

Japan's Right-Wing Women and the "Comfort Women" Issue

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Introduction

The issue of "comfort women" – women from Asia and the Pacific who were forced into sexual slavery for Japan's imperial troops during World War II – has been surrounded by intense controversy in Japan since the mid-1990s. While the supporters of "comfort women" claim that the Japanese government was responsible for wartime sexual slavery and demand an apology and compensation for survivors, right-wing revisionists deny that Japan was responsible for past war crimes.

After briefly reviewing the background on the surge of revisionist activism surrounding the "comfort women" issue, I will focus on recent developments in the second Abe administration, when the Japanese government and right-wing revisionists started actively engaging on this dispute. I will pay close attention to the right-wing movement against the building of "comfort women" memorials in the United States, and the significant roles that Japanese women have played in this revisionist movement. I argue that the Japanese revisionist movement against "comfort women" monuments and statues in the United States has provided Japanese right-wing women in Japan and the United States with a significant new platform. I will then demonstrate that the activities by the Japanese government and the right-wing against "comfort women" memorials are extremely divisive for communities in the United States, especially among Asian Americans.

Revisionism and "History Wars"

The issue of "comfort women" became major news in Japan in 1991, when South Korean, Kim Hak-sun publicly came forward as a "comfort woman." At that time, reactions from the Japanese government and right-wing organizations were not aggressively negative. The 1997 addition of the "comfort women" issue to all Japanese junior high school history textbooks, however triggered a sense of urgency among right-leaning citizens. The right-wing activists initiated a movement to publish revisionist history textbooks, and more generally, to disseminate their version of history, which denies that Japan committed war crimes. Many in the right-wing also attack academia's accepted historical narrative on "comfort women," denying that there was any government involvement in, or corresponding responsibility for, a system of wartime sexual slavery.

The current Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzō Abe of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), has been involved in the “comfort women” revisionist movement since the beginning of his political career in 1993.¹ During Abe’s years as prime minister, from 2006 to 2007 and again from 2012 to the present, the “comfort women” issue became a major political issue in Japan, with right-wing politicians and citizens attacking the claims of “comfort women” as untrustworthy, and denying Japan’s responsibility. Moreover, due to the unwillingness of the Japanese government to officially apologize to and compensate survivors, the “comfort women” issue has become a major diplomatic issue as well, especially between South Korea and Japan. The United Nations (UN) and feminist organizations working on the issue, particularly in Asia and the United States, have criticized Japan for its failure to admit its responsibility, officially apologize to the victims, and remember this historical issue.²

Since the beginning of the second Abe administration in December 2012, the Japanese right-wing politicians have been more actively engaged in the fight over the “comfort women” issue. In 2014, Japan’s most conservative national paper, *Sankei Shimbun*, coined the term “history wars,” as the title of a series of articles focused on Japan’s disagreements with South Korea and China concerning Japan’s colonial history. The paper charged that Japan was a victim of “false indictment” by South Korea, China, the Japanese left, and the liberal media; thus, Japan had no choice but to fight against these accusations. Now, right-wing forces in Japan portray the “history wars” as mostly occurring abroad, with “comfort women” memorials being built in various cities around the world, especially in the United States. Japanese revisionists claim that the United States is the “major battleground” of the “history wars” and implicate the UN, which they consider to be dominated by left-wing, liberal forces that are degrading Japan’s honor.

Controversy over the “Comfort Women” Statues and Monuments

The Japanese government and right-wing politicians started to pay particular attention to “comfort women” memorials when the “Statue of Peace” was installed in front of the

¹ Abe participated in the LDP’s *Rekishū Kentō Inkaï* (The Committee to Examine History), founded in 1993. This committee considered WWII a war of liberation for Asia, and concluded that the Nanjing Massacre and comfort women are both fake stories (“The Committee to Examine History” [*Daitōa Senso no Sōkatsu*], Tokyo: Tentensha, 1995). Abe then came to be involved in the revisionist history movement, and in 1997, founded and became a secretary of a group of young LDP politicians called The Young Diet Members’ Group for Japan’s Future and History Education. See Nihon no Zento to Rekishū Kyōiku o Kangaeru Wakate Giin no Kai, *Rekishū Kyōkasho eno Gimon* (Doubts over History Textbooks), Tokyo: Tentensha, 1997.

² There are feminist organizations that worked on the “comfort women” issue, sometimes collaboratively, across Asia. Such organizations include the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (Korean Council) of South Korea, Lila Pilipina of the Philippines, Taipei Women’s Rescue Foundation of Taiwan, Japan’s Violence against Women in War Research Action Center (VAWW RAC), Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM), among others. In the United States, there are some organizations that extensively work on the “comfort women” issue, such as Washington Coalition for Comfort Women Issues, Inc., “Comfort Women” Justice Coalition of San Francisco, and Comfort Women Action for Redress & Education (formerly the Korean American Forum of California) based in Los Angeles.

Japanese Embassy in Seoul in December 2011. It is a bronze sculpture designed by Korean sculptors Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung to honor the victims of sexual slavery by the Japanese military. This statue became a symbol of not only Korean, but global citizens' activism against wartime sexual violence and support for survivors. On the other hand, for the Japanese government and right-wing activists, the statue became a symbol of unfair attacks against Japan, emblematic of the dispute between Japan and Korea. In response, the Japanese right has started a movement demanding the removal of statues and monuments that commemorate "comfort women" overseas.

In May 2012, the Japanese consulate based in New York demanded the removal of the "comfort women" monument in front of a public library in Palisades Park, New Jersey that was built in 2010. More than half of the city's residents are of Korean ancestry and Korean American residents had raised the funds to build the monument. The Japanese consulate's demand to remove the monument was followed by a visit by a group of LDP Diet representatives, who made the same demand. This demand marked the beginning of the so-called "history wars" in the United States on "comfort women" memorials. Currently, a total of sixteen monuments and statues have been built by communities across North America to commemorate "comfort women," call for an official apology and reparations to the survivors from the Japanese government, and provide a teachable memorial for the American public. However, the building of the memorials led large numbers of Japanese right-wingers to email their objections to mayors, city council members, and others.³

The first "Statue of Peace" in the United States, identical to the one in Seoul, was built in Glendale, California, in 2013. The Korean American Forum of California (KAFC) played a central role in building the statue, and local citizens supported the project, including Armenian Americans in the city of Glendale and Japanese Americans in the Los Angeles area.⁴ In response, two Japanese residents in the Los Angeles area sued the city of Glendale, and collaborated with right-wing individuals in Japan. The individuals also founded an organization, the Global Alliance for Historical Truth (GAHT) in order to mobilize efforts for the removal of the statue. In Japan, the case inspired three right-wing organizations to bring separate lawsuits against the second largest newspaper in Japan, *Asahi Shimbun*, known for its liberal editorial stance. The basis for the lawsuits was the paper's coverage of the "comfort women" issue, which, according to these right-wing organizations, ruined Japan's international reputation and resulted in the building of "comfort women" memorials, such as the Glendale statue. They argued in court that due to *Asahi's* coverage and the resulting "comfort women" statue, Japanese residents living

³ For more background on the statues and monuments built in North America, see Tomomi Yamaguchi, "The 'History Wars' and the 'Comfort Woman' Issue: Revisionism and the Right-wing in Contemporary Japan and the U.S.," *The Asia-Pacific Journal, Japan Focus* 18.6, no.3, March 15, 2020, <https://apjif.org/2020/6/Yamaguchi.html>; as well as Satoko Oka Norimatsu, "Canada's 'History Wars': The 'Comfort Women' and the 'Nanjing Massacre,'" *The Asia-Pacific Journal, Japan Focus* 18.6, no. 4, March 15, 2020, <https://apjif.org/2020/6/Norimatsu.html>.

⁴ The City of Glendale has a large number of Armenian-Americans, making up approximately 40 percent of the city's population.

near Glendale had to endure hardships such as being bullied. However, they failed to provide any concrete evidence of such incidents. Ultimately, the Japanese right-wing forces lost all of these lawsuits, both in the United States and in Japan.

Despite these losses in court, the controversy over the “comfort women” memorials and the allegations of bullying propagated by Japanese right-wing activists and organizations have mobilized Japanese people both in Japan and abroad to actively participate in the revisionist movement that denies the history of “comfort women” as victims of sexual slavery by the Japanese imperial army.

Right-Wing Women and the Major Battleground

Traditionally, the Japanese conservative movement has been male-dominant, with patriarchal values emphasizing traditional gender roles. Its leadership tends to be composed of older men, although there are some women leaders as exceptions. The new, xenophobic right-wing movement called the Action Conservative Movement (ACM), which emerged around 2006, is notable for the significant presence of women, including young women, as movement participants and leaders. ACM groups, the best-known one being Zaitokukai (the Citizens’ Association Against Special Privileges for Japan-resident Foreigners), strategically place women as leaders to enhance their “ordinary citizen” image. This public image contrasts with the more masculine and militant image of existing right-wing groups and the patriarchal and elderly-dominant image of mainstream conservative organizations. The ACM has staged numerous counter-actions against events run by supporters of “comfort women” and placed women at the front of this issue.⁵ In 2009, Zaitokukai staged a series of counter-actions against an educational panel exhibit on “comfort women” held in Mitaka, Tokyo; then-vice-president, and later secretary of Zaitokukai, Yumiko Yamamoto, played a leadership role in these actions. With Yamamoto and a few other women as leaders, right-wing women founded a new women’s group, Soyokaze (Breeze), initially to fight against the “comfort women” issue. Soyokaze later began dealing more broadly with other issues, denying Japan’s war responsibility and promoting racism. In 2011, Yamamoto founded a new women’s group to exclusively work on the issue of “comfort women,” Nadeshiko Action (Dianthus Action).⁶ The group’s first major public initiative was a counter-demonstration against a December 2011 “comfort women” solidarity demonstration in Tokyo.⁷ The counter-demonstration also coincided with the unveiling of the Statue of Peace in Seoul.

⁵ For more background on the ACM, see Tomomi Yamaguchi, “Revisionism, Ultrationalism, Sexism: Relations Between the Far Right and the Establishment Over the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue,” *Social Science Japan Journal* 21, no.2 (2018): 219-238.

⁶ The term *nadeshiko* refers to the dianthus, a pink flower similar to a carnation, used as a metaphor for traditional Japanese femininity. Despite having a group name laden with connotations of traditional Japan, the official English name of *Nadeshiko Action* is not a literal translation but instead is “Japanese Women for Justice and Peace,” a title that sounds quite typical for a liberal organization working for human rights, with terms such as “justice” and “peace” included. The official English name is confusing as it does not indicate anything about the group being right-wing.

⁷ This Tokyo demonstration marked the 1000th Wednesday demonstration in Seoul in support of “comfort women,” which have been taking place weekly since 1991 in front of the Japanese Embassy.

It was a female journalist, Akiko Okamoto, who initially criticized the Palisades Park monument that the Japanese government later protested against, in the May 2012 issue of the conservative magazine *Seiron*. Okamoto was also an activist in Japan's largest conservative organization, Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference), and the leader of a group that she founded, Family Values Society (FAVS). In her article, she claimed that Japanese children in the United States were bullied due to anti-Japan campaigns by Koreans, including the building of the monument in Palisades Park. However, she did not provide any concrete evidence of actual cases of bullying.

Soon, Nadeshiko Action began to work extensively on the issue of "comfort women" memorials outside of Japan, especially in the United States. The organization frequently called on its supporters to send mass protest emails against municipalities with memorials in the United States and used the Internet to organize Japanese women abroad for the anti-"comfort women" movement.

With the building of the statue in Glendale, the story of bullying spread further in Japan through right-wing media articles and books. Three members of Japan's House of Representatives in the nationalist Japan Restoration Party, including one female member, Mio Sugita, visited Glendale in December 2013 in order to conduct "research" on the impact of the statue on the local Japanese community. Sugita brought up the issue of bullying at Diet sessions once they were back in Japan.⁸ As GAHT filed lawsuits demanding the statue's removal, the stories of bullying, although not used in court, were used extensively within Japan and in Japanese communities in the United States to convince people of the importance of the lawsuits. In the multiple lawsuits brought against *Asahi Shimbun* by other right-wing groups, the allegation of bullying against Japanese people in the United States and Australia was used extensively in plaintiffs' claims. Stories of bullying against Japanese children and images of Japanese mothers struggling to protect such children were used to unite Japanese residents in the United States and energized right-wingers in Japan. Multiple gatherings were held in support of related court cases both in the United States and Japan, and Japanese women living in the United States, as well as *shin-issei* women (immigrants of the post-World War II period) were mobilized to protest against the plan to build "comfort women" memorials in the United States. New groups led by women, such as New Jersey's Himawari Japan (Sunflower Japan), were established, and women from these groups began to speak at public hearings at city assemblies.⁹

It is noteworthy that the Japanese government supported this movement. Starting with the Japanese consulate in Los Angeles in 2014, Japanese embassies and consulates have posted announcements for residents to contact them if they experience any cases of

⁸ Sugita brought up the issue of the Glendale statue for the first time on February 3, 2014, at the budget committee of the House of Representatives during the 186th Diet session <https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/#/detail?minId=118605261X00320140203&spkNum=91¤t=11>.

⁹ For example, women who are Japanese residents and *shin-issei* spoke at the public hearings and/or delivered public comments at city council meetings in Glendale, San Francisco, and Brookhaven, GA.

bullying connected with “history issues.”¹⁰ The Japanese consulates in New York and Los Angeles communicate with organizations with a history of hosting activities in support of historical revisionism, such as Himawari Japan in New Jersey and the Japanese Educational Resource Center (JERC) in Los Angeles, both of which have women as their core members.¹¹ Hence, despite their losses in court battles in the United States and Japan, the right wing’s claims and activities have not lost influence on the “history wars.” Instead, they have gained even more enthusiastic support with the help – and sometimes leadership– of the Japanese government. Moreover, the revisionist claims spread even further through coverage of the court cases and the “comfort women” issue in the conservative national media, right-wing monthly magazines, and a large number of revisionist popular history books. Many of these Japanese-language publications are accessible online or as e-books, so it was often easier for the Japanese residents in the United States to access right-wing revisionist information online, rather than other more trustworthy sources by academics and renowned journalists.

Furthermore, free Japanese-language newspapers distributed at Japanese grocery stores and restaurants in the United States also tend to cover this issue from a right-wing perspective, and right-wing organizations use these papers to publish their revisionist opinions in paid advertisements.

After the Glendale statue was erected in 2013, a right-wing organization based in Japan called Ianfu no Shinjitsu Kokumin Undō (The People’s Campaign for the Truth about Comfort Women) was established as a self-described “counter-propaganda” movement to “protect Japan’s honor.” Female members of the organization, including Sugita and Yamamoto, attended and gave speeches at meetings of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva and the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York. In addition to their speeches, the activists held events and demonstrations where they argued that the “comfort women” system was not sexual slavery, just prostitution by willing individuals or their parents who wanted to earn money. They also claimed that accounts of forcible recruitment were based on fake stories, and that criticisms against Japan on the issue are merely “anti-Japanese” activities of Korea and China. They also attempted to portray Japan as a country that respects women as a counterargument to criticisms against Japan for not recognizing its past war crimes against women, including organized rape and sexual slavery in addition to ignoring significant women’s human

¹⁰ Initially, the consulates in Los Angeles and San Francisco posted announcements that only focused on bullying cases caused by “history issues.”

¹¹ Himawari Japan’s website on bullying cases against the Japanese children, commissioned by the Japanese consulate in New York, is <https://www.ijimesodanusa.org>, and the website of JERC, commissioned by the Japanese consulate in Los Angeles, is <https://www.jerc.org/information/ijime-soudan-madoguchi/>. While they deal with bullying cases in general now, in the fiscal year 2018, the content of Himawari Japan was limited to the “bullying cases caused by history issues.” Consulate General of Japan in New York, <https://www.ny.us.emb-japan.go.jp/oshirase/2018-06-15.html>.

rights issues.¹²

Mio Sugita lost her seat as a member of a rather obscure, ultra-nationalist party, the Party for Future Generations, in the December 2014 election for the House of Representatives. Subsequently, she became a right-wing writer and activist, giving speeches and publishing articles and books on "comfort women." She also attended various UN-related events as a delegate from the People's Campaign. In 2017, Sugita won a seat in the House of Representatives as an LDP candidate. Undoubtedly, her revisionist activities on the "comfort women" issue led to her success in becoming a Diet member for the ruling party. Sugita is a prime symbol of the "empowerment" of right-wing Japanese women through their activism in denying Japan's war crimes and women's rights.

Female right-wingers like Sugita and Yamamoto, closely working with right-wing Japanese women abroad, depict Japanese women and children living abroad as the main victims of the "history wars" without presenting any concrete evidence that the movement to commemorate comfort women has caused hardship for Japanese families abroad. Their understanding of Japanese women abroad as victims may be a reflection of the Japanese diaspora's daily hardships, given the racism and other challenges that they may experience as minorities. On the other hand, these hardships are likely not the result of their imagined "history wars." They either neglect the struggles of surviving "comfort women" or portray them as old women being used by selfish Korean activists, ignoring the survivors' agency and their long-term work as activists.

Revisionism and Community Divisions

Japanese right-wing women, such as Mio Sugita and Yumiko Yamamoto, claim that the "comfort women" issue is a topic that should be dealt with and resolved by women. Yamamoto told me during my interview with her, "I thought it better to make it an issue of women versus women, instead of having conservative men working on the issue."¹³ That is, because it has mainly been feminist women in Japan and other parts of Asia who have been working on the issue, right-wing activists would like to make the issue one of right-wing women versus feminist women. Right-wing women also claim that men are considered to be perpetrators, while women are thought to be victims in the context of the "comfort women" issue, and the complex issue of sexuality. For these reasons, they claim that it is easier for women to resolve the issue.¹⁴ At the same time, they insist that the issue has been "fabricated by men," especially leftist male politicians,

¹² Mio Sugita, "Furansugo de Kinchō no Supīchi" [Giving Speech in French Anxiously], Nobukatsu Fujioka ed. *Kokuren ga Sekai ni Hirometa "Inafu=Seidorei" no Uso* [The Lie of "Comfort Women=Sex Slaves" that the UN Spread to the World], (Tokyo: Jiyusha), 302-304; Mio Sugita, "NY no Kokuren Kanren Ibento de 'Inafu wa Seidorei dewanai to Uttaetatokoro...'" [When We Insisted that Comfort Women Are Not Sex Slaves at the United Nations in NY], *Sankei Shimbun*, April 11, 2016, <https://www.sankei.com/premium/news/160406/prm1604060006-n4.html>; Nadeshiko Action, "CSW60 Nadeshiko Action in NY 2016.3.24," March 21, 2016, <http://nadesiko-action.org/?p=9930>.

¹³ Yamaguchi, "Revisionism, Ultrationalism, Sexism," 204.

¹⁴ Mio Sugita and Yumiko Yamamoto, *Josei dakara Kaiketsu dekiru Inafu Mondai* [The Comfort Woman Issue that Women can Resolve because We are Women] (Tokyo: Jiyūsha, 2017), 8, 19.

scholars, and activists. Right-wing women further argue that the “comfort women” issue is merely a diplomatic dispute between South Korea and Japan that does not concern the human rights of women.¹⁵ The anti-“comfort women” movement, therefore, intentionally promotes women as movement leaders and participants in an attempt to make the movement look less sexist, while portraying Japanese women abroad as victims of the “history wars” to make the movement seem like a necessary way to protect Japanese women and children. In addition, women in the movement see their own participation as a way to advance their careers in Japan, or to make new connections and become empowered in Japanese communities in the United States.

The December 2015 diplomatic agreement between South Korea and Japan on the “comfort women” issue, which stated “this issue is resolved finally and irreversibly with this announcement,” furthered the feeling not only among the right-wing activists, but also among the general public in Japan, that the issue has been settled. However, the agreement did not reflect any survivors’ voices, and the issue is not only about South Korea, as there are “comfort women” from other nations.¹⁶ Furthermore, as the Japanese government claims that the removal of the Statue of Peace in Seoul was one of the conditions of the agreement, it has also used the agreement to insist against the building of new memorials and for the removal of existing ones. This includes memorials outside of Korea built by the citizens of foreign countries, which has nothing to do with the diplomatic agreement between Japan and South Korea.

Narrowly characterizing the issue of “comfort women” as a diplomatic issue is in direct opposition to the widely accepted view that it is a globally relevant issue of wartime violence against women. There were “comfort stations” all over Asia and the Pacific, and many survivors live outside of Korea. Therefore, the issue is not confined to Japan and South Korea. Furthermore, members of the movement in the United States to commemorate “comfort women’s” history are not just Korean Americans. Korean Americans have played a major role in this movement, but so did other Asian Americans, such as Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, and Japanese Americans. The movement has formed pan-Asian American networks and established ties between diverse people. Ironically, activism has become stronger in some of the cities that experienced extensive protests from the Japanese government and the right-wing, such as Glendale, San Francisco, and Atlanta/Brookhaven, Georgia, where activists consciously created a multi-ethnic network of activists involved in the issue. The activists also created global networks with activists abroad, such as in South Korea and Japan. This connection was particularly salient between the citizens of San Francisco and Osaka, Japan. Upon hearing the news regarding the erection of the “comfort women” memorial, the Mayor of Osaka protested by cutting its sister city ties with San Francisco. In turn, some Osaka citizens, such as the members of the Kansai Network for the Japanese Military Comfort Women Issue, protested against the Mayor for his decision. Through their protests against the Mayor

¹⁵ Sugita and Yamamoto, *Josei dakara Kaiketsu dekiru Ianfu Mondai*, 193-200.

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Announcement by Foreign Ministers of Japan and the Republic of Korea at the Joint Press Occasion,” December 28, 2016, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page4e_000364.html.

of Osaka and support of the San Francisco statue, the activists in Osaka established a strong connection with the activists in San Francisco.

The Japanese government now places even more pressure against projects to build memorials abroad. As a result, some statues, such as the ones in Southfield, Michigan in 2014, Annandale, Virginia in 2019, and Hamden, Connecticut in 2020 were built on private property owned by Korean American organizations and individuals instead of in public locations. Activists told me how significant it is to build the memorials in public locations, as their purpose is to educate local communities. The Japanese government's emphasis on the agreement with South Korea demonstrates how it wants to make this just a "Korean project," and not a multi-ethnic American project with significant impact for a wider range of people in affected communities.

In addition, the Japanese government and the right-wing's actions against overseas efforts to remember the history of "comfort women" has been extremely divisive for the local communities. Those who support the "comfort women" memorials are sometimes attacked as "anti-Japan," and there are some cases of the Japanese residents and *shin-issei* being ostracized in local Japanese communities for their support of "comfort women". At the same time, Japanese residents and *shin-issei* in the United States who are involved in right-wing revisionism isolate themselves from other Asian communities by portraying themselves and Japan as the only victims in this issue. It is concerning that Japanese right-wing activists living in the United States are being used by right-wing forces in Japan, who do not recognize or care about their subsequent isolation from the local community.

Despite the pressure from the Japanese government and the right-wing activists, there are Japanese Americans who strongly stand against the surge of ultranationalist forces denying the history of wartime sexual slavery, including those with their own or ancestral memories of WWII internment and diverse individuals living in the United States with roots in Japan. They may see the connection between their own or ancestral experiences of injustice to the struggles of "comfort women." For example, Japanese American activist Kathy Masaoka connects the struggle of Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War II to obtain apologies and reparations from the U.S. government to the struggles of "comfort women" to obtain apologies and reparations from the Japanese government, both of which provide significant lessons to the world.¹⁷ Many activists also see the connection between their own experiences of sexism and racism with the struggles of "comfort women." They emphasize that they would form solidarity with their Asian American sisters, survivors of wartime sexual slavery, and activists for "comfort women" in order to fight against injustice. The memorials are one way for Americans, Asians and others to learn and remember this important history, seventy-five years after the end of WWII.

¹⁷ Kathy Masaoka, "Readers React: Japan Should Apologize to 'Comfort Women,'" *Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 2014, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/readersreact/la-le-1216-tuesday-japan-comfort-women-20141216-story.html>.

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