# **To what extent has history shaped the social and political relationship between Japan and South Korea?**

The research conducted, focused on how history has influenced the modern-day political and societal relations between Japan and South Korea, and to what extent it has been influenced. The research topic was dissected into two key research areas consisting of, “*what historical factors influenced the societal and political relations between these two nations?”* and, “*to* *what extent have the historical factors influenced the political and societal relations between them?”.* Additionally, the influence of America has been considered to broaden the variables that could impact this topic[[1]](#footnote-1).

## **Extent of historical influence on the polItical relationship between Japan and south korea**

To understand the reasoning behind the complex status of the political relationship between Japan and South Korea, historical events and many other political factors must be taken into consideration. The main factors consist of:

* Ancient Wars[[2]](#footnote-2), Imperial occupation, and War crimes[[3]](#footnote-3) [[4]](#footnote-4)
* Influence of America during the cold war era[[5]](#footnote-5) [[6]](#footnote-6)
* Ideals of current politicians[[7]](#footnote-7) [[8]](#footnote-8)

### Ancient Wars, Imperial occupation and War crimes

Korean and Japanese military tensions initiated during 1592-1598 due to the Imjin war as confirmed by Kallie Szczepanski, a Ph.D. graduate of Asian histories, as she states “The initiation of Korean-Japanese conflicts can be traced back to the Imjin war”, thus, becoming the first Japanese invasion of Korea[[9]](#footnote-9) [[10]](#footnote-10). The Imjin war significantly impacted Korean Japanese political relations as it triggered the turning point of political trust, creating further military tensions throughout history[[11]](#footnote-11) [[12]](#footnote-12). Although Japan resulted in defeat, it cultivated a militarist and expansionist culture within Japan, hence, increasing national interest in dominating throughout east Asia[[13]](#footnote-13). This aggressive militarist culture, alongside the imperialist mindset, led Japan to annex the Korean peninsula from 1910-1945[[14]](#footnote-14). Throughout annexation, the Japanese conscripted over 5.4 million Koreans to forcibly work in military industries, resulting in over 800 thousand mortalities. Furthermore, Korean surnames, language, and culture were prohibited and replaced with Japanese counterparts[[15]](#footnote-15) [[16]](#footnote-16). Not only did the Japanese censor Korean culture and society, but Japan also decimated natural environments by: deforesting over 50% and damaging over 80% of forests, causing the extinction of native tigers and replacing native plantation with Japanese flora[[17]](#footnote-17) [[18]](#footnote-18) [[19]](#footnote-19). Moreover, Japanese occupation resulted in many wartime atrocities such as: the enslavement of the Korean people, forced prostitution, labour camps, and experimental testings on humans [[20]](#footnote-20) [[21]](#footnote-21).

The Japanese government planned to utilise the ‘rising sun’ flag for the upcoming 2020 Olympics, sparking controversy and political debate[[22]](#footnote-22). The Korean government stated that, due to the flag’s utilisation as a Japanese superiority symbol during the occupation of Korea, the government would retaliate by boycotting the Tokyo Olympics. This political debate as of now has been unresolved, hence displaying the great extent of the negative impact historical influences have on Korean Japanese political relations.

### Influence of America during cold war era

Although the Cold War era was a brief section in history, according to David Hundt, a professor in international relations at Deakin University, the American influence of Japanese Korean relations was immense, as an external factor[[23]](#footnote-23). This was due to America’s rush to rebuild east Asian relations to create economic powerhouses. Furthermore, they created a foothold in East-Asian politics to enforce a democratic influence to compete with the uprising communist influence, from Soviet-Russia, during the cold-war era[[24]](#footnote-24) [[25]](#footnote-25) [[26]](#footnote-26) [[27]](#footnote-27). This led to an apology on Japan’s behalf, to accelerate the process of rebuilding bilateral ties[[28]](#footnote-28). Thus, there is still debate in Korea whether a formal apology was made for the brutal military occupation due to America’s forcing of political cooperation between Japan and Korea, and as **Hundt** states, “Japan’s efforts to make up for the past lacked democratic legitimacy”[[29]](#footnote-29).

***Figure 1:* America’s most important trade partners*[[30]](#footnote-30)***

U.S influences have greatly impacted political relations due to numerous signings of treaties to benefit the economic position of the U.S[[31]](#footnote-31). Figure 1 depicts the importance of Korea and Japan as trade partners, within the top 10 biggest trade partners, to the U.S hence, why the U.S prioritised trilateral trade relations to construct large economies in the East-Asian region. However, Japan’s economic status, post-WWII, led America to prioritise the further industrialisation in Japan hence, the creation of trade treaties favourable to the Japanese government. This led to current political debates, between both nations, of the legitimacy of treaties due to the implications of the U.S initiative to gain economic benefits from both nations[[32]](#footnote-32) [[33]](#footnote-33)

### ideals by the current politicians

The current Japanese president, Shinzo Abe, is affiliated with the ultra-right-wing group, Nippon Kaigi [[34]](#footnote-34). This group supports extremist views such as: revitalisation of the Imperial military; they deny past war crimes, most infamously the ‘rape of Nanjing’; and the reversion of post-WWII restrictions[[35]](#footnote-35) [[36]](#footnote-36). Denial of large-scale war crimes, exemplified by the denial of the ‘rape of Nanjing’, is especially problematic to Koreans as it expresses Japan’s willingness to create divergent realities to historical recounts, including war crimes committed within Korea. As professor **Setsu Kobayashi**, a former Nippon Kaigi member and a leader in Japanese constitutional expertise, states, “They’re thinking about Asia before the war when Japan was the leader of Asia. They want to repeat that. They openly say that” [[37]](#footnote-37). On the contrary, the current Korean president, Moon Jae In, asserts very liberal left-wing policies and ideals[[38]](#footnote-38). Exemplars can be seen in: his war-time repercussion repayment initiatives, his advocation of freedom of speech in media and his methodology of solving political issues, substantiated by his response to the trade war crisis, as president **Moon** states: “I offer to join hands if Tokyo chooses dialogue” [[39]](#footnote-39) [[40]](#footnote-40).



***Figure 3:* Diagram of how exports and imports have decreased[[41]](#footnote-41)**

Due to the divergent values of each presidential administration, clashes of political disagreement have converged into a trade-war crisis based on war reparation demands. Moon’s administration affirms the existence of war-crime victims whilst Abe denies all claims, and in retaliation has orchestrated the removal of Korea off the free trade partners whitelist[[42]](#footnote-42) [[43]](#footnote-43) Furthermore, **Abe** has stated that “war reparation appeals must be upheld under international and universal standards”, implying that Korea’s appeals were irrational and illegitimate[[44]](#footnote-44). As seen in fig.3, trade exports and imports have continually depreciated due to trade restrictions and bans, which in turn, has led governments of both parties to discuss the legality of certain trade restrictions based on the WTO regulations[[45]](#footnote-45). These trade disputes have furthered the deterioration of the political cooperation, as neither can rationally converse without breaking into heated dispute hence, the diverging politics have immensely affected the current political relations negatively[[46]](#footnote-46). Furthermore, war crimes committed against China have relevancy within Korea’s context as they exemplify Japan’s lack of acknowledgement of the most significant of war crimes, denying over 300 thousand people massacred, hence suggesting that Japan’s view on war crimes within Korea are insignificant.

## **Extent of historical influence on the societal relationship between Japan and south korea**

Significant historical influences on societies include:

* Personal experience[[47]](#footnote-47)
* Censorship within the education systems[[48]](#footnote-48)
* Cultural values[[49]](#footnote-49)

### Japan's Uncomfortable Past – MIRPersonal experience

***Figure 4:* Public opinion on whether the comfort women issue has been resolved[[50]](#footnote-50).**

With over 800 thousand Koreans killed due to forced labour and work conditions and an additional 200 thousand enslaved as prostitutes, the older Korean population remains with personal trauma from the occupation by Japan[[51]](#footnote-51). Whether it be a family or personal account from that era, such as stories from Kim Bok-Dong a ‘comfort woman’ survivor, depictions of the brutal Japanese occupation are common[[52]](#footnote-52) . Furthermore, the combination of Japanese denial of war crimes and the absence of a formal apology escalated the issue further by increasing frustration of the Korean people exemplified by **Kim Huk-Sun**, a comfort women survivor, when she states, “I am the very evidence alive; why does Japan say they have no evidence? Bring back my youth!”[[53]](#footnote-53) As seen in figure 4, over 8% of the Japanese population view the ‘comfort women’ issue as completely resolved. In contrast, 0.3% of the Korean population views the issues as resolved. As shown by contradicting statistics, victims within Korea perceive that Japanese society has marginalised the significance of their statements, thus, creating further societal tensions[[54]](#footnote-54).



***Figure 5:* Opinions of how resolving historical issues will improve relations [[55]](#footnote-55)**

The lack of Japanese societal acknowledgement and understanding of personal recounts of Korean victims, over 25% of both nation’s societies believe that historical issues will prove to be difficult to resolve even if bilateral political relations strengthen, seen in figure 5[[56]](#footnote-56). Lack of acknowledgement of personal accounts has proven to further deteriorate bilateral relations, due to Koreans viewing the Japanese society as unsympathetic. Furthermore, over a million Koreans have surpassed the age of 80, hence, large sectors of the Korean population have been directly affected by imperial rule[[57]](#footnote-57). Even without the consideration of intergenerational storytelling, informing their children about wartime atrocities, over 1/50th of the population has extremely negative views on Japan[[58]](#footnote-58) [[59]](#footnote-59).

### **CenSorship within the education system**

According to professor Yurita Makito, a Japanese education systems expert, the Japanese government has implemented an inexplicit version of WWII history[[60]](#footnote-60). This includes: vague descriptions of the Nanjing massacre, the absence of the comfort women issues and portraying a standpoint that Japan was a non-aggressive defensive country throughout the war [[61]](#footnote-61) [[62]](#footnote-62) [[63]](#footnote-63). Makito’s statement is substantiated by AsianBoss, a politics YouTube channel, as an interviewed **Japanese student** stated, “We only briefly covered Japan’s contribution in WWII, much of the textbook was focussed on the Edo period of Japanese history”[[64]](#footnote-64). In contrast, according to Suh Yong-Hee, a Korean education systems expert, Korean textbooks explicitly describe Japanese war crimes and occasionally exaggerates the seriousness of some topics[[65]](#footnote-65) [[66]](#footnote-66) [[67]](#footnote-67).

***Figure 6: Japanese Korean public opinion poll* [[68]](#footnote-68)*’***

Fig.1 displays the effect of educational manipulation within both nations. Over 70% of negative Korean views, on Japan, are based on historical events, whilst the Japanese negatively view Koreans equally based on their historical view of Japanese behaviour. Additionally, they negatively view each other due to the ‘comfort women’ issues and the sovereignty debate over the Dokdo/Takeshima islands. These statistics effectively display the manipulation of education as narratives of history, used to support claims over political issues, cannot be correct simultaneously[[69]](#footnote-69) [[70]](#footnote-70). The divergent narratives have created extensive societal debates, as both societies claim the other is ‘brainwashed’ and uneducated, hence, negatively influencing the societal relationship to a great extent [[71]](#footnote-71) [[72]](#footnote-72) [[73]](#footnote-73).

### **Cultural values**

Both societies extensively display nationalism and patriotism to convey their loyalty to their respective nations [[74]](#footnote-74) [[75]](#footnote-75) [[76]](#footnote-76). Korean’s are characteristically patriotic, stemming from their identity crisis, due to imperialist censorship of Korean culture. The Japanese also are patriotic, however, two patriotic nations with contradicting ideals and cultural values lead to societal tension. For instance, Koreans value their history of oppression and this can be seen in their persistence in their protests for war-time reparations, however, the Japanese value their societal image as an honest, kind and passive society[[77]](#footnote-77) [[78]](#footnote-78). Korea’s globalising and advertising of war-crimes committed by Japan during WWII, caused the defacement of the Japanese public image. This has greatly influenced the societal relationship as the cultural values of each society has led them to protest and counter-protest each other with boycotts and anti-Korean and anti-Japanese sentiments[[79]](#footnote-79). Furthermore, the ‘cultural wall’ has limited the ability to sympathise due to the conservative aspects of society. There’s minimal communication between the two nations, hence, halting any progressive initiatives to improve bilateral relations[[80]](#footnote-80).

## **Conclusion**

Through the utilisation of a diverse range of sources, the conclusion is made that the current political and societal relations, between Japan and Korea, have been greatly impacted due to historical influences mainly due to two underlying factors, war and the unwillingness, of Japan, to accept accountability of their actions. The Japanese government’s refusal to acknowledge the past has not only gradually enraged the general society of South Korea, especially the first-hand victims, it’s also motivated them to boycott Japan entirely to convey their patriotism. Due to the lack of historical education, Japanese society has felt victimised and in-turn retaliated with counter-protests and boycotts. This has led the governments to intervene and take sides, evidently supporting the political standpoints of their people, hence extreme political tensions have arisen based on historical influences.

1985– Word Count

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