

# Sharing Collective Memories on Campus While Sharing History Gets Tricky

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## DO YOU HEAR THE PEOPLE SING?

During the past century, protest has become a shared experience around the world, as citizens across the continents have taken to the streets to demand political, social, and economic changes. In Asia—from China to India, Thailand to Myanmar—people have organized mass demonstrations to express their dissatisfaction with colonial and state governments and their policies. Often, people shared news and supported protests in neighboring countries, using it as an opportunity to mobilize and coordinate their efforts for protest and leading to a growing sense of regional solidarity. Solidarity is possible despite differences in culture, history, and language because the citizens in the region share universal values.

In recent years, the song “Do You Hear the People Sing?” from the musical “*Les Misérables*,” based on Victor Hugo’s classic novel, has been sung in cities and countries around the world. Originally evoking the Paris uprising in 1832, the song has become a popular anthem for protesters around the world, almost 200 years after the scene that the song describes took place. In April 2022, a viral clip protesting the draconian lockdown in Shanghai used the song. In 2019, it was banned from Chinese music-streaming services after becoming a popular protest song during the Anti-Extradition Law Movement in Hong Kong. The song also was sung on the streets of South Korea in 2016 and 2017 by the masses who were protesting the corruption and misuse of power by President Park Geun-hye and her cabinet. The protest led to Park’s impeachment in 2017. Filipino activists and protesters who stood against the brutal policies of the Duterte administration sang “Do You Hear the People Sing?” in recent years. Before these instances in Asia, the song had been sung on the streets of Turkey, Ukraine, and many other places.

The song’s popularity has spread across borders, among protesters online and on the streets, because it generates empathy and compassion for the causes and processes of protest—not only within a given country but also around the globe. These feelings arise because citizens everywhere share historical experiences of resistance. When these national

histories are shared, they become a basis for a collective identity in pursuit of universal values. This article discusses how university campuses in and outside of Asia serve as a crucial arena where East Asian students share common historical incidents and memories from comparative perspectives. When discussing history becomes politically sensitive, the space to share collective memories—as well as the opportunity to understand one another through shared historical memories—becomes smaller. Through my personal experience of teaching comparative politics in the United States, South Korea, and Hong Kong—especially spending 2019 on a university campus in Hong Kong—I have come to realize how the narrowing window to share history could limit the opportunity to discuss universal values that people have commonly pursued in our own history.

## SHARING EAST ASIAN HISTORY

Asian countries have interacted with their neighbors throughout history and naturally have shared similar experiences at similar times, including the experience of mass resistance. East Asians share similar collective memories regarding resistance against corrupt and incompetent regimes, exploitative colonial powers, and unjust policies implemented by states. Although they essentially relate to how the public remembers (or does not remember) the past, collective memories have powerful implications for politics today because they often function as an instrument for understanding the politics of the present (Jackson 2021; Jo 2022; Verovšek 2016).

Scholars from East Asia and those who study the region often share and compare the historical experiences of their countries of interest. These experiences range from ancient history to more contemporary issues including imperialism and anticolonial movements, civil wars, migration, and protests and repression. For instance, in 1919, Korea and China experienced crucial and decisive anti-imperial, nationalist movements two months apart: the March First Movement in Korea and the May Fourth Movement in China. Historians have shown that the March First Movement was discussed intensely in the Chinese media at the time and became a catalyst for the May Fourth Movement (Baik 2019; Li 2019).

Comfort women are another issue about which scholars and civil activists have connected the historical experiences and collective memories of the two countries (Seo 2008).

University campuses are places where these events and memories can be discussed and debated freely by young people. Chinese and Korean students on campuses around the world discuss these diverse topics with one another, both in and outside of class. This has been possible because Chinese and Korean students are among the most likely to study abroad: China is the top sender of students to the United States; Korea is ranked third.<sup>1</sup> During the pandemic, this number decreased and the number of returnees has since increased. However, until the pandemic, the number of Chinese students had been increasing steadily in recent decades. If ethnically Chinese students who are not Chinese nationals are included, the number is even greater. Although the United States accepts the largest percentage of these students (i.e., approximately 50%), universities in other countries—especially those in East Asia such as Japan and South Korea—also have recruited many Chinese.<sup>2</sup>

Students from China and Korea, along with other students of Asian origin or with an interest in the region, meet and share many interests on campuses around the globe. Some may share pop culture or food, others share their interests in histories and collective memories—particularly in their courses in the social sciences and humanities. In comparative politics classes, students often share the pain of civil conflicts

compassion. Many students closely identified with the protesters, regardless of their own nationality. They enjoyed the discussion most when there were no limits set on the aspects of student-led protests, including their effectiveness, their broader impact, the repression tactics used against them, the constraints and limits of student-led movements, and their transnational effects.

Democracy movements are not the only topic that has engaged East Asian students and those interested in the comparative politics of East Asia. They also have shared their perspective on other issues relevant to the region, including imperial aggression, colonial exploitation and repression, nationalist movements, comfort women, civil conflicts, war crimes, and victims of ideology. One of my most rewarding aspects of teaching at a university has been observing students from different backgrounds share and empathize with the ways that these histories have affected not only the country in question but also their own lives. Even when their governments' official stances conflict with one another, on campus, students find and benefit from space, rules, and manners of mutual respect to discuss highly complex historical and political topics intellectually and respectfully.

Being able to speak about similar historical events in a familiar neighboring country assists the discussion because it nudges students who initially are reluctant to engage to feel less overwhelmed by the topic and to become more objective about the issues. In Hong Kong, I found that not all students

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where ideologies and political struggles have caused people to kill one another, resulting in a separation of the nation. Although the current political systems of these countries are different, sharing similar historical experiences and collective memories about them can promote empathy toward one another, as well as universal values despite evident disparities.

A recent example of a collective memory shared by Korean and Chinese students is the student protests for democracy in South Korea in the 1980s and in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1989. University students were at the center of both political movements, demanding political reforms that would make their country's political system more democratic, inclusive, and liberal. Both protest movements mobilized many citizens and put enormous political pressure on the government to respond. As a result, in both movements, college students became the main target of the government's brutal repression efforts. These events also affected subsequent social movements by students and ordinary citizens across Asia and beyond. In my personal experience on campuses in the United States, Hong Kong, and South Korea, student protests against authoritarian regimes were one of the most hotly debated topics, particularly in comparative politics courses. Even though these events had taken place decades before, students discussed them with empathy and

actively engaged in public class discussions on democratization and democratic movements. Even before the National Security Law was enacted in Hong Kong on June 30, 2020, self-censorship was becoming increasingly evident in class. Student-led movements in the region—not only the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong and the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan in 2014 but also the Tiananmen Movement in Beijing in 1989—became an increasingly sensitive topic to discuss freely in class. As the movement in Beijing in 1989 became increasingly conflated with the ongoing political movement and tension in the city, in-class discussion of social movement—one of the most critical topics in a comparative politics course—became more challenging over time.

However, many students were more comfortable discussing cases in other countries, such as the Arab Spring. In particular, South Korea was a safe example that was not as risky as discussing the Chinese case as it unfolded. Popular and acclaimed Korean cultural products (e.g., movies and TV shows, many of which featured the 1980s protests) were a good starting point for discussion. Korean students—who had more direct knowledge and indirect experience of the 1980s democracy movement, the democratization process afterward, and its impact on today's politics in the country—were eager to share these experiences and their opinions. Numerous anecdotes

indicated that the impact of these discussions could be felt beyond the classroom. After class, students often shared their thoughts and emotions via email, during office hours, and in personal conversations. Although their thoughts were diverse, almost all agreed that sharing collective memories of historical events provoked their thoughts and broadened their mind.

#### WHEN SHARING HISTORY GETS TRICKY

Recently, as political tensions have increased among key countries in East Asia, sharing and discussing historical experiences in class or casually around campus has become politically complicated in many places. This is not only because instructors and students are concerned about a particular law, such as the Hong Kong National Security Law, although it is true that the boundaries of that law are not limited to Hong Kong and Chinese nationals. Sharing history is more sensitive because discussing these memories has become an act of identity revelation under increasing geopolitical tensions and in reducing space for mutual understanding and respect.

This tension on campuses began as early as the 2019 Hong Kong protests. Clashes sometimes arose between students from Hong Kong and those from the PRC on campuses in the United States, Canada, and Australia. Whereas these clashes were widely covered by the international media, other cases that took place outside of Western universities received relatively less attention. In the fall of 2019, heated debates and even physical conflicts occurred between Korean and Chinese students on several South Korean campuses.<sup>3</sup> They were centered on the posters that students hung on walls, which are known as big-character posters in Korea and China. Both Korean and Chinese students put up posters related to the ongoing pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong—some in support of and some against the protests.<sup>4</sup> Korean students accused Chinese students of supporting authoritarianism, whereas Chinese students suggested that Korean students were influenced by Western propaganda and accused them of interfering in China's domestic matters.

The tension and conflicts were a concern for university instructors and administrators in Korea, particularly because of the potential to trigger discrimination against Chinese students on campus and in society. This obvious concern was shared widely across campuses as well as in the domestic media. However, a less-discussed implication of this tension is that, in the long run, the opportunity to share universal values through the comparison of historical memories may be lost when sharing history becomes a tricky issue that instructors and students hope to avoid. We are at risk of losing the energy that would be created when students share collective memories, and they may now think twice before bringing up common historical experiences of resistance. This will affect the quality of their education and the breadth of political discussion on campus. The many instances of resistance that have occurred throughout history have resulted in progress toward a freer and more just world, and hesitating to discuss this history within each country's context could lead to concerning consequences in class and on campus. An inability to discuss politically sensitive issues threatens the core values of social

science research and instruction: that is, progress comes from pursuing ideas with total freedom of thought.

There is always hope. As William Faulkner wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Collective memory will not easily fade out, and history cannot be completely rewritten. These tensions and even conflicts on campus also one day will be part of our memories, becoming history itself. Instructors of political science must be considerate of all students' political stances but, at the same time, should not avoid the challenges in discussing sensitive or tricky political topics. The power of social science lies in critical thinking with no boundaries, and the students of social science—regardless of their campus—will benefit from such empowerment.

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#### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

#### NOTES

1. According to China's Ministry of Education, the total number of Chinese nationals studying overseas in 2019 was 703,500 before the COVID-19 pandemic ([http://en.moe.gov.cn/news/press\\_releases/202012/t20201224\\_507474.html](http://en.moe.gov.cn/news/press_releases/202012/t20201224_507474.html), last accessed on August 23, 2023).
2. More than 100,000 Chinese students chose to study in Japan in 2020 ([www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/with-eye-china-us-ties-japans-universities-screen-foreigners-2022-05-23](http://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/with-eye-china-us-ties-japans-universities-screen-foreigners-2022-05-23), last accessed on August 23, 2023). In 2019, more than 70,000 Chinese students were studying in South Korea (Lee and Yoo 2022).
3. See [www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-protests-southkorea-idUSKBN1XP16z](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-protests-southkorea-idUSKBN1XP16z) (last accessed on August 23, 2023).
4. Big-character posters historically have been used for protests in China and Korea. They were used during the pro-democracy movement on campuses in Korea and in popular movements in China, including the one that led to the Tiananmen Square Incident.

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