

## The Competing Narratives of Statue Politics

Written by Thomas J. Ward and William D. Lay

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# The Competing Narratives of Statue Politics

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THOMAS J. WARD AND WILLIAM D. LAY, FEB 24 2019

**This is an excerpt from *Park Statue Politics: World War II Comfort Women Memorials in the United States*.  
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In October 2010, James Rotundo, the mayor of Palisades Park, New Jersey, a city with a population of approximately 20,000 people, made a decision that greatly pleased his constituents of whom more than half are of Korean heritage. Rotundo agreed that it made sense to set up a monument just outside the Palisades Park Public Library to honor the victims of Japan's WWII comfort women system, that is, a Japanese government-supported system that inducted women and girls into a coercive network to provide sexual services to members of the Japanese military. The majority of these women were of Korean origin. The monument in Palisades Park depicts a Korean woman dressed in a traditional Korean dress known as a *Hanbok*. The woman is being whipped by a Japanese soldier.

James Rotundo is not an expert on Korean-American or Korean-Japanese relations. Actually he has only a high school degree. Nevertheless, he was convinced that his decision, some 65 years after the war, to set up what Japanese government officials viewed as an anti-Japanese monument was the right thing to do. The phenomenon of municipal and county officials creating memorials to the victims of the WWII comfort women system, based on a carefully scripted narrative of events of which they have little direct knowledge or experience has repeated itself in towns and counties across the United States from New York to California and from Texas to Michigan. Decisions have repeatedly been made by Americans politicians with no expertise in the events surrounding this tragic chapter of history. Ironically, minor American political leaders are setting up anti-Japanese monuments in the United States, apparently having forgotten that, unlike Korea, the United States is itself directly responsible for the round-up and detention of more than 100,000 Japanese-Americans in the early 1940s. One also wonders why these American officials felt justified in condemning Japanese atrocities in the comfort women monuments while failing to mention that, even seven decades after the end of WWII, U.S. military forces in East Asia continue to use Japanese, Korean, and Filipina women and girls as their "comfort women."

This book does not deny the reality of Japan's comfort women system nor does it question Japan's central role or the system's impropriety and cruelty; however, it does invite reflection on whether or not the mayors of mostly small American towns and villages should, based on limited information, decry the guilt of Japan alone when, this book asserts, there is "plenty of guilt to spread around." Indeed, we argue here that while Japan was unquestionably the principal perpetrator, Korea and America are not without blame, especially when seen in the broader context of the misogynous mentality and behaviors that characterized this chapter of history. We hope to establish through this text that municipal, state, and federal officials in the United States, as well as non-profit organizations that work to address justice and human rights, find themselves drawn into a debate on a subject about which they often know very little beyond the narratives put forth by pro-Korean and pro-Japanese advocacy groups, which seek support in establishing monuments to honor WWII "comfort women" or prevent their proliferation.

The Korean narrative supporting the comfort women statues, politicians, educators and civil society organizations (CSOs) tells that hundreds of thousands of women and girls, some as young as 14, were taken away from their homes in Korea and Taiwan and shipped off as far away as Indonesia, Burma, or the Mariana Islands to provide sexual services to the Japanese military, for sometimes dozens of soldiers each day. Many of these women perished

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during the closing months of the war on remote battlefields including Saipan, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. Survivors of the comfort women system struggled with permanent physical or psychological damage after WWII because of the abuse and mistreatment that they endured for years as comfort women. Many lost the ability to bear children. And in Korea, a nation that made female virginity a requisite for marriage eligibility, survivors felt too ashamed to even think about finding a spouse or having a family once they returned home. They instead resorted to prostitution after the war or became hidden-away second spouses. Others lived on their own, selling Korean kimchi or other goods, trying to escape the nightmares of the hidden months or years of shame of the comfort women system that had broken their spirits.

Comfort women advocates have occasionally been accompanied by one of the very few survivors of the ordeal. These women are now in their eighties and nineties. They understandably harbor feelings of resentment and outrage towards Japan which, they feel, has offered only watered-down admissions of culpability and, on more than one occasion, has threatened even to retract those. Japan is criticized by Korea for not making an official apology and for failing to offer official compensation to the victims.

Korean advocacy groups, focusing on towns and counties where Korean-Americans have political leverage, work with local politicians to gain support for the building of a memorial to the comfort women in the venue in question. Municipalities are usually not asked to fund the monument; private Korean-American citizens or even local municipal governments in Korea commit to cover costs for its creation and design. The rationale for a monument's presence in an American town or city is that it represents an important statement of support not only for the survivors of the system who remain, but also for today's victims of human trafficking and sexual slavery. Comfort women advocates and their government supporters also do understand that the erection of these monuments, serve to pressure and embarrass Japan for not fully grappling with its past and recognizing its culpability for these crimes.

After setting up his city's memorial, Palisades Park's Mayor James Rotundo had his ticket to Korea, where he met with survivors in the comfort women's House of Sharing, a special residency for survivors, paid for by one group. Other politicians have also been the beneficiaries of paid trips to Korea. For many others, the extent of direct contact may simply be a local meeting, which occasionally can begin with a complementary home-made Korean dinner.

More than a dozen towns and counties in the United States have established comfort women memorials. Other locales continue to be lobbied to make this same symbolic gesture of support for the comfort women. These memorials, nevertheless, clearly take a full-throated swipe at Japan. The 2010 plaque honoring the comfort women in Palisades Park, New Jersey has an inscription that reads as follows:

In memory of the more than 200,000 women and girls who were abducted by the armed forces of the government of Imperial Japan 1930s–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.

Mayors, members of city councils, and even members of the U.S. Congress find themselves in the position to support or oppose such proposals. The temptation is always there to make that determination based on weighing the political pros and cons. If the Korean-American CSO that approaches a politician represents a key voting bloc of his or her city or county, the politician will understand the potential pay-off in satisfying the group's request. Koreans are hard-working people and one of America's most successful immigrant populations.<sup>[1]</sup> They have made their mark by rising to the top in law, medicine, business, and other professional fields. Civil society organizations dealing with issues such as human trafficking could intuit that if they support the comfort women advocates, they, in turn, may receive reciprocal support for a project that they value in the future. Beyond benefits that may be inured, human rights organizations would understandably be concerned about the violations of human dignity and rights that resulted from the dehumanizing policy of the comfort women system and would be naturally inclined to denounce it for stealing away the lives of tens of thousands of women and girls.

As these efforts become more publicly known, Japanese-American CSOs may also approach these same political and civil society leaders. In some cases, even Japanese diplomats may become involved, as they were in Palisades Park, New Jersey, Glendale, California, and Fairfax County, Virginia. These talented diplomats present a radically

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different narrative and contend that comfort women interest groups misrepresent the actual unfolding of events. These diplomats provide what seems to be credible evidence to the contrary, arguing, for example, that the women and girls were not, in fact, abducted by the Japanese military. They provide testimonies from some comfort women who testified that they were “well-paid” and who maintain that they became involved in the system voluntarily. They describe how the women lived in comfortable quarters and were made fully aware of what awaited them when they agreed to join the Japanese war effort as sex workers in the first place.

They may also argue that it is unfair to criticize Japan alone. They may argue that the Korean procurers of these women, and the American military officials who, after WWII, chose not to prosecute those responsible for the mistreatment of the comfort women, share the blame with Japan. They will no doubt mention that Korea created its own comfort women system after WWII. They may also elaborate on the legal complaints filed against the Korean government by women who claim they were coerced by Korean officials to serve as prostitutes in the camp towns surrounding U.S. military bases in Korea since the time of the presidency of Park Chung Hee. They may even refer to the thousands of Vietnamese women who have filed complaints regarding the sexual abuse they suffered at the hands of Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War.

What are responsible local leaders to believe? They are not experts in East Asian history. They have probably never studied the Japanese or Korean language. Yet they suddenly find themselves pressured from both sides to be judges of a chapter of history of which they often know very little. This book suggests that academics, politicians, and civil society leaders alike must assess their qualifications to decide on this matter. They need to weigh the impact that their statement of support or the decision not to support the erection of a memorial may have both locally and internationally.

The tragic chronicle of the comfort women is multi-layered and complex. Thus far, a number of U.S. municipalities have failed to recognize the need for a nuanced approach in addressing this matter. The memorial in Palisades Park, New Jersey, for example, states that the norm for the comfort women was to be *abducted from their homes*. The hundreds of testimonies of survivors, however, show that most victims were lured into the system through deceptive promises of career training and education; they were not “abducted.”

In Glendale, California, a plaque next to the comfort women statue has a heading in a larger font than the rest of the inscription: “I was a sex slave of Japanese military.” Intentionally or not, this statement deprecates one of Glendale’s ethnic minorities. Further, the Glendale City Council was not fully informed of the text of the plaque at the time of the statue’s approval, circumstances that led to litigation against the city. Council members were presented only a schematic diagram depicting the monument. When City Council member Ara Najarian asked what language would appear on the plaque, staff member Dan Bell merely stated that it would be “some general language commemorating comfort women.”[2] The court acknowledged that the City Council approved the monument without knowing the inscription’s content, but ruled that the decision to defend the lawsuit was a *de facto* approval of the inscription, even with the heading, “I was a sex slave of Japanese military.”[3] The resolution’s sponsors seemed to have forgotten that some survivors of the WWII internment camps that detained Japanese-Americans called Glendale home.[4]

America has recently experienced a deep divide over Confederate memorials. One lesson learned from the debate surrounding them is that monuments that serve to perpetuate carefully crafted, yet inaccurate or incomplete historical narratives may not survive into the future. Local politicians need to “get it right.” Elected officials, particularly local officials, determine tax rates, secure public safety, oversee municipal parks and public facilities. Local officials often must turn their attention to menial tasks such as assuring that alternate day parking rules during snow season make sense. If they act either to build or to refrain from building a memorial to Korea’s comfort women based on an inaccurate narrative, in spite of the best intentions of the parties who share them, this could backfire, especially at a time when the violations of women’s rights increasingly become a pivotal topic in the United States.

What other information beyond that introduced by Japanese and Korean interest groups should be weighed in making a decision on whether or not to support the establishment of a memorial to the comfort women in a given jurisdiction? Should it matter to local government officials in the United States that the ongoing proliferation of anti-Japanese memorials in the United States may adversely affect U.S.-Japan relations? Have the leaders of a given

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municipality considered whether or not they or the municipality might face litigation for causing Japanese-Americans to feel uncomfortable or unsafe due to a monument?

And what of the U.S. military's involvement with the comfort women following WWII? Have Korean-American CSOs reminded the small town decision-makers where monuments have been established that U.S. soldiers took advantage of the comfort stations in Japan during the first year of the occupation after the war? Is there sufficient awareness that for decades, on a large-scale, U.S. soldiers took advantage of Korean and Japanese girls and women pressured into prostitution because of their impoverished circumstances after WWII? Should any memorial intended to uphold justice and prevent future violence against women focus only on one perpetrator? Have local government officials weighed whether or not installation of comfort women monuments will lead to retaliatory memorials? Will these monuments next lead to statues honoring the women and girls in Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines who have been abused by American military stationed in those countries for the past 70 years? We may have begun our way down a very long "slippery slope." Perhaps that is the right course, but careful consideration of all the facts is more than warranted.

This book invites readers to develop a deeper understanding of the competing narratives behind efforts to proliferate or oppose comfort women memorials around the United States. The authors identify two competing narratives on the comfort women experience. One is the Korean narrative, which, replete with testimonies from victims, indicts Japan's leadership from eight decades ago for the implementation of a system of sexual slavery. It calls for a direct, official apology from the highest level of Japan's current government and for official compensation for the tiny handful of surviving comfort women. The Japanese counter-narrative downplays Japan's level of guilt, suggests that most women joined the system voluntarily, and invites skepticism regarding the number of women involved and the living conditions that they faced. It also argues that Japan has already made sufficient attempts to both compensate the comfort women and to convey a sincere apology. Some Japanese further argue that there is more than enough guilt to spread around and that responsibility for the system should not be limited to Japan.

In this text, while introducing the history of comfort women and discussing their plight, we outline the weaknesses in the arguments that are presented on both sides. We assess how those weaknesses affect the narrative and the outcome of the conflict. We point to the role of the United States in this conflict and to the ways in which America's role needs to be included in the narrative. We also call for further reflection on the impact that these memorials can have on regional security, especially in East Asia where a non-democratic China continues to strengthen its military and economic influence. Our efforts and the story we share here, we feel, expand the narrative of the comfort women. What results is a third narrative, distinct from the Korean and the Japanese rendering of events, and is what we refer to as an American narrative.

A decision to support the erection of a comfort women memorial in any American community based solely on the Korean account of events or a decision not to do so based solely on the Japanese apologia will not only impact local communities, but may also impact global affairs. Based on its catapulting economy and massive military build-up, China expects to soon rival the United States in global influence. China's November 2014 unilateral declaration of a greatly expanded Air Defense Identification Zone infringed on the territorial sovereignties of the governments of Korea, Japan, and Taiwan; in so doing, China showed blatant disregard for its neighbors. China has forcefully taken control of disputed islands in the South China Sea, and created artificial islands for airstrips and forward military placements. China also continues show trials of activists, threatens Hong Kong for seeking autonomy or independence, and provides indirect support for the military build-up of North Korea. Actions taken by American municipalities and NGOs can undermine coordinated Korean-Japanese-American initiatives to encourage China's "peaceful rise" based on rule of law rather than "the barrel of a gun" formula set in place by Mao.[5]

To conclude, we are not denialists. Evidence is manifest that many tens of thousands of Korean women were deceptively recruited or forced into sexual servitude in the years leading up to and throughout WWII. They were victims of egregious, fundamental violations of human rights during the war. We are not calling for an end to comfort women statues in the United States. We are proposing that, when they are built, they do what they purport to do: speak the truth, honor the wronged, and help to prevent future violations. Perhaps monuments in the United States that honor the comfort women should also expose the wrongdoing of the non-Japanese actors who helped to

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facilitate recruitment or allowed the system to survive the war and morph into the camp towns that serve U.S. military even today. Based on three years of research, we present a compelling case to invite decision-makers entrapped in “park statue politics” to pause and examine the impact of the past six years’ worth of comfort women memorials. The information we have compiled invites a new and broader reflection on the events surrounding the comfort women. Japan and Korea continue to number among the developed countries that are most susceptible to brutal spousal abuse. For their part, American soldiers continue to patronize the brothels once populated by Korean and Japanese women and now often staffed by Filipinas and Russians within walking distance of U.S. military bases in Korea and Japan. China conveniently ignores the “comfort women” system within its borders that is staffed by North Korean female refugees. Faced with the debt incurred to escape to China, these women must choose between being sold off as brides to unmarried Chinese males or serving as indentured sex workers in brothels where they endure daily rape and humiliation.

## Notes

[1] “The Korean American Success Story,” *BBC News*, March 30, 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-12888908>.

[2] *Gingery v. City of Glendale*, 2016 Cal. App. Unpub. LEXIS 8375 (Cal. Ct. App. Nov. 23, 2016).

[3] *Gingery v. City of Glendale*, 2016 Cal. App. Unpub. LEXIS 8375 (Cal. Ct. App. Nov. 23, 2016).

[4] See, e.g., Katherine Yamada, “Verdugo Views: Glendale Recalls the Hardship of Japanese Internment Camps,” *Glendale News Press*, Dec. 2, 2015.

[5] Mao Tse Tung, “Quotations from Mao Tse Tung,” trans. David Quentin and Brian Baggins, Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/red-book/ch05.htm>.

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## About the author:

**Thomas J. Ward** serves as Dean of the University of Bridgeport’s College of Public and International Affairs. An honors graduate of the Sorbonne and a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Notre Dame, he did his doctoral studies in Political Economy and International Education at the Catholic Institute of Paris and De La Salle University in the Philippines. He teaches graduate courses in International Conflict and Negotiation and Political and Economic Integration. A former Fulbright scholar, he has lectured at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, and has been a Visiting Research Fellow at Academic Sinica in Taipei. His research on the comfort women issue has been published in *East Asia* and *Asia Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*.

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