

## Editorial

# Transnational Dynamics: The Social Activism of Korean Immigrants and Their Descendants in Germany

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Basch, Schiller, and Szanton-Blanc coined the term “transnationalism,” defining it as “the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (1994, 6). Recent scholarly perspectives view transnational migration as occurring within dynamic social contexts continually reshaped by those who are simultaneously rooted in more than one society. The spaces they occupy are intricate and diverse, encompassing not only the home and host countries but also various other global locations (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007). In this context, studies on transnationalism emphasize how migrants’ life experiences create connections between their homeland and the host country — while extending even further afield potentially (Faist 2000a, 2000b).

Despite growing scholarly attention being paid to the transnational dimensions of migrants’ social movements, conventional theories on the latter have often relied on research engaging citizens who are territorially bound within the borders of the nation-state. Meanwhile, the collective efforts of those occupying socially and politically ambiguous positions, specifically immigrants and refugees, have been largely neglected. These groups have predominately been examined within the realms of Areas Studies as well as race and ethnic research instead (Quinsaat 2013). Little academic focus has been dedicated to migrants’ activism, as mainstream theories on social movements regard these individuals as improbable participants in contentious action. This perspective stems from the perceived legal barriers, limited resources, and restricted political and discursive openings that migrants usually encounter (Steinhilper 2018). With the increasing cross-border mobility of peoples, however, scrutiny of migrants’ transnational social movements has gradually increased (e.g. Koinova 2009; Østergaard-Nielsen 2001; Quinsaat 2013; Sökefeld 2006).

Østergaard-Nielsen (2003) provides two useful categorizations vis-à-vis migrants’ collective activities: “immigrant politics” and “homeland politics.” The first primarily focuses on immigrants’ acquisition of political, social, economic, and legal rights in the host country, with the main goal being to overcome discrimination (Fox

and Rivera-Salgado 2004). In the meantime, the second framework encompasses activities aimed at advocating on, opposing, or improving the political or diplomatic situation faced in the home country. These endeavors seek to strengthen democracy as an institution and to spread related values in those locations (Itzigsohn and Villacrés 2008; Koinova 2009).<sup>1</sup>

Jost et al. (2018) explain that transnational political practices stem from either economic (instrumental) or psychological/ideational (symbolic) motives, even though it is difficult to draw a clear line between these two causes of political behavior. The instrumental perspective, based on rational-choice theory, posits that individuals engage after calculating the costs and benefits of pursuing their own interests (Oberschall 1973; Tilly 1978; Useem 1998). Migrants strive to maximize the advantages of a cultivated transnational identity by actively participating in the economic, social, and political affairs of both their host and home countries. They advocate for favorable investment schemes, tax and toll exemptions, pension plans, and child benefits. Additionally, they seek expanded avenues to exert influence on domestic politics in the homeland, including on the basis of involvement in local councils, the right to cast absentee votes, and eligibility to run as electoral candidates (Bauböck 2005; Itzigsohn 2000).

Meanwhile, drawing on the constructivist approach, the symbolic view argues that factors such as grievances, moral obligations as well as outrage, ideology, social identity, aspirations, and agency drive individuals to engage in collective action (Jost et al. 2018). In moving away from the previous notion that emotions and feelings are irrational, theories on collective action have in particular shifted their focus to ones such as sadness, anger, grievance, attachment, solidarity, and loyalty as explanations for such activism as well as the sustenance of participation therein (Goodwin and Jasper 2006; Jasper 1998). Most important here, in the context of transnational activism, is how migrants' emotional attachment to their own roots and home country has been asserted to be the main drivers of their involvement in social movements (Dhesi 2017; Lyons and Mandaville 2010; Sheffer 2003; Sökefeld 2006). Such transnational activism can be both collective (national) and personal (self-interested). Living under continued uncertainty and precarity, migrants are

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1 In addition, activities such as “long-distance nationalism” (Anderson 1992, 1998), which refers to a collection of identity assertions and behaviors linking individuals residing in different geographic areas to a particular territory they regard as their ancestral homeland (Cohen 1997; Safran 1991) or ethnic-nationalist movements (Edles 1999; Oliveira and Martins 2005), fall under the category of “homeland politics.” Østergaard-Nielsen (2003) further explains that there are three subsets of “homeland politics”: “emigrant politics,” “diasporic politics,” and “translocal politics.” Even though immigrants live away from their home country, they engage in lobbying, participate in elections, or engage in activities intended to firmly establish their social, legal, economic, and political status in the home country (Guarnizo, Portes, and Haller 2003) — which can be categorized as “emigrant politics.” The endeavors of stateless migrants, usually termed “diaspora politics” (Cohen 1997), also fall under “homeland politics.” “Translocal politics” refers to such initiatives as the promotion of regional development (and therewith empowerment) in the home country (Smith and Guarnizo 1998).

liable to be frequently exposed to injustice in their everyday lives. At the same time, those residing in a host country that strongly values “justice” are prone to form elaborate moral frameworks regarding how best to engage on social issues within the course of their day-to-day interactions (Bauböck 2009).<sup>2</sup> In addition, not only national identity but also subgroup affiliations such as those of ethnicity, race, religion, class, and indigenous culture can spur such transnational activism (Klandermans 2014).

A number of researchers have by now analyzed transnational activism via the lenses of diverse perspectives within social-movement theories. Quinsaat (2013), for instance, examines home country-oriented migrant mobilization based on the “political-process model,” looking at the dynamic interaction of political opportunities and obstacles in both sending and host countries, the reproduction of resources, and the construction of collective identity. Østergaard-Nielsen (2001) addresses the impact of different political opportunities’ availability on migrant activism in host societies. Sökefeld (2006) suggests an adaptation of various approaches in dissecting diaspora formation, such as political opportunities, mobilizing structures and practices, and issues of framing.

As illustrated above, examining the trajectory of previous research reveals that the discourse has evolved by now beyond merely introducing the specificities of immigrant transnationalism through case studies. Instead, scholars have sought to continuously explore the theoretical implications of such transnational activism. In the Korean context, a limited body of work has illuminated collective migrant activism in Australia, Europe, Japan, and the United States on various sociopolitical issues. These include: democratization (H.-o. Cho 2005; K.-E. Cho 2015; Mikyung Kim 2020); reunification (H.-Y. Kim 2008); human rights (Noh 2021; Shin and Han 2019); ethnic identity and being an ethnic minority (Park and Ito 2020); and, sexual violence (Moon 2018; Song 2013; Yoon 2018). Existing research on Korean immigrants in Germany has also focused on their participation in democratization (G.-o. Kim 2019, Myeon Kim 2013) and reunification-related movements (Myeon Kim 2007a, 2007b). Labor protests by first-generation Korean migrant nurses (Han 2017; Yang 2016; Yi 2005, 2018) have been addressed thus far, too.

This burgeoning body of work has significantly contributed to our understanding of the trajectories and ongoing development of these movements. However, much of the literature has focused on presenting empirical studies without incorporating theoretical analysis (Yi 2005). Moreover, as most existing research has, as noted, predominantly approached these movements on the basis of the nation-state

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2 Shin and Han (2019), for instance, examine Korean immigrants in Great Britain who are involved in street protests against the backdrop of the Sewol Ferry Disaster, which led to the deaths of 304 people in 2014; the concept of each individual’s “moral identity” is invoked by the two authors. In their research the latter is deemed different from “national identity,” which is based on strong emotional attachment to one’s home country (M.-J. Kim 1997; Sheffer 2003). Moral identity, contrariwise, is allegedly constructed through migrants’ encounters with social injustice in their everyday lives in the host country.

framework, the importance of adopting a transnational approach here has been emphasized more and more over time (Y. I. Lee 2010; Y. J. Lee 2015; Park 2013; Yang 2016). When it comes to the social movements of Korean immigrants in Germany, You Jae Lee (2015) maintains that this history has not been extensively examined from a transnational viewpoint because the dominant narratives have hitherto largely focused on “economic development” and “democratization,” framed within the confines of the national (the home country). This is particularly true regarding the nurses and mining workers who dispatched to Germany to support their economically disadvantaged homeland (Yi 2018).

Against this backdrop, this *ASIEN* special issue aims to analyze how “transnationalism” has manifested in the social movements of Korean migrants and how it can be specifically defined within the German context, based on four articles each covering a different issue: miner guest workers (Sang-Hui Nam); reunification (Jin-Heon Jung); comfort women (Ah-Hyun Angela Lee); and, the youth generation and newcomers (Sunyoung Park). Focus now turns to briefly identifying the main actors involved in organizing these social movements in Germany. Building on this, the following section then discusses the significance of the transnationalism underpinning migrants’ agency, emphasizing its multilayered nature and the interconnectedness of actors; powerful initiatives from below emerge herewith. These actors’ embeddedness within both home and host societies is also illuminated.

## Shedding Light on Transnational Agency

In elaborating on the transnationality of Korean migrants’ activism in the German context, it is crucial to consider which actors are involved and how they have interconnected in initiating, organizing, implementing, and popularizing such social movements. According to existing studies (Y. J. Lee 2015; Yang 2016; Yi 2005; Yoo 1996), the following are among the key protagonists here: dissidents and students; church communities; miner and nurse guest workers; migrant women; and, the descendants of first-generation migrants as well as newcomers. It is noteworthy that organizational consolidation among migrants, however, is attributed to the smaller number of university students and intellectuals who initially supported homeland politics on primarily ideational grounds (Yoo 1996, 55f.).

According to Yoo (1996), some like-minded individuals sought refuge or exile in Germany after the failure of the student movement in Korea. The self-exiled educational elite founded the Forum of Korean Students in West Germany (T’oesuhoe) in 1963, which was strongly connected with regime-critical individuals and protest groups in South Korea. The Association of Korean Residents in Germany (Chaedok haninhoe) emerged out of the Forum in 1964. Since then, the development of political self-organizations in exile can be described as path-dependent. Ones such as the Forum for the Democracy of Korea (Minju sahoe könsöl hyöbühoe, founded 1974), the Council of Korean Nationals for Democracy and National Unification in Europe (Chaeyuröp minjok minju hanin hyöbühoe, founded 1987), and the

Solidarity of Korean People in Europe (Hanminjok yuröb yöndae, founded 2001) have continuously addressed homeland politics. They have also sought to draw the German public's attention to the political situation in South Korea through fundraising campaigns, petitions, and open letters to German authorities.

Since the very beginning, church communities have played a pivotal role in the lives of Korean migrants and their sociopolitical activities (Yoo 1996). The Korean Church, which began its mission in 1964, was initially informally operated by Korean miners who had migrated to Germany through the guest-worker program and later by pastors dispatched from South Korea (Y. J. Lee 2015). Some churches not only fulfilled a religious role but also supported Korean migrants in various other fields, too. These included providing information on insurance systems, tax regulations, and labor laws; offering German language classes for workers and Korean language classes for the second generation; and, addressing topics related to the homeland (Yoo 1996).

The number of Korean churches actively involved in social movements was limited, however (Myeon Kim 2007b). Nevertheless, as part of a global religious institution, they played a distinctive role that transcended national boundaries. They were positioned to provide activists with potential access to transnational networks and, more significantly, had the capacity to overcome ideological divides. In 1979, the Overseas Korean Christian Association for National Unification (Choguk t'ongil haeoe kidokchahoe) was established, a forum bringing together reunification movements based on Christian perspectives. This organization aimed to foster dialogue between Christians from both North and South Korea, actively engaging in discussion while partly embracing socialist ideas rather than simply opposing them outright. Furthermore, in conjunction with the Korean Association for Democracy and National Unification (Minju minjok t'ongil haeoe han'gugin yönhap, founded 1977), they nurtured reunification and democratization movements through international solidarity with progressive forces in Japan and the US (Y. J. Lee 2015). Together they functioned as a new driving force for the reunification movement, forming networks within and between churches and Koreans based in Europe (Myeon Kim 2007b). They established global networks with the Korean diaspora as well, creating personnel, ideological, and organizational connections across countries.

Meanwhile, Korean miner guest workers in Germany, despite their limited right to remain, would increasingly voice their opposition to discrimination and mistreatment by employers and supervisors. When complaints or conflicts arose, the first authority that they turned to was the Korean Embassy. However, as it became evident that government officials tended to prioritize maintaining the status quo over addressing these issues, a form of "activism from below" emerged, bringing attention to problems regarding working conditions in the host society. It aligned with the work of church communities and political activists. The church communities were not only linked to sociopolitical movements but also involved in

miners' religious and daily lives. Their advocacy efforts received moral support and practical assistance from like-minded German students, citizens, and institutions, reflecting the influence of the 1968 student movement (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung et al. 2016). Consequently, student associations, church organizations, and German institutions — including intellectuals and politicians — came together in support of these miners. Through these collective efforts, guest workers, who would become increasingly aware of the political ideas espoused by dissidents and intellectuals, were ultimately drawn into the activities of democracy movements finding momentum among the Korean diaspora. That is not to say, however, that all of these miners shared a common political orientation and participated in such activism.

The miners and nurses dispatched to Germany have often been viewed by the Korean public (as well as in the literature) as a singular group of guest workers. However, their paths diverged significantly concerning protest actions and movements. Collective activism among Korean nurses began with legal efforts aimed at securing the right to remain in Germany in the late 1970s after their permission to stay had eventually expired. At the center of this campaign stood the Korean Women's Group in Germany (Chaedok han'guk yōsōng moim), which split from the Forum for the Democracy of Korea in 1978 shortly before these collective endeavors began. This marked a significant moment given its articulation of nurses' interests, as differing from those of miners. These nurses reached out to the host country's citizens for support regarding their petitions, and thanks to the rise of feminism as a prominent norm in Germany at that time their efforts resonated positively with the wider populace.

Members of the Korean Women's Group in Germany, having achieved the right to stay in 1978, continued to emphasize women's rights thereafter. The Korean Women's Group sought to maintain close connections with civil society both in Germany and in the home country. Through seminars and projects focused on gender equality, they aimed to raise awareness of women's issues and expand their network via collaboration with other migrant organizations. Notably, the Korean Women's Group established commonality with the Japanese Women's Group in Germany by taking the initiative on studying and publicizing the "comfort women" issue in the mid-1990s. In addressing this issue, they distanced themselves from a nationalistic framework based on the historical confrontation between Korea and Japan. Adopted instead was a more universal perspective that framed the issue as one of wartime sexual violence, thereby facilitating support from German and other migrant groups.

The Korea Association (Korea Verband), founded in Germany in 1996 as part of Asia House (Asienhaus)<sup>3</sup>, has focused on advocating for the rights of Korean

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3 Asia House was founded in 1992 under the name "Asia Foundation." Its founder, Dr. Günter Freudenberg, along with several associations working in Asia joined together in Essen to subsequently form Asia House in 1995, relocating its predecessor's headquarters to Cologne. Its aim is to commit to the realization of human rights, the strengthening of social and political participation, as well as to pursue social justice and environmental protection (see: [www.asienhaus.de](http://www.asienhaus.de)).

migrants as residents and citizens of the European country. Alongside the Korean Women's Group, the Korea Association also addressed the issue of comfort women, launching a project to erect the so-called Statue of Peace — a symbolic monument commemorating these comfort women in a public space in Berlin. This followed similar initiatives in Japan, South Korea, and the US. To achieve this goal, the Association took the lead vis-à-vis exerting political pressure on Berlin's local and municipal governments. Through seminars, projects, demonstrations, and publications, the activists engaged the German public, mobilizing a broad spectrum of civic groups both domestically and internationally. With the support of civic groups, labor unions, and other migrant organizations, they successfully obtained government approval for the statue's installation, marking a significant achievement — albeit one only temporary (2020 to 2024) — as the monument is still considered an art exhibition rather than being officially recognized as a universal memorial against sexual violence. However, this accomplishment not only underscores the recognition of Korean migrants as legitimate residents but also integrates their history into the broader narrative and values of German society at large.

The transition with time from the first to the second generation significantly impacted self-organizations within the Korean migrant community. Rather than reforming existing entities primarily composed of first-generation immigrants, the latter's children foregrounded their identity as “the second generation” based on a shared migrant experience in Germany. A significant factor contributing to this shift would be the establishment of their own online public sphere, characterized by a high proficiency in languages other than Korean. Although the first generation primarily created Internet platforms in the latter, thus forming “ethnic colonies” (Häußermann 2007), new groups now communicate digitally in German and English, enhancing their mobilization and participation.

In 2008, a group of young Korean migrants, primarily from the second generation, founded *KorIENTATION e.V.* This organization quickly evolved into a platform for Asian immigrants more widely, particularly those from Vietnam. Its objective — “to consciously and visibly represent the diverse realities of life in Germany, thereby contributing to the fight against racism”<sup>4</sup> — reflects *KorIENTATION's* commitment to civil society while distancing itself from “group particularism” (Münch 2002). Within German society, migrants from Asia are often categorized as merely “Asian” rather than by their specific ethnicities, such as Korean or Vietnamese, fostering a sense of solidarity among those concerned. This has led to new activities, such as participation in memorials commemorating the victims of racist violence, including the pogrom in Solingen in the early 1990s (Ha 2021).

In parallel with *KorIENTATION*, the group #MeTooKorea emerged in 2019 under the influence of the #MeToo movement in the US. Initially focused on ethnic issues, it evolved into *Metoo Asians e.V.*, addressing the broader concerns of Asian

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4 See: [www.kororientation.de](http://www.kororientation.de).

immigrants. One notable initiative was the boycott movement in 2019 against Hornbach, one of the leading DIY store chains in Germany, triggered by a sexist and discriminatory advertisement featuring an Asian-looking woman. Social media played a crucial role in facilitating both a local on-site demonstration and an international petition. The second generation has creatively forged a hybrid identity also as Asian immigrants in Germany, shaped by their experiencing of discrimination within mainstream society. This shift signifies a form of “residence country-directed transnationalism,” one distancing itself from a “homeland orientation.” *Korientation*’s and *Metoo Asians*’ initiatives are indicative of a “post-migrant alliance” (Schramm 2023) within an emerging “post-migrant society” (Foroutan 2022).

Despite apparent disruption between the self-organization of the first and second generations, however, recent developments suggest a promising collaboration is arising. The Korea Association plays a mediating role here, maintaining continuity while forming alliances with new groups on specific issues. In 2021, the Association signed an open letter against anti-Asian racism, as initiated by *Korientation* and other organizations further to being supported by *Metoo Asians* during their 2019 boycott movement. Collaborative action, such as the erection of the Statue of Peace in 2020, exemplify intergenerational cooperation on advocating for human rights.

## **Understanding the Transnationalism of Korean Migrants’ Activism in Germany**

Having identified the various actors involved, we now turn to the question of how exactly transnationalism manifests in the German context. This discussion will provide important insights for developing theories of transnationalism within the growing corpus of works on Korean migrants’ activism and social movements.

### **Protagonists**

Most significantly, identifying the main actors involved is to highlight how the social movements in which Korean immigrants in Germany have participated are reflective of a “transnationalism from below” (Smith and Guarnizo 1998). Kögneter and Smith (2015) argue that to take a transnationalism perspective is to emphasize the need to transcend nation-state polices and focus on the agency of migrants specifically — namely on the “daily lives, activities, and social relationships of migrants” (Basch, Schiller, and Szanton-Blanc 1994, 5). As illustrated above, the primary actors involved here include students, churches, migrant workers, their descendants, as well as newcomers. Acknowledging these leading figures and their interconnectedness is a valuable first step toward understanding the complex trajectories of Korean immigrants in Germany. Moreover, the role of the state in Korean migration history has disproportionately featured hereto given that earlier waves of labor migration to Germany were largely state-led initiatives; this is a further reason why the examination of particular individuals is a necessary corrective.



Next, introducing such a perspective should serve to enhance our understanding of the multilayered sociopolitical and historical spaces that the transnationalism informing migrants' everyday lives creates (Y. J. Lee 2015). For instance, the political incident (Dongbaeklim incident)<sup>5</sup> of 1967 illustrates how Koreans abducted in the capital were prosecuted under South Korea's Anti-Communist Law rather than West German criminal law. Furthermore, these individuals operated across Europe and globally; their networks and organizations, transcending ideologies of democracy and socialism, exchanged personnel, information, and resources internationally. Basch, Schiller, and Szanton-Blanc clarify how "transmigrants develop and maintain multiple relations — familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political — that span borders. Transmigrants take actions, make decisions, and express concerns, developing identities within social networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously" (1994, 2). Relatedly, analyzing matters from a transnational point of view facilitates our improved understanding of the "complex and manifold interconnections of various actors operating within or between different 'scales': community, local, regional, and global" (Kögneter and Smith 2015, 17). Thus, examining the transnational nature of sociopolitical activism within the Korean community in Germany is to refute a zero-sum-game relationship existing among these individuals' different identities exclusively. Instead, they navigate fluid boundaries while embodying multiple selves.

### **Situating Agency Between Home and Host Societies**

Migrants' political activities are significantly shaped by contextual factors in the host country (Quinsaat 2019; Voicu 2014), while closely corresponding with the situation in the homeland as well. Examining the diffusion and transplantation of the Kurdish separatist movement onto German soil, Lyon and Uçarer (2001) highlight how Germany's liberal democratic institutional structures provided material and ideological resources for mobilization. Similarly, Sökefeld (2006) argues that Germany's multicultural discourse portrayed immigration and the resulting pluralism as positive developments, helping counter increasing racism toward foreigners (Ausländer).

When looking at Germany's influence on Korean migrants' social activism, as discussed earlier, it is noteworthy that civic organizations, politicians, and political parties all supported the latter's collective democracy-promoting efforts as well as women's movements. The political climate, as strongly shaped by the 1968 student movement, was very conducive to this (Yi 2018). When it comes to reunification, Korean migrants have integrated lessons from Germany's own history into their

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5 This refers to a significant event involving South Korean nationals in West Germany and West Berlin during the Cold War era. In July 1967, agents from the Korean Central Intelligence Agency abducted several South Korean students and intellectuals who were critical of their native government and had sought a safe place in West Germany.

related endeavors. The firsthand observation of cultural agreements and peacekeeping efforts between East and West Germans during the global détente of the late 1980s, alongside events in Eastern Europe, sparked Korean migrants' own aspirations to steer their homeland's fate, giving significant impetus to reunification attempts (Myeon Kim 2013). At a time when it was divided into East Germany and West Germany, each maintaining diplomatic relations with North Korea and South Korea respectively, the European country was ideologically relatively open, facilitating active engagement by left- and right-wing factions alike and enabling exchange with both Koreas.

The German authorities, by remaining impartial in their interactions with both North Korea and South Korea, provided a regional platform enabling migrant organizations to act as intermediaries between the two. Geographically positioned at the heart of Europe, Germany also played a bridging role connecting reunification movements developed by overseas Korean communities elsewhere — such as in Japan and the US. Furthermore, Germany's local political parties and civil organizations collaborated to promote Korean reunification (Myeon Kim 2007b). At the same time, Gwi-ok Kim (2019) suggests that Germany's physical reunification through the Berlin Wall's fall in 1989 (followed by political reunification a year later) prompted these migrants to view their homeland not as an irreversibly divided Korean Peninsula but as a space where future connections were still conceivable.

However, supportive attitudes on the part of the host society toward such activism were not the only dynamics in play; restrictive policies and exclusionary social norms were also in currency. Østergaard-Nielsen (2001) points out the different immigration policies of Germany and the Netherlands up until the 2000s, noting that in Germany, political opportunities were constrained due to exclusionary migration policies. She critically analyzes how its policies limited immigrants' political activity, contrasting for example with the Netherlands where such social movements have flourished. Conversely, Kaya (1998) demonstrates how Germany's policies and cultural rejection of immigrants paradoxically fostered multiculturalism, creating fertile ground for “minoritized” ethnic Alevis from Turkey to self-organize. In the same vein, given such restrictive migration policies and unjust treatment of the early 2000s, second-generation Korean immigrants have come together to address the issues faced by Asian residents in Germany more broadly, challenging therewith discrimination and advocating for equal rights for all.

Through her oral history of first-generation Korean immigrants to Germany, Yi (2005) argues that their diverse social and political experiences as workers became a sizeable life task each interlocutor had to continuously grapple with. She points out that these encounters were crucial for subsequent social movements' emergence on the scene and for shaping new political orientations in Germany. Each person spoken with recounted their activism in Germany being based on different events in Korea, such as political persecution, class-based discrimination, and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. They reinterpreted these past experiences in the

context of the host society and brought the insight they gained back home, too. For instance, Korean residents in Germany, benefiting from favorable conditions that allowed them to advance various organizational activities among compatriots overseas related to the issue of reunification, transferred their initiatives back to the Peninsula, even during times when such discussions were impossible within Korea due to ideological constraints. From this perspective, although their visible life worlds transition from the sending to the receiving country, the political activities developed during this process reveal a flowing back to Korea from Germany. Yi (2005) further argues that this phenomenon does not see unilateral dissemination from a politically advanced country to a less advanced one; rather, it is characterized by reflection on and the mediation of the involved actors' accumulated life experiences and insights.

Overall, incorporating transnationalism into the discussion of sociopolitical activism aims to explore the connections emerging between the histories of both home and host countries. This necessitates embracing these actors' embeddedness in a changing historical context. At the same time, what this discussion indicates is that while each protagonist is situated within both the host and the home society, the uniqueness of each setting can act as a catalyst when it comes to shaping motives and organizing social movements in a bidirectional, rather than unidirectional, manner.

## Concluding Remarks

In this special issue, the discussion of Korean migrants' social activism in Germany is approached through the lens of "transnationalism" — namely that of "agency" or the interconnected political and historical spaces existing between Korea and Germany. Notably, across the four articles that follow, it is commonly acknowledged that what is required here is to move beyond the previously dominant nation-state framework in embracing transnationalism and all it connotes. Against this backdrop, the following aspects are to be considered of key relevance:

First, it is crucial to understand transnationalism within migrant-driven social activism and to contextualize the environments these individuals inhabit on the basis of it. Focus should go beyond whether such activism transcends national borders. Highlighted, then, is how "social remittances" (Levitt 1998, 2001) — as encompassing social norms, beliefs, and ideologies — do not flow unilaterally from "core" to "periphery" but rather move bi- or multi-directionally, serving as catalysts for related social movements. The special issue underscores that Korean migrants engaged in social activism must overcome any nationalist sentiments and embrace instead the multifaceted and multidimensional nature of life beyond particular borders. This involves recognizing these individuals as social agents and "scattered hegemonies," with dichotomies such as "core-periphery," "global-national," and "national-local" being of reduced relevance (Grewal and Kaplan 1994).

Second, it is vital to contextualize agency within relational, historical, and temporal environments, emphasizing therewith social embeddedness rather than viewing involvement in such movements as something static (Köngeter and Smith 2015). Korean immigrants' social activism has diversified and evolved over time in response to changes in their demographic and sociopolitical conditions, collective consciousness, and the host country's policies. With regard to the shifting contours of identity and feelings of solidarity, third, the question arises as to what extent "Korean" is a valid and useful label to invoke in studies on such migrant activism. Adamson and Demetriou (2007), meanwhile, define "diaspora" as a social collective that transcends national borders and helps maintain a shared national, cultural, and/or religious identity over time through internal cohesion and enduring connections with a tangible or imagined homeland. Diasporas are not homogenous; they include diverse individuals and subgroups spanning multiple migration waves and generations. Not all immigrant groups share the same political and social perspectives (Koinova 2009). Unlike the first generation's strong nationalist inclinations, subsequent ones may not feel part of a diaspora (Bauböck and Faist 2010). Ang (2003) elaborates how the term "diaspora" encapsulates asserting one's distinctiveness and transforming it into symbolic capital. However, this assertion of distinctiveness is paradoxical, given group membership is based on an "imagined community" of those sharing core ethnic characteristics. The same author further demonstrates that "diaspora" serves as a locus for grappling with identity and belonging, embodying support and oppression, emancipation and confinement, solidarity and division.

This special issue examines the various dimensions of transnational agency, focusing on Korean immigrants in Germany and shedding light on their interactions, multilayered identities, and respective historical contexts. In this regard, established are the theoretical foundations for broadening the angle taken from a national to a transnational viewpoint. Although the interconnectedness of protagonists will be discussed, some desiderata still remain. First, further exploration than is possible here of how such interactions have shaped *the* Korean diaspora. Second, the boundaries and the nature of this diaspora. For this, attention should be paid henceforth to how dynamic changes in the composition and migration patterns of the diaspora intersect with the construction of a collective identity. This key aspect needs to be further scrutinized by scholars going forward.

## Note

All Korean words have been Romanized using the McCune-Reischauer system.

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