

Refereed article

Contested Transnational Memory Space of “Comfort Women”: The Korean Diaspora’s Civic Engagement in Germany

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Abstract

On December 14, 2011, the first P'yōnghwaüi Sonyösang, also known as the “Statue of a Girl for Peace,” was built in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, South Korea. Since then, replicas have been installed in global cities such as Berlin, New York, Shanghai, Sydney, and Toronto. The bronze memorial represents Korean “comfort women” — a euphemism referring to Japanese military sexual slavery during the Second World War — and serves as a mnemonic platform. In Germany, the “comfort women” memorial was erected and exhibited in multiple cities, primarily due to the Korean diaspora through its activities earning the solidarity of local communities on this issue. Seeking to install these memorials has led diverse actors to collaborate both locally and transnationally, meanwhile meeting with resistance from the Japanese government. Based on interviews with the individuals who established the memorials as well as German and Korean newspaper sources, I investigate how the Korean diaspora worked together with the German local community to shift the “comfort women” issue into a global memory space. I argue that this solidarity was based on universal and particular identifications with the memorial in question, highlighting the potential for transnational memory to be shared beyond ethnic and national boundaries and contributing to the extraterritorial quality of cosmopolitan memory.

Keywords: Comfort women; Sonyösang; Statue of a Girl for Peace; transnational memory; cosmopolitan memory

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Introduction

On December 14, 2011, the P'yōnghwaüi Sonyōsang (hereafter Sonyōsang), also known as the “Statue of a Girl for Peace,” was erected in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, South Korea. Since then, replicas have been installed in global cities such as Berlin, New York, Shanghai, Sydney, and Toronto. The bronze memorial, featuring a girl dressed in a *hanbok* (Korean traditional clothes), represents Korean “comfort women”¹ — a euphemistic term referring to the numerous women and girls, mostly from colonial Korea but also other countries in the Asia-Pacific region as well as the Netherlands, whom the Japanese military forced into sexual slavery during the Second World War (Ahn 2020, 9; Kwon 2019, 7; Min 2003, 938; Yoshimi 2003, 106–114).

The Sonyōsang’s installation marked the occasion of the 1,000th rally in the series of Wednesday Demonstrations that have been held since 1992 by the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (hereafter the Korean Council), the leading nongovernmental organization in South Korea addressing the “comfort women” issue. The state-driven sexual violence inflicted on these “comfort women” became known in the 1990s thanks to victim-survivors’ courageous testimonies and NGO efforts in South Korea, Japan, and Asia-Pacific more broadly (Ahn 2015, 43; Min 2003, 939). Their strategies to exert pressure on the Japanese government involved seeking international recognition of this historical crime, culminating in the United Nations’ (1996) definition of the “comfort system” as “a clear case of sexual slavery” — one that the Japanese government should acknowledge and take legal responsibility for.

Nonetheless, the “comfort women” issue remains a source of great controversy. The main point of contention here has centered on the coercive nature of the “comfort system,” particularly regarding questions of legal and political accountability vis-à-vis the Japanese state and military (Yoshimi 2003, 98). The Japanese government (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2021) has officially refuted its and the military’s involvement in forcibly mobilizing the victims, overturning the position the Kono Statement established in 1993 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1993). The latter had acknowledged the Japanese military’s direct involvement in establishing the “comfort system” and its forced mobilization of women into sexual slavery herewith. Such regression in historical consciousness is linked to Japan’s political shift to neo-nationalism after Shinzo Abe (2012–2020) from the conservative Liberal Democratic Party became prime minister (P.-J. Kim 2017, 301–302).

The recent article “Contracting for Sex in the Pacific War,” by J. Mark Ramseyer, Mitsubishi Professor of Japanese Legal Studies at Harvard University, engendered substantial controversy in academic circles. He (Ramseyer 2021, 2) essentially supported the claims of Japanese denialists (Ahn 2008, 34–35), positing that these

¹ Quotation marks are consciously used with the term throughout to indicate its euphemistic nature.

women, motivated by the potential earnings, voluntarily entered into contractual agreements for sex work. Ramseyer's argument was highly criticized and countered by experts in "comfort women" research and the redress movement in Japan, South Korea, and the United States. Types of criticism levied here included, among other things, the misuse of official documents, of victim-survivors' testimonies, as well as concerns related to questionable research ethics (Kang 2022; Min 2022; Yamaguchi 2022; Yoshiaki 2022).

In the face of persistent denial and the distortion of the historical narrative surrounding "comfort women," activists and scholars have sought to institutionalize their past on a global scale. Notably, "comfort women" documents being included in UNESCO's Memory of the World Program were among such aspirations. However, these efforts have encountered numerous obstacles, primarily stemming from the Japanese government's intervention and the highly controversial 2015 Comfort Women Agreement, concluded between Japan and its South Korea counterparts (H. Shin 2021, 1), which sought to settle the "comfort women" issue "finally and irreversibly" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea 2015). The bilateral agreement — encompassing also the establishment of the Foundation for Reconciliation and Healing to offer financial support to the victims and the removal of the Sonyōsang located in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul — elicited considerable pushback from advocates for the victims, especially for not including them in this negotiation process. This dissatisfaction with the handling of the matter spurred a proliferation of "comfort women" memorials both nationwide and globally (Kwon 2019, 11–12). Since then, more than 100 replicas of the Sonyōsang have been erected nationwide while at least 17 stand outside South Korea (Korean Council 2021).

Sonyōsang as Cosmopolitan Memory: The Case of Germany

Despite Germany being home to the third-most replicas after South Korea and the US, the level of scholarly attention paid to this phenomenon has been limited. Focus primarily has been given to the "comfort women" memorial built in Berlin (Mladenova 2022). This study is intended to fill this research gap by investigating the related initiatives of the Korean diaspora and German local communities as well as the contestation surrounding the four replicas erected since 2017 in Wiesent, Frankfurt, Berlin and Kassel respectively. Additionally, the exhibitions in Dresden, Frankfurt, Hamburg, and Wolfsburg are briefly addressed as well.

Beyond its Germany-centric focus, this paper contributes to the literature by adopting a theoretical lens grounded in "cosmopolitan memory." Per this conceptual framework, the potential for collective memories in the global era to transcend national boundaries and be shared across diverse ethnic and national communities has been illustrated, for instance, in the case of the Holocaust (Levy and Sznajder 2002, 2007). Previous research in our context has concentrated on the transnational dissemination of the "comfort women" memorial, emphasizing the Korean diaspora

being carrier and scrutinizing its strategies for the universalization of collective memory on this historical episode (Hasunuma and McCarthy 2019; McCarthy and Hasunuma 2018; Schumacher 2021; Son 2018; J. Yoon 2019; R. Yoon 2018). These studies — in line with extant work on transnational memory (e.g. Assmann 2014; Erll 2011; Wüstenberg 2020) — elucidate how collective memory extends beyond national confines through immigrants’ agency, being transformed hereby into universally recognized norms. Adding to these findings, the theoretical framework of cosmopolitan memory applied in this study facilitates the identification of the connections that German local communities have come to forge with the “comfort women” memorial. Cosmopolitan memory is assumed to be constructed through a dynamic process involving the de-territorialization of collective memory from the constraints of the nation-state, followed by its subsequent reterritorialization in frameworks that embrace both universal and specific local contexts (Levy and Sznajder 2002, 92).

Alongside its theoretical contributions, this study is also intended to position the “comfort women” issue within a cosmopolitan perspective, as the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement illustrated the limitations of government-led solutions here (K. Y. Shin 2016; Lee 2017; Park 2022). In addition to the Agreement, the nation-centric approach reflected in works seeking to settle this matter (e.g. Ko 2016; Li and Rui 2019; W. Shin 2019) not only perpetuates the dichotomies of victims versus perpetrators and South Korea versus Japan (Park 2022, 89; K. Y. Shin 2016, 233–234) but also overlooks the intersectional nature of the “comfort system” (Min 2003). Also, it diminishes victim-survivors’ contributions and the global civil society movement engaged in this episode (Lee 2017, 97).

In contrast, the cosmopolitan approach presents the “comfort women” issue as one of global concern, thereby nurturing transnational solidarity and instilling a shared sense of responsibility (Levy and Sznajder 2002, 92–93). Also, it underscores how transnational actors can transcend political boundaries, which may bring us closer to a victim-centered solution and a perspective that extends beyond the national(-ist) discourses surrounding this history seen thus far (Park 2022, 72). Grounded in the posited cosmopolitan-memory framework, the following questions will be tackled: What universal and particular identifications were drawn regarding the “comfort women” memorial, as leading to solidarity between the Korean diaspora and local communities in Germany? How did opponents perceive said memorials on their erection?

Methods

A qualitative research approach is taken, namely by conducting semi-structured interviews with five key individuals to gather and analyze pertinent data. Although the number of interviewees was limited, those spoken with had significant involvement in the establishment of the “comfort women” memorials (see Table 1

below). This was facilitated by the researcher's position as a member of the Korean diaspora in Germany.

Table 1: Interview Partners

No.	Name/Pseudonym	Gender	Affiliation	Involved in	Activities
1	Young-mi	Female	Engaged individually	Wiesent	Co-organized the installation, sponsored activities, participated in the unveiling ceremony
2	Sung-han	Male	Won-Buddhistischer Tempel Regensburg		Convinced the owners of the Nepal Himalaya Park about installing the memorial in the park
3	Minyöng Kang	Male	Koreanische Evangelische Kirchengemeinde Rhein-Main	Frankfurt	Co-organized the installation and related events
4	Nataly Jung-Hwa Han	Female	Korea Verband	Berlin	Initiated the installation in Berlin and supported the University of Kassel
5	Markus	Male	University of Kassel	Kassel	Initiated the installation

The interview guide was designed to cover key topics based on previous studies, including the reasons for organizing the installation of the “comfort women” memorial and conflicts with the Japanese government. It also sought to allow participants to introduce additional relevant information as applicable. Nevertheless, the central question was how exactly these respective interlocutors had managed to win German local communities’ support regarding each memorial’s erection.

The interviews were conducted in German and Korean, either in person or via Zoom, between September 2022 and June 2023. Audio was recorded with the participants’ verbal and/or written consent, and they each chose whether to use their real name or a pseudonym. All interviews were transcribed to ensure accuracy and provide a textual basis for analysis. The qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interviews underwent focused analysis by use of the MAXQDA software (Rädiker and Kuckartz 2020). The data were first coded according to the interview guide, with appropriate categories being developed; the second coding round then followed.

In addition, German and Korean newspapers were consulted to capture the positions of supporters and opponents alike. Relevant newspaper articles were identified primarily by the use of Google’s search engine, in employing specific keywords such

as Friedensstatue (Peace Statue) and Trostfrauenstatue (“Comfort Women” Statue) in German and Sonyōsang in Korean plus the relevant location. The author translated quotes from the interview data and newspaper articles used in this paper from German and Korean into English.

The Korean Diaspora’s Civic Engagement in Germany over the “Comfort Women” Memorial

Wiesent

On International Women’s Day, March 8, 2017, the first “comfort women” memorial — also referred to as the Peace Statue in Germany by its initiators — was successfully erected at Nepal Himalaya Park in Wiesent, a village in the district of Regensburg, Bavaria. The installation was initiated by the Korean diaspora, a result of the unsuccessful attempt of the local governments in South Korea and Germany to build a memorial in Freiburg, a city in the southwest of Germany. In 2016, Korean media reported that the mayors of Freiburg and its partner city in South Korea, Suwon, had agreed to install the “comfort women” memorial in the former’s city center (*Hankyoreh* 2016). This solidarity between Suwon and Freiburg was founded on universal perspectives encompassing human and women’s rights as well as peace principles. Additionally, their alliance was strengthened by identifying the memorial’s place in Germany’s own particular historical context as well as coming against the backdrop of continuing sexual violence against women in current times.

The mayor of Suwon, T’aejong Yōm, a former environmental activist, emphasized that he “wish[ed] for the restoration of the human rights and honor of the ‘comfort women’ victims and peace in the international community” and wanted to “contribute to realizing the universal values of mankind” (*Hankyoreh* 2016). Yōm’s purpose corresponded to that of Freiburg’s mayor, Dieter Salomon, a member of the left-liberal party Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Alliance 90/The Greens). Salomon interpreted the memorial as a universal symbol, prompting him to draw connections between it and instances of sexual violence perpetrated by soldiers of the German Wehrmacht as well as contemporary cases thereof involving the Islamic State (Siebold 2016). In this context, the unveiling ceremony was originally planned to occur on Human Rights Day, December 10, 2016. However, this outcome was thwarted due to opposition from the Japanese government. According to one German newspaper, the Japanese Consul General visited Freiburg and argued that erecting the “comfort women” memorial would “damage relations between Germany and Japan” (Siebold 2016). Also, Freiburg’s partner city in Japan, Matsuyama, had stated it would terminate official ties if the memorial went up (Siebold 2016). Due to diplomatic pressure, the mayor of Freiburg eventually withdrew from the planned course of action.

Along with the Japanese government’s opposition, a dissenting viewpoint regarding installing the “comfort women” memorial emerged from within Germany as well.

Reinhard Zoellner, a professor specializing in German History and Japanology, expressed his disagreement with constructing such a memorial in Freiburg in an interview given with Deutsche Welle (German Wave), a state-owned international broadcaster. Zoellner cited the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement between South Korea and Japan as the basis for his argument: “If [Salomon] persists in erecting the statue in the current context and [amid] the ongoing reconciliation process between Japan and Korea, he is unilaterally taking sides with South Korea” (Felden 2016). Unlike Freiburg’s then mayor, Zoellner territorialized the “comfort women” episode as something occurring between two nation-states, thus considering the erection of a related memorial in the city irrelevant. He proposed creating an alternative memorial making “explicit reference to the fact that German soldiers have also committed such sexual crimes” (Felden 2016).

Triggered by this failure to see it through, the Korean diaspora in Germany founded the Togil p'yōnghwaüi sonyōsang togil kōllipch'ujinwiwōnhoe (German Committee for Erecting the P'yōnghwaüi Sonyōsang in Germany) and the citizens of Suwon the Togil p'yōnghwaüi sonyōsang suwōnsimin kōllipch'ujinwiwōnhoe (Suwon Citizens' Committee for Erecting the P'yōnghwaüi Sonyōsang in Germany) (Ch'ae 2022). Committee members in Germany included Yongnam Ch'u, the pastor of the Koreanisch-Evangelische Kirchengemeinde Bochum (Korean Protestant Church Bochum), and Eunhi Yi, representative of the Frankfurt-based NGO Punggyeong Weltkulturen (Scenery World Cultures).² Numerous individuals, including Young-mi and Sung-han, also participated in the installation eventually taking place in Wiesent.³

Young-mi's engagement here ranged from sponsoring related activities in Germany, co-organizing the memorial's installation, to participating in the unveiling ceremony. Her participation was based on the universal idea that the violence once inflicted on these “comfort women” could happen in any war.⁴ Sung-han, who is affiliated with the Won-Buddhistischer Tempel Regensburg (Won Buddhist Temple Regensburg) and has been working at the Nepal Himalaya Park for several years, played a significant role in convincing the latter's owners to install such a memorial on-site. The solidarity emerging between Sung-han and the park owners was based on their shared understanding that said memorial symbolizes human rights more broadly. According to Sung-han: “The very fact that [the memorial] is being erected is to eliminate war, and then the exploitation of women, including sexual exploitation, human rights exploitation, and all these things that are going on in the war.”⁵ Simultaneously, the memorial was also contextualized to aspects of German soldiers' respective conduct during the Second World War. Sung-han and the park owners agreed that although Germany and Japan were perpetrating nations, the

2 Nataly Jung-Hwa Han, Zoom, September 17, 2022; Young-mi, Zoom, May 11, 2023.

3 Because both interviewees wished to remain anonymous, they were given pseudonyms.

4 Young-mi, Zoom, May 11, 2023.

5 Sung-han, Zoom, May 30, 2023.

latter’s current attitude toward accepting responsibility was unjustifiable given the former’s efforts to confront its own wartime legacy.⁶

As in the Freiburg case, the memorial’s installation led to conflict with the Japanese government, eventually seeing the removal of the commemorative plaque describing the sexual violence the Japanese Empire had inflicted on these “comfort women.” According to Sung-han, the Japanese general consul in Munich visited Nepal Himalaya Park multiple times to try and persuade the owners to remove the statue.⁷ Like Zoellner, the Japanese government argued that the issue had already been resolved through the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement and offered to bear the costs incurred for removing the memorial. When the statue was not removed, the Japanese government turned to diplomatic channels: It exerted pressure on the mayor of Wiesent via the federal state of Bavaria. Nepal Himalaya Park, a journalist for a local newspaper who had reported on the installation of the memorial, and the Won Buddhist Temple Regensburg all received numerous emails and phone calls from Japanese students in Germany demanding the statue’s removal. Due to continued protests from the Japanese government and Japanese students, the park owners eventually agreed with the Japanese Embassy to preserve the “comfort women” memorial but without the aforementioned plaque.⁸

After these events transpired, Scenery World Cultures subsequently began displaying the “comfort women” memorial with the accompanying plaque as part of exhibitions instead. From August to September 2018, the memorial was presented at the Dorothee Soelle Haus, a center for church communities in Hamburg. Although the exhibition was originally supposed to take place in the Frauenmuseum (Women’s Museum) in Bonn, the location was subsequently changed due to the Japanese Embassy’s intervention. According to one German newspaper, the Japanese vice consul requested that the museum director not exhibit the memorial (Scheerschmidt 2019). Such interference continued with the Hamburg exhibition. The Japanese Consul demanded the Dorothee Soelle Haus remove the memorial, claiming the plaque’s framing was historically untrue (Scheerschmidt 2019). Another replica was also displayed in Frankfurt, first in the foyer of the Haus am Dom (House at the Cathedral) from October 2019 to January 2020 and then in the Gebäude für Sozialwissenschaften und Psychologie (Building for Social Sciences and Psychology) on Goethe University’s Westend Campus from February to July 2020.

6 Sung-han, Zoom, May 30, 2023.

7 Sung-han, Zoom, May 30, 2023.

8 Sung-han, Zoom, May 30, 2023.

Frankfurt

The “comfort women” replica memorial’s unveiling in Frankfurt was celebrated on March 8, 2020, thus once again on International Women’s Day. It was erected on the forecourt of the Koreanische Evangelische Kirchengemeinde Rhein-Main (Korean Evangelical Church Congregation Rhine-Main, hereafter Korean Rhine-Main Church), the alternative location the Korean diaspora had suggested after the installation in Freiburg was canceled.⁹ Founded in the late 1960s by the miners and nurses who had come to Germany as guest workers, the Korean Rhine-Main Church is one of the oldest Korean diasporic churches, currently serving three communities in the Rhine-Main area. Whereas other Korean diasporic churches are independent of the state, the Korean Rhine-Main Church is a member of the German state churches. Since 2001, the Korean Rhein-Main Church has been affiliated with the Evangelische Kirche in Hessen und Nassau (Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau), which has historically supported the pro-democracy movement in South Korea and reunification on the Korean Peninsula through its continued partnership and advocacy with the Han’gukkidokkyojangnohoe kwangjunohoe (Gwangju Provost of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea).¹⁰

In this context, the ongoing endeavors to erect the memorial were strongly supported by the local church communities, such as the Evangelische *Stadtdekanat Frankfurt und Offenbach* (*The Protestant City Deanery of Frankfurt and Offenbach*) and the Evangelische Frauen in Hessen und Nassau (Evangelical Women in Hesse and Nassau) (Knoche 2020). According to Minyōng Kang, who has served as a pastor at the Korean Rhine-Main Church since 2016, the solidarity between the latter and the German churches over erecting the “comfort women” memorial was based on a mutual understanding that the church has a responsibility to participate in social engagement aimed at promoting peace and advocating for human rights.¹¹ A few years prior to the installation, they had jointly spoken out in favor of organizing a symposium on world peace as a way to commemorate the centennial of the First World War’s end. Subsequently, this event engendered discussion about installing the “comfort women” memorial on the grounds of the Korean Rhine-Main Church.¹² Their collective awareness led to setting up the statue and co-organizing the symposium on wartime sexual violence and peace with das Projekt Friedensstatue (The Peace Statue Project), which was unfortunately canceled due to COVID-19.¹³

Unlike the cases of Freiburg and Wiesent, the statue built at the Korean Rhine-Main Church has not met with opposition from the Japanese government. According to Kang, the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau communicated with the Japanese Consul beforehand, informing them of the Korean Rhine-Main Church’s intention

9 Minyōng Kang, in-person, June 1, 2023.

10 Minyōng Kang, in-person, June 1, 2023.

11 Minyōng Kang, in-person, June 1, 2023.

12 Minyōng Kang, in-person, June 1, 2023.

13 Minyōng Kang, in-person, June 1, 2023.

to erect the memorial. The representative in question emphasized that no issues should arise because the installation was to be placed on privately owned church land.¹⁴ Contrasting with the Frankfurt case, the Nepal Himalaya Park in Wiesent, also private property, had butted heads with the Japanese government. This might relate to the fact that the park is a publicly visited place, unlike the Korean Rhine-Main Church — as frequented mainly by congregation members. These instances reflect a pattern observed in the US too, where the Japanese government also opposed the installing of “comfort women” memorials in public spaces. Due to such pressure, a commemorative statue initially intended for placement outside a public library was ultimately erected at the Korean American Cultural Center in Southfield, Michigan, instead (R. Yoon 2018, 77). Returning to Germany, the Japanese government’s opposition to these memorials’ establishment in public spaces has been most apparent in Berlin.

Berlin

A few months after the “comfort women” memorial was erected outside the Korean Rhine-Main Church, another replica was installed in Berlin-Mitte on September 28, 2020 — meaning, for the first time in Germany, in a public space. Behind this was the Korea Verband (Korea Association), a Berlin-based NGO founded in the 1960s to promote relations between the two countries in the fight against the South Korean military government and in support of pro-democracy movements within and beyond South Korea. Since 2008, with Nataly Jung-Hwa Han at the helm, the organization has continued to address the “comfort women” issue in the German capital, initially collaborating with Japanese photographer Yajima Tsukasa. Nataly later founded a subgroup within the Korea Association, the Aktionsgruppe Trostfrauen (Action Group Comfort Women), consisting of activists interested in women’s rights more broadly, having members from Germany, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.¹⁵ Its activities include running the Museum der Trostfrauen (Museum of Comfort Women), the only one of its kind in Europe.¹⁶ In contrast to the memorials designed for public spaces, a museum intended to cater to those specifically interested in the “comfort women” matter appears to be outside the purview of the Japanese government. This also explains the existence of the Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace in Tokyo despite the state’s refuting of the “comfort women” history. Undeniably, the public sphere serves as the domain in which fierce debates on official interpretations of past events unfold between political and social actors (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003, 1; Sierp and Wüstenberg 2015, 322).

14 Minyōng Kang, in-person, June 1, 2023.

15 Nataly Jung-Hwa Han, Zoom, September 17, 2022.

16 The Museum of Comfort Women aside, all other iterations are located in Asia — including in South Korea, Japan, China, and Taiwan. For more information on Berlin’s version hereof, see: <https://trostfrauen.museum>.

According to Nataly, her initiative to build “comfort women” memorials in Germany was triggered by the earlier failure to do so in Freiburg.¹⁷ Parallel to installing one in Wiesent, she promoted the erection of another outside a youth hostel near the Mahn-und Gedenkstaette Ravensbrueck (Memorial Museum Ravensbrueck) — a commemoration site for women forced labor under the Nazis. However the youth hostel objected to Nataly’s suggestion, and the plan fell apart. When the Korea Association moved to its current office in 2018, Nataly renewed her efforts to establish the “comfort women” memorial in Berlin nearby, which finally happened, as noted, in autumn 2020. Additionally, the Association cooperated with the Staatliche Kunstsammlung Dresden (State Art Collection Dresden) and the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg (Art Museum Wolfsburg) to display the memorial in various exhibitions, with the initiative coming from their side.¹⁸

Since its erection in Berlin’s public space, the memorial — named Ari by its initiators — has become a “site of contestation” between, on the one side, the Association and its supporters who insist on its preservation and, on the other, those seeking its removal, including the Japanese and the Berlin local government. Shortly after installation, the Japanese asked the German Federal Government, Berlin’s district government, and the German Foreign Office to remove the statue according to *Die Tageszeitung* (The Daily Newspaper) (Hansen 2020b). Soon, the Berlin District Office issued an order to remove the statue within a week despite initially having been the one to give the Association permission for its erection (Hansen 2020a, 2020b). The district mayor of Berlin-Mitte, Stephan von Dassel, a member of the Alliance 90/The Greens, justified the announcement by stating that because the statue addresses the “politically and historically charged and complex conflict between two states,” which he argued is not an issue that can be resolved in Germany (Hansen 2020b; Bezirksamt 2020). The Association then filed an urgent application for legal protection with the Berlin Administrative Court and organized a protest that led to a stay of execution until the memorial’s legal validity had been ruled on (Kiefert 2020; Kurianowicz 2020).

Most recently, Berlin-Mitte confirmed the upkeep of the memorial until autumn 2024 at the District Assembly’s request and announced that it was willing to work toward its permanent preservation according to the German media (Mai 2023). This decision is likely to have been the result of the solidarity built between the Association and the local community in Berlin, including politicians, civil organizations, and individuals demanding the memorial remain in spite of the wishes of opponents such as the Japanese government, the district mayor of Berlin-Mitte, and the Christlich Demokratische Union (Christian Democratic Union) political party (Petersen 2020). South Korean and Japanese right-wingers visited Berlin, too, holding a protest in front of the memorial demanding its removal. Their demonstration was nonetheless met with a counter one by local organizations

17 Nataly Jung-Hwa Han, Zoom, September 17, 2022.

18 Nataly Jung-Hwa Han, Zoom, September 17, 2022.

including the Frauenverband Courage (Women’s Association Courage), Omas gegen Rechts (Grannies against the Right), and the Korea Association (Schleiermacher 2022; Yi 2022). The “comfort women” issue has recently become contested also in South Korea. Some Korean right-wing extremists used to hold counterdemonstrations simultaneous to the earlier-mentioned Wednesday Demonstrations, denying, similar to their Japanese counterparts, the existence of the “comfort system” and the victims’ coercion.

Shortly before Berlin announced the statue’s maintenance, Elisabeth Motschmann, a former federal executive of the Christian Democratic Union, published a counterargument in the local newspaper *Berliner Zeitung* (Berlin Newspaper). Alongside agreeing with the district mayor’s previous decision to demolish the statue, she delimited the memorial’s work to “specifically commemorating the historical chapter of the South Korean comfort women” (Motschmann 2022). Her argument was based on the territorialized idea that a nation-state’s spatiality should be used for commemorating national memories alone.

However, where will we end up if other states want to erect monuments to their disputes in Germany? Has the BVV [Berlin District Council] considered that if the South Koreans are allowed to do so, it would be logical to allow other parties to the conflict to do so as well? Berlin would become the battlefield of countless skirmishes among other countries — a completely unacceptable state of affairs. (Motschmann 2022)

In contrast, the solidarity established between the Korea Association and the local community in Berlin has been primarily based on positioning the “comfort women” memorial within the wider frame of women’s rights at large — specifically sexual violence against women, as Nataly herself highlighted.¹⁹ Political parties such as the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party) and Die Linke (The Left) urged the statue’s retention, emphasizing that it “is an important contribution against sexualized war violence against women” (SPD 2020; Die Linke 2020; Hansen 2020c). Universalizing the “comfort women” episode made it possible to de-territorialize the memorial from the context of Korea and Japan history alone, making it relatable across ethnic/national groups more broadly. For instance Nûrê Alkis, the umbrella organization of the Ezidischer Frauenrat (Yezidi Women’s Council), sympathized with the “comfort women” based on their own experiences of sexual violence inflicted by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq: “[W]e Yezidi Women Share the Pain of Comfort Women” (Hansen 2020d). They expressed their support for preserving the statue at the Korea Association’s demonstration held on November 25, 2020, International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.

Their advocacy was reinforced by Nivedita Prasad, a professor in methods of action and gender-specific social work at Alice Salomon Hochschule Berlin (Alice Salomon University Berlin). She stated “sexual violence is an issue in almost every

19 Nataly Jung-Hwa Han, Zoom, September 17, 2022.

war” (Hansen 2020d), while criticizing Germany’s prevailing memory culture concerning the underrepresentation of women and its sexualized nature. Above all, the Bündnis für die Friedensstatue in Deutschland (Coalition for the Statue of Peace in Germany) was jointly established by the Korea Association and more than 20 local organizations, including multiethnic women’s groups such as Medica Mondiale, Women of Sudan Uprising, Anahita – Afghanisches Frauencafé (Anahita – Afghan Women’s Café), and Women in Exile.²⁰ Prior to approval of the statue’s preservation by Berlin-Mitte’s District Assembly, the Coalition for the Statue of Peace in Germany published an open letter emphasizing that: “It is not about interstate conflicts, [instead] it is about critically addressing sexual violence in military conflict and the legacy of Japanese colonialism and the Pacific War throughout East Asia” (AG “Trostfrauen” 2020).

The letter garnered support from over 3,000 individuals, including academics and activists primarily hailing from Germany. Solidarity also came from transnational communities: At the beginning of the dispute, the Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace advocated for the memorial’s maintenance in an open letter to Berlin-Mitte’s then district mayor Stephan von Dassel (Mladenova 2022, 13–14; Watanabe 2020). The Korean Council also made enormous efforts to preserve the commemorative statue. In July 2022, its president, Yi Nayoung, visited Berlin and delivered a statement demanding the memorial’s permanent installation. This statement — signed by more than 30,000 individuals from Berlin and around the world as well as hundreds of South Korean NGOs — was presented to the newly elected district mayor, Stefanie Remlinger of the Alliance 90/The Greens (Korean Council 2022).

Kassel

The solidarity emerging out of the Berlin memorial’s erection engendered a further replica at Universität Kassel (the University of Kassel) in the federal state of Hesse on July 8, 2022. The Allgemeiner Studierendausschuss (General Student Committee) initiated the installation with the support of the Korea Association after observing the contestation arising over its Berlin counterpart.²¹ Inspired by civil society’s advocacy around the Berlin statue, Markus,²² the Student Committee president at that time, contacted the Association to help erect a similar memorial at the University of Kassel.²³ Such an alliance relied on the universal and particular identification with what the “comfort women” commemoration stands for more broadly. On the one hand, having a replica on campus was contextualized to local debates on addressing colonial relics and thought still to be found in Kassel. In 2015, the university first began to deal with local colonial continuities by establishing the

20 Nataly Jung-Hwa Han, Zoom, September 17, 2022.

21 Nataly Jung-Hwa Han, Zoom, September 17, 2022.

22 As the interviewee wished to remain anonymous, he was given a pseudonym.

23 Markus, Zoom, May 26, 2023.

student initiative *kassel postkolonial* (Kassel postcolonial), which has continued its work ever since. On the other hand, the statue in question was, once again, universalized in the context of ongoing sexual violence against women. This transnational frame allowed Markus to connect the memorial with the sexual violence inflicted on Kurdish people by the Islamic State based on his past involvement with their women’s associations and student organizations. Therefore, Kurdish students at the university strongly supported the Student Committee’s engagement.

We have a big debate in Kassel about street names; we have the so-called Afrikaviertel [Africa District]. So, at the same time, I thought, okay, how can we institutionalize this more strongly within the university? The University of Kassel does not have a specific street name that you might have to change. We have the Kolonialschule [Colonial School], and you can also tie in topics there, but not on the main campus where I am. And then it actually turned out that, in 2020, I heard about the Friedensstatue in Berlin. [...] We want to deal with sexualized violence and postcolonial identity and at the same time with the history of Germany and its colonialism, but, of course, with the question of guilt itself.²⁴

Nonetheless, the university demolished the “comfort women” memorial in March 2023, sparking a heated conflict (Rudolph 2023). The Student Committee argues that it had agreed on a permanent installation with the university. In contrast, the latter claims that the memorial was a temporary installation from the beginning, one to be displayed only until September 2022 as part of the art exhibition *Documenta* held in Kassel every five years; the statue’s presence was later extended with the university’s permission until March 2023 (Rudolph 2023). The Korea Association (2023) saw the university’s unilateral decision hereon as problematic, despite the former’s agreement to remove the memorial as soon as an alternative location for its permanent installation had been settled on. The university also justified the removal by saying, which the Student Committee disputed, that the statue did not have local relevance:

[Artworks can be only permanently installed] if they are continuously accompanied by teaching and scientific projects; they have a content-related connection to the location, and the Senate and Presidium decide on them jointly. (Rudolph 2023)

As an example, the university mentioned the student-led installation *Weg der Erinnerung* (Path of Remembrance), which recalled the Henschel company’s erstwhile location on campus and its involvement in the Third Reich (Rudolph 2023). Since the removal, those demanding the memorial be returned, including German, Korean, and Kurdish students, have organized a weekly protest on Wednesdays at the university, similar to the eponymous ones in South Korea. Here they collect student signatures for the online petition initiated by the Korea Association (2022) demanding the statue’s reinstallation. Although the university

24 Markus, Zoom, May 26, 2023.

has not officially confirmed the Japanese government's involvement in its decision to have the memorial taken down, Markus stated in interview that university management had told him that the Japanese Consulate contacted them and one particular professor immediately after its installation.²⁵ Whether the students can convince the university of their transnational viewpoint — that the statue represents sexualized violence in general and decolonization in the local context — remains to be seen.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how the Korean diaspora in Germany sought support from their local communities in transmitting the collective memory of “comfort women,” as represented by the figure of the Sonyōsang. For this to happen, the Korean diaspora consciously worked together with local bodies and their representatives, such as nongovernmental and religious organizations and politicians; this finding is consistent with previous studies (Hasunuma and McCarthy 2019; McCarthy and Hasunuma 2018; Son 2018). Consequently, the first “comfort women” memorial in Germany was installed in Wiesent (following the earlier failure to do so in Freiburg), followed by other replicas in Frankfurt and Berlin. The contestation over the one in the German capital then inspired the erection of another memorial in Kassel. The Frankfurt replica aside, all others met with resistance from the Japanese government, similar to previous cases in the US and the Philippines (Ushiyama 2021). Often, the latter utilized diplomatic channels to put pressure on the German local and/or federal governments, which led to these “comfort women” memorials being moved or demolished altogether. Such Japanese influence over “comfort women” commemoration in Germany again illustrates the nation-state’s enduring power in memory politics.

The pivotal finding from the German case is the significance of solidarity between the Korean diaspora and local communities, rooted in a dual universal and particular identification with the “comfort women” memorial’s wider meaning (Levy and Sznajder 2002, 93). Much like in the US (McCarthy and Hasunuma 2018, 412–413), in Germany the statue in question became emblematic of human and women’s rights, with an emphasis on addressing sexual violence. This was exemplified in Berlin. This universal framework culminated in the strategic timing of the memorials in Wiesent and Frankfurt each being unveiled on International Women’s Day (albeit in different years). Diverging from the US experience, however, the German case distinctly reveals the particular identification of the “comfort women” memorial with local contexts, as evident in Freiburg, Wiesent, Berlin, and Kassel. Here, they not only voiced Japan’s responsibility as wartime aggressor (Wiesent) but also engaged with Germany’s intrinsic memory culture surrounding the sexual violence perpetrated by its army during the Second World War (Freiburg), the inadequate

25 Markus, Zoom, May 26, 2023.

representation of women in public spaces (Berlin), and the colonial past (Kassel). Drawing from these findings, I argue that the Korean diaspora’s engagement in bringing the collective memory of a nation-state to a transnational scale has contributed to shaping the “extra-territorial quality of cosmopolitan memory” (Levy and Sznaider 2002, 102).

The opposing faction, comprising the Japanese government, local politicians, and academics, viewed the “comfort women” memorial from a limited perspective meanwhile, believing it to be primarily concerned with the bilateral relationship between South Korea and Japan and thus irrelevant to Germany. Such a territorialized perspective sharply contrasts with the cosmopolitan awareness underscoring the memorial’s broader human and women’s rights significance and, precisely, Germany’s memory culture. This polarization reflects the fundamental ideological differences in play, whereby opponents’ narrow focus on territorial and national considerations clashes with the more expansive and globally informed perspective held by proponents of “comfort women” commemoration. At any rate, the ongoing power struggle between these two groups has been one over the authority to select and promote a preferred past (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003, 1).

Beyond the realm of cosmopolitan memory, the emergence of “cross-traumatic affiliation” among diverse actors in the German context, encompassing the Korean diaspora, multiethnic and women’s groups, religious organizations, and university students, constitutes a pivotal development (Craps 2012). An interconnectedness grounded in traumatic histories and experiences sees the “comfort women” historical episode carry the potential to foster “mnemonic solidarity” by linking it to other instances of sexual violence and addressing human and women’s rights at large (Jung 2021, 147; Lim and Rosenhaft 2021, 2). In the German milieu particularly, this history may be connected with ongoing postcolonial/decolonial discourses and help rectify the asymmetry existing between the dominant and subordinate historical narratives informing prevailing memory culture (Schäfer 2021). Despite Germany’s reputation in South Korea as a role model for acknowledging its wartime atrocities against the Jewish people, especially when juxtaposed with Japan’s handling of its own past, collective memory around the sexual violence perpetrated against women during wartime and under colonialism lacks a level of institutionalization comparable to the Holocaust’s treatment (Jung 2021, 129–131). Considering this study’s focus on Germany alone, it is imperative for future research to acknowledge the intersectionality underlined in the discourses surrounding the “comfort women” episode and to link them to other contemporary local and global concerns in order to foster a cosmopolitan historical narrative able to hold currency in the forthcoming post-victim era.

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