In July, 2013, the city council members of Glendale, CA voted amid international controversy to approve the construction of a memorial honoring the Japanese military’s euphemistically-labeled ‘comfort women’ – the 80,000 – 200,000 young girls and women kidnapped and forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese army during World War II. The project has faced outspoken opposition from members of Southern California’s Japanese-American community, as well as from conservative Japanese activists across the Pacific, who view the memorial as representative of a blatantly falsified history that vilifies Japan and martyrs the ‘willing’ prostitutes who served its soldiers. The Japanese government, meanwhile, has merely reiterated its long-time official stance on the subject, stating that any politicization of the comfort women issue should be avoided. The comfort women themselves – now known as halmoni, or grandmothers – have been vocal in their support for the memorial, and have used it as an opportunity to remind the world of their ongoing battle for recognition.

I propose to approach the themes of official memory, counter memory, nationalism, and globalization through the lens of this recent controversy, which so epitomizes the struggle for historical legitimacy that has come to characterize the comfort women’s legacy. Who owns a memory, and why? Do national or regional memories diffuse across the globe with a diaspora? Where and how does the conflict between lived experience and institutionalized history come
into play? How do counter memories gain traction and recognition? What forces shape and inform the vitriolic reactions of those opposed to the memorialization of a contested history? In what ways is the agency of an oppressed group – in this case, the victims of sexual slavery – compromised or enabled by their ownership/assertion of a subversive memory? By what processes has the memorialization of the comfort women come to be viewed as an international responsibility, and by what means have the regional proprietors of this memory sought to reclaim it? In what ways is memorialization a future- rather than past-oriented act? How does the character of the comfort women’s history as an experience of uniquely female oppression shape the ways in which it has been simultaneously championed and repressed in various locales around the globe?

My thesis will seek to address these questions by examining their relevance to the Glendale controversy, which I intend to use as an anchor and springing-off point for my research. However, while my questions will be mapped onto the landscape of the Glendale situation, I hope to use the specificity of this particular controversy to explore the larger history and context of the halmoni’s legacy in terms of the suggested theoretical framework. My sources will consist of both primary and secondary literature, and while I do not propose a fieldwork component, I may, if possible, conduct either phone or email interviews with members of Glendale’s city council, and leaders of the Japanese-American opposition movement in Glendale and Los Angeles.
Bibliography


