

Inter-Korean Dialogue and Cultural Memory Practices

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ASIA IN FOCUS

The Inter-Korean Summit of 27 April 2018 reinstated dialogue between North and South Korea after a decade of little diplomacy between the two states. In doing so, it drew significant international media attention. Heavy debates on how to interpret both the meeting itself and the prospects of further peace negotiations were raised. Among the spectators, several critics argued that the summit was merely an exercise in symbolism. This article aims to challenge this perception because it disregards the important dynamics of the negotiation process that took place. Using a Cultural Memory Studies approach, this study sets out to demonstrate the significance and complexity of the memory negotiations that took place during the summit. The study looks at some of the internal remembrance processes and employed modes of addressing the past. Furthermore, it investigates how the two actors of diplomacy temporarily altered the dominant “mode of remembering” their past and, through this, recontextualised inter-Korean relations within the time and space of the meeting. More specifically, this study examines how cultural artefacts and different forms of cultural memory in performative acts can be said to have created a “civil space” within which diplomatic talks were enabled.

Keywords: Cultural memory, inter-Korean relations, peace negotiations, modes of remembering, politics of memory

On 27 April 2018, an Inter-Korean Summit was held between delegations from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK) with the North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Un and the South Korean President Moon Jae In as the central actors of diplomacy. The summit took place at the Joint Security Area (JSA) of Panmunjom and signified the revival of peace negotiations between DPRK and ROK after a decade of little diplomacy between the two parties. Although the armed hostilities of the Korean War ended on 27 July 1953 with the signing of the Armistice Agreement, no official peace treaty was ever signed. Consequently, this newly instated dialogue sparked significant international media attention. The summit ignited heavy debates on how to interpret this meeting, along with the prospect of further peace negotiations. Many of the media spectators have shown themselves to be critical of the effects of this summit. Additionally, several critics have claimed that "the summit was a mere exercise in symbolism" (Botto & Jo, 2018) because so many, both internal and external, political interests are at play in the Korean conflict. Nevertheless, by calling the meeting "mere symbolism," these critics seem to regard definitive peace along with unification as the only criteria that determine the value of the meeting. However, the success of the negotiation process in itself should not be relegated.

It is important to acknowledge that external factors played a significant role in facilitating this summit and in driving these leaders to meet. The most prominent were the US' call for additional trade sanctions on North Korea in 2017 (Borger, 2017; Harrell & Zarate, 2018; McCurry, 2018) and the passing of several new resolutions by the UN Security Council, which boosted sanctions in a number of areas including a ban on coal and iron exports and restrictions on oil imports (Albert, 2019).

However, this study does not focus on the internal-external dynamics that motivated the meeting. Instead, it seeks to challenge the interpretation that the Inter-Korean summit itself was an ineffectual

"exercise in symbolism." While steps toward peace and eventual unification may arguably have been the primary objectives of the talks, they were far from the only interesting dynamics at work during the actual summit. This study aims to present an alternative way of looking at the diplomatic negotiations along with their potential significance. Following a cross-cultural approach to the understanding of culture and memory, the study looks at the internal remembrance processes at work during the summit in order to investigate how memory can be utilised as a practice that alters relations. More precisely, the study investigates the use of cultural artefacts and different forms of "cultural memory" in performative acts. The essential question here is whether the selected mode of addressing cultural memories created the space for a familiar dialogue between the two actors.

A Cultural memory approach

In order to investigate the importance of the cultural memory practices observed during the summit, it is necessary to outline the theoretical framework of this study in terms of its position within the memory studies field. The basis of memory studies as a field is the understanding of memories not as something fully individual, but something that is also inherently cultural, social and collective in nature. This study draws its understanding of cultural memory from Astrid Erll (2008, 2009) and Ann Rigney's (2005, 2009) studies on the concept. In the book *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, Astrid Erll presented "the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts" (Erll, 2008, p. 2) as a simplistic way of defining the dynamics of cultural memory. Elaborating on this, Erll suggested that memory should be seen at two levels: cognitive and social. In practice, these two levels continuously interact. Memory neither works on a purely pre-cultural, individual level nor on a fully collective level. Erll argues that we remember in socio-cultural contexts as "our memories are often triggered as well as shaped by external factors" (2008, p. 5). Based on previous

work done by Jan and Aleida Assmann, Rigney (2005) lays out the developments of the memory studies field from Maurice Halbwachs's original concept of "mémoire collective" to the current culture-focused version. She argues that "the term 'cultural memory' highlights the extent to which shared memories of the past are the product of mediation, textualization and acts of communication" (Rigney, 2005, p. 14). Cultural memory is performative, and the things we remember about the past are products of current memory practices within different contexts. Cultural memory should not be considered something that spontaneously appears (Nora, 1996, p. 12). It is not something we *have*, but something we *do* (Olick, 2008, p. 159) and both *what* is remembered and *how* it is remembered are important for the meaning the past assumes (Erl, 2008, p. 7). Essentially, it is the constant process of remediation and recontextualisation of cultural memory that works to renegotiate current relations (Erl & Rigney, 2009).

To conceptualise these memory practices, Erl presents the idea of different "modes of remembering" the past and provides the example of how a war, depending on context and group dynamics, can actively be remembered in numerous ways: as a political or historical conflict, a family tragedy or as trauma (2008, p. 7). Jan Assmann presents the idea that what we remember creates our understanding of selfhood (Assmann, 2008, p. 109). How and what we choose to remember at a given time, more or less consciously, can be said to guide how we act and how we understand our relation to others. This is also applicable on a national level (J. Assmann, 2008; Erl, 2008). Assmann suggests that we create the national us and them based on our understanding of the past. The politics of memory is a convoluted affair and using a cultural memory approach enables a look at the dynamics between memory practices and negotiations of group identity within a given context.

Looking at the construction of the first 2018 Inter-Korean Summit, this study seeks to examine the artefacts and selected memory practices

utilised to open up the dialogue between the two political actors about the future relations of their states. Some critics may contradictorily argue that the summit evaded addressing memory altogether so as to avoid dealing directly with the conflictual memories between North and South. However, completely avoiding the aspect of memory in the context of a complex socio-political conflict is impossible. This study thus suggests that their selected mode of addressing memory during the summit lay in the dynamics between "purposeful forgetting" and "selective remembering." These two aspects are considered crucial components within the politics of memory (Mageo, 2001) and both worked to shape the summit. It is important to note that this study does not claim that a homogeneous memory culture exists between nor within the two Koreas. Rather, the study works within the understanding that "a number of normative and formative texts, places, persons, artefacts, and myths" (Assmann, 2008, p. 108) constitute a form of "memory canon" which, to some extent, is familiar to both sides. During the summit, a number of these canonical elements seem to have been employed with the purpose of initiating a certain mode of remembering Inter-Korean relations within the temporality of the meeting. Successful negotiation was arguably found through the chosen address.

The summit: Cultural memory practices

The Inter-Korean Summit on 27 April 2018 was held under the official slogan 'Peace, a new start' (평화, 새로운 시작) (Sohn, 2018). In creating this narrative, the organisers set up the framework for a meeting which could potentially mark the beginning of something new. The framework is, in itself, not unique from the two previous Inter-Korean summits as it strongly resembles the sentiment seen during the South Korean "Sunshine Policy" of the late-1990s and early-2000s. The first two Inter-Korean summits were held in 2000 and 2007, and both were enabled by the Sunshine Policy which worked under the premise that "[p]ersuasion was better

than force, and that engagement through dialogue and economic and cultural exchanges would bring about a change in the North and foster peace between the two Koreas” (Shin, 2018). Instead of paying attention to the narrative itself, it is rather the particular remembrance practices in use that are worth investigating.

In the next section of this study, five different parts of the summit schedule are analysed to illustrate different practices and negotiations. These five examples are far from the only ones, but they illustrate some of the most prominent themes. The primary source material used in the analysis is the full live stream of the summit provided by the South Korean broadcasting station, KBS News.

I. Panmunjom and the emotional setting during the border crossing

The venue of the summit was the Joint Security Area (JSA) between North and South Korea, which is often referred to as Panmunjom in popular media due to both its physical and symbolic proximity to the original “truce village” where the Armistice Agreement was signed (“The DMZ,” 2010). Panmunjom is often perceived as the embodiment of the division (“Venue for Korea Summit,” 2018) and thus acts as a strong symbolic and visual memory trigger in connection to the Korean War. The predetermined memories and usual practices connected to this place mark the importance of the space within which the summit was carried out.

On 27 April at 09:30, Kim Jong Un came out of the main building on the northern side of the Military Demarcation Line in Panmunjom. Surrounded by his delegation, Kim walked up to the line where Moon Jae In stood waiting for him. With his hand stretched out, Moon greeted Kim and invited him to cross (“2018 Inter-Korean Summit”, 2018, 1:09). This moment was a clear break with usual border practices and the first time since the division that a North Korean leader was allowed to set foot on South Korean soil (Fifield, 2018). As something that can be regarded as a tone-setting gesture, Kim af-

terwards reciprocally and unscripted let Moon cross the border into North Korea for a brief moment. They were afterwards seen stepping over the line and returning to the southern side, holding hands while smiling broadly at each other. What was seen during this first section of the summit, was a series of physical acts and bodily practices to establish an emotionally open space. These practices created an image of two people from the same community meeting and greeting after a long time apart. While this could be considered a purely symbolic act, it created a temporary break from the memories connected to the place and set the emotional tone for the rest of the summit. Essentially, it laid the foundation upon which the following negotiations could take place. Furthermore, it served to signify how near in proximity the two sides actually are, which Kim also expressed during the afternoon session at the Peace House:

...The demarcation line wasn't even that high to cross. It was crossed so easily, but it still took 11 years for it to happen. While I was walking over here today, I thought to myself: why did it take such a long time? I had initially thought it would be harder to do. ([...]분계선이 사람들이 넘기 힘든 높이도 아니고 너무 쉽게 넘어오는데 11년이 걸렸다. 오늘 걸어오면서 보니까 왜 그 시간이 오래됐나, 오기 힘들었나 하는 생각이 들었습니다) (2018 Inter-Korean Summit, 2018, 6:41:02)

II. Military Guard of honour as a cultural artefact from Joseon Dynasty

After crossing the border, the two leaders were escorted by a traditional guard of honour along the Military Demarcation Line (“2018 Inter-Korean Summit”, 2018, 1:12). On both sides of the leaders, regular palace guards were lined up, and together with a military marching band in front, they formed a rectangular shape. While this was meant to serve as a gesture of respect towards Kim Jong Un, it was also a visual representation of a traditional guard of honour formation as it was used during the

Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910) (“Our country’s guard of honour,” Dailian, 2012). In a sense, the guard of honour can be considered a purposefully selected relic from their past which provides Koreans with a visual framework that triggers memories of a Korean Peninsula under a united dynasty. This idea that artefacts can be “fished” out of the archive and brought into play during social interactions is something often discussed in relation to acts of remembering the past (Rigney, 2005). Rigney (2005) argues that “public remembrance changes in line with the shifting social frameworks within which historical identity is conceived” (p. 23). By choosing to commemorate the Joseon Dynasty, a momentary shift was created in the current mode of remembering their common past. Under normal circumstances, Inter-Korean relations are dominated by memories of the Korean War; however, with the selected remembering inscribed in this performance, memories of the period before the division of Korea took centre stage and implemented a purposeful forgetfulness of the memories of conflict. This kind of performance is essentially what anthropologist Paul Connerton refers to when he argues that recollected knowledge of the past is conveyed and sustained by bodily practices and ritual performances (Connerton, 1989, pp. 3–4). By enacting this performance, the two states renegotiated the chosen mode of addressing their past and thereby altered their relations within the given time and space of the summit.

The use of Joseon Dynasty costumes and instruments can also be seen as part of a recovery project, an attempt to resurrect a sense of “imagined community” (Anderson, 2006) between the two present-day Koreas, based on past proximity of the two. Overall, the way their past is presented throughout the summit can be seen as a specific mode of remembering that foregrounds the notion of a homeland tragically separated by a political partition, with the meeting attempting to regain common ground. This negotiation tactic aligns with the studies of cultural historian John R. Gillis who highlights that “civil spaces” are “essential to the democratic processes

by which individuals and groups come together to discuss, debate, and negotiate the past and, through this process, define the future” (1994, p. 20). The encounter during the meeting was constructed in a way that should create a sense of civility and familiarity.

III. Arirang creating a sense of unity

While the military guard of honour escorted the two leaders towards the Peace House, a significant anthem was played (“2018 Inter-Korean Summit”, 2018, 1:12). *Arirang* is a traditional Korean folk song dating back long before the division and used in both North and South Korea. This song has often been used in other contexts to bring the two sides together. During the opening of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, for example, *Arirang* functioned as a shared national anthem for the unified Korean women’s team (Strother, 2018). Furthermore, *Arirang* is inscribed on UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage list as heritage belonging to both DPRK and ROK (referred to as *Arirang folk song* and *Arirang lyrical folk song*) giving the song a symbolic status of a shared cultural artefact of value. Like the Joseon costumes, this song was a cultural artefact used to evoke a sense of shared community during the summit.

To underpin this, it is relevant to mention *Arirang*’s reappearance at the proceeding Inter-Korean Summit held in North Korea on 20 September 2018. In a broadcasted clip from this summit provided by SBS News, Chairman Kim, President Moon, their wives and the remaining delegations are seen listening to a performance of *Arirang*. Moon Jae In’s wife, Kim Jung Sook, and Kim Jong Un’s wife, Ri Sol Ju, were seen smiling and laughing familiarly at each other while singing along (“The sound that united,” 2018). This clip reaffirms the familiarity of the song and the strong emotional impact it evokes in audiences from both sides.

IV. The narrative of new beginnings at the 'Peace House'

Upon arriving at the Peace House, Kim Jong Un wrote a message in the visitor's book:

A new history begins now. An age of peace, at the starting point of history (새로운 역사는 이제부터. 평화의 시대, 역사의 출발점에서) ("The sound that united," 2018, 2:54).

Kim's words suggest that the meeting was a venue for the two parties to "cut-off" history. However, the sequence of temporality itself cannot be abolished even if that is what "the starting point of history" insinuates. Cultural memory will always be part of the negotiations. This sentiment is supported by Paul Connerton (1989) who states that all beginnings contain an element of recollection. He argues this is especially true when a group makes a concerted effort to start over since "there is a measure of complete arbitrariness in the very nature of any such attempted beginning" (Connerton, 1989, p. 6). Current modes of remembering the past would first have to be addressed and altered. The Korean War has primarily been remembered on both sides as a bitter invasion by the other. North Korea, in a post-war perspective, has been seen to mainly blame what they refer to as the "U.S imperialist invaders," but they also fault the South for being a "puppet clique" as can be seen in an official North Korean history source on the Korean war ("Outstanding leadership," 1993).

Concurrently, there is also a continuous sense of betrayal to be found within various South Korean "media of cultural remembering" (Erl, 2009, p. 118). In South Korean historical texts and museums about the war, the notion of an unlawful and unfair invasion of the South by the North is still strong. This offence is often directly referred to as the "unjust/illegal invasion of the South" (불법 남침). Since this narrative about the war still stands strong, the act of purposeful forgetting is a necessary part of the peace negotiation process. During the summit, they selectively illuminated memories of national trauma,

including the tragic separation of families and the homeland. The shift towards focussing on familiarity and homeland separation was also apparent in the final Panmunjom Declaration, where "South and North Korea agreed to proceed with reunion programs for the separated families on the occasion of the National Liberation Day of August 15" (Ministry of Unification, 2018). This promise was later actualised, further proving the effectiveness of the given negotiation. It can thus be argued that their repositioning in terms of the past carried the dialogue.

V. Tree-planting ceremony and the rise of a small memorial

In the afternoon, the two leaders met for a tree-planting ceremony. This kind of ritual performance has often been used as a way for leaders to mark new beginnings or commemorate past events (Sanders, 2018). In this study, the term "ritual" is understood as something performed, "an aesthetically marked and tightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience" (Bauman, as cited in Rothenbuhler, 1998, p. 9). It can be seen as a rule-governed activity of symbolic value that draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling (Lukes, 1975, p. 291). During the tree-planting, President Moon shovelled soil from the North's Baekdusan, while the soil used by Chairman Kim was from Hallasan on the southern side ("2018 Inter-Korean summit," 2018, 8:07). Likewise, water from Han River of the South and the Daedong River in the North was used to water the pine tree.

With rituals, it is essential to pay attention to the details that show a political attempt at inscribing new meaning into the venue site. For example, a pine tree is a traditional symbol of peace and prosperity ("2018 Inter-Korean summit highlights review," 2018), and the particular tree used for this summit was purposefully chosen for its age of 65 years, the same number of years since Korea has been in a state of ceasefire after the signing of the Armistice. The tree hereby symbolises entering a new era of peace and prosperity; a time of sharing the earth and

water of the entire Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, rituals function as means of transmitting cultural memory (Connerton, 1989, p. 52). In his study, *How Societies Remember*, Connerton (1989) argues that deliberate changes in cultural memory often happen through a form of performative practice. When trying to create a break and figuratively establish a “new beginning,” something material and physical is often used to stand as the embodiment of this change (Connerton, 1989, p. 4). The ritual performed during the summit was arguably meant to establish an embodied symbol of the beginning of a healing process. To commemorate this, a stone was placed with the words “Peace and prosperity are planted” (평화와 번영을 심다).

Even though peace was not obtained during the meeting, this stone stands as a reminder of the dialogue; a form of spatial memory trigger. Moreover, should these peace negotiations fall flat as the Inter-Korean summits of the 2000s did, this monument will stand as a message. It will act as a reminder of the specific approach under which dialogue was made possible.

Concluding thoughts

This study set out to demonstrate the significance and complexity of the memory negotiations that took place during the summit and, thereby, oppose the interpretation of the summit as mere ineffectual symbolism. When working with the concept of cultural memory as an analytical tool, it is important

to remember that it is essentially an operative metaphor (Erl, 2008, p. 4). In other words, there will always be a personal aspect to the intake of the cultural memories mediated. A critique of this approach could, therefore, be that with the primary material used in this study, one cannot know how individual actors received the given memory practices and perceived the overall peace negotiations.

Nonetheless, cultural memory as an analytical framework provided the opportunity to look at the way the Inter-Korean summit successfully evaded activating contesting memories during the peace negotiations through purposeful utilisation of cultural artefacts and performative memory practices. The analysis illustrated how “purposeful forgetting” and “selective remembering” were used politically to create a temporary shared frame of reference that enabled diplomatic talks between these two actors. While this process of recontextualising cultural memory, in actuality, did not change the current status of North and South Korea, it was an attempt to renegotiate their future diplomatic relations by altering their specific mode of remembering the past.

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