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2016

The Grandmother and the Girl

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Publication Details

V. Mackie 2016 The Grandmother and the Girl Australian Women's History Network <http://www.auswhn.org.au/blog/grandmother-and-girl/>

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The Grandmother and the Girl

Abstract

I opened the white box and took out the figurine of a girl, a miniature chair, and a little pedestal with an inscription in Japanese, English and Korean. I assembled the diorama, placing the girl on the low pedestal, with the empty chair beside her. Without context, this act might have seemed like child's play - like placing a doll in a doll's house.

Keywords

girl, grandmother

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

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AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S HISTORY NETWORK

The Grandmother and the Girl

Vera Mackie explores women's experiences of militarised sexual abuse during the Asia-Pacific War, and the survivors' campaign for acknowledgement by the Japanese government in the eighth post in the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence series.

I opened the white box and took out the figurine of a girl, a miniature chair, and a little pedestal with an inscription in Japanese, English and Korean. I assembled the diorama, placing the girl on the low pedestal, with the empty chair beside her. Without context, this act might have seemed like child's play – like placing a doll in a doll's house.

This figurine, however, is potent with historical and political – indeed, geopolitical – significance. A series of these figurines were recently produced and sold by advocates for the survivors of the system of militarised sexual abuse perpetrated by the Japanese military during the Asia-Pacific War.

From the 1930s to the 1940s, thousands upon thousands of women throughout the Asia-Pacific region were enslaved by the Japanese army and navy, forced to provide sexual service. Estimates of the numbers vary from 100,000 to 200,000 or even higher.

This history is an issue which continues to be the source of tension between Japan and its neighbouring countries. The movement for redress has been a transnational one, involving activists from the Asia-Pacific region, Europe and North America.

There is no acceptable term for this militarised sexual abuse. Some refer to military sexual slavery, while some refer to enforced military prostitution. Some reluctantly refer to 'military brothels' or use the offensive term 'comfort stations' in quotation marks, as this has come to be the most widely understood term.

As for the survivors, they are commonly referred to as 'grandmothers' (*halmŏni* in Korean), a term of respect which avoids the offensiveness of the term '(former) comfort woman', or the sensational and demeaning '(former) sex slave'. The term *halmŏni* has gained currency in English and Japanese activist circles. In the Philippines and Taiwan, too, local vernacular terms for 'grandmother' are used. Indeed, the museum on the issue, which opens in Taipei in December, is called the Grandmothers (*Ama*) Museum.



MINIATURE REPLICA OF THE PEACE MONUMENT. PHOTOGRAPH BY VERA MACKIE.



THE PEACE MONUMENT,
SEOUL. PHOTOGRAPH BY
VERA MACKIE

My figurine is a miniature recreation of a life-sized statue from central Seoul. The statue was erected on 14 December 2010 opposite the Japanese Embassy. It depicts a young woman seated on a chair, facing the Embassy, with an empty chair beside her. On the platform beside the statue is a plaque, with inscriptions in Korean, Japanese, and English. The English inscription reads:

December 14, 2011 marks the 1000th Wednesday demonstration for the solution of Japanese military sexual slavery issue after its first rally on January 8, 1992 in front of the Japanese Embassy. This peace monument stands to commemorate the spirit and the deep history of the Wednesday demonstration.

The figure depicted in the bronze statue wears Korean ethnic dress (*chima jeogori*). Her hair is bobbed, suggesting that she is a young unmarried woman; her fists are clenched on her lap. She does not smile but stares steadfastly ahead. Her bare feet suggest vulnerability, or someone fleeing from danger.

A small bird is perched on one shoulder. Behind her, at pavement level, is a mosaic, suggesting the shadowy figure of an old woman. The mosaic also includes a butterfly. The statue and its 'shadow' suggest the different stages of life of the survivor – the young woman before her ordeal, and the old woman who refuses to forget. The bird is an icon of peace and of escape, while the butterfly has spiritual connotations.

The empty seat suggests those who are missing, but also provides a site for performative participation in the installation, as demonstrators or visitors can have their photographs taken seated beside the young woman.

Statues are often monumental, larger than life-size, standing on a tall pedestal, looking down on passers-by. The Seoul statue is at street level and is life-sized. Because she is seated she seems approachable.

There is, however, another reason why she is sitting. The fragile elderly women who have been demonstrating in front of the Japanese Embassy every week for over twenty years generally sit there on portable stools rather than standing.

The statue does not simply commemorate the ordeal of the thousands and thousands of women who suffered from militarised sexual violence. It also commemorates the determination of the demonstrators and supporters to keep the issue alive. Placed at the very site where these



THE PEACE MONUMENT, SEOUL,
SHOWING THE GRANDMOTHER'S
'SHADOW'. PHOTOGRAPH BY VERA
MACKIE.

demonstrations have now occurred for over twenty years, the statue is a form of petition to the Japanese government and its diplomatic representatives. The face of the statue is composed, steadfastly staring at the Japanese Embassy, an avatar for the elderly demonstrators.



CLOSE-UP OF THE PEACE MONUMENT, SEOUL. PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN BY VERA MACKIE.

When I visited Seoul in February 2013, I spent an afternoon taking photographs of the statue on a quiet Tuesday afternoon, and came back on the next day to observe the Wednesday demonstration. February is the coldest time of the year in Seoul. It had been snowing in the few days before and there was still some snow on the ground. Supporters had dressed the statue in a warm winter coat, woollen hat with ear muffs, a scarf, a long, red, embroidered winter skirt and socks. On the seat next to the statue were cute stuffed toys – a teddy bear and a puppy. Behind her there was a row of cheerful yellow potted plants.

By dressing the statue in protection against the cold, the supporters are symbolically expressing their concern for the *halmŏni*, the 'grandmothers' who have survived. This also symbolises care for the spirits of the countless women who did not survive.

The statue has been replicated in other sites, such as the [War and Women's Human Rights Museum](#), which opened in May 2012 in another part of Seoul. The museum uses a [butterfly](#) as its logo.

The museum houses a historical exhibit, where wall panels explain the history of militarised sexual abuse perpetrated in the Asia-Pacific War. There is a reproduction of the bronze statue that sits across from the Japanese Embassy. The statue is more or less the same as the one in central Seoul, but without the plaque or the mosaic of the shadowy older woman. This statue, too, has an empty seat beside it.

The statue faces a video screen running footage of the Wednesday demonstrations, a virtual suggestion of the location and context of the original statue. The statue in central Seoul needs a plaque to provide basic information. Here, the museum as a whole provides historical context on the militarised sexual abuse perpetrated in wartime, the campaigns for redress, the Wednesday demonstrations, and the commemorative statue.

Another replica of the peace monument has been erected in [Glendale, California](#). The statue, chair and platform are identical to the original installation in Seoul, but the words on the plaque are slightly different. There is a caption 'I was a sex slave of the Japanese military', and an explanation of the statue's iconography of old woman, bird and butterfly. The text of the plaque is in English only.



The original Seoul statue commemorates the activism of those who participate in the Wednesday demonstration, while the plaque on the Glendale statue commemorates the 'more than 200,000 Asian and Dutch women who were removed from their homes to Korea, China, Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, East Timor and Indonesia to be coerced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Armed Forces of Japan between 1932 and 1945'.

THE PEACE MONUMENT IN THE
WAR AND WOMEN'S HUMAN
RIGHTS MUSEUM.
PHOTOGRAPH BY VERA
MACKIE.

The plaque also refers to the local situation in Glendale, where Asian-American and Asian diasporic communities had led the campaign for an acknowledgment of the issue, leading to the announcement of 'Comfort Women Day' by the City of Glendale on 30 July 2012. The plaque also acknowledges House Resolution 121 passed by the United States Congress on 30 July 2007, calling on the Japanese government to apologise and provide compensation. There was a similar campaign in [Australia](#), with a few local governments passing resolutions, but none passed at the national government level. In each of these places, diasporic communities played an important role.



THE PEACE MONUMENT, GLENDALE.
PHOTOGRAPH BY VERA MACKIE.

The Glendale statue is in a park, in front of the local community centre and public library. There are benches and tables in the park, suitable for family picnics. When I visited there in May 2014, it was a sunny spring day. The bright sunlight cast the features of the statue into relief. As in Seoul, supporters had offered colorful potted plants. There was no need, however, for the affectionate touches of scarves and warm clothing seen on the Seoul statue on a cold winter day.

The Glendale statue has brought controversy, with historical denialists from Japan putting pressure on the local government for its removal, but a [court case](#) decided that the statue could stay. A similar controversy has been seen in Strathfield, in the Western suburbs of Sydney. Members of the Korean-Australian community were initially successful in convincing Strathfield Council to

approve a memorial. After pressure from the conservative denialists from Japan, however, [Strathfield](#) decided not to go ahead. A replica is, however, currently housed in a [community centre](#). There has been a similar controversy in [Germany](#).

Another iteration of the Peace Memorial has recently been erected in Seoul in a park some remove from the city centre. In this version, the statue of a young woman in Korean ethnic dress is joined by the statue of a young woman in Chinese ethnic dress, with another empty chair and space for future statues to be added. The juxtaposition of the Chinese and Korean statues is in one sense a demonstration of transnational solidarity, staged at a strategic moment just before Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's official visit with South Korean President Park Geun-hye in October 2015.

In December 2015, two months after Abe's meeting with Park, the South Korean and Japanese governments issued a joint [communiqué](#). The Japanese representative stated that the Japanese government would provide the South

Korean government with funds for the establishment of a fund for the care of the survivors.

The statement was met with hostility by the South Korean survivors, who felt they should have been consulted before any government-to-government agreement was reached, a basic principle of restorative justice. Meanwhile, survivors from other countries were angered at this being treated as a bilateral issue between Japan and the ROK. In short, the Japan-ROK joint communiqué was a matter of geopolitics, an attempt to forge a closer alliance between the governments of the US, Japan and South Korea against China.

The South Korean government representative confirmed that the issue was 'resolved finally and irreversibly' and that the Republic of Korea and Japan would 'refrain from accusing or criticizing each other regarding this issue in the international community'. While the statue was not mentioned in the Japanese statement, the South Korean statement included an acknowledgment that 'the Government of Japan is concerned about the statue built in front of the Embassy of Japan in Seoul' and that the South Korean government would 'strive to solve this issue in an agreeable manner through taking measures such as consulting with related organizations about possible ways of addressing this issue'.

The survivors do not feel that the issue is resolved and do not feel it is appropriate to refrain from further criticism. The Wednesday demonstrations will continue.

In a further development, a replica of the statue with the Korean and Chinese figures was erected at [Shanghai Normal University](#) in October 2016.

The miniature figurine of the Peace Monument was widely disseminated in support of the survivors at the time of the Japan-ROK joint communiqué.

Everyone who touches one of the figurines is reminded of the issue of militarised sexual violence and the campaigns for redress. In the case of the full-sized statues, they are humanised by being life-sized, at street level, and with a place to sit in solidarity with the figure of the girl by the grandmother's shadow.

The shadow of the grandmother reminds us of the gap between the elderly survivor and her younger self, before the ordeal of militarised sexual violence, the decades of painful memories, and the decades of political campaigns.

The figurine affects the emotions in a similarly tangible way. When one takes the figurine in one's hands, its doll-like presence evokes childhood innocence. On contemplating the meaning of the empty chair, one is reminded of the issue of militarised sexual violence that the diorama commemorates. The grandmother's shadow on the pedestal reminds us of the dignity and determination of the survivors who demonstrate every Wednesday.

For the survivors, the issue of wartime military sexual abuse is



CLOSE-UP OF THE FACE OF THE STATUE OF THE GIRL IN THE WAR AND WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS MUSEUM. PHOTOGRAPH BY VERA MACKIE.

more than an historical issue. Their campaign for redress continues. The problem is also not confined to the past, with sexual violence continuing to occur in situations of military conflict around the globe.

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To support these campaigns, see the websites of the [House of Sharing](#), the [War and Women's Human Rights Museum](#), the [Women's Active Museum on War and Peace](#), the [Taipei Women's Rescue Foundation](#) and [Lila Pilipina](#).



Vera Mackie is Director of the [Centre for Critical Human Rights Research](#) at the University of Wollongong. Her essay on transnational activism on the issue of militarised sexual violence will appear in Barbara Molony and Jennifer Nelson (eds) [Women's Activism and "Second Wave" Feminism: Transnational Histories](#) (Bloomsbury) in 2017.

Follow Vera on Twitter [@veramackie](#).