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# (Re)producing the ‘history problem’: memory, identity and the Japan-South Korea trade dispute

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## ABSTRACT

Japan-South Korea relations have consistently been presented by International Relations scholars as a puzzle that confounds mainstream rationalist theories, which struggle to explain the consistent acrimony associated with the so-called ‘history problem’. While many scholars have, therefore, adopted conventional constructivist approaches to incorporate history into their analyses, such literature often neglects the processes of *(re)construction* of this social reality, thereby implicitly treating these negative sentiments as essentialised elements of Korean and Japanese culture/identity which cause certain foreign policies. Using the recent Japan-South Korea trade dispute as a case study, this article instead draws on critical constructivist/poststructuralist theory and discourse analytical methods to examine how the ‘history problem’ is produced and reproduced. It argues that dominant discourses of remembering in South Korea, which represent Japan as an unrepentant colonial aggressor, and of forgetting in Japan, which represent South Korea as emotional and irrational for dwelling on the past, act to (re)produce identities that clash in their attitudes to difficult history. While such foreign policy practices (re)produce dominant national identities, these identities also shape the bounds of which foreign policies are legitimate or imaginable. This *mutually constitutive* relationship between identity and foreign policy continually reproduces the ‘history problem’ in Japan-South Korea relations.

**KEYWORDS** Japan; South Korea; history problem; memory; identity, discourse

## Introduction

‘We will never again lose to Japan’, declared Moon Jae-in, President of the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea), on 2 August 2019. His words came moments after the Japanese cabinet approved the removal of the ROK

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from its 'whitelist' of trusted trading partners, having already introduced certain export controls earlier in July. Even to the uninformed observer, however, Moon's remarks clearly drew from something more than a contemporary trade dispute of relatively narrow focus. His usage of the word 'again' and the remainder of his statement – 'we have come this far today by overcoming countless hardships' – alluded to far deeper sources of acrimony than trade spats alone; allusions to the suffering of Korea during the period of Japan's colonial rule from 1910 to 1945. This was the historical context for why Koreans must not 'lose' to Japan 'again', no matter the nature of the dispute. Captured in this language, therefore, is the extent to which memory of this difficult history is a constant fixture in disputes between South Korea and Japan, even those ostensibly unrelated to it. The contemporary bilateral relationship is characterised by consistent antagonism and vitriol in relation to this past; indeed, following the onset of this particular dispute, Japan-ROK relations are widely considered to be at their lowest point since normalisation in 1965. Using the trade dispute as a case study, this article examines how the so-called 'history problem' in Japan-ROK relations is continually produced and reproduced.

The relationship between Japan and South Korea has consistently been presented by scholars of International Relations (IR) as a puzzle that confounds the expectations of mainstream rationalist theory (see, among others, Cha, 1999; Jackson, 2018; Ku, 2016; Lee, 2013; Park, 2008). Specifically, it is deemed confounding that, in the realist case, two regional allies of the United States (US) who supposedly share common security threats and, in the liberal case, two liberal democracies with strong trade and cultural relations have such a poor bilateral relationship. Regarding realist assumptions, Victor Cha, for example, writes of relations 'marred persistently by friction' even 'despite the existence of shared threats from the Soviet Union, China and North Korea and generally convergent security interests'. Explaining this is posed as 'a difficult task for the Realist school of thought in international relations, according to which states with common allies and common enemies should be friendly' (Cha, 1999, pp. 1–2). Similarly, regarding liberal assumptions, Van Jackson argues that, as 'liberal democracies [who] both embrace popular elections, individual rights, and minority protections ... shar[e] both popular and traditional cultural influences that include extensive people-to-people ties ... [with] their economies bound together by high amounts of trade and direct investment ... Japan and South Korea should get along rather well' (Jackson, 2018, pp. 128–129). Despite these frameworks appearing to be ineffective in understanding Japan-South Korea relations, and most scholars therefore going on to modify or depart from them, this supposed puzzle is repeated at the outset of virtually

every piece of IR scholarship examining this relationship (and generally not in the reflexive manner intended here), illustrating the continued prominence of rationalist theory as a default starting point for examining this relationship.

In seeking to 'solve' this 'puzzle', most analyses aim to incorporate ideational factors relating to the so-called the 'history problem' (K: *yōksa munje*; J: *rekishi mondai*) in Japan-South Korea relations – the common term for a set of interrelated disputes regarding Japan's wartime and colonial conduct during the first half of the twentieth century, including, but not limited to: the 'comfort women' issue; the forced labour issue; Yasukuni Shrine (especially visits there by Japanese politicians); the territorial dispute regarding Dokdo/Takeshima; and history textbooks discussing many of these issues (see Hasegawa & Togo, 2008). This attention to history broadly comes in the form of either a 'conventional' constructivist analysis or, more commonly, a synthetic analysis which aims to incorporate both rationalist and conventional constructivist elements.<sup>1</sup> In particular, there has been a focus on conflicting identities, or other 'cultural' factors, relating to this difficult history in Japan and South Korea. Brad Glosserman and Scott A. Snyder (2015), for example, have argued that an 'identity clash' between South Korea and Japan causes ruptures in their bilateral relationship, while Ji Young Kim (2014, p. 32) suggests that 'history disputes generate diplomatic conflict between South Korea and Japan because they function as emotion-laden symbols'. It is often claimed, in particular, that anti-Japanese sentiment is a core element of Korean national identity (Swenson-Wright, 2012), with opinion polling – such as a 2013 survey showing 98% of South Koreans believe Japan has not sufficiently apologised for the past (Pew, 2013) – frequently cited in support.

Such analyses of identity clashes and history-driven disputes, while convincing in their pinpointing of the most relevant factors in understanding this relationship, have generally been somewhat limited in their explanation for *how* this 'social reality' is *produced and reproduced*, however. Firstly, most provide little in-depth theorisation of or accounting for the underlying processes of identity construction occurring in both states. Glosserman and Snyder (2015), for example, analyse polling data and interviews to ascertain the nature/components of these identities, but without an account of *how* these identities came to be this way (and, indeed, *remain* this way). Meanwhile, in an example of a synthetic analysis, Sheryn Lee (2013) discusses the role of 'cultural and historical factors' alongside material strategic imperatives, but without delving into the construction of the former. Such scholarship, by leaving out explanations or theorisation as to how these identities/cultures are constructed and reconstructed, implicitly positions them as somehow given; a 'natural' result of the relevant historical events.

Secondly, and relatedly, such analyses also tend to imply a one-way causal relationship between these identities/cultures (or relevant history) and the foreign policy that constitutes the 'history problem' – because 'identity shapes interests, and interests determine foreign policy' (Glosserman & Snyder, 2015, p. 18) – thereby missing out how such foreign policy practices themselves also shape national identities. Given these limitations, such literature also tends to lack explicit theorisation of how *memory* of this history features in these processes of identity construction, other than somewhat superficial allusions.

As I explain in further detail in my theoretical discussion below, we can understand such scholarship as broadly following (or, at least, incorporating, in the case of synthetic work) a 'conventional' constructivist approach (see also note 1). What is lacking from the literature, therefore, are more 'critical' constructivist and poststructuralist perspectives. Such approaches have much to offer in terms of their emphasis on the discursive nature of identity construction and the mutually constitutive relationship between such identities and foreign policy. Scholars allied to more critical theoretical approaches also have much of interest to say about the role of memory in these processes which would be of great use here. Research examining relational identity construction between Japan and its neighbours that takes discursive representations seriously is belatedly beginning to emerge, particularly among scholars outside of North America. Taku Tamaki (2010), for example, has analysed Japanese identity construction in terms of 'Othering' narratives regarding South Korea; although he rejects both constructivist and poststructuralist approaches, arguing for what he describes as a 'realist' ontology that allows for 'resilient' identities. Linus Hagström and Karl Gustafsson (2015), in a special edition of *The Pacific Review*, meanwhile, have taken issue with 'norm constructivist' analyses of Japan's identity and made a more explicitly poststructuralist argument against the possibility of 'material' factors constituted and understood independently of their discursive construction. While also emphasising relational identity construction, they argue in particular for a 'layered' or 'sedimented' understanding of Japanese identity, with varying levels of institutionalisation, so as to better explain continuity and change in Japan's identity. Accompanying their work were more specific examinations of the discursive production of relational Japanese identity vis-à-vis South Korea (Bukh, 2015) and China (Gustafsson, 2015; Suzuki, 2015). Hagström and Gustafsson (2019) – while still explicitly adopting a critical constructivist/poststructuralist approach – have since also argued for the importance of 'narrative power', as a sub-category of discourse, in East Asian international politics. Gustafsson has also focused, broadly within this theoretical perspective, on the role of memory in Sino-Japanese relations in particular (Gustafsson,

2014, 2015). Such research regarding Japan is extremely promising but is still limited even after these initiatives and deserves to be developed further. There has also been scant examination of these processes of discursive identity construction occurring in South Korea (in relation to Japan or otherwise). In particular for my purposes here, lacking from the existing literature is an analysis which examines Japan-South Korea relations on *both sides* – necessary to better understand the bilateral ‘history problem’ – using a critical constructivist/poststructuralist theoretical approach which emphasises discursive identity construction and takes account of the role of memory in these processes.

In this article, therefore, I aim at least to begin to develop this research agenda by examining *how the ‘history problem’ is produced and reproduced*, and to encourage further research that utilises and develops this theoretical approach to Japan-South Korea relations. This question seeks to get at the *processes* through which the ‘history problem’ is socially constructed, resisting the reification of its constituent elements. It may also be thought of as a ‘*how-possible*’ question (Doty, 1993): How has it been *possible* that the social reality of the ‘history problem’ has been produced and continues to be reproduced? Under what conditions and through which processes has this possibility manifested? I aim to address these questions by drawing on poststructuralist approaches to IR and conducting a discourse analysis of Japanese and South Korean texts relating to the recent trade dispute between these states.

Following this introduction, I set out a brief background of my case study and explain its selection. I then discuss the broader literature relating to memory and identity in international politics and explain the theoretical perspective and methodological approach I adopt in this article. Following this, I conduct a discourse analysis of the trade dispute in South Korea and Japan, in which I document the discursive (re)production of dominant (South) Korean and Japanese identities which, I argue, are constituted by juxtaposing attitudes to colonial and wartime history. In the South Korean case, these dominant discourses seek to *remember* this past and represent Japan as an unrepentant colonial aggressor; while in the Japanese case, they seek to *forget* this past and represent (South) Korea(ns) as emotional and irrational for dwelling on it. Finally, I relate these observations back to the theory employed in this article in further detail and discuss the implications for our understanding of the broader ‘history problem’. I argue that, while such discursive foreign policy practices act to (re)produce dominant Japanese and (South) Korean identities, these constructions of identity also define the bounds of which foreign policy practices vis-à-vis the other state are understood as permissible, legitimate or imaginable. Thus, through a mutually constitutive relationship between identity and foreign policy, these dominant (South) Korean and Japanese identities depend upon

continued conflict regarding the relevant history to sustain their own coherence and dominance. Such processes are by no means unique to the trade dispute, which is merely an example of the much broader practices of the 'history problem', continually (re)produced through these processes.

## The trade dispute

The factual timeline of the Japan-South Korea trade dispute, beginning in 2019 and still on-going at the time of writing, has been outlined in detail in multiple sources (see, for example, CSIS, 2019), so I set out here only a brief background of the main events up to the end of 2019 – the period of my analysis – to provide context for my arguments. The trade dispute proper began on 1 July 2019, when the Japanese government announced restrictions on the export to the ROK of certain chemicals vital to the production of semiconductors – a major South Korean industry – citing national security concerns. Initial attempts to resolve the situation failed and a public boycott of Japanese goods also began across South Korea. On 2 August, Tokyo escalated the dispute by removing the ROK from its 'whitelist' of trusted trading partners, delaying certain exports through the addition of security checks. Within weeks, the ROK government took retaliatory action, removing Japan from its own 'whitelist'. Subsequently, talks seeking compromise continued to fail, while bilateral trade fell significantly (Stangarone, 2020).

This trade spat, however, began in the context of another bilateral dispute. Although the Japanese government has insisted that its export control measures stemmed from national security concerns, it is generally understood that the trigger for Tokyo's actions was in fact South Korean court decisions regarding wartime forced labour (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019). In a series of judgments from October 2018 to January 2019, ROK courts held that Korean victims of Japan's forced mobilisation of labour during its colonial rule were entitled to compensation from several Japanese conglomerates who benefited from this labour. To provide this compensation, courts then also ordered the seizure of shares held by these Japanese companies in ROK-based entities (J. Lee, 2019). The Japanese government, however, pointed to the 1965 Japan-ROK normalisation treaty which, it argues, settled all claims stemming from the colonial period, and demanded that the South Korean government speak out against the court rulings. When President Moon refused to do so, Japan called for an arbitration panel to decide on the issue, but this was rejected by Seoul (DW, 2019). In this way, the trade dispute should not be considered in isolation, but rather in the context of the forced labour dispute occurring in parallel.

The trade dispute's recency means that it provides a valuable insight into the contemporary state of Japan-South Korea relations, but has yet to receive

substantial academic attention. The dispute also appears *prime facie* to be an exemplary case of a dispute between Japan and South Korea which is caught up in broader issues of history. This case, therefore, provides a useful example for us to understand how the 'history problem' continues to be produced and reproduced in the Japan-ROK relationship more broadly.

## Memory, identity and international politics

International politics are consistently shaped by memories of the past; in particular, these memories frequently inform contemporary national identities which interact with foreign policymaking. In this section, I discuss existing theorising of the role of memory and identity in international politics, before outlining the poststructuralist theoretical framework and methodology adopted in this article.

### *What memory/ies?*

In existing IR scholarship regarding memory, there has been disagreement as to conceptualisation. Jan-Werner Müller, for example, has sought to distinguish collective memory from both history and myth, describing collective memory as 'ahistorical' and rejecting the 'collapsing [of] one into the other' (Müller, 2002, pp. 20, 22). Other scholars such as Duncan Bell (2003, 2006) have been more sensitive to the overlapping nature of these categories while still attempting to make some distinction; while Eric Langenbacher (2010) has advocated a spectral typology of differing levels of 'interpretation' – 'thin' for history, 'heavy' for memory, and 'extreme' for myth. There are significant problems with Müller's juxtaposition of an objective history with an 'ahistorical' collective memory; the telling of history is never value-free and many prominent stories of the past considered as 'history' can be justifiably contested. In this regard, scholars such as Jenny Edkins and Maja Zehfuss argue that 'the past is produced in the present, rather than preceding it' (Edkins, 2003, p. 34), such that 'although memory invokes a past as though it already exists, the past is produced and continually reproduced in such articulations of memory' (Zehfuss, 2007, p. 259). Such scholars, *contra* Müller, study memory broadly as 'representation of the past', with no efficacy seen in strictly distinguishing between histories, collective memories and myths. While Bell and Langenbacher's overlapping categories are more sensitive to this perspective, it still appears unhelpful to lend much weight to such labels for my purposes here. *All* representations of the past are intrinsically relevant, whether we label them as history (e.g. in a textbook), collective memory (e.g. remembrance of war), or myth (e.g. popular ancestral stories). These



are all *ways of remembering*, and to attempt to divide neatly between them adds little analytical value because all such remembering matters for these purposes. Thus, in this article I adopt a broad understanding of memory as representation of the past.

### ***Theorising memory and identity in IR***

Given this discussion, it is unsurprising that the IR scholars paying most attention to memory have been constructivists and critical scholars – especially poststructuralists. Constructivist attention to memory generally stems from the importance such scholars place on identity. Constructivists view identity as a social understanding of the self that ‘constitute[s] actors’ interests and shape[s] their actions’ (Price & Reus-Smit, 1998, p. 266). Because state identity is produced through differing experiences and systems of meaning, it is understood to vary across states – ‘an empirical question to be theorised within a historical context’ (Hopf, 1998, p. 178). Katzenstein (1996) and Berger (1998), for example, have argued that Japan and Germany possess anti-militarist identities stemming from each’s experience of the Second World War and its aftermath. These identities, it is argued, have shaped their foreign policies in the form of a reluctance to engage directly in international conflicts, and restrictions on their military forces and weaponry. This example already alludes to the role that memory may play in the constructivist analysis: If history shapes identities, this surely occurs through the *remembering* of history. Langenbacher (2010, pp. 19, 21) has argued, in this regard, that memory has a ‘prima facie empirical importance’ for constructivist analyses of identity, given the ‘certification or validation of the existence of a self’ that memory provides. Berger (2002, pp. 79–80), meanwhile, argues that the ‘sense of identity’ that memory provides shapes political leaders’ understanding of the world; thus, policy formulation ‘is shaped by collective memory’.

Nevertheless, such a ‘conventional’ constructivist position offers little theorisation of *how* memory informs these identities. Bell has argued that this lack of ‘explicit [and] sustained reflection’ on the role of memory by constructivists is ‘surprising’, given that ‘some account of historical memory is presupposed in constructivist arguments about the constitution and reproduction of collective identities’ (Bell, 2009, p. 349). As alluded to in the introduction, I argue that this stems from a comparatively shallow account of identity formation more generally; one which tends to treat identity as the stable attribute of a unitary state. Little attention is paid to the processes through which identities are (re)constructed, the existence of a diversity of possible identities, and the possibility of their transformation as a result of domestic political processes (Zehfuss, 2001). If conventional forms of constructivism cannot grapple with these processes, it is unsurprising that they do not provide an explicit account of the role that memory plays in them.

Poststructuralist approaches offer a deeper understanding of identity formation and, by extension, the role that memory may play in this process. Poststructuralists focus on *representations* of identity due to an ontological perspective that the meaning afforded to identities is contingent and performative, being (re)produced through discursive practices (Shapiro, 1988). That is to say, identities have no 'real' existence outside of the meaning ascribed to them by discourse. This perspective also views identities as *relational*; the identity of a Self is generally defined in opposition to (an) Other(s) (Campbell, 1998). The term 'undeveloped world', for example, is only afforded meaning through its juxtaposition with the 'developed world' (Doty, 1996). Furthermore, while identities are produced through structures of discourse, these structures are inherently *unstable* and vulnerable to contestation, meaning that the forging of national identities is never complete. Rather, dominant representations of national identity must be continually reproduced to maintain their dominance (Campbell, 1998). Finally, poststructuralists view identity as possessing not a causal relationship, but a *mutually constitutive* relationship with foreign policy; identities both *shape* and *are shaped by* foreign policy practices. Dominant representations of national identity act to define the bounds of which foreign policies are perceived as *possible, imaginable, legitimate* or even '*natural*' (and which are not); and, in turn, foreign policy practices contribute to the discursive (re)production of national identities (Doty, 1993; Hansen, 2006). This mutual constitution means that, while the practices of certain actors such as political leaders may possess more discursive power than those of others, no actor is *pre-discursive* – i.e. operating separately from, or 'prior to' discourse (see Doty, 1997).

As a result of this theorisation of identity construction, poststructuralism also offers a clear path for understanding how memory may fit into these processes. With a conceptualisation of memory as representation of the past, we can understand it as a *category* of the discursive representations that (re)produce identities.<sup>2</sup> In fact, for the national identities most relevant to international politics, representations of the past are an especially key category given the frequency with which they appear in the nation-building narratives of 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 2016). Put in other words, memory is frequently the discursive *language* spoken when national identities are produced and reproduced. These national identities, in turn, shape and are shaped by foreign policy practices, as described above. This relatively uncomplicated and yet powerful theorisation of the role of memory and identity in international politics provides the theoretical framework for my analysis of the 'history problem' in Japan-South Korea relations.

## Method

Discourse analytical methods for use in IR research have been outlined by scholars such as Roxanne Lynn Doty (1993), Jennifer Milliken (1999) and Lene Hansen (2006). Such scholars have resisted both Derridean notions of deconstruction as anti-method (Derrida, 1967/2016) and neo-positivist demands to 'prove' the importance of discourse through causal hypothesis testing (cf. Keohane, 1988). Although most such analyses focus on a single Self defined in opposition to an Other, here I examine a 'discursive encounter' (Hansen, 2006, p. 68): two opposing Selves constructed in relation to each other/Other. In particular, I employ the discourse analytical 'tools' of presuppositions (background knowledge assumed to be understood), subject positions (subjects and objects produced in relation to other subjects and objects), and predicates (labels attached to subjects and objects). Together, these three textual mechanisms produce a world which contains various subjects and objects, endowed with particular attributes, positioned in relation to one another (Doty, 1993, pp. 306–308). With regard to memory, I follow the suggestion of Resende and Budryte (2016, p. 2) – who themselves draw upon Jeffrey Olick (2007) – to make use of memory as a 'sensitising concept', so as to 'draw our attention to the importance of representations of the past [...] in the construction of group identities'. However, my analysis is sensitive to both discourses of remembering *and forgetting*, the latter of which may be marked not only by exhortations to forget but also by an *absence* of certain representations of the past (Zehfuss, 2007).

To undertake my analysis, I gathered relevant Japanese and South Korean texts which relate to the trade dispute: official texts (speeches and statements of national leaders, foreign ministers etc.); and media texts (editorials published by a left-leaning newspaper and right-leaning newspaper in each country). In doing so, I have concentrated on official/dominant discourses as those most relevant to contemporary foreign policymaking, but with some sensitivity to broader debates contained in the media which may both illustrate the extent of recirculation of official discourses in society and provide at least some indication of the existence of alternative discourses.<sup>3</sup> I also limited my text gathering to 2019, as this period included more than enough material to substantiate my arguments and the Covid-19 pandemic also decreased the salience of the trade dispute for a period from early 2020. Relevant texts were identified by performing word searches of key terms in databases and/or within texts themselves. Nevertheless, due to the importance of intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980), I also analysed further texts where these were linked to by, or were able to contextualise, my main texts. Given that I have analysed many more texts than it is possible to specifically discuss in this article, I draw on the most

representative examples of the discourses identified to provide evidence for my arguments. Texts were analysed in their original language; I present my own English translations here, accompanied by the original Japanese/Korean where this is appropriate.

### South Korea and the trade dispute: discourses of remembering

Export control measures placed on the ROK by the Japanese government in summer 2019 covered a range of chemicals vital to the South Korean semiconductor and display manufacturing industries. While the Japanese government denied that these measures constituted a reprisal against the ROK court decisions regarding colonial forced labour, this connection was consistently made by Seoul from the outset. In July, for example, President Moon made public statements arguing that 'Japan's unprecedented tying of history-related issues to economic ones at this time is truly ill-advised' (Moon, 2019c). By August, his language became more explicit, characterising the Japanese measures as 'obvious trade retaliation' (*myöngbaek-han muyök pobok*) against the court rulings (Moon, 2019e). The term 'retaliation' (*pobok*) was then repeatedly used to describe Japan's measures by Moon throughout this period (Moon, 2019h, 2019i, 2019j). This characterisation was also consistently articulated in both conservative and progressive media sources. Multiple editorials published by the conservative *Chosun Ilbo* – while, unsurprisingly, not praising the progressive Moon administration – used the term '*pobok*' to refer to Japan's measures (*Chosun Ilbo*, 2019b, 2019c). During the same period, editorials published by the progressive *Hankyoreh* went even further, characterising Japan's measures as 'cowardly trade retaliation' (*chollyöl-han muyök pobok*) (*Hankyoreh*, 2019a). In this way, a discourse framing the Japanese export control measures as part and parcel of the forced labour dispute was immediately dominant in South Korea across the political spectrum. This was, essentially, the presupposed reality of the trade dispute.

This narrative was a vital pre-requisite to enveloping the trade dispute in the broader discourses of the 'history problem', making the mobilisation of representations of the past – posing Japan as a colonial aggressor Other against the (South) Korean victim Self – more legitimate. Japan's trade measures were frequently narrated by the Moon administration as an aggressive 'attack' (*t'agyök*) (Moon, 2019a), and a deliberate attempt to harm South Korea (Moon, 2019f). More overtly, Moon also referred to the 'deep wounds' (*kip'ün sangch'ö*) between Korea and Japan due to 'unfortunate history' (*pulhaeng-han kwagösa*), which 'Japan, the aggressor' (*kahaeja-in ilbon*) was reopening with its actions in the trade dispute (Moon, 2019e). On the anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japanese

colonial rule, Moon encapsulated much of this discourse in his televised address:

As a victim of great suffering from Japanese imperialism in the past, we, for our part, cannot help but take Japan's ongoing economic retaliation very seriously. It is even more so because this economic retaliation is in itself unjustifiable and also has its roots in historical issues. This is why our attitude towards this Liberation Day has become still more resolute. (Moon, 2019i)

Progressive media also reproduced this historical framing of Japan's actions in the trade dispute. *Hankyoreh* editorials, argued that, rather than introducing export control measures, Japan should seek to address its 'previous violations of human rights' (*Hankyoreh*, 2019a), while criticising as an 'absurd position' the idea that Koreans were at fault for seeking to address historical injustices (*Hankyoreh*, 2019c). In this way, we can see how explicitly Japan's trade measures were framed as synonymous with its previous colonial behaviour through the mobilisation of representations of the past. In doing so, these Othering discourses repeatedly drew on the trope of Japan as 'a country that does not remember its past' (*kwagŏ-rŭl kiŏk-haji anŭn nara*) (Moon, 2019f); an unrepentant colonial aggressor, still guilty of the same sins due to its failure to remember.

This discursive (re)production of a Japanese Other also provided the relational context for the (re)production of a (South) Korean Self. If the trade dispute was the repetition of Japanese attempts to dominate Korea, then – as in the colonial period – Koreans must unite to resist this domination and ensure that they 'never again lose to Japan' (Moon, 2019e). In this regard, while remaining critical of Japan's actions, Moon repeatedly framed the dispute as an opportunity to 'reaffirm our confidence in "doing it ourselves"', increasing South Korea's self-sufficiency and bolstering its competitiveness so as not just to match but even overtake Japan (Moon, 2019d, 2019g, 2019i, 2019k). Such exhortations were at times made more subtly: At a 'Blue Economy' ceremony in Chŏllanam-do, for example, Moon referred at the outset of his speech – without any direct connection to the topic at hand – to 'Japan's sixteenth century invasions of Korea' and reminded the audience that it was residents of this region who 'protected the country', implicitly encouraging them to do the same now (Moon, 2019b). Similarly, in a speech regarding the maritime and fishing industry, Moon began his remarks by noting, again somewhat tenuously, that the location of the event was part of the ancient Paekje kingdom, which was responsible for 'transmitting advanced culture to Japan' (Moon, 2019m). These speeches made no explicit mention of Japan's export controls, but their clear allusion to Korean resistance in the face of Japanese aggression and historical one-upmanship over Japan are prime examples of the Moon administration's

repeated discursive moves both to situate the trade dispute within a particular historical context and to galvanise a proud and united (South) Korean Self in the face of an aggressive Japanese Other. South Koreans were also reminded of this battle against Japan in other contexts: On *Hangŭl* Day – the celebration of the Korean script – for example, Moon described how ‘during Japanese colonial rule, saving *hangŭl* itself was a movement for independence’, reminding the public that those who studied *hangŭl* at the time risked torture and imprisonment at the hands of the Japanese (Moon, 2019l). In this allusion, South Koreans were reminded of their historical responsibilities regarding resistance against the Japanese colonial oppressor. As with representations of Japan, these discourses of national resistance were also reproduced in the progressive media. *Hankyoreh* editorials repeated the assertion that the trade dispute was an opportunity to accelerate the domesticisation of the semiconductor industry (*Hankyoreh*, 2019b), as well as commending the ‘resolute response’ (*tanho-han taëung*) of the South Korean government and people (*Hankyoreh*, 2019d), and advocating further ‘counterfire’ (*matbul*) against Japan (*Hankyoreh*, 2019e).

This ‘resolute response’ was not limited only to industrial efforts to domesticise production lines, but also the efforts of the public in the form of a mass boycott of Japanese goods and services. Participation was so widespread that Honda and Nissan saw sales in South Korea drop by 80–90% (*Yonhap*, 2019), and sales of Japanese beer in the month of August fell by 97% (Kang, 2019). According to the Japan National Tourism Organisation (2020), the number of South Korean tourists travelling to Japan also fell by over 60% during the latter half of the year. Polling showed increasing boycott participation over the course of the second half of 2019, reaching over 70% of the South Korean public by November (*Xinhua*, 2019). In some instances, actions went beyond a boycott and constituted overt discrimination; multiple instances of hospitality venues refusing entrance to Japanese customers were reported, for example (Kasulis, 2019). Opinion polls also revealed that the percentage of South Koreans with a favourable impression of Japan dropped to record lows of almost single digits (*The Korea Times*, 2019). While never explicitly calling for the boycott, President Moon repeatedly commended the public for exhibiting ‘civil consciousness’ (*shimin-ŭishik*) in their ‘resolute opposition’ (*kyŏrŏn-hage pandae*) to the Japanese measures (Moon, 2019h). In an end-of-year address, Moon also praised ‘support from the public’ which had turned Japan’s measures into a ‘blessing in disguise’ (Moon, 2019n). This significantly widespread behaviour and public sentiment among the South Korean public – itself engaged in the recirculation of the relational identity discourses discussed above – illustrates the power of this discursive framing

of the trade dispute and, within it, the identities of Japanese Other and (South) Korean Self.

It should be noted, however, that this has been the dominant, but not the only South Korean discourse of the trade dispute and related issues of identity. A deeper investigation of the diversity that exists in this regard is outside the scope of this article; however, at least noting its existence is important for the development of this research agenda. While opposition conservative politicians were consistently critical of Japan's actions in the dispute and sought to show unity in opposition to them, some have also been critical of the Moon administration's 'appealing to the emotions of [the] people with words', rather than making 'concrete plans' to resolve the dispute diplomatically (T. Kim, 2019). That said, it should be remembered that previous conservative administrations have also engaged in the reproduction of (South) Korean identity in opposition to Japan through the use of historical issues. For example, in 2012 Lee Myung-bak became the first ROK president to land on the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islands in a clear attempt to utilise popular anti-Japanese nationalism to shore up his falling approval ratings (Glosserman, 2020). In terms of the conservative media, *Chosun Ilbo* editorials, while maintaining that the Japanese government's export controls were a retaliatory measure, at times have alluded to some understanding regarding this retaliation from Japan's perspective (see *Chosun Ilbo*, 2019a, 2019d, 2019e). To be clear, then, this is not a strictly partisan issue whereby progressives engage in anti-Japanese discursive practices, and conservatives pro-Japanese; the reality is more nuanced. Nevertheless, as illustrated by the boycott participation rates and opinion polls discussed above, a (South) Korean identity which embodies negative sentiment towards Japan is significantly widespread and has been dominant during the trade dispute.

Through this analysis, therefore, we can observe that the dominant discourses of the trade dispute in South Korea have represented the dispute as part and parcel of the forced labour dispute, and thus the 'history problem' as a whole. This has allowed the trade dispute to be framed, through representations of the past, as a site of ongoing struggle against the Japanese colonial oppressor, ignorant of its history and thus doomed to repeat its past aggressions. This battle – like the battle for Korea's liberation – is constructed as one to be fought by all (South) Koreans, united in their resistance and determination to best their enemy.

### **Japan and the trade dispute: discourses of forgetting**

Following the ROK court decisions regarding forced labour compensation, the Abe administration was quick to threaten retaliation, with Foreign

Minister Kōno Tarō warning of ‘firm measures’ in response (Kōno, 2019a). Yet, when Japan began to introduce export controls on the ROK in July 2019, these were explicitly described as ‘not retaliatory measures’ (*taikō sochi dewanai*), with ‘absolutely no relation’ between them and the forced labour issue (Kōno, 2019h, 2019j). The Abe administration, instead, suggested that its measures had been introduced due to national security concerns (Kōno, 2019i). The specifics of these concerns were never fully explained, but Japanese media reports suggested that they related to lax controls on the re-exporting to North Korea of chemicals with potential military usages. Thus, similarly to the ROK administration’s *connecting* the trade dispute with the forced labour issue as its foundational discursive move, this insistence on the *separateness* of these issues set the narrative basis for constructing the official discourse on the trade dispute in Japan.

These discourses framed both the trade dispute proper and the forced labour issue through the supposedly ‘rational’ and ‘logical’ prism of international law. The Abe administration consistently asserted that the 1965 treaty normalising diplomatic relations between Japan and the ROK – and its attached settlement agreements – resolved all legal claims of the South Korean government and citizens in relation to the colonial period. Thus, when no voice of repudiation against the court decisions came from the ROK government, Tokyo accused Seoul of violating international law. This characterisation was articulated on countless occasions. Foreign Minister Kōno, for example, stated that it was ‘unfortunate that the ROK had not corrected its violation’ of the 1965 agreement (Kōno, 2019b), while Prime Minister Abe Shinzō – on the occasion that he directly discussed the dispute (more rarely than President Moon) – called for ‘honouring the commitments between the two countries, in accordance with following international law’ (Abe, 2019). Even where he strayed close to admitting that the trade measures were related to the ROK court decisions, Abe still maintained that this was about legal agreements, not history:

The issue of former Korean labourers is not about a historical issue, but about whether to keep the promise between countries under international law ... and what to do when the promise is broken. (Abe Shinzō, as cited in Yamaguchi, 2019)

This rational, legal approach of the Japanese Self was contrasted with the irrational, emotional approach of the Korean Other. Kōno, for example, stated regarding the forced labour dispute:

Regarding this matter, although the ROK side state that this is an emotional issue and a legal issue, this is [in fact] a legal issue [only]. Thus, we are asking [the ROK] to put the emotional part aside and properly deal with it legally. (Kōno, 2019d)



Kōno also stated that the ROK should refrain from ‘prioritising personal sentiments’ (*kojin no kanjō o yūsen suru*) and instead focus on correcting its breach of international law (Kōno, 2019g). These Othering discourses draw on long-held tropes of Koreans as emotional and prone to anger that stem from Japanese stereotypes used to justify colonial rule over a century ago (Chi Kim, 2017).<sup>4</sup> Similar narratives were also articulated for contemporary, tangentially related ROK-Japan disputes. For example, on the subject of South Korean prohibitions on the importing of products from Japan’s Fukushima prefecture (the location of the 2011 nuclear meltdown), even though a World Trade Organisation panel had found in favour of Seoul’s appeal on the dispute (Reuters 2019), Japan claimed that the ROK was not ‘following science’ with regard to assessing the safety of the relevant products, implying that Seoul was instead acting by other irrational means (Kōno, 2019f). On occasion, this representation of South Korea as irrational was articulated more explicitly: At a Ministry of Foreign Affairs press conference in August, for example, Kōno referred to the ROK’s threatening to terminate a military information sharing agreement between the two countries (GSOMIA), as well as ‘series of other recent actions vis-à-vis Japan’, as ‘exceedingly negative and irrational’ (*kiwamete hiteiteki katsu higōriteki*) (Kōno, 2019k). In notable contrast, Japan’s own export control measures were represented as a logical consequence of rational national security concerns and fully in compliance with international law (Sekō, 2019a, 2019b). These were not retaliatory measures; baseless retaliation being something a rational actor would not engage in. Indeed, even when Japan had threatened retaliatory action earlier in the year, it was careful to frame this as a threat to take measures ‘based on international law’ (Kōno, 2019a).

As in South Korea, the relational construction of Japanese and (South) Korean identities during the trade dispute also extended to broader attitudes to history, marked in Japan, however, by discourses of *forgetting*. In the official Japanese discourse, such matters of history are to be settled (or have already been settled) by legal agreement, which must then be respected and undisturbed. Emotion, sentiment or even reflection on the past is unwarranted. Throughout the dispute, when broader issues of history have been raised, Tokyo has insisted on a ‘future-orientated’ (*mirai shikō*) relationship with Seoul (Kōno, 2019e), with a constant aversion to even discussing such issues because they are ‘settled’ (see also Tamaki, 2010). This is already apparent in much of the language discussed above, but Seoul’s remembering of these historical issues in the context of the trade dispute was also explicitly criticised by the Abe administration, often posing *Japan* as the ‘victim’ of a Korean vindictiveness regarding the past. For example, when the Speaker of the ROK’s National Assembly referred to the Japanese emperor’s supposed war guilt, Kōno criticised this as

'exceedingly impolite and unacceptable' (*kiwamete burei de ari, ukeiregatai*), and demanded an apology and retraction (Kōno, 2019c). The justification for such responses was grounded in the 'settled' nature of these disputes, with no desire to engage in the substance of what was being alleged. This Japanese approach was consistently contrasted with representations of the South Korean approach, which – combined with the accusations of emotionalism and sentimentality described above – was framed as an attempt to rewrite history. In this Japanese narrative, however, this 'history' refers specifically to *the 1965 agreements*; not the relevant colonial and war history. In an August press conference, for example, Kōno responded to South Korean accusations that Japan had a poor understanding of history by stating that the most important issue of history currently between the two countries 'is about the 1965 agreement', and that 'if the ROK wants to rewrite history, they should understand that it cannot be done' (Kōno, 2019). In this way, official Japanese discourses perhaps can be seen as encouraging the 'remembering' of at least one element of bilateral history – the 1965 agreements – even if *reflection* on the broader circumstances of the agreements is unwarranted. In addition to such overt refusals to discuss colonial and wartime history, such history has also often simply *not appeared* in the official Japanese discourse regarding the trade dispute. Japanese ministers, when discussing the trade dispute, generally would only make any comment on the forced labour dispute, or other such matters, when they had specifically been raised by the ROK or, perhaps, by a journalist at a press conference. In this way, official Japanese discourses of forgetting have been marked not only by overt exhortations to forget, but also by omissions of remembering at all.

The official discourse on the trade dispute – and the representations of (South) Korean and Japanese identities contained within it – has also been reproduced by media publications in Japan, particularly conservative media more aligned with the government. *Yomiuri Shimbun* editorials in this period reinforced the representational Self/Other contrast between Japan and South Korea: The Japanese government's framing of its export control measures as separate from the forced labour issue was accepted without question; multiple editorials regarding the trade dispute failed even to mention the issue, reinforcing these discourses of forgetting (see, for example, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2019b). Instead, the Abe administration's logic for the measures was reproduced fully, with detailed explanations as to how the ROK has allowed the exporting of 'strategic materials' to 'countries that have a good relationship with North Korea' (*kitachōsen no yūkōkoku*) such as Iran and Syria (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2019b). No explicit accusation regarding exporting to North Korea was made in this editorial, but the characterisation of Iran and Syria as countries friendly with the DPRK is clearly

intended to plant this notion in the reader's mind. Tokyo's approach was also contrasted with representations of Seoul's approach: Moon Jae-in was described as whipping up anti-Japanese public sentiment with ethno-nationalist rhetoric (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2019a, 2019c), as well as acting 'illogically' (*sujichigai*) in the dispute (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2019b). These actions were narrated as driven by an emotional desire to restore Korean honour in relation to the past, rather than rational policymaking (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2019e). Indeed, there was even suggestion that Moon probably does not want to resolve the dispute given his irrational 'fixed view' against Japan (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2019c). The supposed illogic of this approach was further reinforced by consistent reproduction of the Japanese government's position that all historical claims regarding the forced labour issue have already been settled. At times, commentary even veered into discourses of danger, presenting South Korea as a country in which the safety of Japanese citizens could not be guaranteed due to the boycott movement and the anger of the South Korean public (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2019d). In this way, the Abe administration's discursive representation of a logical, rational Japanese Self versus an emotional, irrational Korean Other was consistently reproduced in the conservative media's discussion of the trade dispute.

As in the South Korean case, however, it must be noted that this discourse of the trade dispute and Japanese identity has not been the *only* discourse. Certainly, the Japanese government's frustration with the ROK has been felt by a large proportion of the public; as in South Korea, opinion polling showed a record low of those Japanese with favourable opinions of the ROK (Kanaya, 2019). Nevertheless, throughout this period, significant elements of Japanese politics, civil society and media were critical of the Abe administration's actions in the trade dispute and attitude to history more generally. *Asahi Shimbun* editorials, for example, were clear in their characterisation of the export controls as retaliation against the ROK court decisions and consistently positioned the 'history problem' as the root of the dispute, arguing that Abe should not have such a 'passive' attitude to reflecting on the past (*Asahi Shimbun*, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). Small protests against the Abe administration even took place, while hundreds of intellectuals signed a petition arguing that 'South Korea is not the enemy' (Shim, 2019). In this way, alternative discourses of remembering are certainly present in Japan, regularly attempting to contest official discourses of forgetting. This would be a fruitful avenue for further development of this research agenda.

In contrast with the situation described in South Korea, therefore, from this analysis we can observe that official Japanese discourses of the trade dispute have represented it as entirely separate from the forced labour dispute, with both being matters to be solved (or already solved) through international law. In this regard, Japan's forgetting of the past has been

represented as logical and rational, operating under the tenets of international law, versus an emotional and irrational South Korean Other, obsessed by the past.

## Theorising the 'history problem'

### *Mutually constitutive identities and foreign policies*

The analyses of the previous two sections show how the trade dispute has constituted a site for the discursive (re)production of Japanese and (South) Korean identities vis-à-vis the other/Other. In the South Korean case, we can observe the (re)production of a national identity constructed through representations of the past that position Tokyo as a continuous threat to Korea(ns). That is to say, through such representations of the past, (South) Korea is positioned as still today the innocent victim of Japanese (colonial) aggression, while Japan – ignorant of and unrepentant for its history – is doomed to continue such behaviour. In this way, South Korea is understood to be justified in continually demanding that Japan address its past because that past has, in fact, never ended; it is still very much *present*. Thus, interactions with Japan – including trade issues that might, at least on their surface, not relate to colonial history – are consistently caught up in this process of Othering the coloniser Japan while defining the victimised (South) Korean Self. This situation exemplifies a mutually constitutive relationship between foreign policy and identity. On the one hand, this construction of (South) Korean identity shapes ROK foreign policy towards Japan in that it defines the scope of what is possible, imaginable, legitimate, even 'natural' when interacting with Japan. The notion that a South Korean government would engage in foreign policy that entirely ignores the history of Japanese colonialism – especially in the face of a Japan that seeks to minimise or forget this history – is virtually unthinkable *within these parameters of identity*. At the same time, the discursive foreign policy practices highlighted above contribute to the performative reproduction of this national identity in their representation of a (South) Korean Self defined relationally against the Japanese Other. In this way, South Korean foreign policy and identity practices overlap and continually shape each other; 'doing foreign policy' is 'doing identity' to the extent that the two are 'ontologically inseparable' (Hansen, 2006, p. 24).

We can witness a similar phenomenon in the Japanese case. In contrast with the ROK, the official Japanese discourse seeks to forget the past and denies the relevance of Japan's wartime and colonial actions to contemporary politics. In seeking to 'move on' from history in this way, Japan is positioned as rational and logical, often framed through discourses of international law. This Japanese identity is produced relationally through

contrast with (South) Korea(ns), represented as emotional and irrational for consistently seeking to address historical issues, unable to move past these. In this way, Japan is understood to be justified in continually seeking to forget and move on from the past – demanding a ‘future-facing’ relationship with the ROK – because this is the rational and logical position to take. As per South Korea, we can view this as a mutually constitutive relationship between Japanese identity and foreign policy vis-à-vis the ROK. This construction of national identity shapes Japanese foreign policymaking in that it defines the scope of what would be a legitimate and imaginable position for the Japanese government to adopt on such issues; but these very foreign policy practices also performatively (re)produce this construction of Japanese identity.

### ***The importance of discourse***

This perspective adds depth to conventional constructivist analyses, as well as exposing many of the reasons for the inability of rationalist theories to account for the features of this relationship. As discussed in the introduction, conventional constructivist analyses, while often noting the importance of an ‘identity clash’ in this relationship, tend to be silent as to how such identities are constructed, implicitly suggesting that they are somehow a natural consequence of the relevant history. Such an approach leaves many questions unanswered about how these identities come to be this way. As this article attempts to show, a poststructuralist approach that examines the discursive (re)production of Japanese and (South) Korean identity, however, is able to point to relevant discourses and their productive power to answer these questions. Secondly and relatedly, constructivist analyses pose these identities as resulting in a combative foreign policy, thereby implying a one-way causal relationship between identity and foreign policymaking. Poststructuralist approaches supplement this understanding by identifying the mutually constitutive inseparability of Japanese/South Korean foreign policy and national identity. Suggesting that identities influence foreign policy is only half the story (at best) and misses out how foreign policy practices themselves performatively reproduce these identities.

At the same time, rationalist scholars (and some conventional constructivists) may question the importance of discourse here. For example, they may argue that the ROK’s conduct has, at least to some extent, been a ‘rational’ response to threatening behaviour from a stronger economic power, in essence stressing the ‘material reality’ of the trade dispute. Firstly, poststructuralism sees this distinction between the material and discursive as unhelpful; while acknowledging that a ‘real world’ external to thought

exists, it determines that this 'material' world cannot be constituted (or understood) other than through discursive representation (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). That is to say, it is discursive practices which provide the *meanings* that make the world comprehensible and there is no possibility of detaching ourselves from this discursive realm to witness reality otherwise. By extension, as David Campbell (1998) has argued with regard to representations of the Soviet threat in (re)producing 'American' identity, to constitute a threat, events or actions must first be represented as a threat. The point here is not to 'maintain that the foreign policy of [Japan] was benign, nor that [the ROK] wilfully fabricated a danger where none could be perceived' (Campbell, 1998, pp. 137–138, with my substitutions of the relevant states), but rather that *these* policies and actions and *not others* have been represented as a threat. It is this process of discursive construction that constitutes the 'reality' of this relationship. This can be illustrated through contrast with the Moon administration's discursive representation of North Korea. Discussion of what a neo-realist would likely call the very 'material' threat posed by North Korea is outside the scope of this article, but it suffices to say that the DPRK has the means to kill millions in Seoul within minutes and has regularly engaged in aggressive rhetoric and actions towards the ROK. Thus, in a rationalist framework it would be difficult to deny that Pyongyang represents a far greater existential threat to Seoul than does Tokyo. And yet this is the very opposite of the discursive representations of the Moon administration, which has avoided representing the DPRK as a threat and, instead, largely used language of generosity and fraternity as part of a Sunshine Policy redux. Moreover, these contrasting discursive representations have powerful effects in terms of social understanding. In this case, they have produced corresponding sentiment among much of the South Korean public. Polls of South Koreans conducted during the trade dispute showed, for example, significantly higher favourability ratings for Kim Jong Un over Abe Shinzō, and for North Korea over Japan (Asan Institute, 2019); while 61% of South Koreans viewed Japan as a current military threat to the country (Johnson, 2019). It would be very difficult to justify such views based on a rationalist understanding of 'material' threats.

Similarly with Japan, it might be suggested that it is indeed logical and rational for Tokyo to insist on forward-facing cooperation with Seoul. Indeed, much mainstream IR research characterises such attention to issues of history at the expense of cooperation as 'irrational behaviour' (Cha, 1999, p. 1). I will not re-rehearse the theoretical discussion above; however, the crucial point is that it is *South Korea(ns)*, in particular, that are represented as irrational and emotional for looking to the past, and, thus, Japanese policy *in relation to the ROK* that is rational and logical for not doing so. As

well as this discourse drawing on long-held tropes pre-dating the trade dispute, this was not a consistent position of the Abe administration with regard to difficult Japanese history. In December 2016, for example, Abe became the first Japanese post-war leader to visit Pearl Harbor to mourn for the victims of Japan's 1941 attack, having welcomed Barack Obama as the first US president to visit Hiroshima earlier in the year. These visits were a concerted attempt to use remembrance of the past at the sites of highly emotionalised memorials to signal reconciliation between wartime enemies. An Obama advisor stated that the visits 'allowed us to jointly and directly deal with even the most sensitive aspects of our shared history' (*The Guardian*, 2016). At no point did the Abe administration characterise such an aim as emotional or irrational; on the contrary, it was an eager participant. What matters, therefore, is how such actions are represented, rather than some rationalist framework of logic. The discursive practices of the Japanese government have positioned certain bilateral reflection on difficult history as legitimate, and others not. These inconsistent positions problematise the notion that we can explain Tokyo's actions from a perspective that ignores the processes of discursive identity construction.

### ***Reproducing the 'history problem'***

By extension, this perspective also allows us to understand how the broader 'history problem' is produced and reproduced. The dominant South Korean and Japanese discourses of identity, in terms of their attitude to the relevant colonial and wartime past, are diametrically opposed. On the one hand we have a national identity that is reproduced through consistently reflecting on this past and demanding that it be addressed; on the other, we have a national identity that is reproduced through forgetting this past and strongly objecting to its role in contemporary politics. These oppositional representations of the past, therefore, constitute a clash not merely in the sense of disagreement regarding the 'facts' of history (cf. Kimura, 2019), but regarding the role of the past in contemporary politics, informed by (and in construction of) identities that rely on conflict regarding such issues. In other words, the production and reproduction of (these versions of) Japanese and (South) Korean identity depends on the adoption of oppositional attitudes to this history so as to sustain their own coherence and dominance. I have identified these discourses in the trade dispute – arguing that this dispute has both been a product of and contributed to the reproduction of these oppositional identities – but this is far from a unique occurrence; this particular dispute is merely one manifestation of the wider pattern of the 'history problem'. Disputes regarding the 'comfort women', Yasukuni Shrine and Dokdo/Takeshima, among others, are further

examples of the same antagonistic foreign policy practices concerning the past that both produce and are produced by these oppositional representations of identity.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to note, however, that it does not follow from this argument that such a situation is inevitable. This conflict is commonly represented in academic and journalistic literature as inexorable, with strong hints of essentialism. While this article has concentrated on official and dominant contemporary discourses of identity in Japan and South Korea, I have repeatedly asserted that its theoretical perspective sees national identities as unstable and contingent and that alternative representations of national identity exist in both the ROK and Japan, even if it is not possible to address them in detail here. Such alternative discourses may contest and attempt to transform the dominant conceptions of national identity in these states. Nevertheless, the existence of this potential challenge also acts to make the reproduction of the currently dominant national identities all the more vital so as to sustain their dominance. Indeed, in the Japanese case, it was a national identity perceived as overly 'masochistic' in relation to the past that spurred Abe and his conservative revisionist peers to attempt to recast Japanese identity in a prouder tradition (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2015; Oros, 2015). As discussed in the theory section, this should not suggest a belief that discourse is something which may be fully competently manipulated by pre-discursive actors, but the existence of domestic political contestation over attitudes to the past in Japan has been evident to any observer. It is, thus, entirely possible that future transformations of these identities and foreign policies may occur.

For now, though, Japan-South Korea relations are considered to be at their lowest point since normalisation due to the 'history problem', and the resignation of Abe Shinzō and ascendency of Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide in September 2020 does not appear to have triggered imminent improvement. The continual reality of this situation, however, is not simply a natural result of the relevant history, nor is either state acting within the bounds of a 'rational' framework. Instead, this reality is performatively reproduced through discursive practices of identity construction which both depend upon and make possible the foreign policies which constitute the 'history problem'.

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to shed light on the processes by which the socially constructed 'history problem' between Japan and South Korea is produced and reproduced. I have illustrated the discursive processes through which the recent trade dispute has been produced by, and acts to



(re)produce, dominant national identities that clash in terms of their attitudes to difficult history. On the one hand, we see the forging of a (South) Korean identity that seeks to remember the past, positioning Japan as a colonial aggressor – ignorant of and unrepentant for its history, and thus repeating its purposeful oppression – which Koreans must resist. On the other hand, we see the forging of a Japanese identity that seeks to forget or at least minimise the contemporary relevance of this history – deeming this the rational and logical position to take – while representing South Koreans as emotional and irrational for continuing to dwell on the past. The trade dispute, however, is but one manifestation of much broader conflict, produced and reproduced by the clash that results from dominant contemporary identities which have a diametrically opposed attitude to shared history – the broader ‘history problem’. Across the bilateral relationship, discourses of remembering this history are consistently mobilised by the ROK, while discourses of forgetting are consistently mobilised by Japan. We can view this as a mutually constitutive relationship between South Korean and Japanese national identities and their respective foreign policies.

Further research which examines the discursive (re)construction of other elements of the ‘history problem’, such as the ‘comfort women’ issue, may generate additional findings which supplement and develop my analysis of the trade dispute and related forced labour dispute, and deepen our understanding of Japanese and South Korean Self/Other identity discourses. Yet we must also be careful not to reify the ‘history problem’. Although, in the limited space available, this article has concentrated on official and dominant discourses as those most relevant to contemporary foreign policy-making, further research using a critical constructivist/poststructuralist approach which examines in detail alternative discourses in both states would also be extremely fruitful. As well as illustrating that the ‘history problem’ is not inevitable due to the existence of such alternative discourses, such research would help us understand how, and the extent to which, the official and dominant identity discourses in these states are contested. This may also give us a deeper understanding as to how they may be transformed, fundamentally shifting the construction of the ‘history problem’ in the future.

## Notes

1. In this article I distinguish between ‘conventional constructivism’ on the one hand, and ‘critical constructivism’ or poststructuralism on the other. In this regard, I follow Hansen (2006) in not recognising a distinction between the latter two and my discussion of poststructuralism should not be considered as distinguished from a more critical constructivism. Nevertheless, as not all scholars would label their work with such terms, the most important factor here is the actual *substance* of the approaches, even if I use these labels as a helpful heuristic device.

2. Poststructuralist scholars have also termed these 'historical representations' (Bleiker & Hoang, 2006) and 'temporal representations' (Hansen, 2006).
3. Further research that focuses on alternative identity discourses will also be an important part of the research agenda I advocate here as their existence and potential as a source of transformation of the status quo is of significant importance. Nevertheless, due to space constraints, this article focuses on official/dominant discourses as a vital starting point, but with sensitivity to the existence of alternatives throughout.
4. Though these have also been adopted by some Koreans as a national aesthetic termed *han*. See Oh (2019) for an intriguing argument that the South Korean response to the trade dispute *has* been emotional but *has not* been irrational.
5. For example, see Bukh (2015) for an analysis which also highlights the salience of a rational Japanese Self versus an emotional (South) Korean Other in Japanese discourses regarding the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute.

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