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Nationalizing Transnationalism: A Comparative Study of the “Comfort Women” Social Movement in China, Taiwan, and South Korea

María del Pilar Álvarez ¹

Most literature on the “comfort women” social movement focuses on the case of Korea. These works tend to transpose the meanings generated by South Korean organizations onto the transnational network, assuming certain homogeneity of repertoires and identities among the different social actors that comprise this network. Even though there is some degree of consensus about demands, repertoires, and advocacy strategies at the international level, does this same uniformity exist at the national level? In each country, what similarities and differences are present in the laboratories of ideas, relationships, and identities of social actors in the network? Symbolically and politically, do they challenge their respective societies in the same way? This article compares this social movement in South Korea, China, and Taiwan. My main argument is that the constitutive base for this transnational network is the domestic actions of these organizations. It is in the domestic sphere that these social actors reinforce their agendas, reinvent their repertoires, transform their identities, and expand their submerged networks, allowing national movements to retain their latency and autonomy. Following Melucci’s relational approach to the study of social movements, this research is based on a qualitative analysis of institutional documents, participant observation, and open-ended interviews with members of the main social actors.

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Introduction

Since the end of the last century, the study of social movements has been enriched by social actors who structure their actions around transnational networks of advocacy and awareness-raising. Debates about transnational collective action (TCA) bring together concepts from diverse theories related to resource mobilization, political process, and framing (Della Porta, 2005; Della Porta & Caiani, 2009; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Tarrow, 1994, 2005; etc.). These perspectives have made important contributions to the effects of political opportunity structures (POS) on TCA modes of contention and advocacy strategies. They have also shed light on how transnational actors frame their grievances, build a similar narrative of the events, and common collective actions. Nonetheless, one major limitation of these studies is that they take collective action (CA) as their point of departure, paying little attention to the processes that give enable CA or allow it to persist over time. To some extent, theories of *new social movements* have had a limited impact on the study of TCA. Research on the identity of the social movements have generally been quantitative, focused only on visible actions (Della Porta, 2005) or based on *framing* (Bob, 2005; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; etc.).

These analytic tendencies have shaped research on social movements and transnational networks in East Asia. The few publications which examine the transnational “comfort women” movement draw on the theories of Sikkink and Keck (1998) and classic conceptual categories of *resource mobilization* (Chou, 2003; Ku, 2015; Lee, 2015; Piper, 2001; Tsutsui, 2006; among others). These authors have contributed knowledge about the POS that favored movement conformation, the advocacy strategies employed by the movement at the international level, and changes in the way the movement has framed its cause over several decades. These studies (Chou, 2003; Hayashi, 2008; Mendoza, 2003; Mitsui, 2007; Piper, 2001; Tsutsuni, 2006; etc.) demonstrate that, despite the vast literature on “comfort women,” research about this social movement is dominated by case studies – rather than comparisons – and generally draws on data derived from campaigns and reports authored by South Korean organizations and related international organisms (visible actions). The meanings constructed by South Korean organizations are, in this way, transposed onto the transnational network, assuming certain homogeneity in the repertoires and identities of the diverse social actors that comprise this network. Although there is some degree of consensus about the type of demands, the repertoires, and advocacy strategies used at the international level, does this same uniformity exist at the national level? To what extent do the demands for recognition advanced by the transnational movement reflect local CA? What similarities and differences exist in the laboratories of ideas, relationships, and identities of social actors within the network of each country? Symbolically and politically, do they interpellate and challenge their respective societies in the same way?

Given the lack of comparative empirical research on the transnational “comfort women” movement, this article describes its local heterogeneity through the comparative analysis of the movement’s main organizations in South Korea, China, and Taiwan. It is based on the qualitative

analysis of institutional documents, participant observation, and open-ended interviews with select organizations. This analysis contributes, on the one hand, to a better understanding of the “comfort women” movement, which has lasted for 27 years and gained increased international visibility in recent years. On the other hand, it sheds light on current debates of transnational social movements through the micro-level study of TCA, drawing on Melucci’s cultural and identity-based approach. The challenge and originality of this work is to demonstrate the complexity of domestic relationships and pre-political identities of the social actors that form part of this long-lasting transnational movement by casting a sociological lens on mobilization. This analysis also illustrates the latent capacity and ongoing re-invention of this type of activism.

The article is organized in three sections. The first section describes the theoretical and methodological framework of this research. The second section offers a brief historical background on the transnational “comfort women” movement. The third section presents the results of the research based on the analytic categories introduced previously. Finally, the conclusions offer a reflection on the importance of qualitative, comparative, and relational research to advance understanding of social movements and transnational networks.

The Local Features of Transnational Collective Action

The growth of global movements – especially transnational networks of anti-capitalist, anti-neoliberal, feminist, ecological, and human rights activism – gave rise to a new debate about TCA, as mentioned in the introduction. Among the many discussions which have enriched the study of social movements, this research is particularly influenced by the work of Tarrow and Della Porta (2005). These well-recognized authors discuss the territorial dimension of TCA and how it impacts on transnational relationships and identities, as well as on the sustainability of movements. The authors affirm that there is a high level of interdependence between transnational and domestic activism; the actors who participate in TCA tend to have deep roots in dense organizational networks at the local level. However, they put minimal emphasis on the local social construction of movements. Studying the particularities of social actors, their repertoires of action, and their links at the domestic level allows us to appreciate the degree to which these local characteristics carry over to the transnational realm and vice versa. It also illuminates the processes and relationships that lead individuals to get involved in CA. The identity of this type of collective action can be better comprehended by adopting a cultural and relational perspective which takes into account the features of the diverse local organizations that participate in transnational networks.

This research builds on Melucci’s famous book, *Nomads of the Present* (1989). He observes that in post-industrial societies there is a shift from political to cultural CA. In this way, the traditional bases of movement identity, such as social class or political party, vanish, making way for cultural identity as the central force for action. In his book, Melucci argues that social movements are immersed in social networks of everyday life and, indeed, depend upon them. He proposes a constructivist lens on social movements, based on the process of CA. In this view, CA is neither a variable nor a unified element. Instead it is the product of intentionally oriented actions

within a field of opportunities and constraints. Movements are constructed through action and this is the process through which they produce meaning, negotiate objectives, and make decisions. As such, a movement cannot simply be explained by the structure or motivations of actors. The author proposes three conceptual elements for the analysis of movements: multipolar action system, collective identity, and networks of meaning.

The concept of **multipolar action system** contributes to the understanding of the cultural particularities of the main social movement actors. Multipolar action system refers to the area of movement in which the organizations discuss and decide the repertoires of contentious action. It is in this political arena of collective action where visible repertoires take place. In other words, it is a system in which individuals act collectively to build a relatively stable “we” through the negotiation of objectives, meanings, and external environment in which actions take place. Through these interactions, individuals cognitively define the area of movement, its limits, and its possibilities. The features of this system will depend on the political regimen, origin, history and trajectory of the main organizations that participate in the movement. The system is neither linear, nor static, but rather the result of multiple actions and negotiations. **Collective identity** is the *raison d’être* of movements. Melucci defines collective identity as: “an interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals and concerned with the orientation of action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which the action takes place” (Melucci, 1989, p. 34). Collective identity becomes the locus of action, which converts movement participants in *nomads of the present* (Melucci, 1989, p. 55). This perspective suggests a different way of interpreting the collective experience by incorporating the pre-political and symbolic spheres into the study of CA. The latency of action is strongly linked to interactions present in everyday life. The **network of meaning** indicates precisely to these “embedded” interactions, comprised of multiple, disperse, and fragmented groups that interact daily and operate as a laboratory of ideas, problems, and experiences. This category contributes to the understanding of the latency and “invisible” phase of the movement.

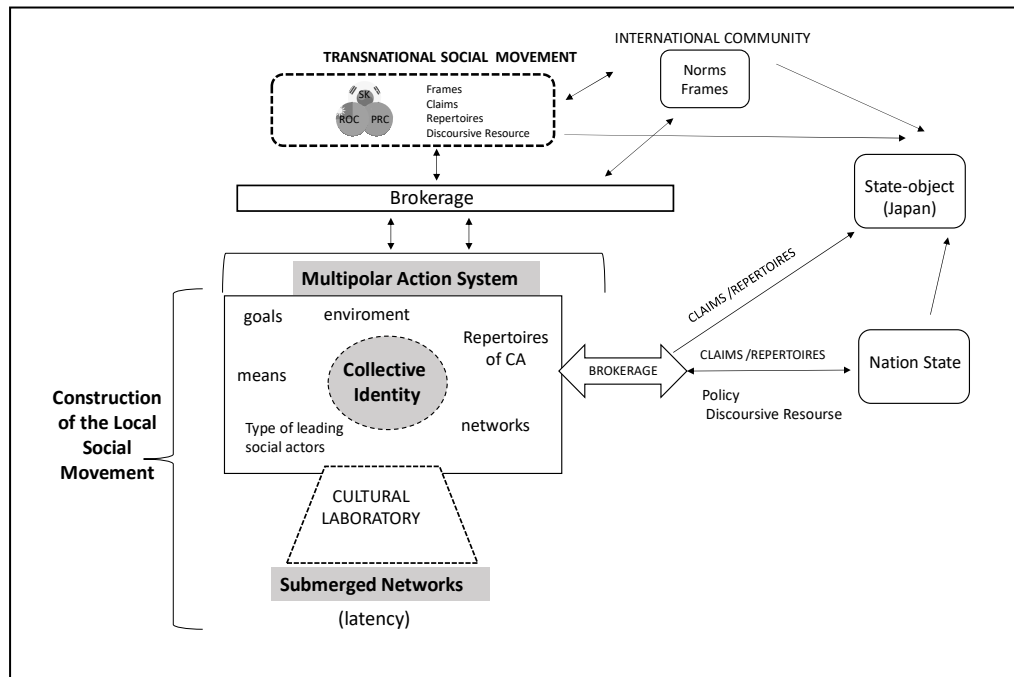


Figure 1. Conceptual framework
 Source: Author’s elaboration based on Melucci

Based on Melucci’s approach, this article puts forth a conceptual framework which centers on the position of social actors within the transnational “comfort women” movement (Figure 1). His three conceptual elements are the categories of analysis that guide this research. This investigation is based on a qualitative analysis with triangulation of data sources. The main sources are institutional documents, social networks of the selected organizations, participant observation during my field research trips in each country between 2016 and 2018, and in-depth open interviews with four social actors: the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military and Sexual Slavery by Japan, the House of Sharing, the Research Center for Chinese «Comfort Women» and the Taipei Women’s Rescue Foundation. My sample includes three former victims (two in China and one in South Korea), the NGOs broad members (in Taiwan and South Korea) and the two main representatives of the Center in China, three NGOs workers (two in South Korea and one in Taiwan), four social workers (two in Taiwan and two South Korea), two former lawyers in Taiwan, nine volunteers (one in Taiwan, two in South Korea, six in China). Moreover, I conducted seven interviews with non-NGOs participants in the Wednesday demonstration in South Korea.

A Brief Background on the Transnational “Comfort Women” Movement

The “comfort women” social movement arose 46 years after the end of the War in 1945. Sarah Soh (2008, pp. 146-173) points out that the knowledge and stories of “comfort women” were

common in Japan and South Korea before the movement arose. The turning point was on August 4, 1991, when Kim Hak Soon, a victim of Korean origin (born in China), supported by women’s organizations and the recently created Korean Council² – became the first woman to testify publicly. Her story, which attracted significant media coverage, activated debates and motivated the creation of other NGOs in countries affected by Japanese Imperial Army’s sexual slavery (Soh, 1996, p.1233). In December of 1991, the South Korean NGO House of Sharing was created, and in February of 1992 the Taipei Women’s Rescue Foundation (TWRF), a women’s rights organization, founded a special section dedicated to researching and defending the rights of Taiwanese victims. That same year, the Task Force on Filipino Comfort Women (TFFCW) was established, and, in 1994, Lila Pilipina, another organization aligned with the TFFCW. In August of 1992, North Korea inaugurated the North Korea Compensation Measurement Committee for Japanese Military Sexual Slavery and Victims of the Pacific War. On April 21, 1993, the Japanese Center for Research and Documentation on Japan’s War Responsibility (JWCR) was created and, in 1998, the VAWN-NET Japan (Violation against Women and War Network) was founded. In the early 1990s, the first activist groups in the People’s Republic of China emerged, led by university professors who had been researching the atrocities committed by Japan between 1931 and 1945. In the 1991 session of the Party’s National Congress, there was a proposal to discuss the cases of former “comfort women” in China (Qiu et al., 2013). In 1999, Su Zhiliang and Chen Lifei founded the Research Center for Chinese «Comfort Women» at the Shanghai Normal University. Currently [Figure 2] the transnational movement has expanded not only to other affected countries, but also to other parts of the world, including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany.

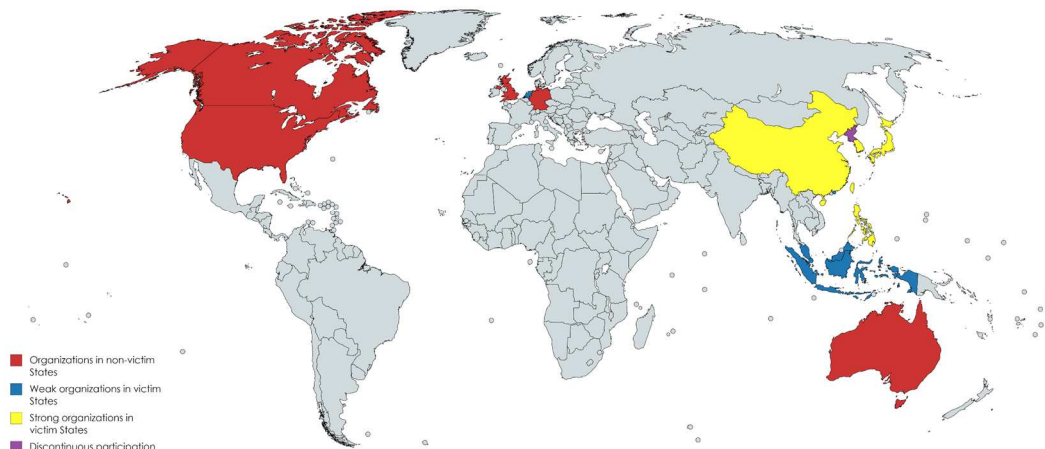


Figure 2. The Transnational “Comfort Women” Movement³

² The Korean Council was founded on November 16, 1990.

³ To date, “comfort stations” have been documented in Japan (especially Okinawa), South Korea, North Korea, China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Singapore, and Vietnam. As shown in the

Source: Author's elaboration based on data collected

The formal origin of the TCA dates to the 10th and 11th of August, 1992, in the context of the first Asian Solidarity Conference (ASC). The ASC is a meeting organized by the Korean Council that seeks to promote cooperation, negotiation, and the creation of a common agenda of struggle with other organizations. This is not the only mechanism for transnational cooperation between the actors in this network. Within the space of the movement, multiple informal and less visible activities promote common codes among members and help them renegotiate local experiences. From the first meetings up until the present day, the movement has been very dynamic. Although the basic demands towards Japan have remained constant,⁴ the publications, repertoires, and advocacy strategies have changed. New elements have been incorporated based on the responses of involved governments and the emergence of new frames of reference. For example, in the first meeting, organizations discussed ways to impact the UN Human Rights Commission; in December of 1995, the resolution was focused, basically, on rejecting the Asian Women's Fund; and, in May of 2016, there were strong complaints about the 2015 Agreement. In all of these cases, resolutions frame their discourse in the language of human rights.

One of the main objectives of TCA has been to judicialize the conflict. Several collective lawsuits have been filed in Japanese courts. With the exception of the case presented in the Shimonoseki Branch of the Yamaguchi, all the other cases have been dismissed. A similar repertoire, the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal (WIWCT), was carried out in Tokyo from December 7-11, 2000 and got extensive international coverage. Former "comfort women" and NGOs from all victim countries participated in the WIWCT, which also included awareness-raising activities and other events meant to strengthen bonds between victims and organizations. NGO social workers and lawyers explain that ex "comfort women" felt empowered, and meeting one another helped give them the strength to speak out in public. Korean victims who were active in the Korean Council persuaded other women to participate actively in the transnational movement. The Tribunal reflected the enormous capacity of the transnational movement to disseminate their repertoires. Nonetheless, from 2001 on, after most of the activists have realized that Japan would neither emit a "sincere apology" nor provide a "coherent response" to their grievances, the activists from participating organizations had to "reinvent" their strategies: "After the Tribunal I felt extremely frustrated because I realized that we weren't going to achieve our objective. Japan was not going to give in. But now I think I was wrong. I think in that moment I couldn't see what we had achieved."⁵

As a result, the central agenda of the organizations pivoted towards local concerns, while still maintaining institutionalized repertoires of action at the regional level and attempting to

graphic, not all the countries where there is evidence of sexual slavery of women during the war participate in the transnational "comfort women" movement.

⁴ There are seven specific demands directed toward Japan: 1) admit that the women were forced, 2) expose the truth, 3) publicly apologize, 4) build memorials and historical museums, 5) provide economic compensation to the victims, 6) punish those responsible and 7) adequately document these historical events in Japanese textbooks.

⁵ Former lawyer of the TWRF, personal interview, Taipei, February 13, 2017.

sustain personal ties between the organizations' members. In order to sustain movement momentum, it became increasingly important for organizations to reinforce the symbols through which they represent the conflict. This change encouraged the movement to operate more and more as a sign of recognition and transgression of the grievances that gave rise to the struggle. Among these, several stand out, including replicas of the South Korean Statue of Peace⁶ (and free interpretations of this statue) in different countries that make up the transnational movement. Today, there are commemorative statues with characteristics similar to the Statue of Peace in South Korea, the Philippines, Japan, Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, the United States, Australia, and Germany.

Through the TCA and, more fundamentally, the informal bonds between the members of the organizations mentioned, actors have successfully maintained a shared definition of grievances and collective legal action against Japan, while at the same time coordinating activities aimed at awareness-raising and public visibility. Meetings have served to strengthen personal relationships and negotiate a common identity. Interviews suggest that the central motivation of activists in organizing regional events, especially academic events, is to share testimonies and documentary information that allows them to better reconstruct historical facts. From the historiographic perspective, the members of these organizations tell how the Japanese imperialistic advances in Asia challenges profoundly Eurocentric Western narratives of the Second World War. These spaces of exchange and discussion help forge a unified discourse about sexual slavery. Organizations debate about how to situate the grievances of "comfort women" within dominant international debates about violence against women in war. The TCA attempts to subvert the universalization of values by the international community, drawing on their deeply rooted regional identity.

Across organizations, activists highlighted how important the regional meetings were for victims. These spaces of accompaniment and empowerment helped them forge their identity as victim-activists. As explained by one former sex slave: "When I am with other victims, I feel more comfortable. Consoled. Sometimes we cry together."⁷ The political participation of these women has become the central symbol of the transnational movement. To some extent, activists don't just speak for them; the movement had enabled victims to speak for themselves, without interlocutors.

Finally, it is important to point out that the Korean Council has played a central role in generating activities among the members and social actors of the transnational network. This leadership of the Korean Council is legitimated by the House of Sharing, the TWRF, and the RCCCW, all of whom appreciate and express gratitude for this organization's perseverance, its ability to mobilize resources, and its capacity to advocate in the international sphere. The Korean Council is a powerful advocate for the internationalization of the conflict and the construction of

⁶ In Korean, the statue is denominated *pyeonghwauwi sonyeosang*. The first statue was placed in commemoration of the 100th Wednesday demonstration in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, on December 14, 2011.

⁷ Kim Bok-Dong, personal interview, Seoul, October 27, 2016

networks outside the region.⁸ This organization is, to some degree, the network's international broker. Within the international community, it advances a specific, though flexible, interpretation of the historical trauma commemorated, generating advocacy strategies linked to the South Korean movement's cultural language. Leaders of the TWRF and the RCCCW justify the leadership of the Korean Council based on the particularities of the relationship between Japan and South Korea, which are marked by deeply anti-colonial and anti-Japanese historical and political revisionism.

Deconstructing the “Comfort Women” Movement in China, Taiwan, and South Korea

In the previous section, I briefly described the main characteristics of the transnational “comfort women” movement, emphasizing the ways in which organizations interact to define their demands, establish a framework for regional action, generate repertoires of action, grow the movement, and increase its international influence. In this section, I attempt to deconstruct and compare the constitutive features of local movements in three countries using the three analytic elements proposed by Melucci and discussed in the theoretical framework.

Multipolar System of Action.

To understand how the political arena of the movement is constructed, it is necessary to study the history and trajectory of the main social organizations. The **origin** and **morphology** of the movement in South Korea, Taiwan, and China are tightly linked to the particular socio-political processes that gave rise to the movement in each of these countries.

In South Korea, the creation of the Korean Council and the House of Sharing was marked by changes in the POS produced by the transition to democracy and the impact of the international feminist movement (Chou, 2003; Piper, 2001; Soh, 1996, 2003). The director of the Korean Council and the Buddhist monk Vice President of the House of Sharing – both of whom were founding members of the movement – sustain that it was “natural” for them to defend “comfort women,” given that, in the ‘80s, they participated in human rights protests under dictatorial regimes. During that period, as part of the struggle for political opening and social justice, Christians and Buddhists were deeply committed to grassroots social organizations and student groups, providing them with political asylum and, primarily, with ideological (and teleological) interpretations, *minjung*, to articulate their grievances (Chang, 2015). Since then, the relationships between distinct religious organizations and “comfort women” NGOs have consolidated, based on mutual solidarity, trust, and reciprocity.

⁸ The Korean Council has the strongest ties with organizations based in the United States, Germany, Canada, and England. Since 1991, this same organization has sent delegates to the United Nations and the International Labor Organization (ILO). Among other international achievements, it is worth mentioning the special reports of the UN in 1996 (E/CN.4/1996/53/Add.1), 1998 (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1998/13), 2006 (E/CN.4/2006/16/Add.2) and 2010 (A/HRC/14/22) and the reports of the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) in 1996, 1997, 1999, 2001-2005, 2007-2009 and 2011.

The particular origins of the movement impacted the **trajectory** of key organizational representatives. The Korean Council, based on its local, regional, and international activism, has become the main organization of “comfort women” in the country. It is an umbrella organization⁹ that contains various other small groups, which support its activities directly and indirectly. The leaders of the Korean Council, like the organization’s founders,¹⁰ are Christians who participate actively in Christian women’s groups. Religious institutions were very active in the beginning of the local movement,¹¹ but currently do not interfere with political decision-making.

Christians played a significant role in founding the Korean Council, while Buddhist groups helped consolidate the House of Sharing. In October of 1992, Song Wol-Joo, the Director of the Korean Buddhist Commission on Human Rights, inaugurated this care facility for victims of sexual slavery. In 1995, the organization moved to its current location, in the outskirts of Seoul, which was donated by the Buddhist businesswoman, Cho Yong-Ja. At this site there is a home for survivors and the first museum of “comfort women.” The organization also has its headquarters. Members of the House of Sharing have a distinct profile and political trajectory than activists from the Korean Council. Their leaders¹² are not as tightly tied to women’s movements or international activism related to women abused in contexts of armed conflict. Instead, the organization has many social workers, recruited based on their professional expertise.

In Taiwan and China, unlike Korea, the movement did not emerge from or have ties to religious organizations. In both cases, the conformation of movement actors was a byproduct of incipient activism in South Korea and Japan. Taiwan, the other former Japanese colony, was experiencing a political opening when news of Kim Hak-Soon and documents confirming the existence of “comfort stations” in Taiwan¹³ became public. This led members of the TWRF (an NGO dedicated to eliminating the traffic of women), founded in 1987, to establish a section focus on recovering victims of sexual slavery of the Japanese Imperial Army. This organization is the only one in the country working to investigate and assist victims. Its staff is comprised of women who work on various topics related to women’s rights. Most employees are social workers and, although it is an independent organization, according to its leaders, nearly 50% of its programs are

⁹ Currently, there are officially 17 member groups (the majority of them women’s associations), 4 affiliated groups, 14 groups which provide solidarity within Korea, and 15 groups which provide support internationally (without counting the groups that formally comprise the transnational network).

¹⁰ The founders, Yun Chung-Ok and Lee Hyo-Chee, belong to the same generation of victims, are Christian, and have been professors at the Ewha Womans University (one of the most prestigious educational institutes for women in the country).

¹¹ At first, these confessional groups contributed material resources and institutional networks to strengthen movement activities. Now, they no longer need this financial support because they operate as independent non-governmental organizations and have ongoing fundraising campaigns.

¹² In 2017, the director and the head of international public relations were both men with master’s degrees in social work.

¹³ In 1992, in Japan, three confidential telegrams were discovered. In these telegrams, dated March 12, 1942, a Japanese Commander in Taiwan requests the shipment of “comfort women.”

financed directly or indirectly by the government. Like the House of Sharing, the majority of current members were not present when the movement was founded. Nonetheless, they remain in contact with the lawyers and volunteers who have been committed to the movement in the '90s. Today, the trajectories of key members of the TWRP are not aligned with the political activism of the transition to democracy which gave rise to the original organization.

In the People's Republic of China, the "movement"¹⁴ took longer to consolidate than in neighboring countries. As in Taiwan, public denouncements and activism in Japan and South Korea provided the initial push to create a space for the defense of victims and research on the topic. Also, as occurred in neighboring countries, local actors gained visibility and reach due to changes in the POS which, beginning in the '80s, with Deng Xiaoping's modernization reforms, tended toward greater political opening. In 1987, two years after inaugurating the Memorial for the Massacre at Nanjing, Li Guping and several citizens sent open letters to the People's National Congress. In these letters they argued that, following the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with Japan, in 1972, China had not taken steps to repair the damages caused by the war. Their demands were published by the local press, leading several war victims to manifest their support. In the early '90s, not just Congress and the media were discussing the topic. In 1993, it was published the first book on sexual slavery of the Japanese Imperial Army in Chinese language. (Qiu *et al.*, 2014, pp. 160-170). And, in 1994, a new guide to patriotic education was unveiled, emphasizing the history of the war of resistance against foreign invasions (He, 2007, pp. 56-57).

In China, four groups of interconnected social actors are observed. The first one is the local volunteers and activists represented by the village teacher Zhang Shuangbing in Shanxi province. The second one is the legal specialist represented by Kang Jian, whose collaboration with Japanese lawyers led to Chinese victims participating in litigations against the Japanese government (Terazawa, 2006, p. 137). Third, professors and researchers in different provinces. Among these professors, Su Zhiliang from Shanghai Normal University and Gao Xingzu from Nanjing University play visible roles. When the "comfort women" issue emerged as a topic of debate in the public sphere, Su and Chen were in Tokyo carrying out research on other topics. Su explained that: "when I discovered [while in Tokyo] that the first comfort station was in Shanghai and that it had never been investigated, I wanted to research about this issue. I never thought it would take me 25 years."¹⁵ When he returned, he began to do research, paying expenses out of his own pocket until 1999, when he was able to build a research center with funding from the university. This research center would later become the RCCCW. The Center is run by a staff of Master's and PhD students who help with research, the museum (inaugurated in 2016), and assistance to victims. Even though the redress movement started in China from grassroots organizations before the RCCCW was built, nowadays the center is recognized as a local, regional, and international as a key social actor in the defense of "comfort women" in China. Fourth, we also found organized or

¹⁴ Following Melucci's works, a social movement is a set of groups, organizations, institutions, foundations, and/or interpersonal networks which operate as mobilizing structures with some degree of coordination and common agenda in the public sphere. According to this definition, the RCCCW is considered a social actor of the "comfort women" redress movement in China.

¹⁵ Su Zhiliang, personal interview, Shanghai, January 2018.

independent volunteers who spontaneously approach victims, mainly, to assist them with clothing, food and care.

The abovementioned actors are the ones who **define the sphere of action at the local level**. Recovering victims and making their testimonies visible has been crucial to ensure that their actions are legitimate. These organizations were responsible for helping the women – the majority of whom are very poor – become part of the political struggle. In both South Korea and Taiwan, the activists began their work in the early '90s with campaigns aimed at helping victims gather the courage to reveal what had happened to them. They established a phone line to report and pushed it widely in the media. They insisted on the need to provide support and psychological services to victims so that they could withstand the sociocultural consequences of going public with their denouncements. In South Korea, unlike neighboring countries, the two NGOs have opened nursing homes where needy victims can live. In the early years, many of the ex “comfort women” who lived in these homes participated in street protests, becoming key actors in local movement culture: “Of course, I didn’t feel very comfortable participating in demonstrations. But now we have the support of many people.”¹⁶ On the other hand, until about 10 years ago, the women who lived at the House of Sharing narrated their traumatic experiences to visitors of the museum on every guided tour. Now, most of them are quite elderly, tend not to attend demonstrations, and rarely tell their stories during guided tours at the Museum of Sexual Slavery by the Japanese Military.

In South Korea, the close **relationship between activists and victims**¹⁷ helped them establish bonds based on genuine feelings of respect, trust, and fellowship. The same types of bonds can be seen in Taiwan between victims and the social workers who participated in therapy programs carried out between 1992 and 2012. With support from members of the organization, in 1992, a small group of victims held their first press conference. Unlike Kim Hak Soon, the Taiwanese women did not, at that moment, want to show their faces in public, so they testified behind a white curtain. Since then, the ex “comfort women” have played a special role in the movement, albeit more minor than in South Korea. Something similar has occurred in China, where recovering the first-hand accounts of victims took longer than in former Japanese colonies. In all three cases, not all the women registered as victims take part in the organizations’ activities.

The activities carried out by these local actors in the framework of a multipolar action system have been made visible through **repertoires of collective action**. These repertoires reveal advocacy strategies, frames of reference, and mimetic actions among the various countries involved, as well as changes and continuities in the movements’ narratives and symbols. At the

¹⁶ Kim Bok-Dong, personal interview, Seoul, October 27, 2016.

¹⁷ It is difficult to determine the number of victims. Korean organizations affirm that there were 200,000 women enslaved, of whom 80% were Korean. Recent investigations carried out in China sustain that there were more than 400,000 victims and that there must have been more Chinese victims than Korean victims, given that the war took place in Chinese territory during a more prolonged period. In China, more than 100 testimonies have been recovered, in South Korea around 239, and in Taiwan 58.

same time, these repertoires show how the movements have influenced their states and how they have challenged dominant socio-cultural codes in their respective societies.

South Korea is the only country with ongoing street protests. These protests have never been repressed by the government. The most emblematic demonstrations are held every Wednesday between noon and 1 pm in front of the Embassy of Japan, in Seoul. They have been happening since January 8, 1992. In the 90's, the number of protesters was small and they would circle the embassy seven times, in an analogy to the biblical tale of the fallen walls of Jericho. At that time, their demands transgressed the socio-cultural frame of reference for women much more than they do today. A co-representative of the Korean Council describes how, at first, people would laugh at them or express indignation: "One day a man came up to me, grabbed my arm and, angrily, told me we should not be making a fuss about that topic because it was an embarrassment" (Interview by author. Personal interview. Seoul, December 14, 2017). Citizens were indifferent to their struggle, and the media showed little solidarity. However, in recent years, the situation has changed, as more young people have gotten involved and more positive repercussions in the press have been published. The movement shows certain continuity, as well as innovations. There has been continuity with regard to the presence of victims associated with the organizations,¹⁸ Buddhist monks, Catholic nuns from several different congregations, and members of other social and political organizations that support this initiative of the Korean Council. Innovations include the transformation of demonstrations, which originally aimed to challenge authorities using conventional, combative repertoires of protest, into more "festive" events which mix identity symbols (KPop dances to the song "Like a rock"¹⁹) with emotional speeches from student participants and the now-classic chants targeting Japan. These innovations are in line with changes in the way political demands are understood and the trajectories of younger members of the movement: "The students have been participating in these protests for a decade now. Korea has changed. The young people now are our children. They are the children of democracy"²⁰; "since the signing of the 2015 agreement, more and more students have started to volunteer with the movement. The students know the case and they are upset because the agreement does not represent the will of the victims."²¹

In Taiwan, there are often protests on August 15 in front of the Representative Office of *Japan* in Taipei. These demonstrations do not mobilize many people. In the beginning, the victims participated in these events and their discourse was less mediated by organizations than that of their counterparts in Korea. At the time this study was carried out, there was only one living victim. As a result, victims no longer participate in repertoires. As in Korea, many young people spontaneously join protests. One of the most unique repertoires of the TWRF is the events it organizes on March 8, International Women's Day, in which the actions taken to defend ex-"comfort women" are mentioned. Although they are institutional ceremonies, they receive high levels of local media coverage. Unlike the TWRF and the Korean Council, the RCCCW has no

¹⁸ In recent years, victims have tended to participate less and less in demonstrations, due to age and health.

¹⁹ The original title of the song is *bawicheoleom*.

²⁰ Co-representative of the Korean Council, personal interview, Seoul, December 24, 2017

²¹ Director of the House of Sharing, personal interview, Gyeonggi, December 7, 2017

repertoires of CA in the street. Its goal is to advocate using institutional channels for grievances. Professor Su constantly sends requests for cooperation and material resources to the Chinese national government. He also maintains a strong network of personal connections with the government of Shanghai, and this allows him to reverse municipal decisions that are prejudicial to the movement. In 2017, when the local government requested that a commemorative statue located on the university campus be removed, due to their worry about complaints by Japan, Su successfully resisted. With collaboration from local media, they blocked construction of an apartment building on the site of a former comfort station. It's important to note that, despite the lack of street protests in China, the RCCCW does participate in marches organized by the transnational network in other countries.

In all three countries, governments have supported research and helped local actors participate in TCA. With the exception of the agreement signed between Korea and Japan on December 28, 2015, the **relationships between movements and governments** tend to be fairly peaceful and conform with the characteristics of local political regimes. As previously mentioned, Chinese organizations exert pressure through institutional negotiation channels, achieving a relatively high degree of support from the state for the implementation of memory policies, especially commemorative museums. In South Korea and Taiwan, the advocacy campaigns the organizations undertook in the 90's resulted in economic reparations, a monthly allowance, and health insurance for victims. The Korea Council and the House of Sharing try to avoid any formal relationships with political parties, but they are open to participation by political figures who defend their struggle, make visits to victims, or join demonstrations. In Taiwan, the relationship with political parties is more contradictory. According to the director of the TWRF, the Kuomintang Party considers the issue of "comfort women" very important because it's linked to national pride, given that Japan invaded continental China, provoking great suffering among civilians. Ironically, the commitment of the KMT to the demands of these women is not reflected in the dominant political affinity of those interviewed, most of whom have a marked preference for the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP).

Over many years, domestic agendas have evolved based on the objectives achieved, the redefinition of goals, and the incorporation of new cognitive frameworks for rethinking the cause. In the past few years, following the inevitable death of most victims, the four organizations have focused largely on advancing policies of memory. Among others, some of the main strategies for historical memorialization have included the creation of museums, the installation of commemorative statues, the production of documentary films, the publication of books, and activism on social media. This strategy of memorializing the past is less central in the ASC. Yet, is it precisely due to the regional dynamics of formal and informal action that organizations, for example, decide to participate in the inauguration of museums in other countries.

The comparative description of the three multipolar action systems provides an overview of the local visible dynamics of the movement in China, Taiwan and South Korea. The type of relationships and pressure strategies depend on the local political culture. As shown in this section,

the POS and trajectory of activists shape the repertoires of CA and symbolic modes of apprehension of the past in each country.

Collective Identity.

The collective identity of these social actors is shaped by an idea of justice which transcends the specific events they commemorate. As suggested by Melucci, collective identity represents the fusion of heterogeneous elements and allows movements to maintain unity. This consensus is neither static nor linear. Instead, it evolves based on the interactions among individuals at different levels of CA, the trajectory of the activists, progress towards the end goal, and the appearance of new frames of reference. As such, to comprehend the specificities of this identity, we must deconstruct it and delve into the motivations that drive the members of these organizations to participate, commit themselves to the cause, and invest in CA physically and emotionally, without obtaining material benefits.

The main participants of the Korean Council **define themselves** as feminists. The Co-representative of the Korean Council points out “this is not a nationalist movement, but a feminist movement because it was born to challenge patriarchy in society and the problems of sexual violence during the wars. It’s a true feminist movement. We have been criticized by nationalist sectors who asked us why this organization should focus on feminist issues when what happened was part of our colonial history.”²² With respect to the **alter-ego relationship**, it is interesting to note that the directors of the House of Sharing and the organizations in China and Taiwan also view the members of the Korean Council as feminists. In fact, many of the small NGOs which participate in the Korean Council are women’s groups. Nonetheless, feminism is a wide umbrella containing many social actors who have nothing to do with the Korean Council. Although the members define themselves as feminists, this does not necessarily mean that they support other visible causes of the local feminist movement. On the other hand, nationalist and post-colonial legacies are visibly present in the signs, speeches, and even the songs at Wednesday demonstrations. Despite the leaders’ declarations, it seems that feminism and post-colonialism blend together in the unique identity of this movement.

In Taiwan, there is also a certain tension between nationalism and feminism. Like the activists of the Korean Council, the directors of TWRF self-define as feminists and are recognized as such by former members of this NGO. They do not feel like heirs of the transition to democracy, a legacy which is still highly present among the original members: “When I first started participating, we were all very idealistic. We had all studied in the early days of political opening. Martial law had ended only a few years before. The new generations are different,”²³ “At the beginning, the movement was very nationalist; now we are more feminists.”²⁴ Unlike those of the

²² Personal interview, Seoul, December 14, 2017.

²³ Former lawyer of the TWRF, personal interview, Taipei, February 8, 2017.

²⁴ Chairperson of the TWRF, personal interview, Taipei, January 8, 2017.

Korean Council, the discourse of TWRF members is more closely articulated with other feminist causes, locally and internationally. Although their activism focuses on “comfort women,” they are motivated by a wider spectrum of issues related to domestic violence, sexual tourism, trafficking of women, etc.

In China, the most active professors and volunteers recognize that this topic is related to the human rights of women. Nonetheless, members do not invoke feminist discourses, nor do they politicize their grievances and demands as clearly as the TWRF, the Korean Council, and the House of Sharing. For example, Professor Chen – who directed the Women’s Center – said that, in the beginning, it was hard for her to accept that “comfort women” were not prostitutes, and she felt certain embarrassment about the topic. Yet, since then, cognitive and socio-cultural changes have given her greater comprehension. She associates this progress with ongoing historical revisionism. Among the volunteers, the majority refers to “comfort women” as a historical issue. Some of them are more critical of official government policies and feel certain admiration for the movement culture in Korea: “The problem is that the Party does not help us. Some local governments help, but the Party does not give us any money. Discursively, they support us, but they don’t send us any resources because this is not something important on the Chinese agenda. If they helped us, it would be different (...) This is not a movement; it’s an academic group. We value research, not going out on the street like in Korea.”²⁵ Not all of them are so skeptical. Many collaborators believe that, as part of the struggle for justice, it is important to raise awareness about the case through local media and by building historical archives to legitimate claims against Japan. This historicist perspective coincides with the low levels of political activism among members of the movement, who have no prior trajectories and no marked political aspirations. It is also conditioned by the peculiarity of the relationship between civil society and the state imposed by the Chinese Communist Party.

Despite the discrepancies among countries, one important and transversal theme could be observed in all local identity-construction processes, especially among younger activists: the need for recognition. Members of every organization agreed that the struggle for justice in the name of ex “comfort women” reflects different demands for socio-cultural recognition. This is particularly true now that the number of living victims has decreased dramatically, while domestic networks have become denser. As I will analyze in the next section, it is these embedded networks which constitute the political and cultural *core* of the movement.

Submerged Networks.

Social movements are made up of **multiple and dispersed groups** which interact in everyday life. Within these groups, individual members construct and reconstruct the values that motivate their actions through ongoing socialization and exchanges of ideas. Activists materialized cultural and symbolic frameworks through formal and informal networks of personal relationships and

²⁵ Former RCCCW volunteer, personal interview, Shanghai, January 20, 2018.

organizational bonds. These same frameworks are expressed in the different repertoires of action agreed upon and legitimated by the movement.

In China, documents and interviews demonstrated the presence of various types of **informal networks** which collaborate with to support the issue. Given the enormous size of the national territory, the RCCCW has cooperative **ties** with individuals who, at the provincial level, act as a mediator between the Center and the victims. These actors have established tight and highly localized links of solidarity which allow them to obtain resources and sustain the trust of local authorities, victims, and the directors of the RCCCW. At the same time, they tend to interact and exchange experiences with volunteers from different countries – generally Japan or South Korea – who come to the regions where there are victims in order to help them. These embedded networks do not act based on grand plans or transnational strategies, and instead tend to concentrate on socio-economic grievances, targeting provincial governments or the national government. Economic recognition leads to moral recognition which restores dignity to the victims, especially in their cities of origin. To some extent, these individuals are opinion leaders in their hometowns and they maintain strong ties with the RCCCW's directors and volunteers. Based on his involvement in the movement, Professor Su has constructed asymmetrical, informal ties of cooperation with more than 60 volunteers located in different provinces around the country. These volunteers provide assistance to victims and help compile primary documents. The biographies of local volunteers vary immensely, from young students to former public servants to retired professors.

The director of the RCCCW plays a key role in articulating different Chinese social actors. This does not, however, prevent other groups, unaffiliated with the Center from acting as submerged networks of solidarity, cooperation, and innovation. For example, based on the impact of the documentary *Twenty-Two* (*Èrshí'èr de Guo Ke*, 2015), Chinese youth from diverse localities decided to form a WeChat group called Warming House (*Wēnnuǎn zhī jiā*), a name they chose in analogy to the Korean group House of Sharing. This group's objective is to assist victims. The members of the group, some 465 people, most of them young, live in different provinces, and many have never physically met. According to members of the Center, groups like these tend to form when the media broadcast special programs about victims. Generally, these citizen-led initiatives fade over time. At the time of writing (2019), Warming House is still an active chat group, and its members exchange information about the topic, with strong nationalist and anti-Japan overtones. As tends to occur among volunteers in Korea, the central axis of mobilization is to collect money, clothes, and food for the victims and to visit them. The members of the group are focus on politics.

In Taiwan, social capital ties appear less important. In the beginning of the movement, social workers visited the homes of victims regularly and tried to maintain relationships with their family members and neighbors. As in China, they also went to see victims and activists in other parts of the world. Today, movement networks are more dispersed and heterogeneous than in previous decades, comprised mainly of women's groups. The individuals who seek out the NGO and the museum, in order to provide help, tend to be young university students who empathize with this issue from gender perspectives. They discuss ways to memorialize the past and encourage

their friends and acquaintances to reflect on the role of women in Taiwan, in language that mirrors Western feminist debates.

In South Korea, there is a dense network of social groups and individuals with no organizational affiliation who exchange ideas and strategies with members of the Korean Council and the House of Sharing. This network ranges from recognized NGOs to volunteers without any background in NGOs or politics who spontaneously become affiliated with the cause. This “underground” interaction includes the exchange of ideas and perspectives about the demands of the movement and the ways in which the past is represented. Depending on the type of social actor, different types of bonds are formed and different aspects of the agenda established by the Korea Council and the House of Sharing take prevalence. For example, in interviews carried out with members of the NGO PSPD – which participates in movement activities on key events – a far higher level of politicization was observed than among individuals who spontaneously approach the demonstrations and/or provide assistance to victims. In conversations with volunteers, recurrent topics included colonial history and national oppression, similar to young volunteers in China. This narrative is also visible in the signs they carry at protests. As in neighboring countries, NGO activities include artistic projects which aim to make historical traumas more visible internationally. Interestingly, many artists are members of the Korean or Japanese diasporas (especially from the United States).

At the same time, Korea is the only country in which members of the two NGOs under study share their daily lives with victims,²⁶ making their activism an alternative lifestyle. These intimate forms of interaction reinforce their quasi-familial bonds with victims, who they accompany on a daily basis, for more than 20 years, in some cases. Religion is also significant in these submerged networks, especially Buddhism and Catholicism. For many of the individuals who collaborate with this movement at the grassroots level, religious beliefs and reflections impact – but do not determine – their ethical and moral understanding of political struggles.

In China, Korea and Taiwan, the diverse groups and individuals variably involved in the “comfort women” movement have limited impact at the regional or transnational level, where select NGOs act as brokers. Nonetheless, they have a strong, albeit indirect, impact by generating debates that challenge the movement’s sphere of action. Discussions are often fueled by actions in

²⁶ I am referring to victims who live in nursing houses managed by organizations. Although the members of these organizations don’t physically live there, they are present during the day, dialogue with them, and celebrate local holidays, like Chuseok, birthdays, etc.

other countries that make up the transnational network. During fieldwork, I observed that, unintentionally, South Korean organizations had the ability to inspire and shape grassroots actions in China. This does not imply that their ideas and repertoires are the same, yet it helps activate the latent capacities of submerged networks.

Conclusions

One central aspect of the transnational “comfort women” movement is the local rootedness of social actors. The organizations which participate in TCA are both restrained and sustained by domestic networks that infuse their actions with meaning, power, and resources. It is in the local sphere that they construct and redefine the boundaries and cultural creations. This process not only shapes domestic activism but also the issues and paradigms addressed by brokers in the transnational sphere. Among social actors in the three countries examined here, the demands highlighted by the Asian Solidarity Conference guide domestic actions only loosely, allowing each organization to interpolate its society and challenge its government in different ways. An examination of the movement at the national level shows how the specificities of each country, including the origin of social groups, the trajectories of activists, and the relationships of these actors to socio-political processes, shape the re-appropriation of the political cause.

The comparison made of the **multipolar action system** highlights that South Korean movement culture found its first articulation in the context of the transition to democracy. Now, however, it is more closely aligned with changes in the international framework related to violence against women in contexts of war. The Korean Council and the House of Sharing have great capacity to raise funds, engage in sustained political activism in the street, and give visibility to women, not only as victims but also as political actors. Both NGOs participate in the network’s activities at the regional level, but the Korean Council has the strongest influence at the international level. In Korea, as in Taiwan, the organizations have shifted their temporal and spatial conceptions as their demands have been incorporated into official state policy. Following the institutionalization of at least part of the movement’s agenda and grievances, the organizations have modified their understanding of the sociocultural challenges confronted. In Korea the organizations’ repertoire of action has led to an ongoing symbolic reinvention of recognition. In Taiwan, however, the movement’s local agenda has focused on the struggle against domestic violence and the trafficking of women. In contrast to these two countries, the RCCCW has consolidated itself as a research center dedicated to the recovery of historical sources and has abstained from adopting a more political or feminist view of the case. Its actions define the struggle within the confines of official government channels. Political radicalism and violence have no place in the advocacy strategies of any of these social movements.

The **collective identity** of the people interviewed reflects, to some extent, the unique style and historical evolution of each organization. In the two South Korean organizations, especially the Korea Council, this identity has several dimensions: investigation, service to victims, public mobilization, recognition for the movement’s political struggle, and cultural and social change with respect to the historical role of women in Korean society. These elements are integrated into

a framework that highlights the human rights of women in armed conflict. The members of the TWRF, after an initial period of nationalist and post-colonial framing, redefined the movement's grievances in feminist terms, minimizing the historical particularities of the case to emphasize solidarity among women. The local sorority (Taiwanese women) is a central element of their identity. On the other hand, the members of the RCCCW are more homogeneous in terms of what motivates their participation in the movement. They constantly highlight the need to give visibility to a "forgotten" history. To some degree, their collective identity reflects tensions between history, nationalism, and women's rights, similar to those present when the movement first originated in neighboring countries. These subtle differences in the construction of collective identity at the national level reflect the various ways of appropriating the traumatic past, generating legitimacy and visibility within each country.

At the grassroots level of the movement, the motives of volunteers and social groups are less clear, although they all share a need for recognition. In Korea, the **submerged networks** provide a substrate for action and include a wide variety of social actors, informally connected through the reticular form of the Korea Council. One of the most significant and unique characteristics of participating individuals and organizations is the existence of a community of activists whose lives are transformed through cohabitation and day-to-day care of victims. This community strengthens the movement and transforms its repertoires. The local strategies of action of the RCCCW are sustained by a wide network of social capital which has successfully integrated victims into the movement and sometimes has funds to assist them. The volunteers scattered across the vast territory of China have the potential for resistance and power. In Taiwan, the laboratory of ideas latent in the TWRF is enriched by the spontaneous participation of individuals in the activities of the museum, dialogue with other organizations in the region (especially Japan), and cognitive academic frames introduced by the professors who lead the organization. Unlike Korea and China, Taiwan does not have a large network of submerged actors. To some extent, its submerged network is smaller because, as I explained in the article, in Taiwan, Japan's past aggressor in Asia is an important but less central issue than on the Chinese and South Korean public agenda. This fact can be observed in the fewest anti-Japanese associations in the country compared to its neighbors.

Finally, revisiting the main questions and objectives of this study, it is important to note that transnational movements are engaged in a process of meaning-construction that reflects the intersection of different spheres of negotiation and action. Throughout this paper, I have endeavored to show how the constitutive base of the "comfort women" movement is the domestic action carried out by organizations. It is at the domestic level that these social actors construct their agendas, strengthen their networks of influence, and maintain the movement's latency. The four organizations analyzed are heterogeneous *inter alia*. They have similarities and differences which they share and renegotiate – though never in their totality – at the regional level. Social actors in China, South Korean, and Taiwan loosely frame their actions around the agenda of the transnational network. Yet, at the same time, these national movements are autonomous and constantly show their capacity for selection and differentiation. A focus on the local character of transnationalism offers a greater understanding of the heteromorphism inherent in this social

movement. The local heteromorphism can enlighten us on the latency and capacity for permanent reinvention of a transnational social movement.

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