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Book Review: *Comfort Women: A Movement for Justice and Women's Rights in the United States*¹

Reviewed by Angella Son²

According to its editors Jung-Sil Lee and Dennis P. Halpin, *Comfort Women: A Movement for Justice and Women's Rights in the United States*, was created by an impetus specific to requests for historical documents from the Washington Coalition for Comfort Women Issues (WCCW), a non-profit organization founded in 1992. The book is thus categorized as an archiving book and its basic goals are to “collect, compile, and archive the last 28 years” of activism for comfort women issues (p. viii). The book has four specific aims: (1) to educate people, especially younger generations, in order to prevent any further cruel violence against women in the future and to assist in activism to fight for women's dignity and rights (p. viii); (2) to make historical documents accessible (p. viii); (3) to present the connections between the comfort women issues and contemporary United States (U.S) and the worldwide concerns for women's rights; and (4) to invite activists to collaborate in solidarity (p. x).

Comfort Women: A Movement for Justice and Women's Rights in the United States is comprised of two parts. Part 1, titled “The U.S. grassroots movement toward legislative advocacy,” consists of four chapters and focuses on efforts and activism in successfully passing U.S. House of Representatives Resolution 121. Part 2, titled “The comfort women's movement becomes transnational,” consists of six chapters and focuses on the impact of activism for comfort women issues in a variety of disciplines that expands to and connects with transnational issues.

Jung-Sil Lee, a former president of WCCW and an art historian, surveys in chapter one the history and activism of 28 years of WCCW on comfort women issues. Chapter two highlights an interview with former Representative Mike Honda, who was instrumental in passing the House Resolution 121 in the latter phase, is presented. In chapter three, Mindy L. Kotler, founder and director of Asia Policy Point, traces how the success of House Resolution 121 resulted from shifting its focus from international to U.S. concerns. Dennis P. Halpin, a former senior professional staff member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, introduces the congressional processes involved in passing HR 121 in chapter four, including the involvement of key political figures and the activism of the Korean American community. In chapter five, Bonnie V. C. Oh, a retired distinguished professor of Korean Studies from Georgetown University, addresses how the first academic conference on comfort women issues at Georgetown University was convened. In chapter six, Margaret D. Stetz, the Mae and Robert Carter professor of Women's Studies and professor of Humanities at the University of Delaware, discusses the juxtaposition of the activism on comfort women issues and American feminism, and its evolution into intersectional perspectives considering ethnicity and age in addition to gender. In chapter seven, Jung-Sil Lee examines visual arts such as fine art, film, musical and opera in by artists or the victims themselves. Frank Joseph Shulman, a professional bibliographer of western-language writings about East, Southeast and South Asia, provides a list of dissertations written on comfort women issues in western language between 1994 and 2005 in chapter eight. In chapter nine, Yongmu Ku, associate

¹ Lee, J.-S., & Halpin, D. P. (Eds.). (2020). *Comfort Women: A Movement for Justice and Women's Rights in the United States*. Hollym International Corporation.

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professor of Political Science and Associate Director of the Peace and War Center at Norwich University, evaluates successes and limitations of transnational comfort women activism between 1992 and 2019. In concluding, in chapter ten, Jung-Sil Lee reports on significant comfort women memorials in the United States with details on reasons, processes, and ways they were envisioned and built along with responses to and impact of their existence.

As an archiving book, *Comfort Women: A Movement for Justice and Women's Rights in the United States*, is superb in presenting many illustrations, photos, legal and historical documents, among other resources for readers including scholars, hands-on activists, and artists. Ninety-five pages of appendices include rich resources of legal and historical documents such as: WCCW Mission Statement, WCCW letter to Japanese Emperor on July 1, 2015, letter to President Obama on July 27, 2010 and letter from the White House on August 17, 2010, catalog of works created by former comfort women, various city or state resolutions, and comfort women memorials in various sites. In addition, fifty-six pages of resources offer other valuable materials such as WCCW activities from 1992 to 2020, "a legislative history of comfort women in the U.S. Congress 1991-2016, recommended readings and comfort stations of the Japanese military. Further, a list of dissertations on Korean comfort women between 1995 and 2004 with their abstracts proffered in chapter nine is an invaluable resource, although it would have been more helpful to have the list updated to recent years since many more works have been developed within the last twenty years.

Though each chapter in the book is incredibly detailed, providing many historical facts useful to readers, they could have been enriched further and made even more inspirational to the readers by having self-accounts of stories behind-the-facts. For instance, inclusion of the lobbyist, Thomas Kim, who provided critical Capitol Hill knowledge to activists and former presidents such as Dongwoo Lee Hahm who initiated and ignited the movement of WCCW and Ok Cha Soh who relentlessly and passionately pressed forward in working with Congress would have been interesting additions.

Further, Lee and Halpin indicate that the geographical basis of the contents of their book is primarily the Washington metropolitan area and, in particular, that the activities of the WCCW were primary (p. viii). While narrowing the geographical basis allowed more detailed facts and resources to be available, the value of the book could have been increased by adding more voices from different geographical areas such as Phyllis Kim, a co-founder of the Korean American Forum of California (KAFC) and Judith Mirkinson, president of the San Francisco/Bay Area Chapter of the National Lawyers Guild and president of the Board of the Comfort Women Justice Coalition. In addition, while the book has a distinguished strength in covering arts and its impact on activism for comfort women issues, added scholarly reflections could have provided readers with a more balanced content.

Overall, in spite of some limitations noted above, *Comfort Women: A Movement for Justice and Women's Rights in the United States* remains a significant resource for assisting activists, both scholars and those in the field, and for informing those from a younger generation who are not yet familiar with comfort women issues.