

Comfort Women

Ensuring Remembrance Through Memorialization by Christine Lee

Christine Lee is a fourth-year undergraduate student concentrating in History, specifically US racial history. She not only focuses on the silenced and marginalized histories of racial minority groups within the United States but also examines how traditional historiography is instrumental in perpetuating their exclusion. In the future, Christine hopes to use storytelling as a medium to inspire all generations to dream and live boldly.



She sits quietly in her chair, waiting. Dressed in a simple *hanbok*, the bronze *sonyeosang* fixes her gaze on the embassy; unblinking, fists clenched, barefoot. Next to her is a vacant seat reserved for the spirits of her sisters, who have already passed away. Together, the living and the departed face the Japanese embassy, the remnant of a colonial empire that had claimed their land, their names, and their bodies. Together, they demand justice.

The *sonyeosang*, which literally translates to “statue of girl,” was installed in front of the Japanese Embassy in 2011 not only to honor the thousands of women and girls forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army, but also to hold the Japanese government accountable for the crimes it had committed. Though Comfort Women (or *ianfu*, as the Japanese called them) came from all of imperial Japan’s territories, the majority of the supplied women and girls came from Korea. And so, when the South Korean government added the issue of reparations for Comfort Women to its national agenda in the 1990s, political tensions between Japan and

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South Korea began to heighten. On December 28, 2015, however, in a “final and irreversible resolution” lauded by the United States as “progress,” Japan offered to pay one billion yen (8.3 million dollars) to South Korea as reparations to the remaining forty-six Comfort Women.¹ In return, the South Korean government, on behalf of the women involved (with whom the government did *not* confer), agreed to never “criticize Tokyo over [Comfort Women] issues again.”² To test the integrity of the compromise, Japan demanded that the *sonyeosang* in front of the Japanese embassy be removed. Yet, the *sonyeosang* must not be removed; the payment must be rejected; the criticism must continue. History and truth cannot be bought and sold.

Since the first public indictment of Japan in 1991 by Kim Hak-Sun, a former Comfort Woman, survivors and advocates alike have identified the South Korean government, not Japan, as the biggest obstructor of justice. Economically dependent on Japanese investment, South Korea has little political power over its former colonizer. Only when the Comfort Women made international headlines did the Korean government finally feel compelled to voice support rather than continue the legacy of silencing its own people.³ To counteract the subtle yet deadly form of institutional erasure by both governments, Koreans, both native and diasporic, have begun building Comfort Women memorials in their respective communities. Yet how effective are the memorials located on foreign soil? To whom do they provide comfort—the survivors or the community?

Every memorial proposal is a reminder that, as much as the memorials commemorate the former sex slaves, they also incriminate the Japanese government for refusing to acknowledge the indisputable truth that the Comfort Women system was devised by the Japanese Imperial Army and endorsed by its government. While the monuments do not offset the Japanese government’s failure to offer proper reparations and an acceptable apology, memorialization

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efforts should continue to indict the perpetrators, both individual and institutional, and create a public memory that will outlive the survivors—thus allowing their legacies to be remembered beyond their mortality.

CAVEATS

Prior to beginning the analysis of whether memorialization serves as an effective medium for justice, certain caveats must be addressed. Firstly, the terms used to refer to these women and girls require some justification. “Comfort Women” is the rough English translation of “*ianfu*,” a Japanese euphemism for prostitutes used by the government. Historians continue to grapple with this language: on one hand, they must refer to the survivors without perpetuating the violence of sanitizing reality; on the other, they must recognize the unique nature of the system of enslavement of Comfort Women. While rape and forced prostitution are not unique to the Asia-Pacific War, the *ianfu* system is special in that the Japanese government officially sanctioned the military’s establishment of systematic sexual slavery. From 1932 to 1945, the Japanese Imperial Army deceived and coerced approximately 200,000 women and girls from its imperial territories to serve as sex slaves for its soldiers—all with the approval of the Japanese government.⁴ Thus, I will use the terms “Comfort Women” and “sexual slaves” interchangeably in an attempt to acknowledge both the truth of the violence these women and girls experienced and the truth of the violence’s uniqueness in the greater historical context.

Secondly, while the Japanese Imperial Army conscripted sex slaves from all conquered territories, including but not limited to China, Taiwan, Indonesia, and even Japan, I will focus on Korean Comfort Women, who comprised an estimated 80 percent, or 160,000, of the conscripted women.⁵ Lastly, it is imperative to recognize that the crimes committed on Comfort Women by the Japanese Imperial Army extend beyond the breadth of this essay. Immediately after

official surrender in 1945, the Japanese government burned the majority of potentially incriminating documents on the *ianfu* system. Additionally, many Comfort Women have passed away or live in silence either out of shame or because of a decision to not dwell on past trauma. Thus, seeking justice for Comfort Women also requires learning to respect the women's agencies and rights to silence, for their scars and bodies do not exist for public consumption and curiosity.

COMFORT WOMEN: SHOT, EDITED, CROPPED OUT

The Japanese government has a notorious history of indulging in historical revisionism. On December 6, 1991, three Korean Comfort Women filed suits against the Japanese government for its crimes.⁷⁶ Kim Hak-Sun, the primary plaintiff and best-known Comfort Woman, said that she emerged from her silence because she “could no longer tolerate the lies of the Japanese government.”⁷⁷ In response to the prosecution, Tokyo declared its archives void of evidence and dismissed the case, arguing that the Comfort Women were prostitutes who engaged in the sex trade voluntarily. Upon hearing of his government's brazen perjury, Yoshimi Yoshiaki, a history professor at Chuo University in Tokyo, personally undertook the mission of exhuming the needed, incriminating evidence. Within three weeks of searching through the Self-Defense Agency's library, Yoshimi found surviving, undeniable, written proof that the Japanese government had actively organized and operated *ianfu* stations during World War II.⁸ Since the upset brought on by Yoshimi's discovery, the Japanese government has cyclically retracted previous denials, conceded begrudgingly to the uncovered facts publicized by various individual citizens and truth commissions—including one conducted by the U.N.—and then undermined this progress by falling back to victim-blaming the women. Thus, the historical reconstruction of the Comfort Women system requires divorcing government propaganda and cultural misperception from hard evidence, which

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includes victim testimonies.

The *ianfu* system ironically intended to prevent the rape of local women and the spread of venereal diseases in the occupied areas by arranging for easy access to Comfort Women. Women and girls (as young as 13 years old) conscripted for the sole purpose of pleasing the Japanese soldiers.⁹ On March 14, 1932, Japanese Lieutenant-General Okabe Naozaburo wrote in his diary about the frequent rape of local Korean women and how “the establishment of appropriate facilities” would circumvent “our soldiers’ sexual problem” as the military’s objective changed from invasion to occupation.¹⁰ In the same month, Okabe’s superior, General Okamura Yasuji, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Shanghai Expeditionary Army, requested that the Governor of Nagasaki send over the first group of Comfort Women. The system was the brainchild of military officials, who received approval and endorsements from the government. This license to rape the women at the *ianjos*, or comfort stations, stemmed from a culture of hypermasculinity—the notion that the male sexual desire was uncontrollable, so female bodies were needed as instruments of relief.

The system’s workings reveal a preoccupation with legitimizing rape as an institutional practice. In 1904 and again in 1910 and 1921, Japan signed the “International Arrangement and Conventions for the Suppression of Traffic in Women and Children.”¹¹ It is most likely that the Japanese government did not conveniently “forget” or consider the agreement as “suspended” during wartime. The most probable explanation for the paradox is that the Japanese government did not see the Comfort Women system as what it was: an industrial organization of rape. After all, politicians for decades have unabashedly declared Comfort Women as voluntary prostitutes and their stories as fabricated anti-Japanese propaganda. To better understand this indoctrination, it is necessary to analyze the active steps undertaken by both the military and the government to circumvent any direct accusations of violating

international law.

In 1938, Japan passed the National Mobilization Law to legalize the trafficking of thousands of Korean girls across international borders, a purpose obscured by the legislative language.¹² “Recruiting agents”—usually a Korean “subcontractor” paired with a member of the *kempeitai*, the police arm of the Japanese Imperial Army—were given the task of filling quotas issued by a military commander. Most women were “recruited” through the false promises of employment as “a factory worker, assistant nurse, laundry worker, kitchen helper, or the like,” while others were simply abducted.¹³ Jong Jinsong, a Japanese researcher, found that, of the 175 Korean women who came forward in 1993 as Comfort Women, 105 named rural areas in Kyongsang and Cholla Provinces as their homes, demonstrating how subcontractors specifically capitalized on the naiveté and fidelity of young daughters of poor peasant families.¹⁴ In this manner, the women, then girls, “voluntarily” chose to work for the military.

Secondly, although some *ianjos* were directly managed by the military, most comfort stations were run by Japanese or Korean civilians as nominal private enterprises that operated under the close regulation of the military. Under military orders, the proprietors ensured that the Comfort Women received weekly check-ups for venereal diseases and were replaced upon death. Beside these specific mandates, the proprietors were given free rein to maintain order using whatever means necessary. Yi Yongsu, a former Comfort Woman, spoke of how the proprietor “pulled out the telephone cord and tied [her] wrists to it [and] then shouting ‘konoyaro!’ [i.e. ‘you rascal’] he twirled the telephone receiver” until she passed out—all for her refusal to enter a certain room.¹⁵ On average, each Comfort Woman serviced up to ten men a day, but before and after each battle the average could rise to forty. After purchasing a ticket at the front desk, soldiers would line up outside the rooms of the women they desired, waiting for the person already inside to finish. Once the

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soldier entered the room, he would hand the ticket directly to the woman or girl inside. This woman or girl would then turn over all her tickets to the proprietor once the station closed.¹⁶ (Theoretically, the women and girls received compensation for each ticket they turned in; realistically, however, only a tiny minority enjoyed such benefits.) This ritual of commercial exchange in which the soldier handed over the receipt of his purchase to the woman, the subject of his purchase, who then accepted the receipt, worked to justify any moral qualms the soldier may have. Since he had purchased her time and body, a transaction the Comfort Woman symbolically acknowledged by taking the ticket, the soldier was then free to treat the woman or girl however he wanted. It was not uncommon for women and girls to die from wounds inflicted by particularly violent soldiers who had not only raped, but also beat them. The Comfort Women system was undeniably designed to be an industrial organization of human trafficking and rape. These are the indisputable facts.

ESTABLISHMENT OF PUBLIC MEMORY AND ITS POLITICS

The politics of memorialization arise from Japan's claim of victimhood. In 2014, the *New York Times* editorial board published an article titled "Mr. Abe's Dangerous Revisionism," a critical opinion piece that denounces Shinzo Abe, Japan's prime minister, for indulging in historical revisionism by claiming that Japan was the unfortunate *victim* of World War II and an ambiguous player in the Asia-Pacific War.¹⁷ Yet such nationalistic sentiments are not confined to the government alone. Some Japanese communities, both native and diasporic, have been very vocal in expressing their discomfort, if not outright anger, in being considered the perpetrators of violence during the Second World War. For example, when Glendale, a small city in Southern California, built a Comfort Women memorial in 2013, Michiko Shiota Gingery and Koichi Mera, two civilians, filed a suit against the city with the support of GAHT-US Corporation, an organization devoted to defending Japan's honor against (alleged)

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historical fabrication. Upon receiving a ruling in 2014 from US District Judge Percy Anderson that the memorial did not violate the supremacy and foreign affairs clause, GAHT issued a statement lambasting the court's decision and accusing "this issue [of] being used to create a negative image of Japan, Japanese citizens, and Japanese Americans."¹⁸ Such accusations expose the underlying trauma induced by the *sonyeosang*, which holds all these groups complicit in and accountable for the violence.

It would be inaccurate, however, to say that the desire for truth does not exist in Japan. In March 1992, the Japanese government held a three-day national phone-in in Kyoto with the intent of gathering information on the Comfort Women issue. An unidentified man who had served the Japanese Imperial Army for three years (starting at the age of twenty-eight) reported that "although many of them [the Comfort Women] were told that they would serve as nursing assistants, the girls were sent to camps of prostitution to be violated by soldiers . . . Following the war the Japanese *ianfu* were sent back to Japan while many of the Korean women were killed by the soldiers."¹⁹ Kichi Kodaichi, who began serving in 1939 in Manchuria, gave testimony to the existence of an *ianfu* residence that "was always busy" and concluded by saying, "I believe more than a million soldiers have remained silent on this issue."²⁰ Yet, despite confessions from soldiers who served during the mid-twentieth century, dissenters, such as GAHT, continue to latch onto disbelief.

Additionally, those who call for public remembrance of Comfort Women in diasporic communities, or places outside of Japan and South Korea, have often been accused of (re)igniting ethnic tension, which then calls into question the basis of East Asian solidarity in immigrant communities. In the case of Vancouver, Canada, Gordon Koida, an influential Japanese-Canadian, argued that erecting a Comfort Women monument would go against Vancouver's commitment to "accommodating immigrants and

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advocating ethnic diversity.”²¹ In the case of San Francisco, Seiko Fujimoto echoed Koida’s sentiments, questioning why “[the advocates for the memorial] have to destroy the relationship of coexistence among Japanese, Chinese and Korean ethnic groups.”²² Such complaints, however, reveal a deeper philosophical trauma that challenges the basis for solidarity among diasporic East Asian communities. Following the reasoning of the dissenters, if having to face the past—namely all the crimes East Asians have committed against each other—precipitates the breaking of peace in the diasporic communities, then the solidarity among these communities is built on a policy of forgetting. Yet, to say that only the Japanese community is guilty of advocating for a relationship based on selective remembrance would overlook the Koreans who support such policies as well. Indeed, in the name of economic progress and “moving forward,” some Koreans have also been active critics of the memorial constructions.

The living, however, do not have the privilege to forget; the complicit do not have the right to ignore. On May 17, 2014, the Japanese American Bar Association (JABA) and Korean American Bar Association of Southern California (KABA) issued a joint statement addressing the opposition to the memorial. JABA and KABA identified interdependence built on an acknowledgement of past histories as the foundation of East Asian American solidarity, saying that “we are neither anti-Japan nor anti-Korea. Rather, we are Asian Americans committed to maintaining a community that celebrates diversity, promotes compassion, and builds friendship on a foundation of honesty . . . while we cannot ignore the unchangeable history that brought us to the present, we can decide to work together for a better tomorrow.”²³ To identify the Japanese with erasure and the Koreans with remembrance would be an oversimplification of the politics between the two nations and groups of nationals, as communities worldwide struggle with how to progress forward through the redress of a past crime.

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And so, the final question then becomes: how should we, the present generation, remember? As of 2016, the nine extant memorials vary in form. Fairfax County, Virginia and Union City, New Jersey set up plaques embedded in rock in the middle of two butterflies; Gwanju-si, Gyeonggi-do in South Korea houses the *Nanum Jip*, or the House of Sharing—a crowd-sourced residence set up for the remaining Comfort Women; Bergen County, New Jersey and Westbury, New York erected plaques in local parks (Westbury has set up two); Seoul, South Korea installed statues of two Comfort Women, Korean and Chinese, in a small park; Glendale, California and Southfield, Michigan adopted the *sonyeosang* that stands outside the Japanese Embassy. In October 2017, against the wishes of some Japanese community members—who have been vocal about their opposition from the conception of the memorial—San Francisco unveiled a statue of three bronze girls in St. Mary’s Square in Chinatown. Though still controversial, the spread of Comfort Women statues since 2011 indicates that, despite the governments’ attempts to write off Comfort Women and the injustice they faced as no longer relevant, characterizing them as figures of a dark and distant past, the current generations refuse to forget. In their memories, the women and girls who have suffered so much will live on.

CONCLUSION

From 1932 to 1945, the Japanese government subjected upward of 160,000 Korean women to sexual slavery. Since 1991, hundreds of survivors have stepped forward to demand justice; by 2016, only forty-six former Comfort Women remained alive. As a political process of restoring human dignity to the victims, memorialization works to keep those women alive. In 2016, the United States housed six out of the nine existing Comfort Women memorials. Meanwhile, Canada had two proposals pending, and Sydney, Australia managed to establish its first memorial (despite

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vehement opposition). Through the controversies, memorialization efforts press forward in defiance of both systematic and institutional historical erasure and the Japanese administration, which still has not issued an acceptable official apology.

Yet how do the current generations practice ethical remembrance? In *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Viet Thanh Nguyen argues that ethical memory is “seeing and remembering how the inhuman inhabits the human.”²⁴ In honoring Comfort Women, the present generation must not generate a one-sided narrative in which Japan is the only force culpable for enacting erasure and violence. Though the onus of the *ianfu* system’s evils does fall on the Japanese government, Koreans were also involved in the sustenance of the Comfort Women system. The bystanders, who allowed for the issue to live in silence until the 1990s, are not entirely innocent as well. In remembering great tragedy and events of war, it is too easy to cast “they” as inhuman and “us” as human. Yet ethical remembrance requires the acknowledgment that if “they” is the Japanese government that set up the system for sexual slavery and benefited most from the women and girls’ labor, then the “us” is the South Korean government that collaborated with the colonial power, doing nothing to stop the operations and continuing to bury the past by institutionally silencing the Comfort Women until the issue of reparations fit in well with the national agenda. If “they” is the past generation whose crime was committing the atrocious acts, then “us” is the current generation whose crime is forgetting what acts were committed.

The memorials are markers of the unfinished Japanese-South Korean deal, receipts for the transaction that never manifested. With the bronze girl, we continue watching and waiting.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Choe Sang-Hun, “Japan and South Korea Settle Dispute Over Wartime ‘Comfort Women,’” *New York Times*, December 28, 2015.
- ² Choe, “Japan and South Korea Settle Dispute.”
- ³ David Andrew Schmidt, *Ianfu—The Comfort Women of the Japanese Imperial Army of the Pacific War: Broken Silence* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1967), 58.
- ⁴ Schmidt, *Ianfu*, 13.
- ⁵ Schmidt, *Ianfu*, 13.
- ⁶ Schmidt, *Ianfu*, 28.
- ⁷ Schmidt, *Ianfu*, 28.
- ⁸ Schmidt, *Ianfu*, 33.
- ⁹ Yuki Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution during World War II and the US Occupation* (London: Routledge, 2002), 10.
- ¹⁰ Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women*, 10.
- ¹¹ Schmidt, *Ianfu*, 90.
- ¹² Schmidt, *Ianfu*, 90.
- ¹³ Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women*, 38.
- ¹⁴ Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women*, 38.
- ¹⁵ Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women*, 51.
- ¹⁶ Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women*, 55.
- ¹⁷ Editorial Board, “Mr. Abe’s Dangerous Revisionism,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2014.
- ¹⁸ Brittany Levine, “Lawsuit Seeks Removal of Glendale’s ‘Comfort Women’ Statue,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 2014.
- ¹⁹ Schmidt, *Ianfu*, 154.
- ²⁰ Schmidt, *Ianfu*, 153.
- ²¹ Toyohiro Horikoshi, “San Francisco Japanese-Americans Ask Why City Needs a ‘Comfort Women’ Memorial,” *Japan Times*, November 3, 2015.
- ²² Horikoshi, “San Francisco Japanese-Americans Ask Why,” *Japan*

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Times, November 3, 2015.

²³ “JABA, KABA Issue Joint Statement on Comfort Women Memorial,”

Rafu Shimpō, May 17, 2014.

²⁴ Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of the War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 19.

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