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Transnational Civil Society and the Politics of Memory in Sino-Japanese Relations: Exhibiting the “Comfort Women” in China

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Abstract

Since 2009, Japanese civil society groups have arranged exhibitions in China dealing with the so-called comfort women issue in cooperation with local Chinese organizers, including state-run war museums that function as patriotic education bases. Organizing these exhibitions has required much time and energy. A fundamental aim of these groups is to make the Japanese government compensate the victims. Why do these groups arrange exhibitions in China even though it is time and energy consuming instead of concentrating their activities in Japan? Why do these groups, who embrace a clear gender perspective and state that one of their principles is to be independent of any government, cooperate with Chinese government-run war museums that serve as patriotic education bases and clearly subsume gender-based identities to that of the nation?

Through an analysis based on key assumptions in theories on transnational advocacy and collective memory of material provided by the actors involved, it is demonstrated that activities in China are a means of exerting pressure on the Japanese government by institutionalizing the memory of the “comfort women” more firmly in China. At the same time, the exhibitions might be regarded as a “Trojan horse” as its emphasis on gender and international solidarity among women might potentially undermine the emphasis in official Chinese narratives about the past, which strongly stress national identity. The paper illustrates that civil society can play a role in the international politics of memory, something often ignored in elite-centred research on collective memory in Sino-Japanese relations.

Keywords: Transnational advocacy, Japan, China, war memory, “comfort women”, exhibitions.

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Introduction

In the last few years, Japanese civil society groups, among them the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM) in Tokyo have arranged special exhibitions dealing with what is euphemistically called the “comfort women” issue in cooperation with local Chinese organizers, including two state-run war museums, which function as patriotic education bases—the Eighth Route Army Memorial Hall in Wuxiang in Shanxi province and the Chinese People's War of Resistance Museum in Beijing. Organizing these exhibitions has required much time and energy. It took several years from the time the initiative was first launched until the opening of the first exhibition. These civil society groups have been active in supporting Chinese victims who have filed lawsuits against the Japanese government in Japanese courts. A central aim of these groups is to make the Japanese government officially compensate the victims. One might think that since getting the Japanese government to compensate the victims is such a central aim, these groups should put their efforts into activities within Japan's borders. Why do Japanese civil society groups organize exhibitions in China despite the fact that it is so time and energy consuming? The main aim of this paper is to provide an explanation to this puzzling question.

In addition, the paper will try to understand another seemingly contradictory state of affairs: Why do these groups, who embrace a clear gender perspective and state that one of their principles is to be independent of any government, team up with Chinese government-run war museums that are sources of patriotic education and clearly subsume gender identities to the nation? Finally, in providing answers to the above-mentioned questions, the paper elucidates the role of civil society in the politics of war memory. The paper is based on fieldwork conducted in Japan and China in November 2011. Printed material and information has been retrieved from Japanese civil society groups and the exhibition held in Beijing was visited.

Fundamentally, I assume that the concerns of civil society groups are no different from those of other actors involved in the politics of war memory. All such participants attempt to secure the memories they subscribe to from oblivion as well as the actors regarded as working on its behalf. They therefore attempt to institutionalize their narratives about war and make them become part of existing national memory infrastructures. By doing so, they may seek to raise awareness of a specific issue in order to influence government policy. As is demonstrated, when such policies are related to international issues and foreign policy, civil society groups may engage in transnational advocacy, attempting to institutionalize their memory narratives abroad and raise

awareness of an issue in other countries in order to affect government policy towards the government in their home country.

As mentioned above, one of the central goals of the Japanese groups studied here has been to persuade the Japanese government to compensate the victimized women. One way of putting pressure on the Japanese government, I argue, has been to attempt to firmly establish the memory of the “comfort women” as part of Chinese collective memory, thereby raising awareness of the issue in China in order to make the Chinese government exert pressure on its Japanese counterpart. In addition, it is suggested that an additional aim of arranging these exhibitions is to undermine the message stressing *national* identity in Chinese collective memory by emphasizing *gender-based* identity and the need for solidarity based on gender.

The next section contains a brief theoretical discussion of the role of civil society in the politics of memory. After that follows a brief overview of the “comfort women” issue in China. The third section introduces the central civil society group studied, the Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace. In the fourth and final section, the activities engaged in by Japanese civil society groups in China are discussed with a focus on museum exhibitions.

Civil society, transnational advocacy and the politics of memory

Much of the research on the politics of memory has tended to privilege the role of elites and government actors.¹ Discussions of memory politics in Sino-Japanese relations sometimes seem to assume that there is one Japanese and one Chinese narrative about the war in the 1930s and 1940s. More nuanced accounts suggest that war memory is domestically constructed through contestation. Civil society groups may be seen as participating in such domestic contestation. Yet, the possibility that civil society groups influence the collective memory of other states through transnational activities has been given relatively scant attention. The case study presented in this paper

¹ Anne Simone Kleinman, “An Unassimilable Past and the Diplomacy of the Future: International Relations in East Asia Fifty Years on”, in *Remembering and Forgetting: The Legacy of War and Peace in East Asia*, (ed.) Gerrit W. Gong, (Washington D.C.: The Center for Strategic & International Studies, 1996), 104, Eric Langenbacher, “Collective Memory as a Factor in Political Culture and International Relations”, in *Power and the Past: Collective Memory and International Relations*, (eds) Eric Langenbacher and Yossi Shain, (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 31, Jan-Werner Müller, “Introduction: the power of memory, the memory of power and the power over memory”, in *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, (ed.) Jan-Werner Müller, (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21–30.

examines the transnational activities of civil society involved in the politics of war memory in Sino-Japanese relations.

According to the theoretical point of departure of this paper, all actors involved in the politics of memory, regardless of whether they are state or civil society groups, follow the same logic. Fundamentally, memory is always threatened by oblivion. Actors involved in the politics of memory therefore attempt to secure their narratives from oblivion. They may regard other actors as agents of oblivion. Civil society groups involved in the politics of memory, I argue, attempt to institutionalize their narratives often with the aim of making them become part of a national collective memory. In this case, however, these activities are not confined to the national arena. The activities of the groups with which we are concerned can be understood in terms of transnational advocacy. Through their activities they create transnational networks. Civil society groups tend to engage in such transnational advocacy activities under certain circumstances:

When channels between the state and its domestic actors are blocked, the boomerang pattern of influence characteristic of transnational networks may occur: domestic NGOs bypass their state and directly search out international allies to try to bring pressure on their states from outside.²

The case study presented in this paper demonstrates how a Japanese civil society group attempts to institutionalize its narrative about the so-called comfort women not only within Japan but also in China. Such transnational efforts might, of course, meet with criticism if the narrative presented is incompatible with Chinese narratives. This means that as an exhibition is prepared its content may be negotiated.

It is often stated that memory is closely linked to forgetting:

If we concede that forgetting is the normality of personal and cultural life, then remembering is the exception, which—especially in the cultural sphere—requires special and costly precautions. These precautions take the shape of cultural institutions.³

² Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (1998, Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 12.

³ Aleida Assmann, "From 'Canon and Archive'", in *The Collective Memory Reader*, (eds) Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 335.

Collective memory, then, is “seen to be at risk … by dying generations and official denial”.⁴ The need to take precautions points to the link between memory and security and the fact that memory is threatened by oblivion. Collective memory is a security issue not in the traditional sense of security as physical survival. It is a matter of ontological security, or the security of being.⁵

The need to take precautions, or security measures, by creating cultural institutions means that it is necessary to record memories in order not to forget them. There are different technologies of memory that make it possible to record memories in different ways. Such technologies increase our capacity to remember.⁶ “At the societal level, moreover, different forms of social organization have clearly depended on different technologies of memory”.⁷ With the rise of the nation state specific modern technologies of memory were created with the intent of strengthening the legitimacy of these nation states and to create and fortify national identities or an imagined sense of community.⁸ “Nineteenth-century European states increased their power and legitimacy vastly by developing new mnemonic forms like the museum, the archive, and indeed professional history itself”.⁹ These mnemonic forms, or technologies of memory, together make up a memory infrastructure. A memory infrastructure facilitates “the longevity and continual re-creation of memory and its influence” as it is used to keeping “the memory alive”. Such an infrastructure consists of “memorials, museums, documentation, curricula, commemorations, and civil societal organizations”.¹⁰ An elaborate infrastructure contributes to the institutionalization of memory narratives. The construction of a memory infrastructure becomes a security measure, which guards against oblivion and the aggressive actions of agents regarded as acting on its behalf.

In the discussion above about memory infrastructures, civil society groups are seen as being part of the memory infrastructure of a society. However, civil society groups are fundamentally different from museums or memorials in that civil society groups are also actors in the politics of memory. As actors

⁴ Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy, “Introduction”, in *The Collective Memory Reader*, (eds) Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

⁵ Karl Gustafsson, “Memory Politics and Ontological Security in Sino-Japanese Relations”, *Asian Studies Review*, 38, no. 1 (2014).

⁶ Jeffrey K. Olick, “Collective Memory: The Two Cultures”, *Sociological Theory*, 17, no. 3 (1999), 342.

⁷ Olick, “Collective Memory”, 343.

⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 2006).

⁹ Olick, “Collective Memory”, 343.

¹⁰ Langenbacher, “Collective Memory as a Factor”, 29.

they are not only part of a memory infrastructure—they contribute to its construction. They establish memorials and museums; they organize commemorative activities, produce written material and attempt in a number of ways to institutionalize the memories they promote. Through such institutionalization the position of a specific memory narrative can be strengthened. One important means for such institutionalization is the construction of museums, the physical structures of which arguably substantiate and give memory narratives authority. Museums can provide a base from which civil society groups may organize their activities¹¹, which may include arranging temporary exhibitions both at home and abroad. By publicizing and institutionalizing a memory narrative, civil society groups may pressure or shame governments into action (Steele 2008).¹²

The “comfort women” issue in China

Several surviving “comfort women” have filed lawsuits in Japanese courts. Even though courts have acknowledged that victims were forcibly held and raped by the Japanese military, it has been argued that the right of individuals to seek damages has been disclaimed with the signing of bilateral post-war agreements.¹³ This has prompted some former “comfort women” to consider the possibility of seeking redress through the International Court of Justice (ICJ). However, the ICJ only accepts lawsuits launched by governments; individuals cannot file suits at the court.¹⁴ With no prospects for success in Japanese courts, one option for civil society groups may be to try to urge the Chinese and Korean governments to deal with the issue, for example, by taking it to the ICJ. Recent developments suggest that this could be happening in South Korea.

South Korean civil society groups involved in the politics surrounding the “comfort women” issue have been active since the early 1990s. The Wednesday protests outside the Japanese embassy have been especially visible.

¹¹ Karl Gustafsson, “Narratives and Bilateral Relations: Rethinking the ‘History Issue’ in Sino-Japanese Relations”, (doctoral dissertation, Stockholm University, 2011), available at: <http://su.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:414566>, 48–49.

¹² Steele, Brent J. *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*, (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2008).

¹³ Masami Ito, “High court rejects sex slave suit”, *Japan Times*, 9 March 2005, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20050319a2.html> (accessed 19 February 2012), *Japan Times*, “Top court: No redress for Chinese”, 28 April 2007, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20070428a1.html> (accessed 19 February 2012).

¹⁴ Xinhuanet “A woman’s fight for justice”, 31 August 2010, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/indepth/2010-08/31/c_13471775.htm (accessed 19 February 2012).

First started in 1992, these protests have taken place every Wednesday for 20 years.¹⁵ In December 2011, just a few days before South Korean President Lee Myung-bak met with Japanese Prime Minister Noda Yasuhiko in Japan, the 1000th Wednesday demonstration was held. To commemorate the event a bronze statue of a “comfort woman” was erected in the location where protests have been held in front of the Japanese embassy. This suggests that the issue is firmly established in South Korean collective memory.

In stark contrast to the situation in South Korea, the existence of Chinese victims of the “comfort women” system, representations of the issue and the politics surrounding it in China have received minimal attention in English-language research. Indeed, scholarly work on history-related issues in East Asia has sometimes presented the “comfort women” issue as a Korean matter with the Nanjing massacre as a parallel Chinese issue.¹⁶ Even though the largest group of women involved are often said to have been Korean, there were also many Chinese victims. However, the topic was not given much consideration in Mainland China until quite recently. Indeed, even though limited research had been conducted in China since the early 1990s,¹⁷ it was announced by *Xinhua* that the first systematic investigation on Chinese ‘comfort women’ was released on 2 July 2007.¹⁸ On 6 July 2007, the first “comfort women” archive in China was opened at Shanghai Normal University.¹⁹ There were calls for compensation by individual victims in China in the early 1990s but initially the victims did not receive support from the Chinese government in making their cases.²⁰ The official line concerning war reparations in general was that it was settled when relations were re-established in 1972. According to the agreement reached at the time, China waived all reparations. However, in 1995, the Chinese government made clear that this only applied to government-to-government reparations and that Chinese individuals retained the right to seek redress.²¹ Furthermore, a recent study of Chinese war museums showed that among 17 museums surveyed only five refer to the “comfort women” and none of the exhibitions treat it extensively.²² It is

¹⁵ Mee-hyang Yoon, *Nijūnenkan no suiyō bi* [Twenty years of Wednesdays], (Osaka: Tōhō shuppan, 2011).

¹⁶ Jungmin Seo, “Politics of Memory in Korea and China: Remembering the Comfort Women and the Nanjing Massacre”, *New Political Science*, 30, no. 3 (2008).

¹⁷ Yihong Pan, “Weianfu yanjiu, and: Rijun xingnuli: Zhongguo “weianfu” zhenxiang (review)”, *China Review International*, 10, no. 1 (2003), 266.

¹⁸ *Xinhua News Agency* “Chinese researchers unveil first ‘comfort women’ report”, 3 July 2007.

¹⁹ *Renmin wang* 2007.

²⁰ Satoshi Isaka, “On China policy, Japan takes off kid gloves”, *The Nikkei Weekly*, 14 August 1995.

²¹ Pan, “Weianfu yanjiu”, 268.

²² Gustafsson, “Narratives and bilateral relations”, 149.

arguably the case that the memory of the “comfort women” has not yet been firmly established as a part of Chinese war memory.

Considering the Chinese government’s sensitivity to public opinion in recent years, partly because of the lack of democratic channels for influence,²³ coupled with strong anti-Japanese sentiments and large-scale activism and protests concerning issues related to Japan, there is a likelihood that public opinion could lead to pressure being put on the Chinese government to raise the issue bilaterally with Japan should the issue become more firmly institutionalized in Chinese collective memory. Against this background, the civil society activities discussed in this article are potentially significant for Sino-Japanese relations.

The Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM)

Several Japanese museums run by civil society groups are actively engaged in reconciliatory projects with Chinese and Korean counterparts. The Women’s Active Museum (WAM) in Tokyo, for example, has been cooperating with Chinese groups to arrange special exhibitions in China. The Grassroots House in Kōchi has conducted several field trips to China and Korea and received visitors from these countries.²⁴ The Oka Masaharu Memorial Museum in Nagasaki cooperates with the Unit 731 Crime Evidence Hall in Northeast China and with the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Museum. The collaborative activities include exchanges of information, mutual visits and presentations of research conducted.²⁵ Such museums may be seen as platforms for the activities of these citizens’ groups. The groups’ activities are not limited to museum exhibitions.

The idea of creating a museum with exhibits related to the “comfort women” was born in 2000 after the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery had been held in Tokyo. The plan was that the museum would exhibit and preserve the tribunal records and material related to the “comfort women” issue for future generations. The tribunal was held from 8–12 December 2000 by a number of NGOs as a people’s tribunal. The Japanese civil society group Violence Against Women

²³ Gustafsson “Narratives and bilateral relations”, 97–121, James Reilly, *Strong State, Smart Society: The Rise of Public Opinion in China’s Japan Policy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

²⁴ Yeong Hwan Kim, “Promoting Peace and Reconciliation as a Citizen of East Asia: The Collaborative East Asian Workshop and the Grassroots House Peace Museum”, *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 2007.

²⁵ WAM, personal correspondence, 25 February 2012.

in War Network Japan (VAWW-NET Japan) was one of the central groups behind this transnational civil society effort. The chairperson of VAWW-NET Japan at the time, Matsui Yayori, was instrumental in the initial efforts to establish the museum and when she died in December 2002 she left her entire estate to the establishment of the museum. In June 2003, the Non Profit Organization (NPO) Women's Fund for Peace and Human Rights launched a campaign to raise one hundred million JPY for the establishment of the museum. In August 2005, the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM) was opened.²⁶

WAM argues that the women survivors'

stories have challenged us in many ways. They have taught us that war crimes are never rectified unless the State faces its crimes; that a genuine apology and promise to prevent recurrence from the State is an absolute necessity; that in order to overcome the past we need to keep the memory of past aggression alive, and pass it on to future generations.²⁷

WAM has five principles: 1) To place a focus on wartime sexual violence when it concerns justice from a gender point of view. 2) To not only focus on victims but also make clear the responsibility of perpetrators. 3) To not only preserve and make public historical and contemporary materials but also create a base for future oriented activities. 4) To function as a people's movement without ties to state power. 5) To send information abroad and promote solidarity activities across borders. WAM organizes special exhibitions and other events to help people learn about the lives of the victimized women and confront the circumstances of wartime sexual violence.²⁸

In its museum, WAM has a small permanent exhibition, which contains photos of victims and an introduction to the "comfort women" issue. Apart from this permanent exhibition, there is always a special exhibition on display. Since opening in 2005, WAM has organized 11 special exhibitions dealing with different aspects of the "comfort women" issue. For example, there have been exhibitions dealing with the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery, an exhibition made especially for

²⁶ WAM, "Wam ni tsuite", <http://www.wam-peace.org/index.php/about>, (accessed 6 May 2012).

²⁷ WAM, "Introduction", http://www.wam-peace.org/english/modules/about/index.php?content_id=1, (accessed 6 May 2012).

²⁸ WAM, "Wam ni tsuite".

junior high school students and exhibitions focusing on specific groups of victims, for instance, victims in East Timor, Korea, the Philippines and Shanxi in China. The panels used in past special exhibitions are loaned to other groups who wish to organize exhibits. For example, in 2008 and 2009, such exhibitions were held in Osaka, Tokyo, Chiba, Shizuoka, Fukushima, Fukuoka and Nagoya by various citizens' groups.²⁹

Besides organizing exhibitions and related activities, WAM also cooperates with victims and groups in victim countries as well as citizens' groups in Japan in order to work towards a solution to the problem. This involves arranging events, educational activities, exhibitions and lobbying governments in Japan, victim countries and third-party countries as well as the UN.³⁰ WAM assists like-minded groups in other countries who are similarly engaged in the politics surrounding the "comfort women" issue. For example, in 2009, when the Taipei Women's Rescue Foundation (TWRF) set up "Ah-Ma's Website: Taiwan's Virtual Museum on Sexual Slavery by the Japanese Military", WAM contributed photos and information. Since 2004, the Taiwanese group has been working to establish a physical museum dedicated to the "comfort women" in Taipei. These efforts have been successful, as local authorities have agreed to accommodate the museum.³¹

Exhibitions organized by Japanese civil society groups in China

Since 2009, Japanese civil society groups have, in collaboration with local Chinese organizers, organized four panel exhibitions in China dealing with the "comfort women" issue. According to Ikeda Eriko, director of WAM, such easily transported panels, once constructed, "walk by themselves". People who see them often express an interest in displaying them in their hometowns. The panels exhibited in China have been based on previous exhibitions held at WAM in Tokyo. So why did these Japanese groups organize exhibitions in China? In a speech delivered in 2008, Ikeda Eriko stated that when the "comfort women" issue became internationalized in the second half of the

²⁹ WAM, *Wam dayori* [Wam news], no. 12 (2009), 10–11, WAM, *Wam dayori* [Wam news], no. 13, (2009), 10–12.

³⁰ WAM, personal correspondence, 25 February 2012.

³¹ WAM, personal correspondence, 25 February 2012, WAM, *Wam dayori* [Wam news], no. 11, (2009), 4–5, see also Taipei Women's Rescue Foundation, The Peace Memorial Museum of the Comfort Women's Human Rights, <http://www.twrf.org.tw/eng/p3-service8.asp>, (accessed 6 May 2012).

1990s, the Chinese government's response was passive. According to Ikeda, even though media have gradually started covering the activities of the former victims, it is taking time for changes to take place in Chinese society. She expressed her hope that the panel exhibitions would "become a tool for spreading information about the victimization" of the women.³² While this goes some way in shedding light on why the exhibitions were held, it is nonetheless necessary to discuss the circumstances surrounding the exhibitions in order to reach a fuller understanding.

Between 2 November 2009 and 5 May 2011, a special exhibition called The Japanese Military's War Crimes Against Women During World War II was held at the Eighth Route Army Memorial Hall in Wuxiang, Shanxi province, China. WAM and several other Japanese civil society groups prepared the exhibition together with the memorial hall and a local friendship association. The exhibition was based on material that had previously been exhibited in the form of special exhibitions at WAM's facilities in Tokyo. To a large extent, the exhibition consisted of translated material from the special exhibition dealing with "comfort women" in Shanxi province that was held for a year in Tokyo beginning on 1 June 2008. Several victims from the area had unsuccessfully sought redress from the Japanese government in Japanese courts. Organizing the exhibition in Shanxi was meant to console the victims after they lost their court cases. In order to realize the exhibition, three million JPY was raised. After two years of preparations, it opened. More than 180,000 visitors came to see the exhibition.³³

This was probably the first time that a Japanese citizens' group held an exhibition at a government-run Chinese museum for over a year.³⁴ It has also been stated that it was the first panel exhibition dealing with the theme of sexual violence to be held in China.³⁵ It took a long time and a lot of energy to arrange. The opening of the exhibition was postponed several times before it finally opened on 2 November 2011. For example, less than a month before it was set to open in spring 2009, the Shanxi Province Foreign Friendship Association stated that, with the opening approaching, domestic and foreign media, groups and individuals might "make a fuss". In order for this not to affect Sino-Japanese friendship it recommended that the exhibition be postponed. The director of the museum felt he could not go against this

³² 6.30 Jikkō iinkai, *Sosei suru rokugatsu* [June revival (of memories)] (Odate: 6.30 Jikkō iinkai, 2008), 4.

³³ WAM, personal correspondence, 25 February 2012.

³⁴ WAM, *Wam dayori*, no. 11, 1.

³⁵ Sanseishō akiraka ni suru kai [The association for making (what happened in) the Shanxi province known], *Chū kō ki* [Speaking one's mind], no. 58 (2011), 7.

recommendation.³⁶ The director, Wei Guoying, delivered a speech at the opening ceremony of the exhibition in which he stated that via the exhibition he wanted

a broad range of visitors to obtain a detailed awareness of the actual circumstances of the harm done to female victims of sexual violence all over Asia and of the Japanese military's war crimes by taking the appeal of the victims as its main pillar.

In addition, he said that the exhibition was meant to "deeply engrave in the memory of history the piercing hardships the women suffered in their lives and the meaning of their struggles". He continued, by reciting a Chinese proverb often used by the Chinese government when discussing history-related issues: "Past experience, if not forgotten, is a guide to the future—we should engrave this history in our minds forever. A tragedy like this one cannot be repeated".³⁷ WAM reports that the exhibition was highly praised by Chinese media and researchers.³⁸

The exhibition was divided into four sections. The first dealt with the "comfort women" system in Asia. The second section focused on the Women's War Crimes Tribunal held in Tokyo in 2000. The third section discussed the Japanese military's sexual violence in China and the struggles of the surviving Chinese women. The fourth and final section dealt with China's, Japan's and the international community's attitude toward the Japanese military's crime of sexual violence.³⁹

The second exhibition in China was held between 14 August and 11 December 2011 at the Chinese People's War of Resistance Museum in Beijing. This was reportedly the first exhibition on "comfort women" to be held in the Chinese capital. At the opening ceremony, the museum's Vice Director Li Zongyuan, Professor Bu Ping from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Ikeda Eriko, representing the executive committee of the team that planned the exhibition, gave speeches. Ikeda, who is also the director of WAM, stated in her speech that the exhibition in Shanxi had been held in order to "inform a large number of people in China about the

³⁶ WAM, *Wam dayori*, no. 12, 14.

³⁷ WAM, *Wam dayori*, no. 13, 3.

³⁸ WAM, *Wam dayori* [Wam news], no. 18 (2011), 11, WAM, *WAM Meeringu risuto* [Wam mailing list], January 2012.

³⁹ Nihongun seibōryoku paneruten jikkō iinkai [The executive committee for the panel exhibition of the Japanese military's sexual violence], "Hachirogun kinenkan paneruten genkō mokuroku [Copy of the catalogue for the Eighth Route Army Memorial Hall panel exhibition]", (2009).

struggles of the grandmothers [the victimized women]” and that they had persevered to have the exhibition at the museum in Beijing “in order to inform people all over China”. Ikeda apologized for Japanese aggression in China in the past and expressed her indignation, shame and sense of responsibility concerning the claims made by some Japanese politicians that the Japanese military did not forcibly take anyone away.⁴⁰ It is clear that WAM understand these politicians as threatening the memory of the “comfort women” through their denials. WAM states: “Here in Japan, there are those who deny the fact of military sexual slavery, and try to evade responsibility for it. But however vigorously they may seek to deny them, historical facts can never be erased”.⁴¹ WAM has labelled Japanese politicians, mass media and right-wingers who “deny the actual conditions” of the “comfort women” “assassins of memory” (*kioku no ansatsusha*)⁴² and described remembering as a “struggle” (*tatakai*).⁴³ This points to how WAM and their allies, just like other participants in the politics of memory, identify actors who, by denying certain experiences or events, are seen as threatening specific memories, making it necessary to take measures to secure the memories in question by firmly establishing them in the memory infrastructures of states.

Ikeda also stated that, above all, she hoped that the young generation would face the issue. She emphasized that the victims of sexual violence suffer not only from injuries to their bodies but also from “the social prejudice that causes them to see themselves as a disgrace” [to society].⁴⁴ A surviving victim from Shanxi, Liu Mianhuan, who had previously sought, without success, compensation and an apology from the Japanese government through the Japanese judicial system, promised that she would continue her struggle and appealed to everyone for support. The daughter of another victim who had already died read a letter from Wan Aihua, the first Chinese former “comfort woman” to come forward. Wan was not able to attend the ceremony in Beijing in person for health reasons. In the letter, Wan had written that she “could not die without regret until she had received an official apology and reparations from the Japanese government”.⁴⁵

The opening ceremony was attended by approximately 15 journalists from not only Chinese media but also the Japanese newspapers *Asahi* and the

⁴⁰ Sanseishō akiraka ni suru kai, *Chū kō ki*, 3.

⁴¹ WAM, “Introduction”.

⁴² WAM, *Firrudowaaku: Nihongun “ianfu”* [Fieldwork: The Japanese military’s “comfort women”], (Tokyo: Heiwa bunka, 2008), 61.

⁴³ 6.30 Jikkō iinkai, *Sosei suru rokugatsu*, 13.

⁴⁴ Sanseishō akiraka ni suru kai, *Chū kō ki*, 4.

⁴⁵ Sanseishō akiraka ni suru kai, *Chū kō ki*, 5.

Japanese Communist Party's newspaper *Akahata*, the news agency *Kyōdō* and the Japanese national broadcasting corporation *NHK*. The day after the opening ceremony, more than 100 newspaper articles about the event could be found on Chinese Internet sites. In Japan, reports were also published on the Internet, leading to criticism from the conservative newspaper *Sankei* and the weekly *Shūkan posuto*.⁴⁶ In the article in the *Shūkan posuto*, it was reported that one of the Japanese organizers, the lawyer Ōmori Noriko, who had earlier represented Chinese former "comfort women" in Japanese courts, denied that the exhibition had been created in cooperation with the Chinese government and stated that: "We would like the Chinese government to do much, much more when it comes to what it can do, for example, in supporting the victims in their daily lives, bringing this issue to people's attention and making demands toward the Japanese government". This was interpreted by the *Shūkan posuto* to mean that Ōmori and her colleagues "hoped that even more pressure would be put on Japan". The article concludes with the following words: "In this way, hatred toward the Japanese will continue to be planted into Chinese young people".⁴⁷ Ōmori's statement is significant as it confirms that the Japanese civil society groups act in accordance with the theories on transnational civil society activities discussed above; since they are unable to directly influence the Japanese government the way they wish to they seek to do it through the Chinese government.

In a discussion in one of the WAM newsletters about the reason for the choice of venue, it is written:

We thought that if the panels telling the stories of the lives and struggles of each of the victims can move the hearts of the young people and domestic and foreign visitors to the War of Resistance Museum, the significance and impact will be very big.⁴⁸

However, to sponsor an exhibition in Beijing is different from hosting one in Wuxiang in Shanxi:

Beijing is the capital, the Museum of the War of Resistance, as a museum representing the country, makes it impossible to avoid the

⁴⁶ Sanseishō akiraka ni suru kai, *Chū kō ki*, 2–5.

⁴⁷ *Shūkan posuto*, "Pekin de kaisai ni 'ianfu ten' ha nihon no shimin dantai no hatarakikake de jitsugen [The 'comfort women' exhibition in Beijing was realized through the work of Japanese citizens' groups]", 2 September 2011.

⁴⁸ WAM, *Wam dayori*, no. 18, 11.

link to foreign policy. The strictness of the environment differed from Wuxiang. Difficult problems in agreeing on the content of the exhibits took place between the War of Resistance Museum and us, and the executive committee had many very serious and heated discussions. As a result, [we] gave up the idea of setting up the same exhibition as in Wuxiang and reconstructed [the exhibition] with the focus on the panels dealing with the Chinese victims.⁴⁹

Another central difference between the Beijing exhibition and the one in Wuxiang was that the second section, dealing with the Women's War Crimes Tribunal held in Tokyo in 2000, was excluded from the exhibition in Beijing. Apparently, this section became the object of "heated arguments" during the planning process.⁵⁰ It was with "bitter remorse" and the knowledge that "at least the panels showing the Chinese victimized women" could be exhibited that the Japanese side agreed to this change. The final exhibition, then, was divided into three parts. The first dealt with the "comfort women" system in Asia and the present situation of the victims. The second section focused on the Japanese military's sexual violence in China and the struggles of the Chinese victims. The third section dealt with China's, Japan's and the international community's attitudes toward the Japanese military's crimes of sexual violence.⁵¹ One possible reason why the section on the Women's War Crimes Tribunal could not be displayed might be that the Japanese emperor was found guilty in this trial. This contradicts the Chinese government's official line.

In regards to these problems, WAM states that the War of Resistance Museum is a national institution and a patriotic education base that stresses "the cruelty of the Japanese military's aggression and the history of anti-Japanese struggle of the Chinese nation". If the exhibition was held in Beijing this might make people "face the actual circumstances surrounding sexual violence and face the lives and struggles of each [of the victims]". In addition, the Japanese organizers believed that the fact that "Chinese women's victimization and struggles up until today took place together with women's struggles all over Asia and, in the context of international solidarity activities, have not been sufficiently conveyed in China".⁵² In other words, the emphasis on Chinese national struggle had suppressed other identity categories, thereby

⁴⁹ WAM, *Wam dayori*, no. 18, 11.

⁵⁰ Sanseishō akiraka ni suru kai, *Chū kō ki*, 8.

⁵¹ WAM, *Wam dayori* [Wam news], no. 19, (2011), 10.

⁵² WAM, *Wam dayori*, no. 19, 10.

creating a silence concerning the struggle of women.⁵³ It is clear, then, that the Japanese groups involved in the exhibition projects wished to organize exhibitions in China not solely for the purpose of pressuring the Japanese government but also to influence Chinese collective memory for its own sake.

Eight faculty members from the Research Centre for Women's Issues at Shaanxi Normal University in Xi'an came to see the exhibition in Wuxiang and expressed their interest in organizing an exhibition at their university. This led to the third exhibition, which was held at Shaanxi Normal University Women's Culture Museum in Xi'an from 15 October to 14 December 2011. This was the first time a group of Chinese women organized a panel exhibition on the Japanese military's sexual violence. In their newsletter, the *Sanseishō akiraka ni suru kai* commented that the titles of the first three exhibitions differed because of the dissimilarities between the intentions of the hosts and because the target audiences differ. Despite these differences, however, it is pointed out that the term "sexual violence" (*seibōryoku*) was avoided in all three exhibitions. The reason for this, it was stated, was because organizers have to apply to higher authorities for permission if the title used when advertising externally is excessively emotive and might provoke "unnecessary reactions". Nonetheless, it was pointed out that the content cannot be made ambiguous and the name of the Japanese co-organizer, the Executive Committee for the Panel Exhibition on the Japanese Military's Sexual Violence, still appears in advertisements. As in Beijing, differences of opinion between the Japanese Executive Committee and the local organizers occurred again during the planning of the exhibition. The Executive Committee gave their "frank opinions" in reaction to the propositions made by the local organizers in which almost all of the "concrete depictions of the circumstances of the victims" had been deleted. The end result, however, was basically the same as the exhibition in Wuxiang in its content.⁵⁴ Significantly, the local organizers in Xi'an used the fact that the exhibition at the War of Resistance Museum in Beijing was approved, even though the topic was delicate, to persuade local higher authorities to allow the exhibition to be held. In other words, the exhibition in Beijing can be regarded as a stamp of approval for others who wish to arrange exhibitions dealing with the topic. The local organizers in Xi'an have mentioned the possibility of staging similar exhibitions in the city in the future.⁵⁵

⁵³ For more on how the national category is highlighted in Chinese narratives about war in museums, see Gustafsson, "Narratives and Bilateral Relations", 164–221.

⁵⁴ *Sanseishō akiraka ni suru kai, Chū kō ki*, 7–8.

⁵⁵ WAM, *Wam dayori*, no. 19, 11.

In connection with the exhibition held in Xi'an, a symposium on media and gender was organized. Several participants voiced their desire to arrange similar exhibitions in their own cities.⁵⁶ This led to a fourth exhibition, entitled "The Japanese military's sexual violence panel exhibition", being held in Guangzhou from 28 December 2011 to 12 January 2012. In contrast to the former three exhibitions in China, this time the term "sexual violence" was in the title. This was perhaps because the Guangzhou exhibition was, for the first time, organized together with a local NGO, consisting mainly of female university faculty members and their students. A press conference attended by journalists from a number of newspapers was held in connection with the opening of the exhibition. Ikeda Eriko, who represented the Japanese executive committee at the opening, reported that the local organizers were very keen on continuing their activities related to the "comfort women" issue. During her talk at the opening ceremony, Ikeda informed the audience about how, in the second half of 2011, the "comfort women" issue had been given considerable attention in South Korea with the 1000th Wednesday demonstration and solidarity demonstrations in various locations both in Japan and around the world. In a report for the WAM mailing list, Ikeda also stated that she "dreamed of the day when Chinese people will join such a movement".⁵⁷

The Guangzhou exhibition's statement of intent declared:

The Japanese citizens' groups that have supported the Chinese women's lawsuits continue to conduct campaigns to demand apologies and reparations from the Japanese government and wish to widely inform Chinese people about the real circumstances surrounding the hardships of the lives of the victimized women and their courageous struggles. In the four years that we have planned the exhibitions on the Japanese military in China, we were able to realize this through cooperation with Chinese people. Through this panel exhibition, it is our heart's desire that the understanding of and respect towards the victimized women will deepen among a large number of Chinese people and that this will become a force that will protect the dignity of these women within Chinese society.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ WAM, *Wam dayori*, no. 19, 11, WAM, *WAM Meeringu risuto*.

⁵⁷ WAM, *WAM Meeringu risuto*.

⁵⁸ WAM, *WAM Meeringu risuto*.

Furthermore, it emphasized the importance of “international solidarity” among women.⁵⁹ According to WAM, visitors to the exhibition, many of whom were young students, expressed encouragement. For example, one visitor stated:

I am grateful for the effort made by the Japanese [organizers]. Japanese civil society’s regret concerning the war is much deeper than understood by the Chinese people. The Chinese people’s misunderstanding of Japan should be reduced, dissolved through many more civil society exchanges and exhibitions like this one.⁶⁰

As mentioned above, several Chinese groups expressed their interest in arranging exhibitions. The Japanese executive committee for the Chinese exhibitions received requests to hold special exhibitions from groups in numerous Chinese locations, including Nanjing, Changsha, Beijing, Hainan, Xiamen, Kunming and other places.⁶¹ There were already plans to hold a larger exhibition in Guangzhou and WAM declared that it wished to continue to organize exhibitions in China.⁶² This demonstrates that the activities are a form of transnational networking as proposed by transnational advocacy theory.

Despite these developments the issue is not uncontroversial within China. Some Chinese have reacted negatively to the exhibitions. When the Chinese organizers of the Guangzhou exhibition proposed to put posters advertising the exhibition on the campus of the university where they work several of their colleagues opposed the idea. Some people critical of the exhibition, for example, claimed that “the ‘comfort women’ were prostitutes” and that “the ‘comfort women’ should receive treatment behind closed doors, not come out and file lawsuits”. WAM comments on this in the following way: “ignorance and prejudice against the victims of sexual violence is still deep-rooted so women need to continue their struggle”.⁶³ Similarly, at a ceremony held in 2010 at the venue for the special exhibition in Wuxiang, a Chinese participant living in Japan pointed out that in patriarchal Chinese society the “comfort

⁵⁹ WAM, *WAM Meeringu risuto*.

⁶⁰ WAM, *Wam dayori* [Wam news], no. 20, (2012), 11.

⁶¹ WAM, *Wam dayori*, no. 20, 11.

⁶² WAM, *WAM Meeringu risuto*.

⁶³ WAM, *Wam dayori*, no. 20, 11.

women” are still regarded as a disgrace to the Chinese nation and that the exhibition should correct this feudalistic way of thinking.⁶⁴

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to explain why Japanese civil society groups involved in the politics of memory have put much effort into staging exhibitions dealing with the “comfort women” issue in China. It is clear that the Japanese civil society groups follow transnational advocacy theory in that in a situation in which they feel unable to directly influence the government of their home country they engage in transnational activities. They wish to establish the issue more firmly as part of Chinese collective memory and thereby put pressure on the Japanese government. They have expressed hope that both Chinese people and the Chinese government will do more to resolve the “comfort women” issue, including pressurizing the Japanese government. Institutionalizing the memory of the “comfort women” in China could, then, lead to greater pressure being put on the Japanese government to provide an official apology and reparations.

This, however, is not the only reason for establishing the issue as part of Chinese collective memory. An additional aim is to inform people in China about the issue in order to eradicate social prejudice within Chinese society toward the victimized women and to instead reinterpret the meaning of their lives in order to recognize them as courageous. This is potentially subversive as it emphasizes gender as an identity category and international solidarity among women. In this sense it is possible to speak of the exhibitions in terms of a “Trojan horse” as they might undermine the emphasis in official narratives on national identity at the expense of other identities and might lead to an increase in gender-based activism. This possibility explains why the Japanese civil society groups are willing to cooperate with patriotic education bases.

The fact that an exhibition was allowed at the War of Resistance Museum in Beijing has made it possible to organize similar exhibitions elsewhere in China, as local organizers are able to legitimize such exhibitions to their superiors through reference to the Beijing exhibition. Even shortly after the Beijing exhibition was held, several exhibitions had been organized elsewhere and sympathizers around China are keen to arrange additional exhibitions.

⁶⁴ WAM, *Wam dayori* [Wam news], no. 14, (2010).

The hosting of the exhibition by the Beijing museum has perhaps opened a Pandora's box that might provide citizen's groups involved in the memory politics related to the "comfort women" issue with momentum. The Japanese groups that took the initiative to organize exhibitions in China have, through arranging these exhibitions, been able to establish a network with like-minded Chinese groups eager to engage in activities related to the "comfort women" issue. Whether this will evolve into a Chinese movement matching the South Korean one is too early to say. The interest shown by people in China in arranging additional exhibitions suggests that this is only the beginning. At the same time, the issue is still controversial in China and there have been negative reactions. If a Chinese movement gains impetus, however, it might have implications for Sino-Japanese relations because it could lead to popular demands in China calling for the Chinese government to do more to pressure its Japanese counterpart to provide official apologies and reparations to the victims of the "comfort women" system. With Chinese public opinion becoming increasingly important and the Chinese government not being able to risk appearing unpatriotic, such calls might make it more difficult for the Chinese government not to act.