

A statue that speaks

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A young girl, an empty chair. Her hands are clenched tightly into fists: she seems determined. And she is determined; she has made a steadfast decision. She wants to break her silence. She is ready to tell you of the crimes committed during the Asia–Pacific War (1931–1945) against the “comfort women” – women whose purpose was to “comfort” the soldiers with their bodies. Won't you sit with her and listen to what she has to tell you?

When she was 17, **Kim Sundeok from Korea** fell for an advertisement by Japanese nurses and then spent several years in a “comfort station” before escaping in 1940. **Mardiyem from Java** was 13 when she was promised the chance to take part in a theatre production in Borneo. She too was ultimately tricked and taken to a “comfort station”. **Tsai Fang Mei from Taiwan** was also 13 when Japanese soldiers abducted her. During the day she served in the barracks by cooking and cleaning; at night she was forced to serve the Japanese soldiers as a “comfort woman” in a cave in Hualian.

Shen Chung Ah Ma recounts her suffering: “I often feel that my life ended on the day I became a sexual slave.” In the following years, she often went to the mountains to cry together with a friend who had also survived the abuse, as no one was allowed to know what they were going through.

The number of affected women is difficult to ascertain, not least because the Japanese government destroyed most related documents as part of a policy of denial after the war. Yuki Tanaka, professor of history at Hiroshima University, speaks of 80,000 to 100,000 “comfort women”, which means that one “comfort woman” had to “comfort” an average of 35 soldiers. Daily. And to this day, the right-wing conservative camp in Japan claims that the “comfort women” entered the “comfort stations” voluntarily and without coercion.

More than half of the trafficked women were minors at the time of their “recruitment”. **Shen Chung Ah Ma** describes that she was so young at the time of her abduction that she did not yet know that sexual intercourse could lead to pregnancy. Many of the women experienced miscarriages or had to undergo abortions, but pregnancy did not protect against further sexual violence. After the end of the war, many of the “comfort women” were shot, while the survivors remained silent because they feared they would be disowned by their respective communities.

It was only 1990 that a transnational movement was formed, taking root in South Korea. The movement demanded justice for “comfort women” and campaigned against sexualised violence in war (The Korean Council). In 1991, the televised speech of the former “comfort woman” **Kim Hak-sun** gave the impulse for many other women to go public with their testimonies. The long silence was finally broken.

Since 1992, organised by the Korean Council, demonstrations have taken place every Wednesday in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul – and they continue to this day. The goal of the protesters? The official recognition of the “comfort women” and their suffering, which was inflicted by the Japanese army.

In 2011, the demonstrators in Seoul also got a new ally in their fight for justice: A young girl, an empty chair next to her. Her hands are clenched into fists. She should look very familiar to you. The bronze statue



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The Statue of Peace was designed by the South Korean artist couple Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung.

of peace that now supports the protesters in South Korea every Wednesday was designed by the South Korean artist couple Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung. Like the statue of peace that you are sitting next to right now, it urges us to no longer avoid confronting the past.



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 The bronze statue of peace in Seoul is an important meeting place for protesters every Wednesday.

The memories remain painful for those affected; as Kim Hak-sun describes: “Whenever I think of those times, I feel heavy in the chest, and I still feel fear.” But it is precisely these painful memories that must not be forgotten. Memories like these encourage others to tell of their suffering; memories like these must be preserved for future generations to prevent repetitions. And that is exactly what this statue wants: to be part of the culture of remembrance. A memorial to violence against women and war crimes. A monument to the fact that history cannot be covered up and voices cannot be suppressed. At least not when civil society comes together and works tirelessly to prevent it.

And precisely that is our wish: that these suppressed voices are finally heard. We share this wish with courageous activists around the world who have been working for decades to make this wish come true. Even when – especially when – an entire government is hostile to them and tries to remove all the statues of peace that have been erected. For example, since the erection of the statue of peace in Berlin in September 2020, there has been an ongoing debate about whether

it should be allowed to remain. Pressure from Japanese foreign policy has already prevented the erection of further statues of peace in other public places in Germany.

In Leipzig, too, we have been unsuccessful in getting a bronze version of the statue erected – the statue of peace you sit next to, whose stories you can listen to, **she only sits next to you today**, eager to tell her story. Don't forget about her.

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