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Cool Japan's Glass Ceiling: Collective Memory and the Limits of Cultural Diplomacy in Japan-South Korea Relations

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Introduction

In 2002, American journalist Douglas McGray published the article *"Japan's Gross National Cool"* in the journal Foreign Policy. Addressing the increasing international cultural influence of Japan that crystallized at the dawn of the 21st century, it asserted that such influence had an important export potential for a country which was, at that time, confronted with economic recession and needed an economic renewal (McGray, 2002; Bouvard, 2015; Javet, 2015).

Yet, the article's biggest impact remains that it has largely contributed to the institutionalisation of the *Cool Japan* discourse, a notion depicting the promotion of a renewed Japanese identity, heavily linked with Japan's emerging popular culture. Since then, Cool Japan has become the cornerstone of Japan's cultural diplomacy apparatus, cultural diplomacy being defined as *"the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding"* (Cummings, 2003, p. 1; Iwabuchi, 2015; Javet, 2015; Papaioannou, 2022).

> *The Japanese government asserts that the worldwide promotion of manga and anime through competitions and festivals serves the purpose of furthering "understanding of and trust in" Japan (Kanji, 2016, p. 41).*

Nonetheless, despite the apparent success of Cool Japan, Japan still faces important criticism, especially among its closest neighbours, among which can be found the Republic of Korea (ROK). Indeed, the legacy of Japanese colonialism and imperial history persists, deeply embedded in bordering countries, feeding regional as well as bilateral tension and constituting a major obstacle to Japan's cultural diplomacy endeavors. As noted by Ogura Kazuo, former director of the Japan Foundation, the institution responsible for *"cultivating friendship and ties between Japan and the world"*, the political tensions characterizing Japan's relations with its direct neighbours tarnish the country's newly constructed image (Javet, 2015; The Japan Foundation, 2022).

This tension raises an important point: that of the place and relevance of the notion of collective memory, considered as the shared pool of memories, knowledge, and stories held by a social group, amidst the discipline of international relations. Since the late

20th century, the notion of memory, and more specifically that of collective memory, has indeed emerged as an increasingly important component in the study and practice of international relations. The advent of the academic field of *memory studies*[1], the emergence of post-positivism within the everlasting debate of international relations, but also the numerous changes and upheaval brought about by the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, are all elements of context which seems to have favored a turning point reinforcing the nature of collective memory as a genuine power issue and a legitimate subject of inquiry within the analysis and practice of international relations (Rosoux, 2017; Mälksoo, 2023).

> *The post-Cold War world has been characterized by an increasing attention to issues of remembering and forgetting (Rosoux, 2017, p. 1).*
>
> *Long considered a "soft" subject in the study of international relations, memory appears increasingly consequential in contemporary world politics (Mälksoo, 2023, p. 1).*

This thesis therefore intends to explore the way Japan's contemporary cultural diplomacy efforts, driven by the Cool Japan narrative, intersect with the notion of collective memory. It examines how a country's cultural diplomacy initiatives may be influenced by a shared past and elaborates on the role of collective memory as a structural force shaping a country's policies and relationships with others. The central research question guiding this inquiry is as follows: *"In what way does the Cool Japan discourse influence Japan - Korea relations, and to what extent does their mnemonically charged relationship*[2] *affect this cultural diplomacy strategy"*?

Numerous reasons justify the choice of this research topic, both from an academic and empirical perspective. From an academic standpoint, two very rich and interesting academic fields will be drawn upon: the theory of soft power, via the notion of cultural diplomacy, and the discipline of memory studies applied to international relations. I believe studying how both intersect to be compelling, given that both are based on similar foundations: perception and subjectivity. This link will be discussed more in depth in the section dedicated to the formulation of the hypothesis. From an empirical

[1] The academic field that studies how people and groups remember and forget the past.
[2] A relationship that is deeply defined, burdened and mediated by historical memory and unresolved past grievances.

perspective, the case of the lingering historical tensions between Japan and South Korea perfectly brings the different concepts together. Indeed, it is a textbook example of the role of memory in international relations and is one of the clearest illustrations of coexistence between cultural popularity and historical disputes.

Additionally, it is an engaging case study I find fascinating. I have been deeply interested in Japanese culture for over a decade now, an interest which has almost led me to live in Japan for a year thanks to Rotary International. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic cancelled my exchange a few months before my departure. My current objective is therefore to deepen my knowledge of Japanese culture and its role in international relations, something which may involve further academic involvement in the coming years. While it prompted me to choose this subject, I have sought to mitigate my interest by relying on secondary data rather than my own impression of Japanese culture.

This paper draws from two very rich academic fields. Firstly, the theory of *soft power*, developed by Joseph Nye in 1990 and widely discussed by numerous scholars, provides the necessary foundations needed to analyse cultural diplomacy and the construction of a national image. Then, the field of memory studies, through the contributions of Maurice Halbwachs on the social frameworks of memory, Jan Assmann on the distinction between communicative and cultural memory, and Jeffrey K. Olick, through the distinction between collected and collective memory as well as on the "politics of regret", provides the analytical tools needed to understand the way a difficult past can be embedded in a state's institutional structures, commemorative practices, rituals and discourses. Drawing on these rich theoretical foundations, a hypothesis regarding the influence of collective memory on contemporary Japanese cultural diplomacy will be formulated through a deductive design. Then, rather than simply confirming or denying it, the Japan - South Korea case study will be mobilized to examine where the hypothesis holds and where it does not. Ultimately, the findings will nuance the initial hypothesis, drawing from the case study and from the theoretical distinctions explored in greater depth in the discussion section.

Regarding the data corpus, both secondary qualitative and quantitative data will be mobilized. Indeed, I will draw from the official Japanese and South Korean discourse, the existing academic research on Cool Japan and on Japan - South Korea relations

(combining both critical and more optimistic view of the phenomenon), as well as from data produced by think tanks, notably the joint opinions polls conducted yearly by the East Asia Institute (EAI), the Genron NPO and the International House of Japan (IHJ). The reason for doing so is simple: I was unable to collect primary data due to language and logistical issues, and the secondary data proved to be particularly relevant to my analysis, especially the EAI - Genron NPO - IHJ joint surveys, which I use to corroborate my findings.

This thesis is divided into four main sections. Firstly, following this introduction, the first chapter lays out the theoretical framework for the research, introducing the notion of power, more specifically, that of soft power, which provides the theoretical foundations needed to focus on cultural diplomacy. Then, the field of memory studies is explored, focusing on the social and collective conception of memory. The role of collective memory as a structural force in international relations will be explored, focusing on major authors such as Maurice Halbwachs, Jan Assmann, and Jeffrey K. Olick. The second chapter then traces the evolution of Japan's cultural diplomacy, particularly focusing on the emergence of Cool Japan at the beginning of the 21st century, the enthusiasm it has generated across Japan's central ministries, and the primary obstacles it has faced, the most important being the issue of historical memory. Next, the third section explores in detail the shared history of South Korea and Japan[3], underscoring the roots of bilateral tensions, the structured ambiguity of the 1965 Normalization Treaty, the 1990s "apology decade", the role of South Korean civil society as memory activists, and the failure of the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement. Finally, the fourth section will take the form of an analysis aimed at answering the research question. To do so, I will examine the dissemination and reception of Cool Japan in South Korea, the critical and optimistic interpretations of the phenomenon under study, and the relevant quantitative data provided by the joint opinion polls mentioned previously, before discussing these findings through the analytical lens of collective memory. A conclusion will then clearly address the research question, synthesize the main ideas developed through the paper, outline the paper's limitations, and address its implications for future research.

[3] A chronological timeline of key events is provided in Appendix 7.1.

1) Theoretical framework

1.1) The notion of soft power

The concept of power has been described by many scholars as one of the most fundamental in political science; some, such as Jon Elster, even terming it *"the most important single idea in political theory"* (Elster, 1976, as cited in Baldwin, 2016, p. 1). Yet, the widespread agreement on its importance does not imply consensus on the way to define and consider the term; as Kenneth Waltz stated, its definition *"remains a matter of controversy*" (Waltz, 1986, as cited in Lukes, 2007, p. 83; Baldwin, 2016). Additionally, although it has been primarily associated with the theory of realism, numerous other schools of international relations have much to say about its role and nature. It is therefore a complicated notion which may be considered differently, depending on the author or school of thought (Schmidt, 2007).

For instance, David Baldwin, Senior Political Scientist at Princeton University and Wallach Professor of Political Science Emeritus at Columbia University, describes two dominant approaches to power analysis: in terms of national power and in terms of relational power. The national power approach depicts power as resources, including armed forces, GNP, … but also intangible elements such as culture or the quality of political leadership. The relational power approach, on the other hand, focuses on a process of interaction where *"A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do"*, and where material resources are deemed less important than the ability to alter the behavior of others (Dahl, 1957, p. 202-203; Schmidt, 2007; Bially Mattern, 2007).

The notion of soft power, one of the foundational concepts of this paper, is primarily linked to the relational approach, while still drawing from the national power approach, specifically from the idea of intangible resources. It is an important analytic concept which was coined in order to fill a deficiency in the way analysts thought about power, but which remains a single component of power within a vast galaxy of ways to consider the subject; it cannot, therefore, be sufficient by itself for a complete analysis of international politics (Nye, 2017).

Officially coined by Harvard professor Joseph Nye in his 1990 book "Bound to Lead", it nevertheless finds its origin in the works of previous scholars. For instance, in 1967, Hans Morgenthau identified 9 elements of national power, among which figured national character, national morale, the quality of diplomacy, and the quality of government, elements closely tied to the concept developed by Joseph Nye in 1990. Going back even further, several proverbs and philosophers' teachings seem to confirm that the behavior the concept denotes is ancient. Confucius, for instance, advocated for a ruler to win the allegiance of their people with virtue, not by force. Nye himself never declared to have invented soft power, claiming it would be absurd, the power behaviour being as old as human history (Fan, 2008; Nye, 2007; Nye, 2021). Yet, he is the most prolific author on the subject, having written numerous articles discussing the topic and its evolution. Indeed, despite introducing the concept in 1990, he notably conceptualised it best in his books "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics" (2004) and "The Future of Power" (2011) (Bakalov, 2019).

1.1.1. Understanding soft power

Despite being a matter of constant debate, drawing a wide variety of interpretations and definitions over the years, constantly adapting to criticism and acclimatizing to an ever-changing international scene, the core intuition of the notion seems to have remained stable.

Ivan Bakalov, for instance, asserts that three aspects in particular have persisted through this progression. Firstly, soft power function through directly or indirectly transforming the attitudes of target audiences in foreign countries; then, it has a longer operational time horizon than hard power and is more suited to the attainment of general rather than specific goals; lastly, it does not lie exclusively within the control of a country's government, but is shared with civil society (Bakalov, 2019; Nye, 2021). In the same vein, Joseph Nye, despite having given soft power's definition different iterations over time, argues that the central definition of the concept remained constant: *"the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment"* (Nye, 2017; Nye, 2021, p. 205).

Over time, various components have been presented as sources of soft power. In 1990, Nye, taking a stand against the prevalent view of the decline of American power, focused on the ability of the USA to attract others and presented the source of soft

power as American culture, international laws and institutions, and American multinational corporations. Since then, however, the list has evolved, and despite sources of soft power encompassing plenty of components, from high-level political ideologies to mass-market consumer goods, three primary pillars can be pointed out. The attractiveness of a country's culture, the allure of its domestic political and societal values, and the appeal and substance of its foreign policies (Fan, 2008).

1.1.2. Ambiguities of soft power

Despite Nye claiming the central definition of the concept to have remained constant, several aspects of the concept continue to make it a complicated notion, conceptually, analytically, and practically.

The most immediate source of ambiguity remains definitional. Indeed, although Nye asserts that the general idea behind the concept has remained stable, its boundaries remain unclear to many, and numerous scholars and practitioners have consistently misunderstood the concept, reflecting genuine ambiguity. This problem seems inherently linked to the fundamental nature of power, which remains a troublesome concept. Nye himself describes power as a contested notion where no one definition is accepted by all who use the word, and where people's choice of definition reflects their interests and values (Fan, 2008; Nye, 2021).

The second source of concern is related to the instability and breadth of the source list, as well as to the ambiguity of the "soft" and "hard" conception of power. Indeed, while three main pillars can be pointed out, it remains quite hard to identify what exactly produces soft power. Nye initially argued that *"the ability to get others to want what you want tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as culture, ideology and institutions"* (Nye, 2021, p. 200), in contrast with tangible sources, more closely associated with hard power. However, David Baldwin provided a refinement to this idea, pointing out that tangibility could not be a defining criterion, something Nye accepted. Finally, Nye advanced that the distinction rests on behavioral outcomes rather than the physical nature of the resource, which seems to indicate that anything can be a soft power source, depending on situations and perceptions (Baldwin, 2016; Nye, 2021).

In addition to these conceptual limits, some technical and more practical limits can be highlighted. Firstly, as Nye explained, *"Attraction rests in the eye of the beholder"*, outlining the deeply relative and subjective nature of the notion, soft power depending entirely on the way the target audience perceives it. A specific cultural asset, such as a Hollywood movie, may generate appeal in Brazil while simultaneously provoking repulsion in Saudi Arabia. Soft power thus arises in the minds of those who feel it, triggered by a stimulus that the sender may have no power over, and which can produce unforeseen effects, including resentment or backlash, a "paradox of attraction" which can make it hard for governments to wield soft power (Nye, 2004; Fan, 2008). This limit is especially important in the context of this paper, which examines the relationship between Cool Japan, a concept closely linked with soft power and collective memory.

Secondly, another limitation heavily linked to this thesis, the fact that many of soft power's crucial resources are outside of the government's control. The role of actors, universities, foundations, artists, … is key, and soft power cannot be reduced to a government's strategy; it is much more than that. For instance, Cool Japan, discussed in detail later, is characterized both by the role of private actors, as a market-driven phenomenon, and governmental instrumentalisation, as a state-led strategy. This structural tension, between what could be called soft power's "spontaneous attraction" and the state's efforts to wield it, is important to consider in this thesis (Nye, 2004; Fan, 2008).

Soft power is therefore a very interesting but also deeply troublesome concept. While it cannot be sufficient to explain a country's politics, it has the merit of having attracted the attention of students and researchers of international relations away from the traditional ways of thinking about power, something Nye aimed to do in 1990, thinking of a new analytic concept in order to fill a deficiency in the way analysts thought about power (Baldwin, 2016; Nye, 2017).

1.1.3. Cultural diplomacy and Nation branding, handling Soft Power

Soft power, thus considered as *"the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment"*, provides the theoretical foundations needed to understand one of the two core concepts of this thesis, cultural diplomacy. Whereas soft power is an analytical concept, cultural

diplomacy refers to a strategy, an instrument wielded by the state. Strictly defined, it refers to governmental initiatives that leverage culture, one of soft power's three sources, to achieve soft power objectives. However, contemporary trends in public diplomacy have broadened this scope, placing greater emphasis on mutual understanding and cultural exchange (Iwabuchi, 2015).

While contemporary international relations remain anchored in the traditional balancing of economic and military power, recent decades have forced the discipline to recognize the important role of cultural and religious dynamics. Indeed, throughout history, organised societies have always used culture to present themselves, assert power, and understand others. Consequently, cultural initiatives have always been present on the foreign policy agenda of governments (Papaioannou, 2022).

Today more than ever, developed states treat culture as a strategic resource, contributing to the emergence of this new diplomatic discipline, defined by Milton C. Cummings as *"the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding"* (Cummings, 2003, p. 1). Cultural diplomacy, therefore, more than simply being about the transmission and dissemination of national culture and values, is about harnessing cultural elements in order to foster mutual understanding and sway foreign audiences, ultimately enhancing a nation's political influence. Cultural elements include both tangible and intangible values and assets, alongside language, the arts, customs, and traditions. As such, cultural exchanges, the cinema, publishing industries, broadcasting media, as well as national cultural institutes such as the Goethe-Institut, all serve as part of the toolkit of cultural diplomacy (Ogura, 2009; Papaioannou, 2022).

Cultural diplomacy is deeply intertwined with the concept of nation branding. Coined by British political advisor Simon Anholt, nation branding is about managing and communicating a country's image to international audiences and other countries. Researcher Ying Fan presents a nation brand as *"the total sum of all perceptions of a nation in the minds of international stakeholders which may contain some of the following elements: people, place, culture/language, history, food, fashion, famous faces (celebrities), global brands and so on"* (Fan, 2010, p. 99). While a nation's brand exists, with or without any conscious efforts in nation branding, cultural diplomacy, which rests on cultural exchange, arts promotion, language programmes, … is still one

of its most important mechanisms, directly contributing to the nation's international image. The relationship between nation branding and cultural diplomacy is bidirectional and mutually constitutive: effective cultural diplomacy contributes to a nation brand, and a stronger nation brand enhances a country's soft power and credibility, making cultural diplomacy potentially more effective (Fan, 2010). Although the concept of nation branding will not be used directly in the remainder of this thesis, understanding its connection to cultural diplomacy will prove to be useful in understanding what Cool Japan is.

1.2) Collective memory, a structural force in international relations

Collective memory constitutes the second conceptual pillar of this thesis. In this section, I will not simply provide a definition, but rather explore its implications in order to understand how it can influence modern international relations.

The notion of memory has been a central concern for social thinkers since ancient Greece, yet it was not until the late 19th and early 20th century that a distinctively social perspective on memory came to be. The earliest explicit use of the term "collective memory" can be traced back to the Austrian writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal in 1902, who referred to *"the dammed up force of our mysterious ancestor within us"* and *"piled up layers of accumulated collective memory"* (Olick & Robbins, 1998, p. 106). Nonetheless, the contemporary usage of the term seems to be more closely attributed to French sociologist Emile Durkheim and, more specifically, to his student Maurice Halbwachs (Olick, 1999). The latter is widely considered to be the precursor of the concept of collective memory, presenting, in 1925, memory as a social phenomenon rather than a purely individual one in his work *"Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire"*. Ultimately, Maurice Halbwachs paved the way for a social meaning of memory, his research marking a major turning point, laying the foundations for subsequent study into the social dimension of memory (Halbwachs, 1925; Olick & Robbins, 1998).

> *C'est en ce sens qu'il existerait une mémoire collective et des cadres sociaux de la mémoire, et c'est dans la mesure où notre pensée individuelle se replace dans*

> *ces cadres et participe à cette mémoire qu'elle serait capable de se souvenir (Halbwachs, 1925, p. 6)*[4].

1.2.1. Maurice Halbwachs, the social frameworks of memory

In *"Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire"*, Maurice Halbwachs goes against the dominant psychological tradition of his time, which treats memory as a faculty of the isolated individual mind. Indeed, he asserts that memory is not a purely internal faculty, but a social function that depends on external group context. He argues that while individuals can retain a mental image of past events, these events are structured into lasting memories only if they are contextualized by a social group to which the individual belongs; memory is thus shaped by participation in collective life (Olick, 1999; Wertsch, 2008). To illustrate his point, he uses the example of the dreamer. He argues that when an individual is dreaming, he is isolated from social contact, cannot rely on social frameworks, and is incapable of "true memory", thus only perceiving fragmented and incoherent images (Halbwachs, 1925).

Halbwachs's core concept, social frameworks, are collective structure of time, space, and language through which individuals organise and recover their recollections. This therefore implies that memory is a social reconstruction of the past, not a pure retrieval. Indeed, he argues that collective memory is not an exact transcription of the past, but simply a reconstruction operated through these social frameworks (Halbwachs, 1925). This idea echoes the notion of the "present of the past" put forward by Saint Augustine, reflecting the fact that memory is not an exact reflection of the past, but only a representation of it (Rosoux, 2002). While Halbwachs's position evolved through later works, becoming more nuanced about individual agency, his core thesis never really changed: memory is undoubtedly social and a process of reconstruction rather than retrieval.

> *L'individu évoque ses souvenirs en s'aidant des cadres de la mémoire sociale. En d'autres termes les divers groupes en lesquels se décompose la société sont capables à chaque instant de reconstruire leur passé. Mais, nous l'avons vu, le*

[4] Original French quotations are left in their original language throughout this thesis to preserve textual integrity.

> *plus souvent, en même temps qu'ils le reconstruisent, ils le déforment (Halbwachs, 1925, p. 206).*

While Halbwachs's work was initially met with mixed reception, it still became the founding text of the modern sociology of memory, contributing to the emergence of the discipline of "memory studies", the academic field dedicated to studying the use of memory as a tool for remembering the past. Yet, it was not until the 1980s that both the general public and the academic community began to take real interest in the notion of collective and social memory (Olick & Robbins, 1998). Halbwachs's core insights, that memory is a process of reconstruction and socially conditioned, were thus taken up and expanded by later scholars such as Jan and Aleida Assmann, or Jeffrey K. Olick.

1.2.2. Jan Assmann, memory as an identity constituent

Jan Assmann is a major legatee of the Halbwachsian tradition, as well as one of its most potent critical reconstructors. He expanded and refined Halbwachs's ideas, developing with his wife, Aleida Assmann, the theory of communicative and cultural memory.

While Halbwachs focused on living memory maintained through social interaction and reconstruction, he left unanswered the question of the way collective memory persists across generations, precisely what Assmann will work on. His reasoning is inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche, who believed that humans had to find a way to preserve their nature across generations, this way appearing to be cultural memory (Assmann, 1995; Assmann, 2011). The notion of communicative and cultural memory thus presupposes a rediscovery of the idea of collective memory, reaffirming the idea that a person derives their sense of belonging to a society, not from phylogenetic variables, but from socialisation and the practice of customs (Olick et al., 2011).

Communicative memory comprises memories related to the recent past, typically restricted to three or four generations, roughly 80 to 100 years. It refers to the varieties of collective memory based on everyday, often informal communication, shared among contemporaries, constituting the field of oral history. Through this manner of communication, each individual composes a memory which, as Halbwachs has shown, is socially mediated and relates to a group (Olick et al., 2011). Communicative

memory is thus characterized by its proximity to everyday life, its high degree of non-specialization and its instability, as when the last generation that carries it disappears, it fades (Assmann, 1995; Assmann, 2011). However, Assmann argues that when stepping back from everyday discussion and entering the area of objectified, institutionalised culture, everything changes. In Assmann's reading, Halbwachs argued that once living communication crystallized in the form of objectified culture, the group relationship stopped, memory being transformed into history. Assmann's thesis contradicts this assumption, asserting that in the context of objectified culture and organised or ceremonial communication, a close connection to groups and their identity persists, in a way that is similar to everyday memory (Assmann, 1995).

Cultural memory thus refers to the long-term memory of societies, not carried by living individuals through everyday communication, but referring to an institutionalised set of knowledge, rituals and symbols established through which a group represents its past, thereby contributing to the construction of a collective identity. One of the defining characteristics of cultural memory is what Jan Assmann calls the *"concretion of identity",* or the relation to the group. Indeed, he asserts that the objective manifestations of cultural memory are fundamentally anchored in an identificatory factor, operating either in a positive sense (We are this) or in a negative one (That is our opposite) (Assmann, 1995). Cultural memory thus refers to a past which constitutes *"the store of knowledge from which a group derives awareness of its unity and peculiarity*" (Assmann, 1995, P. 130). This identity function of cultural memory carries important implications, as it does not merely account for what happened, but focuses on what matters for a group (Olick et al., 2011).

Assmann's concepts thus provide analytical tools that go largely beyond what Halbwachs proposes. Whereas Halbwachs established that memory is social and reconstructive, Assmann focuses on the way it persists across generations through institutionalisation and its identity-constitutive nature.

1.2.3. Jeffrey K. Olick, the politics of regret

Jeffrey K. Olick is an American sociologist whose contributions sit at the intersection of sociology and political science. As co-president of the Memory Studies Association, he has made significant contributions to the interdisciplinary field of

memory studies. Among his most significant contributions are his analysis of what he calls collective and collected memory, tackling a conceptual ambiguity in Halbwachs's work, as well as his theorisation of what he names the "politics of regret", addressing how states and political actors engage with difficult and traumatising pasts.

Olick identifies a foundational ambiguity in the concept of collective memory, asserting that an unresolved tension between individualist and collectivist strains runs through Halbwachs's work. This tension produces two distinct phenomena, which are, according to Olick, of different ontological orders. Furthermore, he argues that this difference, rarely articulated in the literature, presupposes the need for a very distinct epistemology, based on two very distinct cultures in the study of collective memory (Olick, 1999).

The first approach, which he names collected memory, is based on individualist principles, and refers to the aggregated individual memories of members of a group. In this conception, the individual is central; indeed, the social framework shapes what individuals remember, but ultimately it is only the individual who does the remembering. Collected memory thus focuses on the way social context influences individual recollection. On the other hand, the second conception, which Olick simply terms collective memory (as opposed to collected), refers to a collectivist approach arguing that groups themselves have the capacity to remember. Memory is thus not simply located in individual minds, but in collective institutional structures and cultural practices. Groups themselves provide the definitions and divisions through which specific events are coded as consequential (Olick, 1999).

While the first approach focuses on psychological and survey-based methods, the second accounts for analysis of commemorative practices and political discourses. Addressing this distinction is primordial, as the collectivist approach (collective memory in the stronger sense) will be primarily addressed in this paper, with the focus being placed on the way a difficult past is encoded in institutional structures, commemorative practices, and political discourses. Yet, the notion of collected memory will prove to be significant in the analysis.

> *"Collective memory" in Halbwachs thus indicates at least two distinct, and not obviously complementary, sorts of phenomena: socially framed individual*

> *memories and collective commemorative representations and mnemonic traces (Olick, 1999, p. 336).*

In *"The Politics of Regret"* (2007), Jeffrey Olick formulates a process-relational approach that recognizes memory not as static, but as a continuous process linking the past and the present in dialogically contingent ways. Under this framework, expressions of state contritions are thus seen as an ongoing mediation between the past and the present. At the empirical level, he applies this framework to postwar West Germany, aiming to demonstrate the way its political identity was shaped or constrained by Holocaust remembrance. Through this analysis, Olick thus tackles the way states and political actors engage with, manage, instrumentalize, or are constrained by difficult and traumatic pasts (Olick, 2007; Hashimoto, 2008).

Central to his research is his observation that the past is very much present in modern days public agenda, more often as a horrible, repulsive past, rather than a "heroic golden age". He asserts that a globalized willingness to acknowledge historical injustice seems to have disseminated throughout the world following the end of the Cold War, leading to an increase in both official and unofficial state apologies directed towards domestic and external victims (Olick, 1999; Olick, 2007).

> *Political legitimation depends just as much on collective memory as it ever has, but this collective memory is now often one disgusted with itself, a matter of "learning the lessons" of history more than of fulfilling its promise or remaining faithful to its legacy (Olick, 2007, p.122).*

Observing this global trend, Olick presents a new principle of political legitimacy, which he calls the "*politics of regret*". This principle, not only a moral gesture but also a political performance, thus establishes a logic in which legitimacy can be built based on public acknowledgement of historical wrongdoings and moral accountability. Efforts of remembrance and apologies, however, remain dangerous political tools, as they may or may not be successful in restoring positive perception between former adversaries, being subject to ongoing interpretation and contestation by numerous actors (Olick, 2007; Lind, 2008; Dobransky, 2010).

Olick argues that a responsible politics of regret must prioritize the cultivation of truth and understanding among descendants, rather than focusing solely on the relationship

between victims and perpetrators. Indeed, he argues that since contemporary reconciliation between victims and wrongdoers is rare and difficult to achieve, a responsible politics of regret should focus on providing an honest historical record, so that following generations can live without being held hostage by the past. The ultimate value of regret thus rests in the fact that it can allow future generations to understand their shared history, without being held hostage by its toxic residues. Olick anchors this view in Max Weber's classic distinction between the "ethic of conviction" and the "ethic of responsibility". Whereas an ethic of conviction focuses on absolute moral gestures regardless of the outcomes and potential backlashes, the ethic of responsibility Olick advocates for demands that political actors look beyond the short term, anticipating the long-term structural consequences of remembrance (Olick, 2007).

> *These, then, are just some preliminary thoughts on how a politics of regret can be founded on an ethic of responsibility rather than on an ethic of conviction - not retribution for retribution's sake, but that important combination of knowledge and acknowledgment that lays the foundation for reconciliation not between victim and perpetrator but among their children (Olick, 2007, p. 151).*

1.2.4. The implications of collective memory in international relations

Collective memory has tremendous implications in the study and practice of contemporary international relations. Before addressing these implications, two points are to be mentioned. First, groups are a prerequisite for collective memory, be it a family, a neighbourhood, a political party, or even a nation (Olick et al., 2011). In the context of this thesis, the group will essentially be the nation; therefore, the notion of collective memory will be considered as a national memory (Bachleitner, 2021). Then, it is important to note that collective memory is neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically bad, and is highly malleable. This means that understanding and managing the past in international relations can be very complicated (Rosoux, 2002; Rosoux, 2017).

The first major implication that will be highlighted is the role of collective memory in contributing to the collective identity of a nation. Considering collective memory as a major constituent of a national identity is a point that has been raised many times. Whether by Halbwachs and Olick, who argued that collective memory, unlike history,

represented an active past that contributed significantly to our identity, or by Jan Assmann, referring to his concept of cultural memory as a set of knowledge, rituals, and symbols that have been passed down over a long period of time, through which a group represents its past, thereby contributing to the construction of a collective identity. Ultimately, the link established between memory and national identities is something that has been heavily discussed in many important case studies by a large number of scholars (Olick & Robbins, 1998).

> *National and other identities are established and maintained through a variety of mnemonic sites, practices, and forms (Olick & Robbins, 1998, p. 124).*

The second major implication I would like to point out concerns the relation between political actors and collective memory. Indeed, collective memory is something the state has to handle, something it interacts with in many ways.

Firstly, collective memory can be seen as an instrument, a resource mobilized by actors to legitimize policies or construct national identity. As will be developed later, non-state actors such as victims' associations can also mobilize this instrument for their agenda. It is important, however, to remember that memory is not an exact reflection of the past, only a reconstruction of it. This idea, referred to by several authors as the "choice of the past", was one of Halbwachs's core insights, as he argued that collective memory is not an exact transcription of the past, but simply a reconstruction operated through these social frameworks. It suggests that any foreign policy shapes a particular interpretation of history (Halbwachs, 1925; Rosoux, 2002).

But collective memory in the hands of the state cannot be limited to the "choice of the past" alone; it can also act as a constraint on political actors, potentially limiting options available and structurally influencing possibilities. This is referred to as the "weight of the past". This "weight of the past" manifests itself in several different ways, notably through its impact on foreign policy and on the relations countries may have with each other (Rosoux, 2002).

> *Le passé ne se réduit pourtant pas à un réservoir d'instruments que l'on sélectionnerait au gré des intérêts et des objectifs. Il constitue également une contrainte à laquelle peu d'acteurs politiques échappent (Rosoux, 2002, p. 44).*

Collective memory thus seems to have tremendous implications in international relations. It can be seen as constitutive of a national identity, but also depending on a certain interpretation of history, a tricky foreign policy tool, or, on the contrary, a constraint that political actors cannot escape (Rosoux, 2002). These implications are, of course, not mutually exclusive, as the national identity resulting from the collective memory of a group can obviously be exploited for political ends.

1.3) Collective memory and cultural diplomacy

This subsection intends to serve as the connective tissue bridging the components developed in the theoretical framework, interweaving the distinct concepts in order to formulate a workable hypothesis which will then be confronted with a case study. Several interesting connections can be made between the two prime concepts developed in the theoretical framework, cultural diplomacy and collective memory.

I argue that collective memory, primarily as a constitutive force, provides the content, narratives, and symbols that cultural diplomacy draws upon and projects internationally. I'd say that cultural diplomacy, in projecting cultural elements such as festivals or traditional ceremonies to foster mutual understanding, projects a particular version of collective memory. In this sense, it figures as a pillar of cultural diplomacy, collective memory being a constitutive dimension of culture, as culture can be defined as *"a set of shared and enduring meanings, values, and beliefs that characterize national, ethnic or other groups and orient their behavior"* (Faure, 2004, p. 188).

However, this will not be the angle of analysis mobilized in this paper. Indeed, I argue that more than only being a resource for cultural diplomacy, collective memory can also be one of its most important obstacles.

Nations do not only carry proud and positive memories, and memories of trauma and conflicts can reveal themselves to be quite potent in shaping international as well as bilateral relations. A state's cultural diplomacy efforts can thus be faced with the shadow of contested memories, being opposed to deep historical grievances. This echoes the notion of "weight of the past", which rests on the idea that collective memory can act as a constraint on political actors, potentially limiting options

available and structurally influencing possibilities. The nature of collective memory as an obstacle to cultural diplomacy can also be explained by focusing on one particular limit of the soft power concept: it arises in the minds of those who feel it, triggered by a stimulus the sender may not have control over (Nye, 2004; Fan, 2008). As cultural diplomacy not only aims to disseminate culture abroad, but to foster mutual understanding and sway foreign audiences to enhance a nation's influence, it ultimately means that its success is determined by the mind and interpretation of the receiving audience, an audience that may be influenced by the weight of the past.

I therefore posit that as cultural diplomacy aims to increase mutual understanding and influence foreign audiences, the mnemonically charged relationship between Japan and South Korea may impede Japan's cultural diplomacy efforts. This connection raises a second interesting point that will be mentioned in the analysis: the potential role of cultural diplomacy in addressing these underlying memory conflicts.

2) The evolution of Japanese cultural diplomacy

2.1) Japanese cultural diplomacy throughout the 20th century

The institutionalisation of Cool Japan at the dawn of the 21st century does not mark the debut of Japan's interest in leveraging its culture within its diplomatic apparatus. Indeed, cultural policies have been an important part of Japan's foreign policy for a long time. Yet, over the past century, Japan's cultural diplomacy efforts have been characterized by profound transformations and changes.

On the one hand, imperial Japan's cultural policies relied heavily on coercive assimilation, with culture being seen as an ideological instrument to integrate territories into the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" and legitimize Japanese hegemony. On the other hand, postwar Japan pursued means of peaceful rebranding, while remaining especially cautious not to reignite postwar grievances. Finally, the end of the 20th century saw the emergence of the Cool Japan phenomenon, characterizing Japan's advent as a global cultural superpower defined by its industrial and consumer products, as well as its innovative contemporary culture and lifestyle (Otmazgin, 2012).

2.1.1. Cultural policies during the Japanese Empire

It can be asserted that the use of culture and media communication to enhance Japan's image dates back to the early 20th century. At that time, Japan, seeking to become an imperial and colonial power on par with its European and American counterparts, tried to enhance its international image and sought to legitimize its dominant geopolitical position in Asia (Otmazgin, 2012; Iwabuchi, 2015). For Western powers, Japan was to be presented as an equal possessing a unique culture amalgamating Western and Oriental elements, therefore justifying its place amongst great powers. On the other hand, for Asian countries, Tokyo's objective was to portray Japan as fundamentally Asian, presenting it as Asia's natural leader, emphasizing its successful modernization and superior culture (Bukh, 2014).

For this purpose, Japan sought to eradicate Western influence in its colonies and impose Japanese culture and language, often at the expense of local culture and traditions. Following armies, "people of culture", also called *bunkajin*, such as teachers, writers, artists, … were deployed to foster local compliance and help endorse Japanese control. Culture was therefore seen as a way to diffuse resentment, support local elites sympathetic to Japan, and nurture local followers (Otmazgin, 2012; Bukh, 2014).

> *Cultural policies then rested on the notion that it was essential to use other aspects of control aside from militaristic coercion to transform the colonies inhabitants' mental and spiritual outlook and make them susceptible to the Japanese spirit (Otmazgin, 2012, p. 43).*

Yet, Japan's cultural policies in territories under its rule mostly took on radically coercive dimensions. Indeed, beyond cultural promotion, the Japanese administration gradually implemented policies which significantly eradicated indigenous culture. Japan's attempts to eradicate symbols, rituals and institutionalised knowledge, notions which, according to Assmann, constitute important markers of collective identity, were akin to assaults on the cultural memory of concerned nations (Assmann, 1995).

The effectiveness of Japan's cultural policies during its imperial era was, however, limited. Indeed, while it can be argued that in the short term it helped Japan gain better control of its colonies, Japanese-conquered territories were far too large for cultural

policies to be truly effective, and Japanese culture did not have a significant impact. Ultimately, it was military power that really held the empire together (Otmazgin, 2012).

2.1.2. Caution during the post-war era

Japan's defeat during the Second World War and its subsequent occupation by American forces effectively neutralized the government's will to promote its culture in Asia. Japan was seen as an aggressor, and culture was not immediately regarded as the right way to rehabilitate its relations with its Asian neighbours. Government officials primarily feared that introducing Japanese culture abroad might reignite wartime grievances and spark accusations of cultural imperialism, a backlash that would jeopardize its commercial and industrial interests in the region. Additionally, Japan did not regard cultural industries as worth investing in, in sharp contrast with the strong support for manufactured products. The state therefore offered minimal backing to support the commercial export of culture, something which, as will be explained further, will radically change in the following decades (Otmazgin, 2012; Iwabuchi, 2015; Xia, 2024).

Japan's cultural policies during most of the early post-war period were thus rather inward-looking, focusing on the promotion of traditional and artistic practices, as well as preserving monuments and legacies, the promotion of the nation's cultural life, and the guarantee of people's cultural rights being seen as the government's responsibility (Otmazgin, 2012).

Nonetheless, some efforts were made to improve the country's reputation, striving to get rid of the militaristic image of the country and transform Japan into a peace-loving nation in the eyes of others. An emphasis was therefore put on cultural activities such as tea ceremonies and flower arrangements, hoping to convey a serene and peaceful image. A key step of this period was, for instance, joining UNESCO in 1951. Priority was also put on the notions of cultural exchange and dialogue with North America and Europe, while remaining especially careful regarding cultural promotion in Asia (Ogura, 2008; Otmazgin, 2012).

2.1.3. The 1970s shift: the institutionalisation of cultural diplomacy and the Fukuda doctrine

The late 1960s and the 1970s marked an important shift in Japan's strategy. Its goal was now to portray an image of an economically advanced country, aiming to attract international attention and reinforce the standing of Japanese exporters (Ogura, 2008). Furthermore, mobilizing culture as a part of Japan's foreign policy apparatus officially became the responsibility of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). For instance, each Diplomatic Bluebook, which is an annual report on Japan's Foreign Policy and Activities published by the MOFA since 1971, has a section dedicated to mutual understanding and cultural exchange with foreign countries.

The MOFA's role became especially apparent in 1972, with the establishment of the "Japan Foundation", an extra-departmental organization of the MOFA dedicated to the spread of Japanese culture abroad and aiming to cultivate *"friendship and ties between Japan and the world"*. This really crystallized the Japanese government's attempt to pay more attention to the cultural dimension of international relations. A large number of programs and projects in the fields of arts, cultural exchange, Japanese language education overseas, Japanese studies, international dialogue, and global partnerships programs were therefore implemented (Otmazgin, 2012; Iwabuchi, 2015; The Japan Foundation, 2022).

Subsequently, the 1970s saw Japanese officials secure enough to introduce the notions of cultural exchange and mutual understanding within Japan's regional diplomacy initiatives. These cultural initiatives focused on Southeast Asian nations, rather than on China and Korea, where resentment was still high. These endeavours were institutionalised in the framework of the Fukuda doctrine (1977), introduced by former Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda to rehabilitate Japan's regional image, enhance ties with Southeast Asian countries and ease their fear of Japan's economic success (Otmazgin, 2012). The doctrine rested on three principles: Japan's commitment to peace and rejection of a military role; its will to adopt a multi-dimensional approach to consolidate mutual confidence and trust; and its readiness to contribute to the healing of the divide in Indochina, after the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan [MOFA], 1977). This diplomatic framework, alongside resulting initiatives such as the ASEAN

Cultural Fund, proposed by Fukuda to stimulate intra-ASEAN cultural exchanges as well as between ASEAN countries and third parties, subsequently helped promote Japanese soft power and consolidated relations with ASEAN members (MOFA, 1978; De Miguel, 2013).

This shift toward integrating a cultural dimension into regional diplomacy occurred merely three years after Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka's highly disruptive tour of Southeast Asia. In Thailand, large crowds paraded outside his hotel, shouting anti-Japanese slogans. And in Indonesia, he was virtually imprisoned inside the presidential palace for three days due to intense demonstrations. Following a violent incident where Indonesian police killed eleven demonstrators, he was forced to flee the country by helicopter. These events were a strong reminder of the remaining resentment and hatred Japan still faced, and signalled to Tokyo that addressing these grievances was something to be taken seriously (Otmazgin, 2012).

During the 1980s, as Japan's economy matured and the country's influence on the global stage increased, cultural diplomacy retained its importance, even being considered as one of the three pillars of Japan's general diplomacy, along with its efforts in peacekeeping operations and the administration of developmental assistance and economic aid policies (Ogura, 2008). Cultural exchanges and dialogues also expanded, with the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET) being implemented in 1987, bringing foreign university graduates to Japan as assistant language teachers or advisors to local governments and associations. Rather than a strictly educational initiative, the program insists on the role of these graduates as cultural ambassadors (Iwabuchi, 2015).

2.1.4. The late 20th century's shift: the advent of Japan's pop culture

As was just explained, for most of the post-war era, especially till the 1970s, the promotion of Japanese culture by Tokyo's government was characterized by extreme caution, especially towards its direct neighbours, as it was seen as potentially stimulating anti-Japanese sentiments. Nonetheless, some advances were made, focusing on traditional cultural forms, language education, or exchange programmes, especially in the framework of the Fukuda doctrine. While the Japanese government fostered some efforts of cultural exchange and focused on the internal preservation of cultural heritage and traditional artistry, the production, commodification, and

exportation of contemporary artistic and cultural outputs were ultimately left in the hands of the private sector (Otmazgin, 2012; Iwabuchi, 2015).

The late 1980s and 1990s will introduce a radical shift in Japan's attitude, as the government began to embrace the commercial success of its popular culture. Specifically, the widespread resonance of the soap opera *"Oshin"* in other Asian countries was framed as a turning point. Broadcast in other Asian countries in 1983 and 1984, Oshin enjoyed far-reaching popularity, being well received in 46 countries. While Asian consumers had mostly known Japan through its "culturally odorless" manufactured exports, Oshin permitted them to engage with the "actual" faces, histories, and lived experiences of the Japanese people. Additionally, during the mid 1990s, the Japan Foundation's monthly journal, *Kokusai Kôryû* (volume 64, 1994), began to explore the possibility of Japan's cultural interchange with Asia through media culture (Iwabuchi, 2015).

The potential of media culture for cultural diplomacy thus began to draw important attention, and a strong interest emerged in the capability of Japanese media culture to improve Japan's reputation. The success, by the late 1990s, of Japan's private media sector in exporting popular culture, something which will be highlighted by Douglas McGray's article, thus laid the groundwork for the institutionalisation of Cool Japan.

2.2) The emergence of "Cool Japan"

In 2002, the American Journalist Douglas McGray published *"Japan's Gross National Cool"*, an article issued in the magazine Foreign Policy which addressed the growing popularity of the Japanese media culture, as well as Japan's ability to reinvent itself as a global superpower, not collapsing under the economic hardships of the lost decade (McGray, 2002). Indeed, while traditional "corporate Japan" industries grew sluggish, playful teen-centric products and services such as fashion, telecommunications, entertainment, and particularly the multimedia culture of anime, manga, computers, and videogames, became the most rapidly expanding components and highly lucrative export sectors within Japan's recession-stricken economy (Daliot-Bul, 2009).

> *Yet Japan is reinventing superpower again. Instead of collapsing beneath its political and economic misfortunes, Japan's global cultural influence has only*

> *grown. In fact, from pop music to consumer electronics, architecture to fashion, and food to art, Japan has far greater cultural influence now than it did in the 1980s, when it was an economic superpower (McGray, 2002, p. 47).*

Douglas McGray's pivotal article, which was rapidly translated into Japanese, served as a catalyst for Japanese policymakers. The Japanese media culture's global presence, which was initially driven up by domestic market demand and creative innovations rather than government planning, was thus paired with a more organised institutional framework for promoting media exports. Concurrently, Cool Japan was propelled by the increasingly ubiquitous discourse of soft power and nation branding in the framework of cultural policy, which emerged at the same period. Cool Japan thus deliberately began to leverage the growing popularity of Japanese media culture in global markets to enhance the international competitiveness of its domestic content industries, thereby stimulating the national economy and bolstering Japan's soft power (Matsui, 2014; Iwabuchi, 2015).

2.2.1. The Cool Japan craze among Japan's central ministries

It was under Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's administration (2001 - 2006) that the use of media culture to enhance national interests was firmly institutionalised. Addressing the National Diet[5], he asserted that the government would strengthen Japan's global brand appeal by advancing its content industries on the world stage (Iwabuchi, 2015).

In early 2002, the Japanese government thus officially introduced a new national policy framework prioritizing intangible intellectual property. It focused on innovative and creative products, spearheaded by Japanese media content such as anime, manga, and video game software, and led in March 2002 to the establishment of the *Strategic Council on Intellectual Property*, led by the Prime Minister, related ministers, and private sector experts. It then evolved into the *Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters (IPSH)* the following year, and released, in 2004, *"The Policy for Promotion of Content Business: National Strategy in the Age of Soft Power"*, a policy which argued that the content industry should serve as the cornerstone of Japan's

[5] Japan's national parliament.

national strategy, due to its market size, massive economic impact, and its powerful soft power capacity (Daliot-Bul, 2009).

The establishment of the IPSH, thus directly under the Prime Minister's jurisdiction, was a key development that enabled Japan's central ministries to focus on Cool Japan policies and had a mandate to develop Japan's intellectual property strategy across all sectors. Nevertheless, as numerous committees focusing on the promotion of Japanese media culture began to be established, the expression "Cool Japan" began to gain currency as an umbrella policy term covering various areas of interest, and a *"Cool Japan craze"* emerged among Japan's central ministries. Indeed, despite the overarching role of the IPSH, no single governmental institution was explicitly tasked with planning and implementing a coherent cultural policy, and no fewer than 13 governmental ministries and agencies were involved. Among these institutions were the Agency for Cultural Affairs (ACA); the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT); the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI); the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA); the Japan Foundation; and the Prime Minister's Cabinet (Otmazgin, 2012; Matsui, 2014; Iwabuchi, 2015).

Cool Japan policies during the 2000s were thus characterized by intense ministry fragmentation, with routine competition over resources, overlapping responsibilities, and uncoordinated agendas (Otmazgin, 2012; Matsui, 2014; Iwabuchi, 2019). Institutional approaches to Cool Japan thus varied significantly across ministries. The ACA manages cultural preservation, promotion, and development and oversees issues of copyright infringement, while MLIT integrates pop culture into its "Visit Japan campaign", aiming to leverage anime and pop-music to attract inbound tourists. For METI, Cool Japan policies are framed as industrial policies focused on the export of Japanese content, striving to expand the market for the content industry abroad, and aiming to create jobs in the domestic labor market, whereas MOFA treats Cool Japan as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy and soft power. These divergent institutional understandings are directly reflected in terminological differences, while MOFA champions "pop-culture diplomacy", METI talks of supporting the "content industry" (Otmazgin, 2012; Matsui, 2014).

Despite this complicated framework, an important degree of complementarity can be observed across institutions. Indeed, although cultural diplomacy's functions are

primarily the responsibility of the MOFA and the Japan Foundation, other bodies vastly contribute to the development of Japan's cultural diplomacy, in an "inter-ministerial ecosystem". For instance, even though all of METI's initiatives are based on the classical logic of industrial policy, it mobilizes concepts of soft power and nation branding to validate the national importance of content industry development, therefore aligning its economic goals with the MOFA's cultural diplomacy framework. Consequently, METI drives Cool Japan by leveraging creative industries for commercial growth and soft power, while the Cabinet Office oversees the Cool Japan Fund established in 2013 to finance overseas expansion of Japanese cultural products, and the ACA co-manages international cultural exchanges (Matsui, 2014).

2.2.2. An institutional architecture for Cool Japan policy coordination

The first attempt to create a dedicated political and institutional architecture for Cool Japan policy coordination came in 2012, under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. He made it one of his flagship initiatives, inaugurating a dedicated Minister in charge of the Cool Japan Strategy. While Cool Japan had been pursued by different ministries, each according to their own agenda, a cabinet-level political figure was thus now tasked with overseeing and promoting the strategy (de Vos, 2023).

The Cabinet then set up the *Cool Japan Promotion Council* in 2013, an advisory body established under the Prime Minister's office. Furthermore, 50 billion yen was allocated in the national budget for infrastructure promoting Japanese content overseas to spread the charm of Japanese culture internationally. Shortly after, the *Cool Japan Inter-ministerial Liaison and Coordination Committee* was established, a collaborative structure across different ministries and agencies. In practice, it had a hard time coordinating ministries, not being able to override departmental interests and force genuine integration (Iwabuchi, 2015).

The next important step came in 2015, when the *Cool Japan Public-Private Partnership Platform* (CJPF) was established, in response to recommendations from the Cool Japan Promotion Council. The CJPF's purpose is to deepen the Cool Japan strategy and strengthen collaboration between the public and private sectors, as well as among different industries in the field. It remains, however, more of a dialogue forum, rather than a body with real authority (Cool Japan Public-Private Partnership Platform [CJPF], n.d.; Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters, 2024).

In 2019, the Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters officially formulated the first unified "Cool Japan Strategy", aiming to set forth the direction of measures to be undertaken. It took the form of a benchmarking strategy, as Japanese officials analyzed the success of the Korean Wave[6], and used it as an example to revitalize the declining government's budget and market presence in creative industries (Jang & Kim, 2024). It included the shift from a "product-out" to a "market-in" approach, meaning that Cool Japan was now to be defined by what people in other countries perceive as cool, even if not viewed that way domestically. Regarding ministerial coordination, the role of the IPSH was reinforced, and the Cool Japan Inter-ministerial Liaison Committee was abolished, replaced by the Cool Japan Strategy Council, consisting of the Minister of State for Cool Japan Strategy and State Ministers from relevant ministries and agencies. This council is led by the Cabinet Office and supported by inter-ministerial working groups to ensure consistent policy implementation (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters, 2019).

However, right after the formulation of the 2019 strategy, the COVID-19 pandemic severely affected numerous Cool Japan-related fields, thus vastly modifying the environment surrounding Cool Japan. In response was therefore formulated on June 4th 2024 the "New Cool Japan Strategy", aiming to respond to the post-pandemic environment and to the increase in the global popularity of anime and video games. Among many others, this new strategy aims to focus on an intelligence and a data-driven approach, as it calls for renewed intelligence functions using research and analysis aiming to understand specific and evolving regional needs, acknowledging that *"a product that sells well in the U.S. may not necessarily sell well in Southeast Asia. Similarly, in the U.S., a product that is selling well now may not necessarily sell well in the future"* (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters, 2024, p. 20). Additionally, it aims to expand sector collaboration, encouraging the creation of a virtuous circle. Indeed, instead of competition among different fields, it focuses on creating synergies between sectors, with anime/manga and food as a unified gateway. In this new framework, the private industry, academia, and the government should strive to work together in an "All Japan" structure, with anime/manga and food as the gateway and starting point (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters, 2024).

[6] The Korean wave or *hallyu* refers to the massive increase in the global popularity of South Korean popular culture since the late 1990s.

The Cool Japan institutional architecture has thus developed tremendously over the years, evolving from the fragmented ministerial craze of the 2000s to a more coherent multi-layered structure led by the IPSH, Cabinet Office and the dedicated Minister of State for Cool Japan Strategy. Numerous coordinating frameworks, notably between public and private actors, have been put in place, and sector collaboration remains a core objective, with important ministries like METI and MOFA expected to align towards common targets set by the 2024 strategy, while ultimately still managing their own budget and initiatives.

2.3) The MOFA's "pop-culture diplomacy"

As aforementioned, while other institutions such as METI or the ACA's role over Japan's international image are not to be neglected, cultural diplomacy's functions remain primarily the responsibility of the MOFA, being the primary actor in transforming Cool Japan into formal diplomatic tools.

As previously presented, Japanese cultural diplomacy efforts have tremendously evolved over the past century. From coercive assimilation during the imperial era, to a period of peaceful rebranding and cautious cultural promotion for most of the second half of the 20th century, to finally embracing the commercial success of Japan's popular culture and heavily mobilizing it in its diplomatic apparatus. The MOFA has been engaged in cultural diplomacy efforts long before Cool Japan existed as a concept, its primary instrument having been the Japan Foundation established in 1972. At that time, the foundation focused on "classical cultural exchanges"; language education, traditional arts or academic exchanges, and popular culture were entirely outside its remit, entirely driven by the private sector. However, the early 21st century saw the Cool Japan discourse become an important component of Japan's cultural diplomacy efforts, being seen as a significant stepping stone in changing Japan's tarnished image through cultural values. Cool Japan thus became a significant tool in the hands of the MOFA, striving to nurture mutual understanding by leveraging Japan's popular culture (Iwabuchi, 2015; Aruni et al., 2022).

It was in 2003 that the MOFA's commitment towards Cool Japan policies officially began, following a report by the Research Society of International Exchange, titled *"Diplomacy in a new era and the new role of international exchange: Toward Japan's*

taking part in global public opinion formation". This report, one of Japan's earliest governmental documents to explicitly mention McGray's article, marked an important shift for Japan's cultural diplomacy; for the first time, an institution affiliated with the MOFA endorsed the Cool Japan movement. The Research Society of International Exchange, organised by the Japan Foundation, argued that while Japan's national image was previously sustained by its manufacturing and economic infrastructure, it had degraded into a negative perception of a nation trapped in stagnation and missed opportunities. In the same way McGray highlighted it, the report thus asserted that Japan needed to construct and project a renewed national image by utilizing Japan's potential resources. The solution proposed was to mobilize Cool Japan's cultural products (Matsui, 2014).

In 2006, the MOFA thus officially launched its "pop-culture diplomacy", claiming that in order to cultivate deeper international understanding and trust towards Japan, it would deploy popular culture alongside traditional art and heritage as a primary instrument of its cultural diplomacy. Foreign Minister Taro Aso's speech on the 28th of April 2006 crystallized this turn, declaring that pop culture should become an "ally" of Japan's diplomatic efforts. As he declared, *"I think we can safely say that any kind of cultural diplomacy that fails to take advantage of pop culture is not really worthy of being called cultural diplomacy"* (MOFA, 2006; Otmazgin, 2012; Iwabuchi, 2015, p. 424).

> *We want pop culture, which is so effective in penetrating throughout the general public, to be our ally in diplomacy … one part of diplomacy lies in having a competitive brand image, so to speak. Now more than ever, it is impossible for this to stay entirely within the realm of the work of diplomats … what we need to do now is to build on this foundation [the fact that Japan already has achieved a good image] and attract people of the world to Japanese culture, whether modern or that handed down from antiquity (Aso, 2006, as cited in Iwabuchi, 2015, p. 424).*

Concretely, the transformation of popular culture into a diplomatic tool was done via several symbolic initiatives. One of Minister Aso's ideas was the creation, in 2007, of the international manga awards, honoring non-Japanese mangaka who contribute to the promotion of manga overseas. The winners are invited to Japan for a 10-day tour

organised by the Japan Foundation, visiting editors, legendary mangakas and so forth. According to Aso, the prize was created in the hope that it would create a feeling of "bonding with Japan" among its recipients. In 2008, a communiqué released by the Japanese embassy in the United States effectively stated that the award is expected to enhance the understanding of Japanese culture among foreign comic artists (Daliot-Bul, 2009; Matsui, 2014).

These initiatives also take the form of symbolic appointments. For instance, in 2008, Foreign Minister Komura Masahiko appointed the character *"Doraemon*[7]*"* as the nation's first "anime ambassador", stating during the ceremony that he hoped that Doraemon would work hard to *"deepen people's understanding of Japan so they will become friends with Japan"* (Komura, 2008, as cited in Daliot-Bul, 2009). This appointment represented an important point of Japan's pop-culture diplomacy initiatives: the message that the Japanese are kind, decent, creative, and curious people, not to be feared. After all, what could be more reassuring than a foreign minister shaking hands with a Doraemon doll? Similarly, in 2009, the MOFA designated three young female fashion leaders as the nation's "ambassador of cute", having for mission *"to transmit the new trends of Japanese pop culture in the field of fashion to the rest of the world and to promote understanding of Japan by their attending cultural projects carried out by the Japanese Embassies and the Japan Foundation"* (Daliot-Bul, 2009; Matsui, 2014, p. 90; Iwabuchi, 2015).

Nowadays, Japan's popular culture continues to be used in diplomatic contexts. For instance, there is a view that argues that placing animation and manga characters on government planes used by visiting heads of state and officials could appeal to a global audience (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters, 2024).

> *The use of pop culture as a diplomatic strategy stands in appealing, warm, and humane opposition to the threat of military power (Kanji, 2016, p. 41).*

Despite the importance of pop-culture diplomacy, Japan has not forgotten the more traditional aspects of its culture. Indeed, Japan's 21st-century cultural diplomacy is characterized by a hybrid approach, where traditional arts and culture are promoted alongside contemporary media culture. In this sense, Cool Japan, thanks to its

[7] The main character of the hugely popular eponymous manga.

popularity and powerful global appeal, serves as a form of gateway to introduce foreigners to deeper, lesser-known aspects of Japanese culture. The MOFA, mainly through the Japan Foundation, therefore continues to work with overseas institutions and provides a wide variety of performances and exhibitions on Japanese popular and traditional culture, while still enhancing Japanese language education and cultural exchanges. In addition to media culture, traditional cultural resources thus remain an important part of Japan's tourism resources and soft power (Kanji, 2016; Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters, 2024; Xia, 2024).

2.4) The current state of Japan's pop-culture diplomacy

2.4.1. An apparent success

East Asia is the region where Japan's cultural diplomacy has the most to gain, but also the most to overcome, being the area where it needs the most reputational repair. As mentioned previously, for most of the post-war era, Japan has been especially careful regarding its cultural promotion in Asia, yet nowadays, Asian markets represent one of the primary destinations for Japanese cultural exports, mainly thanks to socio-economic reasons and regional integration. Indeed, the emergence of an important urban middle class in recent decades has generated significant consumer demand and leisure time needs, and Japanese contemporary culture and lifestyle have had their highest degree of foreign penetration in this region. Additionally, East Asia represents the most vital theater of "human-centered initiatives", focused on person-to-person engagement (Otmazgin, 2012).

A wide variety of cultural products, ranging from music, animation, and manga to fashion magazines, have thus been adopted by local markets, becoming deeply embedded in the daily consumption of Asian youth. Japanese manga are frequently translated into local languages and dominate the East Asian comic book market, while anime characters such as Hello Kitty or Doraemon are omnipresent, whether on licensed or unlicensed goods. For many East Asian countries, Japan is therefore not only an economic giant, but also a cultural one (Otmazgin, 2008; Otmazgin, 2012). And this trend does not seem to slow down; the market scale of Japanese content overseas, not only in East Asia, has reached over 4.7 trillion yen in 2022, a 3.3-fold increase compared to 2012 (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters, 2024).

Additionally to commercial success, cultural cooperation and human-centered initiatives also continue to play an important role in Japan's cultural diplomacy efforts, attempting to spread Japanese values and culture. For instance, in 2016, the Japan Friendship Association Program was established, a form of people-to-people exchange between Japan and other regions, with the purpose of promoting mutual understanding across various fields like culture, history, or politics (Aruni et al., 2022). The JET Programme, implemented in 1987, also continues to be active, still inviting thousands of foreign university graduates each year to serve as language teachers or international exchange coordinators for local communities (MOFA, 2006; Ogura, 2008; Iwabuchi, 2015).

Similarly, the Asia Kakehashi Project (AKP, now renamed AKP+) launched in 2017 is a public diplomacy effort which provides full scholarships to 1000 Asian high school students to study in Japan. Participating nations included countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, … but also China and South Korea. Thanks to Japan providing scholarships and, similarly to the JET programme, these high school students experienced direct exposure to life and learning in Japan and formed a bond with their host country. The project's slogan *"1000 Bridges Over Asia"* (Kakehashi meaning bridge) perfectly represents its overarching objective, to build mutual understanding and a long-term relationship with these students and their countries. As part of the project, alumni networks were also established; for instance, in Indonesia, the first batch of alumni created the group "AKP Super Senpais", sharing their experience to inspire Indonesian youth, teaching Japanese lessons, and promoting a positive image of Japan. It can be noted that in 2019, following the first batch of the project, Japan experienced a surge in the number of tourists coming from countries participating in the program, something which might indicate that the project successfully spread a positive image of the country (Aruni et al., 2022).

2.4.2. Obstacles to Japan's cultural diplomacy efforts

Despite a significant commercial success, which boosts the ubiquity of Japan's popular culture in East Asian markets, and the apparent success of human-centered initiatives, which are seen as effective in building sustainable interpersonal bonds and "human bridges" between Japan and its neighbours, Japan's cultural diplomacy efforts remain faced with obstacles. A wide array of institutional, structural, and historical

obstacles that seem to limit Japan's ability to translate cultural popularity and exchange into real political influence.

For instance, despite recent improvements, institutional coordination problems continue to hinder Japan's efforts. The financial failure of the Cool Japan Fund, which accumulated a severe 30 billion yen cumulative deficit in 2021, mainly due to lax management, a lack of accountability, and an absence of basic knowledge regarding popular culture that decision-makers use as a basis for investment, exemplifies this problem. Then, beyond these administrative issues, numerous critiques highlight the tensions existing between the private and public sector. Indeed, as mentioned previously, cultural diplomacy mainly rests on sources that are outside of the government's control (Jang & Kim, 2024; Xia, 2024).

Nevertheless, one obstacle in particular stands out among others: the core subject of this thesis, the way collective and historical memory mediates the reception of Japan's contemporary cultural diplomacy. It refers to the persistent political friction in East Asia rooted in the lingering legacy of Japanese colonialism and imperial history. Indeed, this "historical burden" creates a significant barrier that mediates Japan's initiatives, as territorial disputes and deep-seated grievances regarding wartime conduct contribute to regional tensions. Sources demonstrate that these tensions are subject to significant regional variations, with perception in Southeast Asia being generally much more positive due to lesser resentment, compared to China and South Korea, where Japan's wartime conduct and colonization have neither been forgotten nor overlooked (Otmazgin, 2008).

3) Japan and South Korea: a mnemonically charged relationship

As explained in the previous section, Cool Japan emerged as the cornerstone of Japan's contemporary cultural diplomacy apparatus, with MOFA aiming to leverage Japan's popular culture in order to rehabilitate Japan's historical image and foster cross-border mutual understanding. Nevertheless, as Ogura Kazuo, former director of the Japan Foundation, declared, the recurring tensions resulting from

Japan's past and the way it faces it tarnish the country's newly constructed image and mediate its cultural diplomacy initiatives in the region (Javet, 2015).

This chapter, rather than a simple historical digression, will therefore aim to demonstrate the deeply mnemonically charged nature of the Japan - South Korea relationship, an emotionally charged context that, I argue, Japanese cultural diplomacy inevitably interacts with.

To begin with, Japan's colonization of Korea will be explored, highlighting the dual nature of colonial violence, both physical and social. The evolution of both countries' relations during the post-war era will then be explored, focusing on the "intended ambiguity" resulting from the 1965 *Treaty on Basic Relations Between Japan and the Republic of Korea*, the first major state-led negotiation process. Particular attention will then be given to the 1990s decade, the moment when the memory of victims largely entered the debate and ultimately forced Japan to express its official apologies. The role of civil society as actors of collective memory will then be explored, analyzing the issue surrounding the Statue of Peace, and focusing on the concept of cultural memory. Finally, the failure of the 2015 Japan - South Korea Comfort Women Agreement will be analyzed, illustrating the recurring problems surrounding efforts of reconciliation.

3.1) The Japanese imperial rule over Korea

3.1.1. The colonial rule

Despite the Japanese colonization of Korea taking place between 1910 and 1945, Japan's aggressive claims over the Korean peninsula began during the late 1800s. Indeed, Japan took the then Joseon Kingdom into its sphere of influence through the highly unequal Treaty of Ganghwa (1876), which was a part of Japan's policy of forced opening of Korean ports and provided extraterritorial rights to Japanese nationals. Nonetheless, it was after its victory over China and Russia, respectively, in 1895 and 1905, that Japan asserted itself as the dominant regional power and reinforced its claims over the region, including the Korean peninsula. In 1905, through the Eulsa Treaty, the Empire of Korea, proclaimed in 1897, was thus transformed into a Japanese protectorate overseen by a Japanese Resident-General, giving Japan control over Korea's diplomatic affairs. Then, in 1907, a subsequent

treaty further reinforced Japanese control over Korea, legally subordinating its administration to the Japanese Resident-General. Gojong, emperor of the Korean Empire, tried to dispatch delegates to the Hague peace conference, aiming to complain about this control; however, Japan, in retaliation, forced him to abdicate in favor of his son. Finally, in 1910, the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty abolished the Korean Empire and transformed Korea into a Japanese colony, thus formalising the total incorporation of the country into the Japanese Empire and starting 35 years of colonization. The newly formed Korean colony was then governed by a Governor-General, who replaced the Resident-General and held military, administrative, and judicial power (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Division of International Law, 1921; Chen, 1970; Karamova & Alikberova, 2019; Shakibi Nejad, 2025).

Rapidly, laws legalizing racial discrimination were created, effectively rendering Koreans second-class citizens. Additionally, the Japanese colonial system sought to exploit Korea's natural resources, agriculture, and industry. The Oriental Development Company, a Japanese colonial company established in 1908, financed industrial and agricultural projects, owning more than 20% of Korean arable soils. Harold J. Noble, historian and professor at Stanford University, noted that much of the best arable land went to the Japanese and that Korean farmers, alienated from their land, were changed into a landless tenant class, forced to pay heavy taxes (Kim, 2015).

The first decade of colonial rule was characterized by an especially tight military control over all aspects of people's lives (Baik, 2021). Resistance was violently repressed, while freedom of speech and press were tightly controlled. However, in 1919 came the March First Movement, massive nationwide demonstrations against Japan's colonial rule inspired by the death of Korea's last emperor Gojong, possibly at the hands of the Japanese, and by Wilsonian ideals of self-determination. These protestations drew international attention to the "Korean problem[8]" and made the Japanese administration change policies from repressive military rule to a more lenient "cultural policy", allowing more relaxed restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly for Koreans. The wage scales of Korean bureaucrats were readjusted, the

[8] The issue of Japanese colonization of Korea and the protests of Korean nationalists against it.

gendarmerie[9] system was abolished, and some vernacular newspapers and books were even allowed. Nevertheless, many scholars argue that the changes were merely cosmetic, stating that the cultural rule resembled a "divide-and-rule" strategy because Japan had failed to impose its will with military governance and was willing to restore its international reputation (Chen, 1970; Devine, 1997; Kim, 2015).

By the early and mid 1930s, however, the Japanese government itself grew increasingly under the control of the military, and as Japan began its invasion of Manchuria, it began to perceive pleas for Korean independence, which emerged after the March First Movement, as threats. Korean culture, identity, and language, albeit already marginalized and subordinated to Japanese, were to be eradicated. Koreans were to adopt Japanese names under the *Shoshi Kaimei* policy, were forced to worship Shinto shrines, and the Japanese administration began forbidding schools to teach Korean history, culture, or language (Hundt and Bleiker, 2007; Young, 2024).

As conflicts in Manchuria and later in the framework of WWII gained in intensity, labour mobilization also became more coercive. Korean nationals were forced to work in factories, shipyards, farms and mines located in the Korean peninsula, Manchuria and on the Japanese mainland. It still remains difficult to perfectly assess the scale of the phenomenon, but it has been estimated that millions were affected by forced labour (Hein, 2020; Sintionean, 2020).

The early 1930s also saw the development of a form of forced labour which remains one of the most significant points of contention between both countries: the issue regarding the establishment of the "comfort women" system. What is commonly referred to by the euphemism "comfort women" or *"ianfu"* refers to the tens of thousands of Asian women who were forced into sexual servitude in "comfort stations" across the Asian territories occupied by the Japanese army before and during the Second World War (Lévy, 2012; Nishino et al., 2018). Indeed, Japan, having decided not to implement the *"International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children"* concluded in 1921 under the League of Nations, considered that using women from conquered territories to satisfy the sexual needs of soldiers was within its rights as a colonial power. Raids were therefore organised to

[9] The Japanese military police, it was initially entrusted with ordinary police functions.

abduct women from all walks of life and confine them to brothels, initially in cities and later in combat zones. Korea was one of the countries most affected by these crimes, as a large proportion of comfort women were of Chinese or Korean origin (De Pasquale, 2008; Monnet, 2008; Bae, 2017).

Although the system came to an end with Japan's surrender in August 1945, the issue did not disappear. Indeed, the suffering remained, and victims had to endure hostile stares and a certain degree of contempt from their loved ones, pushing many of them to suffer in silence. This near-total absence of public acknowledgment and stigmatization would persist till the early 1990s (Monnet, 2008; Bae, 2017).

> *On m'a calomniée. On parle tellement mal dans mon dos. [Du fait que j'étais une femme de réconfort militaire], j'ai gardé le silence jusqu'à maintenant. On me méprisait en disant que mon corps s'est mélangé aux Japonais, et que j'ai reçu de l'argent sale des Japonais, on disait donc du mal de moi (Hwa-Sun Kim, 2001, as cited in Bae, 2017, p. 100)*[10].

This silence and lack of recognition were not only a matter of contempt. Indeed, as will be addressed in the following section, in the aftermath of the war, Korea was divided along the 38th parallel, torn between the USA and the USSR. The arrangement between the two major powers and their allies led to numerous Japanese war crimes being swept under the carpet. Concurrently, the 1965 normalization treaty that will be analyzed hereafter, under the notion of "structured ambiguity", will prioritize normalization and development, neglecting issues of repentance (Bae, 2017).

3.1.2. The complex nature of colonial violence

Violence during the colonial era was not only physical, but also deeply social and cultural, with Japan deliberately targeting the ways Koreans remembered themselves as a distinct group. This dual nature can be explored by mobilising two concepts explained in the theoretical frameworks: Halbwachs's notion of social frameworks, and Assmann's notion of cultural memory.

[10] Translated from Korean into French by the original author, Annie Jisun Bae. Kept in French in order to avoid a double translation and preserve the integrity of the text.

Halbwachs asserted that individuals organise and recover memory through collective structures of time, space, and language called social frameworks, memory becoming fragmented and losing its coherence without them. Colonization can be read through this lens, Japan's aggressive colonial policies being interpreted as assaults on the social frameworks of Korean memory. By subordinating and banning the teaching of Korean history and culture, imposing Shinto worship, and forbidding the teaching of the Korean language in schools, the Japanese administration targeted Korean symbolic and temporal frameworks, thus effectively, in Halbwachs's sense, attempting to render Koreans incapable of remembering themselves as a distinct group. A great example of this is the late 1930s *Shoshi Kaimei* policy, which forced the adoption, by Koreans, of Japanese names, an attack on individual and familial identity, but also on Korean culture.

Then, Assmann defined cultural memory as the long-term memory of societies which contributes to the constitution of a collective identity. By attempting to eradicate the Korean symbols, rituals, and pools of institutionalised knowledge, notions closely associated with cultural memory, Japan was therefore directly assaulting the collective identity of Koreans, demonstrating the complex nature of colonial violence.

3.2) Rebuilding the relationship during the post-war era

3.2.1. The 1965 normalization treaty's intended ambiguity

Japan's brutal colonization of Korea, as well as its attitude during the Second World War, undoubtedly defined how their bilateral relations were bound to evolve. The first significant evolution in their relationship rests on the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations. Yet, even more than the treaty itself, understanding the ins and outs of the 14-year negotiation process that made it possible provides significant insights into the evolution of both countries' relations. Indeed, the 1965 *Treaty on Basic Relations Between Japan and the Republic of Korea* is the result of a decade-long negotiation process which began in October 1951 and was characterized by deep tensions between pragmatism and the weight of historical memory (Yoon, 2008).

The initial talks under South Korean President Syngman Rhee were complicated. Indeed, the intense anti-Japanese sentiment and demands coming from Korean

officials for an expression of Japanese repentance, as well as financial reparations as a tangible admission of guilt, did not please the Japanese delegates who wanted to focus on legal issues. Additionally, in 1952, disputes over the "Rhee Line[11]" emerged. Then in 1953, in addition to conflicts over the Rhee Line and property issues, controversial remarks made by Japanese official Kubota Kanichiro, claiming the colonial rule had benefited Korea, halted the talks for 5 years. The negotiations finally resumed in 1958 with the fourth conference, Japan having retracted the Kubota statement and Korea agreeing to the release of Japanese fishermen. However, things stalled again due to a new issue, Japanese negotiation of a repatriation agreement with North Korea (Cha, 1996; Yoon, 2008).

Experts argue that the talks took an important turn in May 1961, when Park Chung-hee took power in South Korea as chairman of the military junta. Arguably, Park Chung-hee, who was trained at a Japanese military academy, prioritised Japan as an economic partner and stressed the pragmatic need to overcome historical animosity and normalize ties with Tokyo (Bae, 2017). Japan, for its part, also sought normalization, largely to benefit its long-term economic development, seeking to expand its export and investment markets in South Korea (Yoon, 2008). Furthermore, the United States viewed the Japan - Republic of Korea axis as a security priority in the framework of the Cold War, thus nudging both countries to normalize their relations and proving the importance of broader geostrategic variables in the 1965 Treaty (Cha, 1996). The treaty will thus ultimately be signed in 1965, establishing diplomatic relations between both countries.

In order to understand what the process and signature of this treaty reveal about the Japan - South Korea relationship, the factors and mechanisms that made the treaty possible are to be studied. American political scientist Victor D. Cha (1996) argues that the United States pressure, which became increasingly pronounced starting 1964, was indispensable to the treaty's conclusion in 1965. He asserts that for a long time, negotiations remained stalled due to intense nationalist sentiments (President Syngman Rhee held a strong negative image of Japan and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru held a negative image of Korea and personally disliked Syngman

[11] A unilaterally declared a 60-nautical-mile zone of sovereign waters around the Korean peninsula which extended well beyond international norms and enraged the Japanese.

Rhee) and that Park Chung-hee's pragmatic attitude of prioritizing economy, along with the United States pressure, was what made the agreement possible (Cha, 1996).

> *America's deepening entrenchment in Vietnam and security concerns regarding China caused it to view an immediate reconciliation between these two key regional allies as critical to the anticommunist front in East Asia. This prompted a concerted push for normalization by Washington that brought about a rapid settlement after thirteen years of acerbic and stagnant negotiations between Seoul and Tokyo (Cha, 1996, p. 143).*

However, while Cha's reading of the process leading up to the 1965 treaty remains the most widely considered, an alternative perspective developed by South Korean political scientist Tae-Ryong Yoon shifts the focus to another set of explanatory factors. He questions the USA-centric interpretation, recognizing the US's role but arguing that the pressure was constant since 1951, albeit with some subtle differences in its intensity, and that it cannot explain the precise timing of 1965. Additionally, he confronts the usual view on Park Chung-hee, arguing that his coup in 1961 slowed down the normalization process, complicating Korea's domestic politics and sapping the considerable improvements made by Prime Minister Chang Myon's government during the early 1960s. Finally, he points out an internal contradiction within Cha's "quasi-alliance[12]" model, arguing that according to it, high United States engagement should have led to friction, not cooperation; the conclusion of the 1965 Treaty during a period of USA engagement thus contradicts Cha's own model (Yoon, 2008).

Tae-Ryong Yoon argues that it was the bilateral learning dynamic at play between both countries, the 14-year-long process of "learning through failure", which ultimately constitutes the decisive explanatory factor of the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations. It is an interesting re-examination of the process, which posits that the 14-year-long learning process is the key explanatory factor, rather than a shift in leadership or external pressure (Yoon, 2008).

> *The repeated resumption of talks was not largely because the two states had to "pretend" to want to cooperate due to the U.S. pressure to do so, but mainly*

[12] A kind of relationship between two states that have not formed an alliance despite sharing a common ally.

> *because both states saw this as being in their own best interest (Yoon, 2008, p. 68).*

Two approaches thus confront: Cha's "America centrist" approach, which makes an exogenous explanation the key explanatory factor, and Yoon's "Learning by failure" approach, which focuses on an endogenous explanation, placing Japan and South Korea as primarily responsible for their own relationship.

Both of them, while diverging on explanatory factors, are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, they illuminate complementary dimensions of the same historical reality. Cha's model highlights the extent to which the normalization process was shaped by external constraints, thus placing Japan and South Korea within a broader geopolitical framework. Tae-Ryong Yoon's learning by failure model, on the other hand, recenters the analysis on the two actors themselves, arguing that 14 years of repeated negotiations, failures, and resumptions generated a progressive convergence of interests which made the 1965 treaty possible.

The reason for engaging with both approaches is simple: both, through different mechanisms, point to the same underlying dynamic: the subordination of historical grievance to pragmatic imperatives. Whether driven by external pressure and Park Chung-hee's priorities, or by bilateral recognition of shared interests forged through a long negotiation process.

Both approaches thus describe a relationship in which repentance was deferred in favor of normalization, a "pragmatism over repentance" logic, which is the defining characteristic of the 1965 Treaty, carrying, as will be seen, long-lasting structural consequences. Specifically, Yoon's concept of "intended ambiguity" highlights that the treaty was not built on a genuine resolution of historical disputes, both countries learning to "cooperate not to cooperate", effectively shelving numerous issues and leaving some areas of the treaty relatively vague. Core friction points, such as the Dokdo / Takeshima territorial dispute and the numerous questions concerning wartime abuses, for instance, were left intentionally unresolved.

> *Although Korean girls and women suffered disproportionately from the "comfort women" system, the South Korean government intentionally suppressed discussions of this issue during the Cold War (Li, 2022, p. 106).*

While this compromise enabled both governments to normalize their relations, both nations did not overcome their historical memory; they simply managed it, institutionalizing a separation between past trauma and pragmatic demands of normalization.

3.2.2. The absence of a politics of regret

The intended ambiguity resulting from the 1965 Treaty stands in direct contrast with what Jeffrey Olick identifies as the "politics of regret"; the emergence, during the post-Cold War era, of a new principle of political legitimacy, based on public acknowledgement of historical wrongdoings and moral accountability (Olick, 2007).

Indeed, whereas Olick asserts that a responsible politics of regret should focus on providing an honest historical record, so that following generations can live without being held hostage by the past, the 1965 Treaty was negotiated and concluded in opposing logic, prioritizing security and economic issues. No formal apology was extended, colonial abuse was not acknowledged, and most interestingly, no victim of any kind was consulted during negotiations. The analysis of the 1965 Treaty therefore underlines something deeper than a simple story of normalization; it's the account of a bilateral relationship built on structured ambiguity, where the burden of historical memory was never truly dealt with, merely managed by both governments, not taking into account the voices of direct victims. This structural tension, pitting pragmatic normalization against the unresolved legacy of colonial rule, will resurface repeatedly in the following decades, most strikingly through the comfort women controversy, proving that the 1965 treaty resolved diplomatic issues, not memorial ones.

3.3) The 1990s: a decade of apologies

3.3.1. From testimonies to a diplomatic crisis (1991 - 1992)

It is only decades later, as the global dynamic described by Olick emerged and reached Japan, that the issue of moral accountability was really addressed by Japan's diplomacy, specifically regarding the issue of the comfort women system. Indeed, while Japan's position on the issue was one of denial, a position reinforced by the conclusion of the 1965 treaty, several events taking place during the early 1990s would force Japan to acknowledge the atrocities.

To begin with, in late 1990, the *"Korean Council for Women Subjected to Military Sexual Slavery in Japan" (Chôngdaehyop)* was established. Then, in August 1991, Kim Hak-sun, a former comfort woman, broke decades of silence and testified publicly, bringing the history of the "comfort women" to the attention of the global public in South Korea and Japan. Public awareness of the comfort women issue then intensified further due to her legal complaint against the Japanese government on December 6th 1991, filed alongside two other survivors. An accusation to which Chief Cabinet Secretary Koichi Kato responded by declaring that no documents indicating the official involvement of the Japanese government in the comfort women system could be found. Yet, on the 10th of December, the South Korean government officially requested a formal investigation, which made the Japanese government reluctantly act and effectively rendered the comfort women issue a diplomatic one. A few days later, the South Korean government followed up by launching its own investigations (Bae, 2017; Kimura, 2019).

The establishment of the Korean Council, the sheer volume of testimonies, the official investigations resulting from the lawsuit, and finally, on the 11th of January 1992, the publication by the Japanese historian Yoshiaki Yoshimi, in the newspaper *Asahi Shimbun*, of a Japanese military document ordering the establishment of "comfort stations", would gradually force Japan to acknowledge these atrocities and revisit its policy on the comfort women issue (Lévy, 2012; Bae, 2017; Haas, 2021).

On January 13th, Chief Cabinet Secretary Koichi Kato held a press briefing during which he issued a formal 5-point statement. It called the suffering endured by the comfort women heartbreaking, acknowledged the discovery of the military involvement document, and admitted *"involvement by the military in some form in advertising for comfort women and operating comfort stations"* (Kato, 1992, as cited in Kimura, 2019, p. 108). Additionally, he extended an apology for Japan's past acts and confirmed that an investigation had been underway since December 1991. Although its "strong air of apology", expressing *"deep regret and apologies concerning the past acts of Japan"* that caused *"unbearable pain and suffering"*, the statement did at no point indicate what those "past acts" were (Kato, 1992, as cited in Kimura, 2019, p. 108).

Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa, already scheduled to visit South Korea before the revelations, also held a press conference, expressing his "*heartfelt regret and remorse for those who suffered indescribable hardships"* (Miyazawa, 1992, as cited in Kimura, 2019, p. 113). Arriving on January 16th in Seoul, amid demonstrations calling for official apologies, he expressed his remorse to President Roh Tae-woo before repeating his apologies at a policy speech. At that time, both governments shared the premise that no further compensation would be needed due to the 1965 Claim Settlement Agreement. Yet, only three days after Miyazawa's return to Japan, the Blue House, pressured by public resentment and political rivalry, changed its stance, demanding Japan to conduct a full-scale investigation and asking for appropriate compensation (Bae, 2017; Kimura, 2019).

Read through Olick's theory, this opening sequence looks like politics of regret as a pure political performance rather than a sincere admission of moral accountability. Indeed, a prompt apology for unspecified past acts and the expression of remorse solely on the premise of no additional responsibility give the impression of a calculated admission of guilt rendered unavoidable due to outside pressure, rather than a sincere expression of moral accountability.

3.3.2. The 1992 Kato and 1993 Kono statements

In July 1992, Koichi Kato issued a second formal statement acknowledging administrative involvement in running comfort stations and expressed Japan's sincere apology and remorse to those who have suffered as comfort women. Yet, much like his first statement, he did not go so far as to acknowledge coercion in recruitment, revealing that the ongoing investigation had been unable to uncover materials related to coercive recruitment. This sparked immediate reactions from the South Korean government and public, viewing the failure to find "coercion documents" as an attempt to cover up the truth. The South Korean government then asserted, using the results of its own investigations, that coercion had obviously taken place, given the testimonies of survivors (MOFA, 1992; Kimura, 2019).

The Japanese stance changed in August 1993, when Kato's successor as Chief Cabinet Secretary, Yohei Kono, released the Kono Statement, announcing the findings of the December 1991 investigation. It officially acknowledged the military's direct or

indirect role in coercing women into comfort stations, totally reversing prior denial. It was welcomed by the Kim Young-sam administration, which declared that the greatest obstacle between both nations was now lifted. Advocacy groups such as the *Chôngdaehyop*, however, expressed their view that the statement was an attempt to bring investigations to an end and was still far from the truth (MOFA, 1993; Haggard, 2015; Kimura, 2019).

Unlike the Murayama declaration that would follow, the Kono statement was never adopted by Cabinet vote, therefore remaining the words of a single official. This institutional nature made the Kono statement quite vulnerable to subsequent questioning, being contested on evidentiary grounds by numerous Japanese officials, including former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe calling the statement a product of compromise (MOFA, 1993; Kimura, 2019).

3.3.3. The Murayama Declaration

On the 15th of August 1995, for the 50th anniversary of Japan's surrender, Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama issued what would become the most significant expression of Japanese apology to Asian nations, naming colonial rule and aggression as having caused *"tremendous damage and suffering"*, and expressing his *"heartfelt apology"* (MOFA, 1995).

I find the Murayama Declaration best exemplifies Olick's politics of regret in the case of Japan-South Korea relations. Indeed, to begin with, unlike previous statements, it was formally adopted by Cabinet decision, making it the official position of the Japanese state, not the words of a single official. Then, the declaration came with the establishment of the Peace, Friendship and Exchange Initiative, a program which supported *"historical research into relations in the modern era between Japan and the neighboring countries of Asia and elsewhere and rapid expansion of exchanges with those countries"* (MOFA, 1995, para. 3). Finally, the declaration explicitly aligns with Olick's idea of a responsible ethic of regret by declaring that Japan's task is to *"convey to younger generations the horrors of war"*, so that they never repeat history's errors and are not held hostage by the past (MOFA, 1995 para. 3).

Yet, despite its alignment with Olick's framework and its institutional weight, the Murayama Declaration, much like the Kono Statement, still faced intense criticism.

Indeed, despite Cabinet voting, Murayama was only the leader of the smaller Japan Socialist Party, thus lacking the strength to force his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) coalition partners to support his decision. In fact, at the time of the declaration, a group of 210 LDP members formed the "League of Parliamentarians on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the End of World War II" to protest against the declaration, fearing that it would create historical problems for the future. Critics also include revisionist movements such as the "Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform", a nationalist group which argues that history textbooks focus too heavily on bad aspects of Japanese history, making Japan the sole bearer of the responsibility of the war. This group has explicitly argued that the Murayama and Kono statements should be disregarded, as they tarnish national pride and convey a masochistic reading of history (Kimura, 2019).

The declaration was also criticized in South Korea, perceived as insincere, as it only admitted moral accountability, not considering legal responsibility. The Asian Women's Fund (AWF), established under Murayama in the spirit of the declaration as a mechanism to resolve the issue, for instance, was heavily criticized by survivors and NGOs because it relied on private donations rather than state reparations, viewing it as a way for the Japanese state to "pass the buck" to its citizens and evade legal responsibility (Lévy, 2012; Kimura, 2019).

Ultimately, both the Kono statement and Murayama declaration demonstrate the risk Jeffrey Olick noted in endeavors of regret: efforts of remembrance and apologies are dangerous political tools and may not be successful in restoring positive perceptions between former adversaries, as they remain subject to recurring interpretation and contestation by numerous actors (Olick, 2007; Lind, 2008; Dobransky, 2010).

3.3.4. The 1998 Joint Declaration; opening South Korea to Japanese culture

Officially titled the *"Japan-Republic of Korea Joint Declaration - A New Japan-Republic of Korea Partnership towards the Twenty-first Century"*, the 1998 declaration was issued jointly by Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi and President Kim Dae-jung in October 1998. Like previous declarations, it included Japan's expression of remorse; the key difference, however, was that unlike previous apologies, it was embedded in a bilateral document co-signed by both heads of state, in which the South

Korean President formally accepted the apology, with *"sincerity and appreciation"*. (MOFA, 1998).

Yet, the most significant aspect of the 1998 Joint Declaration remains the immediate tangible effects it had on bilateral relations. Among which can be found the opening of the Republic of Korea to Japanese culture, which had been previously restricted. The 1998 declaration, as such, can be considered the foundational diplomatic framework that institutionalised cultural diplomacy as a primary tool for bilateral reconciliation.

In practical terms, the declaration was accompanied by an action plan intended to give concrete form to the partnership. Key initiatives included the promotion of intellectual and academic exchanges, facilitated by simplifications of visa requirements; the active promotion of cultural and sports exchanges, centered on the co-hosting of the 2002 FIFA World Cup; and finally, the expansion and support of government programs centered around student and youth exchange. These endeavors, prioritising the cultivation of understanding among younger generations so that they do not remain held hostage by the past, combined with both countries declaring that they had to *"squarely face the past and develop relations based on mutual understanding and trust"*, seem to closely align with Olick's politics of regret (MOFA, 1998, para. 2).

> *President Kim Dae Jung conveyed his policy of opening the Republic of Korea to Japanese culture. Prime Minister Obuchi welcomed this policy as contributing to true, mutual understanding between the peoples of Japan and the Republic of Korea (MOFA, 1998, para. 10).*

Yet, similarly to previous statements, its success proved contingent. Indeed, while it institutionalised a "politics of regret" to foster reconciliation, its durability was limited due to several structural and social factors. As mentioned with the Kono and Murayama statements, expressions of state apologies are not static, but an ongoing mediation between the past and the present, meaning their success is subject to interpretations and contestations.

In the case of the 1998 Joint Declaration, in addition to criticism from Japanese officials and revisionist movements, it was Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's 2001 visit to the Yasukuni Shrine that played the decisive role in eroding the future-oriented

notion established in 1998. Indeed, numerous war criminals, including some convicted of Class-A war crimes[13] are enshrined in the monuments. The visit was a strategic maneuver to consolidate Koizumi's support base, competing for the support of the Japan War-Bereaved Families Association, a key support of his main rival, Ryutaro Hashimoto. However, it directly contradicted the spirit of the 1998 agreement, which was founded on Japan's "spirit of humility" and "heartfelt apology" (MOFA, 1998, para. 2; Kimura, 2019).

3.3.5. The 1990s "apology decade"

Ultimately, whereas the 1990s managed to achieve landmark apologies and bilateral cooperation, it was paradoxically undermined by a "dual discourse" where state apologies were simultaneously contradicted by Japanese revisionist circles. This made irreconcilable differences in historical perceptions official, while the persistent refusal to admit legal liability ensured that government-level compromises would be rejected by survivors and civil society as insincere political performances.

Entering the 21st century, a complicated period thus emerged, with cultural successes tempered by tensions, followed by a breakdown of relations and escalation to deadlock from 2005 onwards, culminating in the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement (Nishino et al., 2018; Kimura, 2019). Yet, before focusing on the failure of the 2015 agreement, the role of the South Korean civil society has to be addressed.

3.4) The transmission of memory: the "Statue of Peace"

3.4.1. A civil society endeavor

On the 14th of December 2011, in order to commemorate the 1000th weekly "Wednesday demonstration[14]" held in support of surviving comfort women, the "Statue of Peace", also called the "Comfort Woman Statue", was installed opposite the Japanese embassy in Seoul. The project was entirely funded by the Korean Council and depicts a seated teenage girl wearing a *hanbok*[15], clenching her fists and staring at

[13] Charges covering crimes against peace / of aggression brought against several of Japan's top leaders.
[14] Weekly protests held since January 1992 by the Korean Council in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul.
[15] Traditional Korean clothing.

the Japanese embassy. Rather than anger or sadness, the girl holds a dignified expression, symbolizing the determination of survivors to not give up until they receive an apology. Perched on her shoulder is a bird, symbolizing freedom and peace, as well as the connection between the living and the deceased victims, and the marble beneath her shows the shadow of an elderly woman, representing survivors as they appear today. Finally, an empty chair stands beside her, inviting the public to sit with her to think about those who passed away (Nishino et al., 2018; Li, 2022).

The establishment of the Statue of Peace by the Korean council bears important significance, as it further reinforces the role of NGOs and militants as "memory activists", able to pressure governments "from below". A role they had endorsed since the early 1990s, when civil society movements and survivors such as Kim Hak-sun brought the issue of comfort women to light. Yet, I find the statue to be only one example of a much wider commemorative apparatus. Indeed, the Wednesday demonstrations themselves, held without interruption since 1992; the archives and museums maintained by the Korean council and allied associations; and further Statues of Peace erected elsewhere in South Korea and abroad, are all examples of a much deeper phenomenon, which the following section situates within Assmann's notion of cultural memory (Nishino et al., 2018).

3.4.2. Lasting symbols

Assmann defined cultural memory as the long-term memory of societies, carried by institutionalised pools of knowledge, rituals and symbols, and contributing to the collective identity of a group. This is done via what he calls the *"concretion of identity",* the idea that objective manifestations of cultural memory are anchored in an identificatory factor, in a positive ("We are this") or negative sense ("That is our opposite") (Assmann, 1995; Olick et al., 2011).

I find the Statue of Peace to be, among others, a perfect example of these mechanisms, representing a lasting institutionalised symbol which accounts for what happened, but also what matters for South Koreans. In fact, the example of the Comfort Woman Statue is particularly telling, as it anchors a collective identity based on the statement "We suffered this", operating in negative opposition to the Japanese. An opposition perfectly illustrated by the statue having been installed right opposite the Japanese

embassy, staring at it. The Statue of Peace is therefore the perfect symbol of the existence of the issue surrounding comfort women, and more broadly, the Japanese colonisation of Korea, within the realm of cultural memory, contributing to the South Korean collective identity.

Yet, an important nuance is to be noted: the fact that the South Korean identity should not be reduced merely to an anti-Japanese identity. Indeed, South Korea is obviously not defined solely by its relationship with Japan, and the collective memory of a traumatic event should not be considered as the sole component of a social group's identity.

3.5) The 2015 Comfort Women Agreement

3.5.1. Ins and outs of the 2015 Agreement

In 2015, Japan and South Korea announced, during a joint press conference, the conclusion of an agreement intended to resolve the comfort women issue "finally and irreversibly". Yet, by 2019, this agreement had effectively been shelved, disavowed by the Moon Jae-in administration, which presented the agreement as seriously flawed (Kouzmine, 2016; Kondoch, 2022).

Signed on the 28th of December 2015 by Foreign Ministers Fumio Kishida and Yun Byung-se, the agreements included several key provisions. Firstly, an official acknowledgement of responsibility and the expression of a formal apology by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who relayed his remorse indirectly through his foreign minister. Then, the promise by Japan of a 1 billion yen fund directed to a foundation set up and managed by the South Korean government to support survivors. For its part, the South Korean government agreed to "strive to solve" the issue regarding the Statue of Peace located in Seoul, which was a major point of concern for Japan. Finally, both governments confirmed the issue to be resolved "finally and irreversibly", pledging to refrain from mutual criticism in the international community, including at the UN (Kouzmine, 2016; Nishino et al., 2018; Kondoch, 2022).

Nevertheless, the failure of the agreement became apparent almost immediately, the agreement being characterized by many survivors and activists as a "declaration of war" on everything for which they had been lobbying over the previous 25 years.

According to a poll conducted in 2017, 20% of respondents directly opposed the accord, and 70% declared it should be renegotiated (Nishino et al., 2018; Schumacher, 2021).

Several factors explain the agreement's failure, the most important one being that neither government consulted surviving women or advocacy groups like the Korean Council during the drafting process. This led South Korean civil society to heavily criticize its terms and qualify the agreement as a "diplomatic quick fix" prioritising state interests over survivors' dignity. For instance, survivor Yi Ok-son publicly rejected the deal, declaring *"I can't accept an agreement that ignores us. They should have met the victims and explained their intentions"* (Yi, 2017, as cited in Nishino et al., 2018, p. 198). The 2015 bilateral agreement, similarly to previous statements and declarations, is therefore a textbook example of a failed politics of regret, heavily driven by geopolitical pressure, not long-term reconciliation.

Among the terms that displeased South Korean civil society, the one that caused the most dissatisfaction was that, like previous statements, it recognised moral accountability without any form of legal responsibility, Japan maintaining that its legal liability had already been settled by the 1965 Claims Settlement Agreement. Fumio Kishida further angered activists by declaring that the 1 billion yen fund was a humanitarian contribution, not a direct and official state compensation. The Japanese demand for the removal of the Seoul Statue of Peace also sparked massive backlash, with students organising 24-hour sit-ins to protect the memorials (Nishino et al., 2018; Kimura, 2019; Gluck, 2021).

Park Geun-hye, president from 2013 to 2017, who approved of the deal, was arrested and impeached on corruption charges in 2017. Her successor, Moon Jae-in, immediately challenged the deal, arguing with Shinzo Abe that a great majority of Koreans were not able to accept the bilateral accord, effectively rejecting the agreement and denying the removal of the peace memorials (Nishino et al., 2018).

3.5.2. Structural failures

The collapse of the 2015 agreement is not an anomaly, as it closely mirrors structural patterns in endeavors of reconciliation which already proved to negatively impact previous statements and declarations.

Four continuities stand out. First of all, much like the 1965 Treaty and the 1995 Asian Women's Fund (AWF), victims were sidelined, a top-down exclusion that sparked significant backlash among South Korean civil society. Second, Japan actively evaded legal accountability, as illustrated in 2015 when Fumio Kishida declared that the 1 billion yen fund was a humanitarian contribution rather than official state compensation. This legal sidestepping closely mirrored the structure of the AWF, which relied on charitable private donations rather than official state reparations. Third, much like in 1965, the bilateral agreement was heavily driven by strategic considerations, with the United States heavily nudging its two close allies to resolve their tension in both cases. Finally, much like during the 1990s, the 2015 agreement was characterized by a dual discourse. Indeed, while Shinzo Abe conveyed his apologies through his foreign minister, he subsequently addressed the Diet in January 2016, stating that no written evidence existed proving the Japanese military forcibly recruited comfort women (Lévy, 2012; Nishino et al., 2018; Li, 2022). Overall, the 2015 agreement thus appears to be kind of a melting pot of the structural flaws that already had a negative impact on previous statements and agreements.

Yet, I think the collapse of the 2015 agreement tells more than that. Indeed, I think it actually suggests that the comfort women issue, the most hotly debated of the colonial disputes, has successfully transitioned into the permanent realm of cultural memory.

When the two governments signed the bilateral agreement in 2015, claiming to "finally and irreversibly" resolve the issue, they attempted a top-down diplomatic closure that did not take into account victims. However, the explosive backlash that followed and the ultimate collapse of the treaty under Moon Jae-in proved that the memory of this trauma was no longer simply bound to communicative memory, the fading, unstable recollections of individuals. Instead, as argued previously, it had crystallized into the realm of cultural memory, objectified through monuments, rituals, and deeply rooted in collective identity. It therefore suggests that state-level strategies and agreements have to be careful when dealing with matters embedded in the realm of cultural memory.

3.6) How collective memory can shape a relationship

While more recent developments have occurred since the failure of the 2015 agreement, the episodes presented in this section provide sufficient grounds to clearly understand the way the colonial era and its consequences continue to shape the Japan - ROK relationship.

Indeed, taken together, these successive episodes: the colonial period, the 1965 Treaty's structured ambiguity, the decade of contested apology statements, the institutionalisation of memory, and the collapse of the 2015 agreement, greatly contributed to the current relationship between Japan and South Korea. A relationship deeply rooted in structural ambiguity, where memorial issues were never really resolved, merely managed, deferred, and continuously renegotiated (Sintionean, 2020).

> *In recent years, the issue of colonial era (1910-1945) forced labour has been resurfacing very often in diplomatic feuds between the two governments (Sintionean, 2020, p. 53-54).*
>
> *Forced labour is just one of the divisive issues troubling Korean - Japanese relations. Most of the sources of conflict stem from the inability to find international consensus on how to view the past, particularly the period of colonial occupation of Korea by Japan and Japan's role in the Asia-Pacific War (1941-1945) (Sintionean, 2020, p. 53-54).*

I therefore argue that if Japan's relationship with South Korea has been influenced by a series of settlements that only managed memory, never resolving the underlying issues, then Japan's cultural diplomacy efforts in South Korea operate within a live and periodically reignited mnemonic conflict. A mnemonic conflict stemming from the inability to find international consensus on how to view the past and which, as the next chapter explores, most likely influences the reception of Japan's cultural diplomacy efforts in South Korea.

4) How does collective memory mediate the success of Japan's cultural diplomacy efforts in South Korea?

4.1) Reframing the hypothesis

The objectives of cultural diplomacy are to foster mutual understanding, sway foreign audiences, and enhance a nation's political influence. In this sense, Cool Japan constitutes the cornerstone of Japan's contemporary cultural diplomacy endeavors. Yet, in South Korea, it faces a significant challenge: the collective memory of their shared past. This analysis now aims to explore this relation, the way Cool Japan and collective memory intersect in South Korea. By doing so, it will bring elements of response to the research question formulated in the introduction: *"In what way does the Cool Japan discourse influence Japan - Korea relations, and to what extent does their mnemonically charged relationship affect this cultural diplomacy strategy"*?

My initial hypothesis posited that the mnemonically charged relationship between Japan and South Korea may constitute an obstacle to Japan's cultural diplomacy efforts. The core point of this analysis is therefore to examine whether Cool Japan is effectively fulfilling its role as the cornerstone of Japan's cultural diplomacy, and to analyze the way collective memory intersects with this role.

Rather than treating collective memory as a single concept, this chapter will draw on the distinctions established in the theoretical framework, namely, Assmann's opposition between communicative and cultural memory and Olick's distinction between collected and collective memory. This will allow me to identify at which level of memory Cool Japan operates and when its effects reach a limit.

To begin with, an emphasis will be put on the spread and reception of Cool Japan in South Korea, a concept which, as a reminder, is intended to act as a gateway for lesser-known aspects of Japanese culture and function as the contemporary champion of Japanese cultural diplomacy. Secondly, what I call the "critical stance" will be examined, looking at previous works of prominent scholars on the issue, before focusing, in a third step, on the concept of cultural connectivity, a more optimistic reading of the issue. Quantitative insights will then be explored, examining the results

of the EAI - Genron NPO / IHJ joint surveys. Fifth, important nuances regarding the generational distribution of the identified effect and the real role of the Japanese government will be examined. Finally, a discussion section will bring these findings together through the prism of collective memory, ultimately bringing elements of response to the research question.

4.2) The spread of Cool Japan in South Korea

East Asian markets represent one of the primary destinations for Japanese cultural exports, a wide variety of cultural products having been adopted by local markets and becoming deeply embedded in the daily consumption of Asian youth. South Korea is no exception to this trend, with the spread of Japanese popular culture in the country being defined by a transition from a decades-long official ban to a state of massive, routine penetration, where Japanese media and lifestyle products embedded themselves in daily life.

From 1945 to 1998, the South Korean government maintained a strict ban on the importation of Japanese cultural goods due to historical animosities regarding the colonial period. This ban was lifted in the wake of the 1998 Joint Declaration, gradually allowing the importation of Japanese popular culture and leading to a significant surge in legal consumption. Yet, even during the ban, South Korea was already sensitive to the inflow of Japanese pop culture, which spread through illegal or informal channels. Indeed, Japanese animation, games, music, and dramas were already widely present, accessible through satellite broadcasting, the pirated media market, and the internet. In fact, by the mid 1990s, screens in East Asia, including South Korea, were already “awash” with Japanese dramas, and approximately 10% of South Korea’s music market consisted of Japanese music (Otmazgin, 2008; Chua, 2012; Bouvard, 2015).

By the time the ban was lifted, demand for Japanese culture was therefore already well established, generating immediate sales and a wider circulation of Japanese cultural goods. The spread of Cool Japan through legal channels thus quickly proved to be a great success, with Japanese manga routinely being translated into Korean and Japan-Pop (J-Pop) reaching a peak of popularity during the early 2000s (Katzenstein & Shiraishi, 2006; Otmazgin, 2008). Additionally, the success proved to resonate with a

fairly wide audience, as evidenced by the acclaim received by Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2004), which grossed $1.5m in 4 days from 270,196 admissions, well ahead of competitors such as Disney's *Monsters, Inc*, proving that Japanese animation could appeal to the general South Korean audience (Mitchell, 2002; Katzenstein & Shiraishi, 2006; Matsui, 2014). Ultimately, for the generation that grew up during the 2000s, Japanese animation and manga form a large part of their childhood memories, such that it would not be an exaggeration to say that they experienced more exposure to Japanese manga than Korean manhwa[16] (Oh & Chun, 2026).

In today's South Korea, this pattern of routine, standardized, high-volume consumption of Japanese popular culture has not receded, even intensifying since the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly driven by younger generations. Japanese films, for instance, continue to compete for top spots in the Korean box office, capturing 36.2% market share in September 2025, driven by major successes such as *Demon Slayer: Infinity Castle* and *Chainsaw Man: Reze Arc*. The former even reached, by October 13, a box office of 58.4 billion won, thus becoming the highest-grossing Japanese film ever released in South Korea, surpassing the previous record established in 2023 by Makoto Shinkai's *Suzume*, which itself attracted more than 5 million viewers and generated 57.8 billion won (KoBiz, 2025). Alongside this, many millennials have shown a tendency to revisit their childhood memories shaped by their interaction with Japanese popular culture, as shown by the recent Pokémon Bread sticker craze or the major success of the film *The First Slam Dunk*, which is based on a 1990s basketball manga. Lastly, another viral trend demonstrated the everlasting presence of Japanese culture in South Korea's daily life: the use of AI to transform personal and family photos into distinct aesthetic styles, among which the Ghibli style, referencing a Japanese animation studio, was especially popular in Korea. (Oh & Chun, 2026).

The spread of Cool Japan in Korea has, however, been significantly impacted by the parallel rise and global success of *hallyu*, the so-called "Korean wave". Indeed, hallyu transitioned from imitating Japanese formats to competing against them, a competition which has, in particular, affected the J-pop market, considered to be lagging behind K-pop. Its rise, however, also served as a "wake-up call" for Japanese officials,

[16] The Korean term for comics and print cartoons. It can also refer specifically to South Korean comic books and digital webtoons.

explicitly using it as a benchmark for Japan's policies and analyzing Korea's state-led cultural promotion to revitalize its own creative industries. While Japan was traditionally the leading cultural exporter in Asia, the global success of the Korean wave since the late 1990s has therefore created a complex dynamic characterized by intense rivalry and mutual influence. Nowadays, Japanese popular culture thus remains a significant staple of South Korean consumption, while coexisting with hallyu (Chua, 2012; Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters, 2019; Jang & Kim, 2024).

4.3) Cool Japan, the champion of Japan's cultural diplomacy

4.3.1. The critical stance

In this section, I will introduce several authors I argue have critical views on Cool Japan and its impact on bilateral relations. While their positions and research differ, they have in common a more or less aggressive challenge to Cool Japan. Grouping them in this section is therefore a methodological choice made in order to organise the research.

In 2005, the METI issued a White Paper which declared that "*without the spread of Japanese pop culture, anti-Japanese sentiment would have been stronger in South Korea"* (METI, 2005; as cited in Iwabuchi, 2015, p. 426), an assumption that experts such as Michal Daliot-Bul, Koichi Iwabuchi and Nissim Otmazgin have criticized, presenting it as naive and largely unproven. They, indeed, argue that while Japanese pop culture has undeniably penetrated East Asian markets, the "power" it generates does not easily convert into political influence (Otmazgin, 2008; Daliot-Bul, 2009; Otmazgin, 2012; Iwabuchi, 2015).

Firstly, Michal Daliot-Bul argues that the state's attempt to "tame" Cool Japan into a national brand strategy has resulted in a "clean record" narrative of Japan, where officials ignore the fact that for millions of East Asians, Japan's cultural tradition is tied to memories of imperial aggression. This perspective echoes the notion of "choice of the past" mentioned in the theoretical framework. Indeed, the idea that Cool Japan has resulted in a clean record of Japan's past, with officials ignoring its most negative aspects, illustrates the fact that collective memory is not an exact transcription of the

past, and that any foreign policy shapes a particular interpretation of history (Rosoux, 2002; Daliot-Bul, 2009).

Koichi Iwabuchi, prominent Japanese scholar and professor of media and cultural studies, goes even further in his critique, arguing that Cool Japan is only a one-way projection of a sterilized, unthreatening image of Japan that fails to engage in genuine cross-border dialogue. He highlights what he identifies as an absurdity: Japan trying to foster empathy through anime (e.g. Doraemon as "anime ambassador"), while simultaneously, political actions contribute to anti-Japanese sentiment (e.g. Yasukuni Shrine visits) (Iwabuchi, 2015).

> *By binding past and present, policy makers in Japan seem to believe that the success of Japanese popular culture in Asia can be used to induce collective amnesia in regard to Japan's colonial past and launch Japan into a new political future in the region (Daliot-Bul, 2009, p.254).*
>
> *As pointed out, the standard Japanese idea of pop-culture diplomacy tends to rely on naïve assumptions about media culture's capacity to improve Japan's reputation abroad, and to transcend the problematic and historically constituted relations between Japan and other Asian countries (Iwabuchi, 2015, p.426).*

Finally, Nissim Otmazgin, prominent Israeli scholar and political scientist specializing in East Asian studies, posits that South Korean consumers actively separate their personal enjoyment of Japanese culture from their political and historical stances. He asserts that they can actively consume and enjoy Japanese fashion, travel, food, and anime, while maintaining a critical stance toward Japan regarding wartime responsibilities, and that there is no automatic conversion of pop-culture resources into diplomatic power. During his field research, while students in Hong Kong and Bangkok viewed Japan through a rather apolitical lens, more than two-thirds of South Korean students explicitly cited the role of Japan's wartime responsibilities in their perception of Japan. They expressed positive and enthusiastic attitudes toward Japanese fashion, music, and animation, while simultaneously expressing hostility toward Japan's right-wing policies and historical revisionism. A position perfectly summed up by a student's declaration: *"I like their fashion, music and movies, but*

sometimes they make me mad because of the way they treat history" (Otmazgin, 2008, p. 95; Otmazgin, 2012).

4.3.2. The "Cultural connectivity" concept, a more optimistic reading

Yet, I do not read the findings of these scholars as definite evidence that Japan's contemporary cultural diplomacy efforts are simply ineffective against the mnemonically charged past of Japan and South Korea. Indeed, in contrast to the skepticism exposed by the critical stance, contemporary research and data present a more nuanced, optimistic view of the way Cool Japan navigates bilateral relations and history.

Two points in particular are worth noting. First, the plausible success of the "gateway effect" referenced previously, asserting that Cool Japan content functions less as a direct persuasion tool and more as an entry point toward deeper engagement with Japanese culture (Kanji, 2016; Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters, 2024). Then, perhaps the most interesting point for this thesis, the argument that while pop culture does not erase history, it creates "shared positive memories" across East Asia, memories that can act as a counterweight to historical frictions. This point was documented by Michal Daliot-Bul in her 2009 article, attributing it to researcher Yoshiko Nakano and her 2008 study "Shared Memories: Japanese Pop Culture in China".

In their "Cultural Connectivity and the Sustainability of Korea-Japan Cooperation" article, Seunghee Oh, assistant professor at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy, and Jahyun Chun, professor in the Department of International Relations at Yonsei University, provide the most recent iteration of this optimistic reading. Their concept of "cultural connectivity", referring to *"the ways in which individuals construct their identities in relation to the cultural content they consume"* (Oh & Chun, 2026, p. 2), posits that younger generations in South Korea and Japan, lacking direct experience of the colonial era and shaped by shared experiences, are increasingly forging connections based on commonalities rather than historical antagonisms. Oh and Chun posit that, unlike traditional diplomacy, cultural connectivity manages to act as a "stabilizing force" between Japan and South Korea, with people-to-people ties being resilient, even at times of political turbulence. Their argument is well illustrated by a

trend mentioned previously: the use of AI tools to generate “Ghibli-style” versions of personal photos, a trend Oh and Chun read as a sign of a “reduced level of resistance” toward Japanese culture, as it involves the non-critical, everyday domestication of a Japanese cultural marker (Oh & Chun, 2026).

Whereas Otmazgin emphasized the coexistence of enjoyment and critical judgment within one individual, Oh and Chun thus underscore the cumulative and generational effect of cultural coexistence, asserting that even if no single consumer’s affection for Japanese pop culture translates directly into diplomatic capital, the aggregated effect of an entire generation growing up surrounded by Japanese media may contribute to long-term stability and resilience. Both stances are not mutually exclusive; they even agree on several points: Japanese popular culture is subject to massive and routine consumption, cultural enjoyment coexists with historical grievances and critical views of Japan, and popular culture is consumed in a non-nationalistic and non-dogmatic way. In fact, Oh and Chun’s “cultural connectivity” does not invalidate Otmazgin’s findings; it simply scales them up over a longer and broader horizon (Otmazgin, 2008; Oh & Chun, 2026).

4.4) Quantitative insights: the EAI - Genron NPO / IHJ joint surveys

In their 2026 article, Oh and Chun heavily rely on empirical data from the yearly joint public surveys conducted across both countries. Indeed, since 2013, the East Asia Institute (EAI) has been tracking the South Korean perception of Japan on an annual basis. It did so jointly with the Genron NPO till 2023, then alone in 2024, and finally with the International House of Japan (IHJ) starting 2025. Their sampling method has remained broadly stable, roughly 1000 adult respondents per country, sampled proportionally by gender, age, and region. Yet, the change in the survey’s partnership is a methodological caveat that should be noted, prompting caution regarding year-to-year comparability, despite continuity in sampling methods (East Asia Institute & Genron NPO, 2023; East Asia Institute, 2024; Sohn et al., 2026).

4.4.1. The cultural - favourability metric

Whereas the initial survey’s metric tracks general perception, a narrower metric, tracking specifically the consumption of the other country’s popular culture,

was introduced in 2022, alongside a follow-up question regarding whether that consumption improves the respondents' impression of the other country. I find this recent culture-specific metric to offer very interesting insights.

Since its introduction, the share of South Koreans declaring they enjoy Japanese culture has continuously increased, from 17.2% in 2022 to 40.2% in 2026. Although this does not really tell much yet, it's interesting to note that this sharp increase is consistent with the continuous rise of South Korean's favorable impression of Japan since 2020 (a low point following the 2019 "No Japan" boycott, discussed in section 4.4.3), from 16.1% in 2020 to 54.3% in 2026. More significantly, however, is the fact that among South Koreans enjoying Japanese culture, the proportion who say that this enjoyment has improved their general perception of Japan has remained quite high over the years: 81.3% in 2022, 61.8% in 2023, 77.9% in 2024, 84.7% in 2025 and 82.5% in 2026. Despite the dip observed in 2023, the overall trend has never fallen below a clear majority (Sohn, 2024; Sohn et al., 2026).

4.4.2. Sohn's Ordinal Logistic Regression model

The empirical data gathered by the EAI in 2024, which Yul Sohn, professor at Yonsei University and former president of the EAI, operationalized in his "Ordinal Logistic Regression Analysis", provide the most rigorous, quantitative analysis of the relationship between pop-culture engagement and favourability. Sohn's model treats favourability toward Japan as an ordinal outcome and tests it against a set of explanatory variables, ultimately finding that "Japan visit experience" and "Degree of engagement with Japanese popular culture" are the most significant predictors of favourability, ahead of variables regarding the North Korean threat and economic interests (Sohn, 2024; Oh & Chun, 2026).

It should be noted that in this model, pop-culture consumption and favourability are measured simultaneously, on the same respondents, at a single point in time. This means that the exact direction of the relationship between pop-culture engagement and favourability cannot be proven. Indeed, respondents who already hold favourable views of Japan for other reasons may be more easily inclined to engage with its cultural products. Nevertheless, the link found in Sohn's model, combined with the argument that pop-culture creates "shared positive memories", documented by Daliot-Bul and

attributed to Nakano, and Oh and Chun's "cultural connectivity" concept, seem to provide sufficient grounds for treating pop-culture consumption as a plausible contributing factor to favourability in this paper.

> *Overall, the rise in positive perceptions of Japan is partially attributed to the growing sense that South Korea and Japan share security and economic interests. More importantly, however, it is fueled by increased people-to-people exchanges—through popular culture, tourism, and direct interactions—which have enhanced mutual understanding and expanded the sense of shared identity between the two nations (Sohn, 2024, p.8).*

Yet, despite record-high favourability toward Japan and the seemingly positive impact of Cool Japan on favourability, South Koreans seem to refuse to bypass history. When asked about what should be the main goal of ROK - Japan relations, 53.2% selected "resolving historical issues" and 47.8% selected "Restoring trust between the two countries". In fact, it seems that while cultural connectivity acts as a stabilizing force, historical disputes continue to present significant obstacles (Sohn, 2024).

The 2026 survey results roughly correspond with these findings; Japan's favourability is at an all-time high (54.3%), with "Japan's attractive food culture, shopping and travel opportunities" and "Interest in Japanese popular culture" respectively being the 2nd and 3rd reasons for favorable impressions. Additionally, 82.5% of respondents enjoying Japanese pop culture also declare that it improves their impression of Japan. Yet, reasons for unfavourability continue to overwhelmingly concern historical issues, and "resolving historical issues between the two countries" remains the number one goal ROK - Japan relations should aim for, according to South Koreans (Sohn et al., 2026).

4.4.3. A "glass ceiling": the fragility of culture-driven favourability

A real-world example of the persistence of historical issues exists. Indeed, in 2019, the "No Japan" boycott erupted, resulting from an economic conflict deeply rooted in unresolved disputes surrounding the legacy of Japanese colonialism on the Korean peninsula, especially regarding the issue of compensation for forced labor and comfort women. The boycott sparked a sharp consumer response against the consumption of Japanese manufactured goods and a nosedive in the public perception

of Japan in South Korea the following year (28.3% in 2018, 31.7% in 2019, and 16.1% in 2020). Sales of Japanese fashion brands such as UNIQLO plummeted, airline companies reported a significant decrease in bookings for Japan, and products ranging from Japanese food and beer to cosmetics and automobiles suffered heavy losses (Lee & Chon, 2021; Sohn, 2024).

However, the boycott's real impact on the consumption of Japanese popular culture, specifically, is hard to establish. Indeed, it primarily impacted manufactured goods, and Cool Japan consumption substantially operates through platforms, fandom communities on the internet, and streaming services. Furthermore, surveys only began tracking culture consumption in 2022. Nonetheless, the boycott gives real proof that historical disputes can negatively impact general favourability.

Finally, one last metric deserves particular attention, as it arguably provides the most significant quantitative illustration for this paper's central argument. To the question "If relations between Korea and Japan deteriorate, would this affect your consumption of Japanese popular culture", a large proportion of South Koreans, 47.3% in 2023, 54.5% in 2024, 51.5% in 2025 and 41.1% in 2026, indicated that they would reduce consumption if relations were to deteriorate (East Asia Institute, 2024; Sohn et al., 2026).

Despite variations across the years, the figure never approaches negligibility. A significant share of respondents, even as favourability toward Japan continuously increases, still condition their consumption of Japanese culture to the state of the political relationship. This metric therefore directly suggests that the favourability generated by Cool Japan operates within limits, which seem to be partly defined by the unresolved historical disputes explored in chapter 3. Ultimately, it signifies that while cultural consumption may act as a vector of favourability and a stabilizing force, political and mnemonic tensions have the capacity to impede this consumption. Caution should nonetheless be advised: 2023-2026 remains a short time frame, and tracking the evolution of the metric would most likely prove interesting.

4.5) Nuances and precisions

Before discussing these findings through the prism of collective memory, two important nuances are to be addressed.

4.5.1. The generational gap

The first precision that should be noted is that the favourability documented in this chapter should not be interpreted as homogeneous across the South Korean population. The cultural connectivity concept developed by Oh and Chun, for instance, focuses on younger generations, millennials (1981 - 1996) and Gen Z (1997 - 2012), who are *"unburdened by any direct experience of the colonial era"* (Oh & Chun, 2026).

At first glance, a simple assumption would be to assume that older generations lead negative perceptions toward Japan, being, contrary to younger generations, "burdened" by direct experiences of the colonial era. However, the subsequent declaration by Yul Sohn complicates this premise and suggests that favourability is not simply dependent on generational proximity to historical events but is sensitive to contemporary political and diplomatic developments.

> *The generational gap is also significant. As discussed in EAI's ROK-Japan Relations as Seen in Public Opinion 2013-2023 (in Korean), over the past 12 years, younger age groups in their 20s and 30s have been the main drivers of positive perceptions of Japan, while those over 50 and 60 have led negative perceptions. A noteworthy trend in the recent survey is the shift in political attitudes among those in their 60s and 70s. Since 2023, these age groups have developed a more positive perception of Japan, with those in their 70s registering the highest positive impressions among all generations (Sohn, 2024, p.13).*

Yet, while the generational gap nuances the scope of the cultural connectivity concept, it does not fundamentally influence this chapter's conclusion. Indeed, the coexistence of rising cultural favourability and demands for historical resolutions, this paper's most important finding, can be observed within younger generations, who are

simultaneously the most important consumers of Japanese pop culture and very much engaged in questions of historical accountability.

4.5.2. The role of the Japanese government

The second nuance concerns the extent to which the favourability documented in this analysis can genuinely be attributed to Japan's cultural diplomacy apparatus, as opposed to Japan's private cultural industries. Indeed, as established in section 4.2, the success of Japanese popular culture in South Korea can be traced back before its institutional capture by the government. In fact, manga, anime and music circulated widely before the early 2000s, when the Japanese government began treating them as diplomatic assets, and it is largely this privately produced content, rather than any MOFA-led initiative, that really contributes to increasing South Korea's favourability of Japan. As such, the favourability gain explained in this chapter should first be attributed to Cool Japan understood as a market-driven phenomenon, and then, if any at all, to Cool Japan as a state-led strategy.

This is an important observation which is consistent with a limit of soft power first exposed in the theoretical framework: the issue regarding soft power's "spontaneous attraction" and the government's efforts to wield it.

4.6) Discussion: the co-existence of cultural attraction and historical grievances through the analytical lens of collective memory

4.6.1. The dual nature of Cool Japan

Rather than confirming that a mnemonically charged relationship straightforwardly impedes cultural diplomacy, or that Cool Japan's pull is strong enough to totally override the "weight of the past", these findings suggest a more nuanced relationship: cultural consumption seems to positively impact favourability, and unresolved tensions reliably reduce it (as proved the 2019 "No Japan" boycott), both coexisting within the same population at the same time. To explain this situation, Cool Japan must be distinguished as both a market-driven phenomenon and a top-down, state-led project.

As a market-driven phenomenon, Cool Japan appears to play a stabilizing role through the "cultural connectivity" concept, plausibly enhancing mutual understanding among young people of South Korea and Japan, and ultimately contributing to increased favourability toward Japan among South Koreans. However, as a state-led project aiming to increase political influence, it has important limitations, which have been accurately pointed out by critical scholars. Koichi Iwabuchi, for instance, declared that Cool Japan failed to engage in genuine cross-border dialogue, a declaration that may be criticized when looking at the "cultural connectivity" concept, but which still seems very true, given that none of the improvements documented in this chapter have actively been accompanied by any change in the underlying institutional dispute. The Statue of Peace remains in place, Japan's position that its legal liability was settled in 1965 remains unchanged, and no Japanese apology has been extended and accepted by the South Korean civil society as final. Ultimately, it seems that while Cool Japan does cushion the relationship at the "people-to-people" level, it most likely cannot induce collective amnesia and substitute for real historical truthfulness, demonstrating a glass ceiling cultural diplomacy alone cannot breach.

4.6.2. Distinct modes of memory

I read this situation as the manifestation of two very distinct modes of memory already presented previously, communicative and cultural memory. Indeed, the consumption of Japanese cultural goods, be it manga, animation, music, or even fashion, seems to register within the scope of communicative memory, which was defined by Jan Assmann as the varieties of collective memory based on everyday, often informal communication, shared among contemporaries. The colonial disputes presented in chapter 3, on the other hand, relate to cultural memory, the long-term memory of societies, made up of an institutionalised set of knowledge, symbols and rituals, which contribute to the constitution of a collective identity (Assmann, 1995). I argue that because cultural memory is structurally slower, more rigid and more institutionally embedded than communicative memory, it renders Cool Japan unable to truly address historical grievances. Read through this framework, Cool Japan therefore does act as a vector of favourability, but on a plane that does not enable it to resolve the deeper underlying dispute.

This distinction can also be explored by drawing on the foundational ambiguity Olick described in the concept of collective memory: the distinction between collected and collective memory in the stronger sense. Indeed, the EAI - Genron NPO / IHJ surveys mobilized previously measure aggregated individual attitudes toward everyday cultural consumption. In substance, this concerns what Olick terms collected memory, the aggregated individual memories of members of a group. Yet, this paper explores in greater depth what Olick refers to as collective memory in the stronger sense: the faculty of groups to remember, memory not only being located in the individual mind, but in collective and institutional structures and cultural practices. This is the register addressed in chapter 3, through the analysis of the Statue of Peace and the successive apology statements (Olick, 1999).

Ultimately, none of the improvements documented in this analysis have actively been accompanied by any real change in the underlying institutional dispute. This does not demonstrate a causal mechanism, but it suggests that changes in the collected memory of people may not be able to lead to significant changes in collective memory in the stronger sense. This is consistent with Olick's thinking, as he asserts both phenomena to be of very distinct ontological orders, needing different epistemologies (Olick, 1999).

This distinction helps reconcile the apparent disagreement between the critical stance and the cultural connectivity concept. Indeed, while critical scholars' skepticism precisely concerns the collective, institutional plane of memory, Oh and Chun's more optimistic reading focuses on the collected, individual plane. Both readings are ultimately descriptions of the same phenomenon observed at two different ontological levels.

4.6.3. Cool Japan and the failure of Japan's global politics of regret

The persistence of the historical dispute, despite the cultural and commercial success of Cool Japan, reveals that Japan's politics of regret has remained a process largely disconnected from its cultural policy, a disconnection which is consistent with the distinction established in the previous section.

Jeffrey Olick argues that a responsible politics of regret should prioritize the cultivation of truth and understanding among descendants, focusing on providing an

honest historical record, allowing future generations to live without being held hostage by the past (Olick, 2007). Ultimately, it therefore requires acting upon the store of knowledge, rituals and symbols through which a group constitutes its collective identity, what Assmann terms cultural memory. In other words, a responsible politics of regret should belong to the same ontological order as the historical dispute it aims to resolve.

Cool Japan, however, as previously stated, remains within the scope of communicative and collected memory. It shapes individual contemporary attitudes through everyday cultural contact and consumption, and its effects are aggregated and measured as such by surveys, but it cannot "touch" the institutional architecture of the historical dispute. I would therefore argue that Japan should not expect Cool Japan to fulfill the role a responsible politics of regret ought to do, not necessarily because it is insincere or ineffective, but because it does not match the task.

4.6.4. Answering the research question

Ultimately, these findings suggest that the initial hypothesis formulated, that collective memory may impede Japan's cultural diplomacy efforts, cannot be simply confirmed or rejected; it needs to be nuanced.

Indeed, collective memory does not straightforwardly obstruct Japan's cultural diplomacy, nor is it simply overcome by Cool Japan's commercial and cultural success. Rather, Cool Japan operates efficiently within the realm of communicative and collected memory, where favourability is influenced by everyday exposure and individual attitudes, but cannot act upon the realm of cultural and collective memory. Cool Japan, through "cultural connectivity", thus appears to successfully fulfill its role as a stabilizer of the relationship at the individual "people-to-people" level, but cannot act as a replacement for a real politics of regret to resolve underlying historical disputes. Japanese policymakers should thus manage their expectations of what cultural diplomacy alone can really achieve within a mnemonically charged relationship.

5) Conclusion

In this thesis, I explored the following research question: *"In what way does the Cool Japan discourse influence Japan - Korea relations, and to what extent does their mnemonically charged relationship affect this cultural diplomacy strategy"*, essentially studying the way Cool Japan and the collective memory of the Japanese colonisation of Korea intersect.

In order to do so, I confronted the hypothesis I formulated based on my theoretical framework, which posits that collective memory acts as an obstacle to cultural diplomacy, against the case study of Japan - South Korea relations. Drawing from the academic fields of soft power and memory studies, I found, by formulating my hypothesis, both disciplines to be largely connected by one particular limit of soft power: the fact that soft power rests on the feelings of the receiving audience, feelings that may be impacted by the collective memory of a particular event or trauma.

My findings, stemming from both secondary qualitative and quantitative data, largely nuance my hypothesis, asserting that the relationship between Cool Japan and the shared, complicated past of Japan and South Korea cannot be reduced to a simple story of obstruction, but should rather be understood as the coexistence of two processes operating on very distinct planes of memory. Essentially, Cool Japan, as a market-driven phenomenon, seems to operate within the realm of communicative and collected memory, driving up favourability through what Oh and Chun (2026) call "cultural connectivity". However, as a state-led strategy, it does not manage to truly impact the deeper realm of cultural and collective memory. This conclusion rests on one key assumption: the existence of distinct registers of memory, originating from the theories of Jan Assmann and Jeffrey K. Olick.

These findings have important practical implications. Indeed, it posits that cultural diplomacy should therefore not be expected to substitute for a genuine politics of regret in Olick's sense, which should stand within the same register as the dispute itself. Ultimately, until a responsible politics of regret founded on an ethic of responsibility is developed, the weight of the past will likely continue to define the "glass ceiling" of Japan's contemporary cultural diplomacy in South Korea.

In order to directly answer the research question, I argue that Cool Japan influences Japan - South Korea relations by seemingly fostering favourability and stabilizing ties at the communicative, everyday level of memory. However, their mnemonically charged relationship restricts this strategy by holding it below a "glass ceiling"; cultural diplomacy thus appears unable to reach the deeper, institutionalised plane of cultural memory where the underlying historical dispute remains unresolved.

Despite these very interesting findings, several important limits of this paper have to be mentioned. To begin with, I specifically focus on the bilateral relationship between Japan and South Korea, yet, as mentioned in section 2.4.2, mnemonic tensions and colonial resentment in East Asia are subject to regional variations, and the "glass ceiling" identified may not apply to Japan's cultural diplomacy efforts in other regions. Secondly, while I accounted for historical evolutions and changes, I did not fully address the issue of domestic political shifts, which have been important in the evolution of Japan - South Korea relations. Third, regarding my analysis, the quantitative data mobilized spans a relatively short period of time (2013 - 2026) and is marked by a change in survey partnership, warranting some caution regarding year-to-year comparisons. Furthermore, the data utilized remains secondary, as the gathering of first-hand data was not possible, something that should be noted. Finally, in the introduction, I defined the Japan - South Korea relationship as mnemonically charged, meaning that their relationship is deeply defined, burdened, and mediated by historical memory and unresolved past grievances. Although I find it to be true, it does not mean that their partnership is solely defined by it; their relationship also includes important economic and security partnerships which could not be addressed in this study. This is consistent with Nye's view on soft power, the fact that it cannot be sufficient to explain a country's politics.

Regarding future research, human-centered initiatives such as the Asia Kakehashi Project and the JET Programme have built direct, interpersonal bridges and active alumni networks (e.g. AKP Super Senpais). Future study centered on these initiatives, especially regarding South Korean participants, could prove to be very interesting, analyzing how connections generated through deep and direct person-to-person exchanges fare against the collective memory of past trauma.

Additionally, future research should not be limited to South Korea. While this thesis rests on a single case study, the question of whether its findings would hold for Japan's other mnemonically charged relationships, most notably with the People's Republic of China, remains wide open. Further study could thus apply a similar thought process to the case study of Japan - China relations, effectively testing the resilience of this thesis' findings.

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7) Appendices

7.1) Timeline of Japan - ROK relations

June 22, 1965	*Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the ROK*	Normalised diplomatic relations but deliberately left historic and legal questions ambiguous - The structural starting point for later disputes.
October 22, 1972	*Creation of the Japan Foundation*	Institutionalisation of Japanese cultural diplomacy and creation of the infrastructure used by Japan to project culture abroad.
December 6, 1991	*Kim Hak-sun lawsuit against the Japanese government*	Vastly contributed to increasing the public awareness of the comfort women issue.
January 1992	*Yoshiaki Yoshimi publication / Kato press conference / Miyazawa's visit to South Korea*	Beginning of the 1990s "apology decade".
July 6, 1992	*Kato 2nd statement*	Japan recognizes administrative involvement in running comfort stations - No acknowledgment of coercion in recruitment.
August 4, 1993	*Kono statement*	Japanese acknowledgement of military involvement and coercion in the comfort women system.
August 15, 1995	*Murayama declaration*	Most significant expression of remorse by Japan.
October 8, 1998	*Japan - ROK Joint Declaration*	Major diplomatic opening - Coincides with the progressive lifting of the ban on Japanese culture in South Korea.
2002	*Publication of McGray's "Japan Gross National Cool"*	Catalyst for Japanese policymakers - Starting point for the institutionalisation of Cool Japan.
2006	*Pop-culture diplomacy*	The MOFA officially launched its "Pop-culture diplomacy".
December 14, 2011	*Establishment of the Statue of Peace opposite the Japanese embassy in Seoul*	Symbol of the existence of the issue surrounding comfort women and the Japanese colonisation of Korea within the realm of cultural memory.

2015	*Japan - ROK Comfort Women Agreement*	Attempted to settle the comfort women issue “finally and irreversibly” but failed to produce durable results.

Sources: My compilation based on the references indicated for each event in the thesis

This master's thesis examines the way collective memory intersects with the success of Japan's contemporary cultural diplomacy in South Korea, focusing on the concept of Cool Japan. In order to do so, it draws from the academic fields of soft power (Nye) and memory studies (Halbwachs, Assmann, Olick) to develop a theoretical framework distinguishing communicative from cultural memory and collected from collective memory, while also introducing the notion of politics of regret. It then formulates a hypothesis positing that collective memory constitutes an obstacle to cultural diplomacy.

After tracing the evolution of Japanese cultural diplomacy from the imperial era to the institutionalisation of Cool Japan, and examining the mnemonically charged nature of the Japan - South Korea relationship, from the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations to the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement, this thesis confronts the initial hypothesis against secondary qualitative and quantitative data, including the EAI-Genron NPO/IHJ joint surveys.

The findings ultimately nuance the initial hypothesis. Indeed, Cool Japan registers within the realm of communicative and collected memory, positively influencing relations and acting as a plausible contributing factor of favourability toward Japan through everyday cultural consumption. However, it fails to really impact the deeper, institutionalised register of cultural and collective memory, where the historical dispute remains unresolved. Japan's cultural diplomacy therefore faces a "glass ceiling": while it may stabilize relations at the people-to-people level, it appears to be structurally unable to substitute for a genuine politics of regret.

Key-words: Cool Japan / Cultural diplomacy / Collective memory / Japan-South Korea relations / Soft power

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