

Korean Americans Enter the Historical Memory Wars on Behalf of the Comfort Women コリアン系アメリカ人、従軍慰安婦に代わって歴史的記憶の戦いに参入

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Immigrant groups in the United States routinely build monuments and memorials to commemorate historical traumas in their homelands. Plaques and statues that recall the Nazi destruction of Jewish communities throughout Europe in the middle of the 20th century together with commemorative stones dedicated to Ireland’s 1972 Bloody Sunday are as American as California rolls (to name but two examples). Collectively, these monuments mark a particular group’s ascendant political power, which, by American definition, comes about through economic success. Moreover, such testimonials weave a common narrative that binds people of disparate backgrounds within the same group in a diffuse land. The history involved is as much about the present as the past.

The Japanese government’s willful decision to ignore this routine feature of American society in its myopic effort to deny its nation’s historical crimes is nowhere more evident than in its most recent behavior in northern New Jersey. On May 1, 2012 Japan’s New York Consul General Hiroki Shigeyuki crossed the Hudson River together with four Japanese parliamentarians to meet with James Rotundo, the mayor of Palisades Park, New Jersey, to urge him to take down a small plaque erected

in his town in October 2010 to honor the memory of Korean comfort women. Consul General Hiroki reportedly offered to plant some cherry trees and donate books “on Japanese culture” to the town in exchange for getting rid of the small stone.



(*The New York Times*, May 18, 2012)

This story rapidly gained momentum, most especially because joint military exercises between the United States, South Korea, and Japan are scheduled for June 21-22 off of southern South Korea. This time, however, the South Korean government is also furious — it quickly dispatched its own lawmakers to Palisades Park where the population is more than half Korean-American — and is demanding

apologies. In pointed responses on June 14, 2012 Dan Sneider wrote in the online journal, *The Nelson Report*, that “a great opportunity has been lost for reconciliation. To be totally clear, there is NO WAY this is about the actions of one guy in New York...” Ed Lincoln remarked, “I am also shocked and deeply disappointed that MOFA went along with this--surely CG Hiroki could not have done this without approval from higher up. This represents extraordinarily poor judgment by MOFA and yet another example of the weakness of the Japanese government in dealing with the far right.” The report’s editor, Chris Nelson, went further: “(A)ny Japanese government which claims to be serious about building a real alliance with Korea and The Philippines needs to think...this...over...like...responsible...adults.”

While the Japanese government action might generate “shock” for lack of sensitivity, the action is squarely in line with responses both to the Congressional initiative led by Mike Honda (<https://apjif.org/-Michael-Honda/2438>) seeking apology and reparations to the comfort women (also see articles by Kinue Tokudome (<https://apjif.org/-Kinue-TOKUDOME/2510>) and Alexis Dudden (https://apjif.org/-H_R_759-/1908)) and to the placement (<http://www.japanprobe.com/2011/12/15/comfort-woman-statue-erected-outside-of-japanese-embassy-in-seoul/>) of a statue of a comfort woman in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul in December 2011.

Below are links to several newspaper articles that chronicled the early moments of the story in May. In the meantime, it is important to stress the fact that many Japanese would be livid at the Consul General’s action as well. As articles in *The Asia-Pacific Journal* have long demonstrated, many Japanese sincerely seek

rapprochement with their countries’ Asian neighbors over historical issues and condemn the extreme statements and actions of some of their country’s politicians and officials. Unfortunately, however, despite the emergence of a lively independent blogosphere and reportage in small journals, it is difficult for many Japanese to learn of such events since their nation’s mainstream print and broadcast media remains overwhelmingly complicit in silencing such stories.

Japanese people and their government are beginning the summer months with the choice to move their country forward in the face of multiple challenges in the wake of the 3.11 disasters and economic challenges, a possibility, which is incompatible with squandering time and money on erasing inconvenient memories of the past.

Links:

http://www.northjersey.com/community/history/events/051012_Palisades_Park_ceremony_remembers_comfort_women.html

http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/534214.html

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/19/nyregion/monument-in-palisades-park-nj-irritates-japanese-officials.html>

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Korea: Discourse and Power (<http://www.amazon.com/dp/082483139X/?tag=theasipacjo0b-20>). Her most recent article on Fukushima, "The Ongoing Disaster," was published in the *Journal of Asian Studies* in May 2012.