

POLICY FORUM

Bound by History: Asia's Enduring Past

Introduction

History and Memory in the Raw

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History and memory are very much in the raw throughout Asia today. In Seoul, Taipei, and Tokyo, collective memories of particular national pasts are threading themselves into actions taking place on the streets and in parliament, which are themselves making history. The process underscores the power of some historical events to shape national identity and compels a realization that history is more than just background music to the present.

To some, it may seem an obvious reminder that memory and history are different, however intangible or inert each is to the present. Yet, when memory stands in for history, a collective perception of the past can obstruct pressing economic and security concerns. In some cases, denying events in history and whitewashing at the highest levels can lead to sanctions and sail-bys. As Russian historian Nikolay Kaposov pithily explains, “The difference between a memory war and a history war is that memory wars can cause shooting wars.”

In this light, the speed with which popular invocation of specific histories appears to cause social chaos or cohesion makes it more important than ever for policymakers to grapple with the fundamental reasons why particular events hold such sway. If they fail to confront deeply troubling pasts, certain memories may become ever more potent weapons of differentiation and politicization rather than a means to building a more productive future.

History, Memory, and Social Division in Democratic Asia

In the capitals of Asia's most open societies—South Korea and Japan—there is greater social division today over the future course of each country than at any other time in recent memory. In Seoul, an uneasy public has taken to the streets every week to hold candlelight protests. Beginning in October 2016, hundreds of thousands of people (totaling more than ten million by 31 December 2016) have routinely and peacefully filled the downtown areas of cities throughout the country to call for the impeachment

of President Park Geun-hye. By contrast, in Tokyo, the massive, peaceful protests in the summer of 2015 have now taken a quieter but no less potent form during parliamentary debate over possible revisions to the nation's constitution—especially its famous war-renouncing clause, Article 9.

Ironically, in many ways the divisions in both societies squarely center on collective understandings of the history that define each nation for a majority of its citizens. For South Koreans, the first achievement of accountable democratic governance beginning in 1987 currently propels citizens of all political persuasions to demand an end to cronyism and elite privilege, with stated awareness that domestic and international policies—like them or not—be answerable to the South Korean people. For the Japanese, the majority's commitment to the nation's pacifist international posture is at stark odds with the current administration's determination to rid Japan of the American imposed "masochistic" postwar, 1945 system (in its leadership's words).

Looking at a regional neighborhood armed with nuclear weapons and outsized bellicose ambitions, many Washington thinkers may sigh at the news of South Korea's Saturday night candle marches, and of Japanese college students and academics armed with hip hop anti-war songs and speeches: "Why can't they just get on with it?" Yet, taking seriously the issues that inform these historical moments in the making—especially collective notions about "who we are as a people" based on respective historical experience—will likely guide the success or failure of future U.S. policy towards Asia.

The Candlelight Revolution: "Towards A Country of Equal Opportunity"

To consider the memory and history at play now in Seoul, a key aspect lies in the issue that initially gave traction to the ongoing protests. In the broadest strokes, "regular" South Koreans—some of whom were jailed during the dictatorship era, including under President Park's father, Park Chung-hee, but who overwhelmingly are citizens of a democratic state and work extremely long hours for middle class existences—took one look at the contours of an all too familiar corruption scandal and said, "Enough!" On the one hand, the known money involved in this current event—roughly \$69 million—is not much in the context of South Korea's past. For example, in 1965, President Park Chung-hee received \$800 million in "economic cooperation" money from the Japanese government in lieu of formal compensation for brutalities that Koreans suffered during the era of colonial occupation, which he transferred not to victims but to the Pohang Iron and Steel Company. In 2001, President Kim Dae-jung apparently paid \$500 million to North Korean leader Kim Jong-il to hold a summit. On the other hand, President Park Geun-hye's distinguishing feature thus far had been her supposedly clean slate in regards to corruption. The country's constitutional court is now hearing abundant evidence to the contrary; worse still has been the president's entirely aloof response to the charges. The tawdry details of the consumptive excesses that surround others involved in the scandal—horseback riding, vacation houses, luxury cars—further fuel the fires of discontent.

In short, the lived memory and ongoing reality of social inequality in South Korea have

turned into a truly historical event. In a country still haunted by its recent past of violent domestic upheaval, including internationally famous moments such as the 1980 Gwangju uprising as well as the less televised but constantly occurring democracy demonstrations from 1960 through the mid-1990s, entirely non-violent mass protests resulted in a parliamentary motion to impeach a democratically elected president. The date of the landslide impeachment vote, 9 December 2016, became immediately historicized as the “Candlelight Revolution.” It sprang from the collective realization that if you were not richly connected you *still* could not “get in” to society; worse, your kids could not “get in” no matter how hard you worked.

Informed by the memory of tear gas and police truncheons that defined much of their country’s post-Korean War era of division, the recent demonstrations remain largely “pro-Korean” and in the present tense—no burning of American flags and scant denunciation of Japanese imperialism. Small children attend with their parents and secondary school students in uniform willingly state their names to television cameras to explain that they are out on the streets to make it possible for everyone to have a chance in South Korea. One of the more popular protest placards reads, “Towards A Country of Equal Opportunity.”



Photograph by the author in December 2016 in Seoul, Korea. The signs read, “Towards a country of equal opportunity.”

The direction of this historical moment is unpredictable, especially in the coming months as rival politicians refashion core policies such as economic distribution, educational objectives, and diplomatic relations with Japan, the United States, China, and (most importantly) North Korea. Key, though, is how a general history of inequality—lived for many in memory and in ongoing reality—shapes the particular history unfolding in South Korea today.

Pacifism and Identity in a New Political Era

Matters are a little different in Tokyo. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his administration enjoy strong popular support for its economic promises, regardless of their efficacy. Common to the global nationalist moment of Donald Trump supporters and “Brexiters,” many Japanese seem pleased simply to hear Abe promise to “take back Japan.”

Nonetheless, a majority of Japanese differs significantly on the issue of transforming Japan’s constitution, particularly regarding the matter of dispatching Japanese troops to fight in wars beyond Japan’s borders. Throughout the summer of 2015 and for the first time in more than fifty years, Japanese citizens of all ages poured onto the streets in regular protest. They began in groups of several hundred and culminated in a demonstration of more than 100,000 on the eve of a highly contentious vote concerning new security legislation. That moment is forever recorded in photographs on front pages around the world of a fist-fighting melee inside parliament while tens of thousands stood outside in the rain shouting, “No way! No war!” Theoretically, regional tensions with North Korea and China could boost public support for changing Article 9, yet popular opposition continues to make clear that most Japanese do not want to revise the constitution in such a manner. An October 2016 Kyodo News survey found that 55 percent of Japanese respondents are opposed to constitutional revision under the Abe administration, with 49 percent stating specifically that there is no need to change the antiwar article, and 45 percent seeing the need to discuss ways to modernize Article 9 but not scrap it.¹

Of paramount concern is that most Japanese view their nation’s nonmilitary outlook as essential to their national identity, a present reality that stems from a socially inculcated awareness of the horror that war entails. Albeit to the dismay of many outside Japan, this sentiment does not necessarily take the form of a direct apology for Japanese aggressions in Asia during the 1930s and 1940s—let alone for its colonies in Asia—but rather manifests in a commitment to a future without war, or, at least, a future in which Japanese are not causing war. Thus, the significant resistance to the Abe administration’s proposed changes to Japan’s renunciation of war as a sovereign right is best seen through a historical prism, not through a security lens. For one, a majority of Japanese legal experts, including professional organizations such as the Japanese Bar Association, regard the nation’s recently enacted security legislation as unconstitutional and publicly oppose it. A new political party called the *Minshintō* appeared in March 2016—through the merger of the nation’s two largest opposition parties—with the primary goal of rescinding these bills, which came about in a manner designed to obviate the need for constitutional change. Moreover, a host of lawsuits that challenge the constitutionality of these new laws are currently underway against the Japanese government. Together these lawsuits—and others in the works—represent a profound

¹ “Majority against constitutional changes while Abe in office: poll,” *The Japan Times*, 29 October 2016, Internet, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/10/29/national/majority-constitutional-changes-abe-office-poll> (date accessed: 29 January 2017).

social understanding shared by politicians and policy planners in the opposition parties that the right *not* to wage war is axiomatic to the definition of Japan.

The multiple valences of Japan's internal divide could lead to a collective failure—on the part of the U.S., Japan, South Korea, China, and the international community—to understand the country's national memory. Japan's total war in the Asia-Pacific region in the 1930s and 1940s as well as the history of the past three generations *not* waging war is foundational to its present, historical moment. Results could range from the unintentional encouragement of unwarranted, regionally destabilizing militarist impulses at one end of the spectrum to an equally unintentional encouragement of anti-American sentiment at the other. Both outcomes are contrary to U.S. security interests.

Singular Memories, Collective Consideration

The essays in the following pages highlight similarly contoured and related tensions throughout Asia. From Mongolia's national embrace of historical warlord Chinggis Khan to purge the nation of its Soviet-era imprimatur to a consideration of Sri Lanka's efforts to ease Tamil separatism, a common theme emerges throughout this volume. Masamichi Inoue expresses this theme best in his quotation of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's understanding of the multitude: "singularities that act in common." As such, through a wide range of examples from North and Southeast Asia, this lucid collection brings into relief how particular and often individual memories come to shape a collective consciousness, drawing on historical events which live for that multitude into the present. Each of these brief studies introduces significant "singularities" that merit thoughtful consideration as we collectively chart new territory in Asia today. If South Korea and Japan currently stand as a measure of the moment, it is clear that certain histories are at once living realities, as well as deeply entrenched common memory.

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