Revolution and restoration in post-war East Asia: a Gramscian approach to the ‘history problem’

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Kevin Gray
University of Sussex, UK

Abstract
While tensions over historical issues between Japan and South Korea have long served to impede US strategic goals in East Asia, mainstream International Relations theory has largely been unable to explain the stubborn persistence of such issues. Instead, I interpret East Asia’s post-war history through the lens of Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution, thereby situating the ‘history problem’ in the context of the dialectical relations between state (re)formation, geopolitical contestation and transnational capital accumulation in the post-war era. I argue that US intervention in 1945 was a process in which a set of state–society relations was established whereby democratising tendencies from below were repressed through the establishment of US-aligned capitalist regimes. This implied the partial restoration of certain aspects of the pre-1945 regimes in a manner that served to forestall any genuine coming to terms with past colonial history. Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution thus provides a framework for rethinking how bilateral relations between countries can be explained with reference to the broader dynamics of geopolitical contestation, transnational capital accumulation and the dynamics of state–society contestation within national social formations. While existing empirical applications of passive revolution have typically focused on particular national instances of state formation and transformation, I argue that the concept can be utilised to analyse the region-wide processes whereby the US empire was established in the aftermath of the Second World War, and by extension, how supranational processes of passive revolution subsequently generated their own tensions and contradictions as manifested in contested bilateral relations between states.

Corresponding author:
Kevin Gray, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RH, UK.
Email: K.Gray@sussex.ac.uk
Tensions between Japan and South Korea (herein, Korea) have long served to challenge the underpinnings of US strategic goals in East Asia. While the United States has for years sought to bring the two countries closer together as part of a trilateral alliance, unresolved historical issues between Tokyo and Seoul have repeatedly undermined this goal. Indeed, as we move into the second decade of the 21st century, these animosities show no sign of abating and have again been brought into focus by the Korean Supreme Court ruling in late 2018 that ordered two Japanese companies, Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Corporation and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, to compensate the families of Koreans who had been mobilised as forced labour during the Second World War and were not paid wages owed to them. While such disputes are by no means new, the tensions resulting from the court’s decision spilled over into the security realms through nearly scuppering a military intelligence sharing pact between the two countries and even threatening global supply chains in semi conductors.

Within the discipline of International Relations (IR), observers typically approach the stubborn persistence of this ‘history problem’ with a mixture of puzzlement and frustration. Puzzlement refers to the liberal expectation that the two countries’ shared democratic political systems, bilateral trade, cultural similarities and flows of people would lead to a close degree of cooperation amid amicable relations. Shared regional threats such as the North Korean nuclear programme and the rise of an increasingly assertive China underpin in turn realist expectations that the two countries would have shared motivations to cooperate over security issues. The fact that such bilateral disputes frequently derail security initiatives leads to frustration, particularly among American observers, who see such developments as benefitting only countries opposed to the US alliance system, such as China, North Korea and Russia.

In this article, I argue therefore that existing approaches in IR have failed to shed light on this puzzle. Instead, I draw on Gramscian IR theory to examine how the foundations of US power in East Asia in the post-1945 era laid the basis for the intractability of the history problem. Through interpreting East Asia’s post-war history through the lens of Antonio Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution, understood as a theory of state formation within the causal conditioning of the international (Morton 2007), I argue that US intervention in 1945 saw the establishment of a set of state–society relations under which democratising tendencies from below were repressed through the establishment of US-aligned capitalist regimes. This implied the partial restoration of certain aspects of the pre-1945 regimes in a manner that served to forestall any genuine coming to terms with past colonial and wartime history.

This East Asian passive revolution should be understood not simply as a process manifested domestically within individual social formations but as taking the form of a transnational system of accumulation that served to (re)establish relations of economic dependence between erstwhile metropole and colony. This regional structure did not remain frozen in time, however, and the very fact of successful catch-up industrialisation
established the conditions for profound subsequent shifts in class relations, political regimes and civil society. It was these molecular shifts and corresponding challenges to post-war rule that allowed for the re-emergence of the ‘history problem’ as a bilateral point of contention. As such, Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution provides a framework for rethinking how bilateral relations between countries can be explained with reference to broader dynamics of geopolitical contestation, transnational capital accumulation and the dynamics of state–society contestation within national social formations. While existing empirical applications of passive revolution have typically focused on particular national instances of state formation and transformation, I argue that the concept can be profitably utilised to analyse the region-wide processes whereby US informal empire was established in the aftermath of the Second World War, and by extension, how supranational processes of passive revolution subsequently generated their own tensions and contradictions that manifested themselves in contested bilateral relations between states.

**Existing IR approaches to Japan–Korea disputes over history**

As noted, much of the literature on Japan–Korea relations proceeds by noting how contentious relations between the two countries have confounded liberal expectations that increased flows of trade, investment, people and culture would generate spillover effects and lead to more amicable relations. Democratic peace theory, for example, leads to the expectation that two of Asia’s most established democracies would enjoy cooperative relations, while complex interdependence theory might similarly expect more interaction between the two countries via multiple, multi-layered and multifunctional international institutions (Park 2009: 252; see Midford 2008). In terms of the empirical validity of liberalism’s claims, however, the Japan–Korea ‘puzzle’ might not be such an outlier. As upholders of the liberal international trading system, Britain and the United States were no less inclined to go to war, and there have been numerous instances in which close economic relations have not led to peaceful relations between countries, such as in the case of the United States and Germany in the 1930s. More broadly, liberal peace arguments neglect the historical role of force in the creation of liberal economic and political spaces (Barkawi & Laffey 1999). In the case of Japan–Korea relations, the most intuitive answer to this puzzle of poor bilateral political relations amid thick economic relations draws attention to the role that historical animosities, particularly in relation to the colonial era, play in generating and reproducing tensions between the two countries (Bridges 1993: 6–21). Yet, on their own, the notion of historical animosities leads to a paradoxically ahistorical analysis that tells us little about why exactly these animosities have remained so potent in East Asia, and why the pattern of post-war Japan–Korea relations seems to diverge so sharply, for example, from relations between France and Germany (see Ku 2008).

Constructivist and poststructural approaches to IR have provided more theoretically sophisticated accounts of how relations between Japan and Korea are shaped by competing national identities. Eun Yong-Soo (2020: 32–34), for example, emphasises how national identity, understood as the collective belief shared by individuals that they are
historically, ethnically, culturally and politically related, can be seen as a causal mechanism that shapes foreign policy. As such, all Korean governments, regardless of their political ideologies, have taken a vigilant course of action towards Japan, despite presidents’ calls for reconciliation and cooperation when they come into office (Eun 2020: 43–44). Kim Ji-Young similarly sees diplomatic conflicts taking place as a result of the identity clashes that result from ‘symbolic politics’. In particular, the ‘myth-symbol complex’ that forms the basis of ethnic identity serves as an emotional background against which one group justifies hostility and domination over the other. The conflicting myth–symbol complexes held by Japanese conservative politicians and the Korean public are thus translated into distinct historical narratives (Kim 2014: 35–36). According to Deacon, these national identities are produced and reproduced due to their diametrically opposed nature. One national identity is reproduced through consistent reflection on the past and the other is reproduced through forgetting this past and strongly objecting to its role in contemporary politics (Deacon 2021: 22). Thus, when one actor accuses another of being troublesome or insincere, ‘difficulty’ as a label takes on a life of its own and conflict becomes ingrained. This reification of ‘difficulty’ means that the image of a troublesome/insincere neighbour becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Tamaki 2020: 2).

However, national identity-based approaches also suffer from shortcomings. While they correctly highlight the conflicting identities that underpin contentious bilateral relations, they are not at a theoretical level able to provide a convincing explanation as to why particular identities may prevail at any given time. Such approaches are grounded in an idealist understanding of transformations in social relations due to the disembedding of intersubjective ideas, norms and values from the social relations in which they cohere. As such, they fail to examine whose values and beliefs constitute or embody state identities and interests or why a particular set of ideas become part of the structure and not another (Bieler & Morton 2008: 109). There is a danger, therefore, that history is reduced to a single theme and its variations, and to a singular moment of identity formation. In such accounts, the heterogeneity of civil and political society is often homogenised to fit a presentist (meta)narrative of identity and difference. Identities are read off from some formative moment in the past and, as such, there is a danger of adopting national identity as a metatheoretical explanatory framework in an ahistorical manner (O’Tuathail 1996: 652). For example, Seo Jungmin argues that Japanese national identity has its origins in the mid- to late-19th century and reflects Japan’s challenge as to how to become modern while simultaneously shedding the objectivist category of ‘Oriental’. Japan needed Korea (and China) as a similar race to distinguish itself from the West, while neighbouring ethnicities that were not Japanese needed to be inferior to Japan to make the latter the leader of the East Asian modernity (Seo 2021: 7–8). Although insightful, this fails to explain exactly why competing national identities became and remained so virulent in comparative terms or how the salience of the history problem has changed over time. Furthermore, in terms of their empirical focus, constructivist and poststructuralist approaches to Korea and Japan’s competing national identities through the self–other dyad tend to neglect the constitutive role of outside powers, most notably the United States.

Realist approaches have focused more on the role of the United States, albeit while emphasising change rather than continuity in Japan–Korea bilateral relations (Yoon
Victor Cha has argued that focusing exclusively on historical animosities elides the fact that bilateral relations have seen significant variation during the post-war years between contention and cooperation. When Japan and Korea symmetrically feared abandonment by the United States, they sought to strengthen their bilateral relations and the broader quasi-alliance triangle. However, friction would occur when Japan and Korea had either an asymmetrical fear of abandonment or entrapment (Cha 1999). Yet by focusing primarily on elite-level interactions, this approach provides a state-centric understanding of the history problem and fails to examine how historical issues are debated and contested within the respective societies. Emphasis on the high politics of diplomacy reduces animosities to an oscillation between elite-level conflict and cooperation, thereby neglecting how the salience of such issues has been shaped by social and political struggles within the countries concerned. As with Realist theory more generally, such theories also remain ahistorical. In presenting a broadly benign view of US power in the region, they ignore the foundational role of US power in the reproduction of historical animosities in the post-1945 era.

As I argue, Japan–Korea relations need to be placed within the context of the nexus between American power and processes of state (re)formation during the post-war era. Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution applied on a regional scale is particularly apt for shedding light on this process. In general terms, passive revolution can be understood as a process whereby external pressures associated with the uneven international spread of capitalist social relations lead later developing states to facilitate a reorganisation of state–society relations commensurate with transitions towards modernity. Yet, this process typically involves the repression of subaltern demands (combined with their partial acceptance) and the imposition of a constrained form of ideological hegemony as part of a revolution from above. While existing studies of passive revolution have focused more on the role of the national state (i.e. its ‘Piedmont-type function’) in this process, this article places particular emphasis on the regional dimensions of passive revolution and the state–society relations/contestations and transnational systems of accumulation in which they are embedded. In the East Asian case, this has had certain path-dependent impacts that continued to shape the contours of debate and contestation following the unravelling of the post-war passive revolution from the 1980s onwards. While this approach may be critiqued as underplaying the specific forms of agency that have served to reproduce historical tensions, including the actions of politicians, bureaucrats, civil society actors and intellectuals in both countries, the goal of the analysis offered here is to map out the structuring conditions of post-war US hegemony and how they have shaped the terrain in which such agents act. Indeed, as Bieler and Morton (2018: 44) argue, while agency remains crucial, specific agential strategies cannot be analysed in isolation from structure. At the same time, the structures do not determine agency, and while structures may prevent, constrain or enable agency, they may also be challenged by collective agency.

Passive revolution and state (re)formation

Existing Gramscian approaches to IR have tended to rely more on Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. The ‘world orders’ approach of Robert Cox (1981, 1987), for example,
focuses on how a particular class becomes hegemonic in a national setting and then on how that state plays a central role in establishing a hegemonic world order. The 'global capitalism' school of William Robinson (2005: 561), on the contrary, examines how hegemony is exercised not by a national bourgeoisie via a national state apparatus but by transnational social forces and institutions grounded in the global rather than inter-state system. Such approaches have, however, been rightly questioned over the extension to which Gramsci's concepts can simply be 'internationalised' to encompass such nascent transnational or world orders. In Gramsci's analysis, concepts such as hegemony and civil society are, it is argued, organically tied to the national state (Germain & Kenny 1998: 14–19). Hegemony, understood as primarily a consensual phenomenon, also underplays the extent to which outright violence and coercion has played a key role in the integration of non-Western regions into the post-war US-centred world order (Persaud 2016). Most importantly for our purposes, the notion of a consensual hegemonic neoliberal historical bloc, whether exercised via the state apparatus of the United States (Sauß 2012) or through a nascent transnational state (Robinson 2001), does little to shed light on the puzzle posed at the outset of this article: that of two ostensible US allies whose disputes over history continue to undermine Washington's broader geopolitical goals in the region.3

By contrast, Gramsci's concept of passive revolution is arguably more apt for examining processes of state (re)formation in the context of post-war US 'informal empire' (Panitch & Gindin 2003), and in particular, how legacies of colonialism intersected with specific and state–society contestations and outside US intervention in a manner that served to reproduce the 'history problem'. The concept formed a central theme in Gramsci's carceral writings on the history of Italy's experience of modern state formation. It sought to capture how bourgeois revolutions in late-developing societies took place in reaction to the upheavals in Europe associated with the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. As Gramsci argued, the French Revolution established a state on the basis of the elimination of the old feudal classes and thus achieved widespread popular support. Elsewhere in Europe, however, the bourgeoisie was too weak to establish a dominant position and successive small waves of reform occurred instead. These consisted of a combination of social struggles, but more predominantly, interventions from above of the enlightened monarchy type (Gramsci 1971: 115).

Gramsci's primary historical reference for passive revolution was the Risorgimento, whereby feudal relations of production were superseded by capitalism, albeit on the basis of an alliance between the bourgeoisie and the old feudal ruling class. In contrast to the French Revolution, Gramsci (1971: 63) argued that the Risorgimento lacked a 'Jacobin' moment, thus leading to a revolution without mass participation. Due to the weakness of the social basis of the Risorgimento, a prominent role was played by the Piedmontese state. Indeed, Gramsci (1971: 105) talks of a 'Piedmont-type function', that is, the fact that a state replaces the local social groups in leading a struggle for renewal. The state thus became the substitute for the political (hegemonic) activity of the progressive class through performing

... a function which can, from certain aspects, be compared to that of a party, i.e. of the leading personnel of a social group ... with the additional feature that it was in fact a State, with an army, a diplomatic service, etc. (Gramsci 1971: 104–105)
The concept of passive revolution thereby sheds light on the dialectical unity between revolution and restoration associated with transitions to modernity. In the Italian case,

... the demands which in France found a Jacobin-Napoleonic expression were satisfied by small doses, legally, in a reformist manner – in such a way that it was possible to preserve the political and economic position of the old feudal classes, to avoid agrarian reform, and especially, to avoid the popular masses going through a period of political experience in the years of Jacobinism. (Gramsci 1971: 119)

Restoration thereby takes the form of conservative reaction to the possibility of an effective and radical transformation coming from below. At the same time, some popular demands are ‘answered’ from above by means of compromises made by the ruling classes. The restoration aspect does not therefore deny that some actual modifications are taking place and thus is not synonymous with counter-reformation or counter-revolution (Coutinho 2012: 101). The concept can therefore contribute directly to understanding the class strategies of transitions to capitalism by tracing mechanisms tied to the state which have assisted in the emergence of capitalism to become the primary organ of primitive accumulation and social development (Morton 2007: 601). Societal acquiescence is achieved more broadly through hegemonic strategies, although at best, situations of passive revolution lead to a form of minimal rather than expansive hegemony, whereby transformism takes place in respect to a portion of the popular class but does not extend to them as a whole, and instead simply neutralises them (Femia 1981: 47).

Post-war East Asia might seem rather distant to the case of the mid-19th century Italian state formation, yet the precise meaning of passive revolution in Gramsci’s writings did not remain static. While passive revolution initially referred to the absence of a ‘Jacobin moment’ in Italian history, Gramsci subsequently applied it to a broader group of countries, such as Bismarck’s Germany, which were also deemed as lacking an impetus to modernity from below. Finally, passive revolution was deployed by Gramsci to refer to an entire historical era from 1848 onwards that led to the Fascism of the 1930s, that is, broadly the period that led to the emergence of ‘modernity’ within Europe (Thomas 2006: 72–73). The concept thereby shifted from a focus on the transition towards capitalist social relations to transformations within them. Gramsci (1971: 120) sees, for example, fascism as a response on the part of the traditional ruling classes to competition with advanced industrial countries, whereby ‘far-reaching modifications are being introduced into the country’s economic structure in order to accentuate the “plan of production element”’. Gramsci’s own extension of the concept thereby counters accusations of ‘conceptual stretching’ (see Callinicos 2010). The concept can be used to capture ‘various historical instances when aspects of the social relations of capitalist development are either instituted and/or expanded, resulting in both a “revolutionary” rupture and/or a “restoration” of social relations’ (Morton 2010: 333). It can therefore be seen as ‘... a persistent and universal feature of developmental change. However, the way it manifests itself and unfolds has differed depending on the particular country or region involved’ (Hesketh 2017: 390).

In terms of empirical applications of passive revolution, the majority of studies have focused on national-level process of state formation. Yet, what is missed as a result is the
possibility of a passive revolution that is regional in scope. As I argue in the following section, Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution illuminates the turning point of 1945 in East Asia, understood as a dialectic between revolution/restoration. Somewhat inevitably, however, the precise form that passive revolution took inevitably possessed characteristics that diverged from that of Gramsci’s Italy. For example, the East Asian passive revolution did not involve any restoration of the landed class due to the land reform that took place in the late 1940s/early 1950s. Furthermore, the analysis of the ‘Piedmont-type function’ of the state must take into account the fact that post-1945 Japan and Korea experienced periods of limited sovereignty, whereby they were initially occupied and administered by the US military, albeit in alliance with local conservatives who would form the social basis of the post-war US-aligned anti-communist regime. In this respect, the Piedmont-type function is not one that is carried out solely by the national state but one that is also carried out initially by the US occupying military authorities and then by advisors and experts following the onset or return of formal sovereignty. The East Asian passive revolution was thereby a key underpinning of the broader establishment of US ‘informal empire’ following the Second World War, although as will be argued, it also laid the basis for the failure to resolve the ‘history problem’ and continued to be a source of bilateral tensions following the later challenges to hegemonic rule in both countries.

East Asia’s revolution from above and outside

In methodological terms, examining processes of passive revolution involves first identifying revolutionary impulses from below and thereafter the Piedmont-type function that seeks to reorganise the state’s relations with society through partial acceptance of subaltern demands alongside their exclusion from political and economic decision-making realms. In terms of revolutionary impulses, Japan’s surrender in August 1945 brought forth an unleashing of pent-up social tensions and restiveness in both Korea and Japan. In the former, this reflected tensions that had emerged as a result of 3.5 decades of colonial rule. The United States was faced with the challenge of establishing a regime in the southern half of the peninsula that was both anti-communist and friendly to US interests. Following their arrival there in September 1945, US forces were confronted with newly established structures of governance that had emerged in the immediate days and weeks following Japan’s surrender. Workers made demands for the redistribution of wealth, the creation of a more equal society and the confiscation of property from Korean ‘traitors’ who had collaborated with the Japanese (Kim 2000: 74–77). The programme of the newly established Korean People’s Republic (KPR) was similarly directed against the influences of imperialism and feudalism, and called for the confiscation with compensation of land held by the Japanese and ‘national traitors’, the nationalisation of major industries, freedoms of speech, assembly and faith, voting rights and emancipation of women, full labour rights and close cooperation with the United States, Soviet Union and China (Cumings 1981: 88–90). Thus, as Kim Dong-Choon (2009: 33–34) argues, the immediate post-liberation period was a revolutionary context in which the task of national revolution overlapped with that of class revolution. However, the US occupying authorities refused to recognise the KPR and instead sought to facilitate a restoration of
the basic structures of the colonial state. The bureaucracy, the military and the police of the post-colonial South Korean state were all essentially colonial creations and continued to function as key sources of repressive stability (Cumings 1981: 151–169). These repressive forces, overseen by previously exiled independence activist Syngman Rhee, were immediately unleashed against the restive population.

Yet, the US military government also carried out a number of reforms in the post-war years that were aimed at achieving a limited degree of rule by consensus as a means of reducing the appeal of communism. While this involved establishing the foundations of a formally democratic state, the 1948 constitution was based on ‘an uneasy mixture of democracy and autocracy’. Democratic rights and freedoms were pronounced along with formal checks and balances and separation of powers but these measures were not in reality guaranteed under the country’s legal system (Henderson 1968: 158–159). Elections were also constrained affairs in which the security imperative of anti-communism justified the limitations on freedoms necessary for making elections genuine political contests (Mobrand 2019: 23). One measure that probably had the greatest impact on the livelihood of the majority of Koreans was the land reform (Kay 2002). Through significantly reducing the threat of socialist revolution in the countryside and keeping down food costs, the reform aided industrialisation. As such, this passive revolutionary combination of coercive measures and more consensual reforms from above established the relative autonomy between state and society that would underpin national developmentalism in the coming decades. Yet crucially, this was at the cost of dealing with the remnants of the colonial era, and particularly, with those who had collaborated with the Japanese occupiers. As a result, the so-called ‘pro-Japanese faction’ (ch’innil’pa) would continue to form a key bastion of political power under the developmentalist post-colonial state, and as we shall see, this served to suppress open discussion of the colonial past.

Japan similarly experienced social restiveness and militancy as a result of the difficult economic conditions brought about by the country’s defeat. Mass demonstrations in May 1946 sought to pressure the authorities to address the dire food situation (Gordon 1998: 5). Economic hardship also led to an unprecedented surge in labour organising, with a sharp increase in both the number of unions and in the overall membership, from 1,179 unions and 900,000 union members in January 1946 to 34,688 unions and 6.65 million members in June 1949 (Halliday 1975: 207). In addition, the labour movement saw progress in the building of unions organised at the industrial level, as represented by the umbrella federation Sanbetsu aligned with the Japanese Communist Party (JCP). The latter’s legalisation in October 1945 saw the party grow rapidly, from 7,500 in 1946 to 150,000 in 1950 (Emmerson 1972: 569).

In the Japanese case, however, it is not possible to separate in strict temporal terms the moment of revolutionary upheaval from that of revolution from above. Social unrest and organising from below initially took place in the political space opened up as a result of the so-called ‘democratising reforms’ carried out by the occupying Supreme Command for Allied Powers (SCAP) that were aimed at eradicating the roots of militarism in Japanese politics and society. These reforms unwittingly contributed to these radical activities by promoting relative political freedom and social reform without rehabilitating the economy, thereby leaving working-class people receptive to a range of left-wing appeals (Dower 1999: 255). SCAP also imposed a new constitution that established the
principle of popular sovereignty and guaranteed a broad range of human rights. A minimal level of social welfare became a constitutional guarantee, with women also being granted key rights such as equality before the law. SCAP’s democratic reforms also involved the dissolution of the *zaibatsu* conglomerates that were widely regarded as responsible for stifling domestic competition, repressing wages, and as having played a central role in Japan’s imperialist campaigns. As in Korea, one of the most significant reforms under US auspices was the land reform, which was carried out in the belief that agrarian unrest had been a key contributor to Japan’s extreme nationalism and militarism. Many of these reforms were short-lived, however. Washington became increasingly concerned not just about domestic instability but at the potential victory of communist forces in China, the poor state of the East Asian economy as a whole, and the desperate economic conditions that might lead the region as a whole to reorient itself towards the USSR (Bridoux 2011: 47). With the deepening of the Cold War, therefore, Washington viewed the reforms as hindering economic revival (Kolko & Kolko 1972: 512–517). The ensuing ‘reverse course’ thereby involved a scaling back of the *zaibatsu* dissolution programme along with an anti-communist and anti-working class campaign aimed at weakening organised labour and the newly resurgent left (Halliday 1975: 217).

The restoration element of the passive revolution in Japan was such that it impeded any coming to terms with the country’s history of colonialism and wartime aggression. While the US occupation involved the dismantling of the military, these punitive measures did not extend to the emperor himself. SCAP’s decision to retain the emperor as nominal head of state reflected the Japanese public’s strong attachment to him and fears that making him a martyr would make the country more difficult to govern (Beasley 1990: 215–217). As a result, Emperor Hirohito was not tried or even called as a witness to the Tokyo Trials, despite the fact that under the Meiji Constitution he had borne ultimate formal responsibility for Japan’s military aggression (Chang & Barker 1990: 74). This decision laid the basis for a profound distortion of history as the symbol of the emperor was cleansed from what had been done in his name (Buruma 1994: 175). Discussion and education about the atrocities committed in his name was henceforth impeded by the so-called ‘Chrysanthemum Taboo’, a social prohibition against publicly raising the question of the emperor’s involvement in the war. Instead, Japanese discussion of wartime history focused on the country’s own victimhood rather than on the country’s devastation of large parts of East Asia (Dudden 2008: 36).

This dominance of restoration over revolution was also apparent in the failure of the Tokyo War Trials to address the grievances held by those Asian countries that had borne the brunt of Japan’s aggression. Of the 11 judges that presided over the trial, only 3 were from Asian countries, with Korea notably absent (Chang & Barker 1990: 74). Furthermore, in contrast to the Nuremberg Trials, ‘crimes against humanity’ were mentioned only once in the Indictment, and only in passing in the majority Judgment. This reflected the Allies’ belief that no crime committed by Japan could compare with those committed by Germany during World War Two (Sellars 2010: 1092–1093). The deepening of the Cold War had meant that geopolitical considerations became more urgent than those of justice. In order to stabilise Japan, SCAP facilitated the return of many suspected and convicted war criminals to the reins of power, with evidence related to
such issues as sexual slavery and forced labour deliberately suppressed (Chang & Barker 1990: 76–77).

As a result, the post-war passive revolution meant that Japan’s reconciliation with its neighbours would remain an unlikely prospect. Indeed, the mid-1950s saw the continued extension of the passive revolution into the formal political sphere, as manifested in the establishment of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The emergence of what came to be known as the ‘1955 system’ was based upon a post-war historic bloc that included the LDP, the bureaucracy (in particular the Ministry of International Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Finance), and large corporations (keiretsu) (Carroll 2021: 105–108). In ideational terms, the 1955 system took the form of the so-called Yoshida Doctrine, which rested on the principles of adherence to the pacifist post-war constitution, single-minded focus on post-war recovery and development, and alliance with the United States as the cornerstone of Japan’s security policy (Tamaki 2010: 74–75). In terms of its interpretation of history, this represented a compromise between conservative and progressive positions. The conservative position was that the war had not been aggressive and neither had there been atrocities committed on a vast scale, and that in order to honour the sacrifices of the wartime generation, it was necessary to focus on achieving prosperity. Progressives, on the contrary, emphasised unarmed neutrality and radical pacifism, a position which led them to contest the alliance with the United States for fear that Japan might be dragged into a new war (Dian 2015: 369–370).

While there are key parallels between the Japanese and Korean passive revolutions, it was Japan’s post-war political order that more closely approximated hegemonic rule. Korea’s post-liberation political system was characterised by a highly repressive authoritarianism and was only hegemonic in a limited sense. On the one hand, both of these revolutions from above served to bolster the East Asian state’s relative autonomy and its role in facilitating catch-up industrialisation. The regional experience was not, however, manifested solely in terms in the emergence of cognate state–society formations but took the form of a partial restoration of the hierarchical pre-war regional division of labour. Within this structure, Korea was able to obtain much needed finance and technology from Japan, thereby simultaneously increasing Korean autonomy in the international system while increasing its dependency on Japan (Cumings 1984: 33). It was this regional structure of accumulation that served to further suppress any coming to terms with the past for much of the post-war era.

Instrumental in this was the formal establishment of diplomatic relations via the 1965 Treaty of Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea. Given that political relations between the two countries had remained cool in the 1950s as a result of Syngman Rhee’s anti-Japanese sentiment, it was the May 1961 coup d’état led by Major General Park Chung-Hee that paved the way for the normalisation of bilateral relations. Park had been a lieutenant in the Imperial Army of Manchukuo and thus was himself a symbol of the continuities with the colonial era. His rise to power paved the way for the onset of the developmentalist regime, underpinned by a historic bloc based on the developmentalist state and what would become the chaebol conglomerates (Choi 2020: 1711). The broader geopolitical context, however, was the role played by the United States in placing pressure on both Seoul and Tokyo to normalise bilateral relations. This reflected rising geopolitical threats from China and the deepening war in
Vietnam, and indeed, Washington played a key role in facilitating progress in deadlocked disputes during the course of negotiations (Cha 1996).

This reestablishment of diplomatic relations and resulting expansion of economic exchange played a key role in Korea's national development. As a result of the treaty itself, Seoul received US$800 million (US$300 million in grants, US$200 million in government loans and US$300 million in commercial credits), which found its way into the funding of Pohang steel complex as well as power plants, railroads, irrigation networks and communications facilities (Woo 1991: 87–88). In contrast to the colonial era, therefore, Korea's return to the Japanese orbit did permit national development, although as noted, in economic terms this remained a hierarchical relationship. In order to compete in third markets, Korea had to import not only production technology and know-how from Japan, but also components and intermediate parts. Thus, in the 1960s/1970s, when Korea exported textiles to the United States, it imported textile machinery and synthetic fibres from Japan. Later, when Korea moved into shipbuilding, it began by importing Japanese steel, engines and heavy electrical machinery. Electrical and electronic consumer goods similarly relied heavily on Japanese components and assembly line equipment (Bridges 1993: 94).

Yet, this dependent relationship militated against dealing with historical grievances, which were as a result suppressed under the authoritarian regime. The normalisation of diplomatic relations itself was by no means a form of reconciliation but rather reflected Korea's need for capital and Japan's desire precisely to avoid legally binding apologies and reparations (Lynn 2000: 60). The treaty declared all issues involving compensation and reparations claims as settled, thereby seeking to rule out the possibility of further claims (Dudden 2008: 94). In this manner, it created a form of 'systemic lock' that served to regulate relations between the two countries, with the effect that Tokyo would provide aid to Korea in exchange for Seoul's waving of the right to push for legally binding admissions relating to colonial and wartime era crimes (Lynn 2000: 57). However, the treaty was not the result of bilateral reconciliation but the product of economic and political calculations, and indeed, the treaty itself would later become a source of contention between the two nations (Ku 2008: 23–24). As Deacon has argued, the treaty has allowed Tokyo to portray Korea as irrational and not acting according to 'legal agreement' between the two countries. For Japan, therefore, the history of the 1965 treaty takes precedence over the history of colonialism and repression (Deacon 2021: 18).

The unravelling of the East Asian passive revolution

As I have argued, the East Asian passive revolution meant that public discussion of historical grievances was largely suppressed amid the broader imperative of state-led industrialisation and Cold War geopolitical objectives. However, the unravelling of the post-war passive revolution in the 1980s led issues such as sexual slavery, forced labour and competing interpretations over history to become widely debated. In Korea, this challenge to the ruling developmentalist historic bloc was in part a result of the class realignments brought about by economic development. These realignments brought forth the emergence of a broad oppositional coalition including the middle class and student and labour
movements, which in turn led to the democratic aperture of June 1987. On the one hand, this represented a shift away from overt authoritarianism (or ‘domination without hegemony’) towards a more consensual form of rule. However, the fact that the transition occurred alongside the onset of neoliberal restructuring suggests that the transition maintained distinct passive revolutionary dynamics. Indeed, the transition itself took the form of a compromise between the incumbent political party and opposition elites while excluding political activists and student organisations (Shin 2012: 294). Nonetheless, there is little doubt that an increased space for civil society did emerge and had a profound impact on Japan–Korea relations in both positive and negative ways.

Democratisation led to the emergence of civic organisations that sought to re-examine the colonial past and provide support for the victims of the colonial and wartime eras. This also had an impact on the discussion of such issues in Japan. For example, the first victim of wartime sexual slavery to speak out publicly was Kim Hak-sun in August 1991, who testified to the Japanese public about the suffering she had endured. This set off a series of events including class-action lawsuits and the unearthing of incriminating historical documentation (Kuki 2013: 246–247). While Japan had not seen the kind of seismic shift in its political landscape that Korea saw in the late 1980s, the death of Emperor Hirohito in 1989 also weakened existing taboos and opened up a space for discussion of the country’s past (Dudden 2008: 35–36). Historians increasingly shed light on Japan’s colonial and wartime history, while veterans spoke out truthfully about their wartime actions. Following Kim Hak-sun’s testimony, other former victims of sexual slavery followed suit, thereby encouraging Japanese activists to organise support groups (Hayashi 2008: 126–27). Following an investigation, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kōno Yōhei responded by releasing a statement expressing the Japanese government’s remorse. In addition, Tokyo established the Asian Women’s Fund in July 1995, which was ostensibly aimed at protecting women’s rights in Japan and around the world (Hirofumi 2001: 578).

However, there was also a hardening of attitudes among conservative politicians towards reconciliation efforts, which were dismissed as ‘apology diplomacy’ and ‘masochistic history’ (Kingston 2019: 448). This rightward shift can also be seen as a response to challenges to the ruling historic bloc caused by the stalling of the country’s economic growth model (Carroll 2021: 109–138). While this trend had been discernible since the Nakasone Yasuhiro administration in the 1980s, it became particularly prominent under the Abe Shinzo administrations (2006–2007 and 2012–2020). As grandson of Class A war criminal and former Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke, Abe was well known for his nationalistic views, including those critical of the pacifist constitution and the belief that the education system portrayed an excessively negative view of Japanese history. Abe also disputed the Kōno statement acknowledging the Japanese state’s involvement in wartime sexual slavery (Suzuki 2015: 205–206). He also sought to transform understandings of the Japanese nation and its role in world history. Towards these goals, educational reforms carried out in 2018 and 2019 mandated the teaching of ‘patriotism’ (aikokushin) in schools. These reforms reflected Abe’s membership of Nippon Kaigi, the leading advocate and pressure group for textbook reform along lines that sanitise depictions of Japanese wartime aggression (Carroll 2021: 188–189).

The salience of the textbook issues in bilateral disputes reflects the fact that textbooks are key instruments in the formation of hegemonic worldviews. As Apple states,
textbooks ‘... are really messages to and about the future. As part of a curriculum, they participate in no less than the organized knowledge system of society. They participate in creating what a society has recognized as legitimate and truthful’ (Apple 2000: 6). They have for this reason been contested between opposing social forces within Korea and Japan. In the latter, they have been a focal point for the struggle for hegemony between those critical of the country’s pre-1945 history and aligned with the pacifist orientation of the post-war constitution, and the nationalist forces that supported remilitarisation and opposed the interpretation of Japan’s pre-1945 history in a negative light (Nozaki & Selden 2009: 3–4). Yet unsurprisingly, textbooks have become a key point of contention between the two countries. In 1982, for example, Asahi Simbun reported that Japan’s Ministry of Education had demanded that a textbook describing Japan as having ‘invaded’ (侵略) northern China should be rewritten as ‘advanced’ (進出). Although the report in fact later turned out to false, it led to strong protests by the Korean as well as Chinese governments.

Following the transition to democracy, Korea’s newly emergent civic organisations became an increasingly important actor in these bilateral disputes, even when governments focused on bilateral reconciliation. For example, disputes arose again in 2000 when the conservative Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform published the New History Textbook, which sought to downplay Japan’s military aggression during the Sino-Japanese War of 1895–1895, the annexation of Korea in 1910, and the war with China and the Pacific War. The Kim Dae-Jung government initially appeared reluctant to pursue the matter due to its efforts to engage in reconciliation with Japan. However, strong public protests in Korea forced Seoul to recall its ambassador from Tokyo and establish the Task Force Team to Counter Distortion in Japanese History Textbooks to analyse the textbooks and challenge misrepresentations of Japan’s role in Korean history (Soh 2003: 159–160).

In general terms, there is a contrast between the relative uniformity of the societal response in Korea and the greater diversity of opinion within Japanese society (Soh 2003: 147). Nonetheless, disputes over history have not been absent within Korea. Under the post-war passive revolution, the pro-Japanese faction had addressed its chronic legitimacy deficit through mobilising an ideology of virulent anti-communism. However, the transition to democracy and the retreat of the Cold War undermined the ideological underpinnings of conservatism. Much as in Japan, the crisis of developmentalism and onset of neoliberal restructuring and the social dislocation it brought with it gave rise to renewed conservative and authoritarian tendencies (Jayasuriya 2018: 592–598). One manifestation of this was the emergence in the 2000s of an alternative New Right history movement, which sought among other goals to emphasise the ‘positive influence’ of Japanese colonialism in Korea’s modernisation (Gray 2013). This was in direct contradiction to the mainstream narrative that regarded the colonial era as a period of unparalleled national suffering, although ultimately the movement largely failed to establish itself as a hegemonic worldview (Tikhonov 2019).

It should be noted that as the post-war passive revolution has unravelled, the direct role of the United States in these disputes has become more implicit. Washington’s position has been that its two Asian allies quickly need to put their disputes behind them in order to achieve trilateral cooperation and deal with pressing regional security issues, such as
China and North Korea. On the one hand, this supposedly ‘neutral’ arbiter role fails to take into account the earlier refusal of the United States to deal with such issues during the dissolution of the Japanese empire and Korea's decolonisation. Furthermore, the United States remains powerless to bring about reconciliation through state-to-state negotiations. Pressure from the Obama administration, for example, led the Abe government in Japan and the Park Geun-Hye Government in Korea to reach the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement (Kim, 2016). This agreement involved an apology from Japan and a payment of US$8.3 million to take care of the survivors. However, continued denialism by the Abe administration over the very existence of wartime sexual slavery and the rejection of the deal by some of the survivors of sexual slavery threatened the deal from the very beginning (Hosoka, 2021). Following the ‘candlelight revolution’ and impeachment of Park Geun-Hye in 2017, the liberal–progressive Moon Jae-In government in any case abandoned the deal.

The forced labour dispute and the decline of East Asian hierarchy

As has been argued, the unravelling of the post-war passive revolution from the 1980s created the conditions for the re-emergence and the intensification of the ‘history problem’. In particular, the decline of the Japan-centred regional political economy (MacIntyre & Naughton 2005) and of hierarchical economic relations between Japan and Korea increased rather than lessened the scope for these disputes to disrupt relations between the two countries. This can be seen in the recent disputes surrounding the issue of forced labour. As noted in the introduction, the Korean Supreme Court in October 2018 ordered several Japanese companies to compensate the families of Koreans that had been drafted as forced labour. Nippon Steel and Iron, for example, had paid Koreans little more than half the average salary of Japanese workers, but then deducted costs for food, work clothes and so on, and forcibly saved the rent. By August 1945, the wages of 300,000 Korean workers remained unpaid (Schmidt 2000: 15–16). This had been directly aided by SCAP’s policies in the early occupation era, when Koreans in Japan were encouraged by officials to return to their own country but were given little in the way of financial incentives or means to do so. Furthermore, restrictions were placed on how much money could be taken out of the country (Augustine 2017: 51–52). However, in response to the Korean court’s 2018 ruling, Tokyo predictably protested that such issues had already been ‘settled completely and finally’ under the 1965 Treaty.

In July 2019, Tokyo introduced new licensing procedures that would require Japanese companies to apply for approval before exporting controlled items and their relevant technologies to Korea. These items included fluorinated polymide, resist and hydrogen fluoride, which were all essential to Korea’s semiconductor industry. These chemicals had been designated as controlled goods under the Multilateral Export Controlled Regime, and thus, Japan’s removal of Korea from its whitelist of approved export destinations meant that Japanese firms would have to apply for approval for each shipment. In justifying the move, Japanese officials cited vague ‘national security’ concerns, arguing that some Korean firms had inadequately managed these dual-use goods and, in a parallel implicit critique of Moon Jae-In’s engagement policy, that the goods had been illegally exported to North Korea. There
was little doubt on the Korean side, however, that the trade embargo was related to the increasingly fractious dispute over wartime reparations.

In doing so, the Japanese government sought to leverage Korean dependence on key Japanese inputs. However, the hierarchical relationship between Korea and Japan had already seen significant transformation since the heyday of the post-war passive revolution. Korean industrialisation and the resulting reluctance of Japanese firms to transfer core technologies to the country had accelerated the drive by Korean firms to establish an autonomous technological and production base (Rhyu & Lee 2006: 206). Certainly, the restrictions in the short- to medium-term suggest a significant potential impact on the Korean semiconductor industry, given that the high capital costs of the industry implied a significant impact on profits. However, Korean producers were unwilling to tolerate such supply chain vulnerabilities and therefore sought to diversify their chemical supplies with domestic and non-Japanese supplies, thereby shutting Japanese firms out from the Korean market (Goodman et al. 2019: 20–22). Indeed, the Korean government responded to Japan’s restrictions through establishing a plan for decoupling, known as the ‘Countermeasures to Enhance the Competitiveness of Materials, Parts and Equipment’. This focused on the localisation of production as well as import diversification, and included decoupling from Japan and Japanese firms (Kim 2020: 5–8). Regardless of how stringent Japan’s export controls turned out to be in practice, Korea’s dependence on key items from Japan declined from 32.2% in 2018 to 24.9% in 2021. While imports of hydrogen fluoride did see a decline of one-sixth between 2019 and 2021, there were no reported major disruptions in production (Presidential Planning Policy Committee, 2021).

Economic relations were transformed further as a result of a public boycott in Korea of Japanese goods (Yonhap News, 2020). Imported beer, automobiles, motorcycles, ballpoint pens, golf clubs, toys, cosmetics and fishing gear were all heavily impacted, and Nissan announced its intention to completely withdraw from the Korean market after sales in the country saw a year-on-year decline of 39.7% (Stangarone, 2021). The operating profits of 31 Japanese companies plunged by 71.3% in 2019 compared with the previous year (Nikkei, 2020). Beyond trade, the boycott also led to a drop in Korean tourism to Japan by 65.5% in November 2019 compared with the previous year (Financial Times, 2019). The dispute also led the Seoul to bring a case against Tokyo at the World Trade Organisation. As such, the growing salience of historical issues can be seen as a reflection of the decline in hierarchical economic relations regional order while the fallout from such tensions has served to hasten that decline.

Conclusion

This article has argued that existing approaches to understanding the ‘history problem’ in East Asia have failed to adequately address the puzzle of Korea–Japan relations. Liberal IR theory is unable to explain the paradox of two economically integrated democracies that continue to display such persistent animosity towards each other. Realist approaches emphasise vicissitudes in elite-level diplomacy but fail to account for the remarkable persistence of animosities at a broader societal level. Constructivist and poststructuralist approaches usefully shed light on the role of relational yet conflicting national identities, yet they fail to explain why particular identities may predominate at any given time and
have tended to confuse *explanans* with *explanandum* in treating national identities and the self/other relationship as causal rather than the very phenomenon that needs to explained. In addition, they focus more exclusively on bilateral relations while neglecting the constitutive role of the United States in the East Asian ‘history problem’.

Instead, this article has deployed Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution to examine the vicissitudes of the region’s animosities over time. Passive revolution provides an insight into the manner in which states undergo revolutions from above as part of the transition *to* or *within* capitalist social relations of production in manner that forestalls the emergence of a ‘collective will’. At the same time, passive revolutions should not be thought of as isolated national phenomena but as ‘differentiated outcomes of a historically integrated process’ (Morton 2010: 332). In this respect, the article has taken the case of Korea–Japan relations to shed light on a regional process of passive revolution, an approach that arguably shares more in common with Gramsci’s own analysis of Italian state formation in the context of contemporary European transformations. In the case of East Asia, the specificity of the 1945 conjuncture and the dialectical relationship between restoration and revolution laid the grounds for the expedient suppression of historical animosities in favour of catch-up industrialisation. However, by the 1980s, this passive revolution began to unravel. In Korea, the democratic opening and the emergence of civil society led to renewed efforts to address unresolved historical injustices in a manner that had not been possible during the passive revolutionary developmentalist era. In Japan, the post-Hirohito era led to increased debate around the country’s history of imperialism and aggression, while the crisis of post-war LDP rule led to a shift towards conservative nationalism in the political realm that raised questions about the sincerity of existing expressions of remorse and apology. The recent legal dispute over forced labour in turn sheds light on the extent to which the post-war East Asian passive revolution has unravelled and how the post-war system of transnational accumulation has been transformed. While Japan has sought to leverage Korean dependence on Japanese inputs for its semiconductor industry, the decline of hierarchical economic relations between the two countries has problematised this strategy.

In addition, the emphasis on the constitutive role of East Asia’s passive revolution in these disputes sheds light on the role of the United States in the formation of the post-war regional order, a dimension that is typically underemphasised in existing accounts. While mainstream observers in the United States are often exasperated at how animosities undermine trilateral cooperation, this seemingly neglects the fact that the US occupation of Japan and Korea in the immediate post-war era was foundational to the festering of historical animosities. Furthermore, Japan’s remilitarisation is hindered by the fact that efforts by conservative forces to challenge post-war pacifism continue to undermine the country’s relations with Korea, making trilateral cooperation an increasingly difficult goal to achieve. As such, the US stance of presenting itself as neutral arbiter amid these bilateral disputes fails to recognise the legacies of the specific forms of the restoration-revolution dialectic brought about by the post-war intervention and how that intervention suppressed such issues only for them to re-emerge with a vengeance in recent years.

**Notes**

1. While there are significant differences between constructivism and poststructuralism, such as the extent to which they adhere to state centrism or the contested nature of state identity,
both approaches emphasise the fact that identities are acquired through social interactions and that the state’s self-understanding is realised only after the other is recognised (Tamaki 2010: 27–30). For this reason, the two approaches are treated together in this article.


3. For further critical analyses of neo-Gramscian IR theory, see Ayers (2008), Budd (2013) and Worth (2011).

4. For example, see studies on Mexico (Hesketh 2010; Morton 2003), Bolivia (Webber 2016), Russia (Simon 2010), China (Gray 2010), Japan (Allinson & Anievas 2010), the Soviet Union (Van der Pijl 1993), Scotland (Davidson 2010), India (Chatterjee 1986), Turkey (Tüçal 2009) and Ecuador (Forero 2022).

5. Existing efforts to apply Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution to Korea and Japan have focused not on the period of post-war state building but rather to the Meiji Revolution (Allinson & Anievas 2010), the Abe Shinzo administration (Carroll 2022) and vocational training programmes in Korea (Moore 2005).

ORCID iD
Kevin Gray https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8456-8562

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**Author biography**

Kevin Gray is a Professor in International Relations at the School of Global Studies, University of Sussex. His research expertise relates to the political economy of East Asian development. He is author (with Jong-Woon Lee) of *North Korea and the Geopolitics of Development* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), as well as *Korean Workers and Neoliberal Globalisation* (Routledge, 2008), *Labour and Development in East Asia: Social Forces and Passive Revolution* (Routledge, 2015). He is also editor of (with Barry Gills) *Rising Powers and the Future of Global Governance* (Routledge, 2018); (with Barry Gills) *People Power in an Era of Global Crisis: Rebellion, Resistance, and Liberation* (Routledge, 2013); (with Craig Murphy) *Rising Powers and South-South Cooperation* (Routledge, 2018); (with Barry Gills) *Post-Covid Transformations* (Routledge, forthcoming).