

East Asia Beyond the History War: Confronting the Ghosts of Violence. Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Morris Low, Leonid Petrov and Timothy Y. Tsu. Abingdon: Routledge, 2013. ISBN: 9781138851863

This book provides a multifaceted account of war memory and the possibility of reconciliation in East-Asia, terms here understood as a series of cultural practices representing the Second World War and the Korean War. In her lucid introduction, Tessa Morris-Suzuki characterizes previous scholarship on this problem as mainly focused on political relations between states. Moreover, such scholarship has tended to look at reconciliation as something having a conclusion, rather than as an indefinite, ongoing process. Finally, thus far few scholars have examined war memory in North Korea. This volume, then, differs from previous scholarship in that it studies reconciliation practices as open-ended cultural processes rather than political agreements, and in that it includes North Korea within its purview. One important metaphor the book uses to think about war memory is as a “haunting:” like a ghost, the aftermath of war is never quite present but always felt, exerting an influence that continues to affect cultural production and international relations in the region.

Beyond the introduction, the chapters of this volume are organized in two parts. The first, titled “Reconciliation as Method” focuses on how film, grassroots organizations, and the writing of history books have facilitated and prevented reconciliation. In the second, the focus shifts to consider how museums, memorials, and art can reframe war memory. As may be clear from this outline, the distinction between the two parts of the book is fairly vague, as museums obviously also figure in the re-writing of history, and as grassroots organizations have indeed found their own ways of memorializing the past.

In the first chapter, which reads as a continuation of the introduction, Leonid Petrov and Morris-Suzuki provide an overview of several successful efforts at reconciliation, citing Russia-Chinese border agreements over the possession of contested islands, Korea-Russian agreements over the borderline of a changing riverbed, and the Mount Geumgang complex, which until 2008 was jointly run by North and South Korea. Petrov and Suzuki coin the term “geographies of reconciliation” to describe these successful bilateral collaborations, showing that these processes are as much cultural as they are political.

Using Korea as a case study, Petrov more deeply explores these cultural aspects in the second chapter, focusing on “historiographies of reconciliation” and “media of reconciliation.” During his examination of the former, Petrov indicates that during the so-called “Sunshine Policy” period of collaboration between North and South, some progress was made towards a mutually acceptable nationalistic version of Korean history. Petrov also shows that films on both sides of the border progressively portrayed the other side in a more tolerant light, thus furthering mutual understanding among their audiences.

Timothy Y. Tsu continues Petrov’s examination of the role of film in reconciliation efforts, focusing on how Chinese films have portrayed the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). Tsu argues that such portrayals fall into three categories that also roughly correspond to three historical phases of Chinese film production. First (1949-1966), Japanese were portrayed as ravenous demons, then (1978-1999) as estranged family members, and finally (from 2000 onwards) as nuanced human beings. Tsu thus shows that Chinese cinema, like Korean cinema, has also gradually evolved towards a more tolerant view of an often demonized enemy.

In the final chapter of the volume’s first part, Morris-Suzuki examines how grassroots organizations in Japan have ritually honored, investigated and disseminated knowledge about

forced laborers (mainly Koreans) in Hokkaido. These groups ignore the Japanese government position on this issue (which is to largely disregard it), organizing bi-national workshops where participants excavate mass graves during the day and attend group activities and historical lectures in the evening. She argues that such organizations are successful because they combine physical engagement (digging up the graves to give the bodies of laborers proper burials) with careful historical research.

Moving to the second part of the book, Morris Low examines how Tokyo museums portraying the Second World War deal with gender. Whereas the infamous Yasukuni shrine and neighboring Yūshūkan museum represent of Japanese men as heroic soldiers in a war of Asian liberation, the nearby Shōwakan portrays the lives of children and women during the conflict. Finally, the relatively new Shōkeikan portrays the fate of those sick and injured during the war. While the two latter museums might seem to balance the overly nationalist and masculine vision of the Yūshūkan, Low shows that in fact they supplement this vision: not only do they maintain the gendered vision of the Yūshūkan (where Japanese supermen sacrifice themselves for an Asian future), but they also show the commitment of women, children and the disabled to the noble cause of the war.

The next chapter, written by Morris-Suzuki, moves to Korean War museums, discussing such museums in the US, Australia, China, and the two Koreas. As one may guess from their relative geographic locations, these museums present vastly different views of the conflict, from mourning its victims to celebrating a victory. Instead of arguing for a correct vision of the conflict, Morris-Suzuki suggests that bringing these viewpoints in dialogue with each other opens up the possibility of reconciliation.

Dialogue can also occur via visual art, as the next chapter shows, in which Morris Low examines artistic portrayals of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima. In the process, Low looks at how Japanese photography, American performance art, and Japanese and Chinese visual art have represented the incident, arguing that, as the incident fades further into the past, these media are essential not only keeping the memory of Hiroshima alive, but also for understanding what Hiroshima was and continues to be.

Acting as a kind of epilogue, Morris-Suzuki's final chapter zooms in on the fate of one Korean immigrant in Japan, a man who was a volunteer for the Japanese Imperial Air Force, a kamikaze pilot, a community activist, and the curator of a Japanese memorial of a Korean resistance hero. As these different roles indicate, this course of this man's life refuses any easy historical labels such as "collaborator" or "resistance hero." Instead, Morris-Suzuki's moving recounting of this man's life brings home the necessity of nuanced historical thinking as a precondition for reconciliation.

Despite the fact that this book is a collaborative work, it is sometimes hard to find coherence between the chapters it contains. Perhaps this is due to the nature of "memory" and "reconciliation" as processes that occur, as the volume shows, in greatly varied ways. This means that this volume needs to be seen more as a book one browses depending upon one's interest rather than read in one sitting. That being said, it should be of interest to a particularly wide audience: as my outline of the chapters above indicates, almost anyone interested in East-Asia should find something intellectually stimulating here. For classroom use, Morris-Suzuki's final chapter could act not only as great introductory article for a modern East-Asian history class, but also as more general introduction to the pitfalls of easy historical judgments.

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