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US Comfort Women Memorials: Vehicles for Understanding and Change

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Sixty-five years after the end of the Second World War, the first Comfort Women Memorial in the United States was erected in Palisades Park, New Jersey in 2010, to commemorate the suffering of those women who had endured sexual slavery under Imperial Japanese armed forces. The actualization of this memorial, as well as the negative response by some in the Japanese government, spurred the construction of additional monuments in New Jersey, New York, and California. Today this trend continues with similar formal sites of remembrance under consideration in Chicago, Detroit, and elsewhere.

Mary M. McCarthy, Japan Studies Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, states that “local communities in the United States collaborating with their counterparts in South Korea and Japan could make a real difference in promoting understanding on the difficult issue of comfort women.”

The Comfort Women Memorial Peace Garden in Fairfax County, Virginia, dedicated last May, is a prime example of the type of public-private partnerships that have characterized this commemorative movement. It showcases the growing involvement of Korean-Americans in local organizations and government, along with the power of this issue across ethnicities and generations. Furthermore, it provides evidence that suggests the intent is not anti-Japanese and does not entail the United States taking sides in an international dispute. In fact, there is great potential for these memorials to promote local-level initiatives that could enhance dialogue and understanding on the comfort women issue from a multi-dimensional perspective.

The Comfort Women Memorial Peace Garden in Fairfax was paid for, and is maintained by, the Washington Coalition of Comfort Women Issues (WCCW). The WCCW is a non-governmental organization that was founded in 1992 for the purpose of educating Americans about comfort women and seeking an official apology and reparations from the Japanese government for victims. When the WCCW approached the local government of Fairfax County about the prospect of erecting a memorial, the Chairman of the Board of Supervisors, Sharon Bulova, offered a location on the grounds of the County Government Center itself. She was reportedly impressed by the ideas presented and their resonance with her own personal platform of women’s rights and human trafficking.

With almost four percent of the total population in Fairfax County being Korean according to the 2010 census—though Koreans make up less than one percent of the total US population—and teen sex trafficking being a focal theme for the county in 2014, the partnership seemed natural. The design of the garden and the statements on the two plaques that are the centerpiece were further decided in consultation with official stakeholders in the county. Chairman Bulova herself was a featured speaker at the dedication ceremony, along with US Congressman Mike Honda—a third generation Japanese-American who in 2007 sponsored US House of Representatives Resolution 121 calling on Japan to acknowledge and apologize for the use of sexual slaves during WWII.

Such public-private partnerships and cross-cultural linkages are representative of comfort women memorials throughout the country, whether it is the Palisades Park public library and the advocacy group Korean-American Civic Empowerment, or the Glendale city council and the

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

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Korean-American Forum of California. Comfort women memorialization has sparked large-scale mobilization within Korean-American communities. However, just as importantly, it has also resonated with other individuals and groups who share similar concerns on a larger scale, be it human rights, freedom of speech or historical justice. For example, in 2013, the New York State Senate passed a resolution honoring both the Kupferberg Holocaust Center at Queensborough Community College and Korean-American Civic Empowerment for their joint work on comfort women, including an internship program at the center where students interview surviving comfort women and record their stories for posterity.

In Fairfax County, the link was not historical but contemporary—modern-day sex trafficking. In 2014, the county initiated a sex trafficking prevention campaign, recognizing that teen sex trafficking, in particular, is a growing concern in northern Virginia. This included the creation of a new human trafficking unit in the county police department, the launching of a public awareness website that provides information and resources for help, and the addition of a sex trafficking curriculum in local schools. As Grace Han Wolf, town councilmember in Herndon, Virginia and honorary co-chair of the Comfort Women Memorial Peace Garden Committee, explained, “It’s not about Japan and Korea... If you take out the historical details, it could be the story of some of the girls now [in Fairfax, who are victims of sex trafficking].” This is where the greatest relevance lies for officials such as Wolf, in helping to make social changes today in their own communities.

In these ways, US-Japan-South Korea trilateral relations could not be further from the minds of local officials who see comfort women memorialization in these types of larger contexts. However, some opponents of these memorials have argued that their erection is tantamount to foreign policymaking by local communities and governments. A lawsuit against the city of Glendale seeking the removal of its comfort women statue cited the supremacy clause of the US Constitution and argued that Glendale is involving itself in US foreign affairs, which is only to be conducted by the federal government. A federal judge has since dismissed the case.

For its part, although US government officials met with two former victims after their participation in a dedication ceremony for the newest comfort women memorial in Union City, New Jersey, the State Department has not taken an official position on domestic comfort women memorials, even when pressed to do so. When a petition was posted on the *We the People* website asking the White House for the removal of the memorial in Palisades Park, there was no formal government reply, despite the requisite number of signatures being obtained.

Sometimes where national governments dare not tread, local governments can make significant strides. One example is Mayors for Peace, which was established in 1982 by then Mayor Takeshi Araki of Hiroshima who offered “cities a way to transcend national borders and work together to press for nuclear abolition.” Today over 6,200 cities in 160 countries and regions have signed on to work together for the elimination of nuclear weapons. Mayor Donald L. Plusquellic of Akron, Ohio serves on the executive committee of Mayors for Peace, alongside the mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and 13 other mayors worldwide.

Similarly, local communities in the United States collaborating with their counterparts in South Korea and Japan could make a real difference in promoting understanding on the difficult issue of comfort women. By moving this topic into larger contemporary contexts, such as human rights, women’s rights, and human trafficking, it is possible to erase national and historical specificities. The emphasis on the human component and the current relevancy of the issue that has captivated a diversity of individuals and groups in the United States can be used to create exchange, understanding and change beyond domestic audiences, including the international level. Ultimately such efforts, while not official foreign policymaking, can wind up exerting significant influence over the way all of us, including policymakers, view and react to these issues.

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