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Enabling International History Wars: Everyday Mnemonic Foreign Policy in South Korean and Japanese Popular Culture

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In recent years, scholars have paid increasing attention to the role of memory in world politics. Within this literature, contentious memory politics have been shown to play an outsized role in many international relationships, especially among post-Soviet states and in Northeast Asia. Most existing scholarship on such international "history wars," however, has tended to privilege explanation of their official diplomatic conduct, unproblematically assuming the existence of a social reality in which this conduct is *possible* and makes sense in a national context. To address this, in this article, I draw from critical understandings of foreign policy and research on popular culture and world politics to theorize how, what I term, the *everyday mnemonic foreign policy* practices of popular culture materials, through their construction of understandings of the past and identities of Self and Other in relation to this past, contribute to making possible, imaginable, and even common-sensical the official conduct of international history wars. To illustrate this phenomenon, I analyze Japanese and South Korean popular culture materials to demonstrate the role they play in (re)producing a mnemonic social reality through which the conflictual official diplomatic conduct of the so-called "history problem" between these countries is enabled.

En los últimos años, los académicos han prestado una atención creciente al papel que juega la me-moria en la política mundial. Dentro de esta literatura, se ha demostrado que la política de la memo-ria contenciosa juega un papel desproporcionado en muchas relaciones internacionales, especial-mente entre los Estados postsoviéticos y en el noreste de Asia. Sin embargo, la mayoría de los traba-jos académicos existente con relación a tales ≪guerras históricas≫ internacionales, ha tendido a privi-legiar la explicación de su conducta diplomática oficial, la cual asume sin problemas la existencia de una realidad social en la que esta conducta es posible y tiene sentido en un contexto nacional. Para abordar esta cuestión, en este artículo nos basamos en comprensiones críticas de la política exterior y en investigaciones sobre cultura popular y política mundial para teorizar cómo lo que denomina-mos prácticas de política exterior mnémicas cotidianas de los materiales de cultura popular contribu-yen a hacer posible, imaginable e incluso de sentido común, a través de su construcción de compren-siones del pasado y de identidades del Yo y del Otro en relación con este pasado, la conducta oficial con respecto a las guerras históricas internacionales. Ilustramos este fenómeno mediante el análisis de materiales de la cultura popular japonesa y surcoreana con el fin de demostrar el papel que desempeñan en la (re)producción de una realidad social mnemónica a través de la cual se habilita la conflictiva conducta diplomática oficial del llamado ≪problema histórico≫ entre estos países.

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Ces dernières années, les chercheurs se sont intéressés de manière croissante au rôle de la mémoire dans la politique mondiale. Dans ces travaux, il a été démontré que les politiques mémorielles con-troversées jouent un rôle démesuré dans de nombreuses relations internationales, en particulier entre les États postsoviétiques et en Asie du Nord-Est. Cependant, la plupart des études existantes sur ces ≪ guerres de l'histoire ≫ internationales ont tendance à privilégier l'explication de la conduite diplomatique officielle, c'est-à-dire en supposant sans problème l'existence d'une réalité sociale dans laquelle cette conduite est possible et trouve un sens dans un contexte national. Pour remédier à cela, je m'appuie dans cet article sur des analyses critiques de la politique étrangère ainsi que sur des recherches dans les domaines de la culture populaire et de la politique mondiale. Mon objectif est de théoriser comment les pratiques quotidiennes de politique étrangère mnémonique des contenus culturels populaires, à travers leur construction des représentations du passé et des identités de soi et de l'autre par rapport à ce passé, contribuent à rendre possible, imaginable, voire évidente, la conduite officielle des guerres historiques internationales. Pour illustrer ce phénomène, j'analyse des éléments de la culture populaire japonaise et sud-coréenne afin de démontrer le rôle qu'ils jouent dans la (re)production d'une réalité sociale mémorielle. Cette réalité rend possible la conduite diplo-matique officielle et conflictuelle de ce que l'on appelle le ≪ problème historique ≫ entre ces deux pays.

Introduction

Set in an imagined near future in which North and South Korea are on the verge of reunification and have begun economic cooperation, the 2022 South Korean Netflix drama *Money Heist: Korea—Joint Economic Area*[1] tells the story of nine Koreans attempting a theft of bank notes from the new "Unified Korean Mint." In many aspects, *Money Heist: Korea* closely follows the original Spanish drama upon which it is based—including the means by which the main characters gain their names. Gathering to plot their heist, the leader of the group—"the Professor"—instructs his eight recruits to choose a global city as their code name for the purposes of the operation. To help them, he suggests that they choose cities where they might like to live after the heist, or simply locations that they "like the sound of." With little hesitation, the main character proceeds to choose "Tokyo" as her name. While an unproblematic preference in the original Spanish version, given the continued prominence in the Korean national consciousness of negative sentiment towards Japan concerning the history of its colonial rule over Korea (1910–1945) and broader wartime conduct, this represented a more puzzling choice in the South Korean version of the drama. The selection of Tokyo, therefore, necessitated a clever solution on the part of the writers, not found in the original Spanish script:

> Tokyo: *[looking at a globe to choose her name]* … Tokyo.
>
> Denver: Huh? Of all the places, why the hell would you pick Tokyo?!
>
> Tokyo: Well… we're gonna do bad things, aren't we?
>
> Denver: Damn, you're smart, huh?

The association between "doing bad things" and "Tokyo" did not need to be explained any further to a South Korean audience.

[1]Korean title: *Chong'i-e chip: kongdong kyŏje kuyŏk* (House of Paper: Joint Economic Area), based on the original Spanish title, *La casa de papel*.

In this brief exchange, then, *Money Heist: Korea* offers a fleeting example of the sort of Othering mnemonic practices in relation to Japan that are widespread in South Korea, in the context of broader tensions between these countries concerning their difficult history—often termed the "history problem" in this relationship. In existing academic literature, however, the Japan–South Korea history problem has generally been examined with the purpose of explaining its diplomatic conduct in inter-governmental disputes. In doing so, these analyzes tend to unproblematically presume the *possibility* of such bilateral mnemonic conflict—the prior existence of understandings of history and identity that allow the official conduct of the Japan–South Korea history problem to make sense—neglecting the fact that such a social reality must be *made* (and *remade*). While official discursive practices themselves play a role in the (re)production of such constructions, they are far from the only medium that does so. Importantly, as the above example highlights, this also appears to occur through everyday discursive practices such as those found in popular culture.

It is not only in analyzes of the Japan–South Korea history problem specifically that this insight has been neglected, but also in more general scholarship concerning international memory politics and, particularly, the diplomatic disputes and antagonisms of inter-state "history wars." Despite critical international relations and international political sociology scholarship increasingly highlighting the role of popular culture in performing a sense-making function for international politics, such insights have not been taken up as keenly as they might have been in literature focusing on contentious memory politics. In particular, literature examining international mnemonic conflict has tended to focus principally on explaining its official conduct, through analysis of diplomatic practices and occasionally the quasi-official discourses of textbooks, museums, and memorials. At the same time, broader inter-disciplinary literature on historical memory of war and conflict that has offered more attention to popular culture has generally neglected the performative, boundary-making identity discourses present in such materials and their relationship with the official conduct of inter-state mnemonic conflict.

In this article, therefore, I aim to further extend theorization of international memory politics by focusing on how the official mnemonic conflict of bilateral history wars is made *possible*, *imaginable*, and even *common-sensical* in the national context through the mnemonic practices of popular culture materials. I do this by drawing on critical theorize of everyday "foreign policy" as a boundary-making, performative practice that makes possible the conduct of official "Foreign Policy" through its (re)construction of Self and Other, as well as scholarship on popular culture and world politics. In particular, I develop the notion of *everyday mnemonic foreign policy*—that is, mnemonic practices in non-official venues such as popular culture that not only (re)produce the state through boundary-making identities of Self and Other, but do this particularly through (re)constructing understandings of the past and its contemporary political implications in relation to these national identities—theorizing how such *everyday* mnemonic practices contribute to (re)producing a social reality in which *official* mnemonic conflict may take place.

To illustrate and further investigate this phenomenon, I examine two items of Japanese and South Korean popular culture which contain representations of the other/Other in relation to the history of Japan's colonial rule of Korea and broader wartime conduct, as well as the contemporary political implications of this history—specifically, the high-profile 2017 South Korean film, *The Battleship Island* (*kunhamdo*), and the 2020 *manga* by Japanese controversialist Kobayashi Yoshinori, *The Comfort Women* (*ianfu*). Through this analysis, I show how popular culture materials contribute to enabling the official diplomatic conduct of the history problem in this relationship.

International Politics, Contentious Memory, and Popular Culture

Academic coverage of international memory politics has expanded markedly in recent decades, drawing attention to the important role that mnemonic practices play in world politics (see, for example, Bell 2006; Langenbacher and Shain 2010; Auchter 2014; Bachleitner 2021; Resende and Budryte 2013). Within this broader literature, the contested nature of international memory politics has been documented in various global contexts, with studies proliferating in particular concerning cases of mnemonic conflict within post-Soviet Eastern and Central Europe (see, for example, Torbakov 2011; Zhurzhenko 2013; Subotić 2019; Furgacz 2020) and East Asia (see, for example, Deacon 2023, 2024; Gustafsson 2014, 2020; Hasegawa and Togo 2008; He 2007; Kim 2014; Shin and Sneider 2016). While a variety of theoretical frameworks are employed across this literature, there is general agreement that mnemonic practices are a crucial means by which national identity is constructed and reconstructed—usually in relation to Others—and that such notions of identity shape how the nation understands and interacts with other/Other national communities. This includes theorize that are more agent-focused, emphasizing the instrumentalist strategies of elites to construct memories in particular ways for political ends (e.g., He 2007), and those that are more structural, emphasizing broader identity discourses into which actors are socialized, with their conduct being shaped accordingly (e.g., Deacon 2024). In both approaches, however, memory is generally theorized as playing an important role in the conduct of international politics through its constitution of national identity—be it the contentious memory politics of history wars, or otherwise.

It is notable, however, that the focus of analysis in such literature tends to be on explaining the official practices of state actors in a manner that assumes the prior existence of the social reality in which these agents act. The empirics analyzed often include, for example, the speeches of political leaders, diplomatic interactions, or legislative frameworks, understood as the official conduct of mnemonic foreign policy. To a lesser extent, there is also consideration of what we might call quasi-official discourses, such as those found in school textbooks, museums, and memorials. Even if not necessarily produced by a government, such discourses generally enjoy at least some form of official approval or commissioning, such that we can consider them adjacent to the state. In more authoritarian contexts, this proximity is even clearer—including with regard to mass–media discourses, which are also, much more rarely, subject to analysis. Regardless of the particular empirics that are analyzed, however, the overall focus of the research agenda here tends to be on explaining the role of mnemonic practices in the official conduct of the bilateral relationship, without attention to how it is that such official conduct is made possible.

Broader inter-disciplinary literature examining historical and cultural memory, on the other hand, tends to draw on a wider range of modes through which societies remember and forget. This is especially true of popular culture, which, while not entirely absent from the international memory politics literature discussed above, tends to be neglected and is seldom the main focus of theorization. Plate and Smelik's (2013) volume on the performance of memory in a variety of popular culture genres and artistic practices, for example, ranges from theatrical productions of Flemish Nazi collaboration to memory's role in the television series *Xena: Warrior Princess*. More directly focused on commemoration of international political conflict, Keren and Herwig's (2009) volume on war memory and popular culture offers manifold cases of the memorialization of war—in novels, comic books, video games, and films—while Alan Mintz (2001) has examined the role of popular films in shaping Holocaust memory within the United States.

Such scholarship, however, tends not to have as its focus a theorization of international memory politics and its connection with the reproduction of relational

national identities through the mnemonic practices of popular culture. Indeed, the increased attention to popular culture within memory studies scholarship in recent decades has come with a greater focus on *trans*national, global, and cosmopolitan memories (see Levy and Sznaider 2002). While this research agenda is undoubtedly right to respond to the increasing globalization of culture and mnemonic practices within it, we are nowhere near the erasure of the nation-state as the primary means of global political organization and a central mode of collective identification for individuals. There is, therefore, still significant importance to and further room for theorization of how national memory—crucial in the construction of national identity—is shaped by the mnemonic practices of popular culture and the role of these processes in international politics.

This is particularly true of the conflictual memory politics of international history wars. History wars have been acknowledged as playing a prominent role in the bilateral relations in which they can be found, with antagonistic contestation concerning difficult elements of shared history, such as past wars or atrocities, appearing to shape the conduct of the relationship more broadly (Deacon 2024). And yet, history wars do not occur in all relationships that share such difficult history—they are not inevitable. Undoubtedly, then, asking *why* international conflicts concerning the past arise and endure is a valuable research agenda. But it is not a sufficient one: as Roxanne Doty has argued regarding foreign policy analysis more generally, such "why" questions are often incomplete in that they:

> …take as unproblematic the *possibility* that a particular decision or course of action could happen. They presuppose a particular subjectivity (i.e., a mode of being), a background of social/discursive practices and meanings which make possible the practices as well as the social actors themselves. (Doty 1993, 298)

Thus, a neglect of this aspect of international memory politics makes our analysis incomplete, because it presupposes the possibility of official mnemonic foreign policy. Combined with this shortcoming, the mnemonic practices of popular culture materials, in particular, are also currently understudied in this literature. Thus, a theorization of the role of popular culture materials' *everyday* mnemonic practices in enabling the *official* conduct of international mnemonic conflict appears warranted.

Everyday Mnemonic Foreign Policy and Popular Culture: Enabling International History Wars

While diplomacy and foreign policy are conventionally understood as the means by which the domestic/internal state interacts with the foreign/external, critical approaches have problematized this understanding. With an appreciation that reality is discursively constructed, we are able to question the notion of a state existing unproblematically prior to the conduct that takes place in its name. Instead, as states have no natural essence or fixed existence, they continually rely on discursive practices to articulate them into being and make their conduct possible (Campbell 1998). In particular, discursive practices of diplomacy and foreign policy, in their performative demarcation of the domestic from the foreign and the (national) Self from the Other, produce and reproduce the *very existence* of these boundaries (Ashley 1987). Thus, rather than simply being how the state interacts externally, diplomacy and foreign policy can be understood as a set of practices through which a bounded entity called the state is socially constructed in the first place.

With this understanding of foreign policy in mind, it is immediately apparent that it is not only the state and official actors themselves which engage in such boundary-making practices that continually reproduce the existence of the state, the

national Self, and their demarcation from the external and national Others. In this regard, David Campbell (1998, 68–9) distinguishes between "Foreign Policy"—the conventional understanding of the external conduct of the state—and the broader, boundary-making "foreign policy" described above. It is the constitution of identity by foreign policy that *enables* Foreign Policy to be conducted. Adopting this broader, critical understanding of foreign policy thus brings into focus a wide variety of *everyday* discursive practices by non-state actors, through which the nation-state is constituted in relation to foreign Others, and which enable the *official* conduct of Foreign Policy in particular ways.

Mnemonic practices are a prominent category of such discursive practices. It is well established that practices of remembering and forgetting are a crucial means by which national identities—constitutive of the national community and, therefore, the state—are produced and reproduced (Bell 2006; Langenbacher and Shain 2010; Smith 1996). Discourses of the national Self tend to articulate narratives of collective history which bind together members of the nation through a sense of belonging, while also separating them from Others (Berenskoetter 2023; Deacon 2024). This importance to the national Self makes historical memory a vital terrain of political contestation for the state, both domestically and in terms of its international conduct. But, again, that does not mean that the mnemonic practices implicated in these processes of national identity construction are performed only by state actors—they may also be articulated in mass–media, history taught in schools, exhibitions contained in museums, and a broad variety of popular cultural practices.

Indeed, if we extend Campbell's framework, we can understand these non-official mnemonic practices, engaged in constructing relational national identities in terms of the past, as *everyday mnemonic foreign policy* that makes the *official* conduct of mnemonic Foreign Policy possible. More specifically, I define *everyday mnemonic foreign policy* as non-official discursive practices which not only (re)produce the state through boundary-making identities of Self and Other, but do this particularly through (re)constructing understandings of the past and its contemporary political implications in relation to these national identities. In doing so, everyday mnemonic foreign policy practices (re)produce a particular *mnemonic social reality*—what is "true" or "real" about the past, national actors' conduct, guilt or innocence regarding that past, and how that past should or should not be addressed today—that shapes the national context for any treatment of or action taken concerning the relevant history. In particular, this national context matters for collective notions of imaginability and sense-making in terms of official state conduct concerning the relevant history, thereby shaping the conditions of possibility for the pursuit of particular official mnemonic Foreign Policy. To be clear, this should not be confused with a more conventional argument that everyday mnemonic foreign policy *causes* the state to adopt or not adopt a particular position. Instead, what I am arguing is that such practices play an important role in shaping the discursive context of state conduct—making certain mnemonic Foreign Policies more (or less) imaginable or common-sensical, and engendering consent for those Foreign Policies, through the constitution of a particular "reality" of the past.

Before exploring this conceptualization in more detail in the context of international history wars, it is important to consider further where we might find such everyday mnemonic foreign policy practices. As already indicated above, an underexplored, yet vital, genre in this regard is popular culture. Popular culture texts have been theorized as performing an especially important sense-making function for the international conduct of states:

> [The plausibility of state action] depends upon the ways in which publics understand international politics and the location and role of their own and other states in it. These understandings are produced not only in state officials' rhetoric but also, and

> more pervasively, in the mundane cultures of peoples' everyday experiences. This, then, implicates popular culture in providing a background of meanings that helps to constitute public images of international relations and foreign policy. Popular culture thus helps to construct the reality of international politics for officials and non-officials alike and, to the extent that it reproduces the content and structure of the dominant foreign policy discourse, it helps to produce consent for foreign policy and state action. (Weldes 1999, 119)

Indeed, what Jutta Weldes is describing here is almost precisely the boundary-making everyday foreign policy, which makes official Foreign Policy possible, discussed above. While, as Weldes also suggests, such a sense-making function is not *limited* to popular culture, its texts tend to be especially pervasive—they have an ability "to reach, by definition, a large number of people" (Press-Barnathan 2017, 169), getting to parts of society that political elites do not—giving them a particularly important function. Indeed, regarding international political conflicts in particular, Galia Press-Barnathan (2017, 168-169) notes that popular culture can play an important enabling role because of its frequent complicity in constructions of what the "national interest" is and who the nation's enemies are—"representational struggles" that "provide information about past and present events, about oneself and about the enemy." In the context of a conflict, these popular culture representations of the national Self and the "enemy" Other may thus generate affective public sentiment that shapes and constrains official Foreign Policy in relation to the conflict. For example, representations which instill pride in the nation and hatred towards the enemy may engender consent for the perpetuation of the conflict due to its conduct by the state being more common-sensical.

Thus, returning to contentious memory politics in particular, the everyday mnemonic foreign policy of popular culture materials may possess an important enabling function for the official conduct of international history wars by creating a background of meaning that shapes and constrains the latter's conditions of possibility. Such everyday mnemonic foreign policy practices may appear in the form of narrations of various elements of a nation's history in relation to Others—in popular books, films, television series, or any other popular cultural artifact. These narrations could be more overt and deliberate in their construction of the past, with a clear political agenda, or they could offer more subtle representations that engage in a banal mnemonic Othering that does not even consciously occur as such to the audience. In this regard, the mnemonic practices in question will exist within a broader terrain of collective memory, and may appeal to audiences already steeped in certain constructions of the past and of identity, largely reproducing these understandings. On the other hand, they may also contribute to shifting these understandings in new directions—representations that are more antagonistic towards the Other, or that are more conciliatory, than might be found more generally.[2] What is key, however, is that the popular culture materials have sufficient circulation as, without being consumed in large numbers within the state, they would not have the discursive power to shape understandings of mnemonic social reality in particular ways.

To consider an example, there may be ongoing discord within official diplomatic relations between two states relating to atrocities allegedly perpetrated during a war fought between them a century ago. One side demands that the other acknowledges and offers apologies and restitution for these atrocities, while the other denies that the atrocities ever happened and, therefore, refuses to countenance any such measures. In this context, a historical television drama is produced and distributed in the victim state that contains representations of this history which narrate the other

[2]That is to say, provided a popular cultural text enjoys sufficient circulation, all such texts possess the ability to shape—enabling *or constraining*—official Foreign Policy. However, in the vein of Weldes (1999, 118), in this article I am particularly interested in elucidating processes of *reproduction* and *enabling* of history wars. As discussed in the conclusion, further research may examine, instead, processes of contestation.

state, its leaders and its people as perpetrators of terrible atrocities during the war, and demands an accounting for that history in the present. In doing so, the drama, if sufficiently consumed, may contribute to (re)producing a particular understanding of this history in the victim state—a sense of national Self that places significant emphasis on this history and the importance of addressing it today, as well as Othering of and enmity towards the other state due to its responsibility for the victims' suffering and its denial of a "correct" version of this history. These representations can be understood as everyday mnemonic foreign policy practices that contribute to (re)constructing a particular social reality in which the conduct and perpetuation of conflictual official mnemonic Foreign Policy with the other state in relation to this history is more imaginable, possible, and even common-sensical—constructing consent and (re)producing the national context for it to take place. For the avoidance of doubt, this is not to suggest that one television drama is capable of shaping the collective memory of an entire nation in a homogenous manner. Rather, this will be merely one example of such a text in a broader sphere of popular culture materials engaging in these mnemonic practices—films, books, works of art, etc.—all of which, with sufficient circulation, may contribute to these processes in a contested terrain.

Enabling the Japan–South Korean History Problem through Popular Culture

To illustrate this phenomenon in more depth, I examine the everyday mnemonic foreign policy of Japanese and South Korean popular culture materials to theorize their enabling function for the official conduct of the "history problem" between these countries—persistent diplomatic disputes and antagonisms concerning the history of Japan's colonial rule of Korea (1910–1945) and its broader conduct during the Second World War. Such disputes have related to matters including Imperial Japan's wartime requisition of Koreans for hard labor; the coercive recruitment of Korean women and girls—euphemistically referred to as "comfort women"—for sexual servitude during the war; sovereignty over the disputed territory of Dokdo/Takeshima; coverage (or lack thereof) of this history in Japanese school textbooks; and visits by Japanese politicians to Tokyo's controversial Yasukuni Shrine.

In the last decade, the main battlelines of the history problem have revolved around the first two of these issues: wartime Korean labour and the comfort women. More specifically, the South Korean government has emphasized the coercive recruitment and maintenance of Korean wartime laborers and comfort women—referring to the former as "forced labour" and the latter as "sex slavery"—and the key role of the Japanese military in this recruitment and maintenance (e.g., Republic of Korea MOFA 2022). Official South Korean rhetoric has also emphasized the harsh and brutal conditions faced by labourers, and the violence committed against comfort women—including young girls (e.g., Moon 2018). In emphasizing the need to commemorate this history and honor its victims, therefore, South Korean officials have repeatedly railed against Japan's purported attempts to forget or deny this history, accusing Tokyo of being unrepentant and insincere (e.g., Chung 2021).

In contrast, the Japanese government has generally sought to downplay, or even explicitly deny, many of South Korea's historical allegations. Tokyo's position, for example, has been that Korean wartime labourers do not meet the legal definition of "forced labour" and that there was no particular discrimination against them compared to Japanese labourers (e.g., Kishida 2015). The coerciveness of, and military involvement in, recruitment of Korean comfort women has also been disputed by high-ranking Japanese politicians, including the late former prime minister Abe Shinzō (e.g., Japan MOFA 2007). In any event, Japan has consistently argued that these disputes have already been resolved through legal agreements with

South Korea—such as the 1965 normalization treaty and the 2015 comfort women agreement—and, therefore, has branded South Korea's repeated raising of these matters as an emotional obsession with the past that constitutes a breach of international law (e.g., Kōno 2019).

Although the bilateral relationship has experienced phases of improvement, it has consistently returned to a state of antagonism and mistrust in a variety of arenas, stemming from disputes concerning this history. While some studies have examined these dynamics in the context of popular culture (e.g., Sakamoto and Epstein 2020), little attention has been paid to theorizing the role that Japanese and South Korean popular culture materials play in enabling the official Foreign Policy of the history problem. This is despite the fact that, in recent years, a significant number of popular cultural texts—films, television series, popular literature, art, and more—which engage in everyday mnemonic foreign policy in relation to these issues, have been produced in both countries. For example, one of the most successful South Korean television dramas of recent decades, *Mister Sunshine* (broadcast in 2018), focuses on Koreans who attempted to resist Japanese colonization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. All such popular cultural texts, with sufficient circulation, have the ability to shape South Korean and Japanese national constructions of this history and its political implications in ways that matter significantly for our understanding of how the bilateral history problem is enabled.

Therefore, below, I examine this phenomenon in further detail through a discourse analysis of an illustrative item of popular culture from each country: the South Korean film *The Battleship Island* (Kunhamdo 2017), and the Japanese *manga The Comfort Women* (Kobayashi 2020). As discussed in further detail below, these are both prominent and well-circulated texts. Although this is not to suggest that they are necessarily representative of popular culture in South Korea and Japan more generally, it means that they have significant discursive power in their construction of widespread understandings of the past and identities in relation to that past. In this regard, both are also texts that overtly and deliberately represent difficult history between Japan and South Korea with a clear political agenda—unlike the more passing, banal Othering of the opening vignette of this article. While, as discussed above, both such genres—and those anywhere on the spectrum in between—can contain everyday mnemonic foreign policy practices that possess an important enabling function, more overt cases are better suited to demonstrating my argument, and, therefore, it is such texts that I use for my illustrative case study.

In conducting the discourse analysis, I approached both popular culture items as "texts," in line with the broad understanding of a "text" common to discourse analysts as anything that "conveys meaning in a particular context" (Neumann 2008, 63). In this regard, the texts were read/watched with a specific focus on mnemonic representational practices of relational identity construction—that is, discursive practices of remembering, forgetting, and contesting the past that (re)produce understandings of Self and Other in relation to the relevant history and its contemporary political implications. Discourse analysis is most suitable for such a reading because of its emphasis on deconstructing how subjects are relationally constructed through discursive practices of representation (Doty 1993; Milliken 1999), which can, in turn, be narrowed to a focus on particular kinds of representation, such as mnemonic representations.[3] The analysis, therefore, primarily focused on textual linguistic construction; although the role that imagery plays in these constructions was taken into account, these images were analyzed *as text*.[4] While the texts were read/watched in the original Korean and Japanese, I present my findings below in English translation for accessibility, accompanied by transliterations of the original language where relevant.

[3]See Resende and Budryte (2013, 2) on memory as a "sensitizing concept."

[4]For literature that, instead, focuses on the visual as a particular form of analysis concerning international politics and popular culture, such as in comic books, see Cooper-Cunningham (2020), Hansen (2017), and Shim (2017).

Finally, I note that this section discusses the depiction of violence—including sexual violence—as well as potentially offensive characterizations of such conduct. While I have deliberately avoided including the most graphic imagery from these materials, my descriptions in the analysis may nonetheless cause discomfort to readers.

South Korea: The Battleship Island

The Battleship Island (Korean: *kunhamdo*; hereafter *TBI*) is a 2017 South Korean film set during the final months of the Second World War. It concerns the lives of Koreans requisitioned for hard labour on Hashima—a small island off the coast of Nagasaki dedicated to undersea coal mining, commonly referred to as "Battleship Island" due to the shape of its topography—and their attempted escape from the island. The film was a huge box office success with substantial national circulation—over five million tickets (roughly one in ten of the entire South Korean population) were sold in its first week alone (Korea Herald 2017). Furthermore, special screenings of the film were even staged for foreign diplomats in South Korea and for UNESCO officials in Paris. The latter occurred in the context of a dispute between Japan and South Korea concerning Tokyo's registration with UNESCO of "industrial heritage sites" that included the coal mines of Hashima but made no mention of forced Korean labour having taken place there, angering Seoul (KBS World 2017).

While *TBI*'s plot and characters are fictional, the film is, thus, inspired by and intended to tell the story of actual historical events. In this way, *TBI* explicitly presents a narrative of history that, as Choi and Sakamoto (2021, 301) have argued, can be understood as "affect[ing] popular perception and feed[ing] into South Korea–Japan memory politics" through a shaping of collective memory of this history in South Korea. In particular, *TBI* generally offers narratives that emphasize Japan's historical transgressions and Korea's victimhood—constructing Japan as the colonial oppressor Other of the victimized (South) Korean Self. Three of the most prominent aspects of this historical narrative, each of which I explore further below, include: the deceptive and coercive recruitment and maintenance of Korean labourers, including young children; the dangerous working conditions and appalling living conditions of these Korean labourers; and the sexual enslavement of Korean women and girls as comfort women.

From its outset, *TBI* makes clear that Korean workers at Hashima were recruited by deceptive and coercive means. The film's protagonist, jazz musician Lee Kang-ok, arrives at the Japanese port of Shimonoseki from the southern Korean city of Pusan with a "letter of recommendation" that he has been assured will grant a well-paid position for him and his band in Japan. However, the Japanese official at the port to whom he provides this letter does not take it seriously—briefly glancing at it only in a perfunctory manner. Instead, Lee is forced onto an industrial train carriage by armed Japanese soldiers, along with his young daughter and other Koreans from their ship. As he is led away, he looks to the ground and sees countless other letters of recommendation, all cast aside and trampled on (Figure 1)—he has been duped like so many other Koreans before him. This emphasis on deceptive and coercive recruitment is also explicitly made in relation to children. Indeed, *TBI*'s very opening scene depicts a supervisor in the Hashima mines complaining of an excessively narrow passage and, therefore, calling for some "young kids" (*ŏrin'ae-dŭl*) to be sent down there—attempting to immediately draw the audience's attention to the existence of Korean children in the mines. The deceptive recruitment of such children is then made explicit in a dialogue on board the ship transporting Lee and the other Koreans to Japan:

> Older male: You should still be suckling on your mum's breasts! What's a kid like you doing getting on this boat?

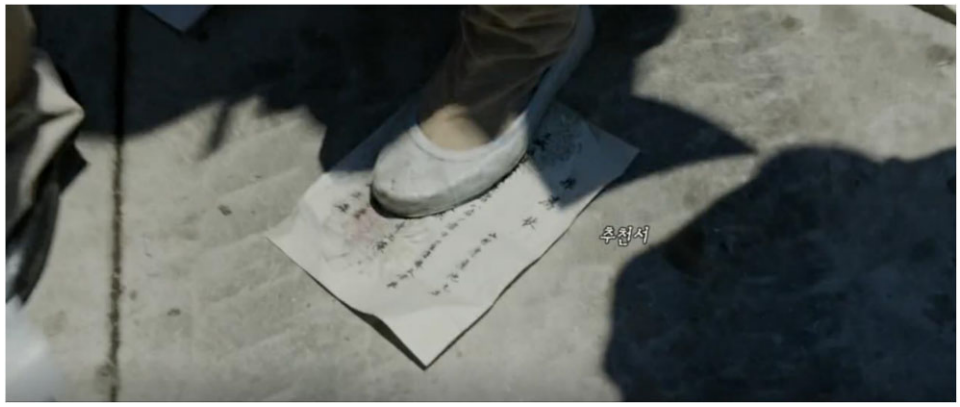

Figure 1. The "recommendation letters" of Lee and other Koreans have been cast aside and are trampled on the ground. © CJ Entertainment.[5]

Figure 2. Dangerous conditions for young Korean labourers in the Hashima mines. © CJ Entertainment.

> Boy: I was out doing errands for my dad. The town clerk said I could make a load of money joining the army and put me on a truck. I couldn't even tell my family…
>
> […]
>
> Older male: [*looking at several more boys of this age*] How could they drag off prepubescent boys? Snatching them from the fields or while they're out wrestling…

In addition to such coercive and deceptive recruitment, *TBI* also emphasizes the appalling conditions in which Koreans lived and worked on Hashima. The Japanese managers of the mine appear to have no regard for the safety of Koreans, with them shown enduring death and serious injury throughout the film with little protection (Figure 2). Indeed, early in the film, this total and deliberate disregard for Korean lives is illustrated starkly when, upon the mine section which the Koreans are working in suffering a dangerous gas leak that could spread across the whole mine, the director orders that this section be sealed—"that's where the Koreans are, right? Blow it up"—leaving countless Korean labourers for dead inside. This Japanese inhumanity towards Koreans also extends to life more broadly on Hashima. Koreans

[5]All figures in this article are quoted for the purposes of review and criticism under fair-use rules. The copyright remains with the original publishers.

Figure 3. Lee's young daughter at a dinner held for the Hashima mine boss. © CJ Entertainment.

are shown being beaten with batons on arrival at the island with no provocation, before being separated from their children and stripped naked to be "disinfected" outdoors in public—all while the film's soundtrack plays celebratory Japanese militaristic music in the background. Moreover, such treatment is clearly framed as being discriminatory in its juxtaposition with how the Japanese residents are treated. Koreans, on arrival at Hashima, are shown being taken to their own living quarters which are of a markedly lower quality than the Japanese quarters—dark, dingy underground rooms with sodden, dirty floors. Food rations are also atrocious, with one Korean shown finding a live cockroach in his gruel. It is also explicitly stated that the Koreans' wages receive so many "deductions" for this accommodation, food, and other items from the mining company, that they are hardly being paid at all—with one exclaiming "we're going to become indebted by working!" The inhumane treatment of Koreans is perhaps illustrated most severely, however, towards the end of the film. Increasingly convinced of Japan's imminent defeat to the United States in the war, the Japanese military management of the mines decide that, to avoid any testimony being offered against them in subsequent war crimes tribunals, all Korean residents should be killed.

As well as hard labour in the Hashima mines themselves, *TBI* also offers narratives of the history of the Korean comfort women stationed at Hashima and elsewhere. While, in *TBI*, the male Koreans brought to Hashima are forced to work in the mines, the women and girls are forced into sexual servitude. This initially includes Lee's eight-year-old daughter, who—along with the other female Koreans—is inspected by a Japanese doctor who boasts that Hashima's "brothel" (*yūkaku/yugwak*) has never had an outbreak of venereal disease. All this time, Japanese men are shown paying particular attention to Lee's young daughter, with the brothel manager bringing her to a dinner for the mine's director and stating of her "isn't this innocence also enjoyable?" (Figure 3). Indeed, in a disturbing development, the director of the mine later hatches a plan to send the girl to his superior in Nagasaki as a "gift." While Lee's daughter is eventually able to escape these dangers, *TBI* has a clear intention to represent Korean girls of even this age as victims of Japanese horrors. More generally, Korean comfort women are narrated by *TBI* as leading a harrowing existence. In terms of depictions of events at Hashima itself, Korean comfort women are shown to be enduring severe violence. In one scene, for example, a Korean woman, running from a violent Japanese soldier, screams "someone tell this lunatic to stop beating me!" The soldier drunkenly responds by shouting "I paid for this," before spewing profanities at the woman and smashing a glass bottle

over her head. Furthermore, in terms of stories told of comfort women away from Hashima, one Korean resident speaks of a woman falling pregnant at a comfort station in China who was forced to endure a violent abortion and then made to return to work within days. Another, meanwhile, says she was "dragged off to China" initially, having been "put on a truck" without knowing where she was going. She then tells of a Korean comfort woman who was tortured to death at the Chinese station by Japanese soldiers for feigning illness. In an almost unwatchable depiction of this torture, the soldiers are shown laughing as they roll the woman back and forth over a bed of sharp spikes as she bleeds to death, while other comfort women look on crying. Given that this scene played no role in the storyline of *TBI* whatsoever, it is difficult to see what purpose it served other than to shock the audience with such depictions of Japan's historical crimes against Korean women and girls.

These mnemonic representations in *TBI* have significant overlap with the main battlelines of the history problem between South Korea and Japan discussed above. *TBI* depicts Korean labourers and comfort women—including children—as having been deceived, coerced, and treated like slaves in awful conditions by Japanese captives. It also explicitly represents Japan as still in denial about this history: the on-screen text that closes the film notes that Hashima "became a UNESCO world heritage site for its role in the Japanese industrial revolution" in 2015, but, although UNESCO advised the disclosure of "all historical facts, including forced labour," the Japanese government "continues to ignore this." In doing so, *TBI* can be understood as engaging in everyday mnemonic foreign policy—boundary-making mnemonic practices that (re)construct an unrepentant colonial Other in Japan, which committed historical atrocities that it will not admit, and a (South) Korean victim Self that endured these evils and now fights for acknowledgement of them. Such constructions are undoubtedly more complex than this article has space to discuss—in *TBI* there are also, for example, Koreans who betray the nation by collaborating with Japan and who themselves engaged in some of the deception that saw labourers and comfort women recruited. However, the overarching narrative is difficult to miss; the film is laced with historical representations of Japanese crimes committed against Koreans.

In shaping South Korean collective memory and understandings of national identity of Self and Other in this way, therefore, *TBI*—and other South Korean popular culture materials like it—contribute to creating a particular kind of mnemonic social reality in which the history of wartime forced labour and the comfort women is understood as worthy of commemoration and proper restitution. In doing so, South Korean official Foreign Policy that engages in antagonistic conflict with Japan concerning these issues—and the history problem more generally—is made more possible, imaginable, and even common-sensical in the South Korean national context. For example, in the years following *TBI*'s release, South Korea engaged in some of the greatest hostility towards Japan concerning the forced labour and comfort women issues since normalisation. This included: Seoul railing against Tokyo's purported ignoring of Korean wartime labour in its UNESCO filings; the relationship reaching new lows after South Korean courts ordered compensation to be paid to former labourers; and the outbreak of a bilateral trade dispute as a result of these court judgments, including a massive South Korean boycott of Japanese goods and services (see Deacon 2022). While, again, this is not to claim a *causal* connection, the everyday mnemonic foreign policy of *TBI*, together with other South Korean popular culture materials, can be understood as contributing to constructing the conditions of possibility for such measures.

Japan: The Comfort Women

The Comfort Women (Japanese: *ianfu*; hereafter *TCW*) is a 2020 *manga*, interspersed with essays, authored by right-wing *manga* artist and controversial polemicist Kobayashi Yoshinori. Although, as its title suggests, the book focuses on the

comfort women, across its 300 pages it also discusses a variety of other aspects of the modern history of Japan–(South) Korea relations that have been constituent elements of the bilateral history problem. Kobayashi is the author of several other similar texts—such as *On The War* (*sensō-ron*)—and was also a founding member of the influential Society for History Textbook Reform (*atarashii rekishi kyōkasho-o tsukuru kai*), formed in 1996 with the mission to revise Japan's school history textbooks away from a guilt-inducing, "masochistic" understanding of modern Japanese history and towards greater nationalistic pride (see Shibuichi 2008). He has developed significant notoriety in Japan for his historical revisionism, with his works receiving substantial attention—including criticism—and selling millions of copies (see Clifford 2004).

In *TCW*, Kobayashi attempts to impart what he argues to be an entirely factual understanding of history—often through imagined and/or anecdotal vignettes and dialogues accompanied by artwork, but also through set-piece essays—overtly attempting to shape Japanese collective memory of these events in relation to South Korea. In particular, in stark juxtaposition with *TBI*, *TCW* generally offers narratives that downplay or deny the history of Japan's colonial and wartime conduct, constructing South Korea as an irrational, emotional Other obsessed with attacking Japan for this history, in contrast with a logical and rational Japanese Self. Three of the most prominent aspects of this historical narrative, each of which I explore further below, include: arguments that the comfort women were not coerced and that the comfort system was not controlled by the Japanese military; arguments that the comfort women served an important and necessary purpose; and representation of South Korea's contemporary conduct in relation to these matters as irrational and illegal.

In offering his narrative of the history of the comfort women in *TCW*, Kobayashi begins by undermining the dominant South Korean position on this history, and particularly the testimony of former comfort women. He argues that this testimony contained "lies and misunderstandings" (p. 27) and was not examined or verified properly (p. 29), blaming this supposed misinformation for sparking the comfort women issue in Japan–South Korea relations from the 1990s onwards. More specifically, Kobayashi claims that the Japanese military was not involved in creating or administering the comfort system, arguing that the term "*jūgun ianfu*" (military comfort women) was only invented relatively recently and never used contemporaneously (p. 13), and that it was *private businesses* that were set up to recruit women and employ them at comfort stations (p. 32). While he admits that some concerning practices may have existed within these processes, he puts this down to "bad businesspeople/agents" (*warui gyōsha*) and parents who sold their daughters to make money to survive (p. 33). The vast majority of comfort women, however, are narrated as leading good lives at the comfort stations. Kobayashi, for instance, claims that the stations had good medical facilities as health maintenance was important (p. 33), and that comfort women had an income of ten times that of a university graduate of the time—working for just two or three years, he argues, gave them enough money to build a house back in their hometown (p. 32). Indeed, in one illustration (Figure 4), comfort women are depicted as living happy and fulfilling lives almost akin to a holiday camp (p. 154).

Kobayashi goes further than this, however, to also contest the notion that the existence of the comfort system was a bad thing, suggesting instead that it was an important necessity, and even "natural." He argues that, in the battlefields of far-away lands, with no idea when—or if—they might see their families and lovers again, and facing death at any moment, Japanese soldiers lost their senses and became like "wild beasts" (*yajū*), attacking "the enemy's women." These "chaotic" acts of rape, according to Kobayashi, were the soldiers' means of letting out their natural sexual lusts (*seiyoku*), which needed to be brought into an ordered control. This control, he argues, was the purpose of the comfort stations (p. 32). In this regard, Kobayashi

Figure 4. Comfort women depicted as leading happy and fulfilling lives at comfort stations. © Kobayashi Yoshinori, Gentosha.

entirely conflates the comfort women with "professional prostitutes"—both those of the time and those in contemporary Japanese sex work venues such as "soaplands," of which he offers crude depictions that I do not reproduce here (pp. 33, 59, 62). Indeed, in asserting that "prostitution is of course not evil. Prostitutes are accepted. Wartime 'comfort women' were just the same. They were professionals who brought order to the chaotic battlefield" (p. 59), Kobayashi presents participation of both "professional" sex workers and the comfort women as essentially an equivalent free choice.[6] Such sex work, he argues, was a normal part of East Asian traditional culture (including in Korea), but was subverted by the global spread of Christianity and its moralizing on sin (pp. 170–1, 249–52). To criticize the past based on contemporary standards of Western morals and feminism, Kobayashi argues, smacks of "arrogance" (p. 211). In fact, he goes as far as to argue that in all workplaces there is some "forcing" because, even though some jobs are not especially pleasant or enjoyable, there are restrictions on workers simply leaving or taking breaks whenever they want to—so if we believe that comfort women were slaves, then so are most workers (pp. 119–20). This justificatory logic attempts to absolve Japan of any sense of shame for the comfort women.

As well as narrating history itself, however, Kobayashi's *manga* also comments on the contemporary conduct of South Korea in relation to this history. Koreans, he argues, have a "deep-seated grudge" (*on'nen*) against Japan which is of such strength that nothing can overcome it (pp. 6, 40). No matter how many times Japanese politicians have apologized, the South Korean people would never accept it (p. 37), because South Korea is "the eternal 'victim' [*higaisha*]" and Japan is "the eternal

[6] In addition, as Edward Vickers (2021, 17) argues more generally, this position of Japanese conservative revisionists "both downplays the extent of the brutality and coercion associated with the [comfort system] and assumes that the system of peacetime prostitution was itself non-coercive, whereas in fact it was underpinned by debt slavery."

'perpetrator' [*kagaisha*]" (p. 6) (Figure 5). This mentality, Kobayashi argues, allows South Korea to think that it "does not need to respect international law or treaties" and so it is impossible to have a "healthy diplomatic relationship" between Seoul and Tokyo (p. 6). The "only way that South Korea can restore [Japan's] trust," he asserts, is "if they prove that they are a country that respects law and rules" (p. 7). Japan, on the other hand, annexed Korea in a way that was "recognized as legitimate [*gōhō*] by international society" (p. 8)—demonstrating a clear contrast between the logical and lawful Japan and the irrational and illegal South Korea. Kobayashi even extends this to a mocking of South Korean remembrance practices. In particular, the comfort woman memorial statue—as found outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul, and now in many other locations within and outside South Korea—is mocked from the outset and throughout the book through the repeated use of a derisive caricature of it. This caricature is depicted in illustrations within the *manga* saying things such as "I don't remember becoming a slave myself, but before I knew it that's what I was being called" (p. 275) and "I don't really understand what Japan did wrong, but I want them to apologize and give us money" (p. 277). As shown in Figure 6, Kobayashi also jokes of these comfort women statues "being built everywhere" (p. 281), with this mocking taking on a nakedly xenophobic tone through his addition of Korean language-like sounds to the end of sentences spoken by the comfort woman statue caricature. This begins simply with sounds that commonly end Korean sentences (e.g., *nida*), but then becomes the names of stereotypical Korean cuisine such as *samgyet'ang* (ginseng chicken soup).[7]

Just as we saw with *TBI*, these mnemonic representations in *TCW* overlap significantly with the battlelines of the Japan–South Korea history problem of recent years. Kobayashi narrates the comfort women as "professional prostitutes" who were recruited by private businesses, and who were well treated and well paid. Furthermore, he frames contemporary criticism of the comfort system as anachronistic and un-East Asian, with South Korea's repeated raising of this history stemming from an irrational grudge that sees the country breaking international law—in contrast with Japan's rational and lawful conduct, including even its annexation of Korea. In doing so, like *TBI*, *TCW* can be understood as engaging in everyday mnemonic foreign policy—boundary-making mnemonic practices that (re)construct an irrational, illegal (South) Korean Other obsessed with raking over the past, and a lawful, rational Japanese Self that has done little wrong and, in any event, looks to the future rather than the past. Kobayashi, in fact, goes even further than the (publicly stated) official Japanese position: he actively mocks, belittles, and demeans the comfort women, and South Koreans in general, in a manner that gets close to the naked anti-Korean racism of far-right Japanese groups.

This even more extreme rhetoric, however, only accentuates further the extent to which *TCW*—and other Japanese popular cultural materials like it—are able to shape Japanese understandings of relational national identity and collective memory in a way that creates a mnemonic social reality in which Japan has no need to address this history and, in fact, should deny and contest South Korea's claims regarding it. In doing so, Japanese official Foreign Policy that engages in antagonistic conflict with South Korea regarding its raising and relitigating of this history is made more possible, imaginable, and even common-sensical in the Japanese national context. For example, when, in the year following *TCW*'s publication, a South Korean court ordered the Japanese government to pay compensation to former comfort women, Tokyo launched blistering attacks on Seoul, labelling the situation "unthinkable" and summoning its ambassador to demand that South Korea "remedy its breaches of international law as a nation" (see Deacon 2024, 10). While, once again, this is not to claim a causal connection, the everyday mnemonic foreign policy of *TCW*, together with other Japanese popular culture materials, can

[7] This would be similar to a British person lampooning French people by having their sentences end with words like "*escargots*" or "*croque monsieur*."

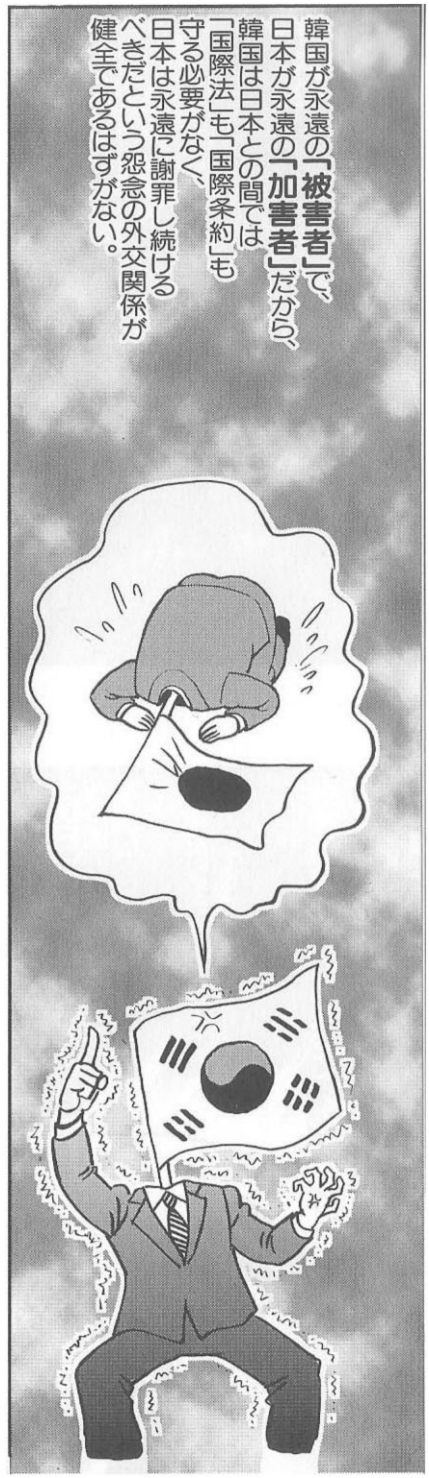

Figure 5. A personified Japan ("the eternal 'perpetrator'") depicted bowing in apology to an angry South Korea ("the eternal 'victim'"). © Kobayashi Yoshinori, Gentosha.

Figure 6. Comfort women memorial statues depicted appearing "everywhere" in South Korea. © Kobayashi Yoshinori, Gentosha.

be understood as contributing to constructing the conditions of possibility for such official conduct.

Conclusion

Analyzing the discourses of Japanese and South Korean popular culture materials relating to the difficult history between these countries as everyday mnemonic foreign policy, thus, exposes their complicity in the construction of a mnemonic social reality in which the main battlelines of official Foreign Policy concerning the history problem in this relationship are made possible, imaginable, and even common-sensical in the national context of each country. This is not to suggest a homogenous understanding of how history is narrated in South Korea and Japan—alternative narrations certainly exist—but merely to provide illustrations of diffuse popular cultural practices that reproduce certain constructions of history and identities in relation to that history, and the enabling function of these constructions.

In analyzing official mnemonic Foreign Policy—whether the mnemonic conflict of an inter-state history war or otherwise—to start at the point of explaining its official conduct can only provide an incomplete understanding that presumes the *possibility* of that conduct. Instead, attention is also due to how official memory politics are enabled through a broad range of everyday mnemonic foreign policy practices that (re)produce and shape widespread historical understandings in relation to identities of Self and Other in particular ways. While official discursive practices

themselves play a role in these processes—and, indeed, the literature would also benefit from greater analysis of the mnemonic representational practices of official and quasi-official materials specifically in terms of their enabling function—they are far from the sum total of those that do so. Moreover, the mnemonic practices of popular culture materials are a particularly important site for investigation of this phenomenon—in terms of Japan and South Korea's history problem, but also more broadly.

However, there is also room to extend this research agenda further. In particular, we might also consider how popular culture materials act to contradict and contest official mnemonic Foreign Policies. While a situation in which the official state Foreign Policy is entirely contradicted by the vast majority of popular culture materials appears unlikely, in most cases, especially in democracies, at least some contestation will exist in such venues. This is true for Japan and South Korea, where, in recent years, the South Korean book *Anti-Japanese Tribalism* and the Japanese film *Shusenjō: The Main Battleground of the Comfort Women Issue*, for example, have enjoyed significant circulation—even while enduring fierce criticism. While it is difficult to reflect such diversity in any one article, approaches which also explicate how such popular culture materials engage in everyday mnemonic foreign policy practices that counter and constrain the imaginability of official Foreign Policy would offer a fuller, more complex understanding of these contentious memory politics at the domestic and international levels.

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