

Mnemonic Encounters: The Construction and Persistence of International “History Wars” and the Case of Japan–South Korea Relations

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Why does contentious history play such an outsized role in some international relationships? Why do these “history wars” endure, overriding incentives to reconcile? Despite their demonstrable importance, history wars have generally been neglected by conventional conflict and security literature; and, while scholarship concerning the international politics of memory has expanded significantly, overarching frameworks addressing these questions remain underdeveloped. In this article, drawing on theories of memory politics, relational identity and ontological security, I analyze history wars as *mnemonic encounters*: sites at which national identities are constructed in relation to one another through remembering and forgetting shared history. Within such encounters, history wars may arise and persist where each side’s mnemonic practices involve conflicting, negative representations of the other, and such representations constitute an important element of their national identities. This occurs because the rearticulation of conflictual representations constitutes both a means by which the national community is reproduced and a defense mechanism against the ontological threat posed by the other side’s counter-constructions. Illustrating this framework, I explicate the construction and persistence of Japan and South Korea’s “history problem,” drawing on extensive fieldwork and a discourse analysis of over one thousand original-language texts from both countries across politics, media and culture.

¿Por qué la historia a nivel de conflictos juega un papel tan grande en algunas relaciones internacionales? ¿Por qué perduran estas “guerras históricas”, las cuales prevalecen sobre los incentivos para reconciliarse? A pesar de su importancia demostrable, las guerras históricas han sido generalmente descuidadas por la literatura convencional en materia de conflictos y seguridad. Además, si bien los estudios en materia de política internacional de la memoria se han expandido significativamente, los marcos generales que abordan estas cuestiones siguen estando poco desarrollados. En este artículo, analizamos, a partir de las teorías de la política de la memoria, la identidad relacional y la seguridad ontológica, las guerras históricas como si fueran *encuentros mnemotécnicos*, es decir, lugares en los que las identidades nacionales se construyen en relación unas con otras a través del recuerdo y del olvido de la historia compartida. Dentro de estos encuentros, pueden surgir y persistir guerras históricas cuando las prácticas mnemotécnicas de cada uno de los lados implican representaciones conflictivas y negativas del otro, y cuando tales representaciones constituyen un elemento importante de sus identidades nacionales. Esto ocurre porque la rearticulación de las representaciones conflictivas constituye tanto un medio de reproducción de la comunidad nacional como un mecanismo de defensa frente a la amenaza ontológica que plantean las contraconstrucciones que lleva a cabo la otra parte. Con el fin de ilustrar este marco, explicamos la construcción y la persistencia del “problema histórico” entre Japón y Corea del Sur. Para ello, nos basamos en un extenso trabajo de campo y en un análisis del discurso de más de mil textos, en la lengua original de ambos países, a través de la política, los medios de comunicación y la cultura.

Pourquoi l’histoire polémique joue-t-elle un rôle aussi démesuré dans certaines relations internationales ? Pourquoi ces « guerres de l’histoire » perdurent-elles, et l’emportent sur les incitations à la réconciliation ? Malgré leur importance démontrable, les guerres de l’histoire ont généralement été négligées dans la littérature conventionnelle relative aux conflits et à la sécurité. Par ailleurs, bien que les travaux de recherche relatifs à la politique internationale de mémoire s’élargissent considérablement, les cadres globaux traitant de ces questions restent sous-développés. Dans cet article, en me fondant sur les théories relatives aux politiques de la mémoire, à l’identité relationnelle et à la sécurité ontologique, j’analyse les guerres de l’histoire comme des *rencontres mnémoniques* : des sites où les identités nationales se construisent par rapport aux autres, au travers d’un processus de rappel et d’oubli d’une histoire partagée. Dans ces rencontres, des guerres de l’histoire peuvent émerger et perdurer quand les pratiques mnémoniques des deux camps impliquent des représentations négatives contraires et qu’elles constituent un élément important de leur identité nationale. Ce phénomène s’explique par le fait que la réarticulation de représentations contraires constitue à la fois un moyen de reproduction de la communauté nationale et un mécanisme de défense contre une menace ontologique présentée par les contre-constructions de l’autre camp. Pour illustrer ce cadre, j’explique la construction et la persistance du « problème de l’histoire » du Japon et de la Corée du Sud, en me fondant sur un important travail de terrain et une analyse discursive de plus d’un millier de textes en langue originale des deux pays, dans les domaines politiques, médiatiques et culturels.

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Introduction

International conflict concerning the past is a consistently observed phenomenon in contemporary world politics. States feud over past wars and atrocities, alleging or denying culpability, and demanding or refusing apologies and restitution; they contest the historical ownership of territory as a means of asserting their sovereignty over it today; they litigate the content of school textbooks and national museum exhibitions, demanding that they reflect history “accurately.” While such inter-state frictions concerning the past may be relatively mild and remain a discrete issue in bilateral relations, in the case of what I refer to as “history wars,”¹ conflict concerning difficult history has a significant and persistent impact on various aspects of the relationship more broadly—be it in diplomacy, security or trade—or even dominates its character and conduct entirely, with state actors shunning ostensible motivations to reconcile and cooperate in favor of continued conflict over the past. Such history wars have been documented in numerous international relationships, with some of the most prominent examples including multiple cases within post-Soviet Eastern Europe (Mink and Neumayer 2013), between Armenia and Turkey (Akçam 2004), and in Japan’s relations with China and the Koreas (Hasegawa and Togo 2008), among others. In the case of Sino–Japanese relations, for example, antagonisms concerning the history of Japan’s imperial aggression have “repeatedly returned to plague [the relationship]” (Gustafsson and Hall 2021, 978), while Turkey and Armenia still do not have official diplomatic relations at all, in large part due to the legacy of the Armenian Genocide, which Turkey continues to deny (Cheterian 2017). History wars are, thus, an important global phenomenon capable of significantly shaping international politics.

Why do states engage in such behavior? In particular, two aspects of the occurrence of history wars—and potential intuitive assumptions regarding them—contribute to an intriguing puzzle. First, history wars do not appear to arise simply because two states share difficult history, such as violent warfare or oppressive colonial rule. Indeed, many such relationships are today characterized by cooperative and friendly relations, unimpeded by the relevant history. For example, while Japan has difficult relationships severely affected by colonial and wartime history with China and the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea), it generally does not with Taiwan or the United States (US)—despite the difficult history of Japan’s colonial rule over Taiwan and of the Pacific War. This observation suggests that, while asking the question “why do South Korea and Japan have a difficult relationship?” might be met with a response that this state of affairs is unsurprising given their history, it is, in fact, far from this simple. When, then, are history wars liable to occur, and why?

A second puzzling element of history wars is that they generally persist for lengthy periods after the historical events in question, rather than weakening as those events become more distant—even where there exist ostensible motivations to reconcile. In fact, history wars frequently flare up decades after the relevant history and persist into new generations born well after these events. Japan’s history disputes with China and South Korea, for example, took many years to develop and, although strengthening and weakening over time, have persisted stubbornly for decades. While a lack of

sustained improvement in Sino–Japanese relations might be explained away with reference to regional security interests and political systems, this cannot be said of Japan–ROK relations, where conventional theory would predict a much stronger relationship. What is it about history wars, then, that sees them able to persistently sour relations, overriding motivations to reconcile?

Mainstream international conflict and security literature, while sometimes alluding to the role of historical representations in conflicts, has seldom addressed these questions in detail, in part due to the difficulty of operationalizing relevant concepts such as collective memory in conventional analyses. Meanwhile, although the past two decades have seen increasing scholarship examining the role of memory in international politics, there have been few attempts to develop an overarching framework specifically addressing when, how and why inter-state history wars arise and endure. In this article, therefore, I develop a novel framework that, drawing from promising trends in recent literature, theorizes international history wars particularly in terms of the identity needs that they may serve for (some) states.

More specifically, I draw on theories of memory politics and relational identity to develop the concept of *mnemonic encounters*—encounters between two national communities in which their identities are constructed and reconstructed in relation to one another through practices of remembering and forgetting shared history. I further combine this concept with insights from ontological security theory to argue that, within a mnemonic encounter, history wars are liable to develop where the mnemonic practices of both sides involve conflicting, negative representations of each other, and such representations constitute an important element of their national identity discourses. This occurs because the rearticulation of such conflictual representations by each side constitutes both an important means by which their national identities are reproduced and a threat to the other side’s *own* autobiographical narratives concerning the past, and thus its conceptions of Self-identity. These threats provoke defense mechanisms in the form of antagonistic contestation concerning the past that supersede incentives to reconcile due to their existential importance. Thus, history wars arise and persist not simply where difficult history exists, but specifically in such circumstances where conflict concerning this past serves, and continues to serve, these vital identity needs.

Having set out my conceptual framework and theoretical contentions, I demonstrate their utility and plausibility for understanding the construction and persistence of international history wars through an illustrative case study of the so-called “history problem” in Japan–South Korea relations. While Tokyo and Seoul’s post-war relationship has experienced periods of improvement, it has consistently reverted to underlying antagonism concerning the history of Japan’s colonization of Korea and broader wartime conduct. This has occurred despite factors conventionally understood to be motivations for reconciliation, making it an important case to understand. I draw on the findings of a multi-year project involving extensive fieldwork and a discourse analysis of over one thousand original-language texts from both countries across politics, media and culture. In doing so, I show how the conflictual mnemonic practices of the history problem have constituted a means of reproduction of important elements of the national communities of Japan and South Korea and a defense against threats to their Self-identities, superseding motivations for reconciliation.

¹Although the term “memory wars” is also sometimes used in relevant literature, I argue that “history wars” captures the basis of these conflicts as they are generally conducted in international politics—battles over how the past is recorded and understood as “history.”

Understanding History Wars: Existing Approaches

Despite their demonstrable importance to world politics, history wars have generally received little sustained attention within mainstream international conflict and security literature. Even where acknowledgment is made that historical representations may play an important role in international or ethnic conflict, theorization of such factors tends to be lacking. David Lake and Donald Rothchild (1996, 55), for example, while noting that “political memories and myths” magnify security concerns between groups—offering the example of “Croats and Serbs ... hav[ing] both used history” to construct negative views of the other—only briefly consider how such “non-rational factors” interact with their main focus of rational choice-based security dilemmas. In this regard, the lack of attention to memory in such conventional analyses is often attributed to the difficulty of operationalizing the concept as a variable (Bell 2006; Wang 2018).

At the same time, a growing sub-field of International Relations (IR) scholarship has examined the role of memory in international politics more generally (Bell 2006; Langenbacher and Shain 2010; Resende and Budryte 2016), with research on inter-state mnemonic conflict in particular often focusing on specific cases within post-Soviet Eastern Europe (Torbakov 2011; Blacker, Etkind and Fedor 2013; Mink and Neumayer 2013) and East Asia (He 2007; Saito 2017; Deacon 2022). Of these studies, some have offered an instrumentalist account of history wars. Yanan He (2007, 44), for example, in addressing “the fundamental cause of international political conflict over history,” argues that the answer “lies in the intentional manipulation of history by ruling elites, or national mythmaking, for instrumental purposes.” Similarly, Igor Torbakov (2011, 210–11) focuses on the “politicizing and instrumentalizing of history” for the purposes of “rallying the society around the powers that be.” While such perspectives may have merit as partial explanations, however, they do not fully account for why history wars emerge in only some relationships that share difficult history, nor what it is about history wars that makes their instrumentalization effective in the first place.

In this regard, more structural analyses have placed greater emphasis on the ways in which historical representations are caught up in notions of national identity, in terms of constructions of both the national “Self” and “Others,” and in relation to ontological security. Ji Young Kim (2014), for example, has analyzed Japan and South Korea’s history problem as an identity clash through the theoretical lens of “symbolic politics,” while Shogo Suzuki (2019) has emphasized the ontological threat that South Korean representations of Japan’s colonial history pose to Tokyo. Such studies have illustrated the fruitfulness of applying identity-related concepts and theories to particular history war cases; however, they have generally not taken on the theory-building task of developing a framework that addresses more overarching questions about when, how and why history wars arise and persist.

Other IR literature on memory and its interaction with identity and ontological security, meanwhile, has been more overt in its attempts to build theory, but generally without a precise focus on inter-state history wars. Maria Mälksoo (2015), for example, has shown how national memory may be a target of processes of securitization that attempt to “defend” such representations of the past and, therefore, a particular sense of national identity. Similarly, Faye Donnelly and Brent Steele (2019) have developed the notion of “critical security history” to theorize how causal historical narratives interact with ontological security and processes of se-

curitization. The important implications of such processes for international politics have also been highlighted, with Ayşe Zarakol (2010) showing how apologizing for historical crimes may pose a threat to the Self-identity of states whose own narratives deny this history, and Jelena Subotić (2019) documenting the appropriation of Holocaust memory by Eastern European states to represent the crimes of communism, illustrating how states respond to mnemonic threats to their identities with a curation of memory.

Perhaps closest to a concerted examination of the construction and persistence of inter-state mnemonic conflicts, however, has been the work of Karl Gustafsson. In examining the persistence of history-related disputes in Sino-Japanese relations, Gustafsson (2020, 1058–9) argues that understandings of forgetting as fading away and denial—rather than an inherent part of remembering—“motivates actors to think of collective memory as always threatened,” resulting in a combative approach to the defense of one’s own understandings of the past. Separately, Gustafsson (2016) has also developed the concept of “routinised recognition” as a theory of relational identity construction that explains conflictual inter-state relations where better ties might be expected. While focusing less explicitly on mnemonic conflict here, Gustafsson’s emphasis on *mutual recognition* highlights the importance of a relational analysis of both sides of bilateral ideational conflicts, such as those concerning history.

Thus, while international conflict concerning the past has generally been neglected by mainstream accounts of conflict and security, an expanding body of literature examining the role of memory in international politics has highlighted the utility of concepts such as relational identity and ontological security to understand this phenomenon. Still requiring further development, however, is an overarching theoretical framework that draws together and develops these insights to explicitly address when, how and why history wars are liable to arise and persist in inter-state relationships.

Understanding History Wars as Mnemonic Encounters

With this precise agenda, in this section, I initially draw on theories of memory politics, relational identity and ontological security in further detail to build up a theoretical toolkit. I then make use of this toolkit, first, to develop the concept of a mnemonic encounter and, second, to theorize the construction and persistence of a history war within it.

Memory, Identity, and Ontological (In)Security

In considering the role of “memory” in international politics, I understand this term to refer to collective practices of remembering and forgetting the past. As Maurice Halbwachs (1992 [1925], 38) argued in his theorization of collective memory, “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories” and, therefore, “it is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories.” That is to say, when we “remember” we do not do so in a vacuum; rather, we are subject to numerous social cues and influences. But the notion of collective memory goes further still: it extends to a group’s “memory” of events that were not directly experienced by all members—or, indeed, any living members—of that group (Olick 1999). We might think, for example, of national war remembrance in the Anglosphere and the exhortations not to “forget” that are often deployed (see McDonald 2010), even if most citizens were not born when the relevant war(s) occurred. Such practices produce and shape understanding of the past across groups, charac-

terizing that memory as belonging to the group even if it was not witnessed by them.

This social understanding shifts our focus away from seeing memory as a fixed “thing,” and towards seeing it as an intersubjective, mediated practice that (re)produces historical understanding—recognizing that “the past is produced and continually reproduced in ... articulations of memory” (Zehfuss’s 2007, 259). This, in turn, brings into view a broad variety of social and political practices as our objects of analysis: political speeches drawing on historical narratives; mass media portrayals of history; the curation of museum exhibitions; the writing of school textbooks; the creation of public memorials. As well as remembering, such mnemonic practices also engage in *forgetting*.² This may include active attempts to curate history—choosing to remember only some things—and/or a more passive failure to remember. In this way, while some scholars have proposed the adoption of analytical divisions—even if overlapping—between history, (collective) memory, myth, and other such categories (Müller 2002; Bell 2003; Langenbacher and Shain 2010), I argue that an expansive understanding of memory is most appropriate here because all such practices of remembering and forgetting are potentially relevant to analyses of the role of the past in present politics.

These insights also immediately draw our attention to the importance of memory to collective identity. In shaping a community’s understanding of the past, mnemonic practices play a fundamental role in shaping that community’s sense of who it is (Bell 2006). Such an identity, and a sense of belonging to it, are vital prerequisites for the existence of a collective (Campbell 1998). However, these collective identities do not stem from a natural essence, simply “representing characteristics of preexisting actors” (Lerner 2022, 74). Indeed, in the case of the nation-state, such communities span across time and space to such an extent that each individual will only ever meet a tiny fraction of their compatriots, illustrating the arbitrary nature of these “imagined communities” (Anderson 2006). Thus, to instill a sense of collective identity between individuals—and thereby constitute the national community into being—discursive practices of nation-building are necessary. This necessity is continual; states are “always in a process of becoming” (Campbell 1998, 12) that requires the continued rearticulation of identity discourses to maintain their existence (Doty 1993; Hansen 2006). This is, in part, because other possibilities exist: national identity discourses are neither homogenous nor static. While particular discourses in a given state tend to achieve widespread dominance in their broad embodiment, they remain vulnerable to contestation (Zehfuss 2001). As Adam Lerner (2022, 77) argues in this regard, “just as narratives can come together to constitute and stabilize a discursive status quo, they can equally undermine discourses’ stability.” Thus, while discursive constructions of identity constitute the national community, (successful) contestation by alternative identity narratives would also be the likely source of change in terms this constitution, transforming the status quo.

Memory plays a vital role in these processes of national identity (re)construction and contestation. Identity discourses often “meaningfully represent a past experience or event” to “function as a source of collective identification” (Berenskoetter 2023, 19) for a community, allowing it to be anchored in something beyond the present time, eliding its arbitrariness and lack of foundation. Indeed, for national communities, narratives of collective ties to decades,

centuries, or even millennia of purported communal history are often a crucial component of the binding together of its people. Such narratives may relate to historical episodes of adversity such as wars or atrocities. These may be constructed as “traumas” that “become an important element of collective identity” (Miller 2013, 20)—“chosen,” in Vamik Volkan’s (2001, 88) terms, to be “woven into the canvas” of the collective and transmitted into future generations—often including enmity against the perpetrators of such violence (Lerner 2022). Just as equally, however, such events may be “chosen glories” for the collective (Volkan 2009), constructed as episodes of national heroism. Or, indeed, they may be (largely) forgotten in the collective’s identity discourses (Zehfuss 2007). Regardless of their characterization, such historical narratives may be articulated in various mnemonic practices: when politicians encourage their citizens to remember previous generations who died fighting wars “for our sake”; when mass media draw on historical episodes to evidence the nation’s “values” or “character”; when children are taught about some elements of the country’s past and not others, curating the national story into which they are socialized. In all these practices of remembering and forgetting, a sense of national identity that is fundamental to the existence of the state is crafted—not only by state actors themselves but also by mass media, creators of popular culture and others.

This fundamental importance of identity for states has significant implications for their international conduct, as explored in recent years by IR scholarship utilizing ontological security theory (OST). Such scholarship broadly argues that states do not only seek to protect their “physical” security (e.g., through military defense), but also seek security in their Self-identity. They experience anxieties stemming from ultimately unanswerable autobiographical questions as to who they are (Steele 2008), which may be responded to with defense mechanisms that attempt to bracket out the anxiety and affirm Self-identity enough to be able to “go on” in the world (Ejdus 2018; Browning 2019).³ These defense mechanisms may even supersede other motivations understood to be in the “national interest” because of their existential importance (Mitzen 2006). Tying these insights regarding state identity needs to the understanding that it is often through mnemonic practices that national identities are constituted, it is unsurprising that IR OST research has identified national memory as a frequent target of ontological security-seeking. In these practices, certain narratives of the past may be “securitized” to prevent them from fading away and endangering the national Self (Gustafsson 2014, 2020; Mälksoo 2015). In this way, we can understand that states may depend upon the continued performance of certain mnemonic practices to sustain themselves and deal with anxiety in relation to their Self-identity.

Further relevance of these assertions for the conduct of international politics stems from two final theoretical insights: the relationality of these processes, and the relationship between identity and foreign policy. First, identity construction is a relational process; if there is no natural essence to a thing, the process of defining it must be based on difference (Doty 1996; Campbell 1998; Hansen 2006). In the context of national identities, the national Self is constructed in relation to Others. When, for example, US politicians describe the characteristics, behaviors or beliefs of certain groups as “un-American,” through Othering those groups, they are also implicitly (re)constructing a sense of Self in

²Indeed, forgetting is always intrinsic to remembering—see Gustafsson (2020).

³Whether such anxieties can be fully expunged, or at least a certain level of ontological insecurity is unavoidable, is debated (see Krickel-Choi 2022).

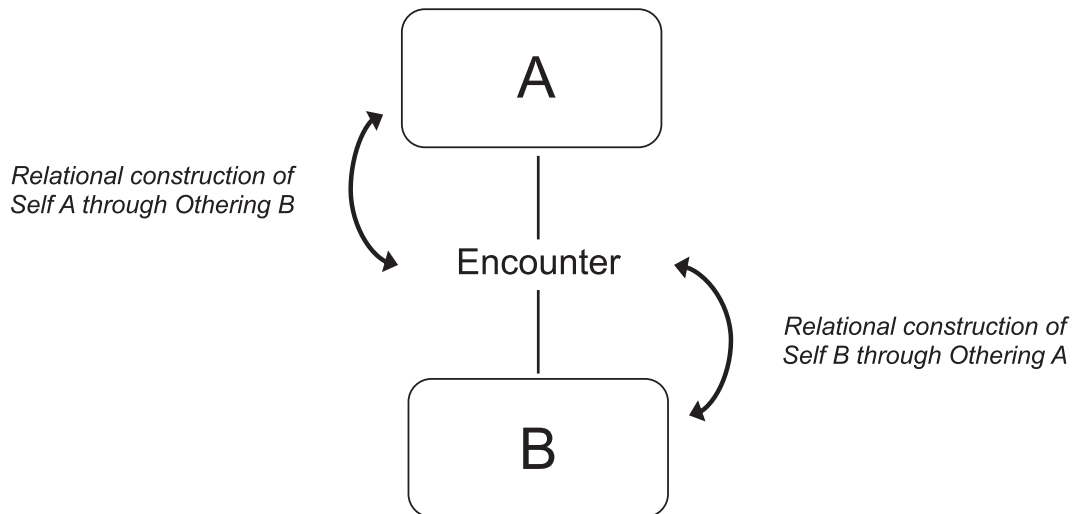


Figure 1. Discursive encounter

what is American. Second, identity also possesses a mutually constitutive relationship with foreign policy-making. Identity discourses shape, constrain and make possible certain foreign policies, as it is the productive power of such discourses that creates the social reality in which political agents act (Doty 1993); and, at the same time, foreign policy practices themselves also shape understandings of identity through their discursive representation of Self and Other. Importantly, states do not conduct these practices in a vacuum; they also witness and contend with other states' own representational practices, which may be perceived as threatening if they strongly differ from their own conceptions of Self-identity. In such cases, conflict and rivalry with Others may result. Indeed, states may become attached to such antagonistic contestation because it becomes an important means of ontological security-seeking (Mitzen 2006; Rumelili 2015). Recalling the previous insights regarding memory's importance to national identity constructs, many of these discourses of Self and Other—which shape and are shaped by foreign policy practices, and which may be sources of or threats to ontological security—will be constituted by mnemonic practices.

Discursive Encounters, Mnemonic Encounters, and History Wars

These insights provide a toolkit for theorizing the construction and persistence of international history wars. My framework for this begins with the above assertions regarding relational identity and foreign policy-making, and using them to study a particular bilateral relationship. To do this, I draw on Lene Hansen's (2006, 68) concept of a *discursive encounter*. As illustrated in figure 1, a discursive encounter is a site of mutual identity construction through discursive representation of Self and Other—that is, both A's construction of itself through Othering B and B's construction of itself through Othering A. In this way, rather than only focusing on how a single Self is constructed in relation to an Other, and that Self's related foreign policy-making, a discursive encounter as the object of analysis “contrasts the discourses of the Self with the Other's 'counter-construction' of Self and Other” (Hansen 2006, 68). Such an approach more fully recognizes these processes as relational by taking into ac-

count the dynamics of *encounter* at play, which then allows us to analyze interactive dynamics of foreign policy-making that might be characterized as mutual friendliness, rivalry or conflict.

I supplement and sharpen this framework by focusing specifically on the role of mnemonic practices in national identity construction to develop the concept of a *mnemonic encounter*. I define a mnemonic encounter as a site at which constructions of national Selves are discursively (re)produced in relation to Others through practices of remembering and forgetting shared history. Put simply, such an approach takes a discursive encounter as its object of analysis, but with *practices of remembering and forgetting* as the particular discursive representations focused on (see figure 2). When states engage in mnemonic practices that (re)produce understandings of the national Self, they will also often be engaged in the representation of an Other concerning shared history—a past war, for example. Importantly, however, the Other will also be engaging in its own mnemonic practices concurrently. Thus, each Self constructs mutual identity discourses of Self and Other in relation to the same historical events. These practices do not occur in secret; each Self witnesses the Other's mnemonic practices—its counter-constructions of the same history—which “send signals about their intentions” in this regard (Mälksoo 2019, 381), informing each Self's continual negotiation of identity in relation to the Other and their shared history. These interactive mnemonic practices, therefore, may have significant implications for foreign policy-making between the two—shaping the social reality in which political agents act—not only in terms of a “diplomacy of memory” directly concerning this shared history (see Bachleitner 2019), but potentially also in terms of bilateral relations more broadly.

In line with the puzzles set out in this article's introduction, however, it is by no means inevitable that an antagonistic history war will emerge within such a mnemonic encounter. Within any discursive encounter, Others do not have to be constructed as enemies, and might even be friends (Berenskoetter 2007; Berenskoetter and Mitrani 2022). Others may also be of greater or lesser significance to the Self. Within mnemonic encounters specifically, the Self's

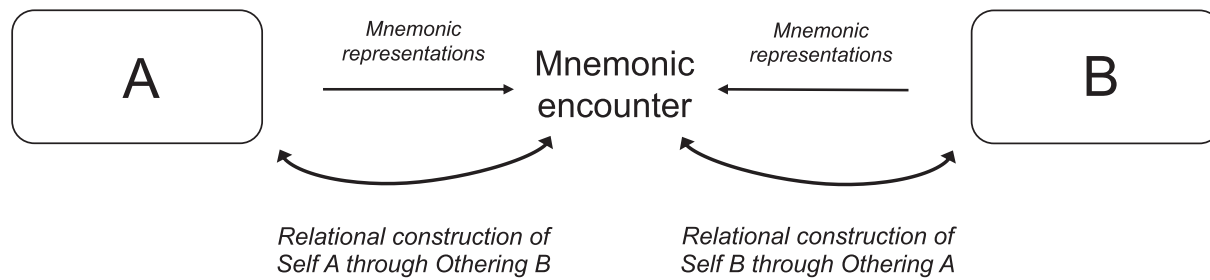


Figure 2. Mnemonic encounter

representations of shared history with an Other may cast that Other in broadly positive, neutral or negative terms, and may be more or less important to the Self. In this regard, an antagonistic history war would be more likely to develop when both states' mnemonic practices involve conflicting, negative representations of the other, and such representations constitute an important element of their national identity discourses. By "important," I mean that the relational representations in question feature prominently in widespread constructions of national identity in the state—a "core construct" (see Strömbom 2014)—often with significant affective sentiment attached to them.⁴

This argument is theoretically grounded in the above-established insights concerning the identity needs of states and the mutually constitutive relationship between identity and foreign policy. First, if certain mnemonic representations feature prominently in a state's autobiographical narrative, persistent rearticulation of them will be important for the discursive reproduction of the national Self. Second, if the relational mnemonic representations of each state cast the other state in a negative light and conflict with its counter-constructions of the same history—its *own* autobiographical narrative—they will constitute an ontological threat to that state. This will exacerbate each state's anxieties concerning Self-identity, founded on its own narratives of the past, resulting in defense mechanisms that attempt to affirm these understandings, such as antagonistic contestation between the two (see figure 3).⁵ While the precise dynamics of these interactions—the threats perceived, the defense mechanisms in response, and the resultant conflict—may depend on various differences between the states such as relative power imbalances,⁶ in general terms, these conflictual mnemonic practices will have an existential importance which may see their maintenance supersede incentives for reconciliation that might otherwise be deemed in the "national interest," resulting in their persistence for lengthy periods.

This, to be clear, is not to suggest that a history war is bound to persist forever—that these processes and constructions are static. While this framework requires some bracketing out of domestic contestation of mainstream identity discourses in order to focus on the international relationship, such contestation bears importance as the likely source of any transformation of a history war—interrupting its persistence. That is to say, successful contestation by alternative discourses would transform dominant concep-

tions of the state's autobiographical narrative, how it represents the past, and how it relates to Others. This may, therefore, also transform the above-mentioned elements of a mnemonic encounter that see a history war liable to persist—if representations of difficult history with the Other became less negative and/or less important to the national Self—making an overcoming of the history war more likely. Indeed, this is consistent with the findings of conflict literature more generally, which suggests that conflict resolution tends to require some form of identity change (Kelman 2004; Kupchan 2010; Berenskoetter and Mitrani 2022), in terms of not only the Self but also how the Other is recognized (Strömbom 2014). Such reimagining of national identity, however, does not tend to come quickly or easily, meaning that, even if their persistence is far from being inevitable, history wars can be extremely "sticky."

History wars, then, arise and persist not simply when there exists, or because of, difficult history between states *per se*, but in circumstances where the contingent national identity constructions within these states are, and continue to be, such that the conflictual mnemonic practices of a history war serve existential needs for the national community which supersede motivations for reconciliation.

Analyzing History Wars as Mnemonic Encounters: The Case of Japan–South Korea Relations

Having set out my conceptual framework and theoretical argument, in this section I analyze Japan–South Korea relations as an illustrative case study. The approach here, stemming from my theory-building agenda, is to use the framework to guide my analysis of this case so as to demonstrate its utility and the plausibility of my theoretical propositions (Levy 2008) in understanding the construction and persistence of international history wars. Particularly given that my framework requires analysis of both sides of a history war, this agenda is aided by examining a single case as it allows for exploration of the relevant dynamics in sufficient depth (Gerring 2004).⁷

Case Selection: Japan and South Korea's History Problem

Since normalizing their diplomatic relations in 1965, Japan and South Korea have struggled to achieve lasting reconciliation concerning the history of Japan's colonial rule over

⁴How identities came to be this way would always be an historically contingent, case-specific question bracketed out of this framework.

⁵See also Gustafsson and Mälksoo (2024) specifically regarding how states may engage in "deterrence" of such mnemonic threats.

⁶I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this clarification.

⁷Further research may build on this with alternative designs—such as comparative studies—that preclude such depth but test my theoretical propositions more generally, including cases of relationships with difficult history but with no history war.

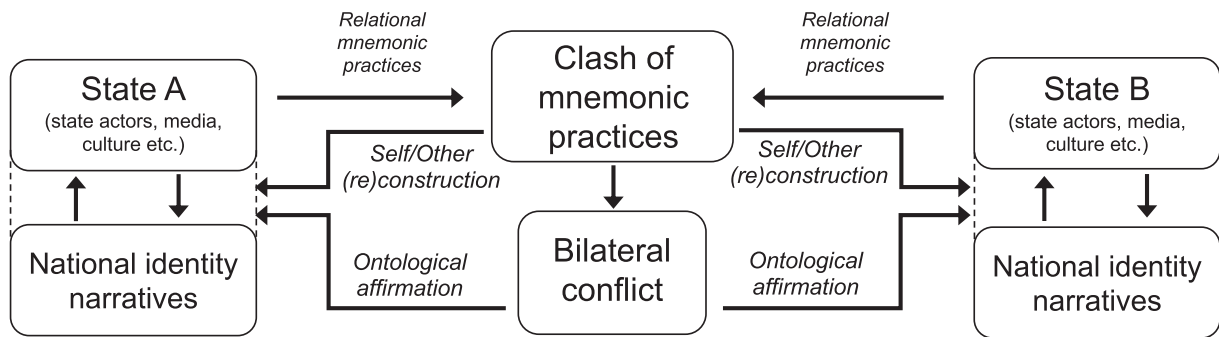


Figure 3. History war structure

Korea (1910–1945) and its broader conduct during the Second World War. Disputes concerning this history have related to: Koreans requisitioned for hard labor; the coercive mobilization of Korean “comfort women” for sexual servitude; ownership of the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islets; coverage of these events by school textbooks; and other contemporary behavior and rhetoric regarding this history (see Hasegawa and Togo 2008). Together, these disputes are commonly referred to as the “history problem(s)” and are acknowledged as the main factor behind the continued difficulties of this relationship (Kim 2014). Indeed, in addition to such disputes directly concerning this history, historical antagonisms have also regularly spilled over to various areas of the relationship. Recent years, for example, have seen serious disputes regarding an ROK navy ship locking its missile radar onto a Japanese surveillance aircraft (Panda 2018), a protracted trade dispute (Deacon 2022), and a public boycott of Japanese goods and services in South Korea with a participation rate of over 70 percent (Yonhap 2020).

While relations between Tokyo and Seoul have occasionally improved temporarily, the relationship has consistently reverted to these hostilities stemming from the history problem for decades, making it an exemplary case of a history war—or a “paradigmatic case” (Flyvbjerg 2006). Furthermore, Japan–South Korea relations more generally have also been understood within certain paradigms as a “deviant case” (Seawright and Gerring 2008), given their contravention of conventional understandings of rational decision-making. Such perspectives commonly cite Japan and South Korea’s shared security interests and political systems—both liberal, democratic allies of the US—as well as ties of trade and culture, as factors that should result in more consistently cooperative relations (Cha 1999, 1–2; Jackson 2018, 128–9). Together, this means both that the Japan–South Korea history problem is a good case for studying the general phenomenon of history wars, and that its particular diagnosis is of significant value given the difficulties it poses to conventional approaches.

Method

My findings are drawn from a multi-year project involving extensive fieldwork in both South Korea and Japan and the analysis of over one thousand original-language texts from both countries.⁸ The period of analysis was from 2015 to mid-2022,⁹ allowing for a contemporary analysis of the rela-

⁸Findings are presented in English, using any translation provided (unless deemed inaccurate) or otherwise my own.

⁹The end of the Moon presidency (decided prior to the 2022 ROK election).

tionship that was not unduly short-term. On the Japanese side, while this period covers governments of the Liberal Democratic Party only, this accurately reflects its electoral dominance. On the South Korean side, administrations of both a conservative (Park Geun-hye) and a progressive (Moon Jae-in) are included. I focus in this article on the two most salient disputes of the history problem in recent years, the “forced labor issue” and the “comfort women issue.” A brief background to each is provided before my findings below.

Drawing on Hansen’s (2006) intertextual models framework, I collected texts in three categories (see Table 1). Category 1 consisted of *official texts*: statements and press conferences by presidents, prime ministers, and foreign ministers, as well as foreign policy publications such as white papers. Category 2 consisted of *media texts*: editorials of the leading left-leaning and right-leaning newspaper in each country. Category 3 consisted of *cultural/popular texts*: museum exhibitions, memorials, protests/demonstrations, popular literature, and television and film. While Category 1’s official texts represent foreign policy-making in a narrow sense, a broader range of genres allowed me to identify the “dispersion [of discourses] through the wider debate” (Hansen 2006, 95) within Japanese and South Korean politics and society, which speaks to my framework’s understanding of collective identity and mnemonic practices. For Categories 1 and 2, sampling occurred through the searching of key terms associated with each of the two history problem issues in relevant databases. Category 3 necessitated more subjective judgment as to which texts were appropriate for analysis, largely due to their prominence and/or relevance to the issues. The full set of texts analyzed is listed in the online appendix for this article.

I analyzed these texts using a modified discourse analysis method focusing on three textual mechanisms: *presupposition*, *predication*, and *subject positioning*. *Presuppositions* consist of knowledge assumed to be understood, thereby “construct[ing] a particular kind of world in which certain things are recognized as true” (Doty 1993, 306). This gets at the naturalization of certain discourses, which might include an accepted version of historical events. *Predication* is the attaching of labels to subjects, “linking ... certain qualities to” and “constructing identities for” those subjects (Doty 1993, 306). Predicate analysis, therefore, deconstructs how something or someone is produced “as a particular sort of thing, with particular features and capacities” through discursive representation (Milliken 1999, 232). Finally, *subject positioning* constitutes the “production of subjects and objects ... vis-à-vis other subjects and objects” (Doty 1993, 306), attention to which demonstrates how identities are constructed in re-

Table 1. Texts collected for analysis

	Japan	South Korea
Category 1: Official texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prime ministerial statements - Foreign minister statements and press conferences - MOFA bluebooks and press releases 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presidential statements - Foreign minister statements and press conferences - MOFA white papers and press releases
Category 2: Media texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Yomiuri Shimbun</i> editorials - <i>Asahi Shimbun</i> editorials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Chosun Ilbo</i> editorials - <i>Hankyoreh</i> editorials
Category 3: Cultural/popular texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Museum exhibitions - Memorials - Protests/demonstrations - Popular literature - Television and film 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Museum exhibitions - Memorials - Protests/demonstrations - Popular literature - Television and film

Abbreviation: MOFA, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

lation to one another. In addition, to focus my analysis on mnemonic practices in particular, I employed memory as a *sensitizing concept* (Resende and Budryte 2014, 2)—that is, affording particular attention to discourses of remembering and forgetting. Within these parameters, I conducted two close readings of each text—once for understanding, then a second time for identifying and recording representations centrally. Once enough representations had been observed, I developed coded categories to structure this process. I then reviewed this data to establish generalized patterns of mainstream discourses in each country, as well as alternatives.

Sub-Cases: The Forced Labor and Comfort Women Issues

The forced labor issue is a prominent element of the Japan–South Korea history problem concerning the history of Koreans mobilized for hard labor by Japan during its colonial occupation. During the period of analysis, the matter came to the fore of bilateral relations due to two sets of developments. The first relates to Japan’s applications to UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) for registration of industrial heritage sites at which the ROK claims Korean forced labor occurred. While Japan successfully registered several such sites in 2015, UNESCO insisted that Tokyo take steps to publicize their “full history.” Despite questionable compliance, in early 2022 Japan proceeded with plans to register another site of Korean wartime labor—the Sado mine complex—angering South Korea further. Concurrently, the second set of developments relates to ROK Supreme Court judgments in 2018 and 2019 that ordered responsible Japanese corporations to compensate Korean wartime laborers. The resultant bilateral spat evolved into a trade dispute in which Japan enacted export restrictions against the ROK, and Seoul responded with its own measures.

A further prominent element of the history problem is the comfort women issue, which relates to the history of Korean women and girls coerced into sexual servitude for Japanese military personnel during the Second World War and disputes regarding this history. During the period of analysis, the matter came to the fore of bilateral relations in the context of multiple developments. The most significant of these was the signing of an agreement purporting to settle the issue in 2015, negotiated between the governments of Park Geun-hye and Abe Shinzō, but then repudiated by the subsequent ROK administration of Moon Jae-in.

Other developments included ROK court decisions ordering Japan to pay compensation to former comfort women, and the installation of comfort women memorial statues in South Korea and overseas.

Findings: South Korea

Mainstream national identity discourses in South Korea place significant weight on the history of Korea’s colonization by and liberation from Japan in the first half of the twentieth century. Anti-Japanese sentiment that developed during this period came to be an important element of Korean (ethno-)nationalism through the post-war period (Shin 2006), with narratives of the deprivations faced at Japan’s hands and the courage of Korean resistance against them remaining prominent across South Korean politics and society (Deacon 2023). Indeed, as well as Liberation Day—the ROK’s national day, celebrating liberation from Japan—the anniversary of the largest uprising against Japanese colonial rule, the March First Movement, remains an important national holiday. Representations of this history, thus, feature prominently—even being said to “constitute national identity in an inextricable relationship to the Japanese Other” (Lee 2014, 1).

In this context, during my period of analysis, mainstream South Korean discourses consistently demanded that Japan acknowledge the “historical truth” of its recruitment and treatment of Korean wartime laborers and comfort women, offer heartfelt apology, and provide restitution—attacking Tokyo for failing to do so and even for repeating its colonial aggression today by targeting the ROK economy with trade restrictions. Through these conflictual mnemonic representations, such discourses defended the South Korean Self’s autobiographical narratives of this history against the threat posed by the Japanese Other’s attempts at erasure, posing remembrance as a Korean national duty.

OFFICIAL TEXTS

Official ROK discourses across both the Park and Moon administrations contested Japan’s forgetting or denial of the history of wartime forced labor and the comfort women, which threatened the ROK’s presupposed narrative of this history. Tokyo was criticized, for example, for failing to acknowledge that Korean forced labor took place at the sites of its UNESCO heritage applications, with ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) officials describing them as

“fraught with painful history”¹⁰ and attacking “Japan’s attempt to glorify these sites ... while ignoring the fact that Koreans were conscripted for forced labor.”¹¹ Instead, Seoul demanded that Tokyo “heal the wounds and pain of the ... victims”¹² as a prerequisite for better bilateral relations.¹³ Moreover, when Japan enacted export controls against the ROK, Seoul—representing these measures as “obvious retaliation”¹⁴ for South Korean court judgments ordering compensation for wartime laborers—repeatedly engaged in mnemonic practices that enveloped this trade dispute in Japan’s imperial history, representing the Japanese Other as an unrepentant existential threat. President Moon, for example, acknowledging “deep wounds between Korea and Japan due to our unfortunate history,” accused Tokyo of “re-opening the[se] old wounds,” and compared its contemporary conduct to its historical attempts to “dominate [Korea] using force.”¹⁵

The ROK also persistently raised the history of the comfort women with Japan, demanding that Tokyo “heal the wounds”¹⁶ of the surviving victims, and contesting Japan’s historical narrative that denied “the involvement of its military in the sexual enslavement as well as its coercive nature.”¹⁷ While the ROK concluded an agreement with Japan attempting to resolve this issue in late 2015, the Park administration continued lambasting the rhetoric of Japanese politicians, labeling derogatory remarks about the comfort women “ignorant and reckless ... shameless in front of history,”¹⁸ and criticizing the Abe administration for “words and actions that undermine the spirit and purpose of the ... agreement.”¹⁹ This came down to a fundamental clash as to what “resolving” the issue meant: to the ROK, it could never mean *forgetting* the comfort women. Railing against such forgetting by Tokyo, Moon argued that “the Japanese government, the perpetrator, should not say the matter is closed” because the issue is “a crime against humanity ... a genuine resolution of which is to remember it and learn a lesson from it.”²⁰ This purported failure to come to terms with history saw Japan constructed as “a country that does not remember its past.”²¹

All such conflictual representations of the amnesiac Japanese Other in official ROK discourses were implicitly juxtaposed with a South Korean Self determined to remember; but this was also often more explicit. For example, throughout the period of analysis, ROK officials visited the elderly former comfort women on traditional Korean holidays, describing them as having “deep scars in their hearts” and “painful memories”²²—reproducing the notion of a responsibility of Koreans to honor the victims of Japan’s crimes. President Moon also lauded remembrance practices, such as the comfort women demonstrations held outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul every Wednesday since 1992, arguing that “historical truths must be disclosed entirely and recorded; they must be etched into lessons from

history for the coming generations.”²³ Furthermore, regarding the government’s responsibility, he stated:

It led me to think yet again about what the reason for the existence of a nation is... Setting history right is to teach human society a lesson and make concerted efforts so that such a horrible incident does not occur ever again. I believe this is a historical duty assigned to me as president. The government will restore the honor and dignity of the victims [and] will take actions to heal their emotional wounds.²⁴

Such rhetoric, thus, explicitly framed Korean remembrance of Japan’s predations, threatened by the latter’s attempts at erasure, as a responsibility of the whole nation—both the state and citizens.

MEDIA TEXTS

South Korean media discourses largely echoed these conflictual mnemonic practices in their relational construction of a remembering South Korean Self and an amnesiac Japanese Other, across both the right-leaning *Chosun Ilbo* and the left-leaning *Hankyoreh*. *Chosun* editorials, for example, defended the South Korean historical narrative of wartime forced labor and the comfort women by accusing Tokyo of “trying to distort” and “hide the truth” of history,²⁵ acting “as if there was no forced labor,”²⁶ and “denying the coerciveness of the mobilization of the comfort women.”²⁷ Japan was thus represented as a “lost child of historical awareness.”²⁸ Similarly, *Hankyoreh* editorials represented Tokyo as “shamelessly brazen” in its “attempt to hide the fact that Japanese imperialists mobilized Koreans for forced labor,” with “no sense of responsibility for historical truth.”²⁹ Japan’s counter-constructions of the history of the comfort women, meanwhile, were labeled “shameful ignorance”³⁰ and “deplorable ... distortions of history,”³¹ with one editorial stating that “no matter how much the Japanese government tries to wash its hands of it, the comfort women issue is an indelible war crime ... and they cannot hide the historical truth that Japan bears legal responsibility for it.”³² Indeed, Tokyo was warned that its failure to “humbly reflect on its historical sins”³³ spelled disaster, as “a nation that forgets its past has no future.”³⁴

As in official discourses, these representations of Japan’s denial and forgetting were contrasted with South Korea’s determination to remember. *Chosun* editorials represented the history of wartime forced labor as an “atrocious we must never forget,”³⁵ and were deeply skeptical of any “resolution” aimed at preventing South Korean remembrance of the comfort women, claiming that “the worst incident of the violation of women’s human rights in the twentieth century”³⁶ could not be “resolved simply by making political decisions at the governmental level between the two countries.”³⁷ *Hankyoreh* editorials were similarly outraged at the

²³Moon 2020/1-a-1-024.

²⁴Moon 2018/1-a-1-003.

²⁵*Chosun Ilbo* 2015/1-b-3-046.

²⁶*Chosun Ilbo* 2015/1-b-3-006.

²⁷*Chosun Ilbo* 2015/1-b-3-122.

²⁸*Chosun Ilbo* 2015/1-b-3-122.

²⁹*Hankyoreh* 2019/1-b-2-004.

³⁰*Hankyoreh* 2020/1-b-2-040.

³¹*Hankyoreh* 2022/1-b-2-039.

³²*Hankyoreh* 2021/1-b-2-036.

³³*Hankyoreh* 2020/1-b-2-060.

³⁴*Hankyoreh* 2022/1-b-2-026.

³⁵*Chosun Ilbo* 2019/1-b-3-035.

³⁶*Chosun Ilbo* 2015/1-b-3-144.

³⁷*Chosun Ilbo* 2015/1-b-3-144.

¹⁰ROK MOFA 2015/1-a-4-023.

¹¹ROK MOFA 2015/1-a-4-025.

¹²ROK MOFA 2018/1-a-4-046.

¹³ROK MOFA 2019/1-a-4-060.

¹⁴Moon 2019/1-a-1-012; ROK MOFA 2019/1-a-4-353.

¹⁵Moon 2019/1-a-1-012.

¹⁶Park 2015/1-a-1-004; Yun 2015/1-a-4-082.

¹⁷ROK MOFA 2015/1-a-4-091.

¹⁸ROK MOFA 2016/1-a-4-120.

¹⁹ROK MOFA 2016/1-a-4-159.

²⁰Moon 2018/1-a-1-004.

²¹Moon 2019/1-a-1-013.

²²ROK MOFA 2015/1-a-4-372.

notion of any resolution of the comfort women issue meaning a forgetting of this history. Editorials asserted that “the two countries’ governments do not have the right to decide that this proposal ... is ‘final,’”³⁸ given the importance of remembering this history to Koreans.

CULTURAL/POPULAR TEXTS

South Korean cultural and popular discourses, meanwhile, generally contained similar mnemonic representations but also offered important evidence of alternatives. With regard to the former, prominent museums not only reproduced the presupposed Korean understanding of the history of wartime labor and the comfort women, but actively contested Japan’s counter-constructions. The National Museum of Contemporary Korean History, for example, presented forced labor as historical fact—describing how Japan “forcefully mobilized [Koreans] for the war effort”—and provided an entire exhibition area on “Japan’s military sexual slavery,” as well as images of comfort women memorials and criticism of Japan’s lack of coverage in school textbooks. Moreover, the National Memorial Museum of Forced Mobilization under Japanese Occupation and the War and Women’s Human Rights Museum (WVHRM) were dedicated *entirely* to remembering the history of these matters, with the WVHRM, for example, explicitly encouraging visitors to “remember the comfort women” and sign a petition demanding that the Japanese government issue a state apology and provide reparations. Prominent elements of popular culture also reproduced these discourses of remembrance. The 2017 film *Kunhamdo*, for example—hugely popular, with over five million admissions in its first week (*Korea Herald* 2017)—depicted Japan’s wartime forcible requisition of Korean laborers and their harsh treatment, including scenes of sadistic violence.

Nevertheless, while such sentiment was significantly widespread, it was not homogenous. Popular literature, in particular, offered examples of alternative discourses starkly juxtaposed with the ROK mainstream, derived from alternative conceptions of the national Self that rejected notions of historical victimhood at Japanese hands. The controversial *Anti-Japanese Tribalism*,³⁹ for example, in a chapter entitled “the myth of ‘forced mobilization,’” argued that the ROK Supreme Court decisions were “absurd judgments based on an obvious distortion of history” and that “there was no legal coercion in recruitment” (p. 69). Other sections questioned details concerning South Korean narratives of the comfort women, suggesting that it is a “serious misconception ... that [they] were forcibly carried off by the [Japanese] government” and that their number has been “absurdly exaggerated” (p. 305). While these mnemonic practices existed on the fringe of South Korean politics and society, they represent important evidence of the contestation of mainstream discourses within the ROK.

Findings: Japan

In contrast to South Korea, mainstream Japanese national identity discourses—especially those espoused by conservatives, who have dominated post-war politics—have increasingly sought to move on from guilt concerning the history of Japan’s imperialism and wartime aggression, to engender greater national pride and spur a more assertive role in the world as a “normal” country (Hagström 2015; Kingston 2016). These moves have involved revisionism of supposedly “masochistic” versions of Japanese history, as well

as a greater boldness in contesting the historical claims of former victims such as China and South Korea, to affirm Japan’s status as a law-following, order-respecting member of the international community (Suzuki 2019). Moreover, in addition to these understandings of the Japanese Self, there exists a lengthy history of constructions of the (South) Korean Other as, variously, inferior to Japan, backward, emotional, and unable to move on from the past, which are still widespread (Tamaki 2010; Bukh 2015).

In this context, during my period of analysis, while demonstrating greater variation than South Korea, mainstream Japanese discourses generally sought to either forget or contest the South Korean version of the history of wartime labor and the comfort women—criticizing the ROK’s persistent raising of matters that had already been resolved by legal agreement. Through these conflictual mnemonic practices, the Japanese Self—represented as logical, rational and law-abiding—was defended against threats posed by an irrational, emotional and illegal South Korean Other that obsessively dwelt on the past and made unfounded allegations against Japan.

OFFICIAL TEXTS

Official Japanese discourses, met with South Korea’s repeated raising of wartime labor and the comfort women, consistently sought the forgetting of this history or contested the ROK’s version of it, which threatened Japan’s own narratives. This often came in the form of claiming that South Korea was acting illegally by not respecting existing resolutions of these issues. Tokyo reacted with anger, for example, to the ROK court decisions ordering compensation for Korean wartime laborers as the matter had already been “settled completely and finally” by the 1965 bilateral normalization agreements,⁴⁰ with Foreign Minister Kōno stating that the judgments “completely overthrow the most fundamental legal foundation of the Japan–ROK relationship.”⁴¹ As for the comfort women issue, Kōno described any pulling back from the 2015 resolution agreement by Seoul as “completely unacceptable”⁴² and demanded that it uphold its responsibility to implement the pact.⁴³ When ROK court decisions ordering Japan to pay compensation to former comfort women were then issued in 2021, Foreign Minister Motegi described the situation as “absolutely unthinkable” and summoned the ROK ambassador to demand that South Korea “remedy its breaches of international law as a country.”⁴⁴

The Japanese government also took objection to the continued presence of a comfort woman memorial statue outside its embassy in Seoul.⁴⁵ Indeed, Tokyo found such memorialization of the comfort women so threatening that it essentially demanded there be none at all. As well as memorials in the ROK, Japan protested against statues in other countries, South Korean filings concerning the comfort women at the UNESCO Memory of the World Register, and proposals for a comfort women museum.⁴⁶ Official Japanese discourses, thus, engaged not only in forgetting this history domestically but also in demanding forgetting within South Korea and internationally.

Tokyo also regularly criticized Seoul’s affective casting of these issues. Foreign Minister Kōno claimed, for example,

⁴⁰Japan MOFA 2018/2-a-4-005.

⁴¹Kōno 2018/2-a-4-105.

⁴²Kōno 2018/2-a-4-084.

⁴³Kōno 2018/2-a-4-103.

⁴⁴Motegi 2021/2-a-4-178.

⁴⁵Kishida 2015/2-a-4-044, 2016/2-a-4-057.

⁴⁶Kishida 2016/2-a-4-076.

³⁸*Hankyoreh* 2015/1-b-2-047.

³⁹Lee 2019/1-c-3-002.

that “although the ROK states that this is an emotional and legal issue, this is a legal issue [only]. We are requesting the ROK to fully deal with this matter legally, leaving the emotional part as a separate matter.”⁴⁷ Whenever questioned about the need for Japan to “heal the wounds” of Korean victims, he slapped down such “prioritizing [of] personal sentiment” in favor of “swiftly correct[ing] this breach of international law.”⁴⁸ Similar narratives could be witnessed in Japan’s UNESCO applications, where Tokyo sought to depoliticize the registrations by claiming that they should only be about cultural heritage and nothing else. Foreign Minister Kishida, for example, repeatedly stated that the matter should be dealt with “from a technical and specialized perspective,” contrasting this with Seoul’s emotionalized approach.⁴⁹

These representations of the South Korean Other as irrational, emotional and illegal were implicitly and explicitly contrasted with a Japanese Self that was rational, logical and followed international law. In relation to the trade restrictions adopted against the ROK, for example, Tokyo denied that the measures had any relation to the ROK forced labor court decisions,⁵⁰ because “Japan only takes actions in accordance with ... rules.”⁵¹ Moreover, given the threat the ROK’s mnemonic practices posed to this Japanese Self-identity, during this period Tokyo also increasingly defended its own autobiographical narratives of the past by contesting South Korea’s version of events. Japanese officials complained, for example, that describing comfort women as “sex slaves ... contradicted the facts,” with its use by South Korea being “totally unacceptable.”⁵² Japan MOFA annual bluebooks, too, stated that claims such as the “forceful taking away” of comfort women and their total number being 200,000 persons “can hardly be regarded to be based on historical facts”⁵³—affirming Japan’s narratives of this history and, therefore, itself.

MEDIA TEXTS

Japanese media discourses, meanwhile, reproduced many of these logics—of an irrational South Korean Other constantly relitigating the past, contrasted with a rational, future-oriented Japanese Self—but also displayed some variation in this regard. Editorials in the right-leaning *Yomiuri Shimbun*, in particular, mirrored official discourses of forgetting by arguing that the forced labor and comfort women issues were already “settled completely and finally”⁵⁴—with the ROK court judgments on forced labor labeled “clearly unacceptable” in their violation of the 1965 normalization agreements,⁵⁵ and any reneging on the 2015 comfort women agreement “totally inconceivable.”⁵⁶ These moves meant the ROK could not be considered “a country that honors its promises.”⁵⁷ The left-leaning *Asahi Shimbun* similarly constructed South Korea as untrustworthy and irrational, stating that “if you change positions on international agreements ... you may call into question your nation’s integrity,”⁵⁸ and that Seoul should “deal with the issue of his-

torical interpretation through respecting agreements”⁵⁹ as they were “a promise between the two countries.”⁶⁰

South Korean remembering was also constructed as a threat to Japan. Both the *Asahi* and *Yomiuri* attacked the ROK’s “moves to make political use of history,”⁶¹ describing this as “irrational ... anti-Japanese propaganda.”⁶² More explicitly, the *Yomiuri* called for the removal of the comfort woman statue outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul to secure “the safety and dignity of the embassy”⁶³ and protested against ROK moves to establish a comfort women memorial day and museum because “offense will be felt by Japan.”⁶⁴ This was accompanied by contestation of the ROK’s version of events and defense of the Japanese counter-construction, stating, for example, that laborers and comfort women being “forcibly taken away and made to work like slaves” was an “erroneous perception”—with mobilization “based on law” being “historical fact”⁶⁵—and arguing that “it is a distortion to consider the comfort women issue as some sort of war crime.”⁶⁶ Nevertheless, *Asahi* editorials were also occasionally more receptive to remembering this difficult history—arguing concerning Tokyo’s UNESCO applications, for example, that, while “post-Meiji Japan achieved remarkable industrialization,” it was important not to “ignore the negative aspects,”⁶⁷ and also recommending “lending our ears to [former comfort women’s] voices”⁶⁸—illustrating at least partial variation among Japanese media discourses, compared to South Korea.

CULTURAL/POPULAR TEXTS

Like South Korea, Japanese cultural and popular texts, meanwhile, often reproduced official mnemonic representations, while also offering evidence of rarer alternatives. To begin with, texts concerning the forced labor and comfort women issues were far less prevalent in Japan than in South Korea—an indication, in itself, of forgetting. In prominent museums there tended to be scant mention of Japan’s colonialism, let alone wartime labor or the comfort women. One partial exception was the Meiji Industrial Heritage Information Center—constructed to fulfill Japan’s commitments to UNESCO to communicate the “full history” of its heritage sites. Yet, the center actually *downplayed* the notion of forced labor or discriminatory treatment. Interview testimony from Japanese former residents of worksites angrily contested the ROK’s claims—perceived as an affront to their nostalgic childhood memories—vociferously defending the Japanese understanding that “no such thing” ever took place. A starkly juxtaposed alternative, however, was the Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM)—relatively hidden in its discreet Tokyo location. WAM exhibits departed from official Japanese discourses by stating that the comfort women were recruited and held coercively by the Japanese military. Panels favorably covered the Korean former comfort women’s fight for justice, including the Wednesday demonstrations and the installation of memorial statues—seemingly embodying alternative understandings of this history, unthreatened by the ROK’s constructions.

⁴⁷Kōno 2019/2-a-4-121.

⁴⁸Kōno 2019/2-a-4-133.

⁴⁹Kishida 2015/2-a-4-026, 2015/2-a-4-027.

⁵⁰Kōno 2017/2-a-4-137.

⁵¹Kōno 2017/2-a-4-138.

⁵²Kōno 2018/2-a-4-086; Japan MOFA 2018/2-a-4-208.

⁵³Japan MOFA 2022/2-a-4-001.

⁵⁴*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2018/2-b-3-015, 2015/1-b-3-004.

⁵⁵*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2018/2-b-3-015.

⁵⁶*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2017/2-b-3-094.

⁵⁷*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2017/2-b-3-077.

⁵⁸*Asahi Shimbun* 2018/2-b-2-018.

⁵⁹*Asahi Shimbun* 2017/2-b-2-117.

⁶⁰*Asahi Shimbun* 2017/2-b-2-118.

⁶¹*Asahi Shimbun* 2017/2-b-2-117; *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2015/1-b-3-002.

⁶²*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2015/1-b-3-004, 2015/1-b-3-001.

⁶³*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2016/2-b-3-071.

⁶⁴*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2017/2-b-3-085.

⁶⁵*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2015/2-b-3-052, 2020/2-b-3-036.

⁶⁶*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2018/2-b-3-099.

⁶⁷*Asahi Shimbun* 2020/2-b-2-058.

⁶⁸*Asahi Shimbun* 2016/2-b-2-100.

In popular literature, while certain texts, such as Okamoto and Katō's *Who Created the Japan–South Korea Antagonism?*,⁶⁹ departed from official Japanese discourses by describing the history of forced labor and the comfort women as “serious human rights violations against Koreans” (p. 12), by far the most popular texts were authored by conservatives mirroring official discourses of forgetting and denial. Right-wing *manga* artist Kobayashi Yoshinori's *The Comfort Women*,⁷⁰ for example, claimed that the testimony of former comfort women “contained lies and misunderstandings” (p. 27), that the Japanese military was not involved in their recruitment (p. 46), that comfort women were not coerced (pp. 119–121), and that they were well cared for (p. 167). Hyakuta Naoki's *Let's Apologize to Korea Now* (a sarcastic title),⁷¹ meanwhile, referred to the ROK forced labor court decisions as “an irrational attempt to rehash what was settled by international treaty” (p. 155). Regarding the comfort women, he further claimed that there was “no evidence of coercion” (p. 228), and labeled memorials as “nonsense statues” (p. 239). Hyakuta also veered into anti-Korean xenophobia, suggesting, for example, that “maybe Koreans are stupid” given they “don't understand anything” (p. 228). Such representations went even further than official Japanese discourses to demean and ridicule the South Korean Other and its counter-constructions concerning this history.

Discussion

Thus, across the texts analyzed, while alternative discourses existed—discussed further below—and there was some variation within mainstream discourses, broad patterns of mnemonic contestation between South Korea and Japan were evident. Generally speaking, South Korean discourses sought to remember the history of forced labor and the comfort women, while Japanese discourses sought to forget or contest South Korea's remembrance.

Understood as a mnemonic encounter, however, these practices did more than simply remembering and forgetting; they also reproduced relational understandings of Self and Other that are important to Japan and South Korea's national identity discourses. South Korean discourses of remembering constructed Japan as an imperial aggressor Other incapable of coming to terms with its past and even continuing its aggression today, and—at the same time—posed commemoration of and pursuit of justice in relation to this history as an important responsibility of Koreans, thereby reproducing a collective sense of national Self through remembering past adversities. A national identity that derives pride and community from overcoming the oppression of Japanese imperialism relies upon such a rearticulation of history that emphasizes the severity of Japan's predations and the courage of Korean resistance against them. Conversely, Japanese discourses of forgetting/denial constructed South Korea as an emotional, irrational Other consistently breaching international law due to an obsession with history that was already settled, and—at the same time—posed Japan as a logical and rational actor that follows rules and international law, thereby reproducing a particular understanding of the national Self that has moved on from or denies Japan's colonial and wartime history. A national identity that poses Japan as a peaceful, order-following member of the liberal democratic international

community relies upon such a forgetting or denial of the country's recent history of aggression.

Moreover, given that these mnemonic practices clearly conflicted with each other, they also fundamentally contradicted important elements of the other state's notions of Self-identity. South Korea's emphasizing of Japan's shameful past threatens Japan's Self-identity that seeks to forget or deny this history; Japan's demands to forget or deny this history threaten South Korea's Self-identity that is determined to remember it. The threat posed by these mnemonic counter-constructions, therefore, exacerbates anxieties concerning Self-identity and produces defense mechanisms: the conflictual contestation of the history problem. Thus, it is not only that these mnemonic practices have played a vital role in reproducing important elements of each state's national Self, but also that the persistent reproduction of conflictual contestation has constituted a defense mechanism against ontological anxieties generated by the Other's counter-constructions. There has, therefore, been an attachment to the reproduction of this history war due to the existential importance of its maintenance for the two national communities.

Nevertheless, while these assertions mean that breaking out of this cycle of antagonism is difficult, this certainly does not mean that the persistence of the history problem is inevitable. Not every actor embodies these mnemonic practices and identity discourses to the same extent, and some embody alternatives. While focusing on mainstream discourses, my analysis also offered evidence of variation within them and of starkly alternative narratives. Indeed, although out of my period of analysis, the current ROK presidency of Yoon Suk-yeol and its emphasis on reconciliation with Japan shows the clear potential for variations of such embodied discourses to result in policy shifts. Such shifts have occurred in the past; Japan–South Korea relations are not a constant and the relationship has experienced phases of improvement. Still, the relationship has consistently reverted to antagonism. While it is alternative identity discourses that offer the potential for overcoming the history problem, most analysts are skeptical that a sustained transformation is occurring under Yoon and see a reversion to conflict ahead (e.g., Jo 2023). This article's argument offers a powerful explanation for that persistent tendency and the reasons why the history problem has not been overcome in a durable way thus far.

Conclusion

While memory's role in international politics has been increasingly recognized in recent years, there has remained significant scope for further theoretical development regarding the construction and persistence of international history wars. This article has attempted to contribute to such theory-building by developing the framework of mnemonic encounters to understand how relational identities are (re)constructed through practices of remembering and forgetting shared history and to explain the emergence of a history war within such encounters. In particular, I have demonstrated how recognizing the identity needs that such conflicts may serve for states, and the national communities that constitute them, allows us to better understand when, how and why a history war may arise and persist in bilateral relationships that share difficult history, overriding incentives to reconcile.

Among cases of international history wars, Japan and South Korea's history problem has been particularly antagonistic and persistent, as well as challenging conventional

⁶⁹Okamoto and Katō 2019/2-c-3–007.

⁷⁰Kobayashi 2020/2-c-3–008.

⁷¹Hyakuta 2019/2-c-3–009.

explanations of state behavior. In illustrating the utility and plausibility of my framework and theoretical contentions, I have argued that the history problem between these countries has persisted for so many decades—despite incentives to cooperate further—because of the extent to which its reproduction is caught up in the reproduction of the very national communities of South Korea and Japan. While this does not mean that the history problem is impossible to resolve, the implications of my argument are that lasting reconciliation will require a sustained reimagining not only of how to deal with the past, but also of how to understand what the very identities of South Korea(n) and Japan(ese) mean.

There is still significant room for further development of this research agenda, however. For example, as well as being readily applicable to other cases of international history wars, my framework could be used to explain why history wars have *not* arisen. While this theory-building exercise has necessitated a single illustrative case study, comparative studies could investigate why a history war has emerged in one bilateral relationship but not another, despite both having similarly difficult history. There also exist avenues for extending the framework and addressing some of its limitations. For example, this article's focus on *inter*-state relations has required a certain amount of *intra*-state generalization in terms of national identity discourses, with less focus on domestic contestation. With the increasing prominence of domestic history wars in recent years—for example, concerning Western attitudes to colonial history and slavery—some of the identity-based theoretical insights of this article could be combined with those of scholarship concerning the domestic mobilization of collective memory (e.g., Jo 2022) to understand how differing conceptions of the national self *within* a state contest history in a way that addresses their respective ontological insecurities. Such approaches hold significant promise in furthering our understanding of the role of the past in present politics.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available in the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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