

Push and Pull:

The Call for Justice and the Failing (and Rescinded) Accountability from the Japanese Government for the “Comfort Women” Survivors

By Ava Redmond

Abstract

In World War II, women across the Asia-Pacific were recruited through force or trickery to be “Comfort Women”—a euphemism used for the system of sexual slavery enacted by the Japanese government and military. Despite calls for accountability, the Japanese government has failed to apologize for its actions of abuse during this time and for the harm brought to these women under this system. This paper argues that the “Comfort Women” issue is beyond temporality and borders. It is simultaneously a historical and contemporary injustice due to the continuing failure of political apologies and continued commemoration through statue memorials and activism. The issue is also beyond borders and transnational due to the range of backgrounds of women affected and the work of Asian diasporas.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Matt James for his Accountability and Injustice seminar, which I took in the spring term of 2023, and for which this paper was written. The conversations he facilitated and the learning he fostered in that seminar are ones that I continue to think about and will take with me as I further my education. I would also like to thank the gracious editors and proofreaders of On Politics for their time and energy, and to Gina Connor from the CIC for reviewing. Lastly, to Simone, for all her time and her effort. To my fellow authors—thank you for your work. It is inspiring and fulfilling to read your writing.

During World War II (WWII), the Japanese government and military created the so-called “Comfort Women” system, a euphemistic term for a state-sanctioned system of sexual slavery, in which women across the Asia-Pacific region were enslaved through force (kidnapping) or under false pretences (trickery).¹ This paper will focus on the “Comfort Women” issue and the lack of accountability demonstrated by the Japanese government for its systemic abuse and military sexual enslavement. I will exclude other governments from my discussions of accountability, such as South Korea, and the Allies of WWII, namely, the United States. Moreover, as the paper does not focus on the accountability of the South Korean or American governments, I will also limit discussions of the institutionalized US military prostitution of South Korean “camp-town women” that took place after WWII. Despite this omission, it is important to note that these systems of sexualized violence and rape are connected.² The Japanese government has continually failed to apologize or has rescinded or contradicted the apologies it has made. I argue that the “Comfort Women” issue is simultaneously a historical and contemporary injustice, due to the failed and/or rescinded acknowledgements made by the Japanese government, and the increasing transnational attention through statue memorials and activism. It is also simultaneously transnational and ethnonational, due to the diverse range of nationalities and cultural backgrounds of women affected, and due to the activism work of different Asian diasporas.

This essay will first describe the “Comfort Women” system and the attempts of accountability by the Japanese government, which has mainly been the use of political apologies. I will then discuss the efforts taken by Prime Ministers and Cabinet Secretaries towards accountability through these apologies, along with legal redress. While exploring these apologies, I will also look at the opposition from Japanese ultranationalist channels, along with the mixed reactions to the 2015 Bilateral Agreement regarding “Comfort Women” between Korea and Japan. Lastly, I will discuss transnational activism and its role in the continued push for apologies from the Japanese government, as well as what true accountability may look like for survivors.

1 Yangmo Ku, “National Interest or Transnational Alliances? Japanese Policy on the Comfort Women Issue,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 15, no. 2 (August 2015): 244, 254, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S159824080000936X>; Yangmo Ku, “Comfort Women Controversy and Its Implications for Japan-Rok Reconciliation,” in *Routledge Handbook of Memory and Reconciliation in East Asia* (Routledge, 2015), 262.

2 I would like to acknowledge that this is a multidimensional issue that transcends borders and time, the aspects of which will be discussed in this paper. However, I am aware that I may use language that may be damaging or recreate rhetoric about the way the “Comfort Women” system operated. In referring to victims, I try to refrain from using the term sex slaves and sexual slavery (Hankyore 2020 in Ushiyama 2021, C. Kim 2016 in Kwon 2019, Oosterveld, 2004). Instead, I use “Comfort Women”, former “Comfort Women”, and “Comfort Women” survivors. However, I utilize the term sexual slavery in descriptions of the system, and to deter narratives created by ultranationalists in Japan. I am wary of my use of those words, and of my use of victim vs. survivor.

“Comfort Women”

The term “Comfort Women,” as mentioned, is a euphemism for the women held in sexual slavery by the Japanese military and government during the Asia-Pacific War. This began in the 1930s and ended in 1945 with the end of WWII. “Comfort Women” came from a range of states and economic backgrounds—the majority were from Korea, but others came from the Philippines, China, the Dutch East Indies, Taiwan, and, notably, Japan.³ During the Asia-Pacific War, the Japanese government institutionalized the sexual commodification and systematic dehumanization of women, and this was justified by beliefs about how to prevent rape in war while satisfying male sexual needs, and to prevent or decrease venereal diseases.⁴ While there was knowledge of this system by the Allies upon Japan’s defeat in WWII, there were no charges made during postwar crime trials, despite evidence of its existence. Nowadays, this crime has been internationally recognized as sexual slavery, as these women had no freedom in the choice of work or movement, and experienced systematic rape and sexualized violence.⁵ As mentioned, “Comfort Women” survivors hailed from various countries across the Asia-Pacific region, but it remains a heavily contested topic of dispute, specifically in relations between Japan and South Korea.⁶

With the rise of democracy and the spread of ideas about liberal democratic human rights in South Korea and other parts of Asia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the issue of “Comfort Women” slowly came to light. Kim Hak-sun, a Korean survivor of the “Comfort Women” system, first gave testimony to her experiences in August 1991. By testifying, Kim Hak-sun inspired a wave of women to come forward about their experiences as “Comfort Women” survivors. Their initial silence was caused and influenced by the social stigma and shame that was attributed to victims of sexual violence.⁷ Prior to Kim Hak-sun’s testimony, few women had disclosed their histories to their families, let alone shared their stories with the world. This testimony was then followed by a lawsuit against the Japanese

3 Stephanie Wolfe, “Redress and Reparation Movements (RRM) in Response to the Japanese Comfort Women System,” in *The Politics of Reparations and Apologies*, ed. Stephanie Wolfe, Springer Series in Transitional Justice (New York, NY: Springer, 2014), 236, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-9185-9_7.

4 Majia Nadeson and Linda Kim, “The Geopolitics of Public Memory: The Challenge and Promise of Transnational Comfort Women Activism,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 45, no. 2 (April 3, 2022): 139, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2021.1954119>.

5 Rin Ushiyama, “‘Comfort Women Must Fall’? Japanese Governmental Responses to ‘Comfort Women’ Statues around the World,” *Memory Studies* 14, no. 6 (December 1, 2021): 1260.

6 Ku, “Comfort Women Controversy and Its Implications for Japan-Rok Reconciliation.”

7 Stephanie Wolfe, “Redress and Reparation Movements (RRM).”

government by three “Comfort Women” survivors (one being Kim Hak-sun), and the issue gained further attention.⁸

Political Apologies

The main form of accountability exercised towards the “Comfort Women” issue is that of the political apology, which is historical and transnational, and typically deals with human rights violations and war crimes.⁹ Since WWII, the Japanese government has given many of these types of political apologies. In doing so, Japan is demonstrating that they are subscribing to the Western-centric international legal system and a Western liberal democratic understanding of human rights norms.¹⁰ Similar to how the testimonies of “Comfort Women” began, the spread of liberal democratic human rights in Asia also triggered Japan’s apologies for their colonial and wartime actions.

Political apologies are a form of state-sponsored history that constructs a narrative for the nation, as it is an action carried out by state representatives, and in the case of Japan, usually the Prime Ministers of the time.¹¹ With that understanding, the refusal to apologize or the rescinding of apologies in turn is also a form of state-sponsored history. In the case of Japan, both forms of this state-sponsored history exist. Notable about the use of political apologies is the fact that they are not legal practice. Instead, the use of political apologies is a political practice called apology diplomacy. Apology diplomacy responds to legal demands without taking legal responsibility, and these demands are usually made by transnational groups, often regarding unresolved historical issues, especially relating to war and colonialism.¹² Apology diplomacy has become an international norm in the post-WWII era to address state-sponsored wrongdoing, and are given for specific incidents in history.¹³ Apology diplomacy usually follows a pattern, in which the responsible party denies its involvement in wrongdoing. In the case of the systemic abuse of “Comfort Women”, the responsible party is the Japanese government. Their denial of their role in this historical injustice thus provokes criticism, and an apology is issued by the same

8 Wolfe, 232.

9 Ažuolas Bagdonas, “Historical State Apologies,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of State-Sponsored History After 1945*, ed. Berber Bevernage and Nico Wouters (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), 779, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95306-6_42.

10 Bagdonas, 780–83.

11 Bagdonas, “Historical State Apologies.” 775, 789.

12 Mariko Izumi, “Asian-Japanese: State Apology, National Ethos, and the ‘Comfort Women’ Reparations Debate in Japan,” *Communication Studies* 62, no. 5 (November 1, 2011): 478, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2011.588299>.

13 Bagdonas, “Historical State Apologies.” 789.

government that denied its role and responsibility for the system in the first place.¹⁴ The political apology and apology diplomacy are offered in place of legal responsibility and financial reparations to the “Comfort Women” survivors and their families. Political apologies and apology diplomacy are set apart from criminal justice and transitional justice and instead are performative acts that look to provide redress.¹⁵ Specifically, it is a verbal performance that takes on a verbal responsibility to respond and fails to take physical responsibility in the form of formal reparations. The political apology also serves the purpose of shifting the blame for the wrongdoing through temporality. By utilizing a political apology, the Japanese government distances itself from its past, instead of addressing the contemporary aspects of the “Comfort Women” issue.¹⁶ By confining the issue to a specific temporal moment and acknowledging that within their apologies, they create the opportunity to consider these historical moments only, with no contemporary consequences.

Aside from the issues about legality and temporality that arise from the political apology, it also creates another problem. Political apologies can serve to recognize some victimhoods, but in doing so, it can obscure other victims. In the case of “Comfort Women”, apologies from the Japanese government and the search for redress often create and recreate a certain kind of “good” victim that is seen as “worthy” of apologies.¹⁷ As the “Comfort Women” issue is multidimensional and transnational, there are often different levels of accepted accountability for different contexts. What is deemed acceptable for attempts towards accountability from the Japanese government can vary for different groups. While they are all bound together by the “Comfort Women” issue, South Korean “Comfort Women” survivors, the Korean diaspora, memorial activists abroad, or Filipino, Chinese, or Japanese “Comfort Women” survivors may all receive and accept different kinds or levels of accountabilities.

As mentioned, recognition of the systemic abuse of “Comfort Women” and the target for the apologies may create another problem. The “Comfort Women” issue is often painted as something between Korea and Japan, as their bilateral relations often snag when considering the issue. While Korean women were the largest demographic within the system and Korea’s

¹⁴ Izumi, 478–79.

¹⁵ Emma Dolan, “Emotional and Gendered Sense-Making through Apologies for Conflict-Related Sexual Violence,” *Global Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (October 1, 2022): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac024>.

¹⁶ Izumi, “Asian-Japanese,” 480.

¹⁷ Emma Dolan, “The Gendered Politics of Recognition and Recognizability through Political Apology,” *Journal of Human Rights* 20, no. 5 (December 11, 2021): 614–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2021.1981258>.

clashes with Japan at a national level are often referenced when considering accountability for the issue, this has often resulted in overshadowing the voices of other non-Korean survivors.¹⁸ Efforts for redress and accountability are often overshadowed by ethnonationalist narratives and different framings of the issue, leading to different types of accountabilities that may also render some victims more visible than others. In this case and with discussions of bilateral relations on a state level, Korean “Comfort Women” survivors are thus more visible than other “Comfort Women” survivors.¹⁹ Due to this increased visibility, “Comfort Women” who were from Japan are often obscured from apologies from their government due to the attention on the bilateral and transnational levels. Recognition can also look for a certain kind of survivor/victim. While some women were recruited through force or were deceived about what they would be doing, others were former sex workers. These former sex workers, who were forced into the system of military sexual slavery, are often utilized by Japanese ultranationalists to argue against the use of apology and also to create notions of what a “good” victim and what “good” femininity looks like.²⁰

Apologies Made by the Japanese Government

Several Japanese prime ministers have specifically admitted to and issued public apologies for the “Comfort Women” system. In response to international attention and activism, apologies were issued in 1992, 1993, 1995, 1998, and 2001.²¹ First, in 1992, Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi apologized and acknowledged the “Comfort Women “in service of the Imperial Japanese Army”, which was followed by a government report that confirmed the military’s involvement in the creation and maintenance of the “Comfort Women” system.²² In 1993, a second report called the Kōno Statement admitted involvement in forceful recruitment. However, it failed to acknowledge that the government and military were the perpetrators behind the system.²³ In a similar fashion, Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi made similar apologetic statements, but the government still made no effort to compensate victims, as reparations for WWII were claimed to have been settled in previously established treaties.²⁴ Tomiichi’s apology continues to be seen by organizations, scholars, and activists as the most signifi-

18 Ushiyama, “Comfort Women Must Fall?,” 1267.

19 Dolan, “The Gendered Politics of Recognition and Recognizability through Political Apology.”

20 Nadeson and Kim, “The Geopolitics of Public Memory,” 128.

21 Yangmo Ku, “National Interest or Transnational Alliances? Japanese Policy on the Comfort Women Issue,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 15, no. 2 (August 2015): 245, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S15982408000936X>.

22 Ku, 253.

23 Ku, 254.

24 Ushiyama, “Comfort Women Must Fall?,” 1261.

cant apology made by Japanese prime ministers. As war reparations were said to have been settled and paid previously, the Japanese government instead established the Asian Women's Fund (AWF), a non-governmental private fund for financial redress. AWF distributed money to some survivors who were willing to accept it, but as it was private and not coming from the government itself, these payments did not count as war reparations.²⁵ These apologies made by Japanese prime ministers are the verbal expression of changing moral standards and the inclusion of liberal democratic human rights norms in Japan and Asia more broadly, informed by transnational feminist networks.²⁶ Other apologies include the ones made by Prime Ministers Obuchi Keizo and Koizumi Junichiro, who apologized and expressed remorse in 1998 and 2001, respectively.²⁷

Legal Redress

Besides accountability through political apologies, "Comfort Women" survivors also looked to pursue redress for their injustice through judicial processes. This pursuit of redress through lawsuits and the courts challenges the Japanese mnemonic familiarity of victimhood and discourses of pacifism in the postwar era by pushing them to take responsibility for the "Comfort Women" issue.²⁸ The first instance of this was the lawsuit filed by Kim Hak-sun and other "Comfort Women" after her testimony, which brought attention to this shift. The demands of "Comfort Women" acted and continue to act as a signal for Japan to re-evaluate its national story. Japan's national self-understanding of its victimhood due to experiencing two nuclear bombs and the subsequent rebuilding of its society has often overshadowed its reflection on its violent colonial history and the victims it left in its wake.²⁹ While these lawsuits rarely come to the verdict that the survivors look for, or the remedies they seek, they have wider implications for Japanese society. It also reflects a larger problem between Japan and other Asian states, in which other Asian states may believe that Japan lacks remorse over its wartime and colonial actions.³⁰ Being called to the courts to settle these injustices provides an avenue in which Japan can confront its national imagining. Even the action of survivors filing a lawsuit against the Japanese government can create more discourse and cause more people to

25 Nadeson and Kim, "The Geopolitics of Public Memory," 124.

26 Izumi, "Asian-Japanese," 475.

27 Ku, "National Interest or Transnational Alliances?," 259.

28 Izumi, "Asian-Japanese," 474.

29 Izumi, 483.

30 Ushiyama, "Comfort Women Must Fall?," 1256.

become more informed about the “Comfort Women” issue.³¹ When people hear that the Japanese government has been sued for the systemic abuse of the “Comfort Women” survivors, it serves as progress for the movement for public recognition. Redress through legalist paradigms also challenges apology diplomacy and reconstructs apology as a form of reparation (in the place of financial reparation).³² This demand for apology as a reparation was seen with the Kampu Trial in 1992 and subsequent lawsuits filed by “Comfort Women” survivors, in which the survivors demanded an official apology from the Japanese government.

The 2015 South Korean-Japanese Agreement on “Comfort Women” (2015 Bilateral Agreement)

On December 28th, 2015, a Bilateral Agreement was created between South Korea and Japan to “settle” the “Comfort Women” issue and resolve “[it] finally and irreversibly”—targeting all former “Comfort Women.”³³ This was met with anger from “Comfort Women” survivors and their families, as they were not consulted by either government during this process. As per the 2015 Bilateral Agreement, Japan offered a formal apology and state-funded reparations (¥1 billion) to help establish the Foundation for Reconciliation and Healing in collaboration with the South Korean government.³⁴ However, to do this, the Japanese government asked for the removal of a statue depicting “Comfort Women” that sits outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul. The signatories of the 2015 Bilateral Agreement considered the matter finally solved, but ultimately failed to settle the issue. The failure of the Agreement was solidified when it was challenged by the words of Prime Minister Abe, who declared not long after the signing that there was no evidence that the “Comfort Women” were taken by force by the military and that the one billion yen was not reparations, but instead was a humanitarian donation.³⁵ Once again, the Japanese state contradicted itself and did not acknowledge the full scope of the issue. By classifying the one billion yen as a humanitarian donation, they avoid the language of legal reparations for their actions during wartime. As described, this resolu-

31 Lisa Yoneyama, “NHK’s Censorship of Japanese Crimes Against Humanity,” *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 15–19; Izumi, “Asian-Japanese,” 478.

32 Izumi, “Asian-Japanese,” 481.

33 Emma Dolan, “Sexual Violence, Political Apology and Competing Victimhoods,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 22, no. 2 (May 2020): 187–205, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2019.1577152>; Dolan, “The Gendered Politics of Recognition and Recognizability through Political Apology,” 620; Ushiyama, “‘Comfort Women Must Fall?’,” 1262.

34 Ushiyama, “‘Comfort Women Must Fall?’,” 1262; Vicki Sung-yeon Kwon, “The Sonyosang Phenomenon: Nationalism and Feminism Surrounding the ‘Comfort Women’ Statue,” *Korean Studies* 43 (January 1, 2019): 8.

35 Dolan, “Emotional and Gendered Sense-Making through Apologies for Conflict-Related Sexual Violence,” 5; Kwon, “The Sonyosang Phenomenon,” 12.

tion was to be irreversible and final, but there is no historical finality to the politics of memory.³⁶ These processes of treaties and bilateral agreements like that of 2015 resign the “Comfort Women” issue to a historical injustice, rendering it a debt paid.³⁷ The 2015 Bilateral Agreement was thus abandoned. As evidenced by the lawsuits filed by survivors and disagreements with the 2015 Bilateral Agreement, the issue is transformed into something beyond a singular violation, continuing the need for justice, and speaks to the present and the positions of the survivors and the government’s responsibility.³⁸

The Rejection and Rescinding of Political Apologies

Survivor groups often rejected apologies by the Japanese government as they were seen as hollow or insincere. As apologies did not clarify the government’s position in the systemic and forced recruitment of women, they fell short of the expectations of survivors. While accepted by other survivors, Korean “Comfort Women” survivors saw the establishment of the Asian Women’s Fund as insincere or inequivalent to direct state compensation and was understood as a way for the Japanese government to avoid legal accountability and responsibilities.³⁹

In addition to the rejection of these apologies by survivors, numerous Japanese administrations over time have also rescinded and abandoned apologies and have continued to fail to recognize the entirety of the injustices faced by “Comfort Women” survivors. The Japanese government recreates the issue as one beyond temporality by apologizing and declaring the issue to be resolved but then contradicting or rescinding apologies. Though they wish to put the issue at rest and say they have done so, they continue to recreate the problems they wish to put to rest. As noted in the section prior, the most significant figure who has rescinded apologies or refused to apologize to the “Comfort Women” survivors was Abe Shinzō. While there has been continuous denial of the experiences of “Comfort Women” survivors by high-ranking officials in the Japanese government or Japanese politics as well as by the media, Abe denied the use of coercion and force, and denied the claims of “Comfort Women” survivors: “There was

36 Carol Gluck, “What the World Owes the Comfort Women,” in *Mnemonic Solidarity*, ed. Jie-Hyun Lim and Eve Rosenhaft (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2021), 96.

37 Izumi, “Asian-Japanese,” 478.

38 Izumi, 481–82.

39 Dolan, “The Gendered Politics of Recognition and Recognizability through Political Apology,” 617; Ku, “National Interest or Transnational Alliances?” 261.

no document found that the comfort women were forcibly taken away.”⁴⁰ These instances of Abe’s denial and others’ denial are often rooted in claims to protect the Japanese national identity and interests, especially with the rhetoric of victimhood and pacifism within Japan itself.⁴¹ There have also been consistent challenges with the rise of the Japanese right-wing ethnonationalists and ultranationalists, who often use ‘historical revisionism’ to discredit survivors. These groups have also aimed to erase “Comfort Women” and their experiences of abuse from textbooks and ultimately, the historical education of this injustice to the public.⁴² Conservative figures in Japan have also made the disgusting assertion and justification that the creation of the “Comfort Women” system was a “necessary evil but also an effective system aimed at protecting women in Japan’s occupied territories.”⁴³ Conservative politicians in Japan, as evidenced by this rhetoric, have long opposed any efforts of their government to apologize for the sexual slavery system. There is not only a general reluctance within these circles to acknowledge the systemic abuse but also attempts to justify its use. In the past, the Japanese government also pressured NHK Broadcasting to not air documentaries about the institutionalized abuse of “Comfort Women”, despite airing other documentaries about wartime.⁴⁴

The Future of Accountability: Transnational Activism, Statue Memorials, and True Accountability

When asked to consider what sort of results to expect if accountability is successfully pursued for this issue, it is important to highlight and acknowledge the work of Asian diasporas and transnational activism for justice for “Comfort Women” survivors. By organizing for this work, these groups have created transnational feminist networks that go beyond borders. In creating bonds beyond borders, they also go beyond the ethnonationalist narratives that are prevalent in Japanese conservative and right-wing politics, but also within apologies. Local grassroots actors are the reasons behind the commemoration of “Comfort Women” around the world, thus shaping and preserving an international historical memory of “Comfort Women.”⁴⁵ As an example of this activism, the first Asian Women’s Solidarity Forum was held in Seoul in August 1992, forming a

40 Hosaka, “Why Did the 2015 Japan-Korea ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement Fall Apart?”

41 Ku, “National Interest or Transnational Alliances?” 244.

42 Ku, 262.

43 Ushiyama, “Comfort Women Must Fall?,” 1261; Ku, “National Interest or Transnational Alliances?” 257.

44 Ku, “National Interest or Transnational Alliances?” 259.

45 Linda Hasunuma and Mary M McCarthy, “Creating a Collective Memory of the Comfort Women in the USA,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 32, no. 2 (June 2019): 146.

transnational network that was dedicated to pursuing accountability and acknowledgement of the Japanese government's responsibility for the institutionalized abuse of "Comfort Women".⁴⁶ The spread and creation of these networks also meant that they were able to raise the issue of the lack of accountability from the Japanese government on the international stage. In one of the first instances of international recognition, the Asian Women's Forum called on the United Nations (UN) to pay attention to the "Comfort Women" issue and the efforts to pursue redress.⁴⁷ These networks have continued to organize to bring more attention to the issue and call for the accountability of the Japanese government in its abuse of survivors. As an example of this organization that is still found today, the Wednesday demonstrations are ongoing protests that call for accountability from the Japanese government and are the longest ongoing protests in the world on a single theme.⁴⁸ These protests call for accountability and create a space for survivors to come together to mourn their loss or celebrate their survival. It is a contemporary space to acknowledge historical injustices.

Transnational activists have been able to call for the accountability of the Japanese government by not only calling attention to it in international organizations like the UN, but also raising public awareness through the creation of memorials and statues abroad. These are not sponsored by the Japanese government, who oppose their existence. As evidenced by the 2015 Bilateral Agreement, their view on the "Comfort Women" issue usually leads them to call for or demand the removal of these memorials⁴⁹. "Comfort Women" statues around the world serve as a reminder of the issue and reimagine the experiences of "Comfort Women" survivors. Like the Wednesday demonstrations and other ongoing protests for accountability, these women can be mourned as victims, but more often than not, are instead celebrated as survivors. These statues and memorials exist to combat the sexist ethnonationalism that is found so prominently in Japanese right-wing politics. It plays an affective role for viewers and acts to create an identity for Asian diasporas and a physical manifestation of a voice for "Comfort Women" survivors. "Comfort Women" statues and memorials are material, normative, and affective manifestations of history.⁵⁰

46 Ku, "National Interest or Transnational Alliances?," 256.

47 Ku, 257.

48 Nadeson and Kim, "The Geopolitics of Public Memory," 125.

49 Rangsook Yoon, "Erecting the 'Comfort Women' Memorials: From Seoul to San Francisco," *De Arte* 53, no. 2-3 (September 2, 2018): 76-78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043389.2018.1481913>; Rin Ushiyama, "Comfort Women Must Fall?," 1259-65.

50 Shanti Sumartojo, "Memorials and State-Sponsored History," in *The Palgrave Handbook of State-Sponsored History After 1945*, ed. Berber Bevernage and Nico Wouters (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), 449-76, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95306-6_24.

The creation of these memorials in public spaces, as advocated by transnational Asian diasporic activism, recreated the historical injustice as a contemporary one, rather than confining it to a specific historical moment. With “Comfort Women” statues, the “Comfort Women” issue is beyond temporality. It creates a space in which these instances of history are memorialized and creates visibility for the historical injustice.

Accountability for this issue relies on what “Comfort Women” want, and as mentioned, the different backgrounds that these women come from may call for different kinds of accountabilities. However, “Comfort Women” survivors often look for justice, which, for them, would be recognition. This recognition would manifest in proper apologies that express the explicit involvement of the Japanese government and military and speak of the truth of what happened to survivors. In accompaniment of apologies, survivors and their families often look to reparations and for the government to acknowledge that reparations are their legal responsibility. While the acknowledgement and search for accountability and redress are still being pushed for, the issue is well-acknowledged in the international sphere. Sexual slavery was not recognized under international law as a crime against humanity or as a war crime until 1998, when it was explicitly included in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC).⁵¹ The UN continues to frequently use “Comfort Women” as an example of sexual slavery and gender-based violence in wartime.⁵² Despite this international recognition, “Comfort Women” are still pushing for their long-standing demands of legal responsibility and recognition, formal apologies, and state reparations. They are facing off against the pull of the Japanese government’s continuous denial or refusal to apologize.

In conclusion, the Japanese government continues to fail to be accountable for the “Comfort Women” system. They have continued to contradict themselves, rescind apologies, or recreate narratives in which they are not fully responsible for the suffering of these women. This issue involves women from a multitude of backgrounds and has also attracted the attention of Asian diasporas. With this understanding, the “Comfort Women” issue is thus beyond borders. The temporality of the issue is also challenged—while the Japanese government’s plethora of failed apologies has tried to constrain the “Comfort Women” system to a singular historical moment, its failures to resolve the issue contradict this notion. By failing

51 Valerie Oosterveld, “Sexual Slavery and the International Criminal Court: Advancing International Law,” *Michigan Journal of International Law* 25, no. 3 (January 1, 2004): 607.

52 Gluck, “What the World Owes the Comfort Women,” 101.

to properly acknowledge and apologize for their actions, the “Comfort Women” issue is beyond temporality. The demand for political apologies has changed the temporality of political apologies from past-oriented to future-oriented.⁵³ The transnational memorials and statues also recreate the “Comfort Women” issue as one that is beyond temporality.

There is an inherent problem with the past political apologies regarding “Comfort Women”, and these past apologies have been consistently shut down by “Comfort Women” and their supporters. “Comfort Women” survivors in apologies are confined to a singular category of “proper” victimhood, often ignoring different types of victims that come from different states or economic backgrounds. Some of the searches for justice have also confined it to a matter of the reaction of a state to the maltreatment and violation of their citizens.⁵⁴ There is a highly gendered and racialized aspect that needs to be addressed when responding to this issue. Despite the failure of apologies from the Japanese state, transnational activism has proven to be a powerful way for “Comfort Women” to seek some form of accountability. Public education through activism like the Wednesday demonstrations, and the acts of transnational activism and grassroots organizations to create statues and memorials have served to be powerful ways to call for accountability. There is a lot of work to be done by the Japanese government to properly account for their past, especially with the rise of misogynistic ultranationalism in Japan. However, the work of activists internationally and the continued resistance of “Comfort Women” survivors across borders and time to pursue justice has proven that they have not forgotten about the “Comfort Women” system. In their push for justice and their refusal to move on, these survivors and activists have ensured that the world will not forget that the Japanese government has failed to fully recognize and acknowledge the role it played in the establishment and management of the “Comfort Women” system.

53 Izumi, “Asian-Japanese,” 474.

54 Wolfe, “Redress and Reparation Movements (RRM) in Response to the Japanese Comfort Women System,” 243.

References

- Bagdonas, Ažuolas. “Historical State Apologies.” In *The Palgrave Handbook of State-Sponsored History After 1945*, edited by Berber Bevernage and Nico Wouters, 775–99. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95306-6_42.
- Dolan, Emma. “Emotional and Gendered Sense-Making through Apologies for Conflict-Related Sexual Violence.” *Global Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (October 1, 2022): ksac024. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac024>.
- . “Sexual Violence, Political Apology and Competing Victimhoods.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 22, no. 2 (May 2020): 187–205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2019.1577152>.
- . “The Gendered Politics of Recognition and Recognizability through Political Apology.” *Journal of Human Rights* 20, no. 5 (December 11, 2021): 614–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2021.1981258>.
- Gluck, Carol. “What the World Owes the Comfort Women.” In *Mnemonic Solidarity*, edited by Jie-Hyun Lim and Eve Rosenhaft. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2021.
- Hasunuma, Linda, and Mary M McCarthy. “Creating a Collective Memory of the Comfort Women in the USA.” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*. 32, no. 2 (June 2019).
- Hosaka, Yuji. “Why Did the 2015 Japan-Korea ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement Fall Apart?” November 18, 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/why-did-the-2015-japan-korea-comfort-women-agreement-fall-apart/>.
- Izumi, Mariko. “Asian-Japanese: State Apology, National Ethos, and the ‘Comfort Women’ Reparations Debate in Japan.” *Communication Studies* 62, no. 5 (November 1, 2011): 473–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2011.588299>.

- Ku, Yangmo. "Comfort Women Controversy and Its Implications for Japan-Rok Reconciliation." In *Routledge Handbook of Memory and Reconciliation in East Asia*. Routledge, 2015.
- Ku, Yangmo. "National Interest or Transnational Alliances? Japanese Policy on the Comfort Women Issue." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 15, no. 2 (August 2015): 243–69. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S15982408000936X>.
- Kwon, Vicki Sung-yeon. "The Sonyosang Phenomenon: Nationalism and Feminism Surrounding the 'Comfort Women' Statue." *Korean Studies* 43 (January 1, 2019): 6–40.
- Nadeson, Majia, and Linda Kim. "The Geopolitics of Public Memory: The Challenge and Promise of Transnational Comfort Women Activism." *Women's Studies in Communication* 45, no. 2 (April 3, 2022): 123–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2021.1954119>.
- Oosterveld, Valerie. "Sexual Slavery and the International Criminal Court: Advancing International Law." *Michigan Journal of International Law* 25, no. 3 (January 1, 2004): 605–51.
- Sumartojo, Shanti. "Memorials and State-Sponsored History." In *The Palgrave Handbook of State-Sponsored History After 1945*, edited by Berber Bevernage and Nico Wouters, 449–76. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95306-6_24.
- Ushiyama, Rin. "'Comfort Women Must Fall'? Japanese Governmental Responses to 'Comfort Women' Statues around the World." *Memory Studies* 14, no. 6 (December 1, 2021): 1255–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980211054308>.
- Wolfe, Stephanie. "Redress and Reparation Movements (RRM) in Response to the Japanese Comfort Women System." In *The Politics of Reparations and Apologies*, edited by Stephanie Wolfe, 231–83. Springer Series in Transitional Justice. New York, NY: Springer, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-9185-9_7.
- Yoneyama, Lisa. "NHK's Censorship of Japanese Crimes Against Humanity." *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 15–19.