



Manufacturing Contempt: State-Linked Populism in South Korea

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Abstract

The current crisis in South Korea-Japan relations partly originates from a South Korean state that is neither fully authoritarian nor liberal. In the past, right-wing, authoritarian regimes in Seoul fomented populist-nationalist contempt against Japan and North Korea, with biased and censored public discourse, but ignored public sentiments when negotiating with the target states. Since the democratic transition in the 1990s, South Korean governments no longer ignore public sentiments. Left-wing leaders and groups have pluralized public discourse about North Korea, exposing citizens to various views and information, and generated public support for Seoul to pursue rapprochement; but, no comparable groups generate counter-narratives about Japan. Instead, left-wing groups have accelerated negative portrayals and coopted state officials to censor dissenting views. Korean censorship follows illiberal trends in western democracies to ban certain public expressions considered offensive to historically victimized groups. The Korean case demonstrates that, without meaningful opposition and counter-narratives, activists for populist causes link with state power to infringe on the rights of domestic citizens and foreign entities. The remedy is liberalized public discourse that critically discusses complex realities.

Keywords Korea · Japan · Diplomacy · Liberal · Authoritarian · Populism · Nationalism · Public discourse · Media · Censorship

On 30 October 2018, the Supreme Court of South Korea (Korea) ruled that Japanese steelmaker Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal Corp should compensate four colonial-era, conscripted laborers 100 million won each (\$87,680). According to data from the Korean government, Imperial Japan conscripted 480,636 Korean laborers during the final years of its thirty-five-year occupation.¹ The Japanese

government has maintained that all historical compensation issues between the two nations were settled with the 1965 treaty that re-established diplomatic relations and provided \$800 million in grants and loans (equivalent to \$6.4 billion in 2019).

After a Korean trial court approved the seizure of Nippon's domestic assets, Tokyo called the move "extremely regrettable" and requested diplomatic consultations with Seoul. In his 10 January 2019 New Year's Address, President Moon Jae-in replied that many South Koreans felt the 1965 treaty did not fairly compensate individual victims and that such views were "not created by the government but by unfortunate history."² No doubt many, if not most, South Koreans criticize the 1965 treaty; but, the claim that their views were not created by the government is contestable.

Since the United States replaced the pro-Japan colonial regime with an anti-Japan, anti-communist one (Rhee Syngman 1948–1960), ruling parties in South Korea—like their counterpart in China—have fomented populist-nationalist contempt against neighboring countries. Unlike in China, no one political party has continuously directed this process. Multiple parties, media, and organizations compete to stoke populist anger against a particular state as enemies of the Korean people:

¹ National Archives of Korea, accessed at <http://theme.archives.go.kr/next/collection/viewJapaneseIntro1.do>, 5 April 2019.

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² "Japan should foster 'more humble' attitude: South Korea's Moon," *Al Jazeera*, 10 Jan 2019.

right-wing oriented groups against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) and left-wing against Japan. Both campaigns have propagated misleading and inaccurate information, and punished those offering contrary information and views.

In recent decades, the rise of left-wing groups in South Korea has pluralized public discourse on the DPRK regime. Citizens are exposed to various views and information, and the claims of one group are actively critiqued by others. The vigorous marketplace of ideas and discourses has contributed to more nuanced inter-Korean policies from both left- and right-wing governments.

As public discourse on the DPRK has become plural and complex, that on the Japanese colonial era has remained or become more Manichean and censored. During the 1990s, anti-Japanese historiography reached new heights with the claim that the Japanese military abducted and enslaved 200,000 Korean women and girls ("comfort women"), and that Japanese governments hide or deny these crimes. In contrast to anti-DPRK rhetoric, the claims of anti-Japanese campaigners are rarely contested by mainstream media and academics. Moreover, unlike in China, anti-Japan organizations in South Korea are not restricted by the governing party. They can and do implement the logical implications of state-sponsored propaganda, even if their actions undermine the agenda of governing parties.

Discourse on North Korea (DPRK)

Since 1948, ruling parties have framed neighboring states and their supporters inside South Korea as enemies of the Korean people. This framing combines populism and nationalism³ to obscure the factual record, support repressive measures against alleged aspects of enemies, and limit public discourse. Until 1997, ruling parties were predominantly anti-communist (right-wing) and vilified the DPRK regime. Stanford Professor Gi-Wook Shin writes:

When I was growing up in South Korea...I believed that North Koreans were barely human...Even when I was teaching at the University of California, Los Angeles, in the mid-1990s, I often received booklets from some dubious South Korean institutions, including one that depicted the current North Korean leader, Kim Jong Il, as a demented playboy.⁴

Until the mid-1990s, right-wing misinformation largely spread uncontested in South Korea, partly because the National

Security Act (1948) criminalized the distribution of information (e.g., newspapers) from or favorable to North Korea. Even today, South Korea remains the only country which bans access to official DPRK news and websites. Anti-DPRK rhetoric in schools and media—often based on “a systematic pattern of... misinformation and inaccurate information”⁵—fomented deep public fear and contempt of North Korea. Shin writes:

In June 2000, South Korean President Kim Dae Jung visited Pyongyang, the capital city of North Korea, to meet his counterpart, Kim Jong Il...Although most South Koreans eventually embraced the historic summit with enthusiasm, their initial reaction was one of shock and confusion because their suspicion and fear of the Communist regime runs so deep.

Right-leaning governments, media (e.g., *Chosun Ilbo*), and civic organizations (e.g., National Congress of Freedom and Democracy) funded refugees (termed ‘defectors’) from the DPRK with stories of oppression. Seoul awarded each defector 20 to 50.8 million won (\$18,000 to \$46,000).⁶ In recent decades, defector-activists have shared their stories overseas, especially in the United States. In 2002, Lee Soon-ok testified to the U.S. Senate that Christians were tortured and killed in a North Korean political prison:

Five or six elderly Christians were lined up and forced to deny their Christianity and accept the Juche Ideology of the State. The selected prisoners all remained silent at the repeated command for conversion. The security officers became furious by this and killed them by pouring molten iron on them one by one.⁷

In a best-selling memoir *Escape from Camp 14* (2002), Shin Dong-hyuk writes that he grew up in Camp 14 (the most isolated prison camp) and was tortured by guards at age thirteen. In 2014, Park Yeon-mi testified to the One Young World Summit in Dublin, Ireland that romance books (e.g., *Romeo and Juliet*) did not exist in North Korea and that her friend's mother was publicly executed for watching a Hollywood movie.⁸

These defector stories help fuel the right-wing narrative of an evil DPRK regime and justified punitive measures against

⁵ Richard Kagan, Matthew Oh, and Davis Weissbrodt, *Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (Washington DC: Minnesota Lawyers International and Asia Watch, 1988).

⁶ “Settlement Support for North Korean Defectors,” Ministry of Unification, accessed at https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/whatwedo/support, 21 April 2019.

⁷ “Testimony of Ms. Soon Ok Lee,” U.S. Senate, 21 June 2002, accessed at https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/lee_testimony_06_21_02.pdf.

⁸ Yeonmi Park, “Escaping from North Korea in Search of Freedom,” One Young World (YouTube), 18 Oct. 2014, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufhKWfPSQOw>.

³ Bart Bonikowski, “Ethno-nationalist populism and the mobilization of collective resentment,” *British Journal of Sociology* 68 (Nov 2017, S1): 181–213.

⁴ Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 151.

its alleged supporters in South Korea. In 2014, the right-wing Park Geun-hye government imprisoned leftist National Assembly member Lee Seok-ki for nine years for allegedly calling for, but not necessarily planning, a pro-communist insurrection. In 2015, it deported Korean-American Shin Eun-mi for five years for favorably reporting on her visits to North Korea. Until 2003, government-issued textbooks and popular movies (e.g., 1981 *Inchon*) depicted heroic South Korean and American soldiers opposing cruel, Soviet-trained North Koreans during the Korean War.

Since mid-1990s, left-wing oriented governments (e.g., Kim Dae-jung, 1998–2003; Roh Moo-hyun, 2003–2008; Moon Jae-in, 2017–), academics, media (e.g., *Hankyoreh*), and civil society organizations (e.g., Korean Council for Reconciliation and Cooperation, Sarangbang Group for Human Rights) have challenged anti-DPRK discourses and offered alternative narratives and policies. During the Kim administration, some scholars argued that the DPRK regime was not fully culpable for the Korean War.⁹ Recently, President Moon personally embraced, and endorsed public praise of, DPRK leader Kim Jong-un¹⁰ and reduced government funding for anti-DPRK defector organizations.¹¹ Popular movies dramatizing alleged DPRK war crimes (e.g., *Northern Limit Line*, 2015; *Operation Chromite*, 2016) were countered by equally popular, and more critically praised, movies that dramatized alleged South Korean military brutality (e.g., *Silmido*, 2003; *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War*, 2004) or that humanely portrayed some DPRK officials (e.g., *Steel Rain*, 2017).

Mainstream media and academics, based in South Korea and other countries, have actively investigated and sometimes debunked the claims of defector-activists. Lee Soon-ok was “later found not to be a political prisoner but a petty economic criminal, a fact of which other North Korean defectors [testified].”¹² Shin Dong-hyuk admitted that he spent much of his childhood in the less-notorious Camp 18

(along with Camp 14), and that he was tortured at age 20 (not 13).¹³

As the 2010s close, the DPRK has become a common topic of democratic discourse in South Korea, where competing parties contest each other’s claims, inform the larger public, and sometimes modify their positions, depending on new information and events. Right-wing parties have become more supportive of political dialogue, economic engagement, and humanitarian aid with the DPRK; and, the left-wing is more open to criticism of the regime’s human rights violations. On 3 March 2016, after ten years of debate, the once controversial North Korean Human Rights Act (NKHRA) passed with bipartisan legislative support.¹⁴ The NKHRA was endorsed by a wide array of nonpartisan, international rights organization (e.g., Amnesty International, Citizens Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, Human Rights Watch), whose members had advanced human rights in South Korea during 1970s and 1980s and currently seek the same in North Korea.¹⁵

Discourse on Japan

As public discourse on the DPRK has become more complex, contested, and dynamic, that on the Japanese colonial era remains largely censored, static, and Manichean. For left-wing parties (e.g., ruling Democratic Party), media (e.g., *Hankyoreh*), and activist organizations (e.g., Chong Dae Hyup), the true enemy of Korean people is not communist North Korea, but pro-Japanese collaborators and their descendants who comprise the South’s political and economic elite. The anti-Japan narrative claims that the colonial regime was equivalent to its wartime Nazi allies in human rights violations. It brutalized independence protesters, forced nearly a half-million Koreans (mostly men) into wartime slave labor, and—most atrociously—abducted and sexually enslaved 200,000 Korean women and girls.

Collaborators and their descendants, wearing the mantle of anti-communism, allegedly avoided accountability after liberation and gained power at the expense of ‘true independence

⁹ Norman D. Levin and Yong-Sup Han, *Sunshine in Korea: The South Korean Debate over Policies toward North Korea* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2002), 77, 102.

¹⁰ Nicola Smith and Junho Lee, “South Korea’s Kim Jong-un Fan Clubs Prepare Welcome as North Korean Leader Vows Visit to Seoul,” *The Telegraph*, 30 Dec 2018, accessed at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/12/30/south-koreas-kim-jong-un-fan-clubs-prepare-welcome-north-korean>.

¹¹ Jeongmin Kim, “As North and South Korea Cosy Up, Human Rights Groups Struggle for Cash,” *Reuters*, 27 June 2018, accessed at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-southkorea-rights/as-north-and-south-korea-cosy-up-human-rights-groups-struggle-for-cash-idUSKBN1JN00N>.

¹² Jiyoung Song, “Why do North Korean Defector Testimonies So Often Fall Apart?” *The Guardian*, 13 October 2015; Song, “Unreliable Witnesses: The Challenge of Separating Truth from Fiction When It Comes to North Korea,” *Apps Policy Forum*, 2 Aug 2015, accessed at <https://www.policyforum.net/unreliable-witnesses>.

¹³ Helen Nianias, “Shin Dong-hyuk: What You Need to Know about the North Korean Prisoner who Admitted Claims in Bestseller *Escape From Camp 14* were False,” *The Independent*, 19 Jan 2015, accessed at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/shin-dong-hyuk-what-you-need-to-know-about-the-north-korean-prisoner-who-admitted-claims-in-9987573.html>.

¹⁴ “North Korean Human Rights,” Ministry of Unification, accessed at https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/whatwedo/NorthKoreanHumanRights/humanrights, 21 April 2019.

¹⁵ Joanna Hosaniak, “NGOs as Discursive Catalysts at the UN and Beyond,” *North Korean Human Rights: Activists and Networks*, ed. Andrew Yeo and Danielle Chubb (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 131–153.

fighters' (patriots). Park Chung-hee was a former officer in the Imperial Japanese army (1944–45) and swore a blood oath to the Emperor, but he (and later his daughter Park Geun-hye) ascended to the presidency. Park imprisoned and even executed former patriots and their descendants because of their alleged communist ties. Lee Myeong-se served as chairman of the Korean Association of Confucian Scholars under the Japanese empire, but he became chairman of Sungkyunkwan University, after a 'true patriot' was ousted, and his granddaughter Lee In-ho became chairman of the Korea Broadcasting System.¹⁶

Right-wing party members (e.g., Lee In-ho) fiercely dispute that they or their ancestors were active collaborators, but they rarely dispute the alleged brutality of the colonial regime. Right-wing party administrations (e.g., Park Geun-hye) have also demanded that Tokyo confess, and compensate for, its war crimes. In the absence of meaningful opposition, anti-Japan activists have inundated South Korean schools and media with problematic information.

Since 2003 and especially after 2010, most school districts have been locally governed by left-leaning parties and have adopted textbooks that elide the human rights abuses of the DPRK but emphasize those of Imperial Japan. In the left-leaning Seoul school district, the largest in Korea, a 2019 sixth grade social studies textbook included photos of extremely emaciated laborers as examples of forced Korean laborers. However, the Japanese newspaper *Sankei* (19 March 2019) reported that the men in the photos were likely ethnic Japanese, not Koreans.¹⁷ The same textbook claimed that young Korean girls were abducted to become comfort women, although Tokyo has found no evidence that the military ordered such abductions.¹⁸ Tokyo acknowledges that some Korean women were deceived or coerced by private brokers, and that women from combatant countries, such as China and Indonesia, were illegally abducted by some Japanese soldiers and units. (Korea, which had become a part of Japan through the 1910 annexation, was not a combatant.)

Korean governments and media generally ignore the Japanese critiques or describe them as unrepentant denials: "Despite a much-touted deal with Seoul and an apology to the 'comfort women,' Tokyo was found Sunday to have once again denied the forcible nature of its mobilization of sex slaves" (*Korea Times*, 31 Jan. 2016). Mainstream and popular media dramatize the suffering of Koreans during colonial rule and equate the comfort women system with the Jewish

Holocaust. *Korea Times* chief editorial writer, Oh Young-jin, writes that "by no means would the suffering of the comfort women be less painful than that of those killed en masse in the Nazi gas chambers" and that western countries need to "see Korea's misery as compelling as they see the Jewish Holocaust."¹⁹ In contrast, neither Oh nor another *Korea Times* editor has equated DPRK rights abuses with the Holocaust.

Nearly every year since 1995, filmmakers have produced popular movies about comfort women: *The Murmuring* (1995), *The Murmuring 2* (1997), *The Murmuring 3* (1999), *My Heart Is Not Broken Yet* (2007), *The Big Picture* (2013), *The Last Comfort Women* (2014), *Tuning Fork* (2014), *Snowy Road* (2015), *Spirits' Homecoming* (2016), *Spirits' Homecoming, Unfinished Story* (2017), *I Can Speak* (2017), *Herstory* (2018), *My Name is Kim Bok-dong* (2019).²⁰ In *Spirits' Homecoming*, Korean girls are kidnapped, abused, and killed by Japanese soldiers, and their bodies burned to destroy such evidence. *Homecoming* was widely praised in Korea and received the 21st Chunsu Film Art Award. In contrast to anti-DPRK films, anti-Japan films are not balanced by any movie that portrays the human rights violations committed by Korean independence fighters (e.g., attacks against civilians) or that humanely portrays Japanese officials.

Government funds for victims of Japan surpass those for victims of North Korea. In 2016, Seoul provided 55 million won (\$49,000) every year for each registered comfort woman.²¹ The Moon administration further elevated the comfort women issue by inviting activist Lee Yong-soo to meet U.S. President Trump (7 Nov. 2017²²) and adding an annual Memorial Day for Japanese Forces' Comfort Women Victims (14 Aug. 2018). In contrast, the much larger numbers of women who 'comforted' the U.S. military in South Korea or South Korean troops during the Vietnam War receive no funds or recognition.

Since 2010, the anti-Japan campaign has expanded overseas, including placing photos of alleged forced laborers on a Times Square billboard; replicating comfort women statues in Canada, the United States, Australia, and Germany; and supplementing the high school curriculum in California with

¹⁶ Ri-taek Kim, "The Every Persistent Cancer of Japanese Collaborators in Modern S. Korean History," *Hankyoreh*, 26 Feb 2019, accessed at http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_editorial/883678.html.

¹⁷ "Korean Textbook for 6th Graders Shows an Irrelevant Photo as that of Forced Laborers," *Sankei News*, 19 March 2019.

¹⁸ Hyon-hee Shin, "Despite Apology, Japan Denies Mobilizing WWII Sex Slaves," *Korea Herald*, 31 Jan 2016, accessed at <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20160131000310>.

¹⁹ Young-jin Oh, "Holocaust vs. Comfort Women," *The Korea Times*, 2 June 2017, accessed at http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2017/06/667_230509.html.

²⁰ Seon-hee Yoo, "'Herstory' Opens New Chapter in Painful Tale of Comfort Women Victims," *Hankyoreh*, 11 June 2018, accessed at http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/848605.html; Min-sik Yoon, "'My Name Is Kim Bok-dong' tells tale of comfort women, champion of human rights," *Korea Herald*, 25 July 2019, accessed at <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20190725000505>.

²¹ Yonhap News, "S. Korea to Hike Support for 'Comfort Women' by 21 pct in 2016," *Yonhap News*, 22 Dec 2015, accessed at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20151222002200320>.

²² Eun-ji Bahk, "South Korea Delivers Slap to Japan via Trump Dinner [Photo]," *Korea Times*, 8 Nov 2017, accessed at http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2017/11/356_238954.html.

textbooks equating the comfort women system to the Holocaust, American slavery, and the Armenian genocide. Ethnic Korean students in North America have equated Japan's "Rising Sun" flag with the Nazi swastika and demanded its removal from public schools.²³

Along with dramatizing one side of a complex issue, government officials and activists have punished those offering contrary findings and perspectives. The testimonies of Japan's alleged victims (especially comfort women) are rarely critiqued by Korean media and academics. San Francisco State professor Sarah Soh observes: "Few reputable historians or nationally known scholars in the field of social science have involved themselves in the task of sorting out the truth in the comfort women controversy, mired as it is in politics."²⁴

Activists and officials have used anti-defamation laws to censor, fine, and imprison dissenting academics. In 2013, Sejong University professor, Park Yu-ha, published a book that discussed the complexity of comfort women experiences and challenged the veracity of some activists' testimonials.²⁵ Nine comfort women activists sued Park for civil and criminal defamation, and government prosecutors requested a three-year prison sentence. A Seoul civil court partially censored Park's Korean-language book and fined her 90 million won (\$74 thousand) for defamation. A Seoul criminal court acquitted Professor Park on the defamation charges; but, on 27 October 2017, after Moon's election, a Seoul appeals court overturned Park's acquittal and fined her 10 million won (\$8848). Prosecutors have appealed, again seeking a three-year jail term.²⁶ On 26 April 2017, a Suncheon National University professor ("Song") lectured to his class that some Koreans "probably" volunteered to be comfort women. The university terminated Song's employment, and a court sentenced him to six months prison.²⁷

Less publicized, but perhaps more pervasive, is self-censorship in mainstream media and the exclusion of arguments that challenge the anti-Japan narrative. We (authors) experienced this when we wrote an op-ed analyzing the effect of South Korea's state-supported propaganda and censorship on the recent Korea-Japan bilateral crisis. A major Korean newspaper initially accepted our English-language op-ed, but four days later, after further deliberation, the editorial board reversed its decision:

²³ Min-ho Jung, "Korean Students up in Arms over 'Rising Sun' Flag in Canadian Classroom," *Korea Times*, 19 Nov 2018, accessed at http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/11/120_258922.html.

²⁴ C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 102.

²⁵ Yuha Park, *Jegug-ui wianbu* [Comfort Women of the Empire] (Seoul: Puriwa Ipari, 2015).

²⁶ "South Korean Academic Convicted of Defaming 'Comfort Women,'" *The Straits Times*, 27 Oct 2017, accessed at <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/south-korean-academic-convicted-of-defaming-comfort-women>.

²⁷ Tae-hee Lee, "Professor Gets Prison for Insulting Comfort Women," *Korea Times*, 15 Nov 2018, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20181115000669>.

We believe the article you and your co-authors sent to us is very well-written with in-depth knowledge and historical insights. However, we think the article is not line with our editorial direction. As you know, the issue regarding wartime forced labor and Japan's export restrictions on core industrial materials are very sensitive issues. So we had better not publish your piece. We really regret that. And we kindly seek your and your co-authors' understanding.²⁸

Some in Korean media have attempted to expand the discourse, including PenNMike, a Seoul-based, online newspaper, and Rhee Syngman (이승만) TV, a YouTube channel for the Rhee Syngman Academy. Critics label them the "New Right," but these alternative media producers prefer to describe themselves as "global" or "anti-ethnonationalist liberals." They assert the primacy of classically liberal values (e.g., freedom, rationality) and criticize the Moon administration's ideology of anti-Japanese, ethno-nationalism, which would unite members of the same ethno-national group (Koreans) against another ethno-national group (Japanese). These anti-ethnonationalists also challenge the dominant narrative on Japan's colonial rule as sensationalized and unsubstantiated, and call for public debate on the topic.²⁹

Lee Young-hoon, a former Seoul National University economics professor and founder of the Rhee Syngman Academy, lectured online that the 'comfort women' system was licensed prostitution under the Japanese military's control, not sexual slavery, and the number was approximately 5000 not 200,000 (Nishioka 2017). Still, the influence of new-right or anti-ethnonationalist groups on Korean public discourse has been limited; almost all Korean mainstream media ignore their arguments or characterize them as pro-Japan traitors (*chinilpa*). Because of the hostile social and legal environment, dissenting academics, reporters, and other publics communicate anonymously in social media and closed Facebook groups.³⁰

²⁸ Communication with author, 20 July 2019. A version of the rejected article was later published in Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* (1 August 2019), "South Korea's left and Japan's right have crushed alternative viewpoints, setting up a trade dispute that may not be resolved," <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3020771/south-koreas-left-and-japans-right-have-crushed-alternative>

²⁹ Sangmi Cha and Ju-min Park, "South Korean YouTubers Lure Japanese Audience with Attacks on Moon," *Reuters*, 23 July 2019, <https://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKCN1UI2W1>; Tae-jun Kang, "South Korean Right's YouTube Dominance Catches North Korea's Eye," *The Diplomat*, 17 Sept 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/south-korean-rights-youtube-dominance-catches-north-koreas-eye>; PenNMike, accessed at <https://www.pennmike.com>; Syngman Rhee Academy, accessed at <http://syngmanrhee.kr>, 4 Aug 2019.

³⁰ 일민족주의를 반대하는 모임 [Group Against Anti-Japanese Nationalism], accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/274155953441706>; 위안부와 노무동원노동자 동상 설치를 반대하는 모임 [Group Opposing the Establishment of Comfort Women and Forced Labor Workers Statues], accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/114841242534428>, 10 April 2019.

In the relative absence of visible, counter-narratives, the anti-Japan campaign has persuaded most South Koreans, and ethnic Koreans overseas, that Japan and its elected leaders are not to be trusted. In 2018, South Koreans rated Japan (3.55 on a 0 to 10 point scale) and Shinzo Abe (2.04) lower than North Korea (4.71) and Kim Jong-un (4.06).³¹ South Korea is the only electoral democracy whose citizens rank democratic Japan lower than autocratic North Korea. By vilifying Japan, activists justify punitive measures against the descendants of colonial collaborators and present-day Japanese entities. These include expropriating the property of collaborator families (2005 Special law to redeem pro-Japanese collaborators' property); the erection of comfort women statutes in front of the Japanese embassy (Seoul) and consulate (Busan), in contravention of the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations; and the 2018 Supreme Court ruling expropriating Japanese-owned assets in South Korea. In 2019, the regional Gyeonggi-do Assembly proposed labels ("This product was produced by a war crime company") on school products made by Japanese companies connected to colonial-era, conscripted labor, including Nikon and Panasonic. The Seoul Metropolitan Council similarly proposed discouraging the purchase of products from "war crime companies."³²

Misformed Populism

In a liberal democracy, state policies should reflect the wishes of the popular majority, as long as they do not violate liberal, constitutional rights. When political elites continually pursue policies that disregard majority preferences, populist movements may be a corrective. In Britain, the leadership of the major parties favored European Union membership and cross-border migration, but a (slim) popular majority did not. Continental European elites, in particular, pushed for a common currency (Euro) and generous asylum policies, despite popular resistance.³³

The corrective function of populist movements depends on the empirical accuracy of their worldviews. Misleading and inaccurate information generate unfounded fears and public demands for policies that undermine core values or strategic interests of liberal states. After Tokyo's 1941

attack on Pearl Harbor, U.S. public fears of the Japanese American minority led to their forced internment (1942–46), despite little evidence of security risk. Liberal thinkers (e.g., J.S. Mill) generally support open public discourse and a free marketplace of ideas, so real information can debunk false ones. Conversely, illiberal regimes (e.g., China) deliberately propagate misleading and inaccurate information to manipulate public opinion.

A relatively new democracy, South Korea is transitioning from its authoritarian past. Unlike China, governing parties no longer restrict the actions of anti-Japan organizations, but, compared to western democracies, the country lacks open public discourse, especially on Japan. The result is that activist organizations independently implement the logical implications of state-supported propaganda, even if contrary to the governing party's agenda.

Since 1948, governing parties—right- and left-wing—have continuously portrayed the Japanese colonial regime as war criminals and current Japanese leaders as unrepentant deniers. Leftist parties added that right-wing leaders were collaborators and their agreements with Tokyo contravened the wishes of the Korean people. The logical, populist implication is that the government should no longer enforce unjust treaties and international laws with respect to Japan.

In the past, right-wing, authoritarian regimes mostly ignored populist sentiments—which the regimes helped generate—to improve ties with North Korea and Japan. Park Chung-hee signed the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations with Tokyo and 1972 North-South Joint Statement with the DPRK. However, since the democratic transition in the 1990s, South Korean governments no longer ignore public sentiments. With the rise of left-wing populism, culminating in the Moon administration (2017–), government officials are less likely to improve ties with Japan or even to enforce past treaties. Korean justices have ruled that forced laborers and comfort women were victims of extraordinary crimes against humanity and that the 1965 treaty does not apply to them as individuals. The Moon administration unilaterally terminated the 2015 Korea-Japan accord, signed by the previous Park Geun-hye government, which "resolved finally and irreversibly" the comfort women issue, after Tokyo had paid one billion yen (approximately \$9.27 million) compensation. It also arrested the former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court for allegedly collaborating with the Park administration to delay a ruling on the forced labor lawsuits.³⁴

³¹ Asan Institute, "South Koreans' Perceptions of Neighboring Countries," accessed at <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/u-s-north-korea-summit-and-south-koreans-perceptions-of-neighboring-countries/>, 6 July 2018.

³² Tae-jun Kang, "One South Korean Province Wants to Tag Japanese Firms as 'War Criminals,'" *Diplomat*, 22 March 2019, accessed at <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/one-south-korean-province-wants-to-tag-japanese-firms-as-war-criminals>.

³³ Paul Krugman, "Can Europe Be Saved?" *New York Times Magazine*, 16 Jan 2016; Cas Mudde, "Europe's Populist Surge: A Long Time in the Making," *Foreign Affairs* (Nov/Dec 2016); Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, "Britain After Brexit: A Nation Divided," *Journal of Democracy* 28(1) (2017): 17–30.

³⁴ Choe Sang-Hun, "Ex-Chief Justice of South Korea Is Arrested on Case-Rigging Charges," *The New York Times*, 23 Jan 2019, accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/23/world/asia/south-korea-chief-justice-japan.html>.

Paradoxically, Japan enjoys more stable relations with a fully authoritarian state (China), which controls the domestic anti-Japan campaign, than with a partly authoritarian state (South Korea) that does not. In the context of trade tensions with the United States, Xi Jinping sharply lowered anti-Japan activities to improve bilateral relations. Shanghai Normal University postponed an international seminar on comfort women (August 2018), and the media paid less attention to the annual Nanjing Massacre ceremony (December 2018).³⁵ Xi hosted a summit with Shinzo Abe (26 October 2018) and allowed a Japanese frigate flying the Rising Sun flag to join the 70th anniversary of China's Navy in Qingdao (23 April 2019).

Authoritarianism is no substitute for open public discourse, but it does provide China's leadership more policy flexibility than does the misinformed populism in South Korea. Unlike Xi, Moon cannot temporarily dial down the anti-Japan campaign, even though he prefers to focus on bettering relations with North Korea. On 11 April 2019, Moon rushed to Washington DC to personally lobby Donald Trump on his North Korea policy, which was considered more urgent than celebrating the 100-year anniversary of the Korean Provisional Government (a colonial-era government in exile).

The activist campaign against Japan and its alleged domestic supporters undermines Moon's rapprochement policy with North Korea in three ways. Firstly, it damages Seoul's credibility with Japan, a potential ally for influencing US North Korean policy and integrating the North into the world economy. Secondly, trade retaliation from Japan imperils the South's economic prosperity, needed to re-elect the left-wing, governing party and aid North Korea. Thirdly, stigmatizing Japan and punishing domestic dissenters undermines Seoul's standing with anti-communist conservatives and principled liberals abroad. Former US Senator Norm Coleman (R-Minnesota) criticized activist organizations (e.g., Chong Dae Hyup) for opposing the 2015 comfort women agreement and supporting North Korea.³⁶ Principled liberals and academics in Japan (e.g., Wada Haruki) and the United States (Noam Chomsky, Bruce Cummings) have criticized Seoul's censorship.

The anti-Japan campaign also obstructs Moon's goal of more equitable relations with Japan and justice for legitimate victims. By censoring academic research and public discourse, anti-Japan activists blur the distinction between

testimonials of real suffering and abuse, and those exaggerated and imagined, providing Japanese critics an easy excuse to reject all victim testimonials.

Liberalism's Low and High Roads

The currently ascendant, anti-Japan movement in South Korea draws on larger, illiberal trends in western democracies. Liberal theorists have historically argued for respecting citizens' negative liberties (freedom from arbitrary power and interference from others) and nurturing their positive liberties (capacity and opportunity) to promote critical, evidence-based discourse.³⁷ However, a recent, influential strain of thought rejects classical liberalism for Manichean or Schmittian politics,³⁸ which frames certain groups as enemies of freedom and not deserving equal protection. It justifies authoritarian means to promote liberal ends, described by Michael Doyle as the "low road" to liberalism.³⁹

In the United States, right-wing nationalists (e.g., Joe McCarthy) argued for restricting the speech rights of political minorities (e.g., communists) that offended the national majority. Today, free discourse is more commonly endangered by left-wing, social justice groups, who would punish speech from historic oppressors (whites, men, heterosexuals) that offend historic victims (e.g., blacks, women, homosexuals). A 2015 survey found that 72% of American university students supported disciplinary action against "any student or faculty member on campus who uses language that is considered racist, sexist, homophobic or otherwise offensive."⁴⁰

In South Korea, restriction on free speech and expression once originated nearly exclusively from anti-communist, right-wing governments; recently, it also stems from the anti-Japanese, left-wing. The South Korean case reveals how, in the absence of meaningful opposition and counter-narratives, activists for populist movements link with state power to infringe the rights of both foreign entities and domestic citizens ('traitors'). The alternative to misinformed populism is either a fully authoritarian state that restricts the movement's actions

³⁵ "Symposium on 'Comfort Women' in China Postponed, not Cancelled," *Global Times*, 8 Aug 2018, accessed at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1114478.shtml>; Leo Lin, "Will the China-Japan Reset Continue in 2019?" *The Diplomat*, 31 January 2019, accessed at <https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/will-the-china-japan-reset-continue-in-2019>.

³⁶ Norm Coleman, "Don't let North Korea Divide U.S. Allies in Asia," *The Hill*, 11 Aug 2016, accessed at <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/291169-dont-let-north-korea-divide-us-allies-in-asia>.

³⁷ Michael W. Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12, No. 3 (Summer, 1983): 205–235.

³⁸ The German theorist Carol Schmitt defined politics as distinguishing between one's friends and enemies. Carol Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996). Also see Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos "Illiberal Means to Liberal Ends? Understanding Recent Immigrant Integration Policies in Europe," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 37(6): 861–88.

³⁹ Michael W. Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12(3) (1983): 208, n. 4.

⁴⁰ Erwin Chemerinsky and Howard Gillman, *Free Speech on Campus* (Yale University Press 2017), 9.

or a liberal marketplace of ideas that contests its narratives. South Korea likely will not return to the strongly authoritarian regime of the 1970s or mimic China's version today. The more likely and normatively superior path is liberalizing public discourse. DRPK discourse offers a template, as a determined coalition of DPRK-sympathetic leftists and classical liberals struggled for decades, against state propaganda and persecution, to increase state and societal tolerance for diverse views.

Principled liberals should fully support the South Korean left's campaign to repeal or reform the National Security Act, which censors 'pro-North Korea' speech. They should also ask left-leaning members, currently leading the government, to repeal or reform anti-defamation laws used to repress 'pro-Japanese' speech. Individual liberty is inextricably linked to informed public discourse and prudent policymaking. The crisis in South Korea-Japan relations partly originates from illiberal and chaotic populist politics, generated by a state that is neither fully authoritarian nor liberal. The remedy is liberalized public discourse that transcends nationalist boundaries,

critically discusses complex realities, and promotes mutual understanding and genuine justice.

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