The disputed islets known by Koreans as Dokdo and by Japanese as Takeshima continue to plague bilateral relations between the two countries, and each side approaches the issue from a different perspective. Koreans regard the dispute as a history problem, while the Japanese perceive it as a territorial issue.

Mikyoung Kim argues that the dispute should be approached as a 'memory problem' in order to open up a venue for mutually sympathetic discourse.

While much of the world’s attention was focused on the maritime disputes in the South China Sea between China and several members of ASEAN, South Korean President Lee Myung Bak paid a surprise visit on Aug. 10 to the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islets, provoking Japan to recall its ambassador to Seoul and reigniting bitter feelings in both nations that have long hampered efforts to overcome historical grievances between them.

Compounding the problems are lingering legacies of the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951, which officially ended World War II, because the treaty added ambivalent legal stipulations to a murky “memory” problem. After the war, Japan, the colonial perpetrator, was transformed into a strategic ally of the United States in the emerging Cold War architecture. The US, in effect, rewarded the former aggressor at the cost of Korea’s grievances.

The current clash over the islets is on a continuum of unsolved memory problems where resentments, lack of convincing repentance and territorial ambition co-exist. In the eyes of Koreans, an unrepentant Japan continues its aggressive posture by making impudent territorial claims, while the Japanese believe the Koreans are confusing territorial issues with peripheral historical sentiments. In short, the two sides keep talking past each other in what is essentially a memory war.

**Lingering Legacies of the Asia-Pacific War**

The Asia-Pacific War (1931-1945) was a pivotal moment in history partly because its violence awakened dormant feelings about earlier humiliations. Japan’s atrocities precipitated memories of 19th-century colonial invasions, collaboration with the West and earlier aggression against Asia. Japan modernized rapidly in the early 20th century and became a colonial power; Korea, meanwhile, vanished into what proved to be the beginning of a 36-year-long Japanese Empire.

Japan, thus, chose not to resist the Western powers but to emulate them. The elites of the Meiji era in Japan held Asia in contempt, and adopted an attitude of even sterner superiority as Japan’s colonial conquests continued.

For Koreans, the memory of dehumanization under Japanese fascism defines the felt past. From their standpoint, Japan not only violated the entitlements of citizens but also offended their national honor, shamed and demeaned them, and refused to repent by humbling itself, as it had humbled them, through a convincing apology. Only the clearest expressions of remorse could have begun to mitigate these resentments, but instead of genuine remorse, Japan extended formal apologies. Remorse is a sentiment that accompanies the realization of wrongdoing; apology is the communicative format through which remorse is conveyed. Even today, Korea under the influence of Confucian formalities remains all too aware of the separate realms occupied by ritual, true feeling and the telltale signs of inauthentic performance.

Repeated insults and denials by Japanese politicians of past wrongdoings raise suspicions of broader Japanese indifference and intensify demands for authentic remorse. Herein lies a perceptual dilemma that worsens the memory problem and alienates Japan from its former victims.

Historians, political scientists and Asian studies scholars often sample regional memory content, but they leave important questions unanswered. How bitter are the memory wars between Korea and Japan? At what level of concreteness or abstraction are events selected for analysis? Which aspects of these events are taken as a given and which remain in dispute? What causes and functions are attributed to them? In what social locations (for example, state, class, community, generation, institution and interest group) are the accounts of historical events produced and perpetuated? Which cultural forces (values, climate of opinion, cultural mentality) inspire them? Is the relation between memories and their social contexts causal? Semiotic? Functional? Hegemonic?

**The Korea-Japan Memory Problem**

Japan is the antagonist in Northeast Asia’s memory wars. Spatially isolated and economically superior to
its former victims, Japan took its time in addressing its past. Post-war Japan deemed demands for apology and compensation less urgent than its own citizens’ sense of victimhood, but as former victim-nations became economic competitors during the last decades of the 20th century, Japan mellowed. If this point stands alone, however, we are left with the conclusion that generations change their minds about the past when it becomes good for business, and that Korea pressed its claims because the country now is strong enough to rub Japan’s nose in its own sins. Resentment grows, it is true, as economic and political circumstances change, but with no conception of national culture and its symbols, we are inclined to dismiss memory changes as epiphenomena reflecting “expressing” or “articulating” power differences, thus denying the very existence of a memory problem.

Koreans take great interest in the way their Japanese neighbors remember the Asia-Pacific War. They get their information from Japan’s textbooks, mass media, official statements, historical monuments and ritual observances. The main point of contention is Japan’s alleged whitewashing of its colonial past and wartime atrocities, where Dokdo stands as a powerful symbol of Japanese unequivocal impudence. Japanese politicians paying their respects at the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, where Japanese war criminals are entombed along with other war dead, have continually reinforced this mindset.

Modern Japan, therefore, is important for the value it adds to the “presentist” models of collective memory, in which the social, psychological, cultural, economic or political demands of the present shape views of the past. When Japanese prime ministers have visited Yasukuni, they were more concerned with their present political problems than with the sacredness of the past. The same observation can be extended to the three LDP politicians who attempted to visit South Korea’s Ulleneung Island in August 2011, despite stern protests from Seoul. The parliamentarians were staging a political show as a means of distracting cynical constituents back home.

The “presentist” mode of collective memory is stronger in Japan than in Korea. A residual culture of communitarianism and honor, and an emergent culture of individualism and dignity coexist. That explains the pendulum swings in public sentiment between dismissive indifference to charged self-vigilance. Conservatives prefer pure nationalism, uncontaminated by memories of atrocity; and they justify Japan’s past actions. To this end, they tell their story in television programs, comic strips and films, which young people avidly consume and discuss. By the same token, newly approved textbooks describe Korea’s Dokdo as Japan’s Takeshima, ignoring another round of memory war between the two neighbors.

**To Japanese critics, Koreans seem ‘dogmatic,’ which is to say morally self-indulgent, and unforgiving as a matter of principle. In turn, Koreans see ‘opportunism’ in the empty apologies of Japanese officials.**

In Japan, facing a difficult past is not a matter of coming to terms with wrongdoing alone but also of seeking to salvage oneself from a sense of shame. Every defense of past wrongdoing is thus rooted in cultural, economic and political contexts that promote official and private expressions.

This is particularly so when we consider the limited economic advantage that Japan can get from the surroundings of Dokdo/Takeshima. It is the very desire to redeem its past in the collective memory that makes the territorial issues so critical. For Japan, winning international recognition that the islands unquestionably belong to Japan is one of the key tasks in rectifying the misdeeds and injustices committed in the process of relinquishing its territories “which she has taken by violence and greed,” as stated in the Cairo Declaration of Dec. 1, 1943. By implication, Dokdo/Takeshima should not have been part of the territories that Japan would have to relinquish.

Japanese honor, which takes the form of particularism — a refusal to submit its “soul” to foreign ideas — energizes and sustains its modernity. Without transcendental reference points to critique wrongdoing, however, Japanese recollection of their country’s atrocities leads more to silence than to remedial protest. They also expect silence from their former victims. When Koreans protest the exploitation of their forebears by Japan, many Japanese hear what they describe as urusa, or “noisiness,” which refers not to acoustics but to contempt and annoyance with insincere complaints. To conceive these different outlooks as a memory war is reasonable but does not get to the core of the problem, for it is ultimately a matter of one nation misreading another’s cultural codes, not its memories.

For South Korea, Dokdo is a reminder of its suffering under Japanese occupation. Koreans consider any contest about its sovereign control over the islands to be tantamount to denying their historical memory as victims of imperialism. For Koreans, Japan’s persistent claims to Dokdo are unmistakable evidence that the former colonizers do not repent their past sins and have every intention of reviving their violent greed.

**A Perfect Symbol**

Korea’s use of the past to reinforce itself in the present draws from Japanese preoccupation in other ways. The Dokdo/Takeshima controversy exemplifies the memory problem because it concerns a group of uninhabited and rocky islands claimed by both Japan and Korea. The fact that the islands are practically useless makes it a perfect symbol of the memory wars. In this context, the Korean “presentism” entails a change in the appearance of an object, event or issue resulting from a change in the position of the viewer. In this case, the viewer is the United States, and its post-war preoccupation with communist rather than fascist expansion as demonstrated by the San Francisco Peace Treaty. New threats cause even powerful states to see the world — and the past — differently. The treaty, which was drawn up during the Korean War, when the US was concerned with maximizing Japanese support against the communist threat to Asia, means a great deal to Japan, for it constitutes proof that it is an ally of the democracies, a respectable nation that has compensated for its historical crimes. In crafting the treaty, the US, over the objection of its European allies, left the legal status of the islands ambiguous enough for Japan to claim ownership. The Korean claim to the islets, in contrast, is based on reminiscences of past suffering and disgrace — intensified on the anniversaries of Japan’s occupation of Korea, the end of the Asia-Pacific War and the normalization of diplomatic relations with Japan.

The “recovery of honor” (myooyehoeok) is the overriding mnemonic task in contemporary South Korea. Amid political democratization and rising national affluence, those “wronged and defamed” under Japanese hegemony are reclaiming “historical justice” (goksajok jungjeui); collaborators are identified and punished. Relative to the continuing resentment against Japan, some Koreans see their memory war as a manifestation of rising nationalism despite, or because of, globalization. Others see Korean honor manifesting a unique version of the norm of reciprocity, linked as it is to a sense of justice so strong that, to Japanese critics, Koreans seem “dogmatic,” which is to say morally self-indulgent, and unforgiving as a matter of principle. In turn, Koreans see “opportunism” in the empty apologies of Japanese officials.

The conjunction of the Cold War’s lingering threats and the memory of Japanese colonialism thus combine to make Dokdo/Takeshima, rather than some other geographical site, the source of the continuing dispute between the two countries. Because very little is materially at stake, the islets become “good to think with,” symbols of national integrity and pride and of humiliation and suffering both for Korea and Japan.

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