

The Power of One Voice: Mapping the Vernacularization between the Women's Human Rights Message and the Comfort Women in San Francisco

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Introduction

Throughout the United States today, memorials for comfort women¹ – girls and women from colonized or occupied areas by Japan in Asia as well as from Japan forced to serve sexually in Japan's military sexual slavery system during World War II until Japan's defeat in 1945² – have emerged as a prominent site for remembrance of the women victims of wartime atrocities past, and advocacy for those suffering sexual violence today.³ To date, at least sixteen comfort women memorials have been erected throughout the United States.⁴ Rape of Nanjing Redress Coalition (RNRC), one of San Francisco's preeminent groups represented by mostly Chinese civic and professional leaders, was inadvertently hurled onto the battlefield of Japan's "history war" waged on U.S. soil, by proposing a city resolution to build a comfort women memorial (CWM) in July 2015. Their action ignited a political and diplomatic

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- 1 Although my personal preference follows the protocol observed among many advocates, to apply quotation marks to this euphemistic term for women subject to sexual slavery, I omit them in this paper in the interest of ensuring the term's repetitive appearances throughout this paper does not convey a didactic undertone.
 - 2 Yoshiaki Yoshimi, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
 - 3 Judith Mirkinson, "Building the San Francisco Memorial: Why the Issue of the 'Comfort Women' is Still Relevant Today?" in Pyong Gap Min and others, eds., *The Transnational Redress Movement for the Victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020), 149-178.
 - 4 Eric Mar, "Map of Comfort Women Memorials in the United States," Education for Social Justice Foundation. Accessed October 05, 2023. <https://www.e4sjf.org/map-of-comfort-women-memorials-in-the-united-states.html>.

firestorm, in a contest for and against the proposal, with the very central government of Japan itself leading the opposition. In this extreme power disparity, a local grassroots supporting coalition was established to join RNRC, the effort's initiator, as leader organization, to expand the support base beyond RNRC's networks.⁵ Comfort Women Justice Coalition(CWJC), as the coalition was named, adopted the framing of human rights as its core message and ultimately succeeded in building CWM on city grounds.

Since the comfort women issue erupted onto the world stage in the 1990s, activists who co-convened CWJC had organized locally to raise awareness of this issue and participate in the global efforts to demand justice for comfort women. In doing so, they did not always opt to deploy a human rights-specific message. Yet, for CWJC, they unequivocally supported the adoption of women's human rights message. This raises the question of what specific factors, such as motives, objectives and circumstances may have influenced their decisions over the messaging as they had other choices that ranged from perpetrator shaming or historical accountability among others that had been deployed previously. Subsidiary to this question, I seek to clarify how the comfort women issue was framed previously if not by human rights – and if there is a pattern or distinction between those that deployed the human rights framing versus those that did not, and if so, to what rationale such distinctions could be attributed.

I adopt human rights vernacularization posited by Sally Merry as an analytical framework to conduct these inquiries. Merry describes vernacularization theory as a process by which ideas and language of human rights is “extracted from the universal and adapted to national and local communities.”⁶ Vernacularization framework situates the activists, main subjects of this study, as active negotiators to adopt or reject, in whole or in part, the global norm package to meet their ends, thus being suited for illuminating the processes through which they integrated the human rights message into the CWJC's vernacular.

5 Mirkinson, *Building San Francisco Memorial*, 149.

6 Sally Engle Merry, “Transnational Human Rights and Local Activism: Mapping the Middle,” *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 1 (2006): 38–51.

I The comfort women system and the ‘controversy’ surrounding Japanese historical revisionism, and the San Francisco Comfort Women Memorial

The victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery System during World War II, euphemistically called “comfort women,” refers to women who were exploited by the Japanese military to sexually serve its soldiers throughout the Japanese empire and Japan-occupied areas until its defeat in 1945.⁷ Numbering in likely hundreds of thousands,⁸ these women included Korean, Chinese, Filipino, Indonesian, Taiwanese, Vietnamese, Malay, Thai, Burmese, Indian, Timorese, Chamorro, Dutch, Eurasian women, as well as few Japanese women.⁹

Japan’s cabinet released the ‘Kono statement’ in 1993, officially admitting to Japanese military involvement in establishing and operating comfort stations.¹⁰ However, as Maki Kimura notes, since ultranationalist Shinzo Abe began his second term as Prime Minister in 2012, Japan’s political climate turned “nationalist and reactionary,”¹¹ increasingly mainstreaming the

7 For English-language Academic scholarship of Japanese military sexual slavery system in book form, see: Yoshimi. Yuki Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution during World War II and the US Occupation* (London: Routledge, 2002); Ikuhiko Hata, *Comfort Women and Sex in the Battle Zone*, (United Kingdom: Hamilton Books, 2018). On Korean comfort women, see: Pyong Gap Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”: Military Brothels, Brutality, and the Redress Movement* (United States: Rutgers University Press, 2021); On Chinese comfort women, see: Peipei Qiu, *Chinese Comfort Women: Testimonies from Imperial Japan’s Sex Slaves*, (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2014); For compilation of testimonies: *Comfort Women Speak: Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military : Includes New United Nations Human Rights Report* (United Kingdom: Holmes & Meier, 2000); For survivor autobiographies, see: Jan Ruff-O’Herne, *50 Years of Silence*, (Australia: Bolinda Press, 1998); Maria Rosa Henson, *Comfort Woman: A Filipina’s Story of Prostitution and Slavery Under the Japanese Military* (United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

8 The exact number remains unknown.

9 Fight for justice. Accessed October 15, 2023. https://fightforjustice.info/?page_id=2694&lang=en

10 Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono. “Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono on the Result of the Study on the Issue of ‘Comfort Women.’” Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 4, 1993. Accessed December 14, 2023. <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/women/fund/state9308.html>.

11 Maki Kimura, *Unfolding the Comfort Women Debates: Modernity, Violence, Women’s Voices*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 3.

revisionist version of the comfort women history in Japanese society.¹² The government of Japan, with far-right historical revisionists and ultranationalists, has since extended what they declared as a “history war” onto U.S. soil on one hand,¹³ while on the other, framing the comfort women issue as a solely bilateral matter between ROK and Japan.¹⁴

In this context, CWMs in the U.S. have not been without controversy, with revisionists relying on Japanese nationalism to prevent the integration of comfort women history – and by extension, Japan’s wartime history – into the larger collective historical memory in the U.S.¹⁵ With the memorial in San Francisco being the first CWM to be erected in a major metropolitan U.S. city, it became a high-profile battleground for the Japanese revisionist “history war.” Established in September 2017 on the grounds of St. Mary’s Square Park in Chinatown, the San Francisco memorial features three standing teenage girls from Korea, China and the Philippines, a visual dissonance with the dominant framing of this issue as involving only Korea and Japan. Nearby, Hak-Soon Kim of Korea, the first comfort woman to speak out in 1991, gazes up at them in her traditional dress. The inscription reads, this “monument bears witness to the suffering of hundreds of thousands of women and girls euphemistically

12 Tomomi Yamaguchi, “Revisionism, Ultranationalism, Sexism: Relations Between the Far Right and the Establishment Over the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue,” *Social Science Japan Journal* 21, no. 2 (2018): 219–238.

13 Tomomi Yamaguchi, “The “History Wars” and the “Comfort Woman” Issue: The Significance of Nippon Kaigi in the Revisionist Movement in Contemporary Japan,” In Pyong Gap Min and others, eds., *The Transnational Redress Movement for the Victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery: The transnational redress movement for the victims* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020), 233-260.

14 For example, the so-called bilateral “2015 Agreement” – announced separately without a common document. On the website of Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a page titled “The Issue of comfort women between Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) simply states “the Governments of Japan and the ROK confirmed that the issue of comfort women was ‘resolved finally and irreversibly’ with the agreement reached at the Japan-ROK Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in December 2015.” See C. Sang-Hun, New York Times. “Japan and South Korea Settle Dispute About Wartime Comfort Women.” Accessed December 14, 2023. www.nytimes.com/2015/12/29/world/asia/comfort-women-south-korea-japan.html.

15 Pyong Gap Min and others, eds., *The Transnational Redress Movement*; Rin Ushiyama, “Comfort Women must Fall? Japanese Governmental Responses to ‘comfort Women’ Statues Around the World,” *Memory Studies* 14, no. 6 (2021): 1255-1271; Sachiyo Tsukamoto, “The Counter-Boomerang Effect of Transnational Revisionist Activism on the Memory of ‘Comfort Women,’” *Memory Studies* 15, no. 6 (2022): 1346–59.

called ‘comfort women,’ who were sexually enslaved by the Japanese Imperial Armed Forces in thirteen Asian-Pacific countries from 1931 to 1945.”¹⁶

RNRC alone, even as a prominent group of accomplished professionals as it was, risked being isolated as a Chinese interest group with its lobbying capacity far outpowered by well-resourced forces. CWJC formed as a result of a grassroots local supporting coalition meeting RNRC members for the first time upon learning about its initiative, and swiftly embracing with the core human rights message with no reservations – which some organizations had not ever deployed before. In this context, vernacularization framework enables mapping of their political calculations and any other relevant strategic considerations from their perspective, to explain what factors, if any, moved the needle towards consensus of the core human rights message. As shall be described below, these activists and their thoughts and rationales informing their own agency come into sharp focus framed in human rights vernacularization.

II Vernacularization of Human Rights

Vernacularization framework is distinct from classic human rights universalization discourse in that the local actors are premised as active agents in shaping the values change agenda for themselves and their community to which they belong. Classic human rights diffusion literature is loaded with unstated normative assumptions about human rights as the universal beacon towards human progress and enlightenment, and have been subjected to criticism for duplicating the dynamic of Western cultural imperialism.¹⁷ Amitav Acharya, in his theory of norm localization, predated Merry in recharacterizing local actors as intermediaries that take the external normative package to critically interrogate and modify as they saw fit in order to advance their own

16 Comfort Women Justice Coalition. “‘Comfort Women’: The Column of Strength.” San Francisco, CA, 2017. Inscription.

17 Ranjoo Seodu Herr, “Women’s Rights as Human Rights and Cultural Imperialism,” *Feminist Formations* 31, no. 3 (2019): 118-142.

vision of improved living conditions in their given societies.¹⁸ Merry, too, also finding the presumed top-down power hierarchy between the global and the local to be problematic, proposed vernacularization theory as a way to redress these limitations.¹⁹ The vernacularization framework therefore presupposes the translations to happen horizontally, across boundaries of class, formal education levels, socioeconomic status, etc.²⁰ Following Merry, Susanne Zwingel has elaborated on the types of interactive, iterative processes that occur on the ground as entailing not only linguistic translations, but transfer of meanings and values attached to the very symbols of human rights.²¹

Vernacularizers in this paper are distinct from those who suffer from lack of entitlements and agency in their lives, that is, victims of violations who may learn for the first time through human rights consciousness to view their suffering as a part of an injustice towards transformation of their own subject position. Specifically, the term “middle actors” (traversing the global on one hand and the local on the other) provides a conceptual distinction between such victim-survivors and the subjects of this paper, though the roles of “middle actors” and victim-survivor are by no means mutually exclusive.²² Practitioners of human rights vernacularization on the ground are a diverse bunch as they simultaneously represent and affiliate with any range of multiple sectors, locales, in addition to global “top” and local “grassroots” level entities as well. Note that the activists discussed in this study did not always deploy the human rights message in the comfort women events they organized. But since they, too, ultimately endorsed the human rights message for CWJC, I loosely conceptualize them for this paper as middle actors of human rights vernacularization.

18 Amitav Acharya, “How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism,” *International Organization* 58, no. 2 (2004): 239-75: 269.

19 Peggy Levitt and Sally Merry, “Vernacularization on the Ground: Local Uses of Global Women's Rights in Peru, China, India, and the United States,” *Global Networks* 9 (2009), 441-461: 443.

20 Ibid., 450.

21 Susanne Zwingel, “Theorizing Norm Translation: Women's Rights as Transnational Practice,” in *Translating International Women's Rights. Gender and Politics*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 9-34.

22 Levitt and Merry, *Vernacularization*.

On the other hand, vernacularizers who deploy explicitly human rights language and message, but whose ideological allegiances are fundamentally inconsistent with the global human rights norm, does not fit the subject criteria for this study, as they have for other vernacularization research. For example, Zeynep Atalay analyzes how particular middle actors of Islamist NGOs co-opt and manipulate the human rights values package, trimming away connotations of fundamental equality, such as gender equality that conflict with their religious values, while accessing the transnational caché attached to human rights language and ‘civil society’ NGO structure in the West.²³

With regard to the manner of utilization of human rights by local actors, scholars have noted, theoretically and empirically, how human rights are deployed in such a way as to promote positive law.²⁴ Positivist law recognizes individuals as rights-bearers, lending to decontextualized and ahistorical, incident-by-incident approach of ‘law enforcement’ that may resemble or win favor with neoliberal governance approaches.²⁵ In contrast, some activists may rely on human rights messages “as a key social movement strategy” or as an embodiment of the very notion of justice that legitimates their long-standing claims for redress particularly in the case against gender violence.²⁶ While such discourse implies a dichotomy of the utility of human rights as either “law” or social movement idea package,²⁷ García-Del Moral has argued that for indigenous women, both utilizations of human rights can be complementary in the hands of grassroots social actors in addressing the injustices of gender violence.²⁸ Such an observation may suggest that contextual factors that

23 Zeynep Atalay, “Vernacularization of liberal civil society by transnational Islamist NGO networks,” *Global Networks* 16, no. 3 (2016): 391–411.

24 K. Tsutsui, C. Whitlinger, and A. Lim, “International human rights law and social movements: States’ resistance and civil society’s insistence,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 8 (2012): 367–396.

25 Paulina García-Del Moral, “Indigenous women, multiple violence, and legal activism: Beyond the dichotomy of human rights as “law” and as “ideas for social movements”,” *Sociology Compass* 6, no. 6 (2022): 6.

26 Karen Engle, *The Grip of Sexual Violence in Conflict: Feminist Interventions in International Law*, (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2020); Levitt and Merry, *Vernacularization*.

27 Levitt and Merry, *Vernacularization*, 460; S.E. Merry, P. Levitt, M. Ç. Rosen, and D. H. Yoon, “Law From Below: Women’s Human Rights and Social Movements in New York City,” *Law & Society Review* 44, no. 1 (2010): 101–28: 102.

28 García-Del Moral, *Indigenous women*, 2.

mediate the function and relevance of the core human rights message as a framing tool play a role in characterizing the utility of human rights in a given issue.

III Methodology

Firstly, I will briefly describe the story of how CWM came to be built in San Francisco from the perspective of CWJC. Then, I catalog and chronologically arrange a select number of local comfort women-related events the activists who later cofounded CWJC organized since the comfort women issue first became known worldwide. Selected events fit the following criteria: each had to be locally held and organized by the local actor/organization that in 2015 were instrumental in creating CWJC; its organizers had control over the event's core messaging; and was an event aligned with, if not for, justice for comfort women. Absent archival infrastructure, records of these events are predominantly compiled via personal observation of the author, interviews and conversations with key actors and archival data, such as meeting notes, emails and promotional materials.

The theory of vernacularization frames the analysis by which I seek to trace evidence of a women's human rights language – and also, its absence – in this trajectory of comfort women awareness-raising and advocacy in San Francisco. I will also examine the framing choices of the core human rights message for comfort women justice, and rationale behind the choices made. Tsutsui, et al, borrow from Bedford and Snow in defining framing in the context of studying social movements as “the process through which activists, in their efforts to mobilize many people for their goals, present their cause in a way that most effectively identifies the problem/injustice and proposes solutions.”²⁹ Framing uniformity is a prerequisite in arriving at a shared core message among multiple independent actors establishing a single group identity and voice such as in the case of CWJC. Therefore, recollections of framing discussions rely on firsthand experience of myself and other women that constitute “middle actors” in this study.

Wider acceptance of auto-ethnographic approaches, particularly in

²⁹ Tsutsui, *International*, 382.

decolonial feminist scholarship has influenced this study's reliance on qualitative methodological elements and firsthand experiential knowledge of main subjects of the study including the author to enrich nuanced and contextualized analytical insights. The methodology in feminist political organizing has a long history, and supports unique epistemic contribution to scholarship from "feminist thinking about nonviolent action: as nonhierarchical, decentralized, and based on individual initiative, people's interdependence, and the power of cooperation."³⁰ Accordingly, the methodological approach I take here is necessarily mixed, and qualitative, involving direct observation, relying on experiential knowledge as a key part of primary data.

IV Brief History of the Effort to Build the comfort women Memorial in San Francisco

As part of "the international movement to rectify more than (sic) half a century of [Japanese government's] denial and injustice,"³¹ the idea of a public memorial for comfort women was well-suited for RNRC.³² The "international movement" has a well-established platform in the Global Alliance for Preserving the History of WWII in Asia (GA), also predominantly of Chinese extraction, dedicated to informing the global community towards a popular consensus to "compel the Government of Japan to honor its postwar responsibilities."³³ RNRC as a local organization took the lead on this project with GA's support. Members of both RNRC and GA were well connected to the local Democratic party and worked closely with the supervisors who were supportive of the project such as Mar, who had bridged grassroots working-class and immigrant communities and the governance institutions including the

30 Gwyn Kirk of Women for Genuine Security and International Women's Network Against Militarism (IWNAM) is also a cofounding member of CWJC. Gwyn Kirk, "Why Women?" *Social Justice* 46, no. 1 (2019): 23-36: 26.

31 Rape of Nanjing Redress Coalition. "History." Accessed September 30, 2023. <http://rnrc-us.org/history>.

32 Mirkinson, *Building*, 156; Julie Tang, oral history interview by Hiroki Arita, video recording, San Francisco, CA., March 12, 2023.

33 Global Alliance for Preserving the History of WWII in Asia. "Objectives." Accessed September 30, 2023. <http://www.global-alliance.net/objectives.html>.

Democratic Party Central Committee and the Board of Education.³⁴

According to Mar, then-Mayor Ed Lee suggested that they add reference to global human trafficking to RNRC's draft, citing rising international attention on this issue including the Pope's visit to the UN to deliver a message on this issue.³⁵ The draft was revised to mention a concern for human trafficking and its local connection to San Francisco as a key trafficking hub,³⁶ and entered the City and County Board of Supervisors' (Supervisors) public hearing agenda for the first time on July 21, 2015, bearing the title "Resolution urging the City and County of San Francisco to establish a memorial for "comfort women.""³⁷ On this 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, the resolution expressed "strong support of creating a memorial in memory of those girls and women who suffered immeasurable pain and humiliation as sex slaves and as a sacred place for remembrance, reflection, remorsefulness, and atonement for generations to come."³⁸

Some of the opponents of the resolution who attended the hearing to testify during the public hearing framed the resolution as being racially-motivated to "bash" and "bully" Japan and a pernicious misinformation campaign waged by vengeful Korea.³⁹ They succeeded in preventing the resolution from being voted on as the Supervisors moved the final vote to the subsequent meeting scheduled on September 22, 2015.⁴⁰

On that date, Yong-Soo Lee, a 'Comfort Woman' survivor and activist who had flown in from South Korea, delivered a powerful testimony in person to a packed chamber.⁴¹ Late Koichi Mera, a prominent figure in the U.S.-based Japanese revisionist movement, also testified, calling Grandma Lee a liar. Mera

34 City and County of San Francisco Board of Supervisors. "Former Supervisor Eric Mar - District 1." Accessed October 06, 2023. <https://sfbos.org/former-supervisor-mar-district-1>.

35 Miho Kim, "preparatory discussion for the August 06 Convening with Supervisor Eric Mar," Google Doc, July 29, 2015.

36 San Francisco Board of Supervisors, *Resolution urging the City and County of San Francisco to establish a memorial for "Comfort Women"*, introduced July 14, 2015, File No. 150764: 2.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Tomomi Yamaguchi, "Japan's Right-Wing Women and the 'Comfort Women' Issue," *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs* 6 (2020): 45-54.

40 San Francisco Board of Supervisors, *Meeting Minutes*, Regular Meeting, July 21, 2015.

41 Judith Mirkinson, "Listen to the Voices of the Women," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 5, 24, no. 9 (2022): 1.

promptly elicited chastise from Supervisor David Campos who repeated “shame on you” four times.⁴² The final vote supporting the resolution was unanimous, thus cementing the city’s official, unequivocal endorsement of comfort women history and a green light to build the public memorial.

Subsequently, as part of the required regulatory oversight of public works and public art, more public hearings were held. Japanese governmental and corporate interests, as well as nationalists persisted in delaying, if not blocking, nearly every permitting process.⁴³ Hirofumi Yoshimura, then-Mayor of Osaka, unilaterally announced termination of the sixty year-old San Francisco-Osaka Sister City relationship, saying their “relationship of trust has completely been destroyed.”⁴⁴ Nevertheless, on September 22, 2017, two years since the passage of the resolution, the memorial was publicly unveiled in a highly publicized ceremony attended by 500 people with great fanfare.⁴⁵

V Local comfort women-themed Events and Core Messaging, 1993 - 2014

1. November 1993: GABRIELA Network Hosts Lila Pilipina and *lola* Amonita

With regard to comfort women, after Grandma Hak-sun Kim⁴⁶ courageously broke her silence, women in other victim countries including the Philippines followed suit. In 1993, GABRIELA Network (GABNet), an organization with local multiracial membership (though predominantly Filipina), organized with SPEAKOUT!, a social justice speakers bureau, a local benefit

42 Emi Koyama, “Japanese Far-Right Activities in the United States and at the United Nations: Conflict and Coordination between Japanese Government and Fringe Groups” in Min and others, eds., *Transnational Redress Movement*, 267.

43 Ibid.

44 “Japan’s Osaka to snap sister city link with San Francisco over “Comfort Women” statue,” Reuters, November 23, 2017. Accessed October 01, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-usa-comfortwomen/japans-osaka-to-snap-sister-city-link-with-san-francisco-over-comfort-women-statue-idUSKBN1DO0KA>.

45 Tomo Hirai, “San Francisco ‘Comfort Women’ Memorial Unveiled,” *Nichi Bei Times*, September 28, 2017. Accessed September 27, 2023. <https://www.nichibei.org/2017/09/san-francisco-comfort-women-memorial-unveiled/>.

46 Sang-Hun Choe, “Overlooked No More: Kim Hak-soon, Who Broke the Silence for ‘Comfort Women’,” *New York Times*, October 21, 2021. Accessed October 07, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/21/obituaries/kim-hak-soon-overlooked.html>.

event for Filipino comfort women. On the event flyer titled “Who Are Our Beautiful Heroines,” the tagline follows, “Women Speak Out about Rape, Women’s Human Rights and Violence Against Women.”⁴⁷ The program at the historic San Francisco Women’s Building featured prominent feminist poets June Jordan and Janice Mirikitani. Nelia Sanchez of Lila Pilipina, support and advocacy group for Filipina comfort women, with *lola*⁴⁸ Amonita Balajadia, had flown in from the Philippines as main speakers and delivered powerful messages about the history and experiences of *lolas* that were little known at the time, and called for a fulfillment of women’s rights and end to sexual violence while also demanding justice from Japan.⁴⁹

According to Doris Mendoza, a member of GABNet at the time, GABNet’s embrace of women’s rights as human rights honored the very insistence of women survivors of sexual violence, irrespective of their social status, ethnicity, education or profession in a highly stratified Filipino society.⁵⁰ In their internationalist orientation, the human rights framing proved to be conducive to finding allies across national and geographic borders. “It was a universally understood language,” that facilitated solidarity in light of limited material resources.⁵¹ Indeed, GABNet is part of a larger, international network, connected with GABRIELA in the Philippines and other countries as well. In studying middle actors of human rights vernacularization, Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink found that the preponderance of global concepts and values in the political activist toolbox positively correlated with their ability to effect positive change on the ground.⁵² This is consistent with findings of human rights movement scholars that claim-making by grassroots advocates gain the legitimacy of the global norm, thereby amplifying their voice in having their

47 “Who Are Our Beautiful Heroines,” A “Comfort Women” benefit, November 13, 1993, San Francisco, CA.

48 *Lola* is a Tagalog word meaning ‘grandmother.’

49 Judith Mirkinson in conversation with the author, August 16, 2023.

50 Doris Mendoza in conversation with author, July 09, 2004.

51 Mirkinson, conversation with author.

52 Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

claims heard, and demanding justice.⁵³

2. July 2004: “Korea-Okinawa-Philippines Women’s Peace Day”⁵⁴

The following narrative is an autobiographical retrospective supported by archival meeting notes for “Korea-Okinawa-Philippines Women’s Peace Day,” an evening of poetry, music, food and education, also held at the San Francisco Women’s Building on July 09, 2004. This event featured perhaps the first known SPAM⁵⁵-themed Iron Chef Contest. The audience, from toddlers to elders, feasted on SPAM *champuru* by the Okinawan team, SPAM *budae chigae* by the Korean team, and SPAM *saimin* by the Filipino team – all prepared by local “aunties” who showed off their cooking talents. The program opened with “Tribute to Kim Soon-duk *harmoni*,” centering victims of Japanese military sexual slavery system to ground the evening’s theme: “Support Peace & Anti-Militarism (SPAM).”⁵⁶

Members of Korea Solidarity Committee (KSC), a co-organizer group, had attended the IWNAM conference in Seoul in 2002, having gained richer appreciation of militarism’s impacts on women. Diasporic communities not only of Korean ancestry but other affected countries were represented in San Francisco as well. To create a community venue for shared analysis-building and promote pan-Asian solidarity, Korea Solidarity Committee, GABNet, and Nikkeis for Peace & Justice with multi-ethnic API Coalition Against the War (APICAW) first organized a series of study groups on the impact of U.S. intervention in their respective home countries with gendered perspectives on militarism. These study groups were intended primarily for their own members who were mostly of Asian ancestries raised in the U.S. in immigrant

53 Levitt and Merry, *Vernacularization*; Mary M. McCarthy and Linda Hasunuma, “Coalition Building and Mobilization: Case Studies of the Comfort Women Memorials in the United States,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 6, no. 3 (2018): 411–434.

54 This is an autobiographical retrospective by the author, supported by select meeting notes and limited print records.

55 SPAM is a canned meat product introduced by Hormel Foods in 1937, which were shipped en masse to allied troops during WWII and become popular in communities with US military presence since. See Hormel Foods. “What is SPAM Brand?” Accessed December 14, 2023. <http://www.spam.com/what-is-spam-brand>.

56 “SPAM: Support Peace & Anti-Militarism,” Women’s Peace Day 2004 program book, Issue 1, July 2004.

or refugee homes and a generation removed from direct personal experiences or memories of U.S. intervention. Resource packets were created from the materials prepared for this series, and distributed on the day of the event. Its Statement of Unity and Purpose – a first community-led articulation of shared gendered perspectives on this topic for most, if not all, participants – affirms “the right for all peoples” to justice, self-determination, to be free from intervention and militarization, and commodification and exploitation of women, all of which emphasize collective dimensions of justice accompanied by a systemic critique of empire, epitomized by prevalence of U.S. military bases in the Asia Pacific and beyond.⁵⁷

Neither “human rights” nor reference to individual-based violations appear in this twelve-page booklet. Ordinary members of the Asian immigrant communities, including the organizers, were among the primary audience as well as beneficiaries of this participatory learning process. Weaving a shared narrative of critique among varied experiences of Asia’s countries affirmed the basis and rationale for pan-Asian solidarity.

3. August 2005: Solidarity ‘Wednesday Rally’ Demonstration in Solidarity with comfort women⁵⁸

On August 10, 2005, these same organizations organized a protest in front of San Francisco’s Japanese consulate office, followed by a march through the adjacent financial district. This was one of sixty simultaneously conducted global protests in solidarity with the grandmothers who had been sitting out at the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, rain or shine on every Wednesday since January 8, 1992.⁵⁹ BAYAN, Okinawan *Genyukai*, and Korean women drummers’ group *Chamae-sori* also joined, with colorful posters and instruments. Sugok Shin, a *Zainichi* Korean woman activist and writer, and Yuri Kochiyama, the late iconic Japanese-American activist, together denounced the Japanese government for refusing to extend a genuine apology to comfort women. Shin

57 Bay Area Women’s Initiative for Peace and Justice in Asia, “Statement of Unity & Purpose,” in *Support Peace & Anti-Militarism (SPAM)*, July 04, 2004: 10.

58 Yoko Moritaka, “Seeking Justice for Comfort Women: Demo in front of Japanese Consulate in SF,” *Hokubei Mainichi*, August 18, 2005: 2.

59 Education for Social Justice Foundation. “Wednesday Demonstration.” Accessed September 30, 2023. <https://www.e4sjf.org/wednesday-demonstration.html>.

told a reporter, “this is not an issue merely between Korea and Japan; [it] is about an egregious act of nationalist violence and domination...” Kochiyama followed suit, saying she was “ashamed as a person of Japanese ancestry.”⁶⁰

Zainichi Koreans are descendants of the Korean colonial subjects of the Japanese Empire, and despite living in postwar Japan for generations to date as their only home, remain legally classified as alien in perpetuity, and thus, excluded from Japan’s polity.⁶¹ Seen through her *Zainichi* Korean lens of living day to day in this reality, comfort women issue and *Zainichi* oppression in postwar Japan are both unresolved legacies of colonial oppression. Shin insisted on everyone to dress in white, to show unity in mourning in accordance with the Korean tradition. This action served the overarching objective of a collective expression of grief and indignation directed at the Japanese government in context of the global call to action of which it was part.

4. December 2014: Local Grassroots Mobilization Confronts *Nadeshiko* Action

In October 2014, FeND messaged me that *Nadeshiko* Action, a right-wing Japanese women’s nationalist organization, would hold a public event titled “True History” on December 13, 2014, at the Silicon Valley community Center of Redwood City. The speaker was *Nadeshiko* Action’s founder and president, Yumiko Yamamoto,⁶² a former leader of *Zaitokukai*, an extremist anti-*Zainichi* Korean hate group, and a known historical revisionist figure in Japan.⁶³ She had now emerged stateside via *Nadeshiko* Action as a vehicle to build an army of Japanese women in the U.S. to fight Japan’s history war. I immediately alerted my peers, including local comfort women activists, who quickly mobilized. Steve Zeltzer, a trade unionist with a long history of solidarity with Japan’s

60 Moritaka, *Seeking Justice*, 2.

61 The Nationality Law of Japan, Law No. 147 of 1950, as amended by Law No. 268 of 1952, Law No. 45 of 1984, Law No. 89 of 1993, and Law No. 147 of 2004, Law No. 88 of 2008.

62 *Nadeshiko* Action Japanese Women for Justice and Peace, “Put an end to the Comfort Women Issue! Consecutive Nadeshiko Action Connecting December 12 Tokyo~13th San Francisco~14th Los Angeles (*Ianfu Monday ni Shuushifu wo! 12gatsu12nichi Tokyo~13nichi San Furanshisuko~14nichi Rosanzerusu wo Tsunagu Nadeshiko Akushon*),” Accessed October 07, 2023. http://nadesiko-action.org/?page_id=7255.

63 *Zaitokukai* is a shorthand for the group whose official name translates to “Citizens’ Group Refusing to Tolerate Special Rights of Koreans in Japan (*Zainichi tokken o yurusana shimin no kai*).” See Tomomi Yamaguchi, “History Wars,” 242.

leftist unions and a vocal critic of Japanese historical revisionism, took the lead in organizing the protest at the event venue.

The protest action was titled “Protest Japanese Right Wing Denial of WW2 comfort women sex slaves and Re-militarization of Japan And Asia,”⁶⁴ and listed three demands: “Stop Denying the History of the Japanese Military’s Subjugation of Women in WW2 sexual slavery!”; “Hands Off Korean Japanese [sic] children and people in Japan!”; and “Yamamoto and “*Nadeshiko* Action” Not Welcome in US With Racist Ideology and Revisionist Japanese Imperialist History!”⁶⁵

WGS, Veterans for Peace (VFP), Eclipse Rising, Code Pink, NoNukes Action Committee, and Occupy were among the endorsing organizations.⁶⁶ In the archive of this event consisting of video footage and press materials, no reference to human rights can be found. Rather, the messaging, while touching on multiple issues, arise from the critical view of the Japanese right-ward shift framed as a “dangerous rise of fascism,”⁶⁷ suggesting that the discriminatory treatment of *Zainichi* Koreans and the failure to resolve the comfort women issue headlining this announcement are symptomatic of this larger ideological and political phenomenon in Japan.

VI Activists’ Convergence with RNRC

A few days before the July 21, 2015 Supervisors meeting, FeND informed me that Japanese historical revisionists will testify against an upcoming ‘comfort women memorial resolution’ of which I was unaware. Michael Wong of VFP joined me in urging others to mobilize, stating that he expected a well-prepared opposition to show up based on his experience protesting and learning about *Nadeshiko* Action as an indication.⁶⁸ After the hearing, a report-

64 United Public Workers for Action, “Protest Japanese Right Wing Denial of WW2 ‘Comfort Women’ sex slaves and Re-militarization of Japan And Asia,” event flyer and press announcement, December 09, 2014.

65 Ibid.

66 Labor Video Project, “US Protest Against Japanese “Comfort Women” Yumiko Yamamoto Sex Slave Denialists In Redwood City,” video recording, at 30:27 mark. Accessed on October 03, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Za-BMvOkzyY>.

67 Steve Zeltzer, in conversation with author, December 17, 2014.

68 Michael Wong, email to Miho Kim, Gwyn Kirk, et al, July 19, 2015.

back email from him noted that those behind the resolution were in attendance, none of whom he had met before.⁶⁹ Kirk stated in her email that a woman who claimed to be a RNRC member introduced herself to her afterwards, to express thanks for showing of support. This marked the first known contact established between local activists and RNRC.⁷⁰

By then, it was clear that to consolidate support for RNRC to withstand the well-organized opposition, the intelligence FeND had to offer as the expert on Japan's right-wing and historical revisionist movement would be of strategic value. Money was needed to connect the resolution's initiators and the activists interested in supporting it, with Fortunately, an international feminist human rights foundation based in SF at the time, Urgent Action Fund (UAF), came to the rescue under its Security Grant Program. I promptly submitted a request for – and received within a mere week's time – \$5,000, with endorsements from Kirk, Tomomi Kinukawa of Eclipse Rising, a U.S.-based *Zainichi* Korean social justice organization, and Rachel Pfeffer, UAF's former interim executive director, renowned feminist scholars/activists.⁷¹ In her endorsement, Kirk noted the potential of the proposed project to “bring together a strong coalition in this particular instance and also generate new connections for future human rights organizing in the Bay Area.” Furthermore, she stated the proposed activities “would make a very timely intervention in a contentious situation that raises up core human rights issues for women.”⁷²

On August 06, 2015, after several preparatory calls with Mar's office, more than twenty local grassroots organizations besides RNRC leaders and Mar and his staff represented, including Code Pink, Labor Video Project, Occupy, American Friends Service Committee, and Asian Americans for Peace and Justice, most of whom were familiar faces from previous comfort women activities.⁷³ FeND revealed that nearly every key figure of the Japanese historical revisionist efforts in the U.S. tied back to Japan's most powerful, nationalist right-wing organization with close ties with the administration:

69 Michael Wong, email to Miho Kim, Gwyn Kirk, et al, July 23, 2015.

70 Gwyn Kirk, email to Miho Kim, Michael Wong, et al, July 24, 2015.

71 Miho Kim, grant proposal to Urgent Action Fund, July 22, 2015.

72 Gwyn Kirk, email to Huong Nguyen, July 26, 2015.

73 Miho Kim, “Memorial resolution meeting notes,” August 06, 2015.

Nippon Kaigi.⁷⁴ Judge Julie Tang, RNRC leader and a co-initiator of the memorial resolution, remarked that this is the first time she encountered a *Japanese-American* opposition impacted by Japan's right-wing movements, which many found "frightening" as portending unprecedented ethnic tension in the Asian-American community. Everyone was unequivocally convinced that a united front was necessary for success. They agreed to form a single entity, with overall command powers mandated to Judges Lillian Sing and Julie Tang, two RNRC leaders.

VII Adopting of the Human Rights Message

Reaching consensus to commit to a coalition required very little discussion after the first convening. The next discussion centered around CWJC's official mission and how we frame our cause and message. We all agreed the message had to appeal to a wider constituency base of the city as well as decision-makers (i.e., Supervisors). For RNRC, human rights was not a term applied in its public communications. In RNRC's home page, for example, RNRC connects Rape of Nanking to the issue of comfort women thusly:

The Rape of Nanking is emblematic of Japan's W.W.II atrocities throughout Asia, which include the enslavement of the comfort women, and the germ and chemical warfare experimentation on humans by Unit 731...Young women were kidnapped and forced into sexual slavery as comfort women. Forced to endure dozens of rapes each day, such women often committed suicide rather than (sic) live with this shame.⁷⁵

According to Mar, the very first draft of the resolution more closely reflected the tone and tenor of the language reflected in other RNRC and GA materials⁷⁶ focusing on Japan taking full responsibility, which could come across

74 Yamaguchi, *History Wars*.

75 Rape of Nanjing Redress Coalition. Accessed December 02, 2023. <http://rnrc-us.org/history.htm>.

76 For reference, see Rape of Nanjing Redress Coalition. <http://rnrc-us.org/about.htm>; Global Alliance for Preserving the History of WWII in Asia. <http://www.global-alliance.net/home.html>.

as “inflammatory.”⁷⁷ The first proposed resolution drafted by RNRC does not explicitly mention sex trafficking, nor women’s human rights. A common thread among victim families, including RNRC members, is the deeply felt pain upon which moral condemnation is directed at the state as the unrepentant perpetrator.⁷⁸ This is consistent with Shin’s message targeting Japan as a *Zainichi* Korean woman.

Women’s rights scholars/activists contributed epistemic authority that informed the collective framing discussion, particularly on strategic advantages of deploying the human rights message over other messaging options. Judith Mirkinson explained that by doing so, “we could tie [the memorial] to what’s going on around the world – in terms of catching, and feeding into, the increasing political momentum on the world stage around eradicating sexual violence in war.”⁷⁹ In fact, Comfort women survivors themselves had participated on the women’s human rights platform globally as well, having been a key force⁸⁰ behind the successful criminalization of sexual violence in conflict.⁸¹ An equally historic UN General Security Council Resolution 1325⁸² linking gender equality to matters of peace and security reinforced the importance of women in peace-building.⁸³

Some groups whose familiar messages were related to systemic and anti-nationalist critique expressed concerns that members either harbored political, ideological concerns about human rights, and/or felt intimidated by what they perceived to be too esoteric to fully rally behind in an effective, empowering

77 Miho Kim, “Resolution 72: Eric Mar mtg.” conference call minutes, July 29, 2015.

78 Tang, *interview*.

79 Based on conversation with the author on October 01, 2023.

80 Gay McDougall, “Keynote Speech at the Seoul International Symposium, Leading up to the ‘Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery in 2000 and the Issue of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery,’” June 1999, 10.

United Nations Security Council. “Resolution 1325 (2000).” S/RES/1325(2000). New York, NY: United Nations, 2000.

Mirkinson, *Building San Francisco Memorial*, 161.

81 The United Nations Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. International Organizations, 2001. Web Archive. Accessed October 08, 2023. <https://www.loc.gov/item/lcwaN0018822/>.

82 United Nations Security Council. “Resolution 1325 (2000).” S/RES/1325(2000). New York, NY: United Nations, 2000.

83 Mirkinson, *Building San Francisco Memorial*, 161.

way. However, the representatives of such groups were poised as middle actors to translate the knowledge gained at the CWJC table as vernacularizers in their respective socio-cultural contexts. Continuous flow of knowledge and communication to and from their respective constituents and CWJC ensured diverse base-building through which mass mobilizations and public awareness-raising were possible.

The human rights framing appealed to some groups as a potential strategic advantage for their own organizational interests irrespective of their relevance to human rights *per se*. For example, Eclipse Rising, a U.S.-based *Zainichi* Korean organization, ultimately agreed that human rights framing by CWJC would be helpful in boosting their own narrative power, backed by a globally commensurate symbol of legitimacy. In other words, human rights in the context of a strategic objective to build a public memorial served as potent political ammunition, rather than a detractor or competitor, of their respective organizational agendas and messages.

Clearly, human rights messaging indeed situated the CWM cause to access global solidarity and a powerful platform. The critical and timely support by UAF secured by framing the issue in terms of the global universal is a case in point, demonstrating the benefit of a global philanthropic infrastructure and formidable political legacy established in the global women's human rights movement. Consensus on the core message was reached with all participating organizations averting difficult compromises on either ideological or practical grounds, and if anything, fueled the enthusiasm among everyone who saw that their unity under a united CWJC would serve as a platform for its member groups as well, besides of course giving CWJC a real winning potential despite tremendous odds.

VIII "Human Rights" Message and Its Utilities

On a practical level, the marriage of the 'outsider' role of the supporting grassroots groups, and the 'insider' role led by the political system-savvy RNRC leaders offered an enormous potential of the coordinated two-pronged 'inside-outside' strategy. In the case of the middle actors 'outside' of the city's political machinery and situated in their respective grassroots communities, the human rights message could be embraced as a broad, inclusive ideal for

social movements, congruent with their own preexisting social justice values. In the past events discussed above, no evidence of substantive concerns against use of human rights framing was found. After all, when community events designed for community members, central messaging need not appeal to any external political targets to make any favorable decisions on their behalf. Additionally, many grassroots community members lacked specialized knowledge, often perceived as a prerequisite to engage meaningfully in international human rights law discourse. Human rights organizations, despite their positioning in civil society, are often highly professionalized and institutionalized. As such, the utility of human rights as a social movement ideal made it more approachable and accessible.

With regard to RNRC's area of political influence on the "inside," symbolizing CWM as part and parcel of improving global norms proved to be a favorable proposition for those who stood to gain from legitimacy that is political in nature, as well as grounded in normative law, to tackle present-day intractable social problems. For example, Mary McCarthy and Linda Hasunuma, in their comparative analysis of CWM efforts throughout the U.S., found that the successful framing of the memorials centered on universal messaging including sex trafficking.⁸⁴ Indeed, as Levitt and Merry noted, "the non-local dimension that points to *global universals* (emphasis added) is precisely what makes human rights discourse politically powerful..."⁸⁵ Indeed, the governance institutions are well-poised to actively utilize human rights as positivist law in changing the global norm through what they are mandated to do: policy-making and legislation.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the comfort women issue has been framed in terms of both human rights and nation-state wrongdoing. In the case of San Francisco during the periods leading up to the formation of CWJC, I draw a tentative conclusion that those identifying with the victims' perspectives demonstrated a stronger tendency to present the issue as that of Japan having

84 McCarthy and Hasunuma, *Coalition Building*.

85 Levitt and Merry, *Vernacularization*, 445.

to take account of its historic wrongs, whereas a perspective that is grounded in the global feminist trajectory of advancing women's rights leaned towards deployment of the human rights message to frame the issue. The deliberations on making the messaging choice in the case of CWJC illuminated the strategic considerations that came into play, by situating CWJC's strategic objective as the context in which to assemble the coalitional vehicle to achieve them. The rationale by which CWJC ultimately adopted the human rights message confirms previous findings by scholars that indeed, tying the issue at hand to the global, universal values package offers a significant political and normative advantage.⁸⁶ At the same time, for local communities that constitute constituents as opposed to political decision-makers, such a concept can be perceived as esoteric, professionalized and intimidating, or insufficient in capturing their preexisting core interest missions, or possibly both.

The finding that the same approach and utility does not exhibit intended effectiveness equally with all audiences across the board offers at least two implications. Firstly, in 'selling' the human rights package to all interested parties consolidating into a new organized formation for the first time, such as the groups coming together to form CWJC, arguments most suited for 'selling' the human rights core package as the best choice of core message options may vary from one target constituency to another. Secondly, women's human rights advocates engaging in specific campaigns such as CWM would benefit from exploring how human rights vernacularization intersects with the political dimension once the coalitional vehicle begins to operate. While human rights reaches decision-makers on the "inside," how can its utility can be harnessed differently in expanding support on the "outside?" In CWM efforts, a strong show of pan-ethnic solidarity in order to consolidate the political force helped counter Japanese nationalist arguments that caused tension among Asian communities. In such circumstances, middle actors who belong to such communities actively relied on the common binding appeal of the universal values package in countering narratives they saw as harmful and divisive. Inquiry into how middle actors in particular built the necessary widespread grassroots support around the human rights message may provide insight into translation and vernacularization techniques distinct from that of building buy-

86 McCarthy and Hasunuma, *Coalition Building*; Levitt and Merry, *Vernacularization*.

in from decision-makers on the 'inside.' Then, strategies to unleash the formidable power of one voice for human rights may be enriched with more precision and intentionality.

ABSTRACT

The Power of One Voice:
Mapping the Vernacularization between the Women's
Human Rights Message and the Comfort Women
in San Francisco

Miho Kim

Adopting the theory of vernacularization as an analytical framework, local actors who convened to help establish Comfort Women Justice Coalition (CWJC) in San Francisco in 2015 also influenced significantly the formation of this nascent coalition's core central message. This paper uses archival sources to trace the temporal pathway through which messages pertaining to "Comfort Women" justice traveled to that moment of selecting CWJC's core message. Directly linking sex trafficking and violence against women, CWJC argued the "Comfort Women" issue was first and foremost a woman's rights issue as human rights. The study offers a nuanced insight into how this consensus to adopt a human rights message over other options emerged, by constructing a narrative overview of the local history of vernacularization of human rights related to the "Comfort Women" issue. In addition, it suggests that it was the informed political, and strategic calculus that guided all stakeholders to an unequivocal consensus to adopt the explicitly universalizing, gendered, human rights message, and the process itself has proved to be an important site of human rights vernacularization. The paper concludes by suggesting further research into the unique roles played by vernacularizers who are not monolithic and employ distinct approaches and techniques in the course of vernacularizing, in their respective socio-cultural contexts and objectives.