

Culture and collective memory

Comparative perspectives

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Shame is sometimes difficult to fathom. When South Korean university students were recently asked to name the three events that "arouse in you as a citizen (rather than a private individual) a sense of dishonor, disgrace, shame, and/or remorse," they listed, in order of frequency, Japanese colonial rule, the International Monetary Fund loan, the Korean War, wrongdoings of former presidents, and the collapse of the Sung Soo Bridge and Sam Poong Department Store. One of the investigators, an American, found the Korean response bizarre. Why should occupation by an overwhelmingly powerful neighbor and acceptance of a loan to support a troubled economy be deemed sources of shame rather than anger or distress? Why should an approximately equal proportion of respondents consider the crimes of individual politicians, the Korean War—which preserved the existence of their country, and the collapse of a bridge and department store, as instances of national disgrace?

Ghanaians, like Koreans, find in economic dependency a source of disgrace; success in international sports, a basis of national pride. But Ghanaians rarely mention colonial exploitation, and they take the enslavement of their ancestors more lightly than do Westerners.

That the field of collective memory contains too few surprises like these is a sign of its provincialism. In the Western stockpile of collective-memory concepts, nothing makes these findings comprehensible, let alone generalizable. For the past quarter-century, it is true, many scholars around the world have labored over the sources and consequences of national memory, but efforts to build a collective-memory discipline have been confined to the West. The present essay addresses this imbalance by using non-Western memories as tools for widening existing concepts, and, in so doing, moving collective memory scholarship intellectually—not just topically—into a global field.

History, commemoration, and memory

The distinction between history and memory is now part of our common vocabulary, although the distinction itself remains vague. That *history* tells about the reality of the past

while *memory* misrepresents the past is, in certain respects, plausible. But that statement needs clarification and expansion—clarification because it makes memory synonymous with lies and misperception; expansion because collective memory scholarship, vibrant and creative for so many years, is approaching a plateau, contenting itself with empirical enrichments and theoretical variations on precisely the themes that have concealed some of memory's important functions. Exploring memory across cultures clarifies these functions by transcending theories based solely on Western experience.

Culture is conceived here as “an *historically* transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of *inherited* conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (Geertz 1973: 89, emphasis added). Collective memory, then, as a means for the preservation of cultural forms as well as information, enables us to engage the past in at least two ways. First, collective memory is a model *of* society—a reflection of its present problems and mentalities. Second, collective memory is a model *for* society—a program that determines the content of its values and defines the meaning of its experience.

However, the adjective “collective” does not mean that a “group memory” exists independently of its constituents. Nor does it mean that everyone perceives the past in the same way. Collective remembering refers to variant individual expressions of culturally induced beliefs, feelings, and moral judgments about the past.

In modern societies, oral traditions persist, but history and commemoration are collective memory's main repositories (Assman 1992). Historical accounts include research and analytic monographs, textbooks, and encyclopedia entries. Commemorative symbolism includes eulogy and ritual oratory, monuments, shrines, relics, statues, paintings, and ritual observances. Clearly, history and commemoration perform different functions. History enlightens by revealing the causes and consequences of events. Commemoration designates the significance of events by lifting from the historical record those which embody a community's distinctive values. History and commemoration, however, cannot be empirically separated: just as history dramatizes the values that commemoration sustains, commemoration is rooted in historical knowledge.

Two perspectives

In the early decades of the twentieth-century, many scholars explored the social contexts of history, commemoration, and belief, but Maurice Halbwachs's work was the most profound. His influence, on the other hand, has been sporadic. Between 1945—the year of his execution by the SS—and the early 1980s, American sociologists ignored him. After 1980, Halbwachs was cited time and again, even though his two major books, *The Social Frames of Memory* and *The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land*, had not been translated into English. (Lewis Coser's selection and translation of Halbwachs's collected works did not appear until 1991.) Halbwachs was therefore dragged into a wave of research that arose independently of him.

Two perspectives on collective memory, the *presentist* and *traditionalist*, organize this late twentieth-century groundswell. These perspectives are neither verifiable nor falsifiable; they are analytic fictions in terms of which observations of experience and memory can be compared. In the presentist perspective, inferred from constructionist, political, and postmodern models of memory, different elements of the past become more or less

relevant as circumstances change. The most inclusive term, “presentist,” emphasizes what the specific models have in common, namely a focus on concrete situations as the basis for the past’s perception and representation. In this perspective, memory is always in transition, always precarious. Memory is a dependent variable insofar as each social unit forges a past compatible with its own needs and problems (See, for example, Bodnar 1992).

The second, traditionalist, perspective refers to realist models depicting the past as a standard and frame for the present. Assuming the historical record to be reasonably authentic, such models construe collective memory as a source of energy and moral direction—in short, an independent variable. The effect of independent variables is, of course, irregular: in one time and place their influence is strong; in other times and other places, weak. At all times and places their influence is real. Because traditionalism places so much weight on the reality of the past, collective memory appears, in its light, to be inherited rather than self-created. History and tradition constantly revise themselves, but they are modifying the essence of existing ideas rather than creating new ones (Schudson 1989, 1992).

The carriers of the traditionalist perspective—from Edmund Burke to Edward Shils (1981)—are sensitive to differences *within* cultures but find the most significance in differences *between* cultures. The latter difference—and there is no way to overemphasize the point—consists of central tendencies governed by an “axial principle”: cultures of self-denial thus distinguish themselves from cultures of self-fulfillment; Apollonian cultures from Dionysian; inner- from tradition-directed; communitarian from individualist. The traditionalist perspective asserts a discontinuity in kind among cultures, distinguishing itself from theories that derive macro-content from such micro-processes as metaphor narrative structures, texts, classifications, and boundary-making (Alexander 2003; Wertsch 2002; Zerubavel 2003).

Is memory really a construction

Presentism shaped early collective memory scholarship, including Maurice Halbwachs’s, and dominates the field today. It arose in the West as an effort to systemize post-World War I disillusionment and doubt. Almost twenty years after that war ended, Louis Wirth observed:

At a time in human history like our own, when all over the world people are not only merely ill at ease, but are questioning the bases of social existence, the validity of their truths, and the tenability of their norms, it should become clear that there is no value apart from interest and no objectivity to hold tenaciously to what one believes to be the truth.

(Wirth 1936: xxv)

For the first time, ordinary people, as well as intellectuals, began to believe there were no longer absolutes of time and space, of good and evil, or even of knowledge.

“Demystifying” knowledge was central to social science in the 1920s and 1930s, and its implications were broad. The “unmasking turn of mind,” which refutes ideas by revealing their functions, inevitably challenges the authority of the past, for once one sees the interests concealed by an idea, it loses its efficacy (Mannheim 1952 [1928]: 140).

The cynical science of memory construction, with its emphasis on a past that is unreal or, at best, disputable, transparent, and temporary, prospers in a world of reciprocal distrust.

By the late 1960s, the past became more meaningless to more people than ever. The young not only thought about it differently; they thought about it less often, remembered less, and felt less strongly about what they remembered. The past's reality and relevance diminished together as identification with tradition weakened (Nora 1996). Underlying this erosion was the discrediting of grand narratives—the legends and myths that once inspired and consoled nations (Lyotard 1984 [1979]). What distinguishes the West, then, is not new or revised historical narratives but an unprecedented sense that all such narratives are irrelevant.

Innovations

By the 1980s and 1990s, a great wave of research had linked collective memory to power relations, relativism, and the “production” of culture. Conceiving the past as a mask for the interests and hegemony of the privileged led to great excesses. Memory became something “manufactured,” “invented,” “fabricated,” “created,” and “remade.” Its favorite topics included victims, unpopular wars, and other reprehensible events. Holocaust and slavery topics abounded. This pattern accompanied the late-twentieth-century rise of multiculturalism, recognition of minorities' entitlements, diversity, and erosion of beliefs that once legitimated separation of racial, religious, and ethnic groups.

Three recent developments, however, limit presentist bias. First, there has been a reaffirmation of the obduracy of history, convincingly demonstrated rather than asserted. Michael Schudson's (1992) analysis of the “resistance of the past” and Gary Fine's (2001) treatment of “cautious naturalism” and of historical events as “action templates” react against models that reduce collective memory to unbridled fabrication. What is known about the past limits what can be done with it interpretively.

Second, collective memory scholarship need no longer infer individual beliefs from historical and commemorative contents. Many scholars, most prominently Howard Schuman, move forward with new lines of inquiry—including national surveys—that explore what individuals believe and feel about the past and how they judge it morally.

Application of the dialogical perspective, which defines collective memory in terms of both cause and consequence, is the third new development. Individuals holding beliefs about the past are not passive end-links on some chain of social causation; they reinforce and modify the oral messages, texts, and symbols they consume. If “culture creation” and “culture reception” are inseparable, then collective memory, an aspect of culture, must be a context for and against which historians and commemorative agents react (Schwartz and Schuman 2005). In this sense, memory is path-dependent: earlier representations of the past affect the availability and resources required for present representations. Collective memory can be seen as an ongoing process of meaning-making (Olick 1999).

The influence of these developments has been limited, but in different research settings they can redirect theoretical trends. As we move from Western to Eastern cultures, we see collective memory and its problems under new lights. In Asia (including China, Japan, and Korea), there exists a surfeit rather than a deficit of meaningful remembrance, and this condition fixates nations, preventing them from coming to terms fully with the dilemmas of the day.

Memory and culture

“Western” and “Asian” are shorthand for two clusters of nations, each having a definite core but indefinite boundaries. Western nations are exemplified by Central and Western Europe, Great Britain, and its three major settler societies—the United States, Canada, and Australia. Northeast Asia is exemplified by three core nations—China, Japan, and Korea. No homogeneity is claimed for these nations, but the differences *among* them—in religion, philosophy, literature, the visual arts, architecture, music, moral values, and worldviews—are small compared to differences *between* them and the nations of the West. This “East–West” divide is not to be dismissed as a product of Eurocentric history and interests; it is palpable and consequential. The cultural contrast between Asia and the West is evident in the constituent beliefs of their histories and memories. (For convenience, the term *Asia* will henceforth abbreviate *Northeast Asia*.)

In recent years, Asian memory has been studied within a presentist framework (Fujitani *et al.* 2001; Jager and Mitter 2007) applied directly or indirectly to World War II. But to say that World War II memories are constructed, then manipulated to strengthen the state and flatter the public, ignores important questions: Why do elites choose a 75-year-old war as their hegemonic tool? Are any parts of this war remembered but not used for the purpose of manipulation? Which parts of the war justify indignation; which require expressions of regret? In this connection, the “politics of regret,” a sub-field of collective memory, now grows rapidly in the West (Olick 2007), but our understanding of regret itself assumes a conception of guilt only partially felt by most Asians.

That memory runs deeply and vitally through Asia is evident in the concept of “the history problem.” Ordinary citizens recognize and feel this problem in their own lives. Nowhere is the tone and texture of the history problem more evident than in Asia’s “textbook incidents.” When, in 1982, the Japanese Ministry of Education demanded that an author revise his textbook to show that Japan “advanced” into rather than “invaded” Chinese cities, the Chinese and Korean governments reacted explosively: they withdrew ambassadors, condemned the Ministry’s action, and declared that bilateral relations would never be the same. In the streets, angry Chinese and Korean students demonstrated their indignation. Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary issued a statement assuring that the error would be corrected. Later, in November, 1982, the Ministry adopted a “Neighboring Country Clause” to make history textbooks consistent with international harmony. Because this clause was only a symptom of the history problem, future textbook crises were inevitable. Such crises continue to inhibit transformative politics, slow the pace of national and regional growth, and obscure the importance of relations with the widening world community.

No comparable “history problem” exists in the West. True, Westerners remember their own nations’ difficult pasts, but in every sphere of international relations—technology, popular culture, politics, trade—the past is a second thought, not the first. Because America’s relations with former enemies are free of recrimination, for example, international business proceeds without reference to the sins of earlier generations.

The Asian history problem is both a historiographical and commemorative matter; it concerns the way Asians invoke the past, play the history card in their relations with one another, how they conceive and symbolize the historical dimensions of events. National surveys commissioned by two Japanese newspapers (*Asahi Shimbun* and *Yomiuri Shimbun*) asked, “Do you think the history issues are important for Japan’s relations with China and South Korea?” If a question about “history issues” were asked in the United States

about America's relations with its neighbors, no one would understand it. Japanese respondents, no less than Chinese and Korean, were familiar with the issue: 67 and 75 percent replied "important" in 2001 and 2005, respectively. In 2005 a comparable sample was asked, "What should Japan do to better relations with China?" In their replies 66.3 percent mentioned "respect Chinese culture and history." Three years later, Japanese were asked, "What do you think both China and Japan should do in order to improve the relationship between the two countries?" The modal response (36.7 percent) was "Solve history issues between Japan and China." A full 60 percent answered negatively when asked, "Do you think that the history issue of Japan's compensation to the former victims in the era of colonization has been solved?" The same percentage answered "no" to the question of whether "the issue of Japan's history issue with neighboring countries such as China and South Korea has been solved." The content of these history issues involves material compensation, but they turn on the question of cultural, not monetary, values. The *history* problem is a *memory* problem so far as it centers on moral judgments of the past.

Memory, dignity, and honor

Unlike Western traditions based on "cultures of dignity," Asian traditions are historically rooted in "cultures of honor." Dignity and honor cultures require different kinds of memory. Peter Berger *et al.* explain:

It is through the performance of institutional roles that the individual participates in history, not only the history of the particular institution but that of his society as a whole. It is precisely for this reason that modern consciousness, in its conception of the self, tends toward a curious ahistoricity. In a world of honor, identity is firmly linked to the past through the reiterated performance of prototypical acts. In a world of dignity, history is the succession of mystifications from which the individual must free himself to attain "authenticity."

(Berger *et al.* 1973: 91)

Honor is almost obsolete in the West and significantly attenuated in Asia, but if we take honor and dignity as concepts—analytic tools—rather than descriptions of reality, we can differentiate societies more precisely. Korea, where defeat and failure are still sources of national shame, is no feudal society, but the remnants of feudal honor distinguish it from America (Schwartz and Kim 2002).

"Honor cultures" maintain order by inducing both guilt and shame among the wayward, but shame does most of morality's heavy lifting. Shame is a reaction to other people's contempt. Thus, when Americans are asked to name the historical events which promote in them a sense of pride, they are most likely to refer to the American founding and World War II, and they do this as a matter of fact, with little concern for the impressions these events make on other peoples. When Koreans are asked the same question, they most often mention the 1988 Olympic Games, which brought them world attention. Japanese name victory in international sports and economic and technological development in almost identical numbers (Schwartz and Kim 2002; Schwartz *et al.* 2005). In China, the 2008 Olympic Games swelled national pride because they impressed the world. Honor rests on achievements that other people notice.

It must be emphasized that the relevance of honor as a standard for thought, action, and feeling is probably fading faster in Asia than in the West, where it is already approaching its plateau. The conviction that every person has a right to respect and protection from arbitrary power, independently of national honor, has advanced more rapidly in some Asian countries than in others, but the direction of change is certain and seemingly relentless. On the other hand, there is a floor, East and West, below which honor cannot descend. This limit, rooted in historical differences, cannot level cultural differences overnight. Before the deep roots of Asian honor are withered as far as the West's, many decades must pass.

Because honor and shame play a more important (albeit receding) role in Asia than in the West (Wallbott and Scherer 1995), new perspectives are required to understand Asian memory. Presentist and traditionalist perspectives are only powerful as long as their empirical equivalents are relevant; as these become less so, fresh problems, hypotheses, and conclusions become more difficult to extract from them. Asia illustrates these limits not through the detail of World War II atrocities but by the spectacle of Japanese officials minimizing them and attributing exculpatory motives to those committing them. These same limits are manifest in the staunch refusal of Chinese and Koreans to accept sincere declarations of regret, to demand in every gesture of apology a level of incontestable "sincerity"—in short, proof of the unprovable. Unrequited demands can be advantageous. Denied recognition of their suffering, victims can draw a sharper line between right and wrong, honorable and dishonorable, "us" and "them."

Many explanations are advanced to account for why Asia's memory problem became so pronounced during the last decades of the twentieth century. Its surge has been linked to new international discourse on justice and human rights, victim nations' rising economic power, self-confidence, nationalism, readiness to criticize rival nations, and, on the other hand, awareness that indignation against former oppressors diverts attention from domestic problems and awareness of the need for political and economic interdependence. These conditions, however, cannot explain why *historical* events are the primary objects of Asian concern. What is it, then, about Asian culture that makes the past resonate so powerfully?

Cultural differences in the memory of trauma

World War II was a watershed of Western history and memory. The ideal of a common humanity emerging from the experience of Nazi Germany's atrocities, observe Michael Schudson and Aleida Assmann, now serves as a common cultural memory for our day. No one can dispute World War II's salience to European memory, but it is even more pivotal to Asian memory. Japanese atrocities of the 1930s and early 1940s, sources of humiliation to postwar generations of Chinese and Koreans, accompany memories of still earlier aggression.

Japan's war against Asia began with Europe's mid-nineteenth-century colonial conquests. Reactions to colonialism, which involved forced modernization, varied: Japan adapted to it and became a world power; China sank in dignity, wealth, and influence; Korea vanished into what proved to be the beginning of a Japanese empire. Meiji elites held China, once the object of unbounded reverence, in contempt, and they adopted toward the rest of Asia an attitude of even sterner superiority. Japan, thus, chose not to resist the Western powers but to become one of them, and the rest of Asia knew it.

China, after millennia of dominance, lost the most. Its “century of humiliation” lasted from the time it submitted to the Nanjing Treaty in 1842 through the 1980s economic expansion under Deng Xiaoping.

During the post-World War II decades, Japan remained Asia’s dominant economic and political power. But Japan’s neighbors remembered their long disgrace. Japanese officials knew that only the clearest expressions of regret could begin to mitigate their neighbors’ resentment. One prime minister after another extended apologies, but China and Korea, under the influence of Confucian ritual formalities, remained too aware of the telltale signs of inauthentic remorse. They were often right. On the other hand, how does any official of any nation act “authentically”? Does not the very consciousness and deliberativeness of enacting a feeling, even if authentic, subvert the impression of sincerity? Here lies a deep perceptual dilemma fueling the memory problem.

Neither in the existing archive of official Japanese apologies nor in public reactions to survey questions about Japanese regret do we find the slightest trace of what is most important to the Chinese and Korean people—efforts to reinstate lost honor. Japan’s apologies acknowledge physical suffering but not the humiliation of conquest and subordination. There is no mention of humiliation because there is no vocabulary of apology for the wounding of another’s honor.

Such matters are less urgent in dignity cultures. Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, for example, do not condemn Germany for humiliating them. Many captured American and British soldiers died in Japanese prisoner-of-war camps, but the survivors feel no dishonor. Like Holocaust survivors, they condemn their tormentors for murdering their friends and ruining their lives. Violation of rights, not honor, is at stake.

The task of locating the Asian case on the intersecting dimensions of dignity, honor, aggression, and victimhood is simplified in Table 59.1, which places nations along four dimensions and, in parentheses, names the sentiments of aggressor and victim. In dignity culture, aggressors, motivated by guilt, direct their apologies to the rights they have violated, and their victims define those apologies as compensation for physical and mental suffering. In honor cultures, compensation is more difficult. If offenders apologize for physical suffering without acknowledging their own shame, moral inferiority, and humiliation—and doing so convincingly—their victims are deprived of what means most to them. Such sensibilities intensify the memory problem.

New outlooks

Asian memory conforms to both the presentist and traditionalist perspectives. Contemporary Koreans, for example, see their history differently from their parents, while also recognizing that the disagreement has to do with real events. However, presentism

Table 59.1

| | <i>Dignity cultures</i> | <i>Honor cultures</i> |
|-------------------|--|----------------------------|
| <i>Aggression</i> | Germany (guilt) | Japan (formal apology) |
| <i>Victimhood</i> | Jews and conquered nations of Europe (indignation) | China and Korea (shame) |

and traditionalism do not tell us what makes an event memorable or what makes people disagree about it in the first place. Without this knowledge we are at a loss to know why commemoration tells us what it does, for its job, as we recall, is to designate “the significance of events by lifting from the historical record the events embodying a community’s cultural values.” Presentism and traditionalism are about the *how*, not the *what*, of memory.

The advent of the memory problem reflects both a malleable past, because it is linked to the changing political power of Asian countries, and an obdurate past, because it formulates a century of trauma that will not go away. But the memory problem tells something more, namely the power of culture to make memory resonate, to get under people’s skin, to make them take notice when the past is represented in the wrong way. No memory problem exists without a memorable history expressing or violating moral values.

During the past thirty years, the volume of collective memory scholarship has grown rapidly, but the intellectual payoff is leveling. Presentists can only say so much about the way interests distort historical perception, while traditionalists are now more alive to memory’s erosion than endurance. Presentist and traditionalist perspectives continue to be elaborated and qualified, but we are reaching the limit of what they can tell us. In Asia, we have reached this limit. To grasp the uniqueness of the Asian memory problem, the concepts of honor and shame have been useful not because they remain dominant aspects of Asian culture but because their residual forms resonate with present experience.

Two statements, accordingly, summarize culture’s role in collective memory. First, the perspectives that organize Western scholarship cannot represent Asian memory. The memory problem is central to Asia’s current economic and political issues because honor and shame bind individuals to their nation in a way that dignity and guilt cannot. No memory problem afflicts Western societies because their cultural values protect individuals from, rather than subject them to, the demands of the institutions to which they belong. Asia’s memory problem would be less consequential, therefore, if its traditions of national honor and shame were less relevant.

Second, Asian cultures, like their Western counterparts, show memory to be dialogic, a mirror and a lamp, a reflector of and guide for the present; but Asia embodies more information about memory as an entity in itself—an ordered system of symbols that make experience, including traumatic experience, meaningful. In few other national or regional settings is the interdependence of past and present, culture and memory, so problematic and consequential, or identification with the past so strong.

Bringing Asia into the field of collective memory studies, not as a site for the testing of Western concepts but as a mine with new concepts and new propositions, widens the existing state of the field, suggesting the contours of a theory that places less emphasis on the interests that distort history and more on the cultural traits that define the meaning of real historical events.

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BARRY SCHWARTZ

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