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Remembering and forgetting in East Asia: Strategic dimensions in history

GERRIT GONG*

In the following article, Professor Gerrit W. Gong, Freeman Chair and Director of the Asian Studies Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington DC, explores how four themes of “remembering and forgetting” may shape East Asia’s future and its influence on the alignment of the global system in the twenty-first century. Because the future remains to be determined, Gong argues, the past should be respected without holding the future hostage to perceptions or demands that may cause misalignment in East Asia or elsewhere in the global system.

The June 2000 summit between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK) and diplomacy across the Taiwan Strait from Taipei’s 18 March 2000 elections to President Chen Shui-bian’s 20 May 2000 inauguration reflected that the most surprising and dramatic changes in Asia—those potential strategic realignments—will arise from, or reflect, the interplay of “remembering and forgetting issues and structures.” This article explores how issues of remembering and forgetting may shape the futures of individuals and nations in East Asia, including their relations within the global system.¹

Four themes

First, “remembering and forgetting issues and structures” are likely to play increasingly salient roles in reflecting and determining East Asian international relations, particularly as peoples and countries orient their futures and pasts within twenty-first century frameworks. Second, driven by faster, cheaper and more capable technologies, globalization can increase misunderstanding and misperception among peoples and countries, particularly when they use divergent pasts to interpret diverse futures. Third, “remembering and forgetting issues” have strategic implications; hence, what is good for individuals and what may be good for states can come into conflict. How do individuals make peace with each other if their countries want to continue conflict? Fourth, only by combining disciplines such as physiology, psychology, philosophy, politics, and policy—what I call the 5P’s—can we unravel the core concerns of remembering and forgetting, in East Asia or elsewhere. This article briefly explores these four themes in turn, beginning with the assumption

that remembering and forgetting issues and structures are likely to be prominent in the twenty-first century.

Importance of “remembering and forgetting issues and structures”

“Remembering and forgetting issues” are those which revolve around what individuals and countries remember and when, and around what individuals and countries forget and why. These span a range of issues in East Asia including, among others, unresolved China-Taiwan concerns; a summit but not yet a North-South Korean peace agreement; Sino-Japanese historical and other concerns; competing territorial claims including in the South China Sea and in the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands.

“Remembering and forgetting structures” encompass interrelated political, economic, social, cultural, and perceptual factors which determine a country’s domestic and international orientation to remembering and forgetting issues. These remembering and forgetting structures operate at both individual and collective (sub-group and national) levels. Each East Asian country has its own domestic and international structures and approaches to remembering and forgetting issues. These structures recognize the inseparable interplay between domestic identity and approach and international historical and future-oriented relations with regional neighbors and the global system.

Indeed, remembering and forgetting issues and structures lie at the heart of national identity and national objectives. They do so in part because, in defining national identity, these national “mystic cords of memory” form a creative nexus of past and future. These points—past and future—do not define a line; together with time, they suggest a multi-dimensional space that shapes national strategic alignments. To put it another way, remembering and forgetting issues and structures help define the perception of national identity, the mobilization of national will and resources, and the implementation of national strategic orientation.

In the nineteenth century, Europe was the primary center of international power. It was European power and the European system that expanded over the course of that century to create a global system for the first time. Prior to the nineteenth century, publicists such as Victoria, Grotius, and others had written about common international norms and values. In practical terms, however, it was not until the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing with China, the 1854 Treaty of Kanagawa with Japan, and the 1855 Bowring Treaty with Siam that countries in East Asia from divergent civilizations first began to operate within a universally recognized international legal standard of “civilization.”

In the twentieth century, and particularly in its first half, there were two centers of power, Europe and North America, especially following the rise of the United States as a great power. The latter part of this period was marked by large structural changes such as de-colonization and the rise of the Third World, the Cold War, and

after 1989, a post-Cold War period characterized by the globalization of information, communications and capital markets.

Now in the first year of the twenty-first century, a third center of power is emerging to join Europe and North America—Asia. The Asian financial crisis has provided a sobering interlude to Asia's rise. The extent to which Asia's recovery is building on, or holding back, more fundamental economic, financial, and perhaps political reforms remains uncertain. Yet, it is already clear that strategic alignments among the countries of Europe, North America, and Asia will shape the central global structures in the twenty-first century.

These strategic alignments will of course also be shaped by alignments within Asia, particularly those between China and Japan; between China, Japan, and the Koreans; among "Greater China" elements, including China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas Chinese communities; and between Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, including between China, Japan, and the states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). At this early point in the century, some of the major factors influencing Asia's future come from outside the region. Yet, as the century progresses, one can expect that alignments within Asia will also shape the global structure. For example, competing Chinese and Japanese nationalisms may lead to regional tension.²

The historical Chinese strategy seems to have run its course with some people in Japan. Many young Japanese approach Chinese demands for recognition of history with increasing cynicism as efforts to fuel Chinese nationalism. For those in China who bear the physical or emotional scars of the Pacific War, perceptions of Japanese indifference to (or, worse, rejection of) war guilt only reinforces Chinese perceptions of bad Japanese faith. These divergences of history could underscore potentially divergent Chinese and Japanese nationalisms. Time may end up not healing, but possibly increasing the challenges of memory.

This kind of challenge could be widely manifest. It could be manifest in contention over cultural relics and historical pieces of art, already evident in Chinese efforts (on the basis of global conventions) to regain lost items, not only from North America and Europe, but especially from Japan where such pieces have been particularly valued.³ It could be manifest in divergent interpretations of historical intent at public meetings such as the January 2000 conference in Osaka,⁴ which was followed by attacks on Japanese government web-sites by irate Chinese hackers.⁵ Also of cause for concern is the possibility of highly nationalistic individuals in China and Japan polarizing opinions toward each other by stirring up emotions in their respective societies.

It could be manifest in the complex interplay of statements and actions involving Japan's identity, rooted as these often are in Japan's past prides and prejudices. They could involve Japanese national politicians enmeshed in what are essentially local, domestic campaigns, as evidenced by the recent deliberate assertions of Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori that Japan is a divine land centered around the emperor.⁶

Beijing's calculated refusal to rebuke Mori publicly, lest such an expression of Chinese displeasure were to bolster Mori's otherwise flagging political popularity, indicates a welcome increase in Chinese understanding of Japanese domestic politics that will help buffer Sino-Japanese ties.

To take another example, the Koreans may unite. Korean unification, whether triggered by an explosion of the North-South conflict, or alternatively, by a North Korean implosion, may—as in the case of German unification—present itself as a fleeting historical opportunity, to be seized or not in the moment.

Japan, China, Russia, and the US each have their own reasons to be concerned that Korean nationalism may offer a way to bind Koreans into a single unified nation. At its heart, such Korean nationalism could include remembering and forgetting issues, perhaps creating territorial disputes with China or more competitive relations with Japan or the US.

Other challenges could arise. North Korea could still face domestic instability in the form of a *coup d'état*, civil war, or massive starvation and civil unrest, which would present tough dilemmas for South Korea and other regional neighbors. A regional or global economic downturn could complicate what would be a difficult Korean economic transition even in the very best of circumstances. Instability on the Korean Peninsula could create a power vacuum drawing Korea's neighbors into conflict at this intersection of great power strategic interests in Northeast Asia.

Thus, in several dimensions, remembering and forgetting issues will shape popular Korean orientation toward Japan, China, and the US. A united Korea may seek to use history as its trump card, particularly with Tokyo, by seeking to play on Japanese colonial guilt in the search for financial assistance to pay for unification. However, one can only hope that the strong desires currently expressed by many Korean strategists for good relations with neighbors such as Japan will weather the vicissitudes of whatever transpires during the Korean unification process.

Further Asian developments could raise an even wider set of remembering and forgetting issues. Indonesia could decentralize. ASEAN could (or could not) succeed in its recent (June 1997) enlargement to admit Vietnam, Laos and Burma. Each of these issues will include myriad issues of how the past and the future are inter-related.

Globalization increases misunderstanding and misperception when divergent pasts interpret diverse futures

It is paradoxical that “faster, cheaper, better” globalization may actually increase misunderstanding and misperception among peoples and countries. This may be especially true when accelerating technological change focuses divergent historical grievances and past suspicions as a prism for interpreting diverse futures.

Consider, for example, the recent collision of technological change, business models, and perceptions of national identity.

On the Boeing flight line in Seattle recently were two Boeing aircraft built at different times: one was a B-52 bomber, the other a modern Boeing 777 passenger jet. To say that the same company built both aircraft is simply to recognize the historical continuity of the Boeing Company. To recognize that the two aircraft were built at different times, however, is to understand that the manufacturing and other technologies used to design and build modern aircraft have changed so dramatically in recent years to justify saying that, except for the name, the company that built the B-52 is not the same as the company that built the Boeing 777.

The engines on the two aircraft illustrate this point of change in technological capacity well. A B-52 has eight engines of approximately 10,000 lbs. of thrust each, giving a total thrust of approximately 80,000 lbs.

A Boeing 777, however, the world's first completely CAD-CAM (computer assisted design-computer assisted manufacturing) aircraft has two engines with 80,000 lbs. of thrust each. This is technological change: the thrust of one engine on a modern Boeing 777 equals all eight engines on a B-52, both aircraft built by an evolving company trying to remain at the forefront of global competition.

Now let us turn to a business model and the question of global perception. (Please note this author in no way endorses or judges the relative business or other merits of any company's business model or approach, in China or anywhere else, and thus that this example is used for illustrative purposes only.)

The best known foreign company in China is Coca Cola, with 82 percent brand identification. The *per capita* number of Coca Cola products consumed in China in 1998 was eight servings. By comparison, the number in 1996 was six (of course, any number divided by 1.2 billion will be small, so the increase from six to eight drinks per person is not insignificant).

In the large cosmopolitan coastal city of Shanghai, the annual *per capita* consumption of soft drinks is 130 servings, more than half of which (70) are Coca Cola products. The annual *per capita* consumption in the neighboring Philippines is 142; in the US it is 395.⁷ This business model has the market potential to demonstrate growth in China from six to eight servings in two years. If Chinese consumers follow the US example, then assuming an upper limit of at least 395 servings, consumption could theoretically increase to half a trillion servings per year.

This is the point where technological change, business models, and perceptions of national identity collide.

Little more than a year ago, in early May 1999, a B-2 bomber lifted off from the 509th Bomb Wing in Whiteman Air Force Base, Missouri. A B-2 bomber can carry up to 16 2000 lb. GPS (global-positioning system) aided munitions, each with a circle error probability of 20 feet even when dropped from 50,000 feet. This particular B-2 carried six weapons, five of which were released against a single target, exploding at 11:50 p.m. on Friday, 7 May 1999. The target turned out to be the embassy of the People's Republic of China in Belgrade.

The news of the bombing broke by Internet, bypassing the Chinese government, and reaching the students first. Angry, students mobilized. The Chinese government was caught behind the curve. President Jiang Zemin and Premier Zhu Rongji and others seeking economic cooperation with the US were undermined politically. Nationalist zealots claimed that the US had deliberately destroyed a sovereign diplomatic structure in a direct affront to China. A boycott of US products began. Graffiti on Coca Cola advertisements said, "Drinking This Is Drinking Chinese Blood."

In the days that followed, US President Bill Clinton apologized for the tragic accident and sought to move forward. Jiang, however, refused to answer Clinton's conciliatory phone call for several days.

China searched in its past for the intent and significance of the bombing. In that past, some in China saw a history of gunboat diplomacy working hand in glove with Western commercial penetration and exploitation. Those wanting to insulate China labeled Zhu's efforts to bring China into the World Trade Organization (WTO) as treasonous. Chinese defense planners were worried that younger Western leaders like Clinton or Tony Blair might use humanitarian concerns in Xinjiang, Tibet, or Taiwan to threaten China's Three Gorges Dam, which if burst would unleash a tidal torrent inundating hundreds of thousands downstream.

This disturbing divergence of US and Chinese perceptions of national identity, particularly at the popular level, is a strong reminder that global competitive movements of information, capital, and technology may knit us into one world which still has fundamental misunderstandings and misperceptions at its core. Indeed, the speed of global change combined with divergent historical prisms may in some cases accelerate international crises.

Another example is found in the recent FIFA Women's World Cup soccer final between the US and China played before a capacity Rose Bowl, a national US audience, and an estimated 100 million viewers in China. Just prior to kick-off, instead of a traditional gesture of international sporting good-will, the audience in the US saw a televised formation of US F-18 fighter aircraft over-fly the stadium. What Americans took for granted as an exuberant symbol of national pride could have been interpreted by Beijing viewers as a threat, particularly after the Belgrade embassy bombing.

In matters such as these, Chinese memory may be too long; US memory, on the other hand is certainly too short. Clearer understanding of how different peoples and countries remember and forget is urgently required to keep even innocent pre-game ceremonies, let alone tragic mistakes such as embassy bombings, from fueling confrontation.

There are many other examples of technology accelerating global economic interaction but fueling misunderstanding in the relations of countries in Europe, North America, and East and Southeast Asia including China, Japan, the two Koreas, Vietnam, and as we have seen recently in Indonesia.

Individuals and states may differ in their approaches to reconciling remembering and forgetting issues

This article's third theme is that remembering and forgetting issues have a strategic dimension that may sometimes draw individuals and states into conflict. How do individuals balance remembering and forgetting—forgiving—if their states are unwilling to do so?

*Some personal examples*⁸

This author was once present when a senior South Korean diplomat was asked, “Do you remember where you were when the Korean War began?” A highly sophisticated and cosmopolitan man, he stopped to see whether the question was simply polite conversation or more. He decided it was more and gave the following account.

“I was in fifth grade,” he began, “and we were excited. War had begun and our teachers said our victorious armies would eat lunch in Pyongyang and dinner in Hsinyiju. The next morning there was a knock on the door. It was not our victorious armies, but the North Korean secret police. They took my father, my uncles, all the men.”

Sometime at this point there was a gunshot, followed by another knock at the door. A soldier put his hand out demanding payment for the bullet which had just killed a member of the man's family. But there is something worse—when there is no gunshot, when there is no closure, when there is only anger and pain.

So, all these years later, this urbane, well-informed South Korean policymaker must make judgments regarding North Korea. He knows his government's policy is to move forward, healing some of the wounds of history, but it is hard to stop reaching out for the hand of a father torn so savagely away in what, in the private, quiet moments, does not seem that long ago.

Or consider this representative case of a woman from Taiwan.

She was born in Beijing to an established family; her grandfather was a senior Chinese official who had his own *siheyuan* (classic four-sided courtyard house). In 1949, she went from Beijing to Taiwan to visit her then-boyfriend. She carried only a small satchel for her clothes because it was to be a short summer visit. But the Chinese Civil War intervened, and she was never able to return. She never had the opportunity to say a proper goodbye to her father, mother and two brothers. She was *guiguiyuyude*, “by the book:” when the Taiwanese government said not to write or call relatives on the Chinese mainland she did not attempt to contact them.

Now it is a new era. Direct contact between the people on the two sides of the Taiwan Straits is becoming possible, and for the first time in 45 years she has visited her home in Beijing.

Yet she was afraid. She asked her friend to pick her up at the airport in Beijing and go with her to what she hoped would still be her old family home. Though recognizable, her neighborhood had of course changed. They went to the local

cathedral. Inside, pointing to the choir loft, she said, “that is where I stood when I was a young girl singing in the choir.” She added softly, “I know they used our church as a storage shed and animal grazing area during the Cultural Revolution.”

Her family’s stately courtyard house had been sub-divided into individual residences, as many in Beijing now are. Yet there was an anticipation of possibility, daring against the logic of reason, that welled up from 45 years of forced separation as she knocked on the door. *You ren zai ma?* (“Is anyone home?”) *You.* (“Yes.”) Then the door opened and a man appeared. He listened, then invited them in. Then, quite strangely, she began talking about her childhood dog and pen-name.

Later she explained why. “I am afraid of being cheated,” she said, “of having that which is most precious held hostage for money if that man is not really who he says he is. I have to test him with things only someone from my childhood would know.” It turned out her mother and father had died many years ago. Two of her brothers, however, were still alive, not in Beijing, but living in Shanghai, and yes, he had their addresses.

This past March and May as Taiwan held its presidential elections, then waited for Beijing’s response to President Chen Shui-bian’s seemingly conciliatory inaugural address, the world watched individuals in both China and Taiwan who may be ready to move forward but whose collective pasts, which still include civil war memories, do not yet allow them to do so.

There also remain, of course, many issues regarding remembering and forgetting that pertain to Japan.

Multiple perspectives are required to deal with remembering and forgetting issues

Remembering and forgetting issues, in East Asia and elsewhere, cannot be unlocked in geographic or intellectual isolation. Geographically, it is necessary to involve different experiences and perspectives from Asia, Europe, North America, and elsewhere. Intellectually, it is necessary to range over what might be called the “5 P’s,” which encompass physiology, philosophy, psychology, politics, and policy.

Remembering and forgetting are the great acts of human consciousness, agency, and will. It is in remembering and forgetting (or, often, in reconciling and/or forgiving) that individuals and nations interpret their pasts, set their current priorities, and shape their future courses of action. In remembering and forgetting, individual and group searches for justice and meaning infuse national and international policy.

Changing someone’s memory does not simply entail changing a perception; it is altering a person’s perception about a past event. But based on that past perception, that memory, that fragment of history, a future course may be set. To change a perception of the past is to change the future. This is true of both individuals and nations.

In East Asia, divergent memories contribute to territorial disputes, including contested borders and freedom of navigation on the open seas. Divergent memories

influence shifting configurations of military power and diplomatic perception. Divergent memories suggest possible re-definitions of national objectives among the East Asian countries.

In describing the unforeseen collision of jet engine technology and a *per capita* soft drink consumption business plan at the crux of Chinese national identity, this article seeks to illustrate a deeper conundrum of international policy—that countries which look for their future in their past and countries which look for their past in their future need ways to deal constructively with each other. The broad veneer of cosmopolitan convenience and culture still hides deeper memories and patterns based on different ways of remembering and forgetting.

These different and perhaps divergent patterns of remembering and forgetting may yet reveal new ways of organizing various types of capital in creatively productive configurations, according to differences in local cultural and historical circumstances.

These diverse patterns may, for example, create operational differences among what has been variously described as Asia's "*keiretsu* capitalism," Europe's "compassionate capitalism," and North America's "compulsive capitalism."⁹ These patterns of remembering and forgetting may shift societal balances among individuals and collectives, and among different definitions of law and order, all of which may over time change the global economic, political, and security centers of gravity.

But all this is part of a future yet to be determined. We owe it to our ourselves and our shared future to learn how remembering and forgetting issues and structures will shape our perceptions of past and future; how technology, identity, and international affairs interact; how the strategic implications of remembering and forgetting can be reconciled at the individual and state levels; and how a global and interdisciplinary search for common answers can help individuals and countries remember and forget in appropriate ways. In doing so, we pay respect to the past without holding the future hostage to perceptions or demands that may over time become increasingly burdensome.

How these issues are dealt with will shape emerging alignments within Asia, and among the countries in Asia and the larger global structure, and as such, they deserve the creativity, the wisdom and the determination of all peoples and countries.

Notes

- * It is a special pleasure for someone with a Dutch first name, an American middle name, and a Chinese last name to be part of a distinguished group paying their respects to Professor Seizaburo Sato, an esteemed colleague who contributed much over many years and is sorely missed.
- 1. Part of this article was first presented as a speech to the John Templeton Foundation Dinner: Exploring the Unique Role of Forgiveness, Museum of Science, Boston, Massachusetts, 3 October 1999.

2. A significant body of literature explores these potentially competing East Asian nationalisms. For example, Denny Roy considers Chinese nationalism and the risk of Sino-Japanese conflict in "Hegemon on the Horizon?", *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 149–168. Suisheng Zhao argues that Chinese nationalism is more reactive to international stimuli than is usually thought in his "Chinese Nationalism and Its International Orientations," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 115, No. 1 (Spring 2000), pp. 1–34.
3. Mahlon Meyer and Leslie Pappas, "Relics of Pride," *Newsweek* (International edition), 15 May 2000, pp. 12–17.
4. The Osaka conference was titled "Verification of the Rape of Nanking: The Biggest Lie of the 20th Century," Osaka, 23 January 2000.
5. "Hackers Leave Anti-Japanese Graffiti on Government Internet Site," *Agence France Presse*, 25 January 2000, Lexis-Nexis; Jonathan Watts, "Hackers Shake up Japan," *The Guardian* (London), 29 January 2000, Lexis-Nexis.
6. "Prime Minister: Japan a Divine Nation Revolving Around Emperor," *Associated Press Worldstream*, 15 May 2000, Lexis-Nexis.
7. See, for example, Mr. R. Fenton-May, Director of Operations Development, Coca-Cola Company, at the "U.S.-China Relations on the Eve of the 21st Century" Conference, The Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., 14 September 1999.
8. Author's personal interviews. Interviewee's identities are purposefully kept indistinct for the sake of anonymity.
9. See, for example, Erik R. Peterson, "Looming Collision of Capitalisms?", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Spring 1994), p. 69.

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