this new information, the United States continues to lend credence to the original false charges by memorializing the comfort women in a monument in New Jersey.'⁴⁹

With more than a week left until its June 9 deadline, the petition was successful in gaining over 28,000 signatures, far more than the 25,000 threshold required to prompt a response from the White House.⁵⁰ However, the White House redirected this request to local officials citing that 'in general, local governments, not the federal government, have jurisdiction over issues such as the placement of memorials in local parks'.⁵¹

Nationwide Backlash from the Korean-American Community

⁴³ Chloe B Park, "Japanese Effort to Remove N.J. Comfort Women Monument Angers Koreans," *Voices of NY*, May 10, 2012.

⁴⁴ Kirk Semple, "In New Jersey, Memorial for Comfort Women Deepens Old Animosity," *New York Times*, May 18, 2012.

⁴⁵ KBS, "Lawmakers Visit New Jersey Comfort Women Monument" *KBS World Radio*, May 10, 2012.

⁴⁶ Kirk Semple, "In New Jersey, Memorial for Comfort Women Deepens Old Animosity," *New York Times*, May 18, 2012.

⁴⁷ Tomomi Yamaguchi. "The History Wars and the Comfort Women Issue: Revisionism and the Right-wing in Contemporary Japan and the U.S." *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 18 no.6 (2020): 7.

⁴⁸ We the People, "Remove the monument and not to support any international harassment related to this issue against the people of Japan," May 10, 2012.

⁴⁹ Furuya Keiji, "Comfort Women Issue: A Petition for the White House," *Official blog*, May 22, 2012.

⁵⁰ Josh Rogin, "Japanese comfort women deniers force White House response," *Foreign Policy*, June 6, 2012.

⁵¹ We the People, "Remove the monument and not to support any international harassment related to this issue against the people of Japan," May 10, 2012.

Following the visits from the Japanese government to the United States, there was considerable backlash within the Korean-American community in Palisades Park. In an article by the Korea Daily Report, Yun Hee Choi, Chief of the Korean-American Parents Association, expressed her contempt. She said that 'the fact that the Japanese government had requested the removal of this monument, using aid as a lure, is committing a shameful crime'.⁵² Equally prompted by the Japanese backlash in New Jersey, Korean activists across the country were inspired to build similar memorials. This is exemplified by the Korean American Forum of California, who led a campaign in Glendale the following year.⁵³ Chejin Park, a staff attorney for KACE based in New York, remarks that the Japanese response was 'helpful for our movement....many more communities now want to have memorials in their communities'.⁵⁴

Media Takedown

Kyungduk Seo, a Korean professor and PR specialist at the Sungshin Women's University in Seoul, was inspired to start a campaign after hearing about the repeated attempts by the Japanese government to take the monument down in Palisades Park. In July 2012, Seo and his students distributed 2,500 posters emblazoned with the slogan 'Do You Remember?', which highlighted war atrocities committed by Imperial Japan around New York City. The poster was later displayed on a 15-meter billboard in Times Square and remained there for three months until the end of December.⁵⁵ Seo commented in a Newsroh article that 'Through the press coverage of the controversy over the monument, Americans who didn't know much about the existence of Comfort Women are now aware of the atrocities done by the Japanese army in World War II and are sick of Japan's lies'.⁵⁶

On November 4, in response to the posters,, a Japanese ad titled 'Yes, We Remember the Facts' was placed on the Star Ledger, one of the largest newspapers in New Jersey.⁵⁷ The ad, which was placed just six months after the Palisades Park officials denied requests for removal, was put together by a Japanese right wing group opposed to the South Korean narrative on 'comfort women', the Committee for Historical Facts.⁵⁸ In September that same year, Shinzo Abe, just weeks after his election as the head of the LDP, signed his name on the ad among various signatories ranging from famous politicians to journalists and professors.⁵⁹

⁵² Chloe B Park, "Japanese Effort to Remove N.J. Comfort Women Monument Angers Koreans," *Voices of NY*, May 10, 2012.

⁵³ Orhon Myadar & R. A. Davidson, "Remembering the 'comfort women': geographies of displacement, violence and memory in the Asia-Pacific and beyond," *Gender, Place & Culture* 28, no.3 (2020): 361.

⁵⁴ Kyung Lah, "Forgotten faces: Japan's comfort women," *CNN World*, June 15, 2012.

⁵⁵ Nippo Chuo, "Ad Requesting Apology over Comfort Women Issue Displayed in Times Square New York," *Chuo Nippo* October 5, 2012.

⁵⁶ Jihoon Lim, "Posters Seek to Raise Awareness of Comfort Women New York City," *Voices of NY*, July 10, 2012.

⁵⁷ Korea Daily "Japanese Ad Rekindles Comfort Women Controversy," *Voices of NY* November 20, 2012.

⁵⁸ Japan U.S. Feminist Network for Decolonization "Yes We Remember the Facts (2012)".

⁵⁹ Tomomi Yamaguchi, "The 'History Wars' and the 'Comfort Woman' Issue: The Significance of Nippon Kaigi in the Revisionist Movement in Contemporary Japan," in *The Transnational Redress Movement for the Victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery*, ed. Pyong Gap Min, Thomas R. Chung, Sejung Sage Yim (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020), 241-242.

U.S. Involvement

Though the second largest population of Koreans outside of North or South Korea lives in the United States,⁶⁰ some consider U.S. involvement in 'comfort women' disputes controversial. Many Asian American groups, especially in Korean American communities, push either to reinforce the memory of 'comfort women' or to pressure Japan for a more institutionalised apology – one ratified by the legislative branches of the government, rather than expressed by a leader. Several of these initiatives to recognise the history of 'comfort women' derive from what Lisa Hasunuma and Mary McCarthy contend is a desire to cement a collective Korean American cultural identity.⁶¹

Many of these Asian American collectives have successfully pressured their local governments to take action. City governments in Palisades, New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles County have all erected 'comfort women' memorials in the past decade. The Japanese government expressed backlash at each; Osaka, once San Francisco's sister city, terminated the relationship over the 'comfort women' memorial there. In 2017, the Japanese government also filed a lawsuit against Los Angeles County for its memorial.⁶²

The Japanese government has remained steadfast in its position regarding U.S. involvement in the 'comfort women' issue. Following the passing of the 2007 bill in the House of Representatives that urged the Japanese government to express a more formal apology, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe noted that the resolution was 'regrettable.'⁶³

Decision-Making Processes

Many Korean-Americans advocate for recognition of human rights violations at a global level, whereas Japan sees attempts to centre 'comfort women' narratives as unprovoked slander, often in countries where the issue is not directly related to local governments.

Speaking about the removal requests in 2012, then Deputy Mayor, Jason Kim, the first Korean-American to be elected to a council seat in New Jersey, reaffirms 'that this is an issue against women; this kind of atrocity of rape and abduction shouldn't happen anymore. If we don't learn from the past history and correct this, it will happen again, and that scares me. That is what drives me to have this monument and tell the whole world why we should have this monument.'⁶⁴

In the same year, Yun Hee Choi, Chief of Korean-American Parents Association, stated that 'the purpose of creating the monument is to acknowledge the importance of women's rights all over

⁶⁰ Lisa Hasunuma and Mary M. McCarthy, "Creating a Collective Memory of the Comfort Women in the USA," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 32, no. 2 (2018): 146.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁶² Agnes Constante, "Who are the 'comfort women,' and why are U.S.-based memorials for them controversial?," *NBC News*, May 7, 2019.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Chloe B. Park, "Japanese Effort to Remove N.J. Comfort Women Monument Angers Koreans," *Voices of NY*, May 10, 2012.

the world and to keep our future generations from repeating it'.⁶⁵ Chejin Park, a lawyer at KACE said in an article published in the *New Yorker* that 'they [the Japanese government] think it's an anti-Japanese monument...but it's not. We don't want to repeat that kind of massive, government-organized human trafficking. The only way we can stop that kind of human rights violation is remembering that human rights violation. The best way to remember it is to have a memory of it'.⁶⁶

On the other hand, those seeking removal of 'comfort women' memorials, mainly right-wing organisations in Japan, are focused on correcting what they perceive to be misinformation and the winning of 'history wars' (Rekishisen). The term was coined by Japan's far-right newspaper, the *Sankei Shimbun*, in April 2014. They believe that they are victims of false accusations by South Korea and China in order to slander Japan in the international community. Their goal is to fight back against fabricated stories of 'comfort women'. Groups who support this view like the Nippon Kaigi, one of the largest right-wing organisations in Japan and Nadeshiko Action, a prominent women's right-wing group, have been vocal against 'comfort women' memorials.⁶⁷ Specifically regarding the Palisades case, in a follow-up meeting held on May 28, 2012 by the LDP regarding the delegation visits, Furuya Keiji revealed that the talks with former Mayor Rotundo 'didn't amount to a decent discussion. The monument is small, but if left unattended for, it can lead to bigger issues.' Yamatani Eriko added that she felt the Korean-American deputy mayor and chairman who were present at the meeting seemed to exert a 'silent pressure' on the mayor. The meeting concluded with the head of the committee addressing Japanese media that 'it is crucial to put an end to the first monument (so that no similar ones will be set up in the United States)'.⁶⁸

Progress on the contestation over the removal of the memorial at Palisades Park has been slow, if not non-existent, on a larger scale, at state and national levels. Despite five 'comfort women' memorials being unveiled in New Jersey, the most recent being in Fort Lee,⁶⁹ the State Department has yet to take an official position on the matter. Despite passing the required numbers of signatories, the petition which called for the removal of the memorial failed to elicit an active response from the White House.⁷⁰

Summary and Conclusions

The 2010 'comfort women' Memorial in Palisades Park, New Jersey, initiated a diplomatic dispute between Japan and South Korea on questions of Japan's Imperial past, namely on the appropriate means of apologies, reparations and commemorations, as imagined by both parties. Not only was this memorial instrumental in mobilising similar initiatives enacted by the growing presence of

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Kyung Lah, "Forgotten faces: Japan's comfort women," *CNN World*, June 15, 2012.

⁶⁷ Tomomi Yamaguchi, "The 'History Wars' and the 'Comfort Woman' Issue: The Significance of Nippon Kaigi in the Revisionist Movement in Contemporary Japan," in *The Transnational Redress Movement for the Victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery*, ed. Pyong Gap Min, Thomas R. Chung, Sejung Sage Yim (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020), 234,242.

⁶⁸ Shigenobu Tamura, "The Issue of Comfort Women Memorial in Palisades Park, New Jersey," *BLOGOS* May 28, 2012.

⁶⁹ Joshua Jongsma, "Fort Lee students give voice to comfort women abused during World War II," *Northjersey.com*.

⁷⁰ Mary M. McCarthy & Linda C. Hasunuma, "Coalition building and mobilization: case studies of the comfort women memorials in the United States," *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 6 no.3 (2018): 411-434.

Korean-Americans in the United States, but the location of the monument enabled the 'comfort women' issue to be investigated at an international level. The Palisades case raises questions over how memorials, especially when located out of the context of the initial event, can incite a response from parties abroad.

Research contributed by Mariri Niino, Frances Hand, and Emerson Monks

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 (Cover Image)

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.

Contact information

Marie-Louise Jansen
Program Director
+33 66828327
contestedhistories@euroclio.eu
www.contestedhistories.org

EuroClio Secretariat Riouwstraat 139
2585HP The Hague The Netherlands
secretariat@euroclio.eu
www.euroclio.eu

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