

One Doesn't Preclude the Other: *Dissociation and the Conditional Reception of Japanese Culture among Young Koreans*

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This article examines how young South Korean consumers of Japanese culture negotiate their cultural engagement in the context of longstanding historical and political tensions between Japan and South Korea. Despite deep admiration for Japanese cultural products, surveys and public opinion consistently show that political distrust and unresolved historical grievances remain prominent. Through twelve semi-structured interviews with Korean university students self-identified as “otaku”, this study finds that participants actively separate their appreciation of Japanese culture from their rejection of Japanese politics and wartime history. This “dissociation” enables the enjoyment of Japanese products while maintaining a critical stance toward the Japanese state, resulting in a conditional and highly filtered reception of culture. The findings further show that this reception is shaped by individual socio-political factors – including national education, political polarisation, generational narratives, and social pressure – which act as interpretive filters rather than determinants. At the same time, cultural engagement can trigger an iterative renegotiation of identity, softening general perceptions of Japan without translating into political alignment or historical forgiveness. By highlighting dissociation and identity renegotiation as key dynamics, this article contributes to understanding cultural reception in conflictual settings and challenges assumptions that cultural attraction naturally and directly fosters political rapprochement.

Keywords: Reconciliation, Public diplomacy, Soft power, Cultural reception, Identity, Japan, South Korea, Popular Culture, Dissociation

The relationship between Japan and South Korea has long been marked by historical tensions rooted in Japan's imperialism, which materialised in its most concrete form in its colonial rule over the Korean peninsula in the first half of the 20th century. This period left heavy scars on both the bodies and minds of the Korean people, becoming deeply embedded in the national collective memory, which also results in the tensions persisting despite decades of formal diplomatic and political interactions between the two nations. "Reconciliation", as the process of restoring a harmonious relationship after a conflict is commonly referred to (He, 2009, p.1), remains uneven and far from fully achieved, and this is particularly evident on the societal level, where trust and mutual understanding continue to be challenged by remnants of historical grievance (Cho & Park, 2011, p.289). This dynamic continues to be observed in recurring joint surveys of both populations, where historical political mistrust remains a major issue for the overwhelming majority of participants, and more than half of Koreans continue to have a negative opinion of Japan (East Asia Institute & Genron NPO, 2023). In short, they consider the problem to be ongoing and by no means resolved.

But this situation also clashes with another really concrete reality: Japan and South Korea are fully integrated economically (Wong, 2005, p.7) and widely consume each other's culture. Anime and K-pop have found mass audiences on both sides since the late 1990s (Iwabuchi, 2015, p.7; Ahn & Yoon, 2020, p.4), and many individuals in both countries deeply enjoy the other's cultural products.

It therefore presents an interesting paradox: South Korean and Japanese populations still hold political resentment and distrust while engaging in each other's culture. This observation complicates assumptions shared by scholars and policymakers that cultural attraction naturally fosters political alignment. If the political effects are not that obvious, the main question that emerges is thus how audiences actually receive foreign culture in conflictual contexts.

To tackle this tension, this article asks: *how do young Korean otaku consume Japanese culture, and how do they situate this consumption within the antagonistic political context between the two countries?* Through semi-structured interviews, this research finds that participants proceed with an active process of dissociation, consisting of separating their appreciation of Japanese culture from their rejection of Japanese politics and history. This process, therefore, contributes to a conditional reception of Japanese culture. This partial reception is shaped by factors specific to each participant, which contribute to the formation of a personal identity that filters the norms associated with the cultural product. At the same time, the findings suggest that cultural engagement can initiate an iterative renegotiation of identity, acting as a catalyst that may soften perceptions of the other without necessarily generating political alignment.

Culture in a Historical Storm

Colonial Period and Trauma

Japan's colonial occupation of Korea from 1910 to

1945 was not limited to political domination, but was part of a broader project of physical, cultural, and ideological subjugation, driven by an imperial ideology that conceived of Japan as having a civilising mission toward its allegedly semi-barbaric neighbours, adapted from Western colonialism into a “yellow man’s burden” (Jung, 2006, p.6; Duus, 1995, p.433). This ideological framing provided the moral basis for practices that had a profound impact on Korean society. Eight million Koreans were mobilised as forced labourers, while between 100,000 and 200,000 women were subjected to military sexual slavery – the so-called “comfort women” system (Cumings, 2005, p.191; Hideki et al., 2023, p.1).

The daily oppression of the colonial administration also took the shape of policies focused on the very identity of the oppressed population. The Sōshi-kaimei, which pressured Koreans to adopt Japanese names, and the restriction of Korean language and cultural expression, were direct elements of this assimilationist project (Cumings, 2005, p.193; Otmazgin, 2012b, p.7). Known as Naisen ittai, this “Japanisation” process pushed Koreans to internalise the imperial identity, erasing the distinctions between coloniser and colonised while denying the legitimacy of Korean national consciousness, forming “a legitimate ground for South Korean grievance”, as Taku Tamaki noted (2020, p.4).

Formal Reconciliation and Its Shortcomings

When it comes to making sense of these historical traumas in current Japan-Korea relations, contemporary literature tends to frame reconciliation between the two countries predominantly as a matter of high politics and formal actions. The lasting resentment is not only attributed to the social and psychological trauma of the actions themselves, but also to the way these events have been politicised and memorialised. The evidence is plentiful: Japan’s handling of historical issues has been perceived in South Korea as insufficient or insincere, whether through apologies regarded as incomplete (Dudden, 2008, p.33), official visits to contentious sites

such as the Yasukuni Shrine honouring war criminals, or political actions such as the revision of Japanese history textbooks to promote more nationalistic narratives (Saaler, 2006, 2015, p.11). Scholars supporting this view therefore argue that reconciliation requires concrete formal commitments from political elites – genuine self-reflection rather than putting the onus on the neighbour (Tamaki, 2020, p.13), forthright apologies, and symbolic gestures such as relinquishing territorial claims (Van Dyke, 2006, p.235).

Yet, this argument is contradicted by the fact that formal efforts have not been absent, and that one could even say that political reconciliation has taken place at this level: relations between the two countries were normalised in 1965 (United Nations, 1965), and subsequent agreements have been reached until very recently to settle historical issues, but were widely criticised domestically in both countries (Chun, 2019, p.387; Easley, 2023, p.56). Youngshik Bong notes, along the same lines, that more than forty statements of apology have been issued by Japanese governments since this normalisation (ed. Togo, 2013, p.60), but that these apologies have either not had the desired effect on the Korean population, who deemed them insufficient or inappropriate, or are even simply unknown in their substance to them (ed. Togo, 2013, p.56). This suggests that reconciliation cannot be achieved through a checklist of actions to be taken by political elites, but rather through the restoration of popular trust between the two societies. Reconciliation is indeed something that must go both ways, but this also implies that for an action to be effective, the population on the other side must itself be willing to receive it positively (Chun, 2015, p.328). This point, therefore, encourages us to focus more on the populations themselves as major actors in this process.

Culture as a Swaying Bridge

Culture offers perhaps the most striking illustration of this dynamic of ambivalent, politically initiated yet

not fulfilled *rapprochement*: a first phase of avoidance, followed by a strong political will to generate interactions. South Korea indeed maintained an extensive ban on Japanese cultural imports in fear of a new “Japanisation” where Japanese cultural influence would once again weaken Korean identity (Yoon, 2014, p.2). It was only in 1998, under the impetus of South Korean president Kim Dae-Jung, that the restrictions were progressively lifted (Iwabuchi, 2001, p.14), explicitly framing it as a vehicle for *rapprochement*. Once legally accessible, a real craving for Japanese cultural products emerged in Korea, driven in particular by the distribution of comics, music, and video games among young audiences (Park, 2005, p.9).

Cultural exchanges differ from most bilateral interactions in the genuine enthusiasm they generate: many Japanese people love Korean culture, and many Koreans love Japanese culture. Policymakers on both sides, including Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso, explicitly framed this mutual enthusiasm as a bridge toward reconciliation, assuming that cultural attraction would naturally reduce political resentment (Iwabuchi, 2001, pp.12–15, 2002, p.208, 2015, p.9).

However, these political assumptions have proven rather simplistic. The intensification of cultural flows did not eliminate social tensions, and the publication of the manga *Ken-Kanryu* in Japan in 2005 (literally *Hating the Korean Wave*) or the stigmatisation of Korean *otaku* consumers illustrate that cultural enthusiasm can coexist with, and even provoke, antagonistic reactions (Ahn & Yoon, 2020, p.4; Yoon, 2014, p.3). More fundamentally, several researchers such as Chua Beng Huat and Nissim Otmazgin have highlighted an active attitude on the part of the audience, which filters, reinterprets, compartmentalises, or challenges the culture it receives and the norms it conveys, so that political alignment is not linear, or even often unpredictable (Chua, 2012, p.81; Otmazgin, 2012a, p.7). Otmazgin also found that a positive impression of one aspect of the other can also coexist with a negative view of

other aspects of it (Otmazgin, 2007, p.23). Culture here proves both to be volatile in its direct influence on each consumer’s opinion, and on the general reception of those consumers within their own society. A product may be appreciated aesthetically or even emotionally, but the social symbolism of that product, and the practices associated with it, remain contested and ambivalent individually and collectively. These observations have been made, however, without unpacking the underlying mechanism: how exactly audiences negotiate this tension remains empirically underexplored by the contemporary literature.

Culture, therefore, occupies a paradoxical position in the Japan-Korea relationship: it represents perhaps the most direct channel through which the two populations interact and engage with one another, generating the kind of genuine grassroots enthusiasm that formal reconciliation initiatives have struggled to produce. Unlike purely political gestures, such as apologies, treaties or diplomatic declarations, cultural exchange implicates the populations themselves as primary actors, making it a uniquely promising avenue for the societal reconciliation that elite-level actions have so far failed to achieve. While reconciliation literature, especially on the Japan-Korea case, acknowledges culture as a potential vector for *rapprochement*, it has largely treated this role as self-evident rather than interrogating the mechanisms through which cultural engagement actually shapes, or fails to shape, popular attitudes (Chua, 2012, p.143).

Yet the gap between cultural attraction and political alignment, as highlighted above, complicates any straightforward optimism. How exactly do consumers internalise, or resist, the norms associated with a foreign cultural product? How do they reconcile genuine appreciation with persistent national antagonism? These questions have been raised but not empirically investigated. This article, therefore, seeks to address this gap by asking: how do young Korean *otaku* consume Japanese culture, and how do they situate this consumption within

the antagonistic political context between the two countries?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, inductive research design based on semi-structured interviews, suited to exploring how participants make sense of their cultural engagement in a politically contested context. Twelve Korean university students aged 18 to 29, all self-identified otaku, were recruited through purposive sampling – seven via a university club dedicated to Japanese popular culture, the remainder through snowballing. As the population most exposed to Japanese culture, otaku represent those most likely to be influenced by it, making their possible political stance all the more analytically significant.

The interviews were conducted in English, both face-to-face and online, depending on each participant's availability and convenience. They all lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and followed a pre-established guide containing broad themes that were not intended to be followed rigidly. Participants were anonymised and given pseudonyms based on common Korean names for clarity in the reporting of findings.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and analysed using the software NVivo, proceeding with an inductive thematic analysis to highlight recurring patterns that structure the subparts of the Interviews section of the article. Sentiments were classified from participants' own evaluative language, including admiration, attachment, resentment, distrust, hatred and political criticism.

Interview Data

Cultural Engagement

Participants demonstrate diverse interests within Japanese culture, though nearly all engage, to varying degrees, with anime and J-pop. Only one

participant states explicitly that they are interested in neither of these two forms. However, each participant's primary focus can be far more niche. These passions are unique and linked to each individual's interests, and these niche interests also highlight how Japanese culture manifests beyond mainstream media.

For eight out of the twelve participants, a spill-over effect occurred. They first engaged with one specific source of cultural product, and this source led them to be interested in other related aspects, broadening their general engagement with Japan. A participant named Siwoo describes how this process worked on him: *"In 2016, I saw the movie Your Name. And I heard the OST of the movie. So, I wanted to understand the songs and the lyrics of the movies or something. So, I started to study about Japanese language, and I am interested about Japan after that movie."*

Culture therefore has the potential to foster broader engagement with other cultural aspects, operating on an interconnected whole in which the level of engagement, rather than the type of culture, ultimately shapes participants' perception of Japan.

Perceptions and Representations of Japan: The Culture-Politics Divide

The participants nearly all nurture a real admiration for Japan's cultural dimension as a whole, for its diversity, encompassing the products they consume. This appreciation of culture also stems from its sophistication. Some participants explain that Japanese culture is appealing as it evokes other aspects of Japanese culture. It is clear that popular culture refers to more traditional notions, sometimes more closely linked to the essence of Japan, which may also explain the overall positive image that emerges in this regard. The participants also emphasise the Japanese ability to make the most of their culture. Minsoo goes so far as to express admiration, saying, *"They just built an empire of anime, weeps and video games. And I think it's something to be admired."*

What emerges from the participants' inter-

views is that their vision of Japan is generally positive in these socio-cultural dimensions, but not blind: if they like these aspects, it is with “due knowledge”, because of the way Japan promotes them or because they represent a real diversity of culture.

This relatively positive view of Japanese culture contrasts with a highly critical approach to Japan on the political and historical dimensions shared by ten participants. On one hand, this negative approach focuses on the very nature of the Japanese political system, in which the LDP – the conservative party – has been in power nearly continuously for the past 70 years, which Minjun describes as anything but a “politically healthy balance”. However, the main criticism lies above all in the actions of Japanese politicians concerning Japan-Korea relations, particularly in the light of historical issues. These notions of sincerity and trust are central to their negative impression of political Japan. This resentment toward political and historical Japan is even manifested as a strong emotional reaction in six participants. Yejun explains clearly: *“The deeper you think about the political situation, and that also relates to the historical situation, the more you will eventually hate Japan.”*

Conversely, only one participant, Dohyun, explicitly expresses a favourable view of the Japanese political scene, and a detachment from historical issues, as he considers Japan’s imperialist past as “the rule of the time, [as for Korea,] a weak country, it was a fate to be beaten”. This view can be attributed to his conservative political values, which led him to identify with the Japanese conservative party’s rhetoric and hope for a similar model in Korea.

But for most, a concrete compartmentalisation of the appreciation of Japan emerges: they appreciate Japanese culture and society, but reject its politics and anything related to historical problems. This process of dissociation remains similar in its functioning for all participants. Jihu illustrates: *“Politically, I would say I don’t really like the country, but otherwise, I like Japan, yeah.”*

Dohyun, for example, who harbours a favour-

able view of Japan’s politics and history, explains this dissociation in his approach to culture. His political alignment, therefore, seems completely independent of his investment in culture: *“When we’re just into those things, we don’t think about other political and economic conflicts, so it’s easier to be closer.”*

Historical Awareness, Memory, and Socio-Political Factors

As seen in the previous section, most participants attribute their negative perception of Japanese politics to historical issues, but also acknowledge that their own understanding of this historical aspect is filtered through a political lens. Many point out that this historical perception was their very first impression of Japan, even before the emergence of their interest in culture, and that it had been enforced through the educational system and memorials. Nine out of twelve participants also qualify Korean historical education as ideologically biased towards an anti-Japanese position. Dohyun explains that Japan is represented as “a kind of villain in Korean history”, and Junseo goes further, describing “an immense amount of unconscious and conscious indoctrination” through teachers that led him to “naturally grow to dislike Japan” before any engagement with its culture.

Some participants clearly link this anti-Japan view in Korean education to a political side, the left-leaning liberals. This is symptomatic of a pattern of political polarisation that eight participants mention. For some participants, this opposition is not ideological, and Junseo evokes this as a means of political survival, insisting that “they just do it because of populism. It is helpful.” Yejun, for his part, describes the position towards Japan as a political issue on which people do not necessarily have a strong opinion, but will simply follow the position of their political camp, as the “small idea follows the big idea”.

This compartmentalisation of politics is also argued regarding the generational question. All par-

ticipants explain that middle-aged and older people generally have a much more negative perception of Japan and its culture than younger generations, but the theme that comes up most often is a stronger emotional attachment among older generations, due to their greater proximity to the traumas, whereas younger generations feel less concerned.

There is, therefore, a sense of emotional attachment shaping the way they perceive others, which can condition their openness to culture. This also echoes the fact that the participant who has the strongest opinion against Japanese politics is Sub-in, the only one to mention a traumatic experience visiting a memorial: *"I went to the Independence Hall of Korea, in memory of our independence from Japan, and I was really shocked as they showed how Japanese people tortured Korean people..."*

The last factor mentioned by participants is social pressure. As antagonism towards Japan is relatively common in Korean society, social pressure emerges for those willing to be influenced or express a favourable position towards Japan. For example, six participants refer to the 2019 No-Japan movement, and Kunwoo describes:

"Using Japanese stuff, watching Japanese media was... They would cyberbully anyone they found. It was almost like they considered it a crime."

Culture as a Catalyst

Many participants acknowledge that their cultural consumption changed their own perception of Japan. This is especially noticeable when participants are invited to self-reflect on their opinion of Japan before engaging with the culture. Some participants mention that they were generally indifferent towards the country, but eight of them clearly explain that their view would be somewhat negative if they did not get interested in Japanese culture. The change relates to their general perception of Japan but does not imply political alignment or historical forgiveness, which remains independent. Minjun continues: *"I think that Japanese subculture changed my view of Japan and the image of Ja-*

pan for the better, yeah, but I don't think subculture changed my historical opinion."

The participants mention that for six of them, culture triggered a real reflection on their own biases, which allowed them to adopt at least a more nuanced view. The participants all describe this phenomenon differently, but their overall understanding of the process is similar, as a kind of renegotiation of identity. Junseo clarifies: *"Rather than Japanese culture influencing political perception, it is more accurate to say that it helps dismantle the indoctrination and biases instilled about Japanese people."*

The fundamental idea here is that culture does not overwhelm historical issues nor erase them. However, it offers new opportunities to conceive Japan through more positive aspects that allow for a variation in an otherwise negative sentiment. Culture appears to call for self-reflection on what made people perceive the country in a certain way.

Discussion and Conclusion

"Culture is kind of like the clothes you wear when you meet someone for the first time. If you see them wearing nice clothes, you think them as positive at first, but after some time, and as you get to know each other, it doesn't really matter that much."

This analogy from Minsoo captures the core dynamic observed throughout this study: while Japanese culture successfully generates emotional engagement and a positive impression among Korean youth, its political and ideational influence fades as deeper, historical and political considerations resurface. Thus, this attraction does not translate into direct political alignment or reconciliation regarding past disputes.

Regarding their perception of Japan, they all explicitly separated cultural Japan from political Japan. To a certain extent, this induces the creation of two different, incompatible versions of the country. Cultural Japan is admired, while political Japan is

despised for its relationship with history. The participants' reception of culture is therefore not linear. This separation, referred to here as dissociation, is sometimes unconscious and allows individuals to enjoy the positive aspects without suffering the negative ones. It also relieves the participants of a moral burden or social pressure.

If this dissociation occurs between culture and politics, it is not easy to identify its reasons. The interviews highlight the existence of socio-political factors specific to each individual that led to their reception of culture. These factors are independent of the cultural product itself, and their norms are internalised by the participants in order to filter the culture they receive. The reception of cultural products is therefore conditional and constantly filtered by the individual's own context. In this regard, these findings echo the audience reception theory introduced by Stuart Hall, whereby messages are encoded in cultural products and then conditionally decoded by the audience upon reception (Hall, 2010).

This influence is particularly evident in the more gradual opening of the participants to a more positive view of Japan following their sustained investment in its culture. Some participants suggested that culture, in this case, offers more varied opportunities for viewing the country beyond historical resentments alone. Thus, this implies that culture acts on the filter that is historical education, reducing its impact or offering alternatives.

This leads to a more open attitude towards culture and the country, creating a favourable environment that remains, however, limited by issues of political trust, which must be addressed in other ways. Culture thus promotes ideational reconciliation to a certain extent, as its influence on participants establishes an increasingly favourable environment open to efforts. That said, and as in most reconciliation initiatives, no direct political influence seems possible in this regard, particularly due to a lack of sincerity.

Therefore, while this research does not resolve

the 70-year-old reconciliation problem between Japan and South Korea, nor does it illuminate directly how culture can be leveraged for political rapprochement, it provides concrete insight into how young Koreans heavily influenced by Japanese culture situate this attraction within their broader socio-political context. Further studies might productively build on the concepts of dissociation and identity renegotiation introduced here.

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