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On Shifting a Nation's Collective Memory: The Role of Ahn Jung-geun in South Korea's Foreign Policy

Maximilian Ernst

This article revisits the role that Ahn Jung-geun plays in Korean collective memory today and contrasts this with the Moon administration's foreign policy. An analysis of Korean collective memory shows that Ahn's assassination of Ito Hirobumi is heavily emphasized but Ahn's ultimate goal of bringing peace to Northeast Asia is overlooked. This emphasis is understood through Jan Assmann's model of collective memory. Based on Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt's proposition, it is argued that the historical figure of Ahn can instead play a constructive role. Shifting the focus of collective memory toward Ahn's ambition for peace in Northeast Asia may serve as a positive nudge for Seoul's Japan policy, thus helping to ameliorate Korea-Japan relations in the medium term.

Keywords Ahn Jung-geun, collective memory, cultural memory, Korean foreign policy, Korea-Japan relations

Introduction

On October 26, 1909, Ahn Jung-geun assassinated Ito Hirobumi, the former prime minister of Japan and resident-general in Korea, at the Harbin train station. Ahn was subsequently arrested by Russian guards and handed over to the Japanese colonial authorities. He was sentenced to death and executed on March 26, 1910, in Lüshun. His request to be executed as a prisoner of war was declined and he was instead hanged as a common criminal (Lee 2015, 18-20).

Today, Ahn Jung-geun is remembered as a national hero and patriotic martyr in both Koreas (Lee and Kim 2012) and recognized as a heroic anti-Japanese activist in China (*Korea Herald* 2019). In the context of Korea-Japan relations—from unresolved issues surrounding the compensation of victims of Japanese forced labor and comfort women (Hwang 2015, 216-23) to territorial issues involving, most prominently, the Dokdo Islands (Lee 2015, 49-57)—Ahn Jung-

geun's position as a national hero who opposed Japan's colonial rule has gained prominence in public discourse and the media (Ryall 2013; Lee 2018). Among other projects, a memorial hall, functioning as a museum commemorating the Harbin incident, was built in 2010 at Namsan Park in Seoul.

The current South Korean administration under President Moon Jae-in pursues an ambitious foreign policy that seeks to bring peace to the Korean Peninsula through both inter-Korean rapprochement and a normalization of Washington's relations with Pyongyang (Chung, Lee, and Lee 2018, 21-28). Furthermore, the government has acknowledged the necessity of improving relations with Japan. In May 2019, one day after the enthronement of the new Japanese emperor, Naruhito, Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha expressed South Korea's "will to push for the development of a future-oriented relationship while squarely facing history" (*Korea Times* 2019).

This article discusses Ahn Jung-geun's commemoration in Korean society today through the lens of collective memory as discussed by Jan Assmann (2010, 109). It will focus on the mediums of active remembrance that frame Ahn's life and Korean history at large, and how such collective memory is imbued with an inherently selective emphasis when informing a national narrative. Building on this, the article will then explore the extent to which a nation and representative individuals have the ability to shift the nation's collective memory, and how that in turn could trigger a change in its relationship with other nations. Furthermore, it is hoped that a discussion will be initiated on how to reconcile the commemoration of Ahn Jung-geun, the national hero, with South Korea's modern, future-oriented foreign policy toward Japan as proposed by Foreign Minister Kang.

After a summary of the Japanese empire's aggressive foreign policy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries leading up to the annexation of Korea, the article will introduce Ito's assassination as part of Ahn's goal of achieving peace in Northeast Asia, rather than as an isolated "anti-Japanese" action. This will be followed by an examination of today's commemoration of Ahn Jung-geun through the lens of collective and cultural memory, illustrated by the example of the Namsan Memorial Hall, as well as through an overview of the current debate relating to his legacy. As a final step, the article will discuss the possibility of a shift in collective memory, as theorized by Assmann and Shortt (2012), and critiqued by Berger (2010). Such a shift is significant enough to support one of South Korea's main foreign policy goals: improving relations with Japan and bringing peace and stability to the Northeast Asian region.

Ahn Jung-geun's Action in Historical Context

Ahn Jung-geun's assassination of Ito Hirobumi in Harbin on October 26, 1909

is widely interpreted as the deed of a martyr and as an act of heroism in both North and South Korea (*Hankyoreh* 2010; Lee and Kim 2012). At the same time, Ahn's actions have also been interpreted as an act of terrorism outside of South Korea, notably in Japan (*Japan Times* 2013). The debate has been polarizing, and the historical figure of Ahn has been politicized on various occasions (*BBC News* 2014). Before discussing how Ahn Jung-geun is remembered in Korean society today, it is necessary to understand the events leading up to Ito Hirobumi's assassination. Specifically, this includes Japan's annexation and colonization of Korea, and Korean resistance prior to annexation in 1910.

After the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki on April 17, 1895, which ended the first Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese tributary system was essentially terminated and Korea's Choson Dynasty exited its vassal relationship with the Middle Kingdom. Having defeated the Qing, Imperial Japan now directed its attention toward Russia, which had equal interests in and exerted direct influence on the Korean Peninsula during the 1890s (Cumings 1997, 141). In 1897, the Korean empire was founded. Although the empire would last for only thirteen years, its foundation constituted an important landmark, as it formed the basis of hope and aspirations for Korean independence fighters such as Ahn Jung-geun. However, the struggle for control over Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula between Russia and Japan continued. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, which Russia eventually lost, led to the Treaty of Portsmouth in September 1905. As Carter Eckert and colleagues have summarized, the central provision of this treaty was "Russia's acknowledgement that Japan possessed paramount political, military and economic interests in Korea, and Russia's pledge not to hinder Japan from, essentially, taking whatever action it deemed necessary in the peninsula" (Eckert et al. 1990, 239).

It was in 1905 that Ito Hirobumi arrived in Korea. The Protectorate Treaty, or Eulsa Treaty, of November 1905 forced Korea to hand control over its own foreign relations to the Japanese empire. Ito, one of the main statesmen of the Meiji Restoration, became Korea's first resident-general. Michael Robinson adequately summarizes the situation as follows:

Ito was part of a faction in the highest levels of Japanese government that had long argued for indirect control of Korea... a reformed, stable and docile Korea run by Koreans but controlled by Japan over direct Japanese rule of the peninsula. In the face of stiff Korean resistance at all levels of society, Ito restructured the Korean government, gradually increasing the power and influence of Japanese "advisors" at all levels (Robinson 2007, 33).

In 1907, Ito Hirobumi instigated the abdication of Emperor Gojong of Korea and secured the Japan-Korea Treaty which gave Japan control over Korea's internal affairs. The young Korean empire was effectively stripped of its

independence, although technically still in existence. Korean resistance against Japanese aggression in the following years took both official and underground forms. The most notable official resistance was the struggle by the former imperial house of Yi to regain their sovereign power over Korea at the Second Hague Conference in 1907. However, all efforts to gain foreign assistance for the protection of Korea's sovereignty were futile (Eckert et al. 1990, 241). It was at this point that Ahn Jung-geun joined the underground armed resistance against the Japanese colonial rulers in Vladivostok, where he assumed the rank of lieutenant general. From an international legal perspective, this rank in the Korean resistance was important, as it emphasized his status as a belligerent in an international conflict, rather than as a terrorist acting as an individual (Lee 2015, 27).

The Japanese empire continued to increase the resident-general's power in Korea and passed laws in the years 1907-1909 to tighten its quasi-colonial grip. Hardliners within the Japanese government were already advocating the annexation of Korea, something which Ito Hirobumi advocated at a later point as well (Keene 2002, 662-67). As a consequence, Ito resigned from his role as resident-general of Korea in June 1909. He was succeeded by General Terauchi Masatake, a former Japanese war minister, who was empowered by the Meiji cabinet to end Korea's independence. Terauchi forced the treaty of annexation on August 16, 1910, five months after Ahn Jung-geun was executed (Robinson 2007, 34).

When he was assassinated on October 26, 1909, Ito Hirobumi, who was on an inspection tour of Manchuria, had just held talks with the Russian finance minister, Vladimir Kokovtsov (Kim 2015, 125). After Ahn shot Ito and two more Japanese officials, he was arrested by Russian guards and two days later handed over to the Japanese authorities. Tae-Jin Yi (2009) and Jang-hie Lee (2015) have provided detailed accounts of the events at Harbin Station. During his imprisonment, Ahn formulated fifteen reasons why Ito had to be killed, which largely relate to Ito's gradual implementation of Japanese colonial rule in Asia as well as the killing of Empress Myeongseong of Korea, and more broadly the crime of "breaking the peace of Asia" (Rausch 2013, 4).

While awaiting trial in Lüshun, Ahn Jung-geun began writing his monograph *On Peace in Asia*, which, owing to his execution, he did not complete (Lee 2015, 24). In this book, Ahn advocated a pan-Asian peace regime, centered on a regionalist, supranational approach to managing the relations of China, Korea, and Japan. Ahn envisioned "a plan for a loose confederation, in which China, Japan, and Korea would cooperate with each other economically and militarily, allowing the three countries to develop while each maintained its sovereignty" (Rausch 2013, 3). It is particularly important to understand Ahn's actions in the context of the ideas presented in this monograph: the assassination of Ito Hirobumi was not an end, but a means to achieve his larger goal. In Ahn's eyes, Ito

was instrumental in moving Japan along a violent path toward the colonization of East Asia, while he believed that the Japanese emperor shared his vision for a peaceful Asia. In the end, Ahn's plans did not materialize despite Ito's death, and the Japanese continued to colonize East Asia, starting with Taiwan and Korea and later China and Southeast Asia. Today, Ahn Jung-geun is primarily remembered for his assassination of Ito Hirobumi, not for what he tried to accomplish with it (Denney and Green 2014; Y. Lee 2014, 246).

Collective and Cultural Memory: Commemoration of a National Hero

Memories permeate and inform every facet of our lives. It is through memory that we “form an awareness of selfhood (identity), both on the personal and on the collective level” (J. Assmann 2010, 109), and build our understanding of what we experience in relation to prior experiences and our recollection of past events.

Memory can be divided into three crudely defined levels. The *inner level*, which focuses on our neuro-mental system and the individual's personal memory, was considered the only form of memory until the 1920s (ibid., 109). Halbwachs' (1992) seminal thesis on collective memory adds a social level to memory, where communication and social interaction are critical in analyzing a society's collective memory. With memory depending on external factors, triggered by the individual's environment, community, and social groups, it can be argued that there is no such thing as *individual memory*—the only real memory is *collective memory* (Gedi and Elam 1996, 30).

Jan Assmann (2010, 110) goes further by introducing the concept of a cultural level, which treats cultural images and objects as carriers of memory long after such memories can no longer be communicated by a living being. Cultural memory therefore relies on external objects and texts to preserve and recall a past that no one alive today has directly experienced.

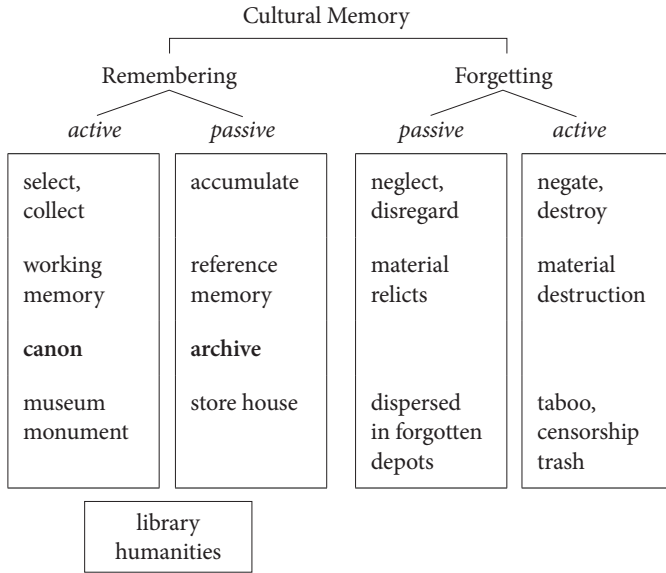
Furthermore, memory is, in and of itself, highly selective, both on an individual and cultural level, in terms of its focus and bias. Just as there are

Table 1. Levels of Memory

Level	Time	Identity	Memory
inner (neuro-mental)	inner, subjective time	inner self	individual memory
social	social time	social self, person as carrier of social roles	communicative memory
cultural	historical, mythical, cultural time	cultural identity	cultural memory

Source: J. Assmann (2010, 109).

Figure 1. Cultural Memory



Source: A. Assmann (2010, 99).

psychological pressures on an individual to forget or overwrite particular memories they have experienced, there are similar pressures on a societal level to “make place for new information, new challenges, and new ideas to face the present and future” (A. Assmann 2010, 97). In the process of selecting memories, forgetting is simply a part of social normality.

According to Aleida Assmann, there are passive and active ways of remembering and forgetting events pertaining to a nation’s cultural memory. If we concede that the passive action of forgetting is the defaulting norm, then whatever approach is taken to remember something must be exceptional (ibid., 98), and its inclusion in a nation’s cultural memory inherently meaningful.

The active remembrance of an event to support a collective memory or identity is typically defined by “a small number of normative and formative texts, places, persons, artifacts, and myths which are meant to be actively circulated and communicated in ever-new presentations and performances” (ibid., 100). It is important that such remembrance is active, and that it reaffirms this memory in a form that is accessible to the society it wishes to remind.

Aleida Assmann outlines three realms of active cultural memory, the most relevant of which to this article is history among nation-states. This kind of collective memory acts as the keystone upon which to build a historical narrative that functions as its autobiography. The presentation and dissemination of a nation’s history is equally critical, from school history textbooks to museums, monuments, and public holidays, the presence of history in the public arena

informs both citizens and visitors of the nation's history and identity (ibid., 100-101).

Collective memory relating to historic events that involve national-historic figures such as Ahn Jung-geun are therefore highlighted in a nation's history and presented to the public through an array of media such as textbooks, television programs, and museums.

Within a culturally and linguistically homogenous community such as Korea, one can assume that its population largely remembers historic events of national importance in a similar way. Ahn Jung-geun clearly forms a part of Korean collective memory and identity today—his commemoration is shared among virtually all Koreans. In this sense, the historical figure of Ahn Jung-geun and how he is portrayed in contemporary Korean society, be it as a hero, a martyr, an anti-Japanese fighter, or an advocate of peace, is based on the narrative in which the nation-state frames his actions. The way in which his memory and legacy is communicated depends on the perspective that is applied or, more simply, what is remembered, and not remembered, about him.

Museums represent a special form of medium when it comes to their role in society and how they communicate with audiences. As Kathleen McLean (1999, 89) puts it, museums constitute a “one-way conversation ‘designed around the cognitive order in the minds of curators.’” Furthermore, museums feature “selective display,” where the content of the exhibitions is “carefully selected to drive home a particular educational message” (ibid., 104). The Ahn Jung-geun Memorial Hall, which will serve here to empirically reconstruct the commemoration of Ahn in South Korean society, was built in 2010 in the center of Seoul. Its location, Namsan Park, holds symbolic value: “Next to the site are the remnants of an old war shrine where Japanese people worshipped their warlords and spirits during the colonial era” (*Arch Daily* 2013). Koreans during this era were expected to participate in these rituals, which makes the Namsan Park a place laden with memories of Japanese oppression. The year of construction, 2010, a hundred years after Ahn's execution, is also noteworthy. Earlier symbols of Ahn's commemoration include a memorial bust from 1967 and a memorial museum built in 1970 at the old Choson Shrine (Henry 2014, 207).

The Namsan Memorial Hall portrays Ahn as a virtuous and well-educated Korean hero who valued the freedom of his fellow countrymen more than his own life. Ahn's family background receives considerable attention—he is described as being from a “prestigious Korean family” which contributed greatly to the anti-Japanese resistance. Indeed, a large part of the Ahn family was involved in anti-Japanese activities throughout Northeast Asia in the early 20th century (Association for Commemorating Martyr Ahn Choong Keun 2010). Therefore, the story of Ahn and his family is not one of victimhood vis-à-vis Japanese atrocities during the colonial period. In contrast to a reading of Korean history that emphasizes the narrative of a nation victimized by Japanese atrocities

Figure 2. Selective Display of Ahn Jung-geun at Namsan Memorial Hall



Source: Author's photo taken fall 2015.

and war crimes as well as Japan's lack of any apologies to date, Ahn Jung-geun is portrayed as a Korean who actively opposed the annexation of his country by the Japanese empire. Ahn Jung-geun's actions do not make the crimes committed under Japan's colonial rule any less grave, but they do offer a different perspective: not of victimhood, but of heroism. The legacy of Ahn which the memorial hall communicates is thus one that emphasizes Ahn Jung-geun's heroism, his compassion for his people, and his readiness to act based on his conviction.

Most exhibition material at the memorial hall features translations. However, the languages displayed differ. All the exhibits have Korean and English translations. In addition, some, but not all, feature Chinese and Japanese translations. The souvenir shop toward the end of the exhibition offers a variety of informative Korean-language material, including illustrated books for children designed to educate Korean-speaking children on Ahn Jung-geun's martyrdom (Eom and Han 2010). There are also a few short brochures in English and Chinese. The main audience of the museum naturally consists of Korean visitors, but as most exhibits at least have English translations, and in many instances also Chinese and Japanese ones, it can be said that the intended audience for the Ahn Jung-geun Memorial Hall is a global one.

The Ahn Jung-geun Memorial Hall represents efforts to actively remember who Ahn was and why he is remembered. The narrative presented to visitors to the memorial hall, framed by the Association for Commemorating Martyr Ahn Choong Keun, intends that Ahn should be remembered as a national hero and martyr who died for his people. The museum also notes Ahn's plans to bring peace to East Asia in the form of a pan-Asian confederation of states, but this takes a secondary position to the focus on Japanese aggression, his family life, the assassination of Ito Hirobumi, and how this contributes to the Korean national identity. As Steven Denney and Christopher Green (2014) point out, "the Seoul-

based exhibition is constructed with the nation-building narrative closer to front and center: it is, in effect, the 'Ahn as early Korean nationalist' approach. His pan-Asian anti-imperialism is in the back seat" (ibid.).

The dominant idea behind Ahn Jung-geun's collective memory in Korean society is that he is a national hero who died for his people as a martyr. His act of shooting Ito Hirobumi takes center stage. However, this neglects his ultimate objective of bringing peace to East Asia by killing the man he thought was standing in the way of Japan adopting a more peaceful policy toward Asia. The commemoration of Ahn Jung-geun in South Korea as national hero has naturally led to a number of controversies, both domestic and regional, especially in Japan (*Japan Times* 2013). Most importantly, his legacy has been framed to represent him as an "anti-Japanese fighter" rather than as an advocate for regional peace. As Franklin Rausch (2013, 3) explains, "Since An actually succeeded in killing Ito, it is that act which receives the most attention. However, such a focus obscures why An acted as he did, allowing people to project their own anti-Japanese feelings on to his motives."

In summary, it can be said that Ahn Jung-geun's collective memory in South Korea today is centered on his heroic deed of opposing Japan's aggressive colonial ambitions. However, this depiction of Ahn which emphasizes the killing of Ito, as heroic and essential for the Korean nation as it may be, does not accurately represent Ahn Jung-geun's objectives, which were to ultimately bring peace to East Asia.

According to Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt (2012, 4-5), memory is not only susceptible to changes, but is itself a powerful agent of change. It should also be noted that while collective memory is essentially dynamic, it is up to the relevant actors to decide what changes are made in it.

Furthermore, a shift or change in the collective memory of a nation is not accomplished easily and, if it can be done at all, takes years if not decades (Roediger and DeSoto 2016). How Koreans remember Ahn in the context of Korea-Japan relations may be difficult to shift, given how closely associated patriotism and anti-Japanese sentiment are in Korea. This is in turn exacerbated by the resurgence of revisionist literature in Japan, which now posits that the Japanese have nothing to apologize for (Berger 2010, 196). A combination of domestic debate within Japan over the apologies it was making in the late 1990s and media reporting of this particular aspect of its diplomatic efforts significantly undermined what was otherwise a promising strengthening of ties between Korea and Japan, and led to a growing "apology fatigue" that appears to have taken hold in Japan since (ibid., 190).

For a significant shift in memory to occur, there needs to be a "genuine agreement not to remember everything... to publicly negotiate which of the problematic issues need to be addressed" in order to overcome inveterate hostile or mutually suspicious dispositions (Assmann and Shortt 2012, 5). This

adjustment in Korea's collective memory of Ahn away from his shooting of Ito toward his vision of pan-Asian peace will only be effective in improving relations if Japan also makes a similar adjustment in its collective memory of Ahn away from his being a terrorist toward his vision of peace. The act of coordinating the change in both nations' collective memories of a controversial figure like Ahn will require the Moon administration to signal its desire to initiate a collective memory shift in earnest with Japan, and for Japan to be receptive to this shift.

As the above discussion shows, all collective memory is essentially constructed by texts and mediums of remembrance like museums and textbooks, and the individuals that interact with them. It therefore has to be appreciated that collective memory can change, albeit sometimes with great difficulty. Currently, the commemoration of Ahn is facilitated through the content of history books, public discourse, television and other media, and museums, among others. Since this article does not propose a complete change in the collective memory, only a shift of emphasis from the shooting of Ito Hirobumi toward Ahn's ultimate plan of peace in Northeast Asia, it can be maintained that such a shift is possible, although it will take time.

The Importance of Easing Tensions between South Korea and Japan

In order to illustrate the potential impact a collective memory shift could have on the success of South Korea's policy toward Japan, it is necessary to first outline the importance of stable Seoul-Tokyo relations for South Korea's key foreign policy objectives.

One of the Moon administration's main foreign policy objectives is improving its relations with Japan. Not only is South Korea's economy highly integrated with its neighbor to the east, but Tokyo also represents a strategic partner for Seoul, with many shared interests on regional issues. Relations between Tokyo and Seoul, however, are currently at a historic low. Exacerbating existing territorial disputes (Nah 2015, 102-20; Lee 2015, 54-62) as well as historical issues relating to forced labor and comfort women during colonial rule (Suk 2015, 130-32; Kim and Lee 2015, 159-65), was a limited military crisis in December 2018, when a South Korean naval vessel allegedly locked its fire control radar onto a Japanese naval surveillance plane. In the aftermath, the governments in Seoul and Tokyo blamed each other for wrong and dangerous behavior (Panda 2018).

Some experts have gone so far as to argue that Korea-Japan relations are at their lowest point since the normalization of relations in 1965 (Kim 2019; Salmon 2019). As recently as October 2018, South Korea's Supreme Court ordered Japanese firms, including Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, to pay compensation for using forced labor during colonial rule (Miller 2019), and in the following month, the South Korean government dissolved the Japanese-funded Reconciliation

and Healing Foundation for the compensation of comfort women, which dealt “a blow to the 2015 bilateral agreement to settle the issue of the wartime sexual slavery” (Kim 2019). In April 2019, the municipal authorities canceled a construction permit for a new Japanese embassy in Seoul, triggering the Japanese government to scrap plans for the new embassy, leaving Japan with a smaller diplomatic footprint in the country (Miller 2019).

All these recent instances serve not only to show that Korea-Japan relations present a continuous challenge for policy makers on both sides of the East Sea, but also to hammer home the fact that it is unresolved historical issues that remain at the heart of the conflicted bilateral relationship. As Hahm Chai-bong of the Asan Institute has explained, history in Korea is a highly politicized issue and the collective memory of South Koreans has a direct influence on foreign policy decision making (quoted in Salmon 2019).

This recent deterioration in Korea-Japan relations comes at a particularly unfortunate time. The current U.S. administration has called into question the long-standing security commitments its armed forces have provided to Pacific allies since the Cold War. President Trump is allegedly planning to withdraw troops from South Korea and to downsize military exercises (Desmaele 2019). The “Cost Plus 50” plan would dramatically increase the cost of stationing U.S. troops abroad for the host country, significantly impacting the security of both South Korea and Japan.

It is clear that in the current situation, South Korea and Japan have much to gain from cooperation. As Tongfi Kim (2019, 3) argues, South Korea and Japan would have a much higher chance of positively influencing decision making in Washington if they cooperated, rather than undermined each other, “South Korea and Japan can resist President Trump’s anti-alliance policies in various ways, but their efforts are unlikely to succeed without cooperating with each other.” Regarding relations with Washington, Korea-Japan cooperation on economic, military, and security-related issues is of paramount importance to the maintenance of regional stability. Against this background, Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha’s statement that “our government’s will is clear regarding the development of the South Korea-Japan relationship in a future-oriented manner,” indicates the current South Korean government’s awareness of the importance of cooperating with Japan in these times (*Korea Times* 2019).

The Collective Memory of Ahn Jung-geun as a Catalyst for Improved Korea-Japan Relations

As argued above, South Korea’s key foreign policy goals are currently at risk of not being realized. Relations with Tokyo have deteriorated throughout 2018 and 2019 to a historic low at a time when improved relations with Japan would be

desirable, given the need for Tokyo and Seoul to speak with one voice to a U.S. administration that questions the security commitments that it provides to its allies in the region. The remainder of this section will be devoted to a discussion of how a shift in the nation's collective memory could reduce its hindrance of—if not positively help improve—relations with Japan.

It is proposed that today, more than 110 years after Ahn Jung-geun's assassination of Ito Hirobumi, a critical discussion of how South Korea commemorates its national hero is warranted, especially with a view to improving contemporary Korea-Japan relations. Given that Ahn Jung-geun's actual objective was to achieve cooperation among East Asian states, and since this is in fact what South Korea's official foreign policy also aims to do today, the historical figure of Ahn Jung-geun can be remembered for more than his shooting of Ito Hirobumi. A shift in Korea's collective memory of Ahn, away from the killing of a Japanese official and toward his ambitions for peace in East Asia, could be a meaningful starting point for thawing relations with Japan. Indeed, the ideals that Ahn Jung-geun was hoping to achieve through *On Peace in East Asia*, including close cooperation in the form of a pan-Asian confederation, are precisely what the region needs to be reminded of today.

The idea of shifting the focus of Korea's collective memory of Ahn's main objective of building peace in East Asia, for which the assassination of Ito was a means rather than an end, is not new (Y. Lee 2014; Yi, Park, and Larsen 2017). What is proposed here is that this shift is particularly pertinent today, as it meets both the needs and the ambitions of the current South Korean administration. Revisiting the discourse on collective memory and the active process of selecting and disseminating currently important details of Ahn's narrative to guide a society's collective memory and narrative-at-large, we can maintain that a different selection of or emphasis on details can lead to a new, dominant interpretation of historical events. Such a shift in a nation's collective memory as posited by Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt, and applied to the interpretation of Ahn Jung-geun, has significant potential. It can serve to underline the main foreign policy goals of the current and future Korean administrations. Ahn already represents an integral part of Korean collective memory that transcends the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and unifies the Korean people North and South in their patriotism that emphasizes the centrality of Korea's independence and sovereignty (*Hankyoreh* 2010; Cumings 2015, 444-52). This pan-Korean patriotism, combined with the commemoration of Ahn Jung-geun that focuses on peace in East Asia—most importantly between the two Koreas and Japan, but also China—would constitute a future-oriented commemoration of Korea's national hero that is both historically correct and inclusive of South Korean foreign policy objectives.

As Steven Denney and Christopher Green (2014) point out, the elevation of Ahn to the status of patriotic martyr is entirely within the right of South Korea,

as commemorating national heroes and martyrs is something all nations do. However, if one country's "grand narrative" is built on killing a political leader of another country, "rapprochement grows more complicated" (ibid.). In this sense, it may be a real opportunity for South Korea to reassess the emphasis that the country's collective memory currently puts on Ahn Jung-geun, the national hero. In line with Foreign Minister Kang's call for a "future-oriented Korea-Japan relationship" (*Korea Times* 2019), the future-oriented collective memory of Ahn Jung-geun may as well be one that emphasizes peace in East Asia and regional cooperation. Reinforcing Ahn's desire for East Asian peace over his assassination of Ito through, for example, a different display at the Namsan Memorial Hall, can act as an agent for change in how Ahn is remembered.

For Korea-Japan relations to significantly improve, however, more will be necessary than a change in museum displays. Ahn is still seen as a terrorist in Japan, and meaningful reconciliation will only occur if all parties involved have the will and readiness to take the necessary steps. A gradual reinterpretation of Ahn's deed that focuses on peace in East Asia instead of Ito's assassination is only one small, albeit a hopefully symbolic, step in a long process that will include many other reconciliatory actions. This process will take many years if not decades and depends on other actors as well, but it is still important that these first steps toward reconciliation among Koreans and Japanese are taken.

Conclusion

This article has discussed how Ahn Jung-geun, a Korean national hero on both sides of the DMZ, is collectively commemorated in South Korea today. It is argued that a shift in South Korea's commemoration of Ahn Jung-geun's heroic deed can be an opportunity for the South Korean administration to align Ahn's commemoration with South Korea's ambitious foreign policy objectives, namely improving relations with Japan and bringing peace and stability to the Korean Peninsula and the wider Northeast Asian region.

Despite challenges and many structural factors outside of the Korean administration's control, Moon Jae-in's foreign policy so far has been successful. However, facing a U.S. administration that openly voices plans to scale back commitments to its security alliances with both South Korea and Japan, it is paramount that Seoul and Tokyo closely cooperate and harmonize their position vis-à-vis Washington. Unfortunately, South Korea-Japan relations are at a historic low at a time when close cooperation is most important. While stable Korea-Japan relations are a desirable outcome in and of themselves, they are also instrumental as Japan shares many key interests with South Korea, especially with regard to relations with Washington and Pyongyang. It is therefore no exaggeration to say that amicable and robust ties between Seoul and Tokyo are crucial for the success

of South Korea's main foreign policy objectives.

The commemoration of Ahn Jung-geun today emphasizes the assassination of Ito Hirobumi, maintaining a source of friction in Seoul-Tokyo relations. It is proposed that Ahn's ultimate objective, to bring peace to East Asia, offers an alternative emphasis in South Korea's collective memory that is not only historically correct, but also useful in realizing South Korea's foreign policy objectives. The discourse on collective memory shows that a nation's commemoration of a hero depends on the selection of texts from which they are remembered, determining how their life is interpreted. While the dominant narrative in Korea's collective memory has thus far emphasized Ahn's assassination of Ito, we can apply Assmann and Shortt's proposition that it is possible to change collective memory. Hence, what is and is not remembered about Ahn can be changed in South Korean collective memory. Changing how he is remembered by selecting texts that place greater emphasis on his pan-Asian peace-making goals is encouraged to aid the thawing of Korea-Japan relations. The shift in Korea's collective memory of Ahn would support the Moon administration's policy of promoting stable and peaceful relations among East Asian states, and peace and reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula.

This article has focused on the potential contribution that a shift of South Korea's collective memory of Ahn Jung-geun could make to improving bilateral relations with Japan and thereby serve South Korea's main foreign policy objectives. Future research might explore the role of Ahn Jung-geun in Japan, and how a shift in collective memory, as posited by Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt, would be received in Japanese society.

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