

Transcript

Title: Unforgiven: Japan through the eyes of Korea and China

Summary: Asia researchers Dr Jun Ohashi and Dr Jay Song consider the optics of Japan's relations with its neighbours, the Koreans and China, where decades-old memories of Japanese invasion and subjugation remain front and centre. What will it take for Japan to overcome its wartime history and regain the trust of these nations? Presented by Ali Moore.

Ali Moore: Hello. I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

Edwin Maher: Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzō Abe, has vowed to improve ties with Japan's neighbors and further promote a mutually beneficial relationship to build a stable friendship with China and South Korea.

Karen Sloane: Demonstrators were protesting outside the Japanese Embassy in Beijing. In Hong Kong, they were burning an old Japanese flag outside the consulate.

Amy Goodman: Japan and South Korea reaching a deal aimed at addressing the demands of so-called "Comfort Women" forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese Military during World War II. Many survivors say the deal falls far short.

Chris Chappell: Could Japan's new military aggression be the biggest threat to China and to the feelings of the Chinese people?

Ali Moore: Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne. On Ear to Asia, we talk with Asia experts to unravel the issues behind the news headlines in a region that is rapidly changing the world. In this episode, we look at the optics of Japan's relations with its neighbors. How do Korea and China see Japan right now? Is Japan succeeding in moving beyond its war time history in the region? China, Japan, and Korea have been linked by trade and culture for centuries, but relations have not always been harmonious between the neighbors.

Moments of hostility between Japan and China date back to the 13th Century, and Korea has felt the brunt of Japan's military might as far back as the late 1500s, but of course it was Japan's military aggressions in the 20th Century which included the invasion and subjugation of Korea and vast areas of China that continue to define relationships between Japan and its closest neighbors. The documented atrocities of Japanese Imperial Forces and the Chinese City of Nanking, for example, remain etched onto China's national consciousness. Japan's post-war constitution explicitly renounced

war as a sovereign right and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes. Since its surrender in 1945, Japan has been a responsible pacifist nation channeling its resources into economic development both at home and in the region.

But fast forward to 2018, and a lot has changed in the neighborhood. An increasingly wealthy China is hungry to regain its former glory. South Korea is rich and highly industrialized. And North Korea, under Kim Jong Un, remains belligerent but with a growing nuclear arsenal. So, is the changing region still holding a grudge against Japan, and does Japan deserve to be seen that way? Also, how do countries seek to uphold their reputations or manipulate those of others for their own ends?

To discuss the importance of perception in the politics of Northeast Asia, I'm joined by Human Migration Expert and watcher of both Koreas, Doctor Jay Song and by Japanese Language Scholar and Japan watcher, Doctor Jun Ohashi. Both Jay and Jun are based at Asia Institute. Welcome to both of you.

Jay Song: Thanks for having me.

Jun Ohashi: Thank you.

Ali Moore: Let's start with a brief stock take, if you like, the sort of state of play in these key relationships. Jay Song, how healthy is the Japan-Korea relationship in 2018?

Jay Song: I think we had some bumps in the past, especially the last 2015 Agreement between South Korean President, Park Geun-Hye, and Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzō Abe, about the Comfort Women issues. Since then, there has been some issues whether the agreement was fair for the victims of human trafficking and sexual slavery during the war time. In South Korea, there's a new president now. There's been discussions about whether that agreement was fair, it was justified, but then they have to also tackle the diplomatic relation with South Korea's immediate neighbor, Japan. So, that has been something between the two country's relations.

Ali Moore: Would you characterize the relationship as healthy?

Jay Song: I think Korean diplomacy, especially with this new first female Foreign [Affairs] Minister, Kang Kyung-wha, has been mature. The diplomacy, especially the relation with Japan, has been very sort of contentious at some points. Both countries have right-wing nationalists who are only considering their own national interest, representing their own views, and not really listening to the other side of the story.

Since the start of this new female Foreign Minister, Kang Kyung-wha, who is to be number two of the UN's Human Rights Office and also number one of the Humanitarian Program, I think she personally probably felt she needed to do something about this past history issue with Japan. She had to talk and promote women's rights issues and representing this Comfort Women. The average age among the Comfort Women is 90 years old, and the youngest one is 85. There are only 37 survivors at the moment. Every year we are losing seven to ten Comfort Women, so time is really pressing. South Korean Government had to do something about this issue.

Ali Moore: Clearly, it's still a really core issue in that relationship. Doctor Jun Ohashi.

Jun Ohashi: Yeah. Well, first of all, I would like to reciprocate to Jay about the comments about the political consensus have been reached between Japan and Korea. I think the two countries have made a lot of effort in a way. According to the opinion poll, which is conducted by Genron involving Japanese and also the Korean Research Institutions, the Opinion Poll shows that both Japanese and Koreans see this bilateral relation as very, very important. More than probably 90% of Koreans think that way, and about 70% of Japanese people believe that these two relations are very, very important.

I think we are in a very healthy situation, but following up your Comfort Women issue, I think this needs to be probably revisited from the point-of-view of gender equality not only in the context of colonizer-colonized. So, I think the world is ready to look at it from a totally different point-of-view.

Ali Moore: It's a completely different paradigm-

Jun Ohashi: Exactly.

Ali Moore: ... if you paint it in that context.

Jun Ohashi: Yes.

Ali Moore: Let's just turn to China for a minute.

Jun Ohashi: Yes.

Ali Moore: That relationship, is it as healthy?

Jun Ohashi: I think it's better. I think probably the lowest point of China-Japan relation is probably 2012 regarding the Senkaku Island, also known as the Diaoyu Island, territorial issue. Again, the 2013 Genron, the opinion poll, 90% of both Chinese and Japanese see the opposite very, very negatively. Interestingly, between 2013 to 2016, we saw a huge

jump of the Chinese tourists in Japan, probably five times within three year window. So, after the period, we saw very positive Japanese, sort of, image felt amongst the Chinese people. There is actually a generational difference. Under 20s, probably 65% see Japanese culture, Japan, positively, but 20s, probably about 40. 60s and above, 16%. So, there is still the historical contentious issues.

Ali Moore: If we look at Korea, is there a disconnect at all between the personal, the people to people, and the political, the political imperatives if I returned to that 2015 Comfort Women Agreement? The question of whether that is to be revisited and why, to what extent is that caught up in the political imperative of having a closer relationship with Japan at a time of an increasingly strong China and an increasingly belligerent North Korea?

Jay Song: I agree with Jun's point about the generational differences when it came to the Chinese view of Japan, and it's same in Korea. There are generational differences, but also there are gender differences. I think the younger people have a more close proximity to Japan. I mean, we are culturally similar, and also we are, politically speaking, we are both democracies. I'm talking about the South, not the North. South Korea, Japan have shared political views, and ideas, and interests and culturally similar, but there's also gender linkage between the two countries.

You talked about the sexual harassment, the MeToo Movement is also going on in South Korea. There's a linkage between the Progressives in South Korea and Japan. They both are aware of issues in the past. They see it more from the violence against women issue, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and also the violence during the war time and the violent masculinity during the World War II period. So there is some alliance among the Women's Rights Movement. But what's worrisome from my perspective is, among the younger generation, there's also growing Nationalism. Young men, college students, they also feed into this sort of very nationalistic idea about the victimhood and the territorial disputes, for example. It's sort of surrounding violent responses to the neighboring countries in more of a territorial sense.

Ali Moore: Is that being, I suppose, identified, even potentially used, for want of a better word, by the government?

Jay Song: Yeah. You made a point about the government-government's relation and the people-to-people relation. I think that definitely there is diplomatic contentions among the three Northeast Asian states, China, both Koreas, and Japan, but people-to-people relation, we see the variety, the more sort of complex relation when it comes to economic trade, culture exchanges, and having international students from Japan in Korea and also Korean students in Japanese prestigious universities. This people-to-people conversation is overcoming the difficulties that we had in the past, and I think it's

moving toward more the positive side to improve sort of bottom of approach people-to-people relation having an effect on the bilateral diplomatic relations.

Jun Ohashi: I think a good sign is the younger generation. The K-Pop is very popular in Japan-

Ali Moore: Oh, that's good.

Jun Ohashi: ... and J-Pop. We were talking about military power and so on, but the soft power is probably, in the next generation, an important factor. I think as early as 2005, they were starting to talk about soft power, how can Japan capitalize on this Japanese popular culture manga, anime and so on.

Ali Moore: This is the cool Japan.

Jun Ohashi: Cool Japan, yes. Yeah. So, I think that it's been successful. I think Japan and now seen as the third most popular country in the world from the BBC Opinion Poll, and Japanese cute culture is actually prevailing in Asian countries. Also, there are many students from China or Korea learning the language. I think this is a fantastic thing. The many Japanese people start learning Chinese and the Korean. So, I really do trust that the younger generation can be taking a major role and also bring a lot of positivity in this discussion.

Ali Moore: Jun, the people-to-people is one aspect of this, but from a government perspective for both Japan and I guess for Korea, is that political imperative there to ensure that this relationship transcends historical issues given the current dynamics of the region?

Jun Ohashi: It is very, very important because there is a big game going on China, United States, and North Korea. We are the middle power, have lots of responsibility, including Australia.

Jay Song: Japan is not a middle power. It's bigger than middle.

Jun Ohashi: Well,-

Jay Song: Maybe South Korea is a middle power.

Jun Ohashi: Well, I don't know. Well, just in comparison to the other two.

Jay Song: Yeah.

Jun Ohashi: I think we need to be united to contribute to the balancing ... I mean, when it comes to the extremist sort of ideology, we should do something about it.

Jay Song: Yeah, I agree with you, Jun. I think in terms of that security strategic relation, South Korea and Japan should be the closest allies.

Jun Ohashi: Exactly, yes.

Jay Song: We're also allies of the United States, and there is concerns about rising China, whether it's a peaceful rise or more scary, more threatening rise in the region. From Korean, both South and North Korean's perspective, Japan's territorial disputes with all the neighborhood is not just with Dokdo/Takeshima, also Senkaku/diaoyu, and also Japan has a territorial dispute with Russia as well. So, Japan is seen as whether it's going to be a trusted neighbor in the region so that we can rely on Japan when we are facing the threats from North Korea's nuclear test, and the rising China, and Russia's sort of ambivalent position in this power balance in the region. I think there's a big question about whether South Korea and Japan can really trust each other.

Jun Ohashi: Exactly. Yes.

Ali Moore: And those territorial disputes, are they more of an issue, and in fact a key issue, in the Japan-China relationship with the Diaoyu or Senkaku Islands and less of an irritant in the Korean relationship? I mean, if you look at what's happening in the East China Sea, there are regular skirmishes with the Chinese.

Jun Ohashi: Well, whenever something happens or this territorial issues' memory tend to be evoked, so may be because of the media, I don't know, it may be strategic, but a territorial issue is very, very dangerous because it's explicit, "This is mine. This is yours." Then the kind of group identity can be easily evoked meaning that the group identity is that the in-group member tried to amplify the positive attributes of in-group member, and tried to minimize the positive attribute of the outsider, and minimize the negative attributes of insider, amplify the negative attributes of outsider.

So, all these insider-outsider dynamics can occur so that it ignites very, very nationalistic discourse on both sides. Maybe those issues can be strategically used by the media. This is something we need to probably look at from the media literacy point-of-view.

Ali Moore: You're listening to Ear to Asia, a podcast from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. I'm your host, Ali Moore. I'm joined by Asia Institute Human Migration Specialist, Doctor Jay Song, and by Japanese Language Specialist, Doctor Jun Ohashi. We're talking about how Japan is perceived by its immediate neighbors, China, South Korea and North Korea. We've been talking about the importance of the US to the region. Jay Song, for Korea, the US has in some ways proven fraught, hasn't it, if you look at the issues constantly surrounding the THAAD Missile Defense Program, for example.

Jay Song: That's correct. US has a big play in the current nuclear ambition by the North, and I think the renewed relation between South Korea and the United States, whether to deploy the THAADs, and that really sparked anger by the Chinese Nationalists as well. The Chinese Government, the authorities, banned Chinese tourists going to South Korea sort of punishing not with the military tools but with the economy power. South Korean businesses, small businesses, especially the tourism industry has huge impact because of the Chinese punishment for South Korea's decision to deploy the THAAD Missile Defense System.

We haven't really talked about the North Korean view about Japan. South Korea and Japan established diplomatic relation in 1965, but North Korea doesn't have a diplomatic relation with Japan yet. They're using this sort of nationalist sentiment and rhetoric about Comfort Women issues, and Japan vice-versa, using the Japanese citizens kidnapped by the North Korean spies. This would be a very contentious issue if there is going to be any diplomatic relation established between those two countries. North Korea is jumping on these Korean nationalistic ideas about Japan's past war crime, and there has no equivalent in Nuremberg Trials, for example, after the Second World War in Northeast Asia.

They're using that as a sort of recovering the justice reparation for the past victims of the crimes against humanity and war crimes. They're probably looking for a bigger sum of money that would be the outcomes of these diplomatic relations between North Korea and Japan.

Ali Moore: What role does North Korea in the South Korean-Japanese relationship?

Jay Song: That's a very good question. I think that's the only time when North Korea and South Korea have something very much in common when it comes to Korea's relation with Japan. They both share the Japanese Colonial Period from 1910 to 1945. The 36 years of Japanese Colonial Period was remembered by most Koreans both in the North and the South. It was very cruel. It was very inhumane. The narrative - the personal narrative was very powerful among Korean people's memory of the past. Both North and South Korean Government is using that as a way to educate the past history on the Colonial Period.

It's in the history book. It's also repeated in the national museums both in South and North Korea about the atrocities committed by the Japanese soldiers and the Imperial Army. And it's been repeated and repeated, and that's been the blocking factor for Koreans, North and South, to overcome the difficulties emotionally. I mean, even me talking to a podcast, just remembering those images and just reminding of those personal narratives, it's just very emotionally overwhelming and traumatic.

Ali Moore: Japan,-

Jun Ohashi: Yes.

Ali Moore: ... can they overcome this. I know we talked about generational differences, but even will those generational differences be enough-

Jun Ohashi: Yeah. I'd like to share one of my anecdotes. When I moved to Scotland to do my second degree, I met a Korean scholar doing PhD. We met at the preparatory English language school together. His name is Mister Lee. We became very, very close and best friends, and we still communicate. What happened at the very beginning was that he showed very a antagonist attitude behavior to me once he recognized that I was Japanese, and I couldn't understand. It kept going that way about two weeks or so. By chance, we happened in a university canteen, and then we had a chat.

Then we sort of came to know that he was angry because of my background, just I'm being Japanese, because of the education he received and also what Imperial Japanese Forces did to Korea. I didn't understand because I was not taught clearly in history class. So, I think reacting to you, what we need to do I think in Japanese education system, in history class we tend to cover probably 3,000 years of timeline in a very short period of time. Probably World War II and the contentious historical issues, probably be touched lightly. Lots of indirect expressions. Comfort Women is one of them. I've been thinking, "What would be the best way to teach that?" I think we need to confront students with text from textbooks used in China or textbooks used in Korea, and then text used in Japan.

Ali Moore: This is such an ongoing debate about the education systems.

Jun Ohashi: Yes, exactly.

Ali Moore: It raises very interesting questions, because we were talking earlier, Jay Song, you were talking about the generational differences but also the enormous cultural, tourist, business, trade links. Yet on the other hand, when you have a certain version of history being taught, that must hold back future closer relations. Is that a fair point?

Jun Ohashi: Yeah. I think we need to educate students in Japan, and Korea, and China that there is different discourses, and what you see is a very, very nationalistic idea. I'm talking about media literacy. We have to be critical about it. You are the person that goes out there and collect the more information rather than sort of believing in one aspect. Another danger is that because of the computer algorithm, if you search something, "Japanese military atrocity," and so on, there are lots of nationalistic discourse, one after another. It's what you call a filter bubble.

Ali Moore: Everyone's reading inside the same bubble and never actually gets a different perspective.

Jun Ohashi: Exactly. Exactly. So, that's probably another danger. But I think from the educator's point-of-view, this is a totally different discourse from different perspectives. The fact isn't only one, always been interpreted, reevaluated from different perspectives, an evaluative moment.

Jay Song: That's a very good point. I mean, there can't be just only one version of history. I mean, it's obvious that there are many version of history, and people see from their own perspectives. Having access to those different versions of history in all these three countries, China, Japan, and Korea, is important to understand what others will see about us. But I want to just point about Shinzō Abe's popularity in Japan. I think his party and his support rate is very high at the moment, but what's worrying for Korea especially is that his denial of the Comfort Women System as an official Japan policy.

He came to the recent Winter Olympics, Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, saying that, "We can't nullify," or, "We can't reverse the agreement in 2015." Also, the denial of the past war crimes is still just a very big blocking factor in bilateral relation. There is still some limits in the upper level in government that they should recognize the past crimes. Without that, I don't think there would be any positive bilateral relation between Korea and Japan.

Jun Ohashi: Yeah, I understand. The former prime ministers made a lot of apology speeches. Also, Shinzō Abe was probably the longest apology in comparison to Murayama and also Koizumi. Shinzō Abe, in his speech, clearly apologize for the Japanese aggression in war time. However, the meaning emerges from constant negotiation. The meaning is always subject to constant struggle. So, always reinterpreted, revisited and negotiated. This is exactly what's been happening. All the inconsistent comments that Shinzō Abe made in the different sort of occasions can cause probably Korean people going back to the Shinzō Abe speech that was actually clear apology and question it. It is inevitable that we constantly revisit the meaning of the leader's comment and reevaluate it. So, that's what's happening now.

Ali Moore: Against the backdrop of the challenges, it would be good if we could finish on a positive note. And indeed, we started our conversation with a positive look at the changing landscape, if you like. Despite these challenges, which will sit within the mindsets of people in China, in Japan, and in Korea, forever to come, really, are you both optimistic that there is a trajectory here for a closer and better relationship particularly when you look at a younger generation?

Jay Song: I want to stay positive, but we talked about apologies, but it has to be understood and accepted by the victims of the past crimes, only 37 surviving Comfort Women in Korea. These apologies were not felt sincere to them and there was reparation, there was no justice done, there was no Japanese soldier, or authority, or the one who's responsible prosecuted in the court. Unless that's done, the positive side has certain limits, which is quite substantial. Rationally, we need to work with Japan to deal with other contenders in the region like North Korea, China. So, yeah, I think it's a glass half-full and glass half-empty, but I want to see the glass half-full side.

Jun Ohashi: I think our enemy is extreme Nationalist's idea. I think probably the education would be the key factor, especially in Japanese education systems. As I said, probably media literacy needs to be introduced in Japanese history classrooms. It's a very difficult thing to do. Perhaps there is a textbook screening panel, and so on and so forth, and then there is now very nationalist system tend to be sort of happening in Japan at the same time. But I think the younger generation will take a very important role from now on. So, this is exactly the point that the education need to face. Then we have to educate our young people.

Ali Moore: Are you optimistic it can be done?

Jun Ohashi: I think so.

Ali Moore: We'll finish it there. This is such a long conversation and one that goes on, because I guess there is no clear answer from any of the countries. Doctor Jun Ohashi and Doctor Jay Song, thank you very much for being with us.

Jay Song: Thank you.

Jun Ohashi: Thank you very much.

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