

History and Memory Issues in Europe and Asia: Acknowledging Similarities for a Better Understanding of Contemporary Tensions

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In 1989, Francis Fukuyama wrote his famous essay “The End of History?” Since then however, history and memory issues have become more important and have acquired a greater sense of urgency. These issues have become major matters of debate when examining the critical question of the use of history and the role of memory in post-colonial identity constructions and contemporary power games, with a strong linkage between internal politics and external strategies.

Similar Debates, Different Factors

In France: Between the Necessary Acceptance of Past Deeds and the Rejection of Non-Debatable Narratives

In Europe, two perspectives must be distinguished concerning the debates on history. The first one is that of intra-European relations, defined by centuries of conflicts and massacres. The two world wars of the twentieth century, with their aberrant ideologies and the mass targeting of civilian populations culminating in racial extermination marked—until today—the pinnacle of such a violent history. This traumatic experience also led to a determination to avoid future wars and to erase all sources of tensions, including history. The second dimension is that of the colonial past of European powers, and the relatively recent recognition of the need to take this past into account, in relation to migration and identity issues.

This debate is particularly significant in France, where more than 80% of the immigrant population comes from former colonies in the Maghreb, with the highest number from Algeria where the decolonization was the most traumatic on both sides. This situation raises the question of reconciliation in much more complex terms than with Germany, the usual model invoked. In the French case, the debate is focused not just on difficult issues related to a controversial colonial past and decolonization process, but also on integration and identity-building among second or third-generation immigrants.

The growing attention given to former victims’ narratives and claims emerged from both the reality of the colonial past and from contemporary social tensions, while at the same time becoming an important element of these tensions.

The use of history by some groups to assert their identity and increase their influence also poses a challenge for the historian, who may be asked to “clarify” his position on the basis of moral grounds rather than historical research. The adoption of “memorial laws” by the French Parliament was a direct consequence of these debates and was intended to impose an official version of history, in order to acknowledge past wrongs in the name of very contemporary political and social issues.

Perfect objectivity in history is illusory, but historical research is based on facts and archival work. Historical research can be used to support memory claims, but it also exists to avoid the possibility of completely distorting history. However, in many countries, history, more than science, has been for years the source of national narratives. It remains, in undemocratic or fragile countries with a poor sense of legitimacy, an instrument at the service of internal politics

and external strategies.

In Asia: A Focus on Japan Based on Strategic Rivalries

In Asia, similar issues related to history do exist, but the debate is more focused on the role of Japan as a colonial power and an aggressor during the Second World War, and far less on the legacies of this colonial past in contemporary Japanese society. The internal political dimension of the debate in Japan, despite the strong presence of a Korean and Chinese minority, is far less significant than in Europe, where factors such as demography and economic difficulties are omnipresent.¹

In the Asia-Pacific, the strategic dimension remains the dominant factor. The reactivation of tensions linked to history is a sign of more profound rivalries in an unstable strategic framework. Questions of history are directly related to contemporary international relations. For the People's Republic of China (PRC), one of the major powers in the region, historical issues constitute an essential instrument for asserting its ambitions based on "historical claims," nourishing strategic competition, and increasing ideological legitimacy.

At the military strategy level, historical issues for the PRC are also a significant element of its offensive "information war" that can be particularly effective to degrade the image of Japan among other democracies.

Controversial historical issues in former colonial powers in Europe are not that different from the situation in Asia, where Japan followed the colonial and imperial models of Western powers after the Meiji Restoration.² However, a lack of knowledge of the Asian context among historians, politicians and media in Europe, and the lack of awareness of the strong similarities among the behaviors of former colonial powers—be it Imperial Japan, the British Empire or the French Republic—make it more difficult to understand the logic behind the official narratives used by some countries to achieve purposes not related to history.

Despite the European experience of the Cold War and the propaganda war with the Soviet Union and its allies, the similarities are not understood, and it is still often the Chinese - or Korean - narratives that prevail, failing to maintain a critical distance, that should not be confused with a denial of historical crimes.

Japan's ties with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy during the war, a lack of knowledge of post-war developments in Japan (apart from its close alliance with the United States, which was also used during the Cold War to build images of resurgent militarism) and the sometimes awkwardness of Japanese public diplomacy on sensitive issues explain this state of affairs.

Complexity versus Oversimplification

However, ignorance is mutual. In Asia, the idealized model of Franco-German reconciliation remains the primary reference, when in fact it is probably the least relevant and ill-adapted to the current tensions that have emerged around the role of China in East Asia.

The common point of history and memory issues in Europe and Asia is their complexity. The main challenge for Europe looking at Asia, as well as Asia observing the "European model," is to be aware of this complexity.

At first sight, historical issues related to colonialism and imperialism only concern the European powers and Japan. However, the first layer of complexity lies in the fact that colonization and issues related to it could be perceived differently according to the situation of the countries

¹ The proportion of foreigners in Japan, including second or third-generation Koreans, is less than 2%; whereas in some European countries, including France, the percentage is above 10%. The figure does not include French nationals whose parents are of immigrant origin.

² The Meiji Restoration began in 1868.

concerned. Thus, in Southeast Asia, the Japanese colonizer sometimes initially appeared as an “emancipator” with respect to Western colonial powers, helping to build or revive national identities. At a more uncomfortable level, the case of elite collaboration with colonial powers is another factor that still resonates today, particularly in countries such as South Korea.

However, complexity also results from the fact that other actors come into play, who are less mentioned despite the significant influence they still play in contemporary international relations. In Asia, this is the case of China, whose slogan of “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (中国民族大复兴) evolved in direct reference to the “century of humiliatio” (百年国耻) that China suffered from the first Opium war to the communist victory in 1949. However, this slogan also relates to the ambition of today’s Chinese regime to re-establish China as the leading power in East Asia, using ancient concepts such as 天下 (all under Heaven), 大國小國 (big and small powers) or 和諧 (harmony) as ways to achieve that ambition. Meanwhile, China denies any expansionism on its part, despite the fact that its contemporary territorial claims and definition of “core interests” (核心的利益) are an expansion of what was considered to constitute “China proper”, based on the last Qing Manchu dynasty’s claims to control Tibet, Xinjiang and Mongolia.

Outside of China, Vietnam suffered French colonization, but the memory of Chinese domination over North Vietnam, which extended from 111 to 938 and then briefly again under the Ming Dynasty, remains present today. Similarly, in Korea, the Manchu protectorate, under the so-called “tributary” system, remained in place from the seventeenth century until the Chinese defeat during the first Sino-Japanese war of 1894-1895, which ended with the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki that liberated Korea from the Qing control.³

The Role of Witnesses in Asia and Europe: A Question of Legitimacy-Building

Another level of complexity comes from the role played by witnesses in contemporary historical tensions. The legitimacy of witnesses in history comes from the European model, in which testimony of Holocaust survivors that was initially not fully recognized, particularly in France, became essential in fighting the influence of anti-Semitic Holocaust deniers who became more vocal during the 1980s and 1990s.

However, in the Asian context, and this is a complex issue, some witnesses’ initiatives, while seeking legitimacy in the European model and references to the Shoah, were less related to the need to testify about the past than to the role played by organizations initiated or influenced by states or political movements. As shown in some famous cases, these witnesses became—consciously or not—the players in a game that, in Asia, encompasses much more than historical issues.

This was the case in Japan with soldiers of the former Imperial army whose testimonies, sometimes reconstructed, were taken up by the liberal press and the pacifist movements in the context of the Cold War.⁴ The same is true of the “comfort women,” who, for some of them, taking into account their undeniable sufferings as sexually exploited women, have also become militant actors in a cause directly related to contemporary political issues, particularly in South Korea.

In these cases, the complexity of the issues at stake is magnified by the strategy of states that control historical narratives so that they contribute to the legitimacy of the political regime and prevent any questioning of the official line.

At another level, and regardless of the country, the decision to open archives and make them available is never totally neutral, and is also part of political or geopolitical objectives that can

³ Korea then became prey of Russian and then Japanese ambitions and influence, leading to the 1905 Russo-Japanese war.

⁴ This is for instance the case of Seiji Yoshida, a former soldier of the Imperial army, who testified how he abducted dozens of women in Jeju, Korea. The information was published by the Asahi Shimbun in 1982, and then retracted in 2014 after Yoshida admitted that he had fabricated it.

evolve in time. After the First World War, the opening of diplomatic archives by the Allied Powers was intended to demonstrate their lack of responsibility in starting the war. Territorial issues in Asia are also the subject of archival confrontations involving contemporary state entities as well as former colonial powers.

Political Regime and Political Will: The Conditions for Reconciliation

Despite the complexity of the issues at stake, a few factors do play a major role in the reconciliation process. The first factor, whatever the historical facts, is the democratic nature of the political system in place and its degree of openness. A high degree of freedom of access to sources for both domestic and foreign historians, free debate, and limited political interference in historical debates are conditions that facilitate reconciliation and the sincere and long term recognition of a former adversary's "repentance". In democracies, the desire for reconciliation as a basis for positive international relations, an awareness of the risks of manipulating history, as well as the existence of check and balances, create conditions for a dialogue that can lead to the elaboration of a shared history.

In non-democratic states, renouncing the instrumentalization of history can also be a tactical choice, serving broader issues. This is the case of China where, in the 1970s, Mao Zedong and then Deng Xiaoping chose not to raise the issue of past historical tensions to reach a rapid agreement with Japan. The political context in the PRC at that time, as well as the Sino-Soviet conflict, played a role in that decision. For the communist regime, issues such as the "Nanking Massacre," which took place in the capital of the nationalist government during the war, were not relevant and did not fit into a narrative where the communist party was presented as the sole active combatant against Japan.

In other situations, as in the case of Eastern European countries eager to join the European Union after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the evolution of historical research in the direction of greater transparency and objectivity—on very sensitive issues such as antisemitism—was also intended to demonstrate the democratic evolution of these states and justify their candidacies.

The geopolitical situation is therefore another essential factor, including in Europe, which makes it possible to manage past conflicts, sometimes at the cost of dealing in depth with memory issues and taking the risk of reopening old wounds at the civil society level. Reconciliation for political and geopolitical reasons, such as the Franco-German rapprochement, is a good example of that will to "forgive" at the cost of neglecting the clarification of tensions inside both societies. Thus, in the treatment of the First World War in history textbooks, the conflict is presented as a shared tragedy, with less attention to responsibilities, and the stress is increasingly on the common fate of soldiers on both sides. The "imperative of oblivion" between France and Germany, "hereditary enemies" since 1870, was the dominant factor until the 1970s. This was at the cost of overlooking more troublesome issues such as collaboration, antisemitism and the role of France in the implementation of Nazi racial policy, as well as the fact that reconciliation was initiated at a time when civil society and political elites in Germany had not yet come to grips with the past. An American historian, Robert Paxton, with his book *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order 1940-1944* published in 1972, was the person who opened the debate on the factors that were left out of the process of Franco-German reconciliation.

The Strategic Factor

The strategic factor has been the second element at the heart of the choice between a willingness to forget and a desire to reactivate conflicts and memory issues. During the Cold War, incorporation into the Eastern or Western bloc based on geographical location was crucial in the way history and memory issues were managed.

West Germany benefited rapidly from the Cold War, which made it a vital ally in the heart

of Europe against the Soviet bloc. It was also the case of Japan, which went from the status of enemy to being the closest ally of the United States. These global strategic incentives have played an essential part in the success of the reconciliation process between Germany and France, as well as between Japan and the United States. However, in the case of Germany, the process of European reconstruction also played a significant role in favor of reintegrating Germany as a legitimate state and ally.

In Asia, the fact that Japan was closely integrated into the US-led system of bilateral alliances to counter the expansion and influence of communism in the region also made it possible to sign a peace treaty in 1952 with the Republic of China in Taiwan that did not mandate the payment of reparations. For President Chiang Kai-shek, the main issue was also strategic, and this issue is still present today.

On questions related to how Taiwan perceives Japan and how Japan perceives Taiwan, historical issues, such as for instance the question of “comfort women,” can resurface in a low-key way, but such issues are essentially, on the Taiwanese side, a marker of the will to belong and relate to “China.” In Taiwan, a Japanese colony from 1895 to 1945, the question of identity and conflicting memories is at the heart of contemporary political issues between the KMT (Kuomintang) and the pro-independence DPP (Democratic Progressive Party). Taiwanese identity has also been built with a positive attitude to Japan and a strongly negative stance toward mainland China. This is because political leadership coming from the continent imposed, from 1945 to the democratization process of the 1980s, a strict political control over the island and any autonomy aspirations or cultural differentiation.

Moreover, in Taiwan, the memory of the February 28 “incident” in 1947, which is estimated to have claimed the lives of between 10,000 and 30,000 people after the mainland republican army took control of the island, remains much more vivid than Japan’s war crimes. Today, it is also the sharing of common democratic values that is at the heart of relations between Taiwan and Japan, often described as a model of “positive reconciliation” in Asia.

In this context, the end of the Cold War did not play the same role in Europe and Asia. In Western and Eastern Europe, it opened the way to reconciliation, as was the case between Poland and Germany, while at the same time reopening questions of history inside the former Eastern bloc that were long left unanswered by the strategic and ideological constraints of the Cold War.⁵ The consequences have not been the same in Asia. In that region, two elements were at play. The Sino-Soviet conflict that erupted in 1960 and Beijing’s perception of the Soviet Union as the main threat were the decisive factors that led to China’s rapprochement in the early 1970s with the United States and Japan.

The end of the Cold War, followed by the end of the Soviet Union, have, on the contrary, led to a resumption of tensions with Japan. Since the mid-1990s, the “China factor” plays a major role. The Chinese regime increasingly used Japan as a “target” in its nationalist education campaigns, in the context of a growing ideological insecurities and the consecutive desire to assert itself as the leading power in Asia. This change of posture on the part of China has led to the re-instrumentalization of historical issues and the recent increase in memorial commemorations and “Japanese war crime” museums.

The case of South Korea is, however, atypical. Japan and the Republic of Korea (South Korea) were allies of the United States during the Cold War and still remain US allies. The two countries share strong common strategic interests. However, political evolution in South Korea after the democratization of 1987 has played a significant role in elevating tensions concerning historical issues with Japan. The incentive to cultivate anti-Japanese sentiments is present on both sides of

⁵ The case of the Katyn massacre of Poland Military and civilian elites by Soviet troops is a major example of these tensions long denied by the regimes in place.

the political spectrum in South Korea.

Conservative parties, marred by the collaboration of elites with Imperial Japan during colonization, must demonstrate their nationalist credentials.⁶ For the opposition, anti-Japanese nationalism also serves to strengthen its legitimacy against conservative. In both cases, the denunciation of Japan also helps to build a sense of national unity and belonging in a divided peninsula.

However, in other parts of Asia such as South-East Asia, the emergence of a perceived growing threat from China is a major factor that explains the easing of tensions stemming from the Second World War. A desire to counterbalance an increasingly assertive China is contributing to greater expectations vis-à-vis Japan, including on security questions. This is notably the case of Vietnam, which, despite the proximity of its political regime with the PRC, has moved closer to Tokyo and Washington.

The Cause of Failure: What Makes Reconciliation Impossible

Paradoxically, the more the Second World War and the Cold War fade into the past, the more historical issues seem to regain importance. On one side, the democratic characteristics of a state argue in favor of reconciliation, but they can also open the doors to the reemergence of tensions that may be rooted in some segments of civil societies.

In the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe, after an initial quiet period related to the desire to join the European Union, greater freedom of speech has set off disturbing debates around the notion of equal victimhood, which equates the suffering of local populations in the Second World War with the misery unleashed in the eradication of long-established Jewish communities.

As demonstrated by the case of South Korea, despite common strategic interests, the combination of political liberalization and nationalism in a recently democratized political system can become a negative factor for reconciliation. In democratic countries, the rapid expansion of social media and the internet also plays a role.

Processes of reconciliation implemented from the top, such as the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1965 between Japan and South Korea, as well as the 2015 final agreement on the “comfort women” issue signed between President Park Geun-hye and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, can be challenged for domestic political reasons, despite their positive strategic motives.

In France, positions on anti-colonialism and the Algerian war have long been strong markers of division between left and right. Any intermediate position, such as that of the writer Albert Camus, that takes into account the fate of people whose families had been living in French colonies for generations, or that of the harkis who fought along French troops and who were abandoned to violent reprisals after independence, has long been rejected. The concepts of “mutual contribution” and diversity, which are constantly referred to in an increasingly diverse France, have little legitimacy in post-colonial societies, particularly in Algeria, where resentment against the former colonial “ruler” still constitutes an essential element of the regime’s legitimacy.

Furthermore, in France, history and memory issues related to the country’s colonial past have become important factors in domestic politics. How to teach history, with the controversial adoption of “memorial laws,” is an object of political debate related to the integration of people of immigrant origin into society and questioning of the French model of assimilation.

In European societies, the collapse of political ideologies has also made the search for identity based on the denunciations of past crimes such as slavery and colonization a critical element of

⁶ For instance, General Park Chung-hee, father of former president Park Geun-hye (who was impeached in 2016), was an officer in the Japanese Imperial army during the war.

new “memory wars” that fuel resentments within some segments of the immigrant population.⁷

Asymmetry and “Resentment-Nationalism”

Another factor impeding reconciliation, often related to ideological divisions and the lack of democracy, is power asymmetry between formerly “dominant” and “dominated” states.

This is particularly the case between Algeria and France, Poland and Germany, Poland and Russia, Korea and Japan, and China and Japan. “Resentment-Nationalism,” whose focus is to “wash out” past and present “humiliations,” and is at the heart of some regimes’ survival strategies, as in the People’s Republic of China since the mid-1990s, is a factor that hinders long-term reconciliation. This type of discourse discourages debate on controversial issues that could challenge, or diverge from, the official line.

At the bilateral level between Beijing and Tokyo, the return of Japan as a “normal” power in Asia, which could upset a strategic balance favorable to Beijing’s interests, is denied in the name of past abuses and the negation of Japan’s political choices and evolution since 1945.

The challenge for the targeted states is to maintain a balance while not appearing to be indifferent or revisionist, as both attitudes can have negative consequences for the global image and strategic interests of the that state.

Thus, in reaction to the erection of “comfort women” statues in the United States, Japan—whose main strength and influence reside in the democratic and open characteristics of its political system and society—has sometimes be tempted to over-react in ways that may have led to negative consequences. The lack of knowledge of the real issues at stake, and of the similarities between what all former colonial powers (in Europe and Asia) did, can only exacerbate these negative consequences, which underscores the need for finely-tuned communication.

Conclusion

In many cases, history itself is not the real issue or factor that prevents a long-term process of stable reconciliation. Rather, it is the utilization, according to the strategic priorities of the moment, of issues of history by some states or interest groups that undermines reconciliation. The decision to commemorate specific past events, such as the Vel d’Hiv roundup of the Jewish population in France in 1942, the violent repression of demonstrations in Sétif, Algeria in 1945, or, in the case of China, the Nanjing Massacre, is made by the powers in place to give strong signals not just to their own public, but to specifically targeted countries and to the international community as a whole.

The very idea of stable reconciliation is almost impossible without a political transformation that modifies paradigms of legitimacy. But paradoxically, in the most controlled societies, it is at the level of civil society that forgiveness can exist, in spite of and in opposition to an official narrative that puts the stress on past grievances. The growing number of Chinese tourists and students in Japan, the importance of Algerian emigration in France, and strong cultural interactions between South Korea and Japan are positive examples.

Reconciliation is thus possible, in spite of lingering historical issues. However, for a long-term and non-controversial reconciliation among nations, a series of conditions must be met. Foremost of them are the establishment of democratic characteristics and the sharing of strong common strategic interests. It is therefore problematic to speak of an ideal universal model of reconciliation when these conditions are not met, as is the case today in Asia. Even in Europe, where this model is based on robust democracies and a strong ambition to achieve peace and reconciliation on the continent, it remains fragile, as the rise of populism has demonstrated.

⁷ However, the low level of activism of the Korean community living in Japan on contentious issues like “comfort women” must be noted.