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## **'Comfort Women Must Fall'? Japanese governmental responses to 'comfort women' statues around the world**

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# ‘Comfort women must fall’? Japanese governmental responses to ‘comfort women’ statues around the world

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## Abstract

This article examines Japanese governmental responses to memorial statues dedicated to ‘comfort women’ – women across the Asia-Pacific whom the Japanese military forced into conditions now recognised as sexual slavery before and during World War Two. This article discusses four cases around the world in which Japanese government officials have demanded the removal of comfort women statues: 1) Glendale, California; 2) San Francisco; 3) Manila; and 4) Berlin. The global expansion of comfort women memorialisation is significant to contemporary statue politics and crises of memory in three ways. Firstly, East Asian diasporas have become important actors in the remembrance of Japanese colonialism and the Asia-Pacific War outside East Asia. Secondly, these statues constitute attempts by diasporas to recover and reclaim a traumatic past through material culture. Thirdly, despite the global geographical reach of comfort women memory activism, neither nationalism nor the power of the nation-state have declined in today’s transnational world.

## Keywords

diapora, material culture, memory politics, postcolonial memory, transnationalism, World War Two

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Recent protests around the world against statues of slave traders, Confederate leaders and other historical figures associated with the difficult legacies of colonialism and slavery have brought to the fore how statues and memorials are intimately connected to questions of political power and cultural identity.

Although the phrase ‘toppling statues’ might conjure images of large crowds tearing down monuments with ropes and chains, there have also been less conspicuous attempts to remove statues from public spaces. In the past decade, the Japanese government has made concerted efforts to stop the installation of, or demand the removal of, memorials dedicated to ‘comfort women’ – women across the Asia-Pacific whom the Japanese military coerced into prostitution during Japan’s colonial rule over East Asia and the Asia-Pacific.

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Since the 1990s, the comfort women issue has been a heavily contested diplomatic controversy between Japan and neighbouring East Asian and South-East Asian states as part of the so-called 'History Problem': Japan's perceived lack of contrition over its colonial and military actions in the first half of the twentieth century (Hashimoto, 2015; Kim and Schwartz, 2010; Lind, 2008). The History Problem encompasses issues such as Japanese right-wing activists' calls to revise history textbooks, territorial disputes, compensation for Korean forced labourers, and Japanese politicians' visits to Yasukuni Shrine, where the spirits of wartime leaders are enshrined. In the past decade, the History Problem has increasingly spilled over beyond East Asia, as East Asian – primarily Korean – diasporas have embraced and led the movement to construct memorials dedicated to comfort women. Today, there are comfort women statues located across South Korea, the United States, Canada, Germany, and Australia. In turn, the Japanese government, led by the conservative Liberal Democratic Party, has strongly opposed these projects as unfair and one-sided attacks that harm its international standing.

Much recent research on comfort women statue politics has shed light on the roles of civil activists, including transnational Korean and feminist movements (Hasunuma and McCarthy, 2019; Mackie and Crozier-De Rosa, 2019; Ward and Lay, 2016, 2019; Yoon, 2018) and the Japanese far-right known as 'historical revisionists' who deny that comfort women were coerced into prostitution (Koyama, 2015; Nakano, 2016; Takenaka, 2016; Yamaguchi, 2020). In contrast, this article foregrounds Japanese government actors – at both regional and national levels – as transnational memory agents in the struggles over comfort women statues. This article chronologically discusses four cases in which Japan acted against the public memorialisation of comfort women: (1) the 'Statue of a Girl of Peace' constructed in Glendale, California, in 2013; (2) the Monument to Comfort Women in San Francisco, completed in 2017; (3) the Comfort Women statue in the Philippines, which was quickly removed shortly after its unveiling in 2018; and (4) the Statue of Peace in Berlin, for which local authorities initially turned down permission but reversed their decision following protests from Korean civic groups in 2020.

Given the complexity of the comfort women debates, this article restricts its focus on recent actions taken by the Japanese government: actions by other states including South Korea, China, and Taiwan fall outside of the scope of this article. Furthermore, as its primary focus is on the controversies over these statues as 'crises of memory', this article does not seek to make historiographical claims about the systematic abuse of comfort women under the Japanese Empire.

## The 'comfort women' as multidirectional memory

In recent years, memory studies has arguably undergone a 'paradigm shift' by centring how transnational movements of people, goods, capital, technologies, and information shape how different communities remember historical events. It is no longer possible to assume a natural congruence between a society's 'collective memory' and the boundaries of the nation-state, nor even to assume that collective memories are primarily 'national' in nature. In conversation with wider debates on the limits of 'methodological nationalism' (see, for example, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2009; Chernilo, 2006; Inglis and Robertson, 2008), numerous scholars have offered accounts of memory narratives and practices that transcend national borders, such as the Holocaust as transnational discourse (Alexander, 2004; Hirsch and Spitzer, 2009; Levy and Sznajder, 2002; Rothberg, 2009), transnational moral dimensions of witness testimony (Kurasawa, 2009) and international commemoration of World War I (West, 2008).

Building on these debates, Astrid Erlil (2011) has proposed 'transcultural memory studies' as an approach that transcends a treatment of cultures as concretely bounded 'containers', urging scholars to cultivate 'an attentiveness to the border-transcending dimensions of remembering and

forgetting' (Erll, 2011: 15). In particular, Erll draws attention to memorial practices among diasporic communities and the development of new media technologies that facilitate cross-border flows of information. Various other scholars have also offered models that complement Erll's proposal by foregrounding various transnational processes that shape historical and contemporary memory practices, such as transnational institutions of memory (Assmann, 2014: 201), cosmopolitanism as a political goal (Inglis, 2015) and transformations of public spaces as transnational 'sites of memory' (Wüstenberg, 2019).

Such transnational perspectives are essential for understanding the complexity and diversity of issues surrounding comfort women commemoration, which has taken place across many countries over several decades. International memorial debates surrounding comfort women began in the 1990s as part of a Korean social movement demanding an official apology and financial restitution from Japan. Soon afterwards, survivors from other countries including China, Taiwan, Indonesia, the Philippines, and the Netherlands joined the call for reparations, leading to a transnational redress movement. From the early days of this movement, memorial discourses and practices surrounding the comfort women have been 'multidirectional' in nature (Rothberg, 2009), highlighting the sexual abuses of women not just as a past atrocity but also as a contemporary problem that requires resolution through progressive political agendas rooted in feminism and universal human rights. As Rothberg has argued, such multidirectional memory narratives encourage actors to draw historical parallels and connections while avoiding 'identitarian competition' (Rothberg, 2009: 21). Indeed, many of the transnational movements commemorating the plight of comfort women have consciously adopted the language of human rights, feminism, and postcolonialism and have highlighted continuing exploitation of, and violence against, women (Mackie, 2001).

In the past decade, the movement to construct comfort women statues has spread globally in a further expansion of these multidirectional discourses. In 2011, South Korean activists installed the first Statue of a Girl of Peace (*sonyeosang*, also known as the 'Statue of Peace') outside the Japanese Embassy in Seoul to demand an official apology and reparations. Since then, numerous East Asian diasporic communities have supported initiatives to construct replicas of the Statue of Peace, which has resulted in statues being installed in the United States, Canada, Germany, and Australia. In the Philippines, these transnational discourses inspired a movement to commemorate survivors through a statue dedicated to Filipina comfort women, which, as this article discusses, was cut short by Japan's intervention.

Beyond the comfort women issue's immediate political and social importance for the survivors and the affected countries, the politics of comfort women commemoration constitutes an important case study for expanding memory studies towards new directions in three key respects.

First, the comfort women issue highlights the growing importance of the role of East Asian diasporas residing outside Asia in commemorating historical atrocities committed under Japanese colonialism and during World War II. This development suggests not only that traditional geographical boundaries which have conventionally defined 'Area Studies' are increasingly inadequate for an ever-connected world, but it also suggests that the kind of 'transcultural memory studies' as proposed by Erll and many others is well placed to study these developments for understanding how diasporic groups 'carry' with them memories of their forebears.

The expansion of war memory discourse among East Asian diasporas is itself an important topic of research, the possible causes of which are too complex to fully explore here. Potential factors include, for example, the expansion of international human rights discourse which has enabled historical atrocities to be discussed comparatively with contemporary examples, the abandonment of assimilationist narratives among diasporic groups in favour of a collective reclamation of cultural pride and autonomy, and the large voting base that diasporic groups command in some

local-level governments which facilitate official decision-making processes in favour of these expressions of diasporic identity (Ward and Lay, 2016, 2019).

Whatever the causal mechanisms behind this development, it is clear that the re-prioritisation of colonial and war memories among East Asian diasporas is neither accidental nor pre-ordained. Rather, it is the outcome of concerted memory activism. As Hasunuma and McCarthy (2019) have argued, recent social activism surrounding comfort women in the United States has resulted from an ‘awakening’ of diasporic *and* feminist identity among female Korean American grassroots activists. The transnational remembrance of comfort women fits within a broader pattern in which East Asian diasporas have ‘reactivated’ memories of Japanese colonialism and the Asia-Pacific War through statues, memorials, and museums. For instance, in San Francisco’s Chinatown, the WWII Pacific Memorial Hall, a private museum, opened in 2015 to commemorate the Second Sino-Japanese War and to celebrate ties between China and the United States as allies during World War II (Chang, 2015). In another example in 2018, Chinese Canadian civil organisations unveiled a Nanjing Massacre Memorial in Ontario, Canada. In conjunction with comparative cases of diasporas leading the remembrance of events that have taken place in their ‘home’ countries, the case of East Asian war memorials outside Asia is an emergent and timely area of research.

Second, this article explores and develops the utility of ‘liquid time’ as a guiding concept for understanding how diasporas with limited, if any, firsthand recollections of past atrocities re-narrate and re-imagine their ancestors’ experiences through art and material culture. Hirsch and Spitzer (2019) have used ‘liquid time’ to describe commemorative, artistic efforts to recover, reframe, repurpose, and re-narrate moments of historical trauma and oppression. In a discussion of school photographs, Hirsch and Spitzer argue that photography has been a colonial instrument for portraying Black people, Native Americans and other racial minorities as needing cultural assimilation and ‘civilization’. In response to this colonial gaze, contemporary artworks by descendants of these groups have repurposed historical photographs to reimagine colonial and racial violence as something more than inevitable and traumatic. According to Hirsch and Spitzer, as ‘generations of post-memory’ with no direct experience of the traumatic moment, these artists create new narratives that unsettle the temporal flow of history through a radical re-interpretation of the past. Conforming neither to the linear progressivism of colonialist ideologies nor to a ‘traumatic haunting’ in which the present is trapped in the past, these works present a re-imagining of ‘alternative pasts, presents and also futures – futures latent but not yet realized in the present of the ‘photographic event’ (Hirsch and Spitzer, 2019: 21). This kind of art develops ‘in unforeseen directions when they are viewed and re-viewed by different people in different presents. In “liquid time” they are not fixed into static permanence; rather, they remain dynamic, unfixed, as they acquire new meanings, in new circumstances’ (Hirsch and Spitzer, 2019: 13).

Like the postcolonial repurposing of school photographs, the transnational comfort women statue movement can be interpreted as the pursuit of ‘liquid time’ by younger generations of East Asian (primarily Korean) diasporas, who have sought to restore the dignity of their ancestors through reconstructed images of them. In doing so, these projects have represented comfort women in a way that emphasises their resilience, dignity and hopefulness for the future, unrestrained by the colonial and masculinist gaze that once subjected them to years of violence and humiliation. As such, these statues act as signposts for a future that ‘could have been’ and ‘could yet be’.

In addition, the metaphor of ‘liquidity’ also helps to explain the geographical fluidity and mobility of comfort women statues. For proponents of the Statue of Peace, the Statue is not specific to a

historical period or geographical location. Advocates have argued that the Statue of Peace stands as a symbol condemning violence against all women: as such, it should be placed anywhere and everywhere, regardless of the proposed location's historical relationship with the Asia-Pacific War. Unlike monuments that usually exist as singular, unique objects at specific locations – like the Statue of Liberty, the Brandenburg Gate, and Nelson's Column – the very purpose of the Statue of Peace movement is to demand replication across cultural borders in as many locations as possible. In practice, the Statue's mobility has been constrained mostly to areas with a considerable ethnic Korean presence. Nevertheless, the high geographical mobility of the Statue of Peace demonstrates that statues, like people, also travel across borders.

Third, the controversies surrounding comfort women statues illuminate the complexity of memorial discourses that vacillate between the national and transnational levels. As Erll noted, 'not every worldwide available object of remembrance will be turned into a cosmopolitan, an ethical, or an empathetic memory' (Erll, 2011: 15). Indeed, as this article elaborates, even as the comfort women debate has become global, powerful stakeholders, including nation-states, have relied on nationalist arguments for and against comfort women memorials. In this sense, the comfort women issue has become an undeniably 'transnational' phenomenon, but it has not yet become 'transcultural' in the sense of transcending the original cultural 'containers' based on nationalist symbols and narratives. The Japanese state has consistently opposed the construction of comfort women memorials as affronts to national pride, while countries such as South Korea, China, Taiwan and the Philippines have incorporated comfort women narratives within anti-colonial nationalist metanarratives to varying extents. Although advocates of comfort women statues have often made the case for constructing statues through the language of universal human rights and feminism, the comfort women issue has also become quintessential symbols of Korean nationalism with two consequences. Firstly, activists around the world have framed the comfort women issue as a predominantly Korean experience, resulting in the relative absence and silence of survivors' voices from other cultures. Secondly, comfort women debates have become deeply politicised in Korean public discourse, with damaging consequences for comfort women survivors and academics who are critical of the orthodox redress movement.

It is not paradoxical that transnational memory activism is grounded in nationalist sentiments. As Rogers Brubaker (1996) has argued, nationalism is compatible with transnational migratory processes, as states engage in what he calls 'homeland nationalism': making claims on behalf of their ethno-national compatriots residing beyond the states' territories. In the case of the comfort women issue, both the Japanese and South Korean governments – at regional and national levels – have engaged in homeland nationalist policies to promote their respective nationalist narratives about comfort women. More broadly, these state interventions suggest that the global expansion of transnational memory activism has not been accompanied by a relative decline in state power. Rather, the growth of such civic memory activism has forced Japan to react and to engage with states such as the United States and Germany, which were not previously active parties in the comfort women debate. Moreover, the American, German and the Philippine governments' divergent responses to Japanese demands also demonstrate how disparities of state power define what can and cannot be commemorated. Whereas the United States successfully rebuffed Japan's claims, the Philippines had little choice but to meet Japanese demand, while Germany has sought to appease the opposing parties through a time-limited permit to display the Statue of Peace. This article suggests that an 'overcoming' of methodological nationalism may lie not in the dismissal of nation-states as insignificant actors, but rather in the re-situation of the nation-states as formidable 'memory activists' in their own right in the global arena of memory politics.

## Between nationalism, postcolonialism and feminism: the rise of the comfort women redress movement

The comfort women (*'ianfu'* in Japanese/*'wianbu'* in Korean) system began as institutionalised military prostitution in the late 1930s and became an integral facet of the Japanese military's operations across the Asia-Pacific until its dissolution in 1945. The military leadership devised legal prostitution at 'recreational centres' or 'comfort stations' (*'ianjo'*) in a bid to reduce rape on the battlefield following reports of mass rape in the first months of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) (Wakabayashi, 2017). The precise number of comfort women recruited into the system is uncertain. Historians estimate up to 200,000 women were trafficked across the Asia-Pacific (see Hata, 1999: 397–406; Soh, 2008: 23–24). Many non-Japanese comfort women were Korean, but Chinese, Taiwanese, Filipina, Indonesia, Thai, Vietnamese, and Dutch women were also voluntarily or forcibly recruited.<sup>2</sup>

The circumstances in which women were forced into prostitution varied: many were recruited on false pretences or sold to traffickers by immediate family members; others were abducted from their hometowns or on battlefronts. Burdened with debt with no freedom over choice of work or movement, comfort women experienced systematic rape and physical violence under conditions now internationally recognised as 'sexual slavery'.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted, however, that some survivors disavow the term 'sex slaves' (Hankyore, 2020). For this reason, and following academic conventions, this article therefore uses the term 'comfort women' and 'former comfort women' or 'survivors' throughout.

Despite the scale of the human rights abuses, reparations for comfort women did not become a diplomatic issue between Japan and the affected nation-states until the late twentieth century. The silence of comfort women for nearly half a century was the product both of military authoritarianism in South Korea that only ended in 1987 and of the low socio-economic status of many survivors in post-war society that prevented them from speaking out (Park, 2014).

After over four decades of silence, in 1991, Kim Hak-sun, a former comfort woman, gave the first public testimony and demanded an official apology from Japan. Her actions soon influenced other survivors to speak out, and a movement demanding financial redress formed to support the survivors; the 'comfort women issue' soon became a source of diplomatic tension between Japan and South Korea.

After initially denying responsibility, Japan officially admitted the military's involvement in the comfort women system and issued a public apology in 1992. In Korea, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan – later renamed the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery (henceforth Korean Council) – led the comfort women's activism and testimonial work in collaboration with Japanese allies. In the wake of these testimonies, comfort women gradually became figures to be respected and admired; survivors were affectionately addressed with the suffix *halmeoni* ('grandma'). As a result, 'comfort women' gradually became a metonym for the nation's suffering under Japan's colonial rule of the Korean peninsula (1910–1945). These developments in Korean civil society also encouraged former comfort women from various countries to speak out and demand an official apology and financial redress.

In response, Japan issued a succession of official apologies: the 1993 statement by Foreign Secretary Kōno Yōhei (Kōno Statement) and the 1995 statement by Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi (Murayama Statement) were unprecedented admissions of Japan's role as colonisers and aggressors in the Asia-Pacific, including the military involvement in the comfort women system. However, these statements did not fundamentally alter the Japanese government's position that liability for reparations had ended with the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the

Republic of Korea. In the treaty – the precise interpretation of which has been contested – South Korea formally renounced all claims to compensation for Japan's colonial rule in exchange for economic loans and grants.<sup>4</sup>

Instead, in 1994, Japan established a third-sector fund called the Asian Women's Fund (AWF), designed to collect and pay out private donations as 'relief payments' to survivors while the government paid for its administrative costs (Ōnuma, 2007). The payment was delivered alongside a letter signed by Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro. This solution was a compromise between progressive politicians, who sought a permanent resolution to the issue, and conservatives of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), some of whom were and are unrepentant about the Japanese military's wartime actions.

Many Korean survivors rejected the plan outright as insincere. Facing pressure from civil groups such as the Korean Council, the South Korean government announced an alternative state-funded scheme for former comfort women. In a bid to delegitimise AWF initiatives, activists and members of the public harassed survivors who agreed to receive the AWF payment, and the women were subsequently disqualified from state support (Ōnuma, 2007: 57–60; Soh, 2003: 228–229). Despite these shortcomings, the AWF Fund made relief payments to 364 survivors from South Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan and the Netherlands before winding down in 2007 (Ōnuma, 2007: 105).

If the AWF plan had led many comfort women to reject the deal, it also proved deeply unpopular for the Japanese right. Reacting against these reconciliatory developments, right-activists began to coalesce around 'historical revisionism' – the denial of Japan's colonial and wartime atrocities – as one of their main goals. In 1996, a group of right-wing activists and intellectuals formed the Society for History Textbook Reform, demanding a turn away from what they called a 'masochistic view of history'. Against this backdrop of political polarisation around public representations of history, left-wing activists inside and outside Japan continued to call for the Japanese government to establish new systems of state reparations throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

A new, 'transregional' phase surrounding comfort women arguably began when the US government entered the fray. In 2007, after the rightist Prime Minister Abe Shinzō remarked that the military was only involved in the forced recruitment of comfort women in a 'broad sense' and signalled a potential revision to the Murayama Statement, the US House of Representatives voted to censure the Japanese government for its handling of the comfort women issue.<sup>5</sup> In response, the Committee for Historical Facts, a Japanese far-right group, posted an advert in the *Washington Post* titled 'The Facts', denying that comfort women were 'sex slaves' and arguing that they 'earned incomes far in excess of what were paid to field officers and even generals' (Committee for Historical Facts, 2012).

The political struggles surrounding comfort women soon became a focal point for the Korean American diaspora as well. In 2009, the Mayor of Palisades Park in Bergen County, New Jersey – a predominantly Korean American district – unveiled a comfort women memorial plaque, illustrated with a Japanese soldier towering over a cowering woman. In 2011, employing a 'multidirectional' rhetoric, Korean campaigners posted an advert in Times Square, New York: the poster showed a photograph of German Chancellor Willy Brandt kneeling in Warsaw and demanded that Japan do the same for comfort women. In response, the Japanese revisionist group, the Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact, posted an advert in a New Jersey newspaper, once again denying that the military were involved in the trafficking of women (Committee for Historical Facts, 2012); assenters to the advert included senior politicians including Abe Shinzō, who returned to power as Prime Minister shortly after the advert's publication.<sup>6</sup> The Committee currently operates as the Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact, dedicated to disseminating revisionist literature in English.



## The Statue of a Girl of Peace in Glendale, California

Prime Minister Abe's return to power at the end of 2012 saw a series of economic reforms he dubbed 'Abenomics' as well as the enactment of nationalist policies in matters of culture and education. Part of Abe's foreign policy involved a realignment of diplomatic priorities in line with his nationalist historical perspectives on the Japanese Empire. The decision in 2013 to construct the comfort women statue in Glendale, California, therefore marked a symbolic gesture by Korean American residents to reject Japan's diplomatic stance and to express solidarity with the survivors. The statue is a replica of the Statue of a Girl of Peace ('*sonyeosang*'), first erected outside the Japanese Embassy in Seoul in 2011 to mark the thousandth weekly protest calling for official apology and redress. The statue depicts a young girl sitting on a chair facing forward, dressed in the traditional *chima jeogori* dress. Beside her is an empty chair, inviting visitors to sit beside her. At the base stone of the statue is a shadow of an elderly woman, suggesting the passage of time.

Although the local Japanese American civil rights groups such as the Nikkei for Civil Rights & Redress and the Japanese American Citizens League supported the statue's installation (Levine, 2013), the Glendale statue quickly became a target for the Japanese and Japanese American right. In 2014, several Japanese American plaintiffs, along with the right-wing denialist organisation Global Alliance for Historical Truth (GAHT), sued the City of Glendale, alleging that it intruded on the federal government's power to conduct foreign affairs (Gingery *et al.* v. City of Glendale, case 2:14-cv-012191; 14-56440 9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2016). GAHT is a non-profit organisation registered in Japan and the United States whose mission is to 'maintain the honour of Japan', combat 'Japan-bashing' and address 'fabricated history'.<sup>7</sup> Since the group's foundation in the wake of the Glendale controversy, its activities have focused on the denial of Japanese atrocities. The directors of GAHT also hold prominent positions with Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference), the largest conservative lobbying group in Japan and one of the Liberal Democratic Party's largest institutional supporters.

An important context to the Glendale case is the 2015 bilateral agreement between Japan and Korea, in which both parties agreed to resolve the comfort women issue 'finally and irreversibly'. In the agreement, Japan offered a formal apology and set up a state-funded reparations programme in exchange for the removal of the comfort women statue placed outside the Japanese Embassy in Seoul.<sup>8</sup>

The plaintiffs lost in the District and Appellate Courts in 2015 and 2016, respectively. However, in 2017, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) submitted an *amicus* brief in support of the plaintiffs for the case to be heard in the Supreme Court (Koichi Mera and GAHT-US Corporation v. City of Glendale, 2017). In the brief, the MOFA argued that the statue violated the spirit of the 2015 agreement and stated that the monument 'presents a significant impediment to Japan's diplomatic efforts on this issue' (Koichi Mera and GAHT-US Corporation v. City of Glendale, 2017: 3).

The Supreme Court denied the petition for appeal, and the verdict in favour of Glendale was finalised in 2017. It is worth noting that, beyond the Glendale case, the 2015 bilateral agreement also failed to achieve its intended purpose of resolving the comfort women issue for good. In Korea, the agreement provoked widespread anger that President Park Geun-He had made a back-room deal with Japan without consulting the comfort women. In defiance, protestors installed another Statue of Peace outside the Japanese Consulate in Busan in 2016. Moreover, following Park's impeachment on corruption charges, President Moon Jae-In's government *de facto* abandoned the agreement unilaterally. Although the agreement was widely panned by the Korean public, the foundation created through the bilateral agreement nonetheless served some of its intended purposes, having paid out compensation to 35 out of 46 registered survivors and 68 relatives of deceased comfort women (Yi and Phillips, 2021).

## Comfort women's column of strength in San Francisco

San Francisco's Women's Column of Strength, located in St. Mary's Square in China Town, is another example in which East Asian diasporic identity became inextricably connected to comfort women memorials. Hasunuma and McCarthy (2019: 151) have also pointed out that Zainichi Koreans – the ethnic Korean diaspora in Japan – were instrumental in coordinating the movement in San Francisco. In this sense, the San Francisco case can be seen as an outcome of the rise in the political clout and visibility of Asian Americans in civil society as well as the result of collaboration between geographically distant diasporas connected through a common commemorative cause.

There are important differences between the Glendale and San Francisco memorials. In San Francisco, the 'Comfort Women' Justice Coalition – a grassroots group based in San Francisco – led the construction and installation of the memorial, initiated by calls by retired judges Lilian Sing and Julie Tang. Initially, there were confusions over the plans for the memorial. In 2016, original plans by the Chinese Cultural Center to instal public art were withdrawn to make way for the comfort women statue, a decision which the Center criticised as evidence that 'politics trumps the community process' (SFist, 2016; Ward and Lay, 2019: 95–96). Moreover, some Japanese American civic leaders expressed concern that Japan was being singled out as an enemy and that it would promote negative feelings against Japanese and Japanese Americans (Knight, 2017; Sabatini, 2015).

Perhaps as a result of these debates, the final design of the memorial is quite different to the Statue of Peace, which is heavily associated with the Korean Council and the orthodox redress movement. Completed and unveiled in 2017, the Comfort Women's Column of Strength is made up of two parts: in one section, three young women (Chinese, Korean and Filipina) stand atop a plinth, facing outwards with a resolute expression and holding hands together in a show of solidarity; several metres apart on the ground, a statue of Kim Hak-sun looks up to the plinth with a contemplative expression (CODAworx, n.d.). As a work of 'liquid time', the memorial re-imagines the experiences of comfort women from different ethnicities to celebrate, rather than mourn, survivors. Although the memorial does not depict women from other nationalities, the San Francisco memorial nevertheless departs from prevalent representations of the comfort women as a uniquely Korean experience as exemplified by the Statue of Peace..

Unlike the Glendale case, there were no lawsuits from opponents demanding the memorial's removal. Instead, the most vocal efforts to prevent the erection of the memorial came from the City of Osaka regional government, also San Francisco's Sister City. Shortly after plans for the memorial emerged, the Mayor of the City of Osaka, Yoshimura Hirofumi, strongly objected to the memorial as a one-sided depiction of history and against the spirit of the 2015 bilateral agreement. A member of the neoliberal regional party the Osaka Restoration Association, Yoshimura was not a typical conservative nationalist like Abe and his peers in the LDP. Nevertheless, it is probable that Yoshimura shared the views of his mentor and party founder, Hashimoto Tōru, who had previously defended military prostitution as 'necessary' and had argued that the Japanese state was not involved in the 'forced recruitment' of comfort women (*Nikkei Shimbun*, 2013). Between 2017 and 2018, Yoshimura threatened to end the Sister City Agreement with San Francisco through multiple open letters; as San Francisco refused to reconsider, Osaka unilaterally ended its Sister City Agreement in October 2018, putting an end to over half a century of inter-cultural exchange and cooperation (Handa, 2018).

Osaka's mayor's attempt to stop the installation of the memorial was ultimately unsuccessful; however, similar attempts to prevent erection of comfort women statues were partially successful in other parts of the United States. In Atlanta, Georgia, initial plans to erect The Statue of Peace

were shelved after objections from the Japanese Consul General (Yoon, 2018: 77–78); the statue was eventually relocated to a public park in Brookhaven, Georgia, 10 miles to the north of Atlanta (Constante, 2017).

## Comfort women statue in Manila, the Philippines

Comfort women were never solely an issue for Japan and South Korea. Up to 1000 Filipina women were taken as comfort women during Japan's occupation of the Philippines between 1942 and 1945 (McCarthy, 2020). Like many former comfort women in South Korea, the survivors remained silent until the 1990s, until more survivors testified and the campaign for reparations gathered pace: in the Philippines, Maria Rosa Henson, who was abducted and raped at 16, was the first to step forward in 1992 (Hayashi, 2001: 574). Although demands for an official apology and restitution were just as strong in the Philippines as in Korea, the responses of the Philippine government and Filipina survivors have diverged from those of Korean counterparts. Unlike Korea, which refused the AWF payments as illegitimate, two charities, LILA-Pilipina and Malaya Lolas, distributed the Japanese relief payments to former comfort women, despite some reservations about the purpose and intent of the AWF (Soh, 2003: 227–228): evidence that attitudes towards the AWF varied across different recipient parties.

In recent years, comfort women have been a focal point for remembrance of the Japanese occupation and Filipino anti-colonial resistance. In 2016, upon Emperor Akihito's state visit to the Philippines, protesters demanded President Benigno Aquino to raise issue of the continued plight of former comfort women (Kyodo News, 2016). Plans for a comfort women statue came to light in 2017 under the leadership of the Tulay Foundation, a Filipino-Chinese civil organisation; the project received official support from the National Historical Commission of the Philippines (Clapano, 2017). The statue was officially unveiled on Roxas Boulevard, Manila, on 8 December 2017: the 2-m structure depicts a blindfolded Filipina in traditional Filipiniana dress looking out towards Manila Bay. The Japanese Embassy in the Philippines quickly expressed concerns about the installation of the statue, arguing that it touched upon a sensitive historical topic (See, 2017), leading the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs to demand city officials for an explanation for the statue's background (Clapano, 2017). In January 2018, Noda Seiko, Japan's Minister for Internal Affairs, visited President Rodrigo Duterte reportedly to air grievances about the statue (*Reuters*, 2018). Several days after this meeting, the President's Spokesperson denied that the President would intervene in the future of the statue and denied knowledge of a letter allegedly sent from the Department of Foreign Affairs to the Mayor of Manila demanding the statue's removal (Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2018a).

The statue remained in place for several months, but it was quietly removed overnight in April 2018 by the Public Works and Highways Department, ostensibly to carry out improvements to the flood defences (*Mainichi Shimbun*, 2018). The statue was never replaced in its original location. The President's spokesperson denied involvement in the removal, but indicated the government would not pursue further official apologies or reparations stating that 'the 1948 Peace Pact has barred any and all further cause for reparation, that is the jurisprudence' (Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2018b). The President later admitted that the statue was removed at Japan's behest, stating that Japan had already 'paid dearly for' its wartime actions (ABS-CBN News, 2018). Criticising the intervention, the English-language newspaper *Philippines Daily Inquirer* speculated the statue's removal was 'a concessionary gesture and an expression of servility and gratitude for Japan's generous pledges of loans and financial commitments to this administration' (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 2018). Since then, the comfort women statue, which had been moved to the artist's studio, has disappeared (McCarthy, 2020).

Despite the Japanese government's apparent success, there have been social movements to demand the restoration of the statue to its original location. The campaign – united on social media under the hashtag #Flowers4Lolas ('*lolas*' meaning 'grandma' in Tagalog with a similar connotation to '*halmeoni*' in Korean) – has staged protests to demand the reinstallation of the statue (Rappler, 2018). While some critics have questioned the motives behind the statue as a Chinese-Filipino co-option of Filipino national memory (Tysmans, 2018), for others, the unceremonious removal of the statue has itself become a moment of national injury that must not be forgotten. As Filipino popular historian Xiao Chua wrote,

That we knelt down to Japan sacrificing national dignity is a reminder to the next generation that hopefully they will create a better, stronger nation so this wouldn't have to happen again. (Chua, 2019)

## The Statue of a Girl of Peace in Berlin, Germany

In recent years, the comfort women debate has also extended to Europe. Two years after the installation of the Glendale statue, another Statue of Peace was unveiled in Wiesent, Bavaria. This was a result of an agreement between the Korean City of Suwon, Gyeonggi Province, and campaigning by the Korean Council (Yonhap News Agency, 2017). Wiesent, with a population of around 2500, was chosen after a similar agreement with Freiburg fell through following strong objections from Freiburg's Japanese Sister City, Matsuyama in Ehime Prefecture (Ward and Lay, 2019: xi).

In this sense, the ongoing comfort women statue controversy in Berlin is an extension of Korean-led campaigns to reproduce comfort women statues across Europe. Korean Verband, a local NGO, led the campaign to instal a Statue of Peace in Berlin (von Richthofen, 2020). When the comfort women statue was unveiled in Berlin's Mitte district in September 2020, the Japanese government expressed opposition to its installation (Ryall, 2020), arguing that the statue oversimplified a complex historical and diplomatic issue. Initially, the Mitte District Mayor Stephan von Dassel ordered the statue's removal on the basis that the statue represented a one-sided criticism of Japan, not a condemnation of sexual violence against women in general (WION, 2020). However, Korean activists strongly objected to the decision by organising petitions and public demonstrations. The Mayor quickly reversed his decision, allowing the statue to stay for one year as originally planned in the proposal (von Richthofen, 2020). While Korean and German activists have called for the statue to be installed permanently, the long-term future of the statue remains uncertain. However, the fact that civic activists successfully overturned the district's initial decision is indicative of the growing political weight of Korean diasporas supported by arguments grounded in feminist and human rights discourse.

## Conclusion

This article has explored how Asian diasporas have carried the comfort women memorial discourse across national and cultural borders, and how the Japanese government has sought to prevent such memorial activism through various uses of state power grounded in claims to protect 'national interests'. As seen in the Japanese government's support for the far-right group GAHT, the Osaka Mayor's protest against San Francisco and diplomatic pressures exerted on countries including the Philippines and Germany, Japanese state actors have sought to suppress wider transnational debates about comfort women and reduce them to a political dispute between Japan and South Korea. It is notable that, unlike recent protest movements that have demanded the removal of difficult statues and monuments, these developments have taken place through established forms of political power, from legal documents and open letters to diplomatic communications and negotiations behind

closed doors. In this sense, this article demonstrates that anti-statue or anti-memorial memory activism does not require public visibility or the support of public opinion.

If the comfort women statues represent a 'one-sided' view of history in the eyes of the Japanese government, they represent something else entirely for the transnational Statue of Peace movement. For them, these statues represent the possibility of recovery and re-imagining of the past beyond the 'inevitable' and 'traumatic' to celebrate the resilience of the survivors. For the supporters, who, as 'generations of postmemory', feel the responsibility to pass on the legacies of the comfort women, the continued expansion of the Statue of Peace around the world is not just an expression of diasporic nationalism, but also a moral imperative.

In the past decade, the comfort women movement has evolved to become increasingly transnational and transregional. However, this does not mean that the power of the nation-state or the affective power of nationalism as a source of ideological power has declined in a transnational world. Indeed, as this article has discussed, nationalism and the power of the nation-state loom large behind these civil attempts to globalise comfort women memorial discourse.

Most tellingly, the relative power imbalances between nation-states have shaped the outcomes of whether comfort women statues could continue to stand as sites of memory. For the first two cases in the United States, legal rulings in support of the statues and widespread civil support successfully countered and rebuffed Japanese diplomatic pressures against the statues. However, for the statues in the Philippines and Germany, respective local and national governments were much more hesitant in installing the statues, concerned that such a move would worsen relations with Japan. In the end, only the Philippines, pressured by Japan through diplomatic channels, imposed a top-down order to remove the statue.

On the one hand, it is undeniable that, while stopping short of denying that comfort women were coercively recruited, the Japanese government has been proactive in seeking to prevent the commemoration of comfort women altogether. In Japanese public discourse, the issue has become a divisive issue between progressives and conservatives. South Korea's unilateral decision to renege on the 2015 agreement has led to a sense of resignation – arguably shared by Japanese policymakers and the wider public – that further attempts at reconciliation are futile. During Abe's second premiership (2012–2020), the far-right have become emboldened to the extent of threatening violence to silence debate. In 2019, the public art exhibition *Aichi Triennale* became subject to widespread controversy after numerous conservative politicians objected to subsidising the exhibition, which featured a replica of a Statue of Peace. The exhibition was forced to close early after protestors overwhelmed organisers with complaints and some threatened arson (Moon, 2019).

On the other hand, nationalism has also been a powerful force shaping comfort women discourse within and outside South Korea. Following nearly five decades of silence, the Korean state and civil society have co-opted the comfort women issue within an ethno-nationalist framework, in which powerful stakeholders enforce dominant narratives of Japan as absolute 'perpetrators' and Korea as absolute 'victims'. In 2016, the government announced that it would replace existing school history textbooks with government-issued ones, prompting academics to sign a public petition opposing it as a politicisation of history (Kang and Bang, 2016: 131). While academics such as C. Sarah Soh (2008) have argued that this dominant narrative suppresses heterodox survivor testimonies that defy the dominant 'victim' frame and precludes difficult debates about Korean collaboration and entrenched patterns of patriarchy and misogyny in Korean culture, the effect of such critique has been limited. In recent years, some academics have been criminally charged and convicted for defaming comfort women (Gersen, 2021; Yi et al., 2019).

In this cultural and political context, the Statue of Peace has become an icon for (anti-Japanese) Korean nationalism: as Korean art critic Chungwoo Lee has pointed out, the 'statue has been accepted as sheer anti-Japan nationalist propaganda, rather than an artwork with multiple

meanings, in Korean society for years' (Moon, 2019). Thus, Suwon City's agreement with Wiesent in Bavaria to instal the Statue of Peace must be understood with reference to these examples of nationalist co-options of comfort women discourse at various levels of government. In this sense, although the transnational Statue of Peace movement has consistently campaigned on progressive, cosmopolitan, and feminist values, it has not yet become fully 'transcultural' or 'global' in the sense of overcoming national and cultural allegiances (Kwon, 2019).

Most recently, the direction of comfort women debates in Korea has become even more complicated after former comfort woman Lee Yong-soo accused the NGOs Korea Council and *Nanum Jip* (House of Sharing) – two of the most powerful comfort women activist groups – of misappropriating funds (McCurry, 2020). Prosecutors have since indicted the former head of the Korea Council, Yoon Mee-hyang – who was recently elected as a member of parliament for the ruling Democratic Party of Korea – for fraud and embezzlement in an ongoing case (Shin and Smith, 2020). Meanwhile, Lee and others have sued the Japanese government for damages in separate court cases in Korea, which, as of writing, remain unresolved. Whatever the outcome of the trials, given the current diplomatic rifts, the chances of another official apology and restitution from the Japanese government remain slim.

Clearly, the comfort women issue has reached an impasse, as nationalist tropes that portray its neighbours in intensively negative terms – what historian Carol Gluck (2021: 102–103) has termed 'hate nationalism' – have become prevalent in East Asian political and public discourse. Despite the steep challenges facing reconciliation, solutions may lie in existing and emerging attempts to diversify narratives about comfort women, as was achieved in San Francisco and curtailed in Manila. The dominance of Japanese and Korean actors in the comfort women issue has meant that until now, the voices of non-Korean survivors – though they may pale in number to Korean counterparts – have been relatively marginal in these debates. The memorialisation of *all* comfort women, as seen in the inclusive design of the San Francisco memorial, offers a pan-Asian – and possibly universalist – condemnation of historical and contemporary sexual violence unanchored from nationalist impulses. Whether such attempts can expand beyond local settings and overcome the entrenched nationalism which has so far characterised Asian war memory debates remains to be seen.

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## Notes

1. This article uses a mixture of first name-surname and surname-first name order for East Asian names. In principle, authors and individuals publishing and active in English-speaking contexts are written in first name-surname order, and East Asian individuals active in Asian contexts are written in the surname-first name order.
2. A key difference between Japanese and non-Japanese comfort women was that many Japanese comfort women were already sex workers in Japan, who moved to the colonies and/or to the frontlines, while many non-Japanese comfort women were recruited on false pretences of high-paying jobs in factories or in restaurants as 'barmaids' (*shakufu*).
3. See UN Economic and Social Council (1996) 'E/CN.4/1996/53/Add.1 Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, in accordance with Commission on Human Rights resolution 1994/45'.
4. Whether the agreement to renounce all future claims to compensation extends to individuals has been heavily contested, with the South Korean Supreme Court ruling in 2018 that individuals still held the right to demand compensation from Japan.

5. Notably, the resolution was sponsored by Congressman Mike Honda, a Japanese American politician from California. H.R. Con Res. 121 2007 'A resolution expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that the Government of Japan should formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner for its Imperial Armed Forces' coercion of young women into sexual slavery, known to the world as "comfort women", during its colonial and wartime occupation of Asia and the Pacific Islands from the 1930s through the duration of World War II'.
6. Abe first resigned in 2007 citing health reasons. Abe returned to power in December 2012 after winning the general election as the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party and resigned in September 2020, again citing health reasons.
7. Global Alliance for Historical Truth (n.d.).
8. The agreement does not explicitly mention statues other than the one outside the Japanese Embassy.

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