

State Violence, Social Memory, and the Ethics of Remembrance and Forgiveness in East Asia

Chua Beng Huat

(National University of Singapore)

“Such a sight was a common one during the Japanese occupation and now today is a common one again among Indonesian political prisoners.”

– **Pramoedya Ananta Toer**

Abstract

To the extent the modern state has a monopoly on the use of force, modern states are agents in creating violence, especially, on a mass scale; consequently, they are also involved in the “resolution” of the history of the violence that they create. The experience of violence from the domestic state is not uncommon among East Asians who have had to live under repressive authoritarian states. One shared experience of violence by an invading nation was the occupation, of varying lengths of time, by Japanese imperialism before and during the Second World War. In instances of domestic-state violence on its own citizens, the relation between the two parties can be represented as: state/history and citizen/social memory. In the case of violence perpetrated by an invading-state, the invaded state, and its people are conjoined in the shared memories of victimhood, which can be invoked against the invader-state and its citizenry. For the invader-state, citizens may be in sympathy with or in denial of the foreign victims of the violence perpetuated by their state. This essay aims to examine some conceptual issues on how incidents of domestic state violence and the violence of invasion and their respective social memories are differently managed and resolved to enable social memory to “pass” into history. Special attention will be paid to the issue of the “Comfort Women” in South Korea.

Keywords: state, violence, history, social memory, trauma

Introduction

Violence is the progenitor of trauma; trauma is a progenitor of social or collective memory. To the extent the modern state has a monopoly on the use of force, the state is an agent in creating violence, especially on a mass scale; the initiator of violence is critical to how society responds intellectually and affectively to the trauma of the violence. Ironically, state(s) are also unavoidably involved in the “resolution” of the history of the violence that they create. Almost all East and Southeast Asian nations have had the experience, at various times in the history of modern state formation, of violence—both from the domestic state and from invasion by another state. While each country in the region has its own instances of violence from its own domestic state, the region shares the experience of being occupied by Japanese imperialism, with varying lengths of time and modes of governance. My interest here is to examine some conceptual issues on the difference in which incidents of domestic state violence and violence of invasion and their respective social memories are managed. As part of the resolution of the trauma involves allowing social memory to “pass” into history, some general understanding of the relations between social memory and history is necessary.

On History and Social Memory

The material resource for history and social memory is the same, namely events that happened in the past. However, from the initiation of academic interest in “social memory,” a necessary distinction between the two concepts has been an issue of concern. History is a systematic recording of past events. It is oriented to the search for systemic and logical causal relations, whether linear and continuous or disruptive and discontinuous, among events that can be verified documentarily. All oral accounts are to be checked for their veracity against archival documents; however, the process of making the document is always already a process of editing the full flow of events.¹ In their search for causal relations, historians have their own intentions, matrixes, and procedures to “edit” the totality of past events. Like memory, selective amnesia is not accidental in a historian’s effort to produce a relatively

coherent account of the past. All the methodologically necessary editing means that history can never be a record of the totality of the past. This makes “history” itself a contested terrain, crisscrossed by different strategies and framings that produce multiple histories from ostensibly the same set of past events; historiography becomes in itself a subject of contention.² History is thus an open-ended enterprise that is constantly open to reinterpretation and rewriting with each new piece of archival information uncovered or recovered or with every new and reliable eye-witness account. In spite of this openness, an inherent tension exists between history’s insistence on documentary “veracity” and memory’s dependence on the recollections of individuals.

Social memory is oriented towards registering the direct personal experiences of individuals of a particular singular event or a constellation of events, including his or her affective disposition towards the said episodes of the past. Over time, however, an individual’s memory of specific events has a tendency to blur; the most traumatic portions could be psychically suppressed; the details and sequences of events may be in disarray and unrelated events may telescope into each other to make up a relatively coherent narrative. Additionally, an individual’s memory is affected by the social context in which the memory is recalled. “It is, of course, individuals who remember, not groups or institutions, but these individuals, being located in a specific group context, draw on that context to remember or recreate the past”³; and “[e]very collective memory requires the support of a group delimited in time and space.”⁴ The academic analysis of social memory readily admits to these characteristics of memories that might be considered “problematic” in veracity. Indeed, the confusion of details of memories are often used to deny their reliability and by extension the “reality” of the events recalled, by those unsympathetic to the ones who remember. However, the characteristics of memory should not detract from its significance in the full and proper recording of the past. Significantly, for reason of its openness and inter-textuality, history is amenable to the insertion of social memory. Against history, social memory is thus simultaneously a supplement, a reminder, a critique, and possibly a contestant—but never a substitute for history.

There is one point at which history has an affinity with social memory. Conventionally, history is presented in cold hard text. However, popular (re)presentations of history inevitably require re-scripting around specific individual historical figures and the reasons, including emotions, for their actions. In this re-scripting, popular history partakes in mobilizing the affective features, which are central to social memory. This is because the affective is more pliable to symbolic and aesthetic representations, from mass demonstration to mass media dramatization, than a single monument that represents the multitude of unknown individuals caught up by the particular event in ritualistic commemoration.⁵ For social memory, such occasional, periodic, or permanent aesthetic representations are essential to prevent the memory from fading and to embed it in the social/collective body. The affective is that which connects the participants and audience who are not themselves victims to the violence (re)presented in the practice of commemoration.

The Politics of Social Memory and the State

The state features squarely in generating violence on a mass scale. (Of course, with the rise of terrorism and secessionist wars conducted by nationalist minorities, non-state actors are increasingly prevalent in the use of force and violence; on this occasion, I shall set these events and actors aside.) Traumatic social memories engendered by mass violence are thus unavoidably highly politicized. States are therefore never disinterested parties in the writing of the history of mass violence, such as civil rebellion or war. Here, it is important to distinguish between the violence perpetuated by the domestic state on its own citizens or by foreign invaders. The position of the state and the citizenry can be broadly sketched within the following conceptual frames.

In instances of domestic state violence on its own citizens, the state and its affected citizens are logically on opposite sides of the issue. The experience of such violence is not uncommon among East Asians who have had to live under very repressive authoritarian states. The relations between the state and its affected citizenry, including possibly

the vast majority of the citizens, may be broadly framed as a contest between history and social memory; the state may be inclined to want to possess history, insisting that the 'official' history is the 'objective/factual' record of events; while the personal experiences of the citizens who have suffered violence from the state reside with the affected citizens who demand redress and retrospective justice for the violence suffered. The memories can remain with an individual or be collectivized and represented by civil society organizations. We can therefore write the relations thus: state/history and citizen (civil society)/social memory. As we shall see, these potentially antagonistic relations may be transformed into sympathetic relations through reconciliation between the state and the affected citizens.

In the case of violence perpetrated by an invading state, an external enemy, the relations between the two states and their respective citizenries are much more complex. Here the state and the people who were invaded are conjoined in the idea of victimhood. The memories of the invasion are shared. The sufferings of citizens, individual and collective, can be symbolically transformed to represent the sufferings of the nation. Theoretically, this shared experience can be invoked to constitute an alliance between the invaded state and its citizenry against the invader-state. However, there is no guarantee that this is necessarily the case. The interests of the state and its citizens are never fully aligned without a remainder because the state has to concern itself with international diplomacy and international trade, which are important to the economic and political stability of the nation. On the other hand, the citizenry may be more inclined to seek redress, symbolically and materially, for their personalized sufferings. The slippage between the differentiated interests can potentially generate antagonistic relations between state and civil society instead of alliance against the invading state. For example, any compromise between the domestic government and the invading nation government to get past the violent events in the interest of economic relations, can be seen as the "selling out" of its citizens, thereby creating friction between the citizens and their government.

Also to be considered is the relations between the invading state

and its own citizens. The interest of the state/history logically faces two different factional responses: first, citizens, including politicians and other opinion and thought leaders, who are in sympathy with the foreign victims of the violence perpetuated by their state and, second, those citizens who are in denial of this violence visited on foreign nationals. Which of these two factions is ideologically dominant depends more on the preference of the incumbent government than on the demographic proportion that hold either position. The possible reconciliation between the two nations is highly dependent on the choice of the incumbent government of the invading state.

We can now see how this set of conceptual possibilities plays out in empirical situations of violence, politics, and history.

Domestic State Violence and Its Possible Trajectories

In substance, the first impulse of a state/government that has utilized mass violence among its own citizens is to suppress, or even erase, the social memory of that violence and to silence its public expression through explicit censorship in any kind of public representation, including historical texts or unofficial commemorations. Such, for example, is the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) and the succeeding Communist state's continuing suppression of some of the major state-generated violence, such as the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and the June 4th 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. The same is true of the dominant single-party Singaporean government, the People's Action Party, in its insistence across three generations of prime ministers that, in the 1960s, it was right to detain alleged communists without trial, even if these accusations were never factually substantiated, ignoring the volumes of counter-memories of the detainees.

Significantly, in both China and Singapore, the tenacious overt suppression of any civil commemoration of the past incidents of state excesses is largely a consequence of an unchanging ruling party/government. In the dominant single-party situation, where there is inter-generational continuity of governance, the incumbent leaders are symbolically burdened with the "sins" of their predecessors as their own;

this explains the incapability of lifting the suppression for fear of losing political legitimacy. (Parenthetically, we shall see later that such is also the circumstance of the Liberal Democratic Party government in Japan.) Because of the persistence of state suppression and denial, the memories of violent incidents such as Tiananmen continue to fester and to feed the state alienation of affected citizens, which then waits in the wings of the national stage, for opportunities to break into the open; witness the annual Hong Kong commemoration on 4th June in Victoria Park. Precisely because overt displays of the armed hand of the repressive state can be very costly in engendering public resistance and rebellion and eroding political legitimacy, most governments prefer to use more covert, subtle, and calibrated modes of suppression, including generating 'official' history as a pedagogical curriculum and/or punishing selected activists to discourage others.

In contrast, in situations where the democratic processes lead to transfer of power between different political parties and leaderships, "reconciliation" between the state and its aggrieved citizens is easier to accomplish. In such situations, the incumbent government is able to distance itself from the "sins" of the previous repressive government and in turn support the affected citizens' call for redress of the violence they had suffered. This process is further facilitated if the incumbent government had been in opposition, like the affected citizens, to the previous repressive government. Such, for example, is the case of the management of the Gwangju Uprising in Korea. The culpable authoritarian President Chun Doo Hwan, who ordered the military to violently suppress the uprising, was first forced out of office by the democratization movement. He was subsequently put on trial and received a death sentence, subsequently commuted to life imprisonment, before ultimately being pardoned by the democratically elected president, Kim Yong Sam, on the advice of his impending successor, president-elect Kim Dae Jung, who in his turn had once been sentenced to death by Chun. Chun entered the Buddhist monkhood after his release from prison. Meanwhile, the Gwangju Uprising has been commemorated in a variety of different ways: it was designated as a national day of commemoration; the Mangwol-dong Cemetery where the massacred

protesters were buried became a national cemetery; and nowadays the Gwangju Prize for Human Rights is offered by the May 18 Memorial Foundation to human rights defenders in memory of the uprising. This transformation of a major national incident of state violence and its installation as an event of national history, if not pride, instead of being suppressed by denial, demonstrates the possibility of reconciliation and a nation healing itself, even if it took more than twenty years for this to be fully realized.

Imperial Japan and East Asia Trauma

Undoubtedly, the most traumatic event experienced across northeast and southeast Asia in the first half of the 20th century was the violence unleashed on the region by the Japanese Imperial Army, from the first Sino-Japanese War at the closing years of the 19th century, till the end of the Second World War in 1945. After the First Sino-Japanese War, Taiwan was ceded to Japan in “perpetuity”; this was followed by the “annexation” of Korea in 1910 and of Manchuria in 1931, the initiation of the 8-year (1937-1945) invasion of China, and finally, the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 starting the Pacific War as part of the Second World War, which finally ended only in 1945. “Between 1895-1945, Japan carved out a vast empire in Asia, encompassing at its height Korea, Taiwan, Manchuria, virtually all of Southeast Asia, most of coastal China, and most of the islands of Western Pacific.”⁶ The complex set of relations of this history continues to trouble the region, more than 70 years after the War.

The acts of aggression were rationalized by the Japanese military establishment in a self-serving manner to justify its aggression. According to Berger, the “bedrock” rationalization was the then widely held belief “that were it not for the creation of the empire, Japan itself might have become a target of Western imperialism, or at the very least, found itself cut off from the raw materials and markets it would need to survive and prosper”⁷; Japan assumed that it was a potential target, a potential victim, of Western imperialism, like the rest of Asia. Beyond this defensive logic, Japan further argued that it was saving occupied Korea, Manchuria, and Taiwan from the decaying Chosun and Qing

dynastic regimes, respectively, and in Southeast Asia “liberating” its peoples and territories from European colonialism. The hypocrisy of this “liberation” claim was obvious as Japan’s intention was to replace Western colonialism and these decaying dynasties by installing itself at the center of the exploitative colonial relations within the region under what it euphemistically called the “Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere.” Here, the infrastructural development that was necessary for the extractive economy during the colonization of Korea (and Manchuria) was used as evidence of Japan’s contribution to postwar economic development.⁸ Finally, the tragic fate as the nation to suffer the very first atomic bomb with a huge loss of lives opened up the discursive space for Japan to work this into a narrative of its victimization,⁹ displacing its position as the perpetrator of the Pacific War.

As the victor of the War and the leader of the capitalist world, the U.S. was critical in the postwar political development in both Europe and Asia. The containment of communism was enacted on two fronts. Western Europe was the first frontline to contain Soviet Russia. The strategic establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had to include West Germany as a key member. Consequently, reconciliation between postwar West Germany and the other western European states, especially France, was essential. Under pressure from the US, Germany was required to “firmly renounce its aggressive past” and agree that “it would not fall back into the same aggressive ultranationalism.”¹⁰ This dovetailed with the sentiments of the postwar West German political leaders, such as Konrad Adenauer, the first Chancellor, who were also determined to root out Nazism. The initially tentative gestures led to eventual reconciliation between France and Germany, laying the foundation for the European Union. Over the years, Germany has publicly apologized for its role in the Second World War and several European states have made financial reparations to victims of the war and have made denial of the Holocaust a crime.

In contrast, there was no pressure on Japan for any immediate reckoning with its war atrocities for two reasons. First, immediately after the War “China was embroiled in civil war until 1949 and then, especially in 1950, China became a direct enemy of the United States. Korea was

weak and divided, and after the Korean War, it was in ruins. In Southeast Asia, the main issues were a set of anticolonial wars and the dissolution of the French, British, and Dutch empires. Influencing policy towards defeated Japan was neither possible nor particularly important.”¹¹ Secondly, and more significantly, the US postwar administration of Japan decided to preserve the Japanese Emperor, and to set up a new parliamentary system with a pacific constitution. As a result, many of the wartime Japanese functionaries were recruited into the new government, finding new political homes in the emergent Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). As the Cold War unfolded, U.S. support for Japan also intensified as it embraced Japan (and South Korea) as an ally in confronting communism in China and in the rest of East Asia. For these historical reasons, Japan was never thoroughly disabused of its reasons nor made to atone for its past violent actions in the rest of Asia until the end of the 20th century, more than fifty years after the War.

As the LDP has governed Japan continuously for the last seventy years, with only two brief interruptions, there is inter-generational continuity, rather than disruption, in both ideology and political leadership. This accounts for the unflinching ideological ‘impenitence’ of the Japanese political right, supported by the powerful conservative nationalist members of the LDP government, in refusing to publicly atone and apologize for the war atrocities of the Japanese Imperial Army in East Asia.¹² This impenitence is expressed in various ways: in the highly symbolic attendance of ministerial-rank nationalist politicians at the annual rituals of commemoration for the war dead at the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, which includes 14 “Class-A” war criminals from the Pacific War amongst all the other Japanese who sacrificed their lives for the emperor and the nation. This symbolic gesture that turns its back on the violence suffered by the rest of East Asia at the hands of the “Class-A” war criminals is carried out in the full knowledge that it will raise the ire of both China and Korea. Reflecting the power of the right-wing LDP faction, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, in order to stay in power, had to commit himself to making the annual visit to Yasukuni Shrine during his six years (2001-2006) in office, in exchange for the faction’s support. Second, it is expressed in the attempt of the nationalist right-wing

historians to rewrite the school history curriculum which denies this egregious past; notwithstanding the fact that only about one percent of the schools¹³ have adopted such revisionist texts. Third, it is expressed in the LDP government's initial denial and subsequent reluctant admission of the Imperial Army's involvement in the operating of "comfort women stations" which enslaved tens of thousands of women captured from all the occupied territories to serve as sex-slaves for the Army. There remains the persistent refusal to fully apologize and make reparations for this act. Finally, even at the cost of possible dismissal from ministerial portfolios, nationalist conservative LDP politicians have repeatedly publicly undermined or detracted from the expressions of contrition by several Japanese prime ministers over the years.¹⁴ Not surprisingly it was the Socialist Party Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi who had gone furthest in offering the "most complete and forthright apology yet for both the war and Japan's history of colonial oppression."¹⁵ All these very symbolic gestures by the nationalist right-wing minority within the Japanese political spectrum have received such disproportionate local and global attention that the nationalist-right faction of leaders, intellectuals, and the Japanese population have come to dominate public discourse both inside and outside Japan, smothering the domestic voices of remorse and penitence and/or pacifist general condemnation of war, in view of the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which in combination constitute the majority of public opinion.¹⁶

Dealing with Japanese Impenitence

In general, the demands for apologies, reparation, and possible reconciliation for Japanese war time atrocities in East Asia were delayed by the immediate and more pressing political issues that faced the other East Asian nations. However, once these domestic issues were settled and economic development was on its way, the (un)settling of the account of the Japanese Occupation came to the fore. Due to the relatively short duration of the three and a half years' occupation and the developmental needs for postcolonial nation building, this settlement with the nations of Southeast Asia has been relatively easily accomplished.

Southeast Asia

In contemporary Southeast Asia, the sentiment towards the Japanese Occupation is partly mediated by the history of European regional colonization. The lightning defeat of the European colonial militaries in their respective colonial territories by the Japanese Imperial Army tore away the thin veil or myth of “White invincibility” in the eyes of the colonized Southeast Asians, marking the beginning of the end of European colonialism. When the European colonial administrators returned after the War, they found the previously colonized people restive and no longer willing to accept domination. Independence was to be achieved by violent revolution if necessary, as in Indonesia and Vietnam, or more peacefully by negotiation as in Malaya. It is now generally recognized by Southeast Asians that the Japanese defeat of the White colonial powers encouraged this struggle and hastened the process of decolonization, for which the contemporary right-wing Japanese claim credit, unmindful of the brutality it exercised during its occupation.

Postwar Japan’s relations with the nations of Southeast Asia were further mediated by Japan’s very speedy recovery from its war-devastated economy to emerge as an industrial economic power by the 1960s. This gave it immense economic leverage in a region hungry for foreign direct investment to jump-start local industrialization. Most Southeast Asian countries had been willing to look past the Japanese Occupation period in exchange for Japanese investments. The case of Singapore is illustrative. In 1959, the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the pinnacle of ethnic-Chinese community power, uncovered several mass graves of those who had been massacred during the Japanese Occupation. Frustrated by being bogged down in a protracted war in China, the Japanese Army had reserved its brutality for the local Chinese. The Chamber undertook the exhumation of the graves and galvanized the community to demand apologies and financial reparation from the Japanese government, with threats of boycotting Japanese products being made and the refusal to unload Japanese cargo ships in the Singapore harbour. The Singapore Prime Minister, the late Lee Kuan Yew, who had been in office for less than three years and whose political power base was uncertain, had to mediate between the community and

the Japanese government. The issue was “settled” when the Japanese government was persuaded to provide S\$50 million, half grant and half loan, to the Singapore government, money desperately needed for nascent industrialization. No apology to the people of Singapore was given. The Chamber was pressured by Lee to accept the deal and not to make further demands which might hurt future Japanese investment for the new nation.¹⁷ In addition, a “Memorial to the Civilian Victims of the Japanese Occupation 1942-1945” was completed in 1967 at a prominent site in the city centre, with equal financial contributions from the Chamber and the Singapore government; the four pillars of this modernist monument symbolize the multiracial population of Singapore, diluting the “Chinese-ness” of the massacred.

However, just below the surface of such pragmatic economic settlement lies a deeper continuing mistrust of the Japanese, as the pre-war militaristic sentiment has not been completely erased. This is reflected in Lee’s comment on the idea of Japan joining in any international peacekeeping operations: “Allowing Japan to once again send its forces abroad is like giving a chocolate liqueur to an alcoholic. Once the Japanese get off the wagon it will be hard to stop them.” He further emphasized that Japan “must put an end to the equivocation and the ambiguity about its role in the last war” and “young Japanese in school must be part of [the] catharsis through their teachers and textbooks,” otherwise, “what proof have we that, if they [younger generation Japanese] get into a desperate situation ... they wouldn’t set out with the same zeal as their grandfathers did?” Obviously, for Lee, if Japan were unable “to square its accounts over the last war,” it would not be able to play a leading political and security role in East Asia.¹⁸

Northeast Asia

The situation in northeast Asia is much more complicated because Japan was the colonizer of Korea, Taiwan, Manchuria, and the invading foreign power of China during the eight years of the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). The issue of war history has only come to the fore after Korea, China, and Taiwan have each achieved political and economic stability.

Take the case of China. From 1980 onwards, its economy grew very rapidly and by the beginning of the 21st century, it had emerged as the second largest economy in the world, surpassing Japan. Arguably, with the progressive privatization of the economy, socialism, the ideological bedrock, and justification for the Chinese Communist Party rule, has lost much of its political credibility and legitimacy, which is compounded by the persistent suppression of social memories as well as individual rights and freedoms. Arguably, it is in the present historical context of a strong economic development but a relative ideological vacuum that the history of the war with Japan may be used to fan xenophobic nationalism to redirect public attention and anger away from the communist party-state.

An immediate provocation for the ongoing ‘history war’ was the attempt, in the 1980s, by some Japanese right-wing historians to deny the Japanese Imperial Army’s massive destruction and killing of civilians in Nanking, in high school textbooks. The media and public reactions in both China and Korea read this incident as symptomatic of the LDP government’s reluctance to recognize and “sincerely” apologize for the past. Things took an even worse turn when Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi kept up his annual visit to Yasukuni Shrine during his six years (2001-2006) in office. During each of those years, there were anti-Japanese demonstrations and riots on the streets in China and protests and petitions on the Internet.¹⁹ The street demonstrations and riots against Japan were sometimes allowed to run their course and at other time were quickly suppressed by the Chinese government because of the attendant risks that the demonstrations could start to turn public anger against the government itself.²⁰ The revival of the history of war must be framed within the revival of the popular and school-taught idea that China suffered a “century of humiliation” from the 1840 Opium War to the end of the Japanese invasion/occupation in 1945. In this narrative, the entire century of humiliation has been distilled into a few signal events, of which the “Nanking Massacre” features prominently.²¹ To “wash away” this humiliation is a central constitutive element in the current nationalism that is stoked by the Chinese government.²² Indeed, Callahan goes so far as to suggest right now: “People who hate Japan

thus is one way to answer the question, ‘who is China?’”²³

With the division of Korea into separate northern and southern states as a casualty of the Cold War, the American military administration depended heavily on those who had worked with the Japanese colonial government to continue to govern the postwar country. The most notable example is President Park Chung Hee himself, who was trained as a Japanese military officer and commissioned as a lieutenant in the Manchukuo Imperial Army until the final stages of the Second World War. Park also worked as an intelligence officer under a Japanese name, spying on Korean resistance guerrillas. He took power after a coup d'état in 1961 and established a military-backed authoritarian regime until his assassination in 1979. Park's regime was succeeded by a second authoritarian military regime, that of Chun Doo Hwan, until he was removed by the power of a democratic mass movement in 1988. The successive authoritarian regimes gave priority to trade, economic development, and international relations, while suppressing issues linked to the history of Japanese colonization. Yet, such politically suppressed silence inevitably breaks down when political conditions change.²⁴ Democratization and the expansion of civil society brought new developments to the history debate within Korea, addressing specifically the issue of the “collaborators” with the Japanese colonizers, with the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2005. The Korean nation has subsequently forgiven former President Chun Doo Hwan, while the forgiveness of President Park Chung Hee is reflected in the fact that his daughter was elected President in 2013. Also, international relations between Korea and Japan have improved significantly with the agreement on cultural exchange in 1998 and the joint hosting of the World Cup in 2002. Nevertheless, the Korean government, like the Chinese, continues to protest the history textbook issue and the visits to the Yasukuni Shrine by Japanese politicians. In addition, in 2011, then Korean President Lee Myung-bak raised the issue of the “Comfort Women” with the Japanese government, in a new context where the issue found wide civil society support. This was undertaken possibly to enhance Lee's political popularity and national solidarity by reigniting Korean resentment of Japan as a past colonizer.

The “Comfort Women”

In line with the public sentiments at home, the Korean government had made demands for formal apology and compensation from the Japanese government for the surviving comfort women. In June 2016, the most recent development, a “settlement” appeared to have been reached, in which the Japanese government will provide one billion yen to financially support the surviving comfort women in Korea. The fact that the negotiated settlement would pave the way for a general security based on a military information agreement between the two countries, perhaps belies the “sincerity” of the negotiators regarding the interests of the surviving comfort women, who were not consulted about the negotiations. The new “urgency” on the two governments to “settle” the issue is probably additional pressure from the United States, which is interested in seeing its two closest allies in Asia working together to counter the rise of China as a world power; the Chinese had been aggressively claiming the entire South China Sea as its “territory.” As anticipated, the negotiated settlement has been met with objections from Korean civil society and its implementation has been put on hold. Meanwhile, Korean civil society has stepped up its activities in commemorating the comfort women, designating, in the prominent Namsan Park, a “Place of Memory of Comfort Women” with a structure dubbed “The Navel of the World” which carries the phrase “history that is unmemorized repeats” in four languages. The memorial thus aims to be both a reminder and a promise of non-repetition.

One of the conditions for the settlement is that the Korean government is never to raise the issue of comfort women again. Through this settlement, Japan in effect seeks to impose political silence on the history of the comfort women. This desire for political silence is reinforced by a second condition for settlement: that the Korean government remove the statue of the unknown young Comfort Women that civil society organizations installed outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul, in 2011. Symbolically, the sculpture of a single unknown young girl in effect de-individualizes the comfort women in order to represent all comfort women. The siting of the sculpture, although far from the locations of the “comfort houses” in the war zones—and thus not located

at the “site of memories,” nevertheless identifies the perpetrator of the violence. Its removal and thus absence from the symbolically strategic site would progressively dilute, if not erase, the memory of comfort women; yet another mode of silencing their history, augmenting the effect of the Japanese right-wing historical textbooks that seek to deny the entire shameful episode.

However, the surviving comfort women stand as personal embodiments of the experience of violence. As eye-witnesses to their own victimization, they stand as “moral truth-tellers,” “witnesses for the legal record,”²⁵ and seekers of justice, interrupting any attempt to “silence” them. “The relations between silence and speech is figured as one of liberation, both politically and personally: to reveal truths which have been denied and to remind the world of its responsibilities to those who have suffered, on the one hand; to heal the self by the very act of speaking and being heard, on the other.”²⁶ The “responsibilities” of the world extend to include not only the perpetrators but also those who are witness or spectators of the traumatic acts and their consequences on the victims. It was the responsibilities of the perpetrator that the right-wing LDP government initially tried to deny by insisting that the Japanese Imperial Army was not responsible for organizing the “comfort stations” and that the women were professional prostitutes recruited by pimps; it had subsequently admitted to the organizing role of the military. On the other hand, it was with the responsibilities of “witnesses,” even indirectly, that the women NGOs across the region, including those in Korea and Japan, continue to assist the surviving comfort women in their search for justice. If history is a record of documents, then, the surviving comfort women now stand in the way of history. However, when the last of them leaves us, their sufferings will become an ‘event’ in history; their living memories would be inscribed on the sculpture as a monument of remembrance; and then, moments of “silence” by passers-by in front of the statue are commemorative moments of remembrance and mourning of the inhumanity the comfort women suffered.²⁷

Conclusion

From this brief survey of the present disputes over the history of Japanese imperial violence, we can make some observations and raise some conceptual issues. First, substantively, the state is an active agent in mass violence, either domestically or as the invader of other territories. It is also directly involved in the suppression and/or fanning of indignations against mass violence, both in the name of nationalism. The three northeast Asian states displayed all these behaviors: China suppresses public discussion of its own massive domestic state violence but fans its people's anger towards Japan; South Korea has tried to come to terms with the domestic state violence of its authoritarian regimes but has yet to forgive Japan for the violence of colonialism and the Pacific War; Japan appears impenitent in accepting the responsibility to apologize for the violence its military visited on the rest of Asia, but is all too willing to forgive their military that had carried out the violence. In the face of Japan's impenitence and to shore up their sagging political legitimacy at home, the incumbent governments of China and South Korea are willing to capitalize on this to stoke the anger of their respective citizens, appealing to their nationalism, resolving always to be vigilant, to defend the nation from being shamed and violated again in the future.

Conceptually, the question is: What factors facilitate the forgiveness of domestic state violence and tyranny? Two factors appear important. First, the perpetrator(s) are identifiable as individuals who can be held directly responsible. Second, the perpetrators are fellow citizens. That the perpetrators are among us in some ways implicates 'us' as fellow citizens—or writ large, as our nation—and as contributors to the shaping of the perpetrators. 'We' must figure in some ways in explaining and accounting for the perpetrators' actions. Furthermore, as the violence was perpetuated on a selective segment of our fellow citizens, as it almost always is, was the majority of the unaffected citizens not in some way complicit in allowing the violence to persist, especially when the majority stood to gain (in)directly from the violation of those citizens who were targeted?

Here, taking the two factors together: Being able to identify the

perpetrators creates discursive room to emphasize their “personal” character (authoritarian) and to attribute the violence to individual responsibilities. Ideologically, this lets the nation (i.e. the rest of ‘us’ fellow citizens) off the hook; the barbarism of the perpetrators is theirs alone and is not a national characteristic. However, given silent complicity, it is unlikely that the rest of the citizenry will let themselves off without reservations or the twangs of guilty conscience; here, forgiving the perpetrators is also forgiving the self. Is this not the case with those South Koreans who have forgiven their past authoritarian leaders, Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan?

The exact opposite is the case of dealing with mass violence exercised by an invading army. Here, the perpetrators are not identified—or not identifiable—individually, and so they are marked by their national identity. The unidentified perpetrators are collectivized, and the responsibilities attributed to the abstract nation; it was the Japanese Imperial Army who carried out violence in the name and interests of the Japanese nation. Correspondingly, victimization is also collectivized; it is ‘us’ as a whole, as a violated ‘nation,’ even if, as individuals, we did not suffer. (We set aside the issue of those of ‘us’ who worked, either because we were coerced or because we volunteered to work, with the colonial power in the decades of colonization.) This collectivization of perpetrators and victims as the embodiment of their respective nations makes the history of war an effective vehicle for stoking xenophobic nationalism for all three countries. Obviously, such unproductive jingoist nationalism should be critically disrupted, if the living on both sides are to move forward. In this instance, as the victims of the violence from Japan, China, and Korea have the moral upper hand in the ethics of guilt, it is they who are in the position to forgive, if not forget. The ethical injunction to forgive is ironically based on the need not only to remember the inhumanity of the Japanese but also to acknowledge the capacity for violence and inhumanity of the Chinese and the Koreans who resisted the Japanese. The grounds for forgiveness thus involve remembering not only ‘us’ but also ‘them’; to acknowledge that inhumanity lies within the human.²⁸

Ironically, a portion of the commanding perpetrators of the Japanese

Imperial Army violence against China and South Korea, had been identified; namely, the more than one thousand individuals, including the fourteen Class A criminals (for crimes against peace), found guilty of some form of war crime by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, who are enshrined in the Yasukuni Shrine. It is the presence of this group of individuals that Korea and China protest when the LDP politicians troop over for the annual commemoration ceremonies at the Shrine. The participation of LDP leaders, especially the incumbent prime minister, in these ceremonies is seen by Korea and China as an intentional act of provocation as they play into the game of the right-wing LDP politicians, whose intention appears to be the “honoring” of the war criminals as Japan’s national war heroes. While there is certainly some truth to this claim, we need to ask, whether the Japanese people have the right to redeem its citizens, however unsavory, according to their own religious traditions. As enshrinement is a religious act of absolution, the act is also simultaneously an act of remembrance: not forgetfulness, nor necessarily one of forgiveness. Here, perhaps once again, the narrow reading of the Yasukuni commemoration by the current Korean and Chinese governments may be an intentional misrecognition that feeds their respective nationalism.

The case of the Comfort Women raises different conceptual questions. Whereas violence is arguably mutual in the battlefield, in the case of the Comfort Women, the vector of violence and inhumanity is unidirectional, from the male Japanese soldiers to the enslaved women; it represents the force of military invasion and masculinity rolled into one. The ethical grounds for forgiveness are thus necessarily different from those of violence on the battlefield. In the medical studies of trauma, “What patients usually crave instead of forgetting is meaning, that is, being able to give the trauma a meaningful place in their life narrative. The fact trauma events seem senseless, cruel acts of blind fate, is part of what makes them traumatic.”²⁹ The Japanese government’s initial denial of military responsibility was something that seemed to deny the truth of the comfort women’s painful public telling of their trauma. In solidarity with the comfort women, Koreans have ensured remembrance of the trauma with the sculpture of the unknown comfort women in

front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul and in the commemorative structure in Namsan Park. The support of women NGOs, across the region, for the surviving comfort women requires particular attention as a deeper expression of female solidarity in a region in which an abusive patriarchy remains highly entrenched; the comfort women may be said to be an iconic expression and embodiment of its continuing power. The Japanese government has now admitted to the imperial military's culpability and has tried to make reparations, the latest being the recent agreement between the Korean and the Japanese government. One of the objections to the "agreement" is that the surviving comfort women have not been consulted, thus denying them their human right to speak. This is of course a very serious, possibly intentional, oversight. Hopefully, the negotiating parties do not simply wait in the hope that the death of the last surviving comfort women will facilitate a smoother agreement.

Notes

¹ Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "You Don't Want to Know about the Girls? The 'Comfort Women,' the Japanese Military and Allied Forces in the Asia Pacific War," *Asia Pacific Journal/Japan Focus*, August 2, 2015, accessed July 8, 2016, <http://apjff.org/2015/13/31/Tessa-Morris-Suzuki/4352.html>.

² Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

³ Lewis Coser, introduction to *On Collective Memory*, ed. Maurice Halbwachs (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Siobhan Kattago, "Written in Stone: Monuments and Representation," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Memory Studies*, ed. Siobhan Kattago (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2015), 179-95.

⁶ Thomas U. Berger, *War, Guilt, and World Politics after World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 125.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁸ Atuhl Kohli, "Where Do High-Growth Political Economies Come from? The Japanese Lineage of Korean 'Developmentalist State,'" in *The Developmentalist State*, ed. Meredith Woo Cummings (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 93-136.

⁹ Daniel Chirot, "Admitting Guilt IS Neither Common nor Easy: Comparing World War II Memories in Europe and East Asia," in *Confronting Memories of World War II*, ed. Daniel Chirot, Gi-Wook Shin, and Daniel Sneider (Seattle: University of Washington

Press, 2014), 22.

¹⁰ Ibid., 37.

¹¹ Ibid., 38.

¹² Berger, *War, Guilt, and World Politics*. For a detailed analysis of the entrenched right-wing conservatism of the LDP and Japanese politics, see T.J. Pempel, "A Decade of Political Torpor: When Political Logic Trumps Economic Rationality," in *Beyond Japan: The Dynamics of East Asian Regionalism*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein and Takashi Shiraisi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 37-62.

¹³ William Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 166.

¹⁴ Gi-Wook Shin, "Historical Reconciliation in Northeast Asia: Past Efforts, Future Steps and the U.S. Role," in *Confronting Memories*, 159-60.

¹⁵ Berger, *War, Guilt, and World Politics after World War II*, 182.

¹⁶ Daniel Sneider, "Interrupted Memories: The Debate over Wartime Memory in Northeast Asia," in *Confronting Memories*, 46-47.

¹⁷ Kevin Blackman and Karl Hack, *War Memory and the Making of Modern Singapore and Malaysia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), 164.

¹⁸ See all Lee Kuan Yew quotes in Cheng Guan Ang, *Lee Kuan Yew's Strategic Thought* (London: Routledge, 2013), 79.

¹⁹ Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, 161-62.

²⁰ Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protests in China's Foreign Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

²¹ Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, 162-90.

²² Ibid., 168.

²³ Ibid., 165.

²⁴ Jay Winter, "Thinking about Silence," in *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Efrat Ben-Ze'ev, Ruth Ginio, and Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5.

²⁵ Siobhan Kattago, introduction to *The Ashgate Research Companion*, 9.

²⁶ Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, "Remembering Suffering: Trauma and History," in *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, ed. Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (London: Routledge, 2003), 97.

²⁷ Winter, "Thinking about Silence," 3-31.

²⁸ Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

²⁹ Martijn Meeter, "Trauma and the Truth," in *Memory in the Twenty-first Century: New Critical Perspectives from Arts, Humanities, and Sciences*, ed. Sebastian Groes (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 344.