

The Limits of Repentance : Lessons from France for a Comparative Approach with the Japan-Korea History Debate

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Abstract

In January 2021, France published an important report commissioned to Benjamin Stora. The title of this report is «Les questions mémorielles portant sur la colonisation et la guerre d'Algérie». The “Stora Report” focuses on one of the most difficult bilateral relations France has, with Algeria, a former French colony independent since 1962 after a prolonged “dirty war.” This paper is a tentative comparative analysis between the France-Algeria case and the Japan-South Korea one. There are differences between the two situations, among them the fact that Japan and South Korea are part of a strategic relationship with the United States when France and Algeria are not. There are also many points in common, including the difficulty of remembering the past without acrimony and looking towards the future. Another point in common, despite the differences in the nature of the regimes between Algeria and the Republic of Korea, is the reticence of both the Algerian and Korean governments to move away from a systematically accusative and aggressive posture for reasons that have more to do with internal issues rather than historical ones. In both cases, dialogue itself remains elusive.

In that context, the objective of this paper is to ascertain from an analysis of the Stora Report and its findings if there is a “French model” that could be used to confront complex issues of repentance and history and to improve bilateral relations between former colonial and colonized nations.

In 2017, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique in France, the Japan Institute of International Affairs and the Japan Information Center (JIC) organized in Paris a symposium called “Perceptions croisées : Questions d’histoire et de mémoire en Europe et en Asie,”¹ with the participation of Benjamin Stora, who spoke, alongside Professor Yuichi Hosoya among others, on «Un enjeu global : le rôle de l’histoire dans l’éducation et la constitution d’une légitimité politique».²

In January 2021, France published an important report commissioned to Benjamin Stora. The title of this report is «Les questions mémorielles portant sur la colonisation et la guerre d’Algérie».³ The report tries to find a difficult balance between repentance for past deeds and history that implies responsibility from both parties. The “Stora Report” focuses on one of the most difficult bilateral relations France has, with Algeria, a former French colony independent

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¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhEeF77GprY&ab_channel=FondationpourlarechercheStrat%C3%A9gique. This symposium has been watched more than 800 times on FRS’ YouTube channel.

² “A global challenge: the role of history in education and the constitution of political legitimacy”

³ “Memorial questions relating to colonization and the Algerian war”

since 1962 after a prolonged “dirty war.”⁴ This paper is a tentative comparative analysis between the France-Algeria case and the Japan–South Korea one. There are differences between the two situations, among them the fact that Japan and South Korea are part of a strategic relationship with the United States when France and Algeria are not. There are also many points in common, including the difficulty of remembering the past without acrimony and looking towards the future. Another point in common, despite the differences in the nature of the regimes between Algeria and the Republic of Korea, is the reticence of both the Algerian and Korean governments to move away from a systematically accusative and aggressive posture for reasons that have more to do with internal issues rather than historical ones. In both cases, dialogue itself remains elusive. As Benjamin Stora writes in his introductory remarks to the report: “In a context of victim competition and fantasized histories...freedom of spirit and historical work are necessary to control the fires of inflamed memories.”⁵

In that context, the objective of this paper is to ascertain from an analysis of the Stora Report and its findings if there is a “French model” that could be used to confront complex issues of repentance and history and to improve bilateral relations between former colonial and colonized nations.

The context

There are points in common between the French and Japanese situations: both are former colonial powers. The conquest of Algeria was achieved in 1848 and fully established in 1902. Korea became a colony of the Japanese Empire in 1910. Both followed the trajectory of the great powers of the time establishing new colonies in Africa and Asia.

In the 21st century, more than 70 years after the end of the colonial period in Japan and 60 years in the case of France, the past has been largely pardoned and forgotten in most of the former colonies or territories occupied during the war, except in the case of Algeria for France and the case of South Korea, North Korea and the People’s Republic of China for Japan. The question remains: why do these resentments persist?

Whereas analysts often refer to the example of Franco-German reconciliation after the war as an example of what should be done with South Korea, the Franco-Algerian case is much closer to the situation that still bars Japan and Seoul from building a stronger and more trustful relationship despite their common strategic interest vis-à-vis an increasingly disturbing Chinese power.

The persistence of resentment in Algeria...

The Algeria war has been and still is a trauma both for Algeria and for France. The unprincipled behavior of some elements of the French forces, the use of torture and rape of prisoners on one side, the number of civilian victims, and the acts of terror both against French colons and Algerians working for France or French interests left scars that are very profound even today. On both sides, the number of deaths is still debated. According to the Algerian authorities, there were more than 1.5 million dead, including civilians, women and children, but France, like Japan in similar situations, contests the number.

Moreover, it is only in very recent years that France has officially recognized the nature of the “Algerian war.” This reticence on the part of France helped nurture resentment and give excuses to those who do not wish for reconciliation in Algeria. At the same time, some on the French side deplore that victims of the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) and political repression of

⁴ <https://www.vie-publique.fr/rapport/278186-rapport-stora-memoire-sur-la-colonisation-et-la-guerre-dalgerie> hereafter referred to as the “Stora Report.”

⁵ Stora Report, introduction.

opponents among those who fought for the liberation of Algeria are still not debated openly. The 150,000 Harkis who fought alongside the French army and were later executed as “traitors” by FLN combatants have never been recognized by the Algerian side.

Furthermore, resentment has been cultivated in France among some groups of migrants, including third-generation migrants with French nationality long-established in France. In this case, frustration related to difficult acculturation and perceived racism, particularly among young men, does play a significant role.

However, more so than the Algerian people, large numbers of whom hope to emigrate to France and also feel resentment against their own government, the Algerian authorities, dominated since independence by the FLN, are not ready to “forgive” in either sense of the term. On February 8, 2021, Algerian government spokesman Ammar Belhimer declared that the Stora Report “lacked objectivity” and failed to properly acknowledge “war crimes and crimes against humanity” committed by France as colonizer.

Indeed, for the Algerian government under the leadership of the FLN, the war of liberation against France still underpins the legitimacy of a regime often criticized for its level of corruption as well as a lack of economic efficiency by its population.

Whereas in France the colonization is part of the high school history curriculum, which often portrays wars of liberation in a positive manner, in Algeria, where the curriculum is under the responsibility of the Ministry of National Education through “Commission nationale des programmes,” the independence war is an important element of national identity building and is presented as an “epic of resistance” against colonial powers.⁶

In Algeria, the role of education is thus very important in perpetuating these feelings of resentment. In this narrative, the war of independence remains the major element of national unity in a country confronted with persistent factors of division.⁷

...as well as in South Korea

One of the main difference between Algeria and South Korea is that, despite a large population of Korean descent living in Japan, the resentment against Japan in this segment of the population has considerably abated since the post-war period. Contrary to the situation in France, the resentment is not nourished by the constant arrival of new poorly integrated migrants that contribute to identity frustrations. However, in South Korea, and despite a lack of contemporary reasons for the level of tensions that do exist between the two countries, it is difficult for Korean citizens to express a sympathetic attitude towards Japan in a society where “Japan-bashing” plays a significant role in politics, and the official governmental position regarding Japan in recent years, particularly after the election of Moon Jae-in, is also an important factor. According to a poll published in June 2021, 68% in Japan and in South Korea do believe that relations between the two countries should be improved but 80% of Koreans said they “do not trust Japan.” The figure is only 69% in Japan. 76% of Koreans also say they do not have a favorable impression of Japan, despite the fact that, before the Covid-19 pandemic, South Koreans were second only to China in the number of tourists traveling to Japan.⁸

In 2015, Japan and South Korea, under President Park Geun-hye, signed an agreement on comfort women issues. According to this agreement, this issue “is resolved finally and irreversibly.” However, President Moon Jae-in, elected in 2017, decided to dissolve the foundation

⁶ Lydia Aït Saadi, «Le Passé Franco-Algérien dans les manuels scolaires d’histoire algériens» in Frédéric Abécassis ed., *La France et l’Algérie: leçons d’histoire*, Lyon, ENS Éditions.

⁷ Idem.

⁸ Yomiuri and Hankook Ilbo Opinion poll in *Yomiuri.com*, 09-06-2021. And : <https://www.statista.com/statistics/654312/japan-foreign-visitors-breakdown-by-country/>

in charge of implementing the financial aspects of the agreement in 2018. This decision was taken essentially for internal political reasons, to garner the support of public opinion supposedly against the agreement. This is despite the fact that 70% of the comfort women who were alive at the time of the agreement had accepted a financial settlement. In 2018, President Moon Jae-in declared that “Wartime crimes against humanity cannot be swept under the rug by saying it is over,” putting an effective end to an international agreement.⁹

This attitude goes against Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi’s and South Korean President Kim Dae-jung’s declaration of bilateral partnership in 1998 calling for the building of a “future-oriented relationship,” in which Japan apologized for its past colonial rule of Korea while South Korea lauded Japan’s post-war development as a pacifist and peaceloving nation.

South Korea is a full democracy, albeit a young one.¹⁰ However, just like Algeria, there is strict control of the education curriculum and history textbooks. These textbooks are the core of national unity and nation-building in the Republic of Korea, a country profoundly divided both between north and south and also internally.

In South Korean history textbooks, the focus is not on context and the Second World War, including the Second World War in Asia and in China. The focus is almost exclusively on Japan’s colonization as well as an inflated resistance to oppression.¹¹ As in Algeria, the education system is one of the biggest obstacles to reconciliation and the end of resentment,¹² but this education system is also the product of an official policy of encouraging resentment against an external “enemy” to bolster political support. This is the case in South Korea on both the left and right sides of the political spectrum for reasons inherited from the past, including the collaborationist attitudes of elites and contemporary political divides. Strategies of influence from North Korea to increase the division between the two closest allies of the United States in Northeast Asia cannot be excluded either. Both Pyongyang and its ally in Beijing have a direct interest in persistent divisions between South Korea and Japan.

In that context, school books in South Korea controlled by the Ministry of Education do tend to focus on issues like Dokdo (Takeshima), comfort women, and Japanese war crimes.¹³ The rhetoric of anti-Japanese sentiment and resentment is prevalent in these schoolbooks and the objective is to build a “victim identity” that also serves as a unifying principle for Korea.¹⁴

Moreover, as in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the law in South Korea forbids any challenges to official positions on issues such as that of comfort women. Feminist historians, placing the issue of comfort women in the broader context of women’s exploitation, often with the support of Japanese feminist movements, have been condemned. Historian Park Yu-ha who works on the continuity of patriarchal society in Japan but also in South Korea has been denounced.¹⁵ In 2018, Professor Lee Tae-he, who questioned the systematically forced recruitment of comfort

⁹ «Japan Protests South Korea Comfort Women Remarks», *Voice of America*, 28-02-2018 on <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/Japan-protests-south-koreas-comfort-women-remarks>

¹⁰ South Korea became a full democracy, free from military rule, in 1987 with the establishment of the Sixth Republic.

¹¹ Daniel Sneider, “Divided Memories: History Textbooks and the Wars in Asia,” *Nippon.com*, 29-05-2019.

¹² Significantly, in the opinion poll published by the *Yomiuri Shimbun* and the *Hankook Ilbo*, 70% of young Koreans say they do not have a favorable opinion of Japan. This figure, for the same segment of the population, is only 40% in Japan according to *Yomiuri.com*, 09-06-2021.

¹³ One of the differences with Algeria is that, in Algeria, military “comfort stations” or «bordel militaires de campagne» supported by the French army did not become a major issue.

¹⁴ Jamal Barbari, «Anti-Japanese Sentiment Among Graduates of South Korean Public Schools», *SIT Digital Collection*, Win 12-15-2017.

¹⁵ Sarah Soh, “Post-Cold War Transnational Feminist Humanitarian Perspective”, ...

women and mentioned the fact that many of these comfort women were Japanese citizens, was sentenced to prison for “insulting comfort women.”¹⁶ The debate is almost impossible with Japanese historians; it is also difficult for Korean historians themselves.

On the contrary, in opposition to regular public opinion crusades, history textbooks in Japan are much more uncontrolled ideologically, as they are as in France compared to the ones published in Algeria. In Japan, there is a process of authorization but, under the condition that they follow the curriculum decided by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, books are written and published by private companies and diversity does exist within limits.

In recent years, the “Japanese history textbook” controversy has been built around one publication used in a very limited number of private schools in Japan. Moreover, the objective of this book was to help combat the “defeatist spirit” of mainstream history textbooks, thus demonstrating that the general tone of these mainstream books was not considered to be “nationalist enough” by the Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact, whose agenda is to reestablish a “truth” more favorable to Japan’s historical position.

Most Japanese history textbooks are neutral, geared to help students pass the university examination based on factual information. Most of these books do mention, for instance, the Nanking “incident” as well as, until quite recently, the comfort women issue. Moreover, the role played by teachers’ trade unions cannot be underestimated.¹⁷

Counter-reactions against “excuses” and “repentance” in France and in Japan

However, the negative reaction and constant resentment in South Korea have also led to what has been termed in Japan “Korea fatigue” and to counter-reactions that can only hurt relations. Whereas in 1996 all junior high school textbooks mentioned comfort women, only one did it in 2006.¹⁸ This evolution is also due to the fact that stories about the plight of “comfort women” published by the *Asahi Shimbun* had been discovered to be fabricated did not help to calm the debate on the Japanese side. This also led to a form of radicalization in some circles that, for instance, now reject the apologies expressed in 1993 by Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono.¹⁹

In France as well, the constant call for “repentance” has led to counter-reactions that go beyond relations with Algeria and are also related to the real threat posed by radical Islam and terror, a factor that does not exist in Japan. In France, debates on these issues have also become part of the political agenda, and intellectuals as well as political parties such as (but not limited to) Rassemblement National on the far right, do dispute the concept of repentance. In 2017, President Macron declared before his election that “colonization is a crime against humanity” and was largely criticized. Since then, the posture of the authorities has radically changed to follow public opinion in France. In 2021, the possible “pantheonization” of lawyer Gisèle Halimi, who defended

¹⁶ Idem.

¹⁷ Idem.

¹⁸ Shaun Dwyer, “Korean Nationalism and the Comfort Women Issue,” *Japan Times*, 23-09-2020.

¹⁹ According to the Kono declaration:

“The then Japanese military was, directly or indirectly, involved in the establishment and management of the comfort stations.”

“The recruitment of the comfort women was conducted mainly by private recruiters who acted in response to the request of the military.”

“In many cases they were recruited against their own will, through coaxing, coercion, etc.”

“At times, administrative/military personnel directly took part in the recruitments.”

“They lived in misery at comfort stations under a coercive atmosphere.”

the FLN during the Algerian war, has been rejected as being “too controversial.”²⁰

In Japan, another element has been the inclusion of these debates on the colonial past into larger issues focusing on pacifism and the denunciation, by political parties and some media, of a potential return to “militarism.” These debates on history and pacifism must be understood in the context of the Cold War. In that context, pacifism and denunciations of a return to prewar militarism and the defense treaty with the United States were and still are useful tools in a strategic context of rivalries and tensions in Northeast Asia.

As in West Germany, the fundamental objective of the Soviet Union during the Cold War—and of the People’s Republic of China and its allies today—was to weaken the US-Japan alliance and delegitimize at all costs the potential role of Japan as a normalized military power. It was in this context, exploiting fundamentally pacifist public opinion after the tragedy of the Second World War, that the *Asahi Shimbun*, close to these movements, published at the end of the 1990s a series of fabricated stories about the comfort women issues that helped place this issue at the forefront of historical debates, although years later its author Takashi Uemura did recognize that these stories were a fabrication.

The weight of identity nationalism

If the risks of a return to militarism and the risks linked to “Japanese nationalism” are often put forward and taken up by the media, the nationalist dimension in South Korea—but also in the People’s Republic of China—to explain the persistence of memorial issues is a dimension that cannot be overlooked. Korean identity nationalism, especially in the south, has been built up and continues to assert itself against Japan, more than 75 years after the end of World War II and the end of the colonization period. This recourse to nationalism with a strong anti-Japanese component essentially responds to poorly resolved internal political issues and to the specific situation of the division between North Korea, for long the only bearer of the image of resistance against the colonial power, and South Korea where, for structural and sociological reasons, colonization gave rise to a lesser level of organized resistance. As a result, there is a tendency among South Korean political circles to “overact” in expressing anti-Japanese nationalism. This posture also plays on supposed public opinion against Japan, at least “publicly expressed public opinion.”²¹

The contemporary strategic dimension is also very present, and we cannot rule out the role of the North Korean regime in supporting organizations and groups hostile to Japan. The objective being to prohibit any rapprochement and peaceful cooperation between Japan and South Korea, the two closest allies of the United States in Northeast Asia. Likewise, the People’s Republic of China pursues the same objective of dividing the alliance system around the United States in Asia.

In the southern part of the peninsula, the debate on comfort women has also developed thanks to the democratization process of the 1980s, which freed up speech, especially the discourse of women, but which also led to a nationalist competition between right-wing parties seeking to dispel accusations of collaboration with the former colonial power and left-wing parties seeking a means of strengthening their legitimacy.

In this context, the anti-Japanese dimension has remained and remains today a potential factor in the Republic of Korea and across the peninsula as a whole. As demonstrated in the recent court decisions in favor of Japan’s position, these issues remain very much prisoners of internal politics

²⁰ In France, the tombs of officially recognized great men and women who served the country are assembled at Le Panthéon in Paris.

²¹ Sonfa Oh, *Getting Over It, Why Korea Needs to Stop Bashing Japan*, Tokyo, Tachibana Publishing, 2015. The author is controversial, particularly in South Korea, but she raises important issues of identity and guilt to shed light on the complexity of contemporary relations between Japan and South Korea.

in South Korea.²²

In that context, there is no real freedom of expression in South Korea, including in the academic sector, on these issues, perpetuating the impossibility of building common discourse and common research leading to conciliation.²³

The French model and the Stora Report's mission

With tensions increasing in France on issues such as terrorism, Islam, migration and the French model of assimilation two years before a presidential election where the far-right party Front national may become the leading political party in France, President Macron launched in July 2020 a mission to “draw up a fair and precise inventory of the memory of colonization and the Algerian war.”

For President Macron, one objective of the report was to take two positions on the same subject, recognizing on the one hand the necessity of controlling migration to win back voters who support Rassemblement National while agreeing on the other hand to deal with the question of the memory of colonization and the Algeria war to satisfy a large migrant population and possibly win its vote when they choose to acquire French nationality.

In his letter commissioning the report, President Macron wrote “I wish to support a new desire for reconciliation between the French and Algerian peoples” to build a “common destiny” between the two shores of the Mediterranean.”

The report is organized into three parts. The first part is called “Algérie: L'impossible oubli” (“Algeria, The Impossible Oblivion”) and focuses on memory issues. Interestingly the report stresses the fact that issues and disputes seem to never end, just as in the case of Japan and South Korea. There is no large segment of the population in Japan that still cultivates a nostalgia for the colonial past as does a segment of the French population that was established in Algeria for generations and had to leave in the country in 1962. However, the fact that the Algerian war was negated in France finds some echoes in the difficulty of focusing on some controversial issues of the colonial period in Japan, too. These issues are difficult for all former colonial powers and Japan is no exception, particularly as the end of Japan's colonial power coincided with its defeat in 1945 and its wish to just forget about a complex and difficult past, cutting off Japan from its own history.

The example of France is differentiated by the fact that, since the end of the 1980s, the opening of military and other archives has led to a flourish of publications by historians on many different issues and from different and complementary angles. Symposiums have also been organized on memory issues and on how to teach this period and include it in the history curriculum. Once again, this is strongly related to the presence of an important community of Algerians or residents of Algerian origin in France raising the urgency of the debate in a way that does not exist in Japan.

The second part of the report concerns “Les rapports de la France avec l'Algérie” (“Relations between France and Algeria”), focusing more on efforts by France to recognize the issues at stake as well as diplomatic initiatives in that field. The Stora Report, however, recognizes that the results were limited. It was not until 1999, more than 40 years after the end of the war, that the French National Assembly officially recognized the expression “Algeria war,” previously named “Les événements” or “order maintenance missions,” after a debate not unlike the one in Japan concerning the denomination of the Nanking incident. It was only in 2012 that the existence of a

²² <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/06/11/national/south-korea-court-rulings/>

²³ Joseph Yi, Joe Phillips, Wondong Lee, “Manufacturing Contempt: State-Linked Populism in South Korea,” on *springer.com*, 28-08-2019.

massacre in Setif in May 1945 was recognized by the French government.²⁴ One of the lessons from the Stora Report is the difficulties that former colonial powers have in navigating between admitting challenging issues while at the same time avoiding over-repentance and sparking counter-reactions. In France in 2000, the establishment of a committee on the use of torture in Algeria was rejected by the prime minister's cabinet. Conservative or more right-wing parties have been critical of efforts to implicate the French police as an institution in the repression that took place in 1961. These same conservative political parties have also criticized President Macron's denunciation of the colonial regime as "unjust and brutal."

The third part of the Stora Report is called "Défis" ("Challenges"). That third part deals with unsolved issues and issues that cannot be easily solved. Two of these issues have a global dimension that could also be of interest for the case of Japan and Korea. The first one is access to archives. The Stora Report is in favor of greater access to French archives, without any control, up to 1962, but it points out the asymmetry between the former colonial power France, where the archives are more fully accessible to historians, and Algeria where, for ideological reasons, access to archives is much more difficult. This asymmetry can be also found in the case of the People's Republic of China where history is a political instrument that cannot be left in the hands of historians and also in the case of South Korea where accusations of "distortion of history" can be used to take action against historians who do not fully conform to the "official" position on historical issues.

In Japan, archives concerning the colonial period are accessible through the National Archives of Japan established in 1971 or the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records. However, these institutions have a degree of latitude over access to sensitive materials. These rules also exist in France regarding the Algerian war and repression on French territory. For Benjamin Stora, the objective should be to implement the concept of "patrimoine commun" or "collective heritage" but this is more easily said than done and there are opponents in both the former colonial and colonized powers. One thing certain, however, is that, in terms of "history," results can only be achieved by accepting the existence of some issues and the fact that no return to an idealized past is possible.²⁵

The Stora Report also mentions the limits of a policy of "excuses" that Japan, like France and other colonial powers, face with their former colonies. The question asked, and it is valid for France as well as for Japan, is how "excuses" can be effective and play a positive role when the other party, on principle or for internal reasons, cannot "let go" of a past that contributes to its legitimacy. Algerian authorities want "excuses," but that would hardly be "enough," as the Stora Report mentions, as there were already excuses expressed by French as well as Japanese authorities to their former colonies. Some of the weariness and backlash in France as well as in Japan among the general public and certain political circles comes from the fact that excuses, as well as diplomatic decisions and agreements that are constantly challenged in the case of Japan, become hostages of internal rivalries in states that use the past to circumvent unsolved contemporary challenges.

Conclusion: major differences and the same disappointments

In the maturity and motivation to find a solution it demonstrates, the Stora Report can be an inspiration not only for Japan and Korea but also for other former colonial and colonized powers. At the same time, there are differences. In Japan, third-generation Koreans living in Japan, many

²⁴ In May 1945 demonstrations organized to celebrate Victory in Europe evolved into anti-colonial demonstrations. Estimates of the number of victims range between 3,000 and more than 40,000.

²⁵ David Hundt, Roland Bleiker, "Reconciling Colonial Memories in Korea and Japan," *Asian Perspective*, vol.31, n° 1, 2007.

of them with Japanese names even when they keep their Korean nationality, do not pose a crucial and existential problem to Japanese society and political balance. A relatively large population of Korean origin chose, after the end of the Second World War, to live in Japan and, despite some tensions, their assimilation is almost complete and does not constitute an issue of internal politics. This is not the case in France where, more than 60 years after independence, Algeria remains the most important source of legal migration to France with 807,000 migrants in 2019.²⁶ There is also an asymmetry of development between France and Algeria that does not exist at the same level between Japan and Korea.

However, despite these major circumstantial differences, tensions at the bilateral level remain unresolved in both cases, and both Japan and France are confronted with the same reluctance to solve the issues and “look towards the future.” In the case of Japan and Korea, the status quo is all the more difficult to accept as the strategic dimension should be at the forefront given North Korea’s nuclearization and tensions with an increasingly aggressive China. On the other hand, the situation between France and Algeria remains essentially at the bilateral and societal levels.

A revisionist debate exists in Japan, as it does in France. However, in France as in Japan, this is a minority position and what is denounced as “revisionism” often is only the objective to deal with historical issues as historians and researchers, accepting debate and contradiction but refusing to accept in principle ideological positions not based on facts and research. This approach is not possible yet with Korea or with Algeria. On these issues, too, a dialogue between former colonial powers and how they deal with historical issues could have positive results.

Among the many points in common between France and Japan, and one of the most important and persistent stumbling blocks to reconciliation with their former colonies in South Korea and in Algeria, is the refusal by the formerly colonized party to “let go” of the past to look towards the future. The responsibility here does not—or at least not only—lie with the former colony.

The French debate on history and memories of the Algerian war is profoundly inscribed into the French contemporary societal debate on immigration and integration. This is a situation very different from the debate between Japan and Korea. In the introduction to the report, President Macron of France declared that “This work of memory, sincerity, and reconciliation has not been completed and will be continued. It must be carried out with courage in a spirit of harmony, appeasement, and respect for all consciences”; along the same line, President Biden of the United States visited for the first time the site of the Tulsa massacre, answering the same expectations from a significant part of American society that also contributed to his election.

The context is very different in Japan, where the expectations of the Japanese public are rather low, in part due to the “Korea fatigue” mentioned earlier. However, the will of mainstream political parties to take into account historical issues and try to solve them in a sensitive and positive manner to improve bilateral relations should not be discarded.

Nevertheless, the asymmetry between the objectives of former colonies and former colonized countries remains huge, and one cannot say that, for the time being at least, France’s efforts to build new bridges with its former colony in Algeria have been successful. Likewise, it must be recognized that, whatever the efforts made by Japanese governments, the results in Japan have not been positive, although a negationist posture would be unmerited. Moreover, the speed and scope of reconciliation and dialogue on history and memory issues are almost entirely in the hands of Algeria in the case of France, or South Korea in the case of Japan, and at the mercy of insecure or weak political movements tempted by nationalism and populism.

For France as for Japan, another issue at stake is regaining the right to historical and scientific debate on controversial periods of their own history without immediately becoming the target of criticisms and denunciations by those whose objectives are to block any discussion on an “official”

²⁶ The total number of foreign legal migrants living in France was 4.1 million in 2019.

and ideologically oriented historical vision for purposes more related to contemporary issues than historical ones.

In his conclusion, Benjamin Stora underlines the importance of historical scrutiny to provide “necessary counter-fire to the fires of memories ignited especially in the youth.” Problems arise when only one of the two sides wishes to engage in this historical scrutiny and the other side needs the history to support its legitimacy. In such instances, joint research becomes very restricted or even impossible. This is the situation facing Japan with South Korea and France with Algeria. As long as identity questions are not resolved in formerly colonized countries, solutions will be very difficult to find in the long term and history will remain hostage to political changes of priority as was the case between Japan and South Korea.