

POLITICS OF MEMORY

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POLITICS OF MEMORY IN EAST ASIAN COUNTRIES: BETWEEN POSTCOLONIAL TRAUMA, STATE NATION-BUILDING, AND REGIONAL CONTROVERSIES

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Abstract

In the contemporary world, memory politics has gained particular significance in East Asian countries, notably Japan, China, and India. It encompasses the memory of colonial pasts, wars, occupations, and decolonization processes, shaping national identity, state legitimacy, and foreign policy. The historical experiences of these countries differ: Japan – a former imperial state, China – a country subjected to imperial influence, and India – a postcolonial state developing its own national consciousness. Memorials, state rituals, and museums become key elements of memory politics, as well as instruments of ‘memory diplomacy.’

Contemporary memory politics in China combines state institutions with material and non-material practices, forming an official narrative of victimhood under imperialism and national unity. In India, memory of the colonial past and the struggle for independence serves as a decolonial project, simultaneously integrating cultural diversity and religious heritage. Memory politics in Japan exists within a political discourse between nationalist and pacifist interpretations of the past, reflected in controversies over the Yasukuni Shrine and school textbooks.

The study demonstrates that memory politics in East Asia serves as an important tool for state-building, fostering civic solidarity, and international positioning. It combines local, national, and transnational practices, enabling the construction of national identity, legitimization of power, and influence into regional relations. Three models of memorial politics in the region can be identified: the Japanese model – reconsideration of post-imperial responsibility; the Chinese model – a narrative of victimhood and revenge; the Indian model – a decolonial project of self-determination. Memory politics thus becomes a dynamic political resource, linking the past, present, and strategic state planning in a global context.

Keywords: memory politics, East Asia, Japan, China, India, postcolonial trauma, national identity, commemorations, memorials, memory diplomacy.

Introduction

In the contemporary world, processes of memory politics are acquiring increasing significance. In East Asian countries – primarily Japan, China, and India – the issues of remembering colonial pasts, wars, occupations, imperial ambitions, as well as decolonization and nation-building, have become crucial components of state policy, the formation of national identity, and regional international relations.

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Firstly, the historical experience of these countries is extraordinarily complex. Japan emerges as a former imperial power, China as a country subjected to both Western and Japanese imperial influences, and India as a postcolonial state that developed its national consciousness through the process of decolonization. Historical traumas, memory rituals, national museums, sites of memory, and state commemorative practices have become central factors in both domestic politics and regional diplomacy.

Secondly, memory politics exerts a significant influence on international relations. A prominent example is the disputes between China and Japan over the interpretation of history, symbols, and commemorative rituals – particularly regarding Japanese politicians' visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. For China, such acts are perceived as attempts to revise history, whereas in Japan they are viewed as expressions of patriotism and respect for the deceased. Thus, memory becomes an instrument of 'memory diplomacy,' wherein history is used as a lever of influence in contemporary international politics (Berger, 2012).

Thirdly, in the era of globalization, digital media, and social networks, memory is no longer merely local or national. It acquires a transcontinental dimension, forming a 'virtual memory' of the past, where competing narratives interact in digital spaces and influence international public opinion. Memory increasingly becomes a resource of soft power, through which states seek to enhance their image or restore historical justice.

Fourthly, in East Asian countries, the issue of memory is inseparable from questions of legitimizing authority, mobilizing citizens, and shaping patriotic discourse. As J. Winter and E. Sivan (1999, p. 38) emphasize, the state in such contexts acts as the '*primary producer and choreographer of memory commemoration*' (Winter & Sivan, 1999, p. 38). However, even within official frameworks, memory remains polyphonic. In each country, numerous mnemonic communities maintain their own versions of the past (Kansteiner, 2002).

As John Lee Candelaria (2023) notes, for most Asian states, the postwar period was a time of societal consolidation and the formation of new national identities. Memorials and monuments served as material symbols of this transformation – they not only honored heroes but also created an imagined community of citizens united by a shared past (Morley & Robins, 1995; Davis, 1994). Nevertheless, the significance of such symbols is not fixed, and the content of memory changes depending on political interests and contexts (Berger, 2012).

In Japan, memory politics is closely linked to questions of national responsibility and identity. On one hand, there exists an official stance of apology toward the victims of Japanese aggression; on the other hand, internal movements seek to 'reinterpret' history without feelings of guilt. Commemorative practices such as visits to the Yasukuni Shrine reflect the conflict between pacifist and nationalist interpretations of the past.

In China, memory politics aims to construct a 'unified historical narrative' of imperialist victimhood. As K. E. Foote and M. Azarhayu (2007) note, elites actively utilize history to legitimize the regime, particularly through institutions like the Nanjing Massacre Museum, which emphasizes the suffering of the people and the moral superiority of the PRC in the global order.

In India, memory of the colonial past and the struggle for independence plays a role in shaping contemporary patriotic discourse. As M. Mayer and K. Pawlik (2023) emphasize, Indian memory politics oscillates between decolonial reinterpretation and Hindu-nationalist tendencies that seek to reframe history within a civilizational vision of the past.

Despite differences in political regimes and cultural contexts, in most countries of the region memory serves as a means of building loyalty and national pride, while simultaneously functioning as a tool of international communication. As K. Blackburn (2010) observes, commemorative practices in Asia create a mosaic of memories – ranging from officially sanctioned to local, alternative, and traumatic.

Thus, memory politics in East Asia demonstrates a complex interplay between authority, history, culture, and international relations. In the context of postcolonial transformations, memory does not appear as a stable archive of the past, but as an arena of political construction, within which states determine what should be remembered and what should be forgotten, shaping their own version of the past and the future.

Theoretical Foundations of the Study

Research on memory politics and memorialization in East Asian countries has developed at the intersection of postcolonial traumatic experiences, state nation-building processes, and regional disputes. In early works, B. Anderson (1983/1991) conceptualized the nation as an 'imagined community,' laying the groundwork for understanding how national narratives are formed through memory and commemoration, particularly in the context of postcolonial Asia. Research by T. G. Ashplant, G. Dawson,

and M. Roper (2013) emphasizes that war and memory politics are not only a means of honoring the deceased but also a tool for state construction of national identity.

An important direction involves studying the influence of colonial and imperial legacies on contemporary memorial politics. A. Anghie (1999, 2005, 2011) and J. M. Hobson (2004) analyzed mechanisms of imperial legitimation and the impact of colonial structures on the international order, which in turn shape postcolonial perceptions of the past in East Asian countries. Suzuki (2004, 2005, 2009) examined the socialization of China and Japan within the European international society, highlighting their duality in perceiving civilizational standards and imperial norms, which affects contemporary narrative practices of memory.

Case studies of memorialization in East and Southeast Asia demonstrate the complexity of the interaction between postcolonial trauma and state narratives. C. Gluck (2022) notes that the wars of the past in Japan, China, and Korea have become a 'political present,' where memory is used to shape national identities. J. L. Candelaria (2023), G. V. Raymond (2018), and K. Noobanjong (2011) analyze commemorations in Asian countries, showing how state monuments become arenas for competing interpretations of nationality and colonial experience. D. Schumacher (2015) observes that East Asia is experiencing a 'boom of complex memories' of the Second World War, including disputes over memorials to 'comfort women' in Japan and the Philippines (Cabico, 2018; Kyodo News, 2018).

Postcolonial dilemmas of memory are particularly evident in the relations between China and India. D. Anand (2012), N. Abhinandan (2021), and M. Juutinen (n.d.) note that historical memory and colonial legacies shape both policy and cultural diplomacy in these states. M. Das (2014) and D. Pal (2019) emphasize that Sino-Indian relations depend on mutual perceptions of the past, including struggles for cultural influence in Tibet and other peripheral regions. S. Gupta (2011) and P. Chacko (2008) explore how national narratives of the past influence contemporary geopolitical behavior and the formation of national identity.

Researchers pay particular attention to conflictual and contested aspects of memory. T. Berger (2012), K. Blackburn (2010), S. Hayase (2007), K. Lunn (2007), and E. Reynolds (1990) describe how different state narratives of war and colonial pasts compete, producing political and cultural tensions in East Asia. C. Rusneac (2022) emphasizes that transnational memory, particularly at Japanese military and colonial cemeteries, functions as a means of communication between states and regions. C. Gluck (2022) and M. Mayer and K. Pawlik (2023) also note that contemporary Chinese memory politics combines traditional and modernist elements, simultaneously supporting the state narrative and regional ambitions.

Thus, the historiography of memory studies in East Asian countries demonstrates the complexity and multidimensionality of the topic. It encompasses the interaction of postcolonial trauma, state-building processes, and regional conflicts, reflecting local, national, and transnational aspects of memory politics (Anderson, 1983/1991; Ashplant et al., 2013; Gluck, 2022; Schumacher, 2015; Mayer & Pawlik, 2023).

Methodological Foundations of the Study

The methodological framework of this research is based on comparative, politico-institutional, discursive, and historical-genetic approaches. Comparative analysis allows tracing how different states, with distinct political regimes and cultural contexts, construct their own versions of the past. The politico-institutional approach enables an examination of the role of the state, its official institutions, museums, monuments, and educational programs in shaping collective memory. As P. Przychodniak notes, in China, memory politics is used as an instrument of political legitimation: *'the authorities interpret the Japanese occupation as the culmination of 'national humiliation,' create and modernize numerous museums and sites of memory, and the Central Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China supervises the official version of the past'* (Przychodniak, 2018).

Discursive and semiotic analysis is employed to study how material and symbolic forms – monuments, texts, state rituals – produce specific interpretations of history. This approach allows us to view memory politics as an infrastructure through which national identities and moral hierarchies are constructed. As H. Saito emphasizes, the issue of historical memory in East Asia is relational, emerging when states promote self-glorifying versions of the past in opposition to foreign interpretations; at the same time, the region increasingly demonstrates tendencies toward cosmopolitan forms of commemoration (Saito, 2017).

The historical-genetic approach helps to understand how memory politics evolves over time – from postwar narratives to contemporary forms of national self-identification. As highlighted in G.-W. Shin and D. Sneider's 'Divergent Memories: Opinion Leaders and the Asia-Pacific War' (Shin & Sneider, 2012),

national memory undergoes several stages of development – from the formation of a foundational myth to its institutionalization and political utilization (Shin, & Sneider, 2016).

The aim of this study is to analyze how East Asian states – specifically China, India, and Japan – construct, transform, and employ memory politics related to colonial histories, wars, imperial ambitions, and decolonization processes to achieve domestic legitimacy and advance external diplomacy. The research seeks to clarify how memory of the past is transformed into a political resource influencing contemporary regional dynamics and to identify common patterns and differences in the memorial practices of these three states.

The analysis of three case studies reveals the specificity of each state's memorial politics. In Japan, attention focuses on debates over official interpretations of the past, visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, school textbooks, and the commemoration of 'comfort women.' In China, memory politics forms part of the state's ideological apparatus and functions as a tool for national unity through the narrative of the 'Century of National Humiliation.' In contrast, in India, memory of the colonial past and the struggle for independence plays a key role in shaping postcolonial identity and legitimizing the state's vision.

Thus, the study identifies three models of memory politics in the region: the Japanese model – as an attempt to reflect on post-imperial responsibility; the Chinese model – as a narrative of victimhood and revenge; and the Indian model – as a decolonial project aimed at self-determination and the restoration of historical agency. In each case, memory politics functions not only as a means of preserving history but also as a tool for shaping political identity, national solidarity, and diplomatic positioning in the global context.

Contemporary Memory Politics in China: Material-Cultural Perspective and State Commemoration

China, as one of the world's oldest civilizations, exhibits a distinctive approach to its past, which shapes its contemporary memory politics. The current memory policy in China creates a complex space where material culture, historical heritage, and state narratives interact. Research shows that China combines spiritual traditions with material representations of the past, transforming historical memory into a tool for state legitimation and the construction of national identity (Suzuki, 2004, 2009; Gluck, 2022; Mayer & Pawlik, 2023).

Studies of memory, cultural continuity, and heritage in contemporary China echo the observations of sinologist P. Rickmans in *Chinese Attitudes Towards the Past: 'the cultivation of moral and spiritual values of the ancients seemed most often combined with a curious neglect or indifference... to the material heritage of the past'* (Rickmans, 1986).

This indicates an approach to historical preservation that emphasizes practices, traditions, and cultural transmission rather than material objects, where *'the past continues to animate Chinese life, living in people rather than in buildings or stones'* (Rickmans, 1986).

Traditionally, cultural heritage was transmitted through texts, calligraphy, and practices, rather than through physical artifacts, ensuring cultural continuity without material representation (Gluck, 2022).

Memory politics in China shifts the focus from material monuments to living heritage. Material heritage is not a priority and has sometimes been deliberately neglected – for instance, during the Maoist period, *'in many cities... 95–100 % of historical and cultural relics were lost forever'* (Rickmans, 1986). The past lives through generations rather than solely through artifacts.

This strategy has several implications. First, the state develops programs emphasizing living traditions, arts, and rituals. Second, material objects may be reconstructed or destroyed, but the essence of memory is preserved through cultural practices. Third, the memory landscape becomes dynamic: memory politics does not merely preserve the past but reshapes it according to contemporary needs. Control over material traces of the past serves ideological purposes, legitimizing authority, and constructing national identity. Rickmans notes: *'From the very beginning – long before Confucius – Chinese developed the notion that only one form of immortality could exist: immortality granted by history... If continuity is not ensured by the immobility of inanimate objects, it is achieved through the flow of subsequent generations'* (Rickmans, 1986). Thus, memory in China becomes a politics of generations, practices, and creativity, rather than merely of stone and brick.

After the fall of the Qing dynasty and during the Republican era (1912-1949), attitudes toward traditions shifted: culture began to be viewed as a resource for nation-building, and private collections and religious artifacts gradually transformed into state museums and cultural institutions (Suzuki, 2005; Mayer

& Pawlik, 2023). Since then, processes of selection, commercialization, and restructuring of cultural heritage have influenced living traditions.

From the late 1990s onward, the PRC government has actively developed material representations of the past: restoration of ancient urban areas such as Beijing's hutongs, the Great Wall, imperial palaces, historical temples, as well as digital reconstructions in video games and multimedia exhibitions (Gluck, 2022; Mayer & Pawlik, 2023). These processes have coincided with rapid urbanization, demolition of villages and monuments, and a 'collective forgetting,' reinforced by censorship following the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution (Gluck, 2022).

Fear of losing shared memory has generated various forms of nostalgia: 'revolutionary,' 'Maoist-new,' cultural and tourist projects, musical and culinary initiatives. The state actively uses historical reconstructions to demonstrate power and legitimize authority. Key institutions shaping official memory include the National Museum of China in Beijing, the Shanghai Museum of the Revolution, and the Memorial of the People's Heroes, where patriotic education, cultural events, and tourism intersect (Gluck, 2022; Mayer, & Pawlik, 2023).

Contemporary Chinese memory infrastructure exhibits three core characteristics: 1) it integrates diverse objects and practices while simultaneously producing an official version of the past; 2) it ensures the resilience and vitality of memory through museums, tourism, and entertainment projects; 3) it provides a space for contested narratives, where different approaches to heritage and authenticity coexist domestically and internationally (Gluck, 2022; Mayer, & Pawlik, 2023).

China actively revives traditional practices and symbols, including Confucian education, ancestor rituals, and the Hanfu clothing movement, often emerging at the community level (Mayer & Pawlik, 2023). Simultaneously, heritage is used as an instrument of foreign policy: the Silk Road and Belt and Road Initiative projects create transnational memory infrastructures, disseminating official narratives beyond the country (Suzuki, 2009; Gluck, 2022).

Chinese memory politics also addresses tragic events of the twentieth century. Memorials commemorating victims of the Japanese occupation, such as the Nanjing Massacre Museum, serve as reminders of historical trauma and as instruments of patriotic education (Gluck, 2022; Mayer & Pawlik, 2023). At the same time, local and alternative memory practices are widespread: private archives, social media, collecting, amateur exhibitions, and educational projects contribute to a complex memory landscape beyond official narratives (Mayer & Pawlik, 2023). Researchers also note the selectivity of Chinese memory. Topics such as internal repression, the famine during the Great Leap Forward, or the Tiananmen Square events are systematically excluded from the official discourse (Zhao, 1998; Yang, 2019). Thus, the state not only constructs what is remembered but actively determines what remains unspoken.

In conclusion, contemporary Chinese memory politics combines state infrastructure with local and personal practices, consolidating official narratives, ensuring the resilience of historical memory, and allowing a degree of interpretive flexibility. It creates a dynamic, multidimensional space of historical commemoration, where material culture, spiritual traditions, and contemporary political needs intersect (Gluck, 2022; Mayer, & Pawlik, 2023; Rickmans, 1986; Suzuki, 2004, 2009). Notably, China's memory politics is closely linked to geopolitical objectives and legislative frameworks. Through the Silk Road and Belt and Road Initiative projects, the state establishes transnational commemorative spaces, restoring historical routes and creating international cultural centers that disseminate official narratives and enhance China's global influence (Suzuki, 2009; Gluck, 2022). Chinese legislation also regulates the use of cultural heritage and historical symbols as tools for national unity and patriotic education, controlling museums, architectural sites, and commemorative practices (Mayer, & Pawlik, 2023). Therefore, memory politics in China serves not only domestic cultural and identity functions but also operates as an instrument of soft power and strategic positioning in the international arena.

Memory Politics in India: Evolution, Legislation, and Geopolitical Context

India, as a postcolonial democracy with a rich historical and cultural heritage, exhibits a complex memory politics shaped by domestic political, social, and religious factors. More than fifty years after gaining independence (1947), pluralistic Indian democracy experiences a period of identity redefinition through the lens of the politicization of religious heritage and the spread of Hindutva ideology. As B. Sarkar (2024) notes, *'the symbolic culmination of this politicization of memory was the consecration of a new Ram temple on the site of the demolished Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, presented as a triumph of a monolithic 'Hindu' heritage'* (Sarkar, 2024, p. 564). This act illustrates how state decisions regarding

heritage can function as instruments of political mobilization while simultaneously dividing populations, even within a single religious group.

India's memory politics has deep historical roots. From colonial times to the present, heritage has served not only as a cultural resource but also as a means of decolonization and national restoration. B. Sarkar (2024) emphasizes that *'for postcolonial democracies, a return to languages, social organizations, beliefs, and arts restores a voice silenced by colonialism'* (Sarkar, 2024, p. 564). This approach involves the critical use of traditions and heritage, integrating them into contemporary political and social realities while avoiding fundamentalism or uncritical nostalgia.

Legislation and institutions in India play a central role in regulating heritage. Museums, monuments, and commemorative practices form the official narrative, combining state legitimation with patriotic education, while limiting access to alternative interpretations (Sarkar, 2024). Following independence, laws for the preservation of historical monuments were enacted, and private collections and religious artifacts gradually came under state control, giving rise to national museums and cultural centers. This institutional framework aims to preserve material heritage while supporting "living traditions" transmitted through practices, rituals, and education (Sarkar, 2024).

The domestic political dimension of India's memory politics is closely linked to disputes over religious identity and political mobilization. As B. Sarkar (2024) observes, *'uncritical nostalgia breeds fundamentalism: the desire to 'restore tradition' within the framework of Hindutva results in violent practices and historical distortions that pit Hindus against Muslims and Christians'* (Sarkar, 2024, p. 564). Consequently, contemporary Indian memory politics involves not only the preservation of material and intangible heritage but also a struggle over the interpretation of the past and the construction of collective identity.

The foreign policy dimension of Indian memory politics manifests in the diplomatic use of cultural heritage and traditions. Similar to China, where Silk Road programs are used to establish transnational commemorative infrastructure (Mayer & Pawlik, 2023), India employs heritage as a tool of soft power, highlighting its civilizational uniqueness and cultural influence within South Asia and beyond (Sarkar, 2024). Memorial and commemorative practices become part of foreign policy when cultural festivals, educational programs, and historical site restorations serve not only domestic patriotic education but also present India's civilizational heritage to the international community.

A central feature of Indian memory politics is the balance between decolonization and the preservation of diverse traditions. B. Sarkar (2024) emphasizes that *'decolonization is not limited to language; it is a return to the full richness of 'what is ours' – both loved and critiqued'* (Sarkar, 2024, p. 564). In this context, memory politics involves the critical reassessment of heritage, support for cultural innovation, and the integration of alternative voices – including those of women and marginalized groups – into commemorative practices and educational programs.

In conclusion, contemporary Indian memory politics is multidimensional, encompassing state regulation of heritage, commemorative practices, museums and monuments, domestic political mobilization, foreign policy positioning, and critical reassessment of traditions. It balances decolonization, preservation of cultural pluralism, and resistance to the monopolization of heritage through Hindutva (Sarkar, 2024). In this sense, India demonstrates both domestic and geopolitical dimensions of memory, linking the past, the present, and strategic planning for the future.

Memory Politics in Japan: From the Meiji Restoration to Contemporary Geopolitical and Domestic Challenges

Since the revolutionary transformations of the late 19th century, Japan has been engaged in the process of shaping its memory politics – a process encompassing both domestic and foreign policy dimensions. The evolution of Japanese memory politics can be characterized in several stages. The first stage followed the Meiji Restoration, which involved the creation of a state narrative, the cultivation of imperial memory, and the symbolic transformation of heritage, exemplified by the establishment of Yasukuni Shrine. The second stage encompassed the period of imperialism and World War II, during which military monuments were actively utilized, the cult of sacrifice was promoted, and patriotic nationalism was reinforced. The third stage began after 1945, when defeat and occupation necessitated a new engagement with history, oscillating between silence, acknowledgment, and denial.

The Meiji era (from 1868 onward) initiated a new state narrative, with the government actively transforming feudal structures, modernizing society, and simultaneously shaping symbolic forms of national

memory. This period laid the foundation for how Japan subsequently interpreted its past, particularly its military history in the 20th century.

In the postwar period, memory politics in Japan became crucial for both domestic identity formation and international positioning. On one hand, the government sought to integrate into the international community, strengthen the alliance with the United States, and avoid conflicts with neighboring countries, notably China and South Korea. As J. Campbell notes: *'Few countries have spent more time recently discussing historical memories than Japan. Yet the country has also avoided confronting the harsh realities of that history'* (Campbell, 2022, p. 1837)

Legally and institutionally, memory has been shaped through the establishment of memorials, museums, state commemorations, as well as educational and public practices. One of the most sensitive symbols of this policy is Yasukuni Shrine, which, according to M. Mullins, *'remains a contested site in contemporary Japan. Despite its name – 'Peaceful Country' – it has historically been associated with war, militarism, and societal conflict'* (Mullins, 2022, p. 145). Established in 1869 to honor soldiers who died restoring imperial authority, Yasukuni quickly became a national space for glorifying all those who perished in Japan's imperial wars until 1945.

Before the war, the shrine was controlled by military authorities, state-funded, and Shinto rituals – officially defined as 'non-religious' – were used to mobilize society, legitimize war, and reinforce the cult of self-sacrifice for the emperor. Following Japan's surrender in 1945, the shrine's status changed dramatically. Under the Allied Shinto Directive, all shrines were separated from the state, and Yasukuni became a religious organization in 1946. In the postwar period, this produced long-standing legal and political conflicts, including constitutional debates (Articles 20 and 89) over the separation of religion and state, controversies over official visits by prime ministers, and practices of commemorating the war dead without consent from families, leading to lawsuits from Japanese Buddhists, Christians, and citizens of Taiwan and South Korea. The issue became particularly politicized after Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone's official visit on August 15, 1985, when the shrine became a symbol of debates on the limits of state patriotism and historical revisionism. Even conservative intellectuals, such as philosopher Umehara Takeshi and writer Sono Ayako, critically assessed the political instrumentalization of the shrine, highlighting risks to democracy and foreign relations, with their early 'minority' warnings gradually becoming part of broader Japanese discourse on memory, responsibility, and freedom of conscience (Mullins, 2022, p. 146).

A. Takenaka (2015) notes that Yasukuni became 'a center where the Japanese state sought to shape the official historical narrative and cultivate a spirit of patriotic sacrifice' (Takenaka, 2015).

Domestically, memory politics manifests in how Japanese governments and institutions have approached war, colonialism, imperialism, and historical responsibility – for example, through disputes over history textbooks, prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni, or the choice between justifying the past and acknowledging guilt. W. Van Kemenade (2006, p. 7) observes that Japanese war "amnesia" creates serious challenges for reconciliation with victims and neighboring countries. S. Saaler and J. Aukema (2024) cite a Japanese business leader noting, *'If things are left as they are ... a skewed perception of history – without knowledge of the horrors of the war – will be handed down to future generations'* (Saaler & Aukema, 2024).

By the late 20th and early 21st centuries, attention to historical responsibility intensified, alongside efforts to restore national prestige, as exemplified in studies such as Yoshida Shigeru Years: Coming to Terms with the Issue of Historical Memory (Iokibe, Komiya, Hosoya, Miyagi, & Tokyo Foundation for Policy Research's Political and Diplomatic Review Project, 2020). Although Japan does not have a single, comprehensive memory law, through various acts and state decisions, the government maintains a network of national monuments, museums, educational programs, and state ceremonies (e.g., the annual August 15 commemoration). Recognition of August 15 as a day of remembrance for defeat and victims – including speeches by the emperor and prime minister – illustrates the official codification of memory.

Domestically, Japan faces a dilemma: on one hand, the need to preserve memory, consolidate national identity, and honor the dead; on the other, political control, amnesia, and revisionism create tensions across generations, regions (e.g., Okinawa), and in relations with neighboring countries. Conflicts also arise between "anti-Eurocentrism" and "anti-Americanism" in the sense of asserting Japan's civilizational identity beyond being a 'Western satellite.' In this context, memory of war, colonialism, and imperial past becomes a contested space for debates over Japan's role in the contemporary regional order.

The foreign policy dimension of Japanese memory politics is particularly visible in relations with China, South Korea, and the United States. Yasukuni Shrine functions not only as a domestic political symbol

but also as a source of diplomatic tensions, as visits by Japanese leaders often provoke criticism from neighboring states (Kingston, 2025). Research also indicates that memory and historical narratives are leveraged as part of Japan's soft power and strategic positioning in the Asia-Pacific region (Selden, 2013). Postwar Japanese memory politics increasingly incorporates pan-Asian ideas, seeking to present Japan not merely as a Western nation but as part of Asia with its own high culture and civilization.

In conclusion, memory politics in Japan is a multifaceted phenomenon. It encompasses the formation of the state narrative since the Meiji era, transformations through wars and defeat, domestic policies of remembrance and forgetting, foreign policy strategies of reconciliation and competitive memory, legislative and institutional practices of memorialization, and controversies surrounding symbolic sites such as Yasukuni. Memory serves both as a resource – for national identity and international positioning – and as a political arena for contestation.

Conclusions

Memory politics in East Asian countries demonstrates a multi-layered interaction between historical traumas, nation-building processes, ideological mobilization, and regional competition. A comparative analysis of China, India, and Japan shows that memory functions not only as a cultural phenomenon but also as a political resource, actively employed by states to strengthen internal legitimacy and shape their international status.

A common feature across the three countries is that memory is institutionalized and regulated through official channels – museums, memorials, educational programs, legal mechanisms, and state rituals. At the same time, the objectives and content of these policies differ significantly depending on historical experience and the current political system.

China frames its memory politics around the narrative of the 'Century of National Humiliation,' emphasizing the trauma of colonial oppression and the heroization of resistance. This model contributes to social consolidation while reinforcing ideological and geopolitical claims. Internal tragedies and mistakes of the regime are largely excluded from the official historical memory, as they do not align with the logic of state legitimation.

India, drawing on its experience of British colonialism, constructs memory as a tool for decolonization and the restoration of cultural agency. However, this process is accompanied by the growing influence of Hindutva, which directs memory toward religious nationalism. Consequently, memory simultaneously strengthens the identity of the majority while provoking internal socio-cultural conflicts, limiting space for plural historical voices.

Japan, in contrast, navigates between the need to acknowledge historical responsibility for its imperial past and the desire to reframe national pride. The ambivalence of memory manifests in prolonged domestic debates over the interpretation of war crimes, the politico-legal status of military symbols, and Japan's role in World War II. These unresolved historical issues often exacerbate tensions with China and the Republic of Korea.

It is important to note that each country develops its own balance between remembering and forgetting. In China and Japan, certain historical episodes that could undermine the state's image are concealed, whereas in India, historical memory sometimes becomes a tool for exclusion and marginalization. In all cases, the past is "filtered" through the political interests of the present.

The foreign policy dimension of memory is also decisive. China actively exports its historical narratives within global infrastructure projects and seeks to assert moral authority; India positions itself as a civilizational power reclaiming recognition for its ancient traditions; and Japan uses memory to maintain a pacifist image while gradually integrating this with the restoration of regional authority. History thus becomes one of the main resources in geopolitical competition, with memory serving as an argument, a symbol, and a tool of influence.

The digital era significantly complicates the state's ability to monopolize interpretations of the past: alternative narratives and transnational discussions can challenge official policies even in highly controlled information environments. Today, memory in East Asia unfolds not only in national but also in global spaces of interaction.

Therefore, memory politics in East Asia is not merely about preserving historical facts but represents a struggle for control over the interpretation of the past, shaping both state behavior and the structure of regional relations. China, India, and Japan demonstrate different trajectories in linking memory with political expediency, yet all use the past as a resource for shaping the future. The effectiveness of regional

interaction will largely depend on whether East Asia can move from conflictual memory politics toward practices of dialogue, mutual recognition, and the pluralization of historical narratives – a key condition for stability, cooperation, and peaceful development in the twenty-first century.

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