

## **THE LIMITS OF FORGIVENESS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: GROUPS SUPPORTING THE YASUKUNI SHRINE IN JAPAN AND POLITICAL TENSIONS IN EAST ASIA**

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### **Abstract**

Visits (or attempts to visit) to the Yasukuni Shrine by Japanese officials have generated a series of controversies and tensions between the countries occupied by imperialist Japan during the Pacific War. The central dilemma is that Yasukuni, emblem of Japanese militarism, questions the coherence and consistency of the requests for forgiveness made by different Japanese prime ministers to countries in the region in repentance for atrocities and violations of human rights committed in the past.

The weakness of the apologies is not an exclusive problem of Japan. On the contrary, the official pardon granted by one state to another has become an increasingly common practice, but questioned in international relations. The limits of apologies in the process of reconciliation between states have led to a new research strand, aligned with the debates on transitional justice, which discusses dimensions of the level of forgiveness in terms of rectification processes. From this perspective, previous research shows that there is a tendency to analyse the case of Yasukuni without delving into the social groups that support the shrine and define the agenda of prominent personalities of local politics, especially linked to the ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), who claim Yasukuni. Faced with this gap, this article examines the characteristics and modes of action of the groups in favour of Yasukuni and the responses from China and South Korea to the visits to the shrine by officials, in order to understand the peculiarities and scope of forgiveness in East Asia.

### **Keywords**

Yasukuni; forgiveness in international relations; reconciliation; East Asia.

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## **THE LIMITS OF FORGIVENESS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: GROUPS SUPPORTING THE YASUKUNI SHRINE IN JAPAN AND POLITICAL TENSIONS IN EAST ASIA<sup>1 2</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

Since the 1980s, a number of changes have taken place in East Asia (China, South Korea and Japan) that enabled the prominence of forgotten historical controversies. The end of the Cold War, historical revisionism driven by different academic sectors in the region, the democratization of South Korea, and the patriotic education of Deng Xiaoping (He, 2007; Pye, 1993) led to a renewed rapprochement between these countries. Since then, the strengthening of economic, social and cultural ties in the region has coexisted with rising political tensions related to the attacks and violations of human rights committed by Japan in the period of imperialist advance (from the incorporation of Taiwan as a colony in 1895 until the end of the Pacific war in 1945).

Beyond the reparations and apologies made by Japan in the context of the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with China (1972) and South Korea (1965), for years these countries have not demanded that Japan accounts exhaustively for atrocities committed in the past. This attitude was based on the need to establish economic agreements that facilitated development policies. In recent decades, this duality fell into crisis. The governments of China and South Korea demand consistent and credible apologies from Japan. Apologies are no longer understood as a simple diplomatic event, but mainly as the beginning of a reconciliation process with the countries in the region.

Several political controversies related to Japan's past as an aggressor in the region and to the peace treaties agreed after the war (Tokyo Trials and the Treaty of San Francisco) confluence in this new scenario. Among the main tensions, the dilemmas surrounding Japanese textbooks, the demands of former sex slaves of the imperial army of Japan (euphemistically called comfort women), the claims made by forced labourers during the Pacific War, the visits by government officials to Yasukuni, and territorial disputes (Dokdo/Takeshima and Sensaku/Diaoyu) stand out. The countries in the region perceive all these issues as an attempt to glorify Japanese imperialism. For example, the textbooks

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in question ignore the atrocities committed by Japan during the war (Bukh, 2007, Hundt and Bleiker, 2007).

Visits (or attempts to visit) to the Yasukuni Shrine by Japanese officials are also considered an act of provocation and contradiction regarding the apologies made. The governments of China and South Korea, as well as various social groups within Japan, have expressed their dissatisfaction, as they consider the shrine to be a symbol of Japanese militarism. Interestingly, increasing outrage among countries in the region has gone hand in hand with growth in the shaping and repositioning of groups and/or Japanese associations in defence of Yasukuni.

These have a high impact on the local political agenda given their close links with the ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Prime ministers, senior officials, journalists, and teachers are active and visible members of these groups. Does the defence of Yasukuni by the same officials who have apologized for the atrocities committed in the past reflect a weakness in forgiveness? Does the existence of social groups that defend and promote visits to Yasukuni contradict the process of regional reconciliation?

This paper liaises the Yasukuni Shrine case with the academic debates about forgiveness in international relations in order to understand to what extent the groups in favour contradict the apologies made. Taking up Daase's proposal (2010), we analyse the role of groups supporting Yasukuni and the official reactions of the governments of China and South Korea to the visits of Japanese officials to Yasukuni, in an attempt to illustrate the singularities and scope of forgiveness in East Asia.

### **Forgiveness and international relations**

In 1990, Emperor Akihito apologized to the Koreans for the atrocities committed during colonization. In 1992, in a speech made at the Korean National Assembly<sup>3</sup>, the then Prime Minister of Japan, Kiichi Miyazawa, expressed his sincere apologies to the country's former colonies. Three years later, Tomiichi Murayama officially apologised for the attacks on the countries of the region during the war and urged the Asian Women's Fund to compensate former sex slaves of the imperial army of Japan. Despite his contradictions, Shinzo Abe also apologized for past mistakes in 2007 and 2015.

These repeated requests for forgiveness are not unique to Japan's reconciliation process with its neighbours. On the contrary, it is a widespread practice in the international community as evidenced by the Queen of England's apology to the Maori of New Zealand, the request for forgiveness for slavery of Ugandans made by Clinton on a visit to the country, the apologies expressed by Canada to its native peoples, the forgiveness request by John Paul II for the Inquisition (Cunningham, 1999: 287-288) and Pope Francis' apology for the persecution of the Catholic church evangelicals, among many other examples.

What is political guilt, and is collective repentance possible? What is the value of forgiveness in international relations? Why do some state representatives ask for forgiveness and not others? How does it impact on regional integration processes? These questions that arise within memory studies, transitional justice and human rights gave

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<sup>3</sup> Korea will be used to refer to South Korea.



way to a new research strand in international relations that links forgiveness with repentance, accountability and reconciliation (Cohen, 2004; Lazare 2005; Lind, 2008; Smith, 2008; Thompson, 2002).

Lind (2008) notes that most countries achieve reconciliation without the need for an apology or repair. That is, reconciliation and apology are not necessarily part of the same political process. His paper discusses the existence of a positive link between recognizing the attacks of the past and improving international relations. To this end, the author compares the process of reconciliation between Germany and France with that of South Korea and Japan, and concludes that sometimes apologies can be counterproductive in diplomatic terms. His argument ignores, among other things, historical and cultural differences related to the characteristics of the idea of forgiveness in these societies and to the peculiarities of the process of rectifying the past conducted by Japan during the occupation and in the context of the Cold War. In any case, he introduces an interesting reflection on the limits of repentance in foreign policy in terms of the impact it has on domestic politics.

Another author who takes up the case of Japan to discuss forgiveness in international relations is Daase (2010). Unlike Lind, he builds analytical categories that define collective forgiveness and the reconciliation process. This author perceives the apology not as mere rhetoric but as an act loaded with content. That is, a paradigm shift in how to interpret and perpetuate the past. He highlights four categories that allow us to study the feasibility of a pardon to be accepted by the victims. First, the status and role of the person expressing the apology, who should represent the highest authority of the country found guilty, is vital.

Second, the level of credibility perceived as the material and political cost that the apologizing state should have. Third, the level of repentance measured in terms of consistency between forgiveness and the symbolic or memory policies that are enforced or not. The last aspect is the social approval or level of collective acceptance since the apology is requested on behalf of a group: the nation. Therefore, the state should prevent dissatisfied local groups from impacting on the political agenda and contradicting the official position.

While the categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive and, to some extent, the separation between the level of credibility and repentance, and between the implemented memory policies (political cost) and the level of social approval is blurred, this definition of forgiveness in broad sense allows us to operationalize the discussion about the Yasukuni Shrine.

After a brief historical review, we will analyse the level of social approval considering only the Japanese main social groups supporting Yasukuni: members, objectives, types of claims, channels of action, and achievements; and the level of credibility and repentance following the kind of apology made (what they are repenting about) by Japanese senior officials, their relationship with associations supporting the shrine and the impact on the governments of South Korea and China.



## The case of the Yasukuni Shrine

### Brief historical review

The Meiji Restoration (1868) modified the religious map of the country. Immediately after the renovation group got into power, the leaders of the imperial government started to deactivate Buddhist institutions with coercion and violence, while prohibiting other popular religious practices. Shintoism, an animist folk cult, was imposed as the state religion. To this end, it was stated that all the country's shrines were to become places to perform rites of state and the pastors were kept under strict government supervision (Breen, 2008: 12).

In this context, Yasukuni, which was built prior to the Meiji Restoration, was called "peaceful country" (*yasukuni*) in 1879, the date when it assumed the status of special shrine: the symbol of the new Japanese nation-state. A military site where the state was the benefactor that should celebrate those who sacrificed themselves for the nation. The spirits (*kami*) no longer belonged to the private sphere, they were souls of all Japanese and, in turn, responded to the greater deity (the emperor) who should honour them.

Despite the important role of Shintoism, the Meiji Constitution of 1889 established religious freedom (Article 28). Doak notes that until the beginning of the Pacific War, there were certain liberties. In fact, several Christians like Imanaka Tsugimaro and Professor Tanaka Kotaro participated in governmental activities without discrimination based on their religious choice (2008: 28).

The radical change dates from 1931 (Mudken Incident), when the political mobilization for war was imposed on Japan and its colonies. The ambitions of imperialist Japan were based on freeing countries in the region from Western domination and build the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere under its rule. In the war years, especially since 1937 (occupation of Nanjing), Yasukuni<sup>4</sup> became the emblem of militarism and expansionism:

*"Dear Mother, I'm sorry I neglected you and have not written before. I hope everyone is safe. I joined the Special Attack Forces. I will not forget your kindness during my life. My final duty towards you as a mother is to fulfil my goal. In an attack on an enemy ship I will give my life. Mother, take care. Protect the family for me. Please send my greetings to all the villagers. Meet me at Yasukuni"* (Testimony of Kaneyuki Fukuda (kamikaze) extracted from: Kamikazeimages.net

As happened in the discussions prior to the Tokyo Trials about the need to grant amnesty to Emperor Hirohito, the permanence of Yasukuni was also a matter of debate. Jesuit Priest Bitter was one of the Vatican's representatives during the US occupation and advised MacArthur not to destroy the shrine:

<sup>4</sup> In 1943 the bronze torii located at the entrance to Yasukuni was removed by instruction of Prime Minister Tojo to use the material for the development of heavy industry. The current torii was built in 1978 (Breen, 2008: 18).



*"(...) his advice was that each person who had died for the nation was entitled to have his spirit memorialised at Yasukuni, regardless of his personal belief" (Doak: 2008, 51).*

The shrine not only was not destroyed, but to the nearly two and a half million soldiers remembered for having given their lives for the nation of Japan (1853-1945), a plaque in memory of the fourteen convicted Class-A criminals at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East was added later in 1978.

Japan's new constitution enacted in May 1947 established the separation between religion and politics. Therefore, the shrine was no longer in state hands, becoming financed and maintained by various non-governmental associations based in the newly created *Association of Devotees of Yasukuni (Yasukuni Jinja Hosankai)*. It was made up of personalities from the dome of power that the occupation regime sought to demonize: an imperial princess as president, a former foreign affairs minister as vice-president and a former prime minister as advisor (Breen, 2008: 20). As the occupation forces withdrew, Emperor Hirohito visited the shrine; and in 1953 the Japan War-Bereaved Families Association was formed to try to sensitize government authorities on the importance of the state to guarantee the nationalization of the shrine and grant public funds for the rites. These pressures did not prevail. Official attempts to subvert the peace order appeared in 1969 when the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) submitted a bill calling for the state to protect the shrine, which was denied. Five years later, the then Prime Minister Takeo Miki visited Yasukuni and was forced to apologize.

The controversy became an international force from the 1980s. Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro visited Yasukuni in 1982 and 1983, saying that it was the end of the war and that expressing gratitude for those who gave their lives for Japan was a state duty. At the same time, he authorized a study council to investigate official visits to the shrine. The research results were published in November 1984, leading to internal tensions and regional concern (Rose, 2008: 29).

Photo 1 – Japanese activists in favour and against the Yasukuni Shrine (May 2005)



Source: Capture of documentary *Annyeong Sayonara*





The tension reached its peak during the period 2001-2006 when Junichiro Koizumi repeatedly visited the shrine. Since then, Yasukuni has caused diplomatic discord between the countries of the region (He, 2007; Hei, 2008; Rose, 2008; Selden, 2008; Wang, 2008) and conflicts within Japanese society (pioneer in claims against the shrine).<sup>5</sup> In this scenario of memories in disputes, the local and transnational civil society has been very active organizing debates and imposing certain meanings of the past. Through the formation of groups for and against Yasukuni, they have given rise to different interpretations of what happened that pose limits to the pardons granted by the governments of Japan. As Lind (2008) argues, the official apology is not a necessary condition for reducing conflicts generated by past aggressions, nor a sign of internal ideological consensus.

### Groups in favour of Yasukuni

There are various social groups in favour and against the Yasukuni Shrine. Most groups or associations against Yasukuni not only demand the suspension of visits to the shrine by Japanese officials, but also a profound historical revisionism. They have a more transnational nature than the groups in favour, and act in cooperation with foreign governments to put pressure on Japan. They are also involved in lawsuits regarding other political tensions, like the textbooks and claims of the victims of sexual slavery.

*The Global Alliance for Preserving the History of WWII in Asia, Asia Victims of the Pacific War Family of the Deceased of Korea, Northeast Asian History Foundation (NEAHF), Center for Research and Documentation on Japan's War Responsibility, Institute of Research into Collaboratist Activities, the Korean Council for Redress and Reparations for the Victims of WWII Atrocities, stand out, among others. (Shin, 2008).*

While these organizations play a very important role in the internationalization of the problem and in putting pressure on the governments of Japan, in this paper we focus only on the groups in favour of the shrine, for two reasons. The first is that their analysis allows us to reflect on the limits of the level of collective repentance in Japanese society. The second is based on the close relationship between the Liberal Democratic Party and these associations, which leads us to deepen the analysis on the variables of forgiveness suggested by Daase: repentance level and coherence.

The associations in favour of the Yasukuni Shrine play an essential role in the appreciation of the Japanese imperialist past due to their close connection with the party that virtually dominates Japan's political life since the end of World War II: the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). However, existing literature<sup>6</sup> shows there are few studies that take these groups or associations as key players in disputes generated around Yasukuni. Among the most significant contributions, the publications by Daiki Shibuichi (2005) and Yongwook Ryu (2007) stand out. Shibuichi explores the stances on the shrine expressed by the "right" and "left" factions in Japan. In this division of the somehow classic and not consistent political ideological spectrum, he incorporates social groups in favour of Yasukuni. While not delving into their actions and characteristics, he points out the

<sup>5</sup> The first lawsuit against the Japanese government demanding removal of the name of a former fighter from the commemorative plaques was filed in 1968 by relatives of a Japanese victim (Tsunoda Saburo).

<sup>6</sup> We have conducted an exhaustive search of works in English and Spanish.



connection between them and the LDP. He does not consider it to be a majority sector, but a very powerful one. Officials, teachers, journalists, and renowned politicians promote visits to Yasukuni, seeing it as a symbol of nationalism underpinning Japanese identity. On the other hand, Ryu says that support for the shrine is part of a growing conservatism in Japan that harms diplomatic relations with China and South Korea. Like Shibuichi, he stresses that the LDP is the only party that defends Yasukuni. Considering the major importance given to certain groups in favour of Yasukuni in previous works (Shibuichi, 2005; Tetsuya Takahashi, 2007; Ryu, 2007; Yuji, Keito and Kei, 2015), the impact of their activities on regional media (Japan Herald, Korea Herald, the Japan Times, the Korean Times, China Daily, Xinhuanet, Asahi Shimbun) and the level of accessibility to information, we selected the following organizations:

- Japan Conference (*Nippon Kaigi*)
- Japan War-Bereaved Families Association (*Nippon Izokukai*)
- Association of Members of Parliament Visiting the Yasukuni Shrine Together (*AMPVYST*).
- Association of Shinto Shrines. (*Jinja Honcho*)

*The Japan Conference or Nippon Kaigi* is the youngest group, formed in 1997. It arises from the union of two nationalist groups: the Society for the Defence of Japan (formed by religious organizations) and the National Association for the Defence of Japan (formed by several military leaders) (Kuji, Keita and Kei, 2015: 1). Under the slogan "let us build a country we are proud of", its main objective is to propagate a comprehensive historical revisionism of the imperialist past of Japan by promoting officials' visits to the shrine, the establishment of patriotic education and a Shinto monarchical state (which leads to a constitutional reform).

As Shibuichi noted (2005), this group maintains a very close relationship with senior government officials. For example, the current president of the organization, Miyoshi Toru, is the former president of the Supreme Court of Japan. The current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Aso Taro and Koizumi Junichiro, all members of the Liberal Democratic Party are also members of this group (Kim, 2014).

According to a report in the newspaper *Asahi Shimbun*, *Nippon Kaigi* has 250 offices in the country and in parliament and the representation of 289 members (40% of seats), almost all of the LDP, although the opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) also has supporters within this group. In 2014, fifteen of the nineteen cabinet representatives were members of this organization (Kato, 2014). Currently, 80% of Shinzo Abe's cabinet and half of the parliamentarians belong to this group. According to the official website, among the different personalities of the Japanese public life, many prominent members of the LDP participate: Shinzo Abe, Junichiro Koizumi, Akira Amari, Haruko Arimura, Kazuhiro Haraguchi, Kunio Haraguchi, Bunmei Ibuki, Yoshio Mochizuki, Eisuke Mori, Satoichi Nakawa, Hiroshi Nakai, Gen Nakatani, Keinji, Kosaka, Yoshitaka Shindo, Yoshihide Suga, Sunichi Suzuki, Sanae Takaichi, Wataru Takeshita, among others; university lecturers: Tadae Takubo, Shiro Odamura, Keiichiro Kobori, Takemoto Tadao, Irie Takamori, Yoshio Keino (President of the Japan Teachers Association), Masayuki Shibuki (Kohken Co.), etc.; prominent businessmen and professionals: Keiichiro Uchino (director of a prestigious law firm), Kosaku Inaba (former president of a heavy industry), etc.; and other representatives of civil society, such as Sadanoyama





Shimatsu (director of the Japan Sumo Association), Yoshiko Sakurai (journalist and television presenter), Seiho Okano (leader of a religious cult called *Gedatsukai*).

Besides having prominent personalities of local politics who hold or have held important government positions among its members, Tomomi Yamaguchi highlights:

*"movements such as Nippon Kaigi that not only have the ability to mobilize members of the National Assembly but also parliamentarians from prefectures and religious groups have played a key role in the consolidation of a right-wing trend since the late 1990s that culminated in the Education Basic Law, visits by prime ministers to Yasukuni, etc."* (quoted in Kuji, Keita and Kei, 2015: 2).

Its clear and direct link in certain government decisions does not mean that there are no sectors within the LDP that dismiss *Nippon Kaigi*. However, they have managed to enact controversial bills, for example, the one establishing the old imperial flag of the Rising Sun as the national flag and the imperial anthem *Kimi ga yo* ("May his reign last forever") as the national anthem in 1999.

Another relevant group is the *Japan War-Bereaved Families Association* or *Nippon Izokukai* founded in 1947 with the aim of vindicating the interests of the descendants of veterans of the Pacific war. This group is more powerful and nationalist than *Nippon Kaigi*, but like it, it has broad support from the LDP and the positions in its organization are occupied by parliament members of the ruling party. At first, it struggled to obtain governmental financial assistance to the families who lost next of kin during the war. In 1957, it persuaded the Ministry of Welfare to cede one of its buildings for no rent. And in 1960, having reached its initial goal, it pressured the government to ensure that Yasukuni is protected by the state and officials, and that especially the Emperor and the Prime Minister support the shrine as they did before the war. Since then, the *Association* began to introduce bills (through the parliamentarians faithful to the group) to ensure state support of the shrine and establish official rites for those killed in combat. Indeed, they conducted another more visible type of action: street demonstrations, leafleting, collecting signatures and sitting in front of the prime minister's office. The bill was rejected five times during the period 1969-1974 (Daiki, 2005: 70-71).

Faced with these refusals, they defined a new strategy focused on encouraging public officials to visit Yasukuni. To force Yasuhiro Nakasone to officially support the shrine, several subgroups that make up the *Association* went on hunger strikes, even inside the shrine. Former Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto (1996-1998) was a member of this group and visited the shrine during the first year of his administration (Pollack, 1996). Similarly, in 2000 the Mayor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, did the same, becoming the first governor to make an official visit (Tanaka, 2001). An interesting change in their demands occurred in 2014 when the *Association* passed a resolution supporting the removal of the plaques commemorating Class-A war criminals and their transfer to another place and thus avoid controversies around the shrine (Fackler, 2014). This new strategy seeks to eliminate the discussions around which fallen the state should commemorate and thus advance their nationalization project.



Besides these two groups, there are other smaller ones. Among them, *the Association of Parliamentarians visiting the Yasukuni Shrine Together* (AMPVYST) stands out for its advocacy capacity. This association was founded in 1981 and reflects the power achieved by the groups in favour of Yasukuni. It consists of LDP and DPJ parliamentarians who wish to visit and/or enable official visits to the shrine, especially every 15 August when the end of the war is commemorated. The AMPVYST considers that these visits will increase the national political consciousness. Between 2008 and 2013, about 40 or 50 parliamentarians visited the shrine to mark the end of the war.

Finally, it is important to mention the *Association of Shinto Shrines* or *Jinja Honcho*. According to its official website, it is a conglomerate of private religious institutions responsible for promoting the Shinto religion and enforce Japanese traditional and cultural values. Since the end of war and the consequent separation of state and religion, this *Association* aims to strengthen the revival of Shintoism as a folk religion that defines the Japanese national identity. In this sense, it advocates to resume pre-war values such as the divinity of the Emperor and respect for the imperial family. On the other hand, it is responsible for managing all national shrines and certify priestly promotions. Its main channel of action is the weekly *Jinja Shimpo*, responsible for the social and religious agenda of national Shinto shrines. It is closely linked to *Nippon Izokukai* and often collaborates in drawing up its agenda. For example, during 1969-1974, *Jinja Honcho* actively supported *Nippon Izokukai* and the LDP in the demand for the nationalization of the shrine. In terms of ideological foundation, it is more like *Nippon Kaigi* since it combines the defence of Yasukuni with the importance of restoring what they consider to be the "traditional values of Japanese society" (Sieg, 2014).

All these groups are civil associations. In no case were they created by political parties, although they are their main pressure actors. In order to increase the level of adherence to their demands, especially visits to Yasukuni, each organization distributes material (books and pamphlets) that reflects their revisionist perspective of the past. The groups also maintain relations with officials of some prefectures (usually belonging to the LDP) that are responsible for attracting new members and collect donations. The action channels they use to achieve their aims are peaceful: legal means (they push for new regulations), commemorations, social promotion activities and educational projects. They also have the implicit support of newspaper *Yumiuri Shimbun*, one with the largest circulation in the country, the daily *Sankei Shimbun* and the monthly magazine *Shokun!*

Pollmann (2016) emphasizes the importance of the media since they may favour the realization or not of a visit. Through public opinion polls, he notes that officials and prime ministers tend to do their visit if they feel supported by the population. This domestic consensus has negative international consequences in Korea and China, but if the official has broad support, they are overcome. If support for a prime minister turns out to be less than expected, the visit will be repudiated or even not made. When Koizumi visited Yasukuni, he did so being aware that the surveys favoured an eventual visit. The author explains that the greater the support, the visit will take place and support for the official in question will continue, although it will be reduced.

On the other hand, groups in favour of Yasukuni are connected to each other and also have various action and pressure channels. Their lobbying at political level has allowed them to consolidate their power of influence on the national and local government. Most of the representatives with leadership positions in these associations/groups are themselves members of the LDP and occupy important positions in government (prime



ministers, ministers, parliamentarians, and prefects). This does not mean that the groups are part of the LDP, but their members are simultaneously participating in party activities and in activities outside them. As mentioned in the case of groups against the shrine, in Japan there is not a single voice on the issue of Yasukuni. On the contrary, within it we can find a variety of positions that reflect the diversity of perspectives regarding the visits. Nor would it be correct to say that there is homogeneity within the LDP. Within it, there are those who oppose the prime minister visiting the shrine. One can also identify different perceptions about the meaning of this memory site, since for some it is a place to honour the fallen while for others it is a symbol of militarism (Ryu, 2007). The ideological pluralism prevails in the other political parties. According to data presented by Ryu (2007), LDP parliamentarians are generally more likely to visit the shrine and consider that by doing so they honour the fallen, and those who do not belong to this party are usually more prone to oppose the shrine and consider that it represents militarism. Interestingly, the groups against the shrine cross transversally the party logic. For example, the AMPVYST group is a partnership involving both LDP and the DPJ parliamentarians in favour of the shrine. In any case, the LDP, simply by having a liberal ideology regarding the economy and a conservative-nationalist one in politics is closer to these groups supporting the shrine and whose members are part of their ranks.

The scope of the groups in favour of the shrine and their intrinsic relationship with the leadership of the dominant power in Japan question the level and type of collective approval of the apologies made by Japanese officials for atrocities committed in the past. The support and legitimacy of visits to Yasukuni show the difficulty in reconciling national repentance with the appreciation of the national being. As discussed in the next section, this dilemma also raises other types of incompatibilities in Japan's reconciliation process with its neighbours.

### **When forgiveness becomes inconsistent**

Since the 1950s, several Japanese officials have apologized for the atrocities committed during the war to countries affected by the occupation [see Table 1]. However, forgiveness does not seem to have been accompanied by a policy of adequate memory to strengthen the mere rhetoric of the apology. Or perhaps, even more complex, the notion of forgiveness has not been agreed by the countries in the region, especially Korea and China. Thus, a series of questions related to the level of repentance and the level of collective acceptance of forgiveness arise: To what extent the demands of the Yasukuni advocacy groups oppose the apology requests? Who can and should the Japanese state commemorate?

Table 1. Apologies from the governments of Japan

<b>Year</b>	<b>Authority</b>	<b>Recipient of the Apology</b>
1957	Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke	Republic of the Union of Myanmar
1957	Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke	Australia
1965	Minister of Foreign Affairs Shiina Etsusaburo	South Korea (Treaty Restoring Diplomatic Relations)



1972	Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka	People's Republic of China
1982	Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki	All Asian territories occupied by Japan during the war
1982	Director of the Cabinet Secretariat Kiichi Miyazawa	Korea
1984	Emperor Hirohito	Korea
1984	Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone	Korea
1985	Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone	All Asian territories occupied by Japan during the war in the United Nations
1989	Prime Minister Takeshita Noboru	Korea
1990	Minister of Foreign Affairs Taro Nakasone	Korea
1990	Emperor Akihito	Korea
1990	Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu	Korea
1992	Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa	The former comfort women
1992	Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa	Korea
1992	Director of the Cabinet Secretariat Koichi Kato	The former comfort women
1993	Director of the Cabinet Secretariat Yohei Kono	The former comfort women
1993	Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa	All those affected by war
1993	Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa	All those affected by war
1993	Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa	For the aggressions committed during the war
1994	Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama	All people of Asian territories occupied by Japan during the war
1995	Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama	The former comfort women
1996	Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto	South Korea (for colonization and former comfort women)
1996	Emperor Akihito	South Korea
1998	Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto	Holland
1998	Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi	Korea
1998	Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi	People's Republic of China
2000	Consul General of Japan in Hong Kong, Itaru Umeza	All Asian territories occupied by Japan during the war
2000	Minister of Foreign Affairs Yohei Kono	People's Republic of China



2001	Minister of Foreign Affairs Makiko Tanaka	For the aggressions committed during the war
2001	Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi	Korea for the colonization of the country
2001	Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi	The former comfort women
2002	Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi	Korea
2003	Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi	All Asian territories occupied by Japan during the war
2005	Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi	All Asian territories occupied by Japan during the war
2005	Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi	All Asian territories occupied by Japan during the war
2007	Prime Minister Shinzo Abe	The former comfort women
2010	Minister of Foreign Affairs Katsuya Okada	Korea
2010	Prime Minister Naoto Kan	All Asian territories occupied by Japan during the war
2010	Minister of Foreign Affairs Katsuya Okada	United States for prisoners of war
2010	Prime Minister Naoto Kan	Korea
2011	Minister of Foreign Affairs Seiji Maechara	Australia for the mistreatment of prisoners of war
2011	Deputy Foreign Minister Toshiyuki Kat	Canada for the mistreatment of prisoners of war
2013	Prime Minister Shinzo Abe	All Asian territories occupied by Japan during the war
2014	Ambassador to the Philippines Toshinao Urabe	All Asian territories occupied by Japan during the war
2015	Prime Minister Shinzo Abe	All Asian territories occupied by Japan during the war
2015	Minister of Foreign Affairs Fumio Kishida	Agreement with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of South Korea: the former comfort women

Source: Own list based on data provided by the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the House of Representatives of Japan

As shown in Table 1, in the 1990s the amount of apologies made by the prime ministers of Japan increased significantly, from 4 in the previous decade to 12. This increase marked a trend, with 7 apologies made in 2000. The apologies tend to emphasize the *responsibility* and deep *repentance* of Japan:



*"For a while, in a not too distant past, Japan followed a mistaken national policy, choosing to advance through war and leaving the people of Japan subsumed in a terrible crisis, and through aggression and colonial dominance, caused profound damage and great suffering to the peoples of many countries, particularly Asian nations (...) Allow me to also express my feelings of profound mourning for all victims (...)"* (Tomiichi Murayama in the speech about the 50 years of war, 15 August 1994)

*"In the past, Japan, through aggressions and colonial dominance, caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of many countries, particularly those from Asian nations. Honestly, given these historical facts, I once again express my feelings of deep remorse and heartfelt apologies (...)"* (Junichiro Koizumi, 15 August 2015)

Ironically, one notes that while Junichiro Koizumi as prime minister apologized for the horrors of the past every year, he also visited the Yasukuni Shrine annually. Shinzo Abe had the same attitude, continuing to defend Yasukuni despite the pardon granted in 2007. Nakasone Yasuhiro and Koizumi Junichiro and Shinzo Abe, among other senior officials, are active members of the *Japan Conference* organization. Lai (2014: 84) points out that since the 1990s, a more articulated and ideological movement led by *Nippon Kaigi* emerged, reflecting the popular resentment toward what they perceived as using war files to permanently denigrate them and force them to maintain *an apology diplomacy*. Unlike other associations studied, this one has a broad political role and adherence. According to data collected in official websites, *Nippon Izokukai* aims to promote the socio-economic welfare of war victims (and their families) while seeking official support to care for memorials located outside Japan in Sakhalin, the Kuril islands, in Malaysia, and the Philippines, among others. *Nippon Kaigi*, however, has more controversial political objectives, for example, modify the constitution to allow the re-emergence of an independent Japanese army. It has a monthly publication that discusses how to interpret the history of the country, the need to restore "national pride", "respect and enhance the tradition and culture" and restore the "true identity of Japan". Regarding Yasukuni, recent statements emphasize the rejection of a proposal to convert the shrine into a public cemetery because "it tramples national history". They also have a YouTube channel with events, lectures, commemorations and other dissemination events. It is very striking, with a high number of statements made by public officials showcasing some state authorities doing their activities, such as Shinzo Abe. Visits to the shrine are usually made on specific days, such as during the Spring Festival (mid-April), the Autumn Festival (mid-October) and on 15 August, the Day of Surrender of Japan in World War II. According to Pollmann (2016), it is the most chosen date for visits of parliamentarians and cabinet members. That day marks the end of the war for Japan, while its neighbours celebrate the Japanese liberation. This is a sensitive date in the relations between Korea, China and Japan. Other dates chosen by prime ministers and officials for visits are the spring and autumn Festivals when religious services are conducted.





The prime ministers who visited Yasukuni were Nakasone, Hashimoto, Koizumi and Abe. Both Nakasone and Koizumi visited the shrine on 15 August, Hashimoto and Abe on other dates. According to data obtained by Pollmann, there have been constant visits of parliamentarians to the shrine since 2003, both during the festivals and on 15 August. The size of delegations at festivals seems to suggest that those days are more important than the commemoration of the end of the war. On the other hand, the cabinet members visited the shrine every 15 August in the periods 1999-2008 and 2012-2014. These data indicate that, despite the lack of prime ministerial visits between 2006 and 2013, both cabinet members and parliamentarians continued to go to Yasukuni during the festivals and on 15 August.

Between 2006 and 2013 the prime ministers decided not to attend. It is the case of Obuchi, Mori, Abe (during his first term, 2006-2007), Fukuda, Aso, Hatoyama, Kan, and Noda. However, Abe, in his two terms, and Aso, sent offerings. Abe did it once in his first term, Aso did it twice, once in each festival, and then Abe sent offerings in each festival, on 15 August, and personally visited the shrine in 2013. Sending gifts is a sign that despite not being able to make the visit, the prime minister is legitimizing the shrine.

This enhancement of the local meaning of Yasukuni in detriment of the impact on regional relations suggests that for several officials domestic policy seems to matter more than international policy. While visits earn support from broad sectors, they undermine relations with China and Korea. However, if they choose not to attend, there will be no international damage to repair. The period of non-visits by the prime ministers may indicate greater respect for Japan's neighbours, but this attitude did not prevent visits by other public servants, generating some incoherence and inconsistency in the apologies made.

On the other hand, combining the act of visiting Yasukuni with the apologies of prime ministers, one notes that, just like with the organizations in favour of the shrine (especially *Nippon Kaigi*), the act of honouring the fallen in the war is not synonymous with legitimizing human rights violations committed by imperialist Japan. The apologies emphasize repentance and responsibility for the damage caused and commemorations at Yasukuni are based on the need to dignify those who unjustly lost their lives for the Japanese nation. This dichotomy, discussed and criticized by the countries in the region (and even by large segments of Japanese society) shows the diversity of ways of interpreting the past that dominate the regional agenda and the consequent problem of absolutizing the value of forgiveness:

*"It is not my intention to hurt the feelings of the Chinese and Korean people. It is my desire to respect and protect freedom and democracy, and build a respectful friendship with China and Korea, as have all prime ministers who have visited Yasukuni"* (Shinzo Abe, 26 December 2013)

### **The regional impact: China and South Korea**

The governments of China and South Korea consider the visits to Yasukuni by Japanese government officials, especially the prime ministers, as a provocation that challenges the



level of repentance and collective acceptance of the "heartfelt" apologies made by the Governments Japan on several occasions.

South Korea is the most active country in its claims<sup>7</sup>. According to documents posted on the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFAT) of this country, the first claims date back to the 1980s when Nakasone Yushihiro went to Yasukuni. During the period of Junichiro Koizumi (2001-2006) the statements of dissatisfaction increased. In 2001, during the 53rd meeting of the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights of the United Nations, Koizumi's visit to the shrine was mentioned, among other issues. Also in the statement made on the 56<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the war, Junichiro Koizumi referred to the visits to Yasukuni and asked for understanding for the feelings of the Japanese people for the shrine. In subsequent years, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Korea made several statements of rejection, emphasizing the militaristic nature of the matter and the existence of plaques commemorating war criminals. In August 2003, visits were one of the issues discussed by the foreign ministers during a meeting, without reaching consensus.

The documents examined (see Table 2) indicate criticism of the visits and of the misconception of history that Japan disseminates. Besides the "wrong" view of history, there are other conflicts between the two countries, such as the territorial dispute over the Dokdo/Takeshima Island and requests for Japan to modify a series of school textbooks that minimize its aggressor role in the past. Korea's indignation over the visits by prime ministers to Yasukuni continued. In April 2013, official meetings were cancelled after Shinzo Abe went to the shrine and in December the National Assembly issued a formal condemnation of the visits, and the meetings on defence and military exchanges were suspended. In this regard, the statement made by the Korean government spokesman stressed:

*"If Japan really wants to actively contribute to world peace, it is important to face its history and build trust by expressing deep regret and make apologies to the governments and peoples of neighbouring countries that suffered the pain of its colonial rule and militarist aggression"* (Statement by the Spokesman on Yasukuni, 26 December 2013, MOFAT).

In early 2014, the Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea at the United Nations, Oh Joon, referred to the tension caused by visits to Yasukuni and condemned the leaders of Japan for maintaining a confrontational attitude. During that year the Korean government made several statements expressing its discontent after the visit of Shinzo Abe and cabinet members to Yasukuni. On 22 April 2015, the Korean government said:

*"(...) Japan should express its sincere repentance and apologize for the errors made in the past to meet the aspirations of both countries"*

<sup>7</sup> It is also in other regional disputes regarding Japan's past as an aggressor in the region, as the case of former sex slaves of the imperial army of Japan and the tensions caused by the textbooks.



*to improve bilateral relations”* (Statement by the Spokesman on Yasukuni, 22 April 2015, MOFAT)

Like Korea, China has also repeatedly stated its concern about the visits of Japan’s prime ministers to the shrine (See Table 2). In its complaints it requests that they be stopped, arguing, like Korea, that the Japanese government is misreading history. The requests were made not only through statements, but also in meetings between officials. One of the major complaints made by China is that Japan's attitude precludes fluency in diplomatic relations between the two countries. For example, Hu Jintao declared in 2005 that Japan should consider the three documents that serve as the foundation of their relations: the Sino-Japanese Joint Statement, the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between China and Japan and the Sino-Japanese Joint Declaration. The following year, Takako Doi linked the impasse in Sino-Japanese relations to the sustained visits by Japanese leaders to the Yasukuni Shrine. In addition, he described the visit as an act that:

*“Challenges international justice and tramples the intuitive knowledge of mankind. It has had a strong impact on the process of improving relations between China and Japan and has also damaged the international image and national interests of Japan”* (Interview with Tang Jia Xuan, 20 August 2006, MOFAT of China).

The claims continued throughout the decades. In 2013, Qin Gang, spokesman of the MOFAT of China said that Shinzo Abe's visit to Yasukuni was outrageous:

*“unacceptably tramples on the feelings of the Chinese people and of other Asian people victims of the war and openly defies historical justice and human consciousness (...) we urge Japan to honour its commitment and reflect on its aggressive past, to take steps to correct its errors and eliminate adverse effects, and take concrete actions to regain the trust of its Asian neighbours and of the international community in general”* (Qin Gang, Declaration on Yasukuni, 26 December 2013).

Table 2. Regional Impact of visits to Yasukuni 2001-2015

<b>Period: 2001-2015</b>	<b>China</b>	<b>South Korea</b>	<b>Japan</b>
<b>Reason for protest</b>	- The Chinese MOFA accuses Yasukuni of being a symbol of expansionism and aggression, the way how the Japanese government understands and is approaching its history of aggression being the nodal point.	- The Korean Ministry stressed that the Yasukuni Shrine is a place where the wars of aggression of Japanese imperialism are justified and glorified.	



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Presence of plaques commemorating Class A criminals being the main indicator of the misperception of the Japanese government.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Presence of plaques commemorating Class A criminals</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Requests/ Answers</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Draw lessons from history and look to the future to develop Sino-Japanese relations".</li> <li>- Develop relations considering the "spirit of taking history as a mirror and looking into the future" (coined by Hu Jintao).</li> <li>- Compliance with the four political documents established between China and Japan (the China-Japan Joint Declaration of 1972, the China-Japan Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1978, the China-Japan Joint Declaration of 1998 and the joint declaration on advancing strategic relations and mutual benefits holistically of 2008), on which their relations should develop.</li> <li>- Request a correct understanding of history through actions enabling relationships to thrive.</li> <li>- Respect for the feelings of the Chinese people and victims of other Asian countries.</li> <li>- Any homage at Yasukuni is essentially an attempt to deny and cover up the history of the invasion of Japanese militarism, and to challenge the results of World War II and the post-war international order.</li> <li>- The Japanese side was urged to show remorse for the history of aggression and to make tangible efforts to win the trust of its Asian neighbours and the international community.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Approval of the proposal by the "Advisory Group to consider a memorial facility for remembering the dead and Praying for Peace in Japan" to build a new memorial.</li> <li>- Discontent with a distorted interpretation of history by the Japanese government.</li> <li>- Request not to take any action that may hinder the normalization and the establishment of a constructive relationship oriented to the future, such as visiting the Yasukuni Shrine.</li> <li>- Request to "take a humble and sincere approach to the history of Japan to win the trust and play roles of responsibility within the international community"</li> <li>- The visits are qualified as irresponsible for ignoring the feelings of Japan's neighbouring peoples.</li> <li>- Questioning about the presence of plaques commemorating Koreans.</li> <li>- The rhetoric and actions carried out by Japan, including visits to Yasukuni, are identified as an impediment to the development and stabilization of bilateral relations.</li> <li>- Request for correspondence between Japan's actions and its apologies.</li> <li>- It is considered that the visits can only deny the international order and override the basis on which Japan returned to the international community after World War II (MOFAT Korea, 17/04/2014).</li> <li>- Complaints regarding the "anachronistic" behaviour that the Yasukuni visits represent for the Korean government.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Prime Minister Taro Aso said he considered unnatural not to honour those who had died for Japan so it was necessary to visit the shrine. (MOFA China, 02/08/2013).</li> <li>- The Japanese government affirms that the Murayama, Koizumi and Abe statements express the way they understand the history, repeating the idea of a "deep remorse and heartfelt apology" about what happened in the past. The apology extends to other events such as the case of comfort women or the Nanjing massacre.</li> <li>- The Japanese government said the visits were made by citizens and were not official in nature.</li> <li>- The visits are justified claiming that they seek to honour those who sacrificed themselves to build the peace that Japan enjoys today.</li> </ul>



<p><b>Related topics</b> (mentioned as historical problems in statements made at Yasukuni)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conflict of Sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.</li> <li>- Controversy about how history is told in Japanese school textbooks.</li> <li>- Recognition of China over Taiwan.</li> <li>- Security cooperation between the US and Japan and future military orientation of the latter.</li> <li>- The issue of comfort women.</li> <li>- The Nanjing massacre.</li> <li>- Disputes arising in the East and South China Sea.</li> <li>- The nuclear issue of North Korea.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conflict of sovereignty over the Dokdo/Takeshina Island.</li> <li>- The issue of comfort women.</li> <li>- Protests over history school textbooks.</li> <li>- For the Korean government the visits reflect an erroneous look of history and began to be associated with intentions to revise the Constitution by the Abe Cabinet.</li> <li>- The nuclear issue of North Korea.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Actual repercussions</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Statements of various Chinese officials and institutions condemning the acts.</li> <li>- Requests for emergency meetings with the Japanese ambassador and foreign minister to express discontent.</li> <li>- Refusal of Chinese officials to meet Abe because of the visits (MOFA China, 30/12/2013); (MOFA China, 9/1/2014).</li> <li>- Cancellation of talks with Prime Minister Koizumi that would take place within the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Busan and the trilateral summit to be held in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations + 3 (ASEAN) after his visit to Yasukuni in 2005.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Requests for meetings with the Japanese ambassador in Seoul and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan, asking them not to hinder the development of friendly relations between Korea and Japan as well as the maintenance of peace and cooperation in Northeast Asia.</li> <li>- Cancellation in 2013 of the planned meeting between Minister Yun Byung-se and his Japanese counterpart.</li> <li>- Approval by the Korean National Assembly of a resolution denouncing official visits to Yasukuni and comments from Japanese politicians on historical topics.</li> <li>- Cancellation of talks with Prime Minister Koizumi that would take place within the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Busan and the trilateral summit to be held in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations + 3 (ASEAN) after his visit to Yasukuni in 2005.</li> </ul>	

Source: Own information based on the statements and press conferences provided by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of China, Japan and Korea (2001-2015)

The information gathered and analysed shows that both in Korea and China, the visits to Yasukuni create diplomatic tensions that do not seem to affect economic and trade commitments between these countries and Japan, although they hamper the possibilities of a deeper political rapprochement. In no event the groups that promote visits to Yasukuni and keep the memory alive within Japanese society are mentioned. The arguments used to reject visits to Yasukuni are often similar. These are based on the deepening of historical wounds, the misreading of the past and the unnecessary lock in diplomatic relations. Visits to the shrine reflect the paradoxes of forgiveness, an act that



far from representing consensual historical memories, is permanently reconstructed in many forms.

Accordingly, and considering the views expressed by the various ministries, the issue of the visits to Yasukuni is a subject that Korea and China cannot avoid ruling against given the symbolic and historical weight of the shrine. The criticism points to the presence of plaques commemorating Class A criminals as the key issue, but there is no substantive debate on the history told in the museum that adjoins the shrine. Despite the permanent manifestations of disagreement and the consequent cancellation of official visits of China and Korea to Japan, there have been no formal proposals<sup>8</sup> for dialogue between states that allow discussing and coordinating a peaceful resolution to this conflict.

## Conclusions

Based on the materials and the sources examined, we argue that the tensions surrounding the Yasukuni Shrine reflect a contradiction in the strategy of forgiveness as the way to reconciliation with South Korea and China. Mainly, the absence of a consensus on what kind of apology is required by the affected states stands out, as well as the lack of agreement on what the meaning or intent of the visits to Yasukuni is. The period of non-visits by prime ministers relatively reduced regional tensions, but it did not generate a significant change in the inconsistency of apology diplomacy. To a large extent, this is because during 2006-2013 the visits by other Japanese officials continued. Also, the policy of non-visits did not affect the activities of organizations in favour, especially *Nippon Kaigi*, which continued to encourage not only visits to Yasukuni but also, and primarily, a view of history that, according to statements repudiating the shrine, is considered to be controversial and provocative by neighbouring countries. Resorting to the categories that allow us to study the feasibility level of forgiveness in international relations proposed by Daase (2010), we find that the highest authorities in Japan have been responsible for making an apology, whether the emperor, prime ministers and other high rank officials. As for the other three categories, one notes that forgiveness requests have not been accompanied by memory policies that reinforce the value of the word.

As stressed, the increases in the number of apologies made by the prime ministers of Japan go hand in hand with a quantitative and qualitative growth of the power of groups supporting Yasukuni, especially *Japan Conference*, and the conduction of visits by public officials. The activities of these groups reflect a growing appreciation of Yasukuni as a symbol of the origin of the modern Japanese nation state that defies the notion of forgiveness. Thus the dichotomy of honouring the fallen versus legitimizing what happened poses serious constraints to regional political understanding that lead to the need to rethink the shrine as a place of memory.

Forgiveness does not necessarily imply a process of historical rectification by the repentant country. This incompatibility has its origins in the process of transitional justice experienced by Japan, the adversarial stage of the Cold War, the economic motivations

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to remember that, compared to other dilemmas, such as the textbooks, the states created dialogue committees (e.g. the Joint Research Committee for Korea-Japan History 2001-2002 and 2007, and the Joint Research Committee for China-Japan History 2006-2010) that had the participation of officials and scholars from the three countries: Korea, China and Japan. Although they failed to resolve the conflict, they are an interesting antecedent of cooperation on memory issues (Nozaki, 2002, 2005 and 2007; Nozaki and Selden, 2009).





behind the restoration of diplomatic relations with its neighbours, the rise of China, and the change in the regional positioning of Japan.

Although the incorporation of these aspects exceeds this research, it is important to take them into account to avoid falling into a simplification of the current process of re-emergence of nationalist associations linked to high-ranking personalities of Japanese politics who defend Yasukuni. Other issues that impede reconciliation are: forced labourers during the Pacific War, the case of sex slaves of the imperial army of Japan, territorial disputes (Senkaku/Diaoyu and Dokdo/Takeshima islands), the issue of textbooks that causes very negative reactions in China and Korea for the justification of crimes such as the Nanjing Massacre, the colonization of Korea, the forced recruitment of comfort women, all issues grouped under the argument of freeing these nations from the European colonizing yoke.

Finally, it should be stressed that the extent of the practice of apologies in international relations does not mean that there is a monolithic and universal concept of forgiveness. In repentance, cultural, social, and political implications come together and should be considered in future research. If, as Lind argues (2008), the German case is an exception rather than the rule, we wonder why in the claims made by South Korea and China the exception has become the norm.

And if the exception becomes the norm, why continue demanding apologies in a sporadic way and not think about creating institutions of dialogue between the states involved to resolve the conflict? Faced with this limitation, forgiveness might be seen not only as part of a reconciliation process but also as a legitimate tool to negotiate political positioning at regional level. Therefore, the inability to advance the reconciliation process not only lies in the tensions over Japan's past as an aggressor that cut across Yasukuni, but also in the absence of joint action by the countries in the region.

Visits to Yasukuni by Japanese government officials, whether or not on behalf of the state, negatively impact on the maintenance of peace and regional stability. As long as this practice continues in the context of the significant growth of Yasukuni supporting groups and little conciliatory policy by its neighbours, the importance of forgiveness in the process of regional reconciliation must be rethought and re-evaluated.

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## Declarations

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## Film

*Annyeong Sayonara* (2005, Corea del Sur). Directores: Kim Tae Il y Kato Kumiko.