

# Part 1

## Reimagining History

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# Chapter 1

## Imagining Alternative Pasts: Imperial Nostalgia on Japanese Television

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*Japanese victimhood tends to be at the center of commemoration of the Asia-Pacific War on Japanese television, with Japanese imperialism across East Asia being only occasionally represented. During the administration of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō (a known historical revisionist and prominent proponent of tighter media control), several changes in the narrative around Japanese imperialism could be observed on the small screen. Comparing several Japanese television dramas from the mid-2000s (when Abe was not in power) to 2015 (with him firmly in office), this paper will examine how representations of Japanese imperialism changed within that decade.*

### **Introduction: Can television change the past?**

The broadcasting of history is a lucrative business. For better or for worse, history and television are almost insolubly tied together. Particularly in countries with a public broadcasting system, and/or educational aims written into the broadcasting laws, television will aim to take the broadcasting of history “seriously.” Gary Edgerton (2001, 1, italics in original) asserts that “*television is the principal means by which most people learn about history today.*” Nonetheless, whether drama or documentary, television programs tend to put the “story” in history, focusing on narratives, satisfying our thirst for a coherent tale with heroes and villains and a clearly defined plotline. Even documentaries try to woo audiences by telling a gripping tale, to keep the audiences hooked in front of the screen and to remain discernible in the “flow” of televisual images. Because of the narrative structure that most television formats follow, more often than not the lines between fact and fiction can blur and genres converge. Nonetheless, the often-clichéd liveness of television, the sense of being

there when “things” happen(ed) allows us to escape to the past, in the same way as Buonanno (2008, 70) establishes for “imaginary tourism;” but in this case, we can time-travel without leaving the security of our homes and the time we live in. Often enough, however, television is not taken as a serious competitor in the selling of history (Anderson 2001, 24), particularly if one looks at fiction, in spite of its pervasiveness and the point that Edgerton makes. And, as Holdsworth (2008, 139) also argues, DVD sales, online archives and online content providers make the past even more easily available to us.

The narration of televised history is very much a contribution to the imagination of a nation in Benedict Anderson’s (1991) sense—it helps to shape a common historical consciousness, a past that we, in the present, can live through together. It has long been established that a common memory, or collective memory, helps to maintain a consciousness of a group (Connerton 1989; Halbwachs 1992; Ricoeur 2009), particularly through common commemorative ceremonies, memorials or, indeed, the media. The media can help keep established narratives alive, but these narratives will always be selective, just as memory is always selective. In that sense, historical dramas and documentaries are but two sides of the same coin, as they will often document—or fictionalise—the same events, contributing to the collective memory of the event. And while this common, and very present, experience of the past might perhaps educate us, it can equally gloss over aspects of the past that would not sell well. The past, after all, needs to be one that we recognise and to which we can relate.

While the above considerations are truisms valid across most of the democratic broadcasting industries in Europe or North America, slightly different tropes apply if we look at East Asia, in particular Japan. With respect to Japan’s past as imperial power in the region, the past is not just a selling point, but also a bone of contention, and whatever approach to “unifying the nation” may appear on television, Japan’s neighbours will scrutinise it. Although Huyssen (2001, 63) proposes that “the political site of memory practices is still national, not postnational or global,” in the day and age of global interconnectedness, collective memory does not stop at borders. If Japan does not “remember correctly” in the eyes of its neighbours, even in television drama, it can easily spark outrage. However, Japan has a tightly regulated broadcasting system, one in which the production of content (fictional or non-fictional) has to follow strict rules and regulations. Japan, too, had its “memory boom” (Seaton 2007), television (and film) bringing us versions of a past, but it takes different shapes than in Europe, and fictional, not factual, formats, have taken center stage throughout. *Jidaigeki* (period dramas), for example, started off in cinema and are films or dramas mostly set in a samurai past. When Japanese cinema declined (like its counterparts all over the

world), *jidaigeki* moved from the big screens to the small and have been a staple of the broadcasting landscape since the 1960s. The public broadcasting station NHK in particular has high stakes in the market, their *taiga dorama*<sup>1</sup> are highly promoted “media events” (Buonanno 2008; Dayan and Katz 1994) that run over the course of one year. But they will mostly represent a past that is, in Nietzsche’s (2009) terms, usable, a past without contest. In other words, a past that does not involve Japan’s neighbours or its imperialist desires to a great extent.

Furthermore, Japan has more or less been governed by the same political party since 1955, and not only are the media restricted by broadcasting guidelines (Yamada 2017), media and politics also are in a cosy relationship with one another. While this has always been the case, things changed decisively from 2012 onwards, during Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s second term in office (Fackler 2016).<sup>2</sup> The government has furthermore embarked on a course to “revise” some of the more contentious parts of Japan’s past, turning the narrative from conqueror of East Asia to liberator from other imperial powers and benevolent colonial master. Television, as the most ubiquitous and visible medium in Japan is therefore sandwiched between a government intent on revising the past and a restrictive broadcasting system enforced by the same government. While it may thus seem safer not to mention the more contentious bits of Japanese history at all, they do appear on television, albeit to a much smaller extent. As fiction is so important in that respect in Japan, television drama and its focus on stars and the potential for identification that they offer can lure people into an engagement with the past in a way that documentary cannot. They can equally create and uphold narratives (Thornham and Purvis 2005), including those that may perhaps be problematic if discussed in a non-fictional context, as there is controversy over “the facts.” As Buonanno (2008, 77, italics in original) points out, “[...] we need to take stories seriously. One reason for doing so is that they provide a stage for social reality and organize and display the dramaturgy through which *society represents itself to itself*.”

Invariably, though, the question of “historical accuracy” pops up, particularly when talking about fiction. But those questions may be for historians to answer (Rosenstone 2018). To some extent that has already happened, as a lot has been written about the significance of collective memory and the media, also in the context of Japan. Most often, the focus is either on the text or on its relationship to actual historical events. Few of these studies, however, have taken into account the constraints set by the industry that produces the texts, the political and legal framework that dictates how content can be produced. Using Japan and its memory of its own imperial past as example, this paper aims to close that gap, by showing

that a text exists not just within the context of its society, but also within the context of its creative industries. To do this, I will answer the question: to what extent are the creative industries shaped by political forces, and how does this in turn influence the production of content? Before looking at the Japanese television industry, however, it is necessary to look briefly at the historical background to elucidate why broadcasting “the war” could be problematic in Japan and the wider East Asian context.

## **Japanese imperialism and the memory of “the War”**

For a little less than two-hundred and fifty years, Japan was a comparatively secluded country, trading only with very few other countries. Therefore, it was able to withdraw itself mostly from the world stage. When the maelstrom of global imperialism eventually caught hold of Japan, the nation embarked on a modernization process to catch up with the dominant powers of the day, and thus avoid its own colonization. The key concept, phrased by the most influential political thinker of the time, Fukuzawa Yūkichi, was *datsu-a nyū-ō* (leaving Asia, entering the West); it pointedly explains the aim of Japan to become one of the major powers itself while attempting to leave the supposedly less-developed Asian countries behind.

Japan thus entered the stage as imperial power only relatively late when the world had already been largely carved up. Its eyes, however, were not set on faraway shores, but on its immediate neighbours. Japan considered itself to be “in, but above Asia” (Iwabuchi 2002, 8), superior to the rest of Asia that had not been as successful in avoiding colonization. Japan’s first target was China, in the first Sino-Japanese war of 1894/5 which resulted in Taiwan becoming a Japanese colony. Korea was next and became a Japanese colony in 1910. In 1931, Japan established a puppet government in Manchuria (in North-East China) under the leadership of the ousted Chinese emperor Pu-Yi. While the Japanese colonial regime was far from benign—for example, colonial citizens in Taiwan and Korea were forced to take Japanese names and the usage of their native languages became limited—the Japanese government furthermore encouraged its own poorer population to leave the Japanese homeland and settle on the Asian continent (Tamanoi 2008; Young 1998), ensuring a Japanese presence on all levels. The settlement and incorporation of Manchuria into the Japanese Empire was also not without violence, even though it was nominally independent. The incidents in Manchuria led directly to the invasion of China in 1937, another one of Japan’s imperialistic targets. While this war tends to be looked at through the lens of the

Nanjing Massacre, the events in the then-capital of China during the Japanese invasion in 1937 are but one brutal aspect of a war that was to last eight years and only came to an end when Japan surrendered to the US in 1945. However, not all aspects of that war are equally remembered in Japan. The comfort women (women, mainly, but not solely, from Korea, forced to work as sex slaves for the Japanese Army) and Unit 731 (an army unit testing chemical and biological weapons on Chinese civilians), are aspects of that war that have largely “slipped the mind” of Japanese commemoration in favor of the fight against the US (Buruma 1995).

The USA only entered the fray in 1941 after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor and only then did the various conflicts across the world become one war fought with various actors on various fronts. For Japan, the USA became the most prominent opponent at that time. The fire-bombing of various major Japanese cities by the US Air Force as well as the two nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki did, arguably, lead to a culture of commemoration focusing on those events, marking Japan as victim rather than perpetrator of the war (Buruma 1995).

This focus on being a victim of the war has led to criticism from other Asian countries that had been at the receiving end of Japanese imperialism, since the fact that Japan colonized East Asia is often left out of such narratives. Textbooks that downplay Japanese actions on the Asian mainland have also led to controversy within East Asia, and the war in Asia and the Pacific in all its complexities is not necessarily taught widely at school, because of Japan’s role in starting it. Even more than seventy years after the end of the war, there is still little consensus around the past; in other words, it is not easily usable. In his book on Japanese war memory and media, Philip Seaton (2007, 21–24) establishes that there are five viewpoints from which the war can be seen: progressive and progressive leaning, both accepting that Japan started an unjustifiable war and differing only in that the progressives reject victimhood for the Japanese while progressive-leaning people accept it; conservative, which sees the war as having been justified and Japan becoming its ultimate victim; and nationalist, in which the war was not only justified, but also fought in the right way. The fifth category comprises people who have no interest in, or knowledge of, the topic. That way, it becomes clear that what arouses the least controversy is Japan as victim of the war and this is where the focus is often set in the media.

Yet not even that is easy. As briefly mentioned above, Japan has been governed by the same conservative-nationalist party, the LDP, for most of its postwar history. Many politicians are involved in groups that favour a re-evaluation of Japan’s role in the war,

ultimately aiming to silence the progressive and progressive-leaning discourses. Abe, Japan's longest serving Prime Minister of the recent past (2012–2020), is one of those historical revisionists. He has been involved in several groups that argue for a reconsideration of Japan's position as "aggressor" in East Asia in the first half of the 20th century to become that of a benefactor to its neighbors, therefore rendering the attacks on its neighbors (and Pearl Harbor) as just and justifiable actions. Historical revisionists such as Abe thus aim to let Japan's history as perpetrator recede to the background, preferring instead to instill "patriotism" by highlighting Japan's achievements (Saaler 2016). Imperialism, particularly if recast as beneficent for the colonized, can fulfill such a purpose and generate a feeling of nostalgia for lost greatness, particularly in the face of a more powerful China in East Asia. As Mariko Asano Tamanoi (2008, 159–60) points out,

*... the sense of nostalgia does not simply represent the nation's yearning for the landscapes, lifestyles, and spectacles of the lost empire; it also represents the nation's strategy, enabling it to deny the existence of "the rupture in history." And the memory industry, which has replaced the Japanese state, has been playing the major role in assisting the Japanese people to forget the power of their own state, which once dominated ordinary Chinese people in a place where they now entertain themselves.*

Television, and particularly television drama, are part of this "memory industry" (Tamanoi 2008, 160), but Japanese television tends to broadcast what can be shown without creating too much controversy, bringing us back to the trope of Japan as victim of nuclear bombings and the wide acceptance of Japanese people as victims of the war. More often than not, the commemoration of the dropping of the nuclear bombs is taken out of context, and the nuclear bombs become some kind of natural disaster (Buruma 1995) that has been unleashed upon Japan. Although, as Seaton (2007, 116) points out for the 1970s to the early 2000s, progressive discourses on Japan's past as colonizer have been broadcast on all channels,<sup>3</sup> since then, substantial changes have happened in the Japanese broadcasting landscape that make this claim no longer valid. In the following, these changes to the Japanese mediascape will be outlined.

## Japanese television as aide-mémoire

“Through its repetition and continual re-narrativization of grand historical narratives of, for example, world wars and world cups, television itself is marked by, and generates our obsession with, commemoration and anniversaries” (Holdsworth 2008, 138). Although Amy Holdsworth makes this statement for British television, the same can be said about Japan. In Japan, however, a clear focus on August can equally be observed (Seaton 2007), as not only did the two nuclear attacks happen on the 6th and 9th of August 1945 respectively, Japan also surrendered unconditionally to the USA on 15 August 1945. Furthermore, *obon*, the festival to commemorate the dead, falls during mid-August, and many people take annual leave to visit their family and the family graves. Therefore, the most prominent programs focusing on the war will be promoted as “media events” (Buonanno 2008; Dayan and Katz 1994) around that time. Because documentaries are not a very important format on Japanese television, the media events will most often be television dramas.

One reason for this certainly is that Japanese television is a personality-driven medium as stars take center stage in the promotion of a show. If a new television drama is announced and built up to be the “media event,” very rarely, if ever, will the directors or producers be visible. Except for a select few, they tend to hide behind the “big names” they have cast. However, stars in Japan, no matter how famous they are, are contracted employees of their agencies (Aoyagi 2005; Kirsch 2014) and therefore typecasting is a common occurrence, as it would be an economic risk to let actors and actresses go too much against type. For that reason, audiences know exactly what to expect from the dramas. For example, Matsushima Nanako, the main character in one of the dramas to be discussed, has previously appeared in another drama set during the war and is famous for playing strong women on the small screen. Casting Matsushima will attract a certain fan audience.

This is not limited to fiction; the presence of television stars, or *tarento* in Japanese, is prevalent throughout the medium. Hardly a format works without the participation of *tarento* on screen who, in effect, often replace the audiences. During a variety show, the *tarento* will show their reaction in place of the audiences, with the downside that the reactions to any kind of controversial topic become scripted and enacted, offering an opportunity to silence dissent as the powerful agencies would not want their employees to be involved with anything that could generate controversy (Kirsch 2014).



Therefore, broadcasting a program that is potentially controversial, or goes against established and widely accepted narratives is difficult. Although Japanese television broadcasting has, from its start in 1953, been operating within a dual system of private and public stations, which was set up to guarantee the plurality of opinion, news and narratives do not differ widely across the channels. Most of the broadcasting laws and guidelines were written by the US Occupation Forces in the late 1940s in an attempt to establish a media system that would be free of government control. Initially, they had favoured a system solely based on private broadcasting stations, but because the then-state broadcaster NHK had turned into an institution, it could not simply be taken off the air. Instead, the postwar NHK was modelled after the BBC and is financed solely through license fees. It is also the only station that is allowed to broadcast on a nationwide level. Furthermore, the chairman of NHK is appointed by the government, and its budget is set by the Diet, making indirect pressure at least possible (Krauss 2000, 2017).

By contrast, the first private station also went on air in 1953, and subsequently four more followed, making the setup of available channels that have dominated the market up to the present day complete by 1964. As, legally, private stations are regional stations, they need to form conglomerates to ensure nationwide coverage. Even with the digital switchover in 2012, the smallest of these conglomerates have yet to find partners in the most remote regions, so shows need to occasionally travel across conglomerate boundaries in order to be seen by the whole of Japan. Private stations are solely financed through commercials, but any show receives money from sponsors to be produced. As Hilaria Gössmann (1995) has pointed out, not upsetting those sponsors is paramount in the production of content on the private stations, leading to self-censorship in the creation of a show. But that is but one side of the coin. Hirahara (1991) mentions one example of direct influence by sponsors on content in the 1960s. When a television drama was seen to deal too critically with Japan's wartime past and postwar remilitarization, the sole sponsor of the drama withdrew its support, leading to the drama being shelved. More recently, sponsors threatened to withdraw support from a drama, *Ashita mama ga inai* (Abandoned, Nippon TV) in 2014, because its storyline had triggered a wave of complaints (Mainichi Shimbun 2014). But even before that, political influence has led to withdrawal of sponsorship, most notably in 1989 when the then-Minister for Trade and Industry, Kajiyama Seiroku advised the automobile industry to stop funding TV Asahi's flagship news program, *News Station* (Kume 2017). Sponsors, however, are not mentioned in any broadcasting guidelines, neither are the advertising agencies which will

provide the station with the sponsors, but they, together with the agencies of the actors, might wield considerable influence over the production of content.

Additionally, all big private television stations are affiliated with newspapers and although cross-ownership laws prohibit ownership greater than one third of the other company (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, n.d.), there are ways to bypass those laws, as the members of a conglomerate can own shares in other companies within the conglomerate. More importantly, newspapers and affiliated television stations tend to cooperate for news programs. Here, another peculiarity of the Japanese media system gains importance, namely the press clubs. Press clubs are informal gatherings of media and politicians (or any other body in need of media coverage). Participation is by invitation only, and it is there that news is shared. Since a violation of the unwritten rules would lead to exclusion from the vital press clubs, few journalists would dare to bite the hand that feeds them. As a result, investigative journalism is not very prevalent in Japan. Risking expulsion from the press clubs is not an easy step to take, so most news programs and newspapers tend to be descriptive rather than analytical, let alone critical. Although in theory, each paper has a political leaning, this leaning is usually only evident in the “Opinions” section and does not always translate to the affiliated television station.

Different rules apply to broadcasting. The broadcasting laws stipulate political neutrality, with controversial topics required to be tackled from as many angles as possible, yet there is no independent watchdog to make sure that the rules are fulfilled.<sup>4</sup> Every private station also has to apply for a renewal of their broadcasting license every five years. The right to grant, renew or indeed withdraw, a broadcasting license lies with the government—the Ministry of the Internal Affairs and Communications to be precise. While usually this is a mere formality, Fackler (2016) reports direct warnings made by government officials ahead of the 2014 election not to violate the broadcasting laws, citing an example that had (almost) been made out of one of the biggest stations in Japan, TV Asahi, in 1993. In that year, the LDP lost the election for the first time since 1955. Although they still were the strongest parliamentary party, they no longer held a majority and hence could not form a government. Instead, a coalition government took over. Shortly after the election, before the new government had been sworn in, the editor-in-chief of the news desk at TV Asahi claimed that the surprising outcome of the election had been due to the influence of the media, in particular his station—which had been very critical of the LDP and had “adapted the broadcasting to definitely destroy the 55-system” (Kume 2017, 260).<sup>5</sup> This conversation was leaked, and the uproar from the LDP was loud; they saw this as a direct violation of the

broadcasting law and threatened to block renewal of the station's broadcasting license. A subsequent inquiry saw the editor-in-chief take the blame and resign, and TV Asahi was severely reprimanded. This was not the first exchange of punches between the right-wing LDP and the left-wing Asahi Group, nor was it the last (Kume 2017; Yamaguchi 2017). The media in Japan has thus been operating within a restrictive system that encourages self-censorship. This means they are often at the whim of the prime minister in office at the time and the extent to which they will allow critical questions.

In 2012, with Abe's return to office, this changed decisively. The "battle" between the LDP and the Asahi Group intensified, and in 2014, the LDP embarked on a defamation campaign to discredit some of the reportages on the comfort women issue that only the Asahi Newspaper had ever dared to break, and which had received widespread criticism at the time, and now, particularly from the Japanese right (see, for example, Yamagiwa 2014). In the same year, many news anchors were forced off the air, at NHK, TBS and TV Asahi, seemingly in an attempt to "freshen" their image on screen; the common thread uniting these broadcast journalists was their tendency to ask probing questions. Additionally, the former chairman of NHK is on record stating that NHK should not veer away from government policy, effectively turning the seemingly independent public broadcaster into a state broadcasting station in all but name. In 2016 and 2017, the UN envoy for freedom of speech issued stern warnings to Japan that its media was becoming too tightly regulated. Abe, in particular, has been very vocal in trying to silence his critics. Although the neutrality law still applies, planned legislation would see the law abolished, giving the LDP the opportunity to decide what can be broadcast without having to abide by an already problematic "neutrality" themselves (Kirsch 2016; Yamada 2017).<sup>6</sup>

In a nutshell, when Seaton (2007) states that progressive programs could be observed across the spectrum, this no longer is the case. The LDP has ensured that progressive media have lost market share and therefore broadcasting controversial topics, such as the comfort women or the Nanjing Massacre, is no longer economically viable and potentially dangerous. The fight for the "correct" memory of the war is thus extending into all realms of public society and with the LDP wielding a tight grip on the media, the press clubs can be used as potential leverage. Therefore, when one looks at the topic of war memory from the angle of the industry, it becomes clear why the *taiga dorama* on NHK and the *jidaigeki* on the private stations tend to focus on a non-controversial past. Although it might be easy to say that the tightening of the screws refers solely to "factual" reporting and will not influence fictional content, as Hayden White (1997, 18) reminds us, it is an artificial distinction, and what will

influence the production of factual content, also has impact on the creation of fictional content, as it is subject to the same broadcasting law and can equally create controversy, particularly in the age of social media. Production of content is also not outsourced to smaller, independent companies, but happens within the same media conglomerate, reinforcing the point that the one goes hand in hand with the other.

## Rewriting the past?

How can this have an impact on content production? We have already established that the focus is on a usable past, and that does not necessarily have to be one that is more recent but is one that is least likely to cause upset with politicians and sponsors alike. While under previous prime ministers, the more “progressive” productions that Seaton (2007) observed seem to have been possible, what does cause upset—and what does not—changed decisively when Abe Shinzō came to power and started his campaign against “progressive” media and began to rewrite the past. As Abe, according to Fackler (2016), did not permit critical questions, the coordinates of the broadcasting landscape changed decisively during his time in office.

The year 2005 marked the start of the memory boom on Japanese television. It was the year of the 60th anniversary of the end of the war—an important date in the Chinese lunar calendar that implies everything has come full circle.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore not entirely unsurprising that the war was commemorated so intensely that year. Starting in May, dramas that represented the war in some form were broadcast, peaking in August when Japan normally commemorates the end of the war in the Pacific. Indeed, among those many dramas, a plethora did deal with the past in a more progressive way. And the memory boom did not stop in that year, but went on until at least 2012, albeit to a lesser extent than in 2005. For example, *Hiroshima Shōwa 20-nen 8-gatsu 6-ka* (Hiroshima 6 August 1945), produced by the television station TBS in 2005 (which is affiliated to another progressive paper, the Mainichi Newspaper) tackled the discrimination and abuse Korean colonial citizens faced in Japan very openly (Kirsch 2012). That all of this was in a narrative on Hiroshima may have made it more palatable for audiences, but it showed that the Empire had a darker side, too.

Similarly, the 2007 biopic *Ri Kōran* (TV Tokyo) also showed the darker side of the Japanese Empire. Ri Kōran was a Japanese actress whose career is intricately interwoven with notions of Empire, as she was a Japanese national who had grown up in Manchuria and

was thus fluent in Chinese so she could pose as Chinese during the war. Consequently, she starred as the “hot-headed” Chinese woman to be tamed (High 2003; Kirsch 2015) in many propaganda films. As her life and career are well known in Japan, it would have been difficult not to mention the Empire and Japan’s presence in Manchuria. What would, however, not have needed to be mentioned is the killing of Chinese civilians at the hands of Japanese soldiers.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the drama *Shinjitsu no shuki: BC-kyū senpan Katō Tetsutarō—Watashi wa kai ni naritai* (A true record: BC level war criminal Katō Tetsutarō—I want to be a shellfish, Nippon TV 2007) shows explicit killings of a Chinese boy at the hands of Japanese soldiers. Katō, another “real life person” is the author of the very famous short story *Watashi wa kai ni naritai* (I want to be a shellfish) that has since been turned into two films and two television dramas and which tells the story of a common soldier who is falsely tried as a war criminal. When the soldier is hanged for crimes he did not want to commit, he utters the words that if he gets to be reborn, he would like to be a shellfish, at the bottom of the sea, untroubled by any war between humans (Kirsch 2019). So, the Empire has not been absent from the small screen, and, at least for a certain period of time, its representation has crossed political boundaries. TBS and the (Nikkei Newspaper-affiliated) TV Tokyo, the more progressive stations, as well as Nihon TV, which is affiliated to the conservative paper Yomiuri Newspaper, do show cruelty and Japan’s imperial enterprise is not as rose-tinted as historical revisionists would want to see it. On the contrary, not much else is actually shown from the Japanese Empire apart from its cruelty. And in *Ri Kōran*, for example, it becomes obvious that it is far from a beneficial enterprise, because it put a strain on colonizer and colonized alike, showing many “imperialists” as broken figures.

Eight years later, in 2015, with Abe firmly in power, several changes could be observed. In 2015, three dramas were broadcast in August, and one drama was rebroadcast. Whatever was shown on television, apart from some fly-on-the wall documentaries and reportages, also tended to focus on the postwar rebuilding efforts, not the events of the war as such. However, two of these three dramas were set in Manchuria, namely *Reddo Kurosu—Onnatachi no akagami* (Red Cross—call-up orders for women) and *Tsuma to tonda tokkōhei* (The kamikaze pilot who flew with his wife), made by TBS and TV Asahi respectively, two supposedly progressive stations affiliated with progressive papers, and in the case of TV Asahi, also at loggerheads with Abe’s administration.<sup>9</sup>

In order to understand the significance of these dramas, not just in their industry context, but in their historical one as well, it is necessary to quickly outline the guiding principle under which Manchuria was to function. The most important one is that of *gozoku*

*kyōwa*—the harmony of the five “races”: the Japanese, the Han Chinese, the Manchurians, the Mongols and the Koreans. The Japanese were to guide the others, but the overall aim was “racial harmony.” While nothing of that harmony is shown in the previous dramas—on the contrary, the Empire is mainly full of violence—the slogan of *gozoku kyōwa* becomes visualised in the 2015 representations. *Red Cross*, for example, tells the story of a family of Japanese farmers living in rural Manchuria in close contact with their Chinese neighbors. They celebrate together and, all in all, few prejudices exist between them. In one particular scene during such a celebration, the setting is in very warm colours, suggesting “harmony” even on a visual level. The fighting that takes place around them is blamed on criminals—turning the first years of the war in East Asia into no war at all, therefore also referring to the parlance of the time, when these Chinese guerrilla forces were called “bandits” by the Japanese (Yamaguchi and Fujiwara 1987). Only with the fighting in China in 1937 is this idyll shattered and the family torn apart, but the time in Manchuria shines in glorious nostalgia of times when the Japanese still ruled the Asian mainland. No atrocities whatsoever are being shown, unlike in any of the previous dramas, and the colonial enterprise is represented as very successful, also in integrating the Japanese with their Chinese neighbors. The enemy that tears the idyll apart is the Soviet Union in their advance in 1945, not the Japanese or the Chinese.

Similar tropes appear in *Tsuma*. Again, the harmony of the five races is visualised, this time even by putting the slogan on screen with the help of flags and signs advertising it. In this drama, the focus is on a small military community in rural Manchuria in the final months of the war. Manchuria becomes the land of milk and honey, as the Japanese population in the homeland is at the brink of starvation. The female Japanese main character (who has fled to Manchuria where her husband is stationed with a kamikaze training unit) is overwhelmed by the affluence in the colony. Again, the peace and harmony of the five races is disturbed by the advancing Soviet Army and some Chinese troublemakers who resist this principle. As in *Red Cross*, the experience of the Japanese Empire is rendered harmless. It is without violence on the side of the Japanese and the crimes are always perpetrated by others. There is no space for mentioning Unit 731, comfort women or arbitrary killings. Just by watching these dramas, it becomes inconceivable that a nation as benevolent as Japan would have ever instigated the Nanjing Massacre; Japan solely appears as benefactor and in both instances, the “war” is turned into a misunderstanding of the true intentions of the Japanese by some Chinese, a representation much more in line with what historical revisionists in Japan argue for than the previous representations of violence and arbitrary behavior. Contemporary friction between

Japan and China is glossed over by the rose-tinted version of the past, when it is precisely that past that causes the friction in the present. The representations of the Empire therefore follow Rosaldo's argument about colonial nostalgia, "people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed" (Rosaldo 1989, 108).

## **Conclusion: Memory alterations**

Memories can change. We change them for ourselves when we are not comfortable with them, but we can equally also change them for our society, as Halbwachs (1992) has argued. And we can also choose to forget. But both acts, remembering and forgetting, are ultimately about the present, and, as Lyotard (1984, 22) put it, "[t]he narratives' reference may seem to belong to the past, but in reality it is always contemporaneous with the act of recitation." In the case of Japan, the way in which the contemporaneity of the past manifests itself becomes highly visible. A simple change in the political administration can influence the coordinates in which content is being produced and historical memory is televised. At the beginning of the memory boom, mainly between the years 2005 and 2007, some very progressive dramas acknowledged Japanese aggression, however subtly, and the Empire was not a source of nostalgia. Ten years later, and with a historical revisionist in power and the media in a stranglehold, televised narratives begin to change. Notably, although the summer of 2015 was another round anniversary, only very few dramas were broadcast and only by the private stations affiliated to more progressive papers (and having aired more progressive content in the past). Other than that, many shorter features focused on the rebuilding in the immediate postwar period, indicating that it is time to move on (while we seemingly never move on from the *taiga* dramas and *jidaigeki*). The two dramas in question were both set in Manchuria, but there is no mention of other Japanese colonies, let alone of expansion and they very much fall under the "rose-tinted nostalgia" that Tamanoi (2008) has observed. No criticism is voiced and everything that stands in the way of inner-regional cooperation is but a misunderstanding from the others, as they appear as having never quite understood what Japan had intended to do in colonizing them. Therefore, Japan is completely absolved from any crimes in the creation of its Empire. In a way, both dramas are closer to the propaganda films on the Empire prevalent in the 1940s (Chang 2015; Kirsch 2015) than to the historical discourse on it. Therefore, "[t]he constant danger of confusing remembering and imagining,

resulting from memories becoming images in this way, affects the goal of faithfulness corresponding to the truth claim of memory” (Ricoeur 2009, Kindle loc 134–35).

When indeed it is impossible to show the events of the war in all their facets, it seems as if producers (or any other actors in the Japanese creative industries) try to avoid the topic altogether. It appears to be a safer bet to not broadcast anything controversial at all—in other words self-censoring of content—than to stir up controversy. This avoidance of controversy adds another layer to reasons for the demise of the memory boom. It did not just come to an end because it had simply worn out; political considerations also played a part. An approach that looks only at the content of the dramas themselves and assesses them for their historical value (which in itself is highly problematic) will only ever reveal that dramas often sacrifice accuracy for dramaturgy. Ignoring the industry and its political constraints does not permit us to see what has driven the changes that have become so visible throughout the past decade. A mildly self-critical version of the past possible in 2005 has been replaced by a white-washed version of the same past from 2015 onward. This version is one that is less likely to cause friction with the political powers and may not necessarily even be what audiences want to see, given that there is no evidence to suggest that the attitude towards the war within Japanese society at large has shifted. Because of political constraints, the production of content has become much more of a one-way route than it has been in the past, where what was produced and broadcast was much more in line with the prevalent discourses within Japan. The media are catering to the political establishment, having evidently been shocked by various attempts to silence dissent.

Therefore, returning to the provocative question posed at the beginning of this chapter concerning whether television can change the past (discounting alternate histories à la *Man in the High Castle* or *SS-GB*), television has the potential to at least change the narratives about the past. Memories can be altered to suit the present-day political discourses and something contentious can easily be turned into something pleasant. The memory industry is very much an industry in which various actors shape what can be consumed, and thus remembered, and what cannot be consumed, and thus forgotten, with an eye on the political powers and the content they supposedly like to see. It is within those hierarchies of power that content is shaped, thereby enabling television to be used as a tool to rewrite the memory of the war more decisively than ever before.

## Notes



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<sup>1</sup> According to information provided in the NHK Museum of Broadcasting (visited on 4 November 2017), *taiga dorama* (literally, big river dramas) were created in 1963 in order not to lose out against the *jidaigeki* on the big screen.

<sup>2</sup> Abe Shinzo's first term in office stretched only over one year in 2006–2007. He resigned for health-related reasons. He was re-elected in December 2012 and resigned for health reasons in August 2020.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion on several case studies, see Sakurai (2005) and the papers in Takai ed. (2011).

<sup>4</sup> The BPO, the Broadcasting Ethics & Program Improvement Organization, comes closest to an independent watchdog, however, it consists of members of the industry and is thus mainly about self-control (BPO, 2021). Nonetheless, it is also seen to be in danger of falling under government control (Monthly Takarajima 2015).

<sup>5</sup> The 1955 System (*1955 seido*) refers to the dominance the LDP has had over Japanese politics since 1955, when the LDP was formed after the merger of two strong political parties. This merger weakened opposition parties, leaving them practically unable to form a government since (with the exceptions of 1993–1995 and 2009–2012).

<sup>6</sup> The changes to the broadcasting law have yet to be executed and the neutrality clause (Article 4 of the broadcasting law) still applies (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, n.d.).

<sup>7</sup> The Chinese lunar calendar was used in Japan until the end of the 19th century and still has some influence on Japanese numerology. Sixty marks the number in which all twelve animal signs have been paired up with all elements once and a new cycle begins. The sixtieth birthday for that reason tends to be celebrated more than others.

<sup>8</sup> The autobiography of Ri Kōran mentions several atrocities that the Japanese Army committed during the time (Yamaguchi and Fujiwara 1987).

<sup>9</sup> The third drama was *Ichiban densha ga hashita* (The first train is running) and was broadcast by NHK. They “played it safe” by telling the story of how quickly after the bombing, the trams in Hiroshima started operations again.

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