

*Studies in Historical Memory: A Path to Contemporary Understanding*

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**Abstract**

This presentation will examine case studies of historical memory taught in classes with Japanese university students. Students have grown up with sense of pride in Japan being a peaceful member of the international community. At the same time, students often express frustration that irrespective of what Japan does, it will always be criticized for a wartime past that cannot be changed. In this situation students feel powerless to make their country correctly understood. In addition, the education system fails to provide a narrative that brings together pride in Japan's achievements with an honest assessment of imperial history. Case studies of historical memories which highlight the way the same events are being remembered differently in different places, e.g Hideyoshi's Korean incursions and the assassination of Ito Hirobumi, can be a way to develop student understanding and empathy. The case studies provide students with an introduction to different perspectives presented in a non-confrontational way. By encasing the studies in the context of historical memory, students are able to take on board other perspectives without feeling that they or their country is being criticized. Students are encouraged to interrogate the way history is remembered and discuss their ideas about the way history should be taught at school.

Keywords: Historical memory, history education, peace studies, Japan, Korea, CLIL case study

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## Introduction

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” or so Santayana believed. In reality though, history education is commonly used as a way to legitimize one’s own point of view, fostering parochialism and division rather than unity and understanding. Instead of freeing people from repeating mistakes, the study of history can ensure that prejudice and hostilities are reinforced.

Today I am looking at Japan’s relations with Korea and the way that this is dealt with within the education system, but the principles apply to any contested history. In many respects there is a lot of co-operation between Japan and Korea, however when it comes to history things are awkward. Japan and Korea see their shared history very differently. In the case of Japan, the current government sees historical interpretation and the content of history textbooks as a domestic issue. (McNeill, 2013). In contrast, the Korean Government believes that Japan has a 'grave responsibility' to be remorseful, and ensure that young people in Japan are brought up with knowledge of Japanese imperial aggression. (MOFA, Korea, 2016). Despite the political tensions, students often are attracted to Korean culture, but the polarized political context often leaves students with a degree of unease. This paper seeks to outline an approach to history that helps students understand and empathize with the perspectives of former colonies while not taking on the burden of assuming personal responsibility for events that occurred long before they were born.

## The current situation

It is often said that Japanese students are not taught about Japanese imperialism. But this is only partly true. Although student knowledge isn't deep<sup>1</sup>, from my experience at several different universities in Tokyo, it is fair to say students display a common narrative. The narrative includes the ideas that

- imperialism is bad,
- to varying extents, Japan, was responsible for atrocities, (there is little specific knowledge, but there is a vague awareness).
- Japan was not the only country that committed atrocities (e.g. the atomic bombs and firebombings)
- And the Japanese people were also victims. (of foreign countries, but more particularly of their own government and army who “deceived” them. )

In addition to the narrative of the past, students tend to view contemporary Japan as a model state. Japan is seen as generous with foreign aid and a peaceful country which has been at peace with its neighbours for more than seventy years.

Despite this, in The Genron NPO’s 2015 survey of Japan -Korea attitudes, 52% of Japanese had unfavourable feelings to Korea, and 73% percent of Koreans had unfavorable feelings to Japan. This is a problem. But, when Japan’s neighbours criticise Japan, students often feel frustrated and they can’t understand the reason or why it’s necessary for only Japan to continually apologize. History is seen as a

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<sup>1</sup> The lack of depth of knowledge is not specific to war time or colonial history. In school history teaching, there is a much greater emphasis on “who” “what” and “when” than there is on “why” or “how”.

perplexing topic with no solutions. Some students become hostile, for most it's easier to ignore the bad feeling and stick to a veneer of *yakiniku* and K pop.

Student ambivalence reveals a deeper issue. The education system does not provide students with a narrative that allows them to be simultaneously proud of Japan's achievements and at the same time be conscious of the oppression and crimes that were committed under imperial rule.<sup>2</sup>

The failure to reconcile the two strands is evident in the Japanese government's policy on history teaching. The government has vast powers to enforce its views since all textbooks must be approved by the government before they can be used in state schools. The government strongly opposes teaching what they call "*self-deprecating*" history, which refers primarily to history that includes the crimes committed under Japanese imperialism. The former Education Minister, Hakubun Shimomura warned of the dangers of this style of teaching as it contributes to feelings of worthlessness and even suicide among young people. (McNeill, 2013) As an alternative, the government advocates teaching "*patriotic*" history - which picks up the good points of the country and minimizes the bad. The rationale Shimomura gave for this is that if students feel pride in their country, they will feel pride in themselves. (Kingston, 2015) But, narrow insistence on a single point of view doesn't protect students, it makes them prisoners of the past by denying them the chance to understand other points of view. As Bar-Tal & Rosen (2013) have outlined, the education system plays a formative role in creating norms in societies' attitudes towards historical events and conflicts. A society that teaches history from a single point of view, denying the legitimacy of other views, perpetuates distrust and fails to create a constructive mindset for engagement and resolving difference.

This paper recommends a shift away from history based on narrative to history based on questioning. One way to achieve this is through the study of historical memory. Deconstructing the way in which history is remembered by asking questions provides students with an opportunities to recognize, understand and approach differences constructively "What is remembered?", "What is not remembered?", "By whom?", "Why?", "How?" "Have the memories changed over time?" In addition, shifting from narrative's emphasis on "acquiring knowledge" so as to embrace "dialogical and dialectical thinking" enables students to become more comfortable with complexity and ambiguity. (Paul, 1992) These are precisely the kind of skills the Japanese government's Global Human Resource Strategy should be cultivating if it wants its citizens to be able to engage internationally.<sup>3</sup>

### **The study of historical memory**

When teaching historical memory there are important points to note.

First, this is not a Japan issue *per se*. All countries have debates about history. Australia, my country, has some very ugly parts in its history. Government policy assumed that the Aboriginal race would die out. And policy was made to ensure they would. Australia still struggles with this history. It seems to be easier for

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<sup>2</sup> Simplistic approaches to war history are not unique to Japan. See Phillip Seaton's (2001) analysis of the British Media's reporting of Yasukuni shrine and Japanese war memory.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the Japanese Government's Global Jinzai strategy see Yonezawa (2014)

students to reflect, when they know that the issue of historical memory is bigger than Japan.

In addition, studying historical memory is not about blame, and it's also not about trying to force students to adopt a counter narrative. It is interrogating the past and thinking about what is believed, by whom and why, particularly in areas where memories are contested. Asking questions rather than accepting a narrative helps students to gain insight into alternative points of view, develop empathy, curiosity and a belief that situations can be improve.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, being able to analyse Japanese history from different points of view does not diminish a Japanese person's Japaneseness. Rather, it enables them to be more sophisticated and flexible thinkers.

### **Historical Memory: the example of Hideyoshi**

Let's take a look at an example of thinking about the way events are remembered using a case study of Hideyoshi, the leader of Japan in the late 1500s. Students are asked to recall their memories of Hideyoshi.

To begin with, who is Hideyoshi? Why is he famous? When you think of Hideyoshi do you think of a good guy or a bad or neither or both? The general memory students have of Hideyoshi is that he united Japan and in doing so brought peace. In addition he overcame class barriers to become the *taiko*.

His achievements were remarkable. But is that all there is to Hideyoshi? The aim of this question is not to denigrate or minimize Hideyoshi's achievements, but to add a different dimension.

“What did Hideyoshi do after he united Japan?” Usually most students know that he invaded Korea, but some do not. Few know much detail. “What do you know about the wars?” “Who won?” “Are there any memorials in Japan?” “Are there any memorials in Korea?” “Have you studied it?” “Have you studied it in depth?” “Have you discussed it?”

Students read about the wars in Korea. Hideyoshi's battle hardened troops, who had already united Japan, initially made exceptionally fast progress, going from Pusan to Seoul in about 3 weeks. There were two expeditions, and they were brutal with many casualties. More than 140,000 Japanese died in the invasions. Hideyoshi's soldiers were under order to kill. More than 200,000 Korean and Chinese soldiers and civilians were also killed. Similar to the practice at the time of decapitating the enemy, Hideyoshi ordered that the noses of the dead enemy be sent back to Japan.

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<sup>4</sup> He Yinan (2007) has discussed the issue of re-visiting national myths in the context of China-Japan relations. She outlines the difficulties created by national mythmaking and urges reflection and mutual self critique as a means to improve understanding between the two countries. The approach she advocates is similar to the philosophy that underpins this paper.

## Thinking now about Korea's point of view

What's Korea's memory of the war? Students read about the Korean commander Yi Sun Sin, his turtle boats and the technology and immense naval skill that was used to defeat Japan. What reminders are there of the wars in Korea?

Let's take a look at a couple of memorials. This is a statue of Yi Sun Sin in Pusan. Do you know who he is? Few students had heard of him prior to learning about him in class. This is a little surprising since he was highly regarded by Admiral Togo and other Japanese naval commanders who fought the Russo Japanese war. (Hawley, 2005) Look at the statue. What can we guess about how Koreans think about him?



Figure 1: Yi Sun Sin, Pusan (Wikipedia)



Figure 2: Yi Sun Sin, Pusan. (Wikipedia)

It's big. It's prominent. It's overlooking the city. He seems strong, proud, brave, a protector and guardian. He is a source of inspiration, dignity. Yi is one of Korea's greatest heroes. (Citizen's Name Admiral Yi, 15 April, 2005)

The statue was built in 1951 on the site of a former Japanese shrine. Think about when it was built. Think about where it was built. Why do think it was built? (There is almost always more than one possible reason)

National pride. Reclaiming national identity. The need to have heroes and inspiration. Erasing Japanese presence. There are multiple possibilities.

Students sometimes respond that Korea built this statue with Yi Sun Sin looking out to Japan as reminder to Japan that it (Japan) had been defeated. And this is also a valid explanation. But is it likely to be the sole motivation for Koreans wanting to remember Yi Sun Sin? And, even if it were, would it be understandable for Koreans to want a symbol that said "we won't be invaded again"? Is the feeling attributed to Korea more understandable if it is juxtaposed against Japan's mythologizing the memory about Genghis Khan's failed invasion of the Japanese archipelago? Questioning is a way to create empathy and understanding.

## Now let's compare Japan's memory of the wars.

How does Japan remember Hideyoshi's wars in Korea? What memorials remain? Outside Toyokuni jinja in Kyoto there is a memorial to Hideyoshi's Korean invasions, the *mimizuka* or the grave of the ears, though it contains noses rather than

ears. Interred in this mound are the noses of tens of thousands of Koreans and Chinese who were killed by Hideyoshi's troops. Although the *mimizuka* appears in at least one Japanese high school history textbook, for many students learning about it in class is the first time they have heard about it. The brutality of the wars doesn't fit comfortably with their "memory" of Hideyoshi, but at the same time from the pictures of the *mimizuka* students can that despite the brutality of the past, there is a quiet respectfulness in the way the site is maintained today. It may not be widely remembered in Japan, but from the photos, it appears that those who do remember do so with care and sincerity.



Figure 3. A explanation sign at the *Mimizuka*



Figure 4. The *Mimizuka*

There are those who would say that teaching about the *mimizuka* is self deprecating history, and if it's taught as a narrative fact, with no opportunity to think or analyse, perhaps it may be. Simply learning of existence of the *mimizuka*, may lead to feelings of shame or hopelessness that history can't be changed. However rather than this absorbing a narrative, the students approach the study actively, interrogating the way it has been remembered. "Did you know about it already?" "If you did, where did you learn about it?" "Have you been there?" "Why do you think it was built?" "Is it well looked after?" "Why do you think local people look after it?" "What does it show about the way the war has been remembered in Japan?" "Should the Korean invasions and the *mimizuka* be included when students learn about Hideyoshi?" "Do school trips to Kyoto visit the *mimizuka*?" "Should they?" "Should it be taught about at school?" "How should it be taught?"

These questions don't necessarily have single right answers, but they're a catalyst to think, and to research and compare and discuss and evaluate. They take "self-deprecating history" and make it active and constructive. Despite the government's concerns that students will be burdened with hopelessness if they are taught "self deprecating history", I have yet to have a student say that the knowledge of the *mimizuka* (or any other episode of Japanese history) *should* be excluded from study and discussion. Studies of historical memory enable students to take an event from the past that can be loaded with shame by critics, and approach it as problem solving. Students discuss returning the noses to Korea. "What if Korea insisted they be returned?" "Should they be?" "Why might it be a good thing to return the noses?" "Why might it *not* be a good thing to return the noses?" "Are there opportunities that could come with returning the noses?" "Are there potential problems?" "Are there conditions that should be applied or alternatives that would be preferable?" "If Korea had Japanese noses, should they be returned." Students are asked to consider more than one point of view in their answers and give reasons for their opinions. This is real life problem solving. Without historical understanding and being able to see different points of view, it is very difficult to have constructive negotiations to resolve points of tension and disagreement.

## Historical Memory: Ahn Jung Geun and contested history.



Figure 5: 2014 Asian World Cup, Seoul.

I'd like to look very briefly now at the incident above. It's a complex issue and time won't allow to do more than raise a few questions.

In case anyone doesn't know, it is a picture taken at the Asia Games Japan Korea soccer match in Seoul in 2014. The incident caused an outcry in Japan. On the left is Yi Sun Sin, whom we've already discussed, and on the right Ahn Jung Guen, the Korean who, in 1909, assassinated Ito Hirobumi, Japan's first prime minister. At the time he was assassinated, Ito was the Japanese Special Envoy to Korea. Ahn's assassination of Ito is familiar to students.

The picture of the Korean crowd holding the pictures of their national heroes raises a couple of issues. The first issue is whether it's suitable for people from the host country of an international event to display pictures that appear designed to offend a participating country. There are international protocols on this, and it does not merit discussion in this paper. A second issue, which is the issue I will focus on, is the positive regard for Ahn in Korea and the difference in the way that Ahn is remembered in the two countries. Let's interrogate conflicting memories of Ahn. First the memory of Ahn that has been passed down to Japanese students.

*"What words do think of when you think of Ahn?"*

"Murderer, assassin, hates Japan, Korean, nationalist, violent"

*"What words do you think Koreans might associate with Ahn?"*

"Hero, champion, powerful, hates Japan, pride"

These are very different images, and students recognize the difference in perspective. The Japanese government calls Ahn a "terrorist". (Korean who assassinated Japan's first leader, 2014) The Korean government has called him a "patriot... who advocated peace". (Lee vows every effort, 2010)

It's easy for students to understand the Japanese government's position that Ahn is a terrorist – he assassinated a political leader. But a patriot who advocated peace? How can it possibly be true? I encourage students to keep an open mind, and resist the urge to reject the Korean government view without researching and evaluating it. Is Korea simply trying to provoke Japan, or is there more to the story about Ahn? Why does Korea remember Ahn, a murderer, as a hero?

Students research the writings of Ahn and are surprised with what they learn. For example they learn that Japanese troops killed the Korean empress while Ito was Prime Minister. They also learn Ahn, who lived at the height of imperialism, was a Pan Asianist, who believed the “yellow races should unite against the white races” (Saaler & Szpilman, 2011). It is possible that Ahn’s Pan Asianism may also come as a surprise to those in Korea who remember Ahn primarily as a nationalist. Reading about Ahn, students learn that he didn’t hate Japan *per se* but he did feel bitterly let down by Japan particularly after the Russo Japanese war. Ahn also criticized local injustices in particular the gap between rich and poor. In Ahn’s writings he called for peace and equality. When students go back to what Ahn wrote they see a lot more complexity and begin to understand that there may be reasons behind the difference in memory. Japanese memory of Ahn is defined solely by his assassination of Ito. (Ironically Ito was a political moderate.) In contrast Ahn’s ideals of dignity and justice underpin the Korean memory.<sup>5</sup>

As a way to highlight subjectivity in the way that events are treated and the memories that are chosen, the students are asked to compare the assassination of former Prime Minister Ito by the Korean Ahn, with the assassination of Prime Minister Inukai by a group of Japanese junior naval officers in the May 15 incident of 1932. To some extent different times account for the differing treatment of political assassins. However the question remains why are students very familiar with the assassination of former Prime Minister Ito, whose death became a pretext for the Japanese colonization of Korea, and yet quite unfamiliar with the assassination of Prime Minister Inukai, whose death marked a shift to military rule in pre-war Japan. Interrogating the memories does not always lead to definitive answers, but it does lead to a more nuanced understanding of history.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, teaching history as a narrative to be remembered, whether it be “patriotic” *or* “self-deprecating”, runs the risk of reducing history to a mantra. Narrative without enquiry provides students with knowledge but fails to give them the ability to discern the accuracy of the information. Teaching students to question the way history is remembered and to look from alternative perspectives provides them with flexibility of thinking and gives them tools to analyse, understand and negotiate the world around them. These are foundational skills for engaging constructively and confidently and provide a starting point for resolving differences peacefully in globalizing world.

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<sup>5</sup> Students research information themselves. At a minimum they are required to seek out the fifteen reasons that Ahn gives for assassinating Ito, but they are encouraged to research widely and look for differences in English and Japanese sites as well as other languages that they may read. Franklin Rausch (2012, 2013) has written in depth about Ahn and the way he is remembered in Korea, Japan and China.

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