

Volker Stanzel

Prologue

Researching a Painful Past

Collective memory is part of the human condition. The memory members of a community—or a nation—share, is shaped by past events collectively experienced. It also is shaped by present modes of thinking. It therefore may be a cause as well as a tool of politics at different times and ages. It may mediate the identities of communities. And it may positively or negatively impact reconciliation between communities.

In the midst of geopolitically volatile East Asia where four competing nuclear powers sit side by side, two democratic, affluent nations should, by all logic, be islands of stability, bound by similar values, interests, and the need to protect themselves against not too friendly neighbours. But that is not the case. Japan and South Korea—these are the two seemingly obvious candidates for friendly cohabitation—have continuously tense relations that these days, in 2019, are worse than ever during the about seventy years since both countries regained sovereignty as nation-states. The reason lies in their conflicting collective memories.

In a nutshell, though in a very general way, one might say that in South Korea historical pride is an element of the collective memory of Korea's relationship with Japan, Korea standing closely at the side of the Chinese Empire for centuries. Then there are the instances of victimisation at the hands of the Japanese: a devastating invasion in the 16th century, the year 1876 when Japan forced Korea to open the country to the outside world, lastly the colonisation of Korea from 1910 to 1945. On the Japanese side there is a sense of measuring itself against China rather than China-dependent Korea; and maybe Japan rising economically during the second half of the 20th century so much earlier than South Korea, becoming the world's second economic power, had ambiguous effects on the feelings on both sides of the Korea Strait. These collective memories made for a more complicated relationship than that of Japan with the other countries its troops had ravaged during the Pacific War.

Violent conflicts between human communities cause collective suffering; they also leave lasting scars in the minds of both victims and aggressors. These may transcend the lifetime of the generation who experienced or caused the suffering. In order to enable societies to build a peaceful future for themselves, such scars need to be dealt with. For that purpose reconciliation with former enemies may be necessary — or not, if that seems the politically more advantageous option. The history of conflicts between societies throughout the world shows that reconciliation is as possible as is the re-awakening of dormant conflicts. In such cases, politics employs relevant elements of collective memories as instruments to overcome the residue of conflict, or to deepen it. The case of Japan and Korea offers examples of both options.

In 1965 both countries established diplomatic relations, obliging Japan to make available a series of loans and grants for economic cooperation and compensation for the colonial period. From then on

up to the present time, Japanese politicians, its parliament and emperor repeatedly expressed „remorse“ and issued apologies for Japan’s crimes during the colonial period. By the early 2000s the civil societies of both countries developed in similar ways: affluence built on economic growth allowed modern cosmopolitan pop culture to thrive: music, movies, „manga“, hi-tech gadgets; Japanese singers became popular in Korea, Korean soap operas in Japan. And in 2002, both countries jointly staged the Football World Cup. In a more serious vein, historians of both countries produced a joint history book: „The History of Interaction between Korea and Japan: From Pre-historic to Modern Times“.

That happy period ended in 2007. The official Japanese statements on the suffering Japan had inflicted on Korea, all along occasionally had been countered by other public figures in Japan who denied the war crimes or eulogised the colonial period. High school history textbooks in Japan often had been accused by South Koreans of glossing over Japanese wartime aggression. The joint history book on which work had begun in 1997 had been presented to the public in 2007, and it so far never came to be adopted as a textbook for schools in either country. But the trigger of the deterioration of relations between the two countries turned out to be the issue of forced prostitution in Korea during the war (the system of the so-called „comfort women“¹) which re-emerged in 2007 when a Korean group representing surviving women demanded a new apology and compensation from Japan, supported by a similar demand by the American Congress. The dispute that ensued gradually exacerbated other areas of conflict between the two countries, such as a persistent territorial dispute, and the question of individual compensation for forced labour employed by Japanese companies during the colonial period.

In an effort to overcome the process of mutual poisoning of the relations, in 2015 Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe and South Korean president Park Geyun-hye reached an agreement on the creation of a fund to pay compensation to surviving forced prostitutes, accompanied by a renewed Japanese apology; in turn the South Korean government declared the matter as "finally and irreversibly resolved" and promised to take away a statue of a forced prostitute an NGO had placed opposite of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. However the statue was left standing due to strong domestic opposition, another statue was erected in front of the Japanese consulate in Busan in 2016, and in 2018 the new South Korean president Moon Jae-in even went as far as apologising to the surviving women for the agreement his predecessor had concluded. Also in 2018, the Korean Supreme Court permitted South Korean former war labourers to claim compensation from Japan, and allowed the Korean government to impound assets of Japanese companies guilty of employing forced labour during the colonial period.² In retaliation, Japan restricted exports of hi-tech materials to South Korea. There were unfriendly encounters between Japanese and Korean warships and planes, cooperation in military intelligence was terminated by South Korea, and at the G 20 summit in Osaka in June 2019, the South Korean president and the Japanese prime minister avoided to have their usual bilateral meeting.

¹ „Comfort women“ (Jap. ianfu, Korean wianbu) was the euphemism for forced prostitution created in war-time Japan, an obviously cynical term that - strangely - still is in use world-wide.

² Here, the position of the Japanese government is that the agreement of 1965 has settled for good all compensation issues, and that it is the responsibility of the South Korean government to satisfy individual claims.

Memory is never frozen. Only the very moment something occurs is the past imminent. The stronger that moment is emotionally charged, the longer it will remain in an individual's or a community's memory - but, not unchanged: the process of remembering is constructive. Thus the accuracy of a particular memory is the exception. This is even truer if no-one, or not many, of the original victims or perpetrators are alive anymore. Then, what the next generations perceive as the authentic narrative created from disjointed elements of past events may gain retrospective significance as an element of politics that is very much today's. Political leaders may find it more important to cater to parts of their public than to promote reconciliation with a former enemy. The public may be generationally so far removed from the actual experience of the violence of the past that reconciliation and peace do not seem to be of vital importance. Thus there is no shortage of instances in the world where the recreation of old memories has acquired a new and dangerous salience; the conflict between Serbs and Kosovars over battles fought as long ago as in the 14th century is a case in point.

War crimes, including forced prostitution and forced labour, occurred wherever the Japanese armed forces went during the Pacific War. Yet nowhere (not even in China which regularly accuses Japan of not owing up sufficiently to its war crime history) have collective memories become tools of today's politics to the degree it is the case between South Korea and Japan. As much as the memory of the pain endured or inflicted must be kept alive, most of all to prevent another slide into outbursts of violence: it must not hinder reconciliation but must promote it. There were offenders, and there were victims, and there were those who were both at the same time. Their descendants should not be defined by the deeds and sufferings of their ancestors. Especially in today's world of shifting grounds, it would seem essential that two countries that have much in common aside from their past of violence and suffering find ways for their societies to move on toward a durable peaceful future.

And yet, even the most dedicated efforts, guided by common sense and good will on all sides, may still encounter almost insurmountable obstacles in the minds of the people concerned. Germans and French, Germans and Poles, all of them well known for seemingly successful reconciliation work, provide striking cases in point. Historians of both countries cooperated over three years in the German-French case, eight years in the German-Polish one, to author joint schoolbooks on history, in a work similar to that of the Japanese and Korean historians mentioned before. Both groups were successful; or so they thought. In 2006 the first of three volumes of the German-French book „Europe and the World Since 1945“ was presented to the public; the first volume of the German-Polish one „Europe - Our History“ in 2016. In both cases the academics involved had come a long way in establishing a joint view of the conflictuous history of their countries. Longer than the societies of the three countries had, it turned out. To date, in all three countries the books have not yet become regularly used in schools, or if so in singular cases, then in the context of an „experimental phase“. Even in these countries, often seen as models for reconciliation, in fact, it seems, the Past still has an irresistible claim on the Present.

That is why it is essential to research the facts of even the most painful matters of the past painstakingly, and conscientious of the pitfalls waiting. Meticulous and circumspectious exploration of the facts is necessary if the obstacles in the way are to be surmounted. Ms Park Yu-ha has tried to

do that with this volume, now made available in English by Barak Kushner and his Cambridge Translation Team.