

JF Special Issue: 'The Comfort Women as Public History'

Introductory essay:

The "Comfort Women" as Public History - scholarship, advocacy and the commemorative impulse

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Abstract

In this introductory essay to the special issue of *Japan Focus* on "The Comfort Women as Public History," we analyze the turn since the early 2000s towards "heritagization" of this controversial issue. After reviewing the political, cultural and historiographical background to ongoing disputes over "comfort women," we examine how the reframing of this issue as "heritage" has been accompanied by increasing entanglement with the global politics of atrocity commemoration, and associated tropes. Prominent among such tropes is the claim that commemoration fosters "peace". However, following recent critical scholarship on this issue, and drawing on the papers that comprise this special issue, we question any necessary equation between heritagization and reconciliation. When done badly, the drive to commemorate a contentious issue as public history can exacerbate rather than resolve division and hatred. We therefore emphasise the need for representation of comfort women as public history to pay due regard to nuance and complexity, for example regarding the depiction of victims *versus* perpetrators; the transnational dimension of the system; and its relationship with the broader history of gender politics and the sexual subjugation of women.

Introduction:

For thirty years now (as of 2021), "comfort women" have held centre stage in East Asia's memory wars. However, over the past decade, as most of the women themselves have passed away or been incapacitated by extreme old age, the focus of activism on their behalf has increasingly shifted from litigation or pursuit of reparations towards commemoration. In this special issue of *Japan Focus*, we analyze from various perspectives this impulse to commemorate and its repercussions. As the history of comfort women becomes increasingly public and institutionalized, divorced from the individuals who embodied it – as it generates international heritage disputes, becomes a fixture of global "dark tourism", or becomes enmeshed in transnational feminist rights activism – we ask: what becomes of that original communicated historical experience and that original quest for historical understanding? Strenuous efforts by powerful elements within the Japanese establishment to delegitimize research into this phenomenon, and to suppress, discredit or distort related evidence and testimony, have provoked justified outrage amongst many researchers, pushing them to activism and polemic. But can polemic be reconciled with proper regard for historical nuance and complexity; or, in contributing to cynicism concerning claims to historical truth, might it ultimately undermine the very cause it seeks to promote?

At one level, the articles collected here illustrate the difficulty of maintaining a clear distinction between research and advocacy regarding such an emotive issue. They also prompt reflection on how scholars and activists (many featured here identify as both) might better manage the often seemingly competing demands of academic rigour and an ethical commitment to justice. This was a key question that emerged at an international workshop held in Fukuoka in September 2019 at which most of the papers collected here were initially presented. They include testimony from scholars involved in campaigns on behalf of comfort women, or in movements for their commemoration (Shin, Su, Norma); more conventional academic analyses of transnational efforts

to secure recognition for comfort women, whether through litigation (Hao) or heritage activism (Vickers, Schumacher); and personal reflections by an academic educator (Heo) and filmmaker (Dezaki) who in different ways have sought to promote international understanding of this issue.

This introduction provides some context for understanding the emergence of the comfort women phenomenon as a hot button issue in East Asian public history, analysing the political maelstrom that has swirled around it since the early 1990s and the research that has sought to engage with it. A critical appreciation of the political forces which have shaped public argument is essential to understanding the turn, within the past decade, towards what we term the ‘heritagization’ of comfort women - the main focus of this special issue. The emergence of UNESCO as a forum for “heritage diplomacy”,¹ with rival East Asian actors competing for global approval for their particular interpretations of the wartime past, has been of particular significance in this process.

But there is more to this international dimension than simply a convergence of nationally-bounded movements with their discrete agendas; transnational institutions, practices and discourses have also played an important part in shaping how various actors engage with comfort women history. Notably, precedents associated with Holocaust commemoration have come to influence the framing as heritage of this issue. Just as Holocaust commemoration with its mantra of “never again” is frequently directed at contemporary bigotry and racism, so campaigners have represented truth-telling over comfort women as a necessary step towards a better world: of fidelity to historical truth, transnational reconciliation and respect for women’s rights. However, widely-shared assumptions as to the efficacy of commemoration in peace-making have recently been subject to searching critique.² It is increasingly evident that commemorative public history, when done badly, can just as easily hinder as support reconciliation. We therefore conclude this introductory paper by offering some suggestions as to what might constitute *better* public history in relation to the comfort women issue.

‘Coming into memory’ - the political, cultural and historiographical background to the comfort women dispute

There is a stark contrast between the intense spotlight trained on the comfort women since the early 1990s, and the near oblivion to which they were previously consigned. In the late 1940s, Cold War politics prompted America to reach a swift accommodation with Japan’s conservative establishment on issues of war responsibility and war atrocities in the interests of anti-Communist solidarity. This precluded a more thorough investigation of war crimes than might otherwise have taken place, within a broader international postwar context in which political elites took scant notice of crimes against women (see Hao’s article here). The partitioning of East Asia between rival Cold War camps ensured that priorities other than the settling of scores with a defeated and weakened Japan held sway. It was no accident that the burst of publicity surrounding comfort women in South Korea from 1991 coincided with that country’s post-Cold War democratization.

In addition, the ground for what Gluck has termed the “coming into memory” of comfort women history was prepared by longer-term regional transformations in culture and *mores* relating to female sexuality.³ The neglect of comfort women before the 1990s does not betoken widespread

¹ Tim Winter, “Heritage diplomacy”, *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (2015), 21:10, 997-1015, DOI: [10.1080/13527258.2015.1041412](https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2015.1041412)

² See, for example, Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2000); David Rieff, *In Praise of Forgetting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); and Lea David, *The Past Can’t Heal Us* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

³ Carol Gluck, “Operations of Memory: ‘Comfort Women’ and the World,” in Jager and Mitter (eds), *Ruptured Histories: War, Memory and the Post-Cold War in Asia* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 47-77.

ignorance of the wartime deployment of female sex workers so much as social acceptance of their exploitation. It also reflects the 20th-century reality across Asia and the Pacific (and beyond) whereby, while male purchase of sexual services was generally accepted, female provision of these services was widely perceived as shameful. For poor women on the margins of society, entering prostitution to support their families *in extremis* might be construed as a “filial” act; but survivors of rape or sexual abuse impugned, through their very existence, the masculinity of male relatives who had failed to protect “their women”. These intensely patriarchal norms explain the enduring reluctance of many former comfort women to speak out.

Ironically, given the tendency today to frame this issue in intensely nationalist terms (pitting “Japanese” against “Koreans”, for example), early work to document comfort women experiences emerged in Japan, where before the late 1990s a relatively liberal political climate allowed feminist ideas to circulate. In a notable contrast with the dichotomisation of Japanese perpetrators *versus* foreign victims that later characterized discussions of the comfort women (most dealing almost exclusively with non-Japanese victims), the 1970s witnessed considerable publicity for accounts of Japanese women trafficked across wartime Asia for sex. In 1971, Mihara Yoshie, a former comfort woman writing under the pseudonym Shiota Suzuko, published a memoir detailing her suffering at the hands of the Japanese army.⁴ In 1975, the film *Sandakan No. 8* (サンダカン八番娼館), based on the bestselling books by Yamazaki Tomoko (consisting of testimony from a former Japanese sex slave), was nominated for an Academy Award. This film tells the story of a *karayuki* (prostitute) working in wartime Southeast Asia as she struggles to provide for herself and her family back in Kyushu, in western Japan. The narrative reveals not only the suffering of *karayuki*, but also their agency; there is more to this story than passive victimhood. Both the books and subsequent film, which was screened in China during the 1970s as well as in art-house cinemas in the West, received widespread attention in Japan and overseas at a time when the comfort women issue as it is presently configured, as a memory conflict between Northeast Asian states, had yet to surface.

The opening salvo in the present memory war came in late-1991 when Kim Hak-Sun, a Korean comfort woman, launched the first legal case by a former sex slave of the Japanese Imperial Army against the Japanese government. Kim drew support from scholars and lawyers on both sides of the Japan Sea (or East Sea). Her case was followed by further class action lawsuits through the 1990s, and by related historical works which disseminated victims’ personal testimonies. Kim’s story was published in Korean in 1993, and in 1995 appeared as part of an English translation of comfort women testimonies entitled *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*.⁵ In the same year, Yoshimi Yoshiaki’s book *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during World War Two* appeared and went on to sell 80,000 copies. In this context of widening public awareness and controversy, the Japanese government issued apologies (in 1993 and 1995) and established the Asian Women’s Fund to disburse compensation to surviving victims. Such measures were quickly deemed inadequate by many activists and victims, especially in Korea (Kim Hak-Sun being one of the most strident), because they involved no acknowledgement of criminal liability on the part of the Japanese state, or of a legal obligation to compensate victims. In Southeast Asia many former comfort women accepted the compensation of approximately \$20,000, but in Korea the movement pressured victims to refuse it (see below). Meanwhile, the failure of official Japanese statements to cement a consensus within Japan over the comfort women system and other wartime atrocities spurred further litigation. The courtroom became seen as a means for extracting formal admission of Japan’s violation of universal norms while simultaneously challenging entrenched judicial bias against female victims of sexual violence.

⁴ 城田 すずこ (Shiota Suzuko), 「マリアの賛歌」 (*In Praise of Mary*). 東京：日本基督教団出版局 (Tokyo: Board of Publications of the United Church of Christ in Japan).

⁵ Keith Howard (ed.), *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women: Testimonies* (London: Cassel, 1995).

The response from Japanese rightists determined the conflict's subsequent historiographical battlelines. Since the late 1990s, rightists have denied any direct involvement by the Japanese military and the Japanese state in the organized sexual coercion of women during wartime. They have insisted the comfort women system was simply an extension of "normal" commercial prostitution, with many women handsomely remunerated for their services. Such ideas have gained purchase in contexts where many male conservative elites, not only in Japan but across Asia, continue to see commercial prostitution as unexceptionable. In the 1970s and 1980s especially, both Korea and the Philippines were favoured destinations for sex tourism, with Japanese men the largest pool of clients.⁶ Into the early 21st century, Japan and the Philippines connived in licensing the trafficking of Filipina *Japayuki* on "entertainment visas" that served as a thin cover for sex work in Japan.⁷

For their part, comfort women campaigners have frequently sought to maintain a clear distinction between the comfort women system and commercial prostitution (implicitly regarding this as non-coercive), continuing to emphasise the responsibility of the Japanese state and the system's coercive nature so as to justify their description of comfort women as "sex slaves". In the early 1990s, many campaigners denied any historical relationship between the comfort women phenomenon and "regular" commercial prostitution of the kind associated with *karayuki* or licensed commercial prostitution in Japan. This stance is reflected in a 1993 article on the *karayuki*, which asserts that "these women are not to be confused with the recently much-publicized 'comfort women'", thus appearing to reject the possibility that non-Japanese comfort women and individuals such as Mihara Yoshie might share any sort of common victimhood.⁸

Scholarly interventions have, since the mid-1990s, brought into question this simple demarcation. Historians such as Yoshimi Yoshiaki, Yuki Tanaka and Sarah Soh have steadily refined and broadened their definition of the "coercion" at work within the comfort women system.⁹ They now acknowledge that modes of recruitment ranged from brutal compulsion (frequently involving the direct and indirect role of the Japanese military) to pecuniary transactions more typical of licensed prostitution as then practiced in Japan. Importantly, such transactions do not necessarily imply an absence of coercion (as rightists seizing on such research have tried to argue). Earlier scholarship on the *karayuki* had already shown that pre-war Japanese prostitution relied on a supply of girls (often underage) from desperately poor families, who were frequently indentured to their brothel-keepers in what amounted to a form of para-slavery. Beyond Japan, especially, more historians are now of the view that, as Wakabayashi puts it, the comfort women system "grew... out of peacetime colonial policies to transplant the de facto slavery of domestic licensed prostitution into Taiwan and Korea."¹⁰

⁶ In the case of the Philippines, women were also increasingly trafficked to Japan from the 1970s as *Japayuki*, travelling on 'entertainers' visas, but mostly working in the illegal but widely tolerated domestic commercial sex industry. See Mark Maca, 'Education Governance Reform and Skills Certification of Filipino Entertainment Workers Exported to Japan (1994-2004),' *International Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies* (2019), 15/2, 89-115.

⁷ Mark Maca, "Education, Governance Reforms and Skills Certification of Filipino Entertainment Workers Exported to Japan, 1994-2004," *International Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2019), 89-115. DOI: 10.21315/ijaps2019.15.2.4

⁸ Bill Mihalopoulos, "The making of prostitutes: the *Karayuki-san*," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 25:1 (1993), 41-56, DOI: 10.1080/14672715.1993.10408345, 41.

⁹ Yoshimi Yoshiaki (trans. Suzanne O'Brien), *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Yuki Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution During World War II* (London: Routledge, 2002); C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

¹⁰ Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, "Comfort Women: Beyond Litigious Feminism" (review essay), *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (2003), 223-258, p. 249.

This refined understanding of coercion, and with it the complication of the distinction between comfort women and “regular” prostitutes, has, in turn, invited comparison with the sexual abuse of women in other historical contexts. Japan during the American occupation, Korea during the Korean War, and Vietnam during the Vietnam War all arranged for the provision of sexual services to soldiers involving at least the connivance of the military authorities. Nonetheless, the placing of Japan’s comfort women system within a wider history of military sexual procurement has sometimes provoked outrage, especially in Korea, where it has been perceived as an attempt to relativise these women’s victimhood.¹¹ Clearly, there are limits to how far the comfort women system can be portrayed as equivalent to other instances of institutionalised sexual exploitation. In terms of scale and official complicity, Japanese crimes exceeded anything practiced by the postwar American occupation forces, for instance. This was in large part because of the absence in pre-1945 Japan of even a theoretical adherence to the proposition that ideals such as human rights and individual dignity ought to inform the treatment of prostitutes, or indeed of citizens in general.

Other contexts exist with which comfort women campaigners have been more willing to invoke comparison, in seeking to represent their cause as part of a global quest for human rights. The surfacing of the comfort women issue in East Asia in the early 1990s coincided with horrific sexual violence perpetrated against women during the Yugoslav wars and Rwandan genocide. International outrage, combined with a post-Cold War resurgence of multilateralism, fuelled calls to uphold universal norms. This was the backdrop to the establishment of UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register (see the article by Vickers in this special issue). Renewed faith in multilateralism and the assertion of universal rights also spurred the establishment of United Nations-sponsored commissions to investigate war crimes in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and elsewhere. Joining this wave of global activism, comfort women campaigners secured the establishment of international commissions of enquiry (one by the International Commission of Jurists, two by the UN Commission on Human Rights). These culminated in the informal, but procedurally rigorous, Women’s War Crimes Tribunal convened in Tokyo in December 2000, which involved several prominent international lawyers. The tribunal heard victim testimony, gathered evidence from victims, perpetrators and scholars, and indicted the Japanese emperor and other wartime leaders for “crimes against humanity”. Victims meanwhile continued to pursue civil suits through national courts in Japan, South Korea, and the USA. (Such suits are discussed in this special issue by Xiaoyang Hao. In her paper, Heisoo Shin also discusses the relationship between comfort women campaigning and global human rights advocacy.)

Efforts to litigate the comfort women issue thus surged on a wave of global rights activism. For scholars, this litigiousness raised certain complex questions. The Japanese military’s destruction of documentation at the end of World War II meant that evidence of sexual crimes in most cases depended heavily on oral testimony, which rightist opponents attempted to undermine by honing in on any inconsistencies in the victims’ recollections of trauma experienced during a war half a century in the past. Some scholars see the litigation process as posing a dilemma which historical research will likely never resolve. To quote Wakabayashi again: “Historical enquiry is one thing, criminal indictment, another...The victims, poor and mostly non-Japanese, were often teenage girls. Their pain and trauma did not end in 1945; in some ways it got worse... Yet at this late date historians cannot fully ascertain the nature and circumstances of their victimization; nor can Japan make truly proper restitution for it”.¹²

Moreover, the debate over evidence has been complicated by the increasing influence of postmodernist theorising in historical and social science research within Asia. The respected Japanese sociologist Ueno Chizuko has invoked poststructuralism to attack the “positivism” of

¹¹ Soh, *op. cit.*

¹² Wakabayashi, *op. cit.*, 223.

leading (male) comfort women researchers.¹³ She makes the point (echoed by Hao in this special issue) that established notions of evidence implicitly discriminate against women, since published sources and official archives have typically been produced almost entirely by men. For Ueno, the class actions launched by former comfort women in the 1990s marked a “feminist paradigm shift” which challenged judicial and academic practitioners to consider diverse forms of evidence, oral as well as written.¹⁴ Ueno has also challenged Japanese leftists to “rise above ethnic nationalism” and embrace transnational feminism, critiquing the “patriarchal” equation of feminine virtue and chastity. The insistence on distinguishing comfort women from prostitutes, she has argued, implicitly denigrates the latter and has proved incoherent and self-defeating.

Yet postmodernist theory has proven a double-edged sword for the comfort women and their advocates. Postmodernist scholars in the West - who, imbued with Foucauldian ideas of power/knowledge and poststructuralist conceptions of “discourse”, sallied forth to storm the citadel of “positivist” epistemology and its truth-claims - have generally been viewed as belonging to the post-Marxist progressive left, just as were their early Japanese counterparts, such as Ueno. However, radical postmodernist claims that historical “truth” is inevitably positional have also been taken up with alacrity by certain influential right-wing Japanese intellectuals. A case in point is the University of Tokyo Professor Fujioka Nobukatsu, whose exposure to postmodernist historiography in America catalyzed his transition from Marxist firebrand to revisionist nationalist. Fujioka was among those interviewed by Miki Dezaki for his documentary film, discussed in the final paper of this special issue.¹⁵ Seeking to wrap his revisionism in the mantle of postmodernist pluralism, Fujioka established a *Liberal View of History Study Group* (自由主義史観研究会) to propagate a highly illiberal brand of Japanese nationalism. In 1996, he helped establish the *Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform* (新しい歴史教科書をつくる会), which spearheaded the rightwing backlash against “masochistic” narratives of the wartime past. Among the arguments advanced by rightists is the claim that portrayals of the comfort women as “sex slaves” and condemnations of the pre-1945 system of licensed prostitution are part of a Western neo-imperial “Christian” conspiracy to denigrate “traditional” Japanese culture.¹⁶

By the early 2000s, it should be noted, a degree of scholarly consensus had emerged outside Japan regarding the comfort women phenomenon. Debate continues regarding the system’s relationship with licensed prostitution, and how that connection should be evaluated. There remain divisions, as we discuss below, between those inclined to emphasise the system’s uniqueness (as an instance

¹³ Ueno Chizuko 上野千鶴子, “Jendashi to rekishigaku no hoho” (ジェンダー史と歴史学の方法), in *Shinpojiumu: Nashonarizumu to “ianfu” mondai* (シンポジウム：ナショナリズムと「慰安婦」問題), ed. Nihon no Senso Sekinin Senta (日本の戦争責任センター) (Tokyo: Aoki Shoten, 1998), cited in Wakabayashi, *op. cit.*, 238.

¹⁴ This shift can be evidenced by the number of researchers who have made extensive use of oral testimony in their work on comfort women. These include Yoshimi Yoshiaki’s work (cited above); Dai Sil Kim-Gibson in her 1998 documentary film, *Silence Broken*; and Peipei Qiu (with Su Zhiliang and Chen Lifei) in *Chinese Comfort Women: Testimonies from Imperial Japan’s sex slaves* (Oxford: OUP, 2013). But it is important to remember that comfort women activism has never reflected any crude gender divide: as Field and Watanabe emphasize, men (former soldiers and scholars) as well as women played an important role as witnesses in the 2000 Women’s Tribunal in Tokyo. See Mina Watanabe and Norma Field, “Reopening the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, Fifty-Four Years Later: As Recorded in the Documentary Video, Breaking the History of Silence,” *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, February 15, 2021 Volume 19 | Issue 4 | Number 1, Article ID 5536.

¹⁵ This is discussed by Yoshida Takashi, “A Battle over History: The Nanjing Massacre in Japan,” in Joshua Fogel (ed.) *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 70-132.

¹⁶ See, for example, the work of the popular rightwing manga artist, Kobayashi Yoshinori (小林よしのり), most recently his publication 慰安婦 (*Comfort Women*). 東京：幻冬舎 (Tokyo: Gentosha, 2020): 249-264.

of Japanese turpitude), and others pursuing a more comparative, internationalist and, often, emphatically feminist approach. Nevertheless, even scholars who lament the sometimes simplistic and polemical tone of comfort women activism can generally agree that the system existed, was extensive, and constitutes a genuine atrocity.

Within Japan itself, consensus remains elusive and the public battle over comfort women history continues. Since the early 2000s, and especially since 2012 when Abe Shinzo returned to the premiership, denialists have had the upper hand in domestic debate, as the relative openness of the 1990s has been reversed. As Vickers notes in his paper for this special issue, school textbooks now almost entirely ignore the comfort women (in stark contrast to the situation in the mid-1990s, when most did). And although Hao, in her paper, argues that litigation in the 1990s and early 2000s helped place comfort women's experience on the public record, the impact on public consciousness within Japan has been slight. Whereas, in the mid-1990s, Japan's official statements of regret and the provision of reparations were coupled with commitments to educate future generations, today the opposite is true. The 2015 Japan-Korea agreement, which aimed at finally settling the comfort women issue, featured no Japanese promise to permit discussion of the issue in school textbooks (or by the public broadcaster, NHK); instead, the expected *quid pro quo* for Japanese compensation payments was the removal of a commemorative comfort woman statue in front of Japan's Seoul embassy. Japan's aim was clearly to bury the comfort women, not to commemorate them.

This, then, is the recent context in which many comfort women campaigners have shifted their focus away from litigation towards heritage-making. But questions arise as to what this latest turn means for evidence, nuance, context and historical understanding - as well as for the activists' declared objectives of reconciliation, dignity for the victims (*in memoriam*), and heightened consciousness of women's rights. It is to a more detailed examination of these questions that we now turn.

Comfort women as heritage: the re-making of public memory

By December 2011, when campaigners in Seoul erected the aforementioned comfort woman statue outside Japan's embassy, litigation had reached a dead end. As Hao shows, though Japanese courts did not necessarily reject victims' testimony, they declined to find the Japanese state liable for their suffering. Meanwhile, survivors were steadily passing away or, incapacitated by age, were unable to continue pursuing lawsuits. The dwindling number of survivors was highlighted in the numerical titles of two widely-circulated Chinese documentaries by director Guo Ke: *Thirty-two* (2012) and *Twenty-two* (2017).¹⁷ The widespread screening of these films testified to Beijing's increasing willingness under Xi Jinping to "weaponize" comfort women history. Before 2013, China's promotion of the comfort women's cause had been extremely limited, though from 2007 there was some coverage of the issue in the revamped Nanjing Massacre Memorial, and a traveling exhibit designed with help from Japanese activists toured the country from 2009-2012 (see Hao's paper here). This changed with Xi Jinping's ascendancy, as intensifying tension between Japan and both China and Korea over a range of issues, encompassing territorial disputes as well as war-related grievances, boosted official support for the heritagization of comfort women.

Officially-sanctioned commemoration in China lent momentum to a wider shift in activism from courtroom to museum or monument, with the fight for truth and justice increasingly conducted through symbols. As Vickers notes in his paper for this special issue, comfort women heritage-making now extends from the carefully curated exhibitions mounted by the Women's Active Museum (WAM) in Tokyo (notable for their extensive efforts at contextualisation), through the

¹⁷ For both, Su Zhiliang (a contributor to this special issue) served as an advisor.

relatively restrained narrative of the Ama House Museum in Taipei (pointedly eschewing anti-Japanese invective), to China's officially-approved exhibitions focusing exclusively on the wartime period and on Japanese-as-perpetrators (although even in those Chinese memorials, the propagandistic slant appears less pronounced or blatant than at other official war-related museums).¹⁸

This shift to heritagization has also involved appeals to UNESCO, which through its role in certifying heritage as of "universal" significance has emerged, in effect, as an international court for commemorative justice. Campaigners featured in this special issue have been heavily involved in such efforts. The opening of the Nanjing Comfort Women Museum was timed to coincide with the submission of a Chinese application, with which Su Zhiliang was closely involved, to inscribe comfort women-related documents on UNESCO's Memory of the World Register (MOW). Su, as inaugural director of that museum, subsequently participated in the preparation of a second application to MOW, involving a broad international coalition chaired by Heisoo Shin. Their contributions to this special issue detail these efforts to achieve symbolic justice through memorialization.

Shin's account shows how the failure of the 2015 Japan-Korea Agreement - the last gasp of bilateral reparations diplomacy - energized Korean campaigners on behalf of comfort women (and helped mobilize opposition to the conservative administration of President Park Geun-hye, which collapsed amidst a corruption scandal in early 2017). Korean activists were by this stage already planning to submit an application to MOW; outrage at the 2015 deal reinforced a shift from reparation seeking to memorialization that was already underway. Shin also testifies to the sometimes tense relations between activists and state officials, and to the diplomatic complexity of navigating a contentious application through UNESCO. As Vickers argues in his paper, this process has laid bare the tensions between UNESCO's claims to function as a global forum for objective "expertise" and its financial and political reliance on the support of key member states, notably Japan and China. Shin's account shows how attempts by UNESCO officials to tone down the more contentious language of the MOW application (involving comparisons with the Holocaust, for example) were ultimately insufficient to placate Japanese opposition, which has so far succeeded in blocking inscription.

All of which underlines Jan Assmann's observation that as victims or participants pass away, the enduring mnemonic afterlife of their experiences is shaped by institutional support: "the durability of memories depends on the durability of social bonds and 'frames'".¹⁹ Assmann describes such a process of institutionalization as a shift from "communicative" to "cultural" memory. Unlike the "social memory" formed through communication with eyewitnesses, "cultural memory" is "exteriorized, objectified and stored away in symbolic forms that... may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another."²⁰ This transmigration of memory from the realm of lived experience to that of cultural institutions inevitably involves some loss of nuance. Drawing comparisons with the emergence of religious traditions, Assmann argues that the keepers of the sacred flame - scholars, priests or politicians - transmit a version of memory whose purchase on collective consciousness depends on institutionalized narratives of identity.²¹

¹⁸ See Vickers 2019, op. cit. for a fuller discussion of Chinese comfort women exhibitions.

¹⁹ Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," in Peter Meusburger, Michael Heffernan, Edgar Wunder, *Cultural Memories. The Geographical Point of View* (Knowledge and Space 4) Dordrecht; Heidelberg; London; New York 2011, S. 15-27; p. 18.

²⁰ Ibid., 17.

²¹ He is vague, however, as to the distinction (if any) between this "cultural memory" and history as a scholarly discipline.

In the comfort women case, institutionalization has equally served to diminish, limit or even reverse the purchase of their memories on public consciousness. In this respect, UNESCO-focused heritage diplomacy over the issue is again revealing. South Korea's authorities, under pressure from comfort women activists, have offered varying support for such UNESCO efforts depending, partly, on which party has been in power and how far it has allied itself with civil society movements. China's government, having from 2013 weaponized the comfort women issue within the context of rising tensions with Japan, reversed course in 2018, cancelling at short notice a conference Su Zhiliang was due to host in Shanghai. Beijing then sought collaboration with Japan in resisting President Trump's "trade war"; official support for comfort women campaigners was duly dropped as the price for better relations with the Abe administration (see Vickers' paper). A different pattern has been evident in Southeast Asia, where countries subjected to wartime occupation by Japan extracted what was often portrayed locally as reparations-by-proxy (in the form of export credits or overseas aid) from the 1950s through to the 1980s.²² Most of these nations' governments have subsequently proven unwilling to lend their support to international comfort women campaigns. States such as Singapore, which since the 1980s has institutionalized these women's stories as part of its official national story as told in state museums and textbooks, have simultaneously consigned the issue definitively to the past, implicitly regarding it as settled.²³ It is notable that, amongst Southeast Asian countries, only groups from the Philippines and Timor-Leste participated in the transnational campaign to inscribe the *Voices of the Comfort Women* archive on the MOW Register.²⁴

In the comfort women case, Assman's observation concerning the inevitable loss of nuance in institutionalized historical narratives also seems apt. Memorialization efforts have typically prioritized affective impact over historical complexity, homogenizing the past into a recognizable and digestible package where the diversity of historical experience is largely erased. The statue of an innocent young girl outside Japan's Seoul Embassy has rapidly become the archetypal comfort woman image deployed in campaigns across the world, appearing in at least 10 locations outside Korea, including: Glendale, California in 2013; Shanghai in 2016; San Francisco and New York in 2017; Melbourne in 2019, and Berlin in 2020, where the statue also toured the city on public transport. At the Nanjing comfort women memorial in Liji Alley (opened in 2015), acrylic tears adorn the walls of the building, while, inside, a bronze bust of Kim Hak-soon, the first Korean former comfort woman to speak out (in 1991), leaks artificial tears that visitors are invited to wipe away (towels are provided). Here, visitors are offered an emotional, and emotionally manipulative, substitute for engagement with actual survivors. Just as the plaster saints in a medieval cathedral were more amenable to clerical manipulation than their living, breathing originals, so the martyrdom of the comfort women becomes repackaged as a simple morality tale in the absence of the victims themselves.

[Insert around here: Figure 1 - Comfort women statue with acrylic tears at the Liji Alley Comfort Women Memorial, Nanjing]

Clearly, this commodification of comfort women history says as much about the impact of global heritage tourism, particularly 'dark tourism', as it does about the process of institutionalization as such. The Asian boom in national, regional and international tourism has fuelled a rapid expansion and commercialization of the heritage sector. The spread of comfort women statues, museums and

²² Typically state to state arrangements which Japan did not acknowledge as war reparations, but locally touted as such, in the form of aid, development loans, or in Malaysia's case naval ships.

²³ When a WARMAP conference was held at the National Museum of Singapore in late 2017, approval was withheld for an invitation to Su Zhiliang to attend as a keynote speaker. This conference coincided with the controversy over the *Voices of the Comfort Women* application to the UNESCO MOW Register.

²⁴ In 2018, the Philippines government, at the request of the Japanese Embassy, ordered the removal of a comfort woman statue that had been erected on the coastal path along Manila Bay.

memorials is, in part, testimony to the global rise of competitive atrocity commemoration, as various aspiring Asian states and cities strive for their place on the world heritage map. In China, comfort women have been belatedly inserted into a commemorative landscape shaped by a patriotic education campaign which (since the 1980s) has promoted pilgrimages to sites of wartime Japanese atrocities. What distinguishes the Nanjing Comfort Women Museum, opened in 2015, is its orientation to a primarily international audience. Unlike the Nanjing Massacre Memorial (of which it is formally a branch), the Comfort Women Museum remains off-limits to under-18s, and thus to school children, typically the primary targets of patriotic education. It instead deploys the rhetoric of the world peace museum (linking representation of atrocities to “never again” exhortation), while its exhibits affirm the global significance of the comfort women phenomenon, which is presented through striking yet familiar sculptural iconography, packaged for wider dissemination through a well-stocked gift shop.

Informing the heritagization of the comfort women along with that of other atrocities of Asia’s World War Two is the paradigm of Holocaust commemoration. Holocaust remembrance has influenced East Asian commemorative practice ever since Japanese peace activists in the 1960s sought to “twin” collective memories of Auschwitz and Hiroshima.²⁵ But it is the symbolism the Holocaust has attained in American public culture since the 1970s that has turbocharged the Asian fashion for invoking it, especially as nation-states and municipal authorities go in search of the global tourist dollar. Through exhibitions, education and competition for UNESCO recognition, China and Japan have vied to publicize their roles in rescuing European Jews; in 2015, Sugihara Chiune, the Japanese “Schindler”, who as a diplomat in wartime Lithuania assisted the escape of 6000 Jews to Japanese-controlled territories, guest-starred in a Japanese leg of a global roadshow of Anne Frank exhibitions. Meanwhile, Shanghai has sought to burnish its reputation as a cosmopolitan global metropolis by highlighting its wartime role as a haven for Jewish refugees from Europe.²⁶

The influence of the Holocaust paradigm has extended to comfort women commemoration. As both Heisoo Shin and Su Zhiliang’s contributions to this special issue evidence, for East Asian campaigners striving to claim international heritage status for the comfort women, the Holocaust has come to assume an almost totemic significance, featuring in renewed efforts to twin global histories of victimhood. In 2018-19, Taipei’s comfort women museum, the Ama House, hosted another touring exhibit on Anne Frank. The intention there was doubtless educational as much as commercial or diplomatic, and broadly informed by the feminist agenda of the foundation that runs the Ama House. Yet, apart from the coincidence of their contemporaneity, arguably the only characteristics that Anne Frank and the comfort women share are their gender and status as victims.

The transnational entanglements of comfort women activism

The transformation of comfort women into heritage symbols has also coincided with the increased entanglement of their history in various forms of transnational rights activism involving feminists, diaspora activists and others. In the USA, as Schumacher explores here, comfort women campaigns have produced new alliances within the wider Asian diaspora. For example, Chinese-American activists in San Francisco, long frustrated in their attempts to establish a local Nanjing Massacre memorial, channeled their energies into erecting a comfort women statue, collaborating for this purpose with Korean-American groups. As this American experience and the hitherto frustrated transnational campaign for UNESCO recognition reveal, such joint-activism has

²⁵ Ran Zwigenberg, *Hiroshima: The Origins of Global Memory Culture*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²⁶ Edward Vickers, “Remembering and Forgetting War and Occupation in the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong and Taiwan,” in Patrick Finney (ed.), *Remembering the Second World War* (London and New York, Routledge, 2018), 52-54.

frequently been beset by divergent priorities, ideological assumptions and tactical calculations. Both Schumacher and Dezaki note here how comfort women commemoration in the USA has become embroiled in the fraught world of American identity politics. This may be symptomatic of what the author Susan Neiman describes as the elevation of “competitive victimhood” to the status of a “major sport” in the USA.²⁷ Yet in the context of a white supremacist backlash against all Americans “of colour”, might not a revival of pan-Asian solidarity (inclusive of all East Asian diasporas, including the Japanese) appear more urgent?

Other activists have harnessed the comfort women issue to contemporary global campaigns against prostitution, pornography and discrimination against women. Caroline Norma, whose translation of Morita Seiya’s essay appears in this special issue, portrays the comfort women system as one manifestation, albeit an extreme one, of the systematic patriarchal oppression of women. As an activist, Norma has campaigned for the abolition of the commercial sex industry, and, articulating a radical feminist critique of marriage as an institution, has criticized calls for “marriage equality” on behalf of gays and lesbians, thereby attracting a storm of invective from feminist and LGBTQ circles in Australia. In an instance of “cancel culture”, Norma found herself boycotted at the 2018 “Historical Materialism Sydney Conference” by scholars protesting at what they characterized as her “transphobia” and “anti-sex worker rhetoric”.²⁸ More immediate to our present discussion is the “paradigm shift” in comfort women scholar-activism Norma speaks for, led by prominent Japanese feminists such as Onozawa Akane and Kitahara Minori, which invokes the historic trauma experienced by these victims in contemporary debates about the decriminalization of prostitution.²⁹ The status of prostitution became a full-blown conflict within the global feminist movement when in 2016, much to the consternation of abolitionists such as Norma, Amnesty International announced a new policy supporting decriminalization in order to protect, as it put it, the “human rights of sex workers”.³⁰

Steering wide of that internecine conflict within global feminism, Heisoo Shin’s contribution frames efforts to commemorate the comfort women as part of an ongoing struggle on behalf of female victims of wartime sexual violence. This is consistent with the approach adopted by many activists since the 1990s. As Hao’s analysis of litigation shows, victims’ lawyers often stressed connections with more recent cases of sexual violence in wartime, underlining points of principle concerning women’s rights and their judicial enforcement (the testimony offered in these cases itself became part of the *Voices of the Comfort Women* archive submitted to UNESCO in 2016). Comfort women campaigners have persistently sought to draw parallels with what they see as equivalent atrocities, as both Shin’s account and Dezaki’s documentary film illustrate. For example, the initial application to UNESCO’s MOW Register invoked comparisons with the Holocaust of the Jews and the Cambodian genocide.

Tracing and unpicking these entanglements is important if we are to fully understand the complex dynamics of heritagization and the public history it produces: why an issue such as the comfort women becomes the focus of commemoration in particular places at particular times, while simultaneously provoking active hostility in certain quarters. Such entanglements also raise questions concerning how comfort women’s stories are understood and reinterpreted in new contexts, for new audiences. New possibilities in terms of elevated symbolism and global

²⁷Susan Neiman, *Learning from the Germans*. (London: Penguin Random House, 2019), 265. Originally, Chinese-American activists in San Francisco began campaigning for their local Nanjing Massacre memorial at around the same time as the Californian writer, Iris Chang sought to establish the global status of the Nanjing Massacre as China’s “Forgotten Holocaust”.

²⁸ Karishma Luthria, Liam Thorne and Annie Zhang, “Academic Boycott of Caroline Norma at USyd Conference”, *Honi Soit*. www.honisoit.com (2018) (accessed December 1, 2020).

²⁹ <https://apjff.org/2017/19/Norma.html>

³⁰ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-05-23/norma-do-men-have-a-right-to-prostitutes/5471458>;

recognition bring with them numerous potential pitfalls. On the one hand, a wider lens, illuminating systems of patriarchy, coercion and sex trafficking in peacetime and wartime, and complicating distinctions between comfort women and “regular” prostitutes, constitutes good research. But attempts to co-opt victims for radical feminist campaigning risk justifiable accusations of anachronism, threatening to simplify and homogenize their experience at the expense of historical understanding (and of wider credibility). Recent efforts to link the comfort women to the global #Me Too movement speak volumes about the global dynamics (and dangers) of competitive victimhood.³¹ In 2019, stickers proclaiming “Me Too With You”, depicting the iconic comfort woman statue seated next to an empty chair, were distributed by campaigners in Korea and elsewhere, in an apparent effort to topicalize comfort women and appeal to a younger generation. Yet for those unable to see the immediate parallels between the casting couch and the comfort station, or between Harvey Weinstein and the Imperial Japanese Army, such efforts risk trivializing the traumas experienced by the women exposed to both.

In addition, recruiting comfort women to the cause of global radical feminism raises difficulties of tactics as well as principle. That the challenge to “patriarchy” has been taken up by some activists in East Asia should give pause to those inclined to dismiss this perspective as intrinsically “Western”, and thus alien. As we have seen, the beginnings of comfort women activism in Japan, from the 1960s onwards, were entangled with discussion of the *karayuki-san*, and were championed by leftist and feminist groups whose larger target was the conservative postwar establishment. (A similar pattern obtained later on, in South Korea, where many leading advocates of justice for former comfort women were staunch opponents of the inherently patriarchal conservative-military establishment, widely seen as tainted by association with Japan.) But while the shock of radical feminist critique may prove salutary for some, considered tactically, it risks polarization or alienation of mainstream opinion in societies where many remain wedded to a vision of “traditional” values. For all that a radical challenge to traditional views of gender roles and sexuality may be desirable and necessary, if the overriding goal is to achieve justice for the comfort women themselves, then a more moderate brand of feminism may stand a better chance of gaining traction with the broader public.

[Insert around here: Figure 2: Sticker associating comfort women activism with the Me Too Movement, 2019.]

A better public history? The case for context, complexity and accuracy

Campaigners on behalf of comfort women have faced dismissal, ridicule and much worse over several decades, especially at the hands of Japanese rightists. The success of powerful nationalist politicians and lobby groups in silencing critical voices and intimidating the media can be hard for many outside Japan - bamboozled by its misleading self-description as a “liberal democracy” - to comprehend. After long years of struggle, activists still find themselves confronted by a wall of Japanese ignorance and apathy seemingly more impenetrable than ever, just as the last surviving comfort women are passing away. The need to maintain the struggle, to honour the memory of these long-neglected women even after they have gone, is viscerally felt by comfort women activists.

³¹ Efforts noted in Dezaki’s documentary film, *Shusenjo*. See also Esther Brito Ruiz, “Before #Me Too, There Were The ‘Comfort Women’”, *The Diplomat*. (www.thediplomat.com, January 10, 2020). Accessed December 8, 2020.

That feeling is reinforced when the chorus of rightist denialism in Japan is boosted by endorsement from influential Westerners - perhaps none more so than Mark Ramseyer of Harvard University, holder of the most prestigious chair in Japanese Law outside Japan itself. Ramseyer, who in 2018 was awarded the Order of the Rising Sun by a grateful Abe administration, argues that “licensed prostitution” and the comfort women system alike were governed by “the logic of the credible commitments... basic to elementary game theory.”³² Dismissing claims that coercion played any significant role in the recruitment or management of comfort women, he portrays them as autonomous agents bargaining over their contracts in a market regulated by military authorities concerned, above all, to prevent debilitation of their troops by venereal disease. Ramseyer’s work underlines the impossibility of drawing a neat line between the comfort women system and the established practice of licensed prostitution. But in his determination to reject all suggestions that the system was oppressive, he relies on highly selective evidence, failing to engage seriously with the work of Yoshimi, Tanaka, Soh or others who have adumbrated a nuanced but nonetheless damning account of the wartime Japanese military’s active complicity in organizing and maintaining mass sexual subjugation. In using “game theory” as an explanatory framework, he also ignores the dynamics of power affecting the impoverished, and often illiterate, women and girls involved in both the comfort women system and “regular” licensed prostitution. Of the former *karayuki* interviewed by Yamazaki Tomoko (and featured in *Sandakan No. 8*), he writes that “the recruiter did not try to trick her; even at age 10, she knew what the job entailed.”³³

We may well sympathize, then, with campaigners who view calls for nuance and complexity that come from the academy with suspicion. At the best of times, nuance in public history can be hard to sustain, for reasons we note above. The urge to memorialize typically involves a moralizing impulse that is impatient of complexity - an impatience intensified today by the drive to compete for notice in the burgeoning memory marketplace. Even where campaigners acknowledge complexity, they often calculate that only simple messaging can hold public attention. Their fear is that nuance may offer a lever to opponents determined to sow confusion. In November 2018, Vickers (one of the present co-authors) spoke at a conference convened in Tokyo by the campaign for MOW registration, where he delivered a preliminary version of his essay in this special issue. Asked by a prominent Korean activist about his planned remarks, he explained that he would critique the narrow focus of most comfort women museums and put the case for broader contextualization. Hearing this, she expressed strong misgivings at any blurring of the laser-like focus on the iniquity of the Japanese military, for fear of playing into the hands of rightists in Japan keen to muddy the historical waters. Placing the comfort women system in comparative context, even if academically justified, was felt to be a moral betrayal. As the Irish historian Anne Dolan has observed, the aims of commemoration and historical scholarship are often opposed, for the professional historian *must* raise complexities and consider questions that others might prefer put to rest.³⁴

But we argue that it is this very retreat from nuance, complexity and the critical scholarly eye that endangers the comfort women campaign at this crucial moment. Dezaki’s documentary *Shusenjo* shows how public debate over the comfort women is bedevilled by accusations that opponents are merely twisting history to serve their own agenda. Revisionists on Japan’s nationalist right have invoked the fashionable postmodernist notion of positionality both to encourage cynicism concerning the very idea of historical truth, and to justify their view that self-respecting Japanese

³² J. Mark Ramseyer, “Contracting for sex in the Pacific War,” *International Review of Law and Economics*, 65 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.irle.2020.105971>, 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁴ See Dolan’s powerful public reflections on plans to commemorate Ireland’s decade of war and revolution (1912-23) <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/president-michael-d-higgins-announces-series-of-centenary-lectures-1.4414076>. For Dolan’s talk see <https://www.rte.ie/player/movie/machnamh-100/166390312400?extraguid=PI000016351>.

should reject any narrative that impugns national honour. Today, this is a classic move from the nationalist-populist playbook, deployed with notable success from America to Russia and India to Japan. In such a context, any resort to hyperbole and exaggeration by comfort women campaigners gives ammunition to rightists eager to dismiss them as hysterical and to rubbish their justified protests against the whitewashing of Japan's wartime record.

The contributions to this special issue suggest ways of addressing historical complexity that offer promise for those seeking truth and justice. On the one hand, Dezaki and Heo show how efforts to bring balance and nuance to debate today confront an epidemic of hate speech on social media, as well as official censorship and obfuscation. In both Korea and Japan, Heo encounters young students conditioned to see the comfort women question entirely through the prism of nationalist enmity. In this context, resistance to nuance fuels the cycle of hate by lending credence to accusations that activists seek merely to demonize Japan. Yet the classroom also provides grounds for hope. Heo finds that comparison enables her students to "place" comfort women history in a global context, and so transcend the nationalist conditioning which reduces comfort women history to a bilateral dispute between Japan and South Korea. If Japanese students are encouraged to reflect on the underlying factors that permit an atrocity, and on how far these may be found in other societies, the compulsion to rush to the defence of the maligned motherland may diminish. By the same token, rather than simply hurling blame at Japan, Koreans, Chinese and others may be challenged to reflect on how far, and why, their own societies have permitted or promoted the mass sexual exploitation of women. Dezaki's documentary similarly challenges the antagonistic politics of nationalist tribalism. Korean audiences have been surprised and encouraged to learn that there are Japanese scholars and activists who have long fought the denialism of Japan's right-wing establishment. Likewise helping to lower the temperature in East Asia's vicious history war is the emphasis of the Nanjing Comfort Women Station Museum (curated by Su Zhiliang) on the role of Japanese researchers and activists in bringing the comfort women issue to public attention.

A broader transnational and global approach, emphasizing how the comfort women system - in its origins, scope and the identity of its victims - cut across national divisions, and so must be understood in a context broader than that of World War Two - might hold further promise for activists, not least because it would surely command a better hearing in Japan. A 2018 exhibition at The Women's Active Museum (WAM) in Tokyo dealt with Japanese comfort women, a group whose existence is barely acknowledged in most coverage of the issue. The WAM exhibition highlighted the connections between the comfort women system and the longstanding practice of state-licensed prostitution in Japan. It also drew attention to the continuing exploitation of many comfort women in postwar Japan (some ended up in brothels servicing American soldiers), and to the persistence in trafficking of women for sex, tacitly condoned if not coordinated by the state. In the Nanjing Comfort Women Station Museum, visitors are presented with a rather more limited version of this broader context for comfort women history. Here, the exhibits stop short of recognizing pre-war Japanese sex trafficking to Southeast Asia as part of wider phenomenon which included southern Chinese prostitution and child slavery networks operating through British-controlled treaty-ports. Efforts to contextualize the issue in Chinese exhibitions are constrained by an evident taboo surrounding acknowledgement of the *Chinese* practice of organized sexual exploitation of women.

Nonetheless, such broader contextualization highlights how, fundamentally, relationships of power explain the sexual exploitation of women in wartime, and how such a vast apparatus of sexual subjugation can come to be seen as acceptable. Those relationships underpin a reality - of entrenched patriarchy, of the dehumanizing commodification of women, and of subordination of the individual (male or female) to the state - that is far from unique to wartime Japan. It is therefore not enough, and indeed counterproductive, for commemorative efforts to portray the comfort women system as a uniquely "Japanese" atrocity and preach "never again". Learning to understand

the system historically means seeing that the conditions that made it possible have been, and remain, widely present, not least in many of the East Asian societies that were most directly affected by it.

Importantly, combining commemoration with greater contextualization need not debase or relativize, but could actually heighten consciousness of the extreme nature of the system that comfort women endured. Breaking down the neat and historically untenable dichotomization between “victim” and “perpetrator” societies may also help both to diminish Japanese defensiveness, and to highlight the transnational prevalence of the patriarchal attitudes and structures that were preconditions for the creation of such an extreme and systematized form of sexual exploitation. This is certainly the potential of the transnational feminist “paradigm shift” in the interpretation of comfort women history explored here by Norma and Morita.

At the same time, entanglements with contemporary causes, feminist or otherwise, need to be handled judiciously, to minimize exposure to charges of anachronism or distortion that may stoke cynicism. Indiscriminate “twinning” of comfort women with other victims of violence during conflict risks undermining historical understanding, while heightening rather than diminishing Japanese defensiveness. In particular, the entanglement of comfort women history with the Holocaust is deeply problematic. Peter Novick has associated the American fetishization of the Holocaust with a view of politics as “a competition for enshrining grievances”; similarly, Doss attributes America’s “memorial mania” to the “fevered pitch of public feelings”.³⁵ Within East Asia, too, competition to associate the Holocaust with rival national narratives is one symptom of a broader pathology of competitive victimhood, as the drive to hold Japan accountable in the court of global public opinion fuels a tendency to invoke comparison with Nazi genocide. The touring exhibit on Anne Frank at Taipei’s Awa House Museum in 2018-19 arguably constitutes a case in point. The Anne Frank House in Amsterdam has in recent years organised a number of such exhibitions at sites of persecution and genocide around the world, with the stated purpose of challenging visitors “to think about concepts such as tolerance, mutual respect, human rights and democracy.”³⁶ The intentions may be laudable, but what does the secular canonization of Anne Frank, and her association with the fate of women trafficked for sex in wartime East Asia, do for either? In each case, the nature of victimhood is very different: gender-neutral racist mass murder *versus* gender-based violence and mass sexual exploitation. It seems doubtful whether the global aesthetic of the child/girl victim promotes nuanced historical understanding either of the Nazi Holocaust or of the comfort women system.

Certainly, the use of global comparisons may be a powerful tool for rendering atrocities relatable to a diverse global audience, helping to build ties of solidarity and empathy across national borders. In certain instances, such as World War Two, atrocities may justifiably be linked by virtue of the global fascist “axis” that facilitated them. However, asserting equivalence out of a need for international attention is highly problematic. In this regard, it is significant that UNESCO officials requested removal of comparative references to the Holocaust and the Cambodian genocide from the Comfort Women MOW application documents. As Novick observes of American discourse on the Holocaust, making it “the benchmark of oppression and atrocity” tends to “trivialize crimes of lesser magnitude.”³⁷ We should not need to assert some sort of equivalence with other atrocities in order to establish that the comfort women system was horrific and should be condemned. And indeed, trying to do so distorts history and invites ridicule from those who seek to dismiss the issue altogether.

³⁵ Novick, *op. cit.*, 8; Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010).

³⁶ <https://www.annefrank.org/en/education/product/61/anne-frank-a-history-for-today/>

³⁷ Novick, *op. cit.*, 14.

As comfort women history is ever more drawn into the global atrocity-heritage nexus, and invoked in transnational rights-claiming, it is pertinent to reflect on exactly what the purposes are behind such commemorative activism and how far these relate to the individual victims involved. Susan Neiman, writing from an American perspective, asserts that “monuments are not about history; they are values made visible”. That, she continues, is why “we build memorials to some parts of history and ignore others.”³⁸ Yet, if comfort women are to serve as symbols, then what precisely ought they to symbolize - or what values should they “make visible”? Peace, reconciliation and a broader understanding of women’s rights are often cited by activists as key objectives. This would seem to dictate reconsideration of an approach devoted overwhelmingly to establishing Japanese culpability. Such is apparently the view of former comfort woman Lee Yong-soo, who in April 2020 expressed her disillusionment with the regular “Wednesday Demonstrations” held outside the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, stating that “the rallies only teach young students hatred.”³⁹

Lee's intervention reminds us that, in the blur of entangled activism, it is too easy to forget the individuals at the heart of the matter. After the Asian Women’s Fund was established in 1994 to channel compensation to foreign victims, those in Korea were subjected to enormous pressure to reject Japanese atonement money, on the grounds that the terms did not make clear the responsibility of the Japanese military and government. As a result, many Korean women filed their requests in secret.⁴⁰ All too often, former comfort women seem to have been valued as symbolic victims more than respected as autonomous individuals. And amidst the focus on Japanese “perpetratorhood”, the pain of having long been shunned by one’s own society for the “dishonour” of sexual abuse at the hands of the enemy can be overlooked. The drive to recognize and understand the suffering experienced by former comfort women, to grant them some sort of justice, cannot be confined to demands for Japanese atonement, and perhaps needs to move beyond discussion of atonement altogether.

At its best, the commemorative impulse ought to be an aid to historical understanding, not an affecting yet reductionist substitute for it. There are real dangers, as we move into an era without living witnesses to the reality of the comfort women system, that its history becomes simplified and commodified as activists compete for attention in a global heritage marketplace that evaluates atrocities against a Holocaust gold standard. But this would be to distort the historical experience related by comfort women themselves. The victims’ testimony discussed here by Xiaoyang Hao reminds us how, as Wakabayashi has also stressed, the trauma that many women suffered did not end in 1945, but actually worsened thereafter as a consequence of prejudice at the hands of their own families and communities.⁴¹

Ultimately, of course, public history on its own remains a slim reed on which to base hopes for justice, resolution and reconciliation. For nuance and complexity to command serious public

³⁸ Neiman, *op. cit.*, 263.

³⁹ Tae-jun Kang, “South Korean NGO’s role in supporting ‘comfort women’ questioned”, *The Diplomat*, (May 13, 2020), www.thediplomat.com (accessed December 7, 2020).

⁴⁰ Wakabayashi, *op. cit.*, 250.

⁴¹ Besides problems of anachronism and historical distortion, and further stoking of Japanese defensiveness, a reductionist commemorative approach also risks unnecessarily raising the stakes for UNESCO in determining whether, or how, to recognize the “universal significance” of this issue. Persuading UNESCO to recognize the comfort women system may be a worthwhile enterprise, but both the success of the campaign, and its symbolic value, will likely depend on how this phenomenon is contextualized in relation to global histories of sexual slavery. Emphasizing how the patriarchal societies of 20th-century East Asia were jointly, if unequally, responsible for the oppression and sexual exploitation of many of their most vulnerable women offers a way forward here. The symbolism of the comfort women system then derives from its status as an extreme manifestation of a much wider pathology, extending well beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of wartime Japan.

attention, a conducive political, social and cultural environment is necessary. Trust and security are vital here. The febrile relations amongst Japan, South Korea, China and America in the early 21st century provide fertile soil for nationalist populists, while presenting a daunting prospect to purveyors of balance and nuance. The success of attempts to secure widespread recognition for the comfort women both within Japan and internationally will ultimately depend on a transformation of the prevailing political climate. Nevertheless, it is precisely the adverse political environment today, poisoned by populism and nationalist hatred, that underlines the importance of holding the line for the critical scholarly eye - for complexity and appropriate context - in our understanding of the past.

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