

Telling the Story of the Comfort Women

Written by Thomas J. Ward and William D. Lay

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THOMAS J. WARD AND WILLIAM D. LAY, MAR 18 2019

**This is an excerpt from *Park Statue Politics: World War II Comfort Women Memorials in the United States*.
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In the mid-1930s, the government of Japan established a government-controlled network of brothels, referred to as “ianjo” or comfort stations, based on a massive Japanese private prostitution network in place since the emergence of Japan as a colonial power in the late nineteenth century. The ianjo system involved the deployment of tens of thousands of indentured Japanese sex workers across Northern Asia. As Japan prepared for war in the late 1930s, its military decided against continuing to recruit Japanese women for this purpose. The government replaced them largely with innocent Korean women and girls who joined the military because, in most cases, they had been deceptively recruited based on promises of a bright future with education and respectable, gainful employment. Instead these women became the exploited sex prisoners of the Japanese Army and the collaborators who had misled them into an unending nightmare of terror and rape.

This book is dedicated to the tens of thousands of women and girls who endured such deception only to face daily, multiple sexual violations by the Japanese military during World War II. Let us also remember the empty, ruined lives that surviving victims faced when they returned home after the war. They became marginalized from society because they had committed the “crime” of being raped. Sadly, the role played by Korean, Chinese, and Taiwanese collaborators in the deceptive recruitment of women and girls for Japan’s comfort women system must also be told. Just as the Croat, Serb, and Romanian nationals who oversaw Hitler’s concentration camps did not escape judgment because they too were also “victims,” the crimes of the comfort women collaborators should not be concealed when the comfort women’s story is told.

We should not forget that the American military also had a role in all of this. They patronized the comfort women system during the first year after the war. After that, for 72 years until today, American GIs have patronized the hundreds of thousands of women and girls trapped in the camp towns around U.S. bases in Japan, Korea, and the Philippines. Like the WWII comfort women, many of these women’s lives have also been destroyed. Nor can we forget that today, North Korean women escape every day across the border into China. To repay the “debt” for their “freedom,” these women will be sold into a forced marriage or to a brothel in China. Many will face the same personal shock and terror that women and girls endured three-quarters of a century ago under Japan’s military during the Pacific War.

Human trafficking extends far beyond Asia. By properly telling the story of the comfort women and properly identifying all responsible parties, we believe that we can best contribute to a future world where all women will experience that personal dignity, respect, and genuine love that the comfort women could never know.

In March 2017, Europe’s first comfort women memorial was dedicated in Wiesent, Germany, a small town in Bavaria with a population of approximately 2,500. The monument was described in the *Korea Times* as the “first ‘comfort women’ statue in Europe,” suggesting that there could be more in the future. The *Korea Times* reported that, on the one hand, this statue along with the 60 some other statues that have already been set up in Korea, China, Canada, the United States and Australia served “as a means to promote global awareness of comfort women,” that is, the tens of thousands of women and girls forced into sexual slavery by Japan’s military during WWII. *The Korea*

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Times added that the comfort women statues also stand “in protest of the deal reached between Seoul and Tokyo on the issue in December 2015,” [1] the date when the agreement was signed by Japan and Korea which in theory ended the comfort women impasse between the two countries. This agreement fell apart with the March 2017 impeachment of Korean President Park Geun-hye. Park was the key Korean proponent of the deal whereby Japan recognized that the Japanese military leadership was directly responsible for the creation of the comfort women system and it agreed to provide some \$8.3 million for the creation of a foundation to provide support for surviving comfort women.

The events surrounding the installation of the Wiesent statue provide insight into our motivation for writing this book. In fact, on September 8, 2016, the sister cities of Suwon, Korea and Freiburg, Germany announced plans for the installation of the first comfort woman statue in Europe. The statue's dedication was set for December 10, 2016, to coincide with the commemoration of International Human Rights Day.[2] Freiburg is a city 100 times larger than Wiesent. Wiesent was approached only after Freiburg rescinded its decision to install the statue just two weeks after having announced the plan to go forward. Freiburg leaders reversed themselves because of the stiff resistance they faced from their Japanese sister city of Matsuyama.[3]

Korean civil society groups almost certainly do not plan to limit their comfort women statue installations to just one country in Europe or to just one city in Germany. They hope to see a proliferation of comfort women statues there as a platform for their narrative of the comfort women's story. In the United States, in less than a decade, comfort women statues have spread from New Jersey to California and from Michigan to Texas. And, as with Freiburg and Wiesent, city officials have found themselves caught up in a war of memory between opposing camps.

Like Europe, America had nothing to do with the creation of the comfort women system. Most Americans know virtually nothing about this chapter of history. The decision by Freiburg to rescind its plan for a comfort women memorial suggests that, like their American counterparts, European political leaders may be caught off guard and not know enough to take an educated position on the comfort women. Other parts of the world invited to join this debate may also find that they have a limited understanding of this period in East Asian history.

In May 2017, Japan's financial maneuvers with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) blocked inclusion of damning comfort women records in that organization's official “Memory of the World” historical archives. As it had done in 2016, the Japanese government postponed release of a monetary contribution of \$30.84 million to the organization pending UNESCO's review of an application from Chinese, South Korean, and Japanese civic groups for adding a “Voices of the Comfort Women” archival collection in UNESCO's Memory of the World program. The “Voices” collection recounts what women endured as military sex slaves of the Japanese Empire. It inculpated Japan's WWII government and decried today's Japan for continuing to obstruct justice for the surviving victims.[4]

On October 16, 2017, instead of supporting the “Voices of the Comfort Women” proposal, the Memory of the World International Advisory Committee called in its communiqué for dialogue between those who had submitted this proposal and competing Japanese and American non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that had submitted their own exculpatory version of this history to UNESCO in a proposal entitled “Documentation on ‘Comfort Women’ and Japanese Army Discipline.” [5] The UNESCO advisory committee expressed hope for an eventual “joint nomination to encompass as far as possible all relevant documents.”[6]

Not only the United States but also UNESCO, Taiwan, Canada, Australia, and Germany as well as other parts of Europe have found or may soon find themselves parties to the unsettled debate over the historical memory of the comfort women. Countries and organizations find themselves forced to choose between the delimited Korean narrative of historical events versus the equally delimited Japanese narrative. Through the “hide and seek” maneuvers of Korea and Japan, the two major players in this dispute, pyrrhic victories are scored with setbacks for both sides in other battles that ensue.

This book focuses on the history of the comfort women system as well as on the American experience with comfort women statues. With some fifteen memorials established since 2010, the United States has far more comfort women

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memorials than any other country in the world except for Korea. There are also numerous American cities that have balked until now at establishing comfort women memorials. These include Washington, D.C., Atlanta, New York City, and Detroit. One reason for hesitance is the strong, official Japanese opposition to such memorials. American municipal leaders must engage and decipher the truth of two conflicting comfort women narratives, one promoted by Korean advocates and the other by the Japanese government, each with active support from Korean-American and Japanese-American civil society actors. As a result of this caustic debate, players on the Korean, the Japanese, and the American sides of the dispute have all suffered adverse consequences.

Japan and the Republic of Korea are America's two most important Pacific allies in facing the challenges of a nuclearized North Korea as well as those posed by China, an emerging military superpower interested in consolidating its claims to Taiwan, to the South China Sea, and to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Because of the comfort women controversy, Japan and Korea were not on speaking terms for several years. Still today they compete in embittered public relations offensives. Viewers were reminded of these tensions at the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, Korea. At the beginning of the competition, the National Broadcasting Company network (NBC) issued a written apology to the Korean organizers and it also dismissed its political commentator Joshua Cooper Ramo for saying, "every Korean will tell you that Japan is a cultural, technological and economic example that has been so important to their own transformation." NBC took these steps after the Pyeongchang Olympic Organizing Committee objected and "informed NBC of the errors in their commentary and the sensitivity of the subject in Korea." [7]

The prime targets of Japan's and Korea's public relations efforts in the United States have largely been local American mayors and city councils, typically from small towns, admittedly not as small as Wiesent, Germany but not major metropolitan centers.[8] Leaders in such municipalities often deal with policies on taxes, zoning, loitering, solicitation, the sale of alcohol, parking rules, garbage disposal, recycling and the setting of fines for failing to pick up after one's dog. Yet local leaders have now been thrust into a complicated historical, sociocultural, and political debate on whether or not to install a statue in a city park that will denounce Japan and honor the memory of the Asian women who, some 80 years ago, were forced into sexual slavery by Japan and dispatched to military brothels in places such as India, China, Burma, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The municipal leaders of these American towns need to decide whether the allegations against Japan are accurate. They must then decide whether or not to dedicate a monument to the comfort women victims in a local park, a park that likely has no monument to many closer-to-home atrocities such as African slavery or the annihilation of Native Americans.

American leaders seem to have made judgment calls on the comfort women issue without a broader understanding of the many factors involved in this tragic chapter of East Asian history. The narratives used to lobby for and against comfort women statues in the United States provide no "teaching moment." They ignore the cultural attitudes, mindset, and conditions that allowed for this cruel exploitation to occur in the first place. Intentionally or not, the inscriptions used on the memorials indict only one country, when, one could argue that culpability extends beyond Japan. Furthermore, in light of today's massive ongoing trafficking of women and girls in Japan, China, and Korea, it is tragic that the monuments fail to inform Americans of this, especially because many of the Filipina and Russian women who staff the brothels used by American military personnel in Northeast Asia are the products of such trafficking. The monuments in America denounce the trafficking of a century past in detail using contested numbers and descriptions of how women were coerced into service. They at best offer lip service to the victims of today's trafficking and serve to fuel the short-sighted political agendas and ambitions of male politicians (and some females as well) in Korea, Japan, China, the United States, Australia, and perhaps now in Germany.

There is much that the leaders of municipalities all over the world can and should learn from the comfort women statue experiences of the United States. This text breaks new ground in studying both the process and the implications of having local government leaders take positions on competing historical narratives of events that took place almost 70 years ago. In our research, we have relied on the groundbreaking research that brought the comfort women issue to the forefront in the 1990s. This begins with the pioneering work of Yoshimi Yoshiaki who provided a documented confirmation of the existence of the Japanese Imperial Army's comfort women system and its mode of operation. Yuki Tanaka provided further elaborations on the system but he also confirmed its historical precedents and its continuance following the war with the assent of the leadership of U.S. Military Occupation forces. In this

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book, we also recognize C. Sarah Soh for her contribution to the wider narrative that inculpates actors beyond Japan. We regret not having been able to meet with her during our visit last summer to California to visit key sites there.

Our research includes a compendium of texts on the ordeals faced by the comfort women. This includes all of the testimonies of the survivors who endured the comfort women system that have been compiled by the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, by the Taipei Women's Rescue Foundation, and by Japan's Asia Women's Forum. It also includes the testimony of Filipina comfort woman Rosa Henson, the testimonies of mainland Chinese women prepared by Dr. Peipei Qiu, and the official testimony and remembrances of Jan Ruff-O'Herne, a Dutch woman who was forced into the system.

In an attempt to get a better understanding of the United States' handling of the system, we also examined the archives and official correspondences available between the United States and Japan in the years leading up to the war that are located in Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library in Hyde Park, New York. This included communications by representatives of the Korean independence movement with the White House. We have also pored over the legal proceedings of cases brought against Japan by comfort women both in American and in Japanese courts, as well as to the responses to such allegations, and to the campaign to proliferate comfort women statues by the Global Alliance for Historical Truth led by Dr. Koichi Mera.

As long as the comfort women issue remains in contention, arguments over the veracity of the Japanese versus the Korean account of this chapter of Pacific War history will be played out over and over again in small towns and villages across the United States. We have necessarily been reliant on local news coverage and television coverage of those matters. Such developments are a fundamental concern of this text. They have led us to make first-hand visits to comfort women memorials in New Jersey (including the very first comfort women memorial in the world which was dedicated in 2010 in Palisades Park), New York, Virginia, and California, including the Glendale statue and the site of the newly installed San Francisco statue.

Over the past four years, we have also had the opportunity to report on and present our findings to experts in the field at conferences in Connecticut, Washington, DC, and in Taipei, Taiwan. Our research has produced articles for the *East Asia Quarterly* and the *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*. All research and experiences have helped us to collect our thoughts, refine them and produce here what we believe will be a valuable text for scholars, NGO leaders, and local political leaders in the U.S. and in other parts of the world who are asked to take sides on a chapter of history of which they know very little. The decisions they make can lead to unanticipated social and geopolitical ramifications, and we hope to shed light on all considerations.

Notes

[1] Bo-eun Kim, "Europe's First Comfort Women Statue Set up in Germany," *The Korea Times*, March 9, 2017, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/02/120_225355.html.

[2] "Europe's First 'Comfort Women' Statue Planned for German City," *The Japan Times*, September 8, 2016, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/09/08/national/plan-afoot-install-europes-first-comfort-women-statue-freiburg/#.WsvAcy7waUI>.

[3] "German City Drops Plan to Install First 'Comfort Women' Statue in Europe," *The Japan Times*, September 22, 2016, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/09/22/national/german-city-drops-plan-install-first-comfort-women-statue-europe/#.WpHTN67iaUk>.

[4] Ki-weon Cho, "Japan Again Withholds Annual Funding to UNESCO Memory of the World," *Hankyoreh*, May 8, 2017, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/793834.html.

[5] "International Memory of the World Register Recommended Nominations List 2016-2017," UNESCO, https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/mow_recommended_nominations_list_2016-2017.pdf.

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[6] "International Memory of the World Register Recommended Nominations List 2016–2017," UNESCO.

[7] Liana Baker, "NBC Apologise and Remove Joshua Cooper Ramo from Air following Comments about South Korea and Japan," *The Independent*, February 12, 2018, <http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/olympics/winter-olympics/joshua-cooper-ramo-removed-sacked-nbc-apologise-japan-korea-comments-winter-olympics-2018-a8206216.html>.

[8] The first comfort women memorial in the United States was established in 2010 in Palisades Park, New Jersey, which at the time had a population of 19,622. The only major American city that has a comfort women memorial at time of writing is San Francisco, California.

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*.

William D. Lay is Chair of the Criminal Justice and Human Security program at the University of Bridgeport. He teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in international public law, international humanitarian law, US constitutional and criminal law, and human security. Born in Tokyo, he has traveled extensively in Asia and the Asia Pacific region. He was a Kent Scholar throughout his years at Columbia Law School, and was Senior Editor of the Columbia Law Review. He clerked at the New York Court of Appeals for Judge Joseph Bellacosa, a recognized authority on New York criminal procedure, and practiced law for 12 years with the Fried Frank and Skadden Arps firms in New York City before joining the UB faculty. His articles on East Asia have appeared in *East Asia* and the *Harvard Asia Quarterly*.