

Research note

The Cosmopolitization of Remembrance — The Kwangju Uprising and the UNESCO “Memory of the World” Register

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Summary

The Kwangju Uprising of May 1980 represents an important turning point in South Korea's contemporary history, as it played a decisive role in the subsequent democratization of the country. Despite the numerous studies done on the uprising, however, there has nonetheless rarely been any research conducted either on how it has been commemorated or on the development of remembrance discourses around it. This article thus focuses in particular on how to understand and explain the now apparent increasing urge to connect this uprising to incidents elsewhere in time and space, such as the Holocaust, and to protest movements in other countries, such as Argentina, Chile, and South Africa. Based on a single pilot case study of the process of inscribing the Kwangju Uprising into the UNESCO “Memory of the World,” the article develops a preliminary analytic framework wherein the phenomenon is explained as the “cosmopolitization of remembrance.” Actors with a stake in the remembrance of the uprising pursue a strategy of leveraging legitimacy by invoking globally accepted norms, doing so in order to promote their own take on the still highly contested interpretation of the Kwangju Uprising.

Manuscript received on 2014-08-25, accepted on 2014-10-08

Keywords: cosmopolitization, glocalization, democratization, Kwangju Uprising, remembrance discourse, UNESCO Memory of the World

Introduction

How does the cosmopolitization of remembrance work? According to the “cosmopolitization thesis” (Beck et al. 2004; Levy and Sznajder 2001; Levy 2010), collective memories are no longer confined to national societies but are instead increasingly “glocalized” through processes of interpenetration between global and local remembrance practices and discourses. This article elucidates the phenomenon

* The author wishes to express his appreciation to the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and suggestions on the submitted draft of the paper. He would also like to thank Eun-Jeung Lee and Brooks Jessup for reading through earlier versions of the article and for offering useful suggestions. He also thanks this journal's copy editor for his professional support. The work on this paper was supported by the Academy of Korean Studies of the Republic of Korea [AKS-2014-OLU-2250001].