

Surviving the Periphery: Invasion Management, Commemorative Practice, and the Differential Survival of Political Communities on the East Asian Periphery

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Abstract— From the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, East Asian political communities experienced recurring struggles for regional influence, ranging from interstate wars and territorial expansion to diplomatic negotiations. Some retained or recovered political autonomy. Others did not. This paper examines South Korea and Taiwan as two cases of political survival and compares the historical and strategic conditions that shaped their trajectories. It also considers Ryukyu, whose kingdom was abolished but whose distinct cultural identity persisted, to distinguish the survival of sovereign institutions from the continuity of a community. The analysis draws on field interviews conducted in Korean, Japanese, and Mandarin Chinese with museum curators at four institutions, supplemented by comparative historical scholarship.

The argument has two parts. Drawing on political scientist Matthias Maass, the first examines how great-power interests support or undermine a weaker polity's autonomy. The second examines "invasion management," the adaptation of conflict environments through inherited knowledge and learning from failure, and "commemorative practice," the ceremonies and embodied habits through which generations transmit and reinterpret conflict, following social theorist Paul Connerton. Korea adapted resistance after its initial defenses failed in 1592, while later generations made memories of resistance into political resources. Taiwan illustrates remembrance under suppression and conditions that may discourage invasion. Ryukyu's diplomatic shelter-seeking failed to preserve its sovereignty, yet ancestral practices sustained a distinct community.

The argument is anti-essentialist, following historian Prasenjit Duara's critique of nationalist historiography. Invasion management was not an innate Korean capacity, as Chosŏn's initial defenses failed and Seoul fell within nineteen days. Taiwanese identity likewise changed, shaped partly by policies intended to suppress it. Historical scholarship supplements claims extending beyond the curators' accounts. The result is a study of how political communities sustain and reshape themselves through institutions and practices, and why that continuity does not always secure sovereign statehood..

Keywords— Commemorative practice, East Asian international relations, invasion management, political survival.

I. THE PUZZLE

In May 1592, Japanese forces under Toyotomi Hideyoshi landed at Busan with more than 224,000 troops. Within nineteen days, Seoul fell, and the Chosŏn king fled north toward the Chinese border. The country had suffered a

decisive military defeat. The invasion had overwhelmed the court's initial defenses, but the loss of the capital did not end the war or extinguish the dynasty.

Seventeen years later, Satsuma Domain forces invaded Ryukyu. The Ryukyuan king surrendered and was taken to Japan as a prisoner. The country had suffered a decisive military defeat. Yet here, too, military defeat did not immediately end the kingdom's existence.

The more consequential divergence emerged over the following centuries: Korea lost its sovereignty under Japanese colonial rule from 1910 to 1945 but subsequently regained independent statehood, while the Ryukyu Kingdom was abolished in 1879 and was not restored as a sovereign state. These different outcomes form the starting point of this paper.

Taiwan extends the comparison by bringing the relationship between political authority and collective identification into sharper focus. Despite the Dutch occupation, Qing annexation, Japanese colonization, and Kuomintang (KMT) authoritarianism, Taiwan has produced one of the most distinct political identities in contemporary Asia, a community whose self-identification as "Taiwanese" rather than "Chinese" has more than tripled over twenty years of survey data.

What explains these divergent outcomes? This is the question this paper addresses. They cannot be explained by ethnic character, geography, or willpower alone. These outcomes require a distinction between the survival of a state and the persistence of a community that understands itself as historically distinct. The two may reinforce one another, but they do not necessarily coincide. The Ganghwa War Museum curator expressed the relationship between historical experience and collective identification directly: "What the history of invasions left us is not bravery. It is a shared knowledge that we have been here before and survived. That is a community of experience, not a race." This observation guides the comparison. Drawing on four curator interviews and historical scholarship, the paper examines two processes: "invasion management," through which defenders adapt the conditions of confrontation, and "commemorative practice," through which later generations preserve and reinterpret experiences of conflict. It asks how these processes interact with great-power interests to sustain political institutions and collective identities—and why the persistence of a community does not always secure its political autonomy.

II. EXISTING EXPLANATIONS AND THEIR LIMITS

Three bodies of scholarship help explain the outcomes examined here: military capacity, great-power interests, and the persistence of collective identity. Each identifies an important dimension of survival, but their relationship requires closer examination, particularly when the continuity of political institutions and the persistence of collective identity diverge.

Military capacity helps explain the immediate outcomes of invasion, but initial defeat does not adequately distinguish Korea from Ryukyu. Both kingdoms were rapidly overwhelmed: Chosŏn lost control of Seoul within nineteen days, while Ryukyu surrendered promptly despite mounting naval resistance. Their subsequent trajectories nevertheless differed. Military capacity therefore remains part of the explanation, but it must be

examined as something that can be reorganized during a conflict rather than measured only at its outset. The question is how defenders adapt after their initial defenses fail, and whether those adaptations allow political institutions and organized resistance to endure.

Great-power interests provide a second explanation. Matthias Maass situates small-state survival within changing international conditions, including the interests of stronger powers in preserving weaker political units. Moonhaeng Heo, curator at the Jinju National Museum, expressed this logic directly: “The real reason Chosŏn survived is international relations. The Ming didn’t save Korea because they cared about Koreans – they intervened because if Chosŏn fell, Japan would be at their border.” This perspective helps explain why external support becomes available in some circumstances and is withheld in others. It does not, by itself, explain how local resistance is organized or how a distinct collective identity persists under domination. Korean resistance before Ming intervention, Taiwan’s changing identification under KMT rule, and Ryukyu’s unsuccessful appeals for foreign protection require attention to both external interests and the institutions and practices through which communities respond.

A third explanation emphasizes the persistence of collective identity. A shared understanding of the past may sustain solidarity when political institutions are weakened or sovereignty is lost. Yet treating identity as an enduring national property risks assuming the continuity that needs to be explained. Prasenjit Duara’s critique of nationalist historiography cautions against reading the past as the unfolding history of an already coherent nation. In the cases examined here, the relevant question is how collective identification was maintained, reshaped, and mobilized under changing conditions. Korean resistance drew on existing institutions and traditions while adapting them to new crises; Taiwanese identification developed through experiences of colonialism, authoritarian rule, and democratization. Ryukyu further complicates the relationship, as a distinct identity persisted without the restoration of the kingdom’s sovereignty. Identity can therefore be a resource for political action without guaranteeing a particular political outcome.

This paper brings these explanations into conversation by examining the practices that connect them. “Invasion management” directs attention to how defenders reorganize their responses within the constraints of military capacity and external support. “Commemorative practice” examines how experiences of conflict become resources through which later generations understand their community and its claims to continuity. Together, these concepts provide a framework for investigating how strategic adaptation and collective memory contribute to survival, while recognizing that neither operates independently of wider political conditions.

III. FRAMEWORK: TWO CONCEPTS

Invasion Management

This paper uses “invasion management” to describe a strategic logic identified through the Jinju and Ganghwa interviews: a weaker political community’s efforts to reshape the conditions of confrontation so that an invader’s initial military advantages become less decisive. Whereas shelter-seeking emphasizes protection secured from a stronger power, invasion management directs attention to the defenders’ own adaptation of military

arrangements, political institutions, and sources of mobilization. These responses can complement external protection, but they are not reducible to it.

The framework identifies three elements of invasion management: terrain selection, center relocation, and ideological legitimation. Terrain selection involves choosing or shaping the sites of engagement to limit the effectiveness of an invader's superior forces or preferred tactics. Center relocation preserves governing institutions by moving them beyond an invader's immediate reach, preventing the capture of a capital from automatically ending organized political authority. Ideological legitimation provides a framework through which actors outside the central command can justify and organize resistance. Each addresses a different vulnerability. Terrain selection can improve the prospects of individual engagements, center relocation can preserve political coordination, and ideological legitimation can sustain mobilization when central authority is disrupted. The comparison examines how these elements operate in particular circumstances rather than assuming that all three are equally present or effective in every case.

Invasion management involves both inherited knowledge and learning under pressure. The Chosŏn court's initial defensive arrangements – the jaeseung bangryak – failed to halt the Japanese advance in 1592, and Seoul fell in less than three weeks. This failure makes it difficult to describe effective resistance as an automatic expression of Korean national character. Earlier responses to invasion nevertheless provided precedents for adaptation. The Koryŏ court's relocation to Ganghwa Island during the Mongol invasions (1231–1270), for example, demonstrated how a government could preserve its political center despite an enemy's dominance on the mainland. The existence of earlier precedents, however, did not ensure their use or effectiveness. Each new crisis required defenders to judge whether earlier strategies remained applicable and how they should be modified. Invasion management is therefore neither an innate national capacity nor a strategy passed down unchanged. It is institutional knowledge that must be interpreted and adapted to the demands of a particular conflict.

Commemorative Practice

Surviving an invasion does not ensure that later generations will remember the conflict or draw on it when confronting new threats. For that to happen, experiences of conflict must be transmitted through institutions and practices that outlast those who lived through them. This paper draws on Paul Connerton's account of social memory to examine how communities enact their relationships with the past through commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices, alongside written records and material objects.

Commemorative ceremonies are formal occasions for remembering the past, often taking the form of festivals, annual rituals, or memorial pilgrimages. They are explicit occasions where a community enacts its relationship with the past and, in doing so, transmits and reinterprets its meaning across generations. Bodily practices, meanwhile, are the habits and skills acquired through socialization and repeated participation, which can transmit memory without explicit historical instruction. Both channels matter, and they may overlap within the same practice. Public commemorative ceremonies are vulnerable to political suppression, while less explicitly political bodily practices may prove more durable. Their persistence, however, does not automatically translate into organized political resistance.

The three cases illustrate how public commemoration and less explicitly political practices can sustain collective memory. In Korea, the Jinju Namgang Yudeung Festival and the Hogsusa Temple pilgrimages publicly commemorate past conflicts. Alongside these ceremonies, habits of communal participation and shared obligation can be learned through Confucian educational traditions, Protestant worship, and everyday community life, without necessarily referring explicitly to a history of resistance. These repeated practices may sustain a sense of belonging even outside formal occasions of remembrance.

Similarly, Taiwan sustained memory through both accounts of past violence and material practices. Despite the KMT's suppression of the 228 Incident, memories of the violence continued to circulate privately within families and communities. Indigenous carvers also incorporated figures associated with colonial rule into everyday objects, giving material form to experiences of domination.

Ryukyu likewise maintained collective memory through the Shīmī (Tomb-Sweeping Day) ancestral observance and practices surrounding kamekōbaka (turtleback tomb). However, Japanese political control restricted Ryukyuan's ability to hold public ceremonies commemorating resistance to Japanese domination. These restrictions may have made it harder to turn a shared identity into organized demands for political autonomy. Ryukyuan cultural identity thus survived through ancestral rituals and everyday practices, but this continuity did not by itself secure the restoration of sovereign statehood.

Together, these cases suggest that commemorative practice can sustain a community's sense of continuity even when its political institutions are weakened or lost. Its relationship to invasion management, however, requires further examination. Remembering earlier resistance does not necessarily preserve the capacity to resist anew. The comparison therefore asks when shared memories become resources for political action, and how institutions and external conditions enable or constrain that process.

Method and its Limits

The paper's primary evidence comes from four field interviews conducted between June 2025 and March 2026 at museum institutions in Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. Museum curators were selected mainly because their work involves preserving and interpreting historical memory, and because they help determine which events are represented, how they are presented, and what their significance is for contemporary audiences. Their accounts therefore provide evidence of how particular institutions understand and communicate experiences of invasion, resistance, and political loss.

These interviews offer institutionally situated interpretations rather than a comprehensive account of collective memory in each society. Curators' perspectives do not necessarily represent those of museum visitors, local communities, or groups whose experiences receive less institutional recognition. Their descriptions of a ceremony or exhibition establish how they understand its purpose; they do not, by themselves, demonstrate how participants interpret it or whether it produces political action. The analysis accordingly distinguishes interviewees' interpretations from historical claims requiring independent support and from the comparative inferences developed in this paper.

Hyeonsoo Kim, curator at the Ganghwa War Museum, identified a particular limit to the historical scope of her testimony. She recommended the Sinmi Yangyo (American Expedition to Korea, 1871) as the earliest appropriate starting point for arguments connecting invasion and collective identity, and noted that extending the analysis back to the Koryŏ period “would be somewhat difficult.” This paper treats that recommendation as a boundary on the use of her interview. Earlier episodes, including the Koryŏ court’s relocation to Ganghwa Island, are examined through historical scholarship rather than attributed to her account.

The interviews nevertheless contribute insights that a comparison organized solely around major wars and diplomatic settlements might overlook. Wen-Cheng Shih, curator at the National Museum of Taiwan History, explained that “Researchers assume certain events are important. But when you interview the communities involved, sometimes they have no memory of those events at all, and something completely different turns out to matter. That is why researchers must return to local voices.” Although curator interviews cannot substitute for research with those communities, they can identify practices, objects, and interpretations that warrant closer examination.

The comparison uses the interviews alongside historical scholarship to investigate how strategic adaptation and remembrance may contribute to political and cultural continuity. It does not treat four institutional accounts as sufficient to establish necessary conditions for survival. Instead, it examines where the proposed processes are supported by the evidence, where their operation remains uncertain, and how their consequences differ across the three cases.

IV. SOUTH KOREA: LEARNING TO SURVIVE

The Geographic Baseline: Inhujiji

Curator Kim explained Ganghwa’s strategic importance through the concept of inhujiji (“the place of the throat”) – a narrow maritime approach through which forces seeking access to the capital had to pass. “The Sinmi Yangyo, the Byeongin Yangyo (French expedition to Korea, 1866), the Treaty of Ganghwa (1876) – all of them happened here because of the same geographic logic. To enter the capital, you had to pass through this throat.” Indeed, her account identifies a local strategic advantage. Control of a restricted approach could help defenders contest access to the political center. The same position, however, also exposed Ganghwa to repeated foreign incursions.

At the regional level, Korea’s location gave outside powers strategic reasons to maintain Korean sovereignty as a buffer rather than to incorporate Korea into their own systems. This relates to political scientist Matthias Maass’s emphasis on the international conditions under which stronger powers support the survival of weaker political units. Ming China in 1593 intervened to keep Japan off its border. Similarly, the United States maintained the Korean alliance after 1953 to anchor its influence in the Pacific. These were different historical arrangements, but both illustrate how opposition to a rival’s expansion could motivate external support. Korea’s position, both politically and geographically, made it so its absorption into an adversary was more costly to the great powers than its continued existence.

There is a structural precedent for Chosŏn’s case in the peninsula’s history. The tidal geography of the Ganghwa waterway, with its extreme tidal ranges that prevent ships from crossing without observing precise timing,

contributed to the Koryŏ court's choice of Ganghwa Island as its relocation site during the Mongol invasions. Using the island's geography, the court remained there from 1232 to 1270, preserving its governing institutions despite Mongol military dominance on the mainland. This did not protect the mainland from devastation or ensure full political independence, but it prevented military advances on land from immediately extinguishing the political center.

Curator Kim's own account focuses on later conflicts and their place in Korean historical memory: the Byeongin Yanggyo (1866), the Sinmi Yanggyo (1871), the Treaty of Ganghwa (1876), Japanese annexation of Korea (1910), and the Korean War (1950–1953). She framed the interpretive question as follows: "What did the history of invasions leave us?" Her answer emphasized the possibility of a shared understanding of endurance: "If you think what it left is a community consciousness – a shared knowledge that we have been here before and survived – that much you can write." This interpretation connects the section's geographic and institutional history to the paper's second concern: how later generations understand repeated conflict as part of a shared past.

Invasion Management as a Learned Response

The interview with Curator Heo supports a central argument of this paper: Korea's survival depended not on the success of its initial defenses, but on its capacity to sustain and adapt resistance after those defenses failed.

Heo explains the initial system and its failure: "the jaeseung bangryak concentrated elite troops from the center together with regional forces at designated rally points. But when that point was breached, there was no fallback. If you get lost there, the road to Seoul is open." After the Japanese landing at Busan, Seoul fell within nineteen days. The initial defensive strategy had failed to halt the advance, but this did not eliminate the capacity to organize resistance elsewhere.

After this failure, the court reverted to the distributed chingwan system of local defense, and commands began to approach the invasion with a different logic. As Heo puts it, "the Chosŏn navy did not fight wherever the enemy chose. They identified terrain where they could win, and they fought there." The Hansan Daechup (Battle of Hansan Island, 1592) demonstrates this principle of invasion management. Yi Sun-sin, needing open water for the hakikjin (crane-wing formation), led the Japanese fleet into waters near Hansan Island. By choosing conditions favorable to his fleet's formation and firepower, he reduced the opportunities for Japanese forces to use close combat and boarding tactics. The Jinju curator described this as "the deliberate design of the conditions of battle." The contrast with the initial land defenses illustrates the importance of adapting the conditions of engagement.

Additionally, the First Siege of Jinju (1592) shows how defenders used terrain and available resources under extreme numerical disadvantage. Approximately four thousand Korean defenders faced twenty thousand Japanese troops. The castle's terrain restricted the approaches available to the attackers, as there was a river to the south and cliffs to the west. Advanced weapons technology, such as the pigyŏk chinch'ŏlloe (explosive shell used by the Joseon Dynasty during the late 16th century), kept attackers from reaching the walls. The defenders also, in the curator's account, "played flutes to induce homesickness among soldiers who had come a very long way from home. Small things, deliberately chosen." These measures illustrate how defenders sought advantages beyond troop numbers by combining favorable terrain, weapons, and efforts to weaken enemy morale.

By contrast, the Second Siege of Jinju (1593) demonstrates the limits of such strategies. The same castle fell when the invaders brought a force approximately five times the previous size. The curator stated that “The strategy was the same. The conditions were not. When the walls collapsed and the numbers became overwhelming, the strategy had no terrain to work with.” The two sieges show why invasion management must be understood as a conditional capacity rather than a guarantee of survival.

Ideological legitimation provided another resource for resistance. The curator described Neo-Confucian loyalty (ch’ung) as a basis for mobilization outside the central command: “Ch’ung means: if the state cannot protect the people, the people must protect the state. That belief is why ordinary scholars and farmers took up arms without waiting for a royal order.” This account suggests how an existing ethical commitment could authorize local action when the court’s ability to coordinate defense was disrupted. Loyalty alone does not explain the organization or effectiveness of such resistance, but it helps explain why the fall of Seoul did not end it. Here, adaptation involved drawing on an established tradition to sustain action under conditions of weakened central authority.

Commemorative Practice: Converting Battle into Ceremony

The experience of resisting invasion could become a resource for later generations only if it was preserved and given renewed meaning. The Korean case illustrates two channels through which this could occur: public commemorative ceremonies and historical narratives transmitted through institutions outside the state. These channels could sustain a shared understanding of resistance without necessarily preserving the military knowledge used in the original conflict.

The first is a commemorative ceremony. The Jinju Namgang Yudeung Festival is the clearest example. During the First Siege, floating lanterns on the Namgang River signaled surrounding forces for reinforcement. Today, residents float lanterns on the same river every October. The curator described the festival: “Every person who floats a lantern is re-enacting the moment when the garrison asked for help and refused to surrender. They do not need to know the history to be shaped by the practice.” In his interpretation, participation connects residents to the defenders’ experience even without detailed historical instruction. Hogsusa Temple, maintained near the museum as a memorial to those who fell in the sieges, provides another setting for remembrance. The curator described monthly visits by local high school students. The annual festival and recurring temple visits show how the conflict is incorporated into the contemporary community’s calendar.

The second method is non-state institutional memory. The Ganghwa curator Hyeonsoo Kim clarified the structure as follows: “The independence movement ran on three tracks simultaneously – nationalist organizations, Protestant churches, and schools. None of them was the colonial administration. That is why colonial education policy could not extinguish Korean identity: when the state was captured, the non-state channels operated independently.” These institutions provided settings outside the colonial administration in which Korean history and collective identification could be sustained. Their existence helps explain how the loss of sovereignty did not place every means of historical transmission under the same authority, although they remained vulnerable to colonial control and suppression.

Historian Andre Schmid's research provides a more direct connection between remembered resistance and later political action. Independence activists in the early twentieth century invoked the earlier ūbyōng tradition in interpreting and legitimizing their own resistance. Such references are significant because they show historical memory being put to political use. They need not imply that military strategies passed unchanged across three centuries. Rather, later actors could draw on earlier resistance to explain their obligations and place their actions within a longer history.

The Korean case therefore suggests that commemorative practice preserves more than information about past battles. Ceremonies give those battles a recurring presence in community life, while institutions and activists can reinterpret them as grounds for solidarity and action. The relationship to invasion management lies in this possibility of renewed mobilization, rather than in the automatic transmission of an earlier strategy.

V. TAIWAN: MEMORY FORGED BY SUPPRESION

The Dog Left and the Pig Arrived

The Taiwan interview opened with a proverb. Asked about the relationship between colonial history and present-day Taiwan, Curator Shih said, "There is a saying – gǒu qù zhū lái: 'the dog left, and the pig arrived.' The dog referred to Japan. The pig referred to the KMT. It means the thing that came after was worse than the thing that left." He continued: "Japan had been in Taiwan for fifty years. In that time, Taiwan modernized its infrastructure, education, and public health. People had adapted to Japanese administrative standards. Then in 1945, the KMT arrived from the mainland. The officials who came were corrupt. They were, by many measures, less capable than the Japanese administrators they replaced. People compared. The comparison was not flattering to the new rulers."

The proverb raises a puzzle for first-time observers of East Asian colonial memory. Why might a period of foreign domination later become a favorable point of comparison? In Shih's account, the Japanese period was not remembered simply as good but as a reference point against which KMT administration was judged. The comparison expressed disillusionment with rulers whose claim to national belonging had raised expectations that their administration failed to meet.

The comparison with Korea concerns how later experiences reshaped the memory of Japanese rule. Korea's independence movement framed colonial rule as the object of resistance, and the commemorative practices examined above preserve that emphasis on oppression and refusal. In Shih's account of Taiwan, KMT misrule altered the frame. The Japanese period became a standard against which the new rulers were measured and found lacking. These interpretations do not represent every Korean or Taiwanese experience, but they reveal how the same colonial power could occupy different positions in later narratives of belonging. In Taiwan, the comparison gave force to a particular grievance of being governed badly by a state that claimed to be one's own.

Suppression as an Inadvertent Commemorative Practice

The Taiwan case suggests that assimilation policies intended to replace a distinct Taiwanese identity with a Chinese national identity could also give people reasons to affirm their difference. As Shih put it, "They changed

the language, rewrote the curriculum, suppressed the Japanese period and the 228 Incident. But suppression is not erasure. The more they suppressed 228, the more it became who we are.”

The 228 Incident began on February 28, 1947, and the subsequent KMT suppression of the anti-government uprising killed an estimated ten to thirty thousand Taiwanese civilians. Public discussion of the violence was suppressed for four decades. Social theorist Paul Connerton provides a framework for considering how memory persists through social practices beyond official historical accounts. His approach emphasizes how communities transmit understandings of the past through commemorative ceremonies and learned bodily practices. Reading the curator’s testimony through this framework, this paper asks not only how a memory survives, but who has the authority to interpret it. In Shih’s account, suppression sharpened the distinction between the history the state authorized and the memories families regarded as their own. The KMT could dictate the textbook, but it could not fully control what families repeated privately about February 1947. Where those accounts continued to circulate despite the risks, remembering became a way of preserving experiences excluded from official history. The party-state’s attempt to control Taiwan’s remembering could therefore reinforce the divide between its version of the past and that of the people it governed.

The National Chengchi University (NCCU) survey series documents a substantial shift in identification. The proportion identifying exclusively as “Taiwanese” rose from 17.6 percent in 1992 to 61.7 percent in 2023, while exclusive “Chinese” identification fell to 2.4 percent. An essentialist reading would treat this shift as a suppressed identity resurfacing unchanged. Read alongside the curator’s account, however, the trend is consistent with a different interpretation. Remembrance sustained privately around a suppressed trauma could contribute to the formation of Taiwanese identity as changing political conditions allowed those memories to enter public life. Commemorative practice, in this reading, does more than preserve a fixed account of the past. It enables a community to interpret its experiences and claim a role in authoring its own history.

Shih described the contemporary relationship between identification and historical knowledge. “Young Taiwanese today are not particularly interested in the historical periods we curate. What they care about is their lives and their future. But they are quite clear that they are Taiwanese, not Chinese. This clarity does not require historical knowledge. It is a lived sensibility.” His observation suggests that a sense of belonging need not depend on detailed knowledge of the events associated with its formation. It does not establish that commemorative practice alone produced that identification, but it points to a distinction between remembering particular events and inhabiting a collective identity shaped partly through interpretations of the past.

The Taiwan case thus extends the framework beyond the commemoration of successful resistance. Memories of violence and exclusion could also provide grounds for identifying as a distinct community. Their political significance depended on the work of those who preserved and later publicized them, and on the changing conditions that allowed private remembrance to become part of public life.

Material Objects as Bodily Practice

The Taiwan interview introduced another form of memory transmission not illustrated in the Korean material and only partially paralleled in the Ryukyuan case: resistance to colonial authority expressed through everyday

objects. As Shih put it, “Originally, indigenous sculpture depicted their own figures and mythological scenes. After the Japanese arrived, famous carvers began carving Japanese policemen into soup bowls, into spoons. This is a way of expressing anger – taking the thing you resent and reducing it to a useful object. You use it. You control it. You make it serve you.” He described a similar logic in temple architecture, where foreign colonial figures were carved as door guardians, their power absorbed into a local religious order.

Connerton’s concept of incorporating practices helps explain how the making and use of these objects could transmit memory through craft, apprenticeship, and repeated use, without relying on documents or formal ceremonies. In Shih’s reading, using an object depicting a colonial officer reverses the relationship of authority. The figure that once commanded now serves. A child eating from such a bowl could encounter this interpretation of power without a formal history lesson. The object represents colonial domination, while the act of using it symbolically diminishes the ruler’s power.

The Ryukyuan examples also connect material objects to shared memory, but they emphasize a different relationship with the past. As Section 6 will demonstrate, the kamekōbaka tombs and the Shīmī ancestral observance affirm relationships with earlier generations and the continuity of the community. The Taiwanese carvings described by Shih express opposition more explicitly. They name an adversary and diminish it. This difference matters for the framework because bodily practices can preserve both a sense of belonging and judgments about past domination. In the Taiwanese examples, an oppositional narrative carried through everyday objects could provide material for later public commemoration as political restrictions eased. The Ryukyuan case will examine how ancestral practices sustained a distinct community after the loss of sovereign statehood.

Invasion Management Before Invasion

Taiwan’s response to the threat of invasion differs from the Korean wartime examples in an important respect. It seeks to shape the conditions of a possible future attack. The comparison therefore extends invasion management from adaptation during war to efforts to discourage an invasion before it begins.

The structural baseline is geographic, as it was for Korea. Shih stated, “If the Taiwan Strait were closed, the entire north-south maritime corridor of Asia would collapse. The United States understood this in 1950 and understands it today.” His account emphasizes the regional consequences of conflict in the strait, and relates to Maass’s arguments about strategic interests that give stronger powers reasons to support a weaker political unit’s continued existence. As with Korea’s inhuji position, however, geography helps explain outside interest without fully explaining how local actors respond to their vulnerability.

A second source of strategic value has been built through industrial development. The importance of Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) in advanced semiconductor manufacturing creates economic interests in preventing disruption to the island. The curator expressed this view directly. “Taiwan makes the chips that run everything. If Taiwan is destabilized, the world economy stops. That is our most powerful protection – not military, economic.” Technology journalist Craig Addison describes this proposed deterrent as the “silicon shield.” Taiwan’s semiconductor industry makes military strength only one part of the calculation, because an attack could damage the productive capacity an invader might hope to control. Industrial development need not

have been designed as defense policy to acquire this strategic effect. The proposed protection lies in making economic disruption a foreseeable consequence of invasion, although its deterrent value depends on whether those costs outweigh the attacker's political and security objectives. Its logic operates before an attack. The framework connects this deterrent logic to the Korean examples of terrain selection. In both cases, the weaker side's position depends partly on conditions that military superiority alone cannot resolve. The difference is timing. Korea's defenders used favorable terrain to contest an invasion already underway; Taiwan's semiconductor industry may help discourage an invasion by raising its anticipated costs.

Democratization supplies the third element, an analog of ideological legitimation. Neo-Confucian ch'ung helped authorize Korean farmers and scholars to resist without waiting for a royal order, allowing resistance to continue when central authority was disrupted. Taiwan's democratization brought a comparable shift in the basis of political authority. As political scientist and Taiwan specialist Shelley Rigger documents, direct presidential elections in 1996 marked a decisive step in placing the choice of national leadership in the electorate's hands. What could be defended was therefore more than the survival of a regime. It was the community's right to choose its own government.

As ch'ung helped justify resistance beyond the Korean court's immediate command, democratic legitimacy can provide reasons to defend a political community beyond loyalty to its current leaders. The parallel concerns the grounds for resistance, rather than a shared intention to develop a defense policy. Its relevance to deterrence lies in the possibility that resistance could continue after the defeat of the government, making an invasion harder to convert into lasting political control. Whether this prospect actually deters an attacker remains uncertain, but it shows how the basis of political authority may shape the anticipated consequences of invasion before fighting begins.

The Taiwan case therefore extends the framework from responses during invasion to preparations before it. Korea illustrates how defenders could sustain and adapt resistance after their initial defenses failed. Taiwan suggests that memories of repression can contribute to collective identification, while economic importance and democratic legitimacy may strengthen a community's position before an attack. These factors do not guarantee deterrence, but they can raise the anticipated costs of invasion and complicate the prospect of lasting political control. Invasion management, understood in this prospective sense, concerns not only how a community withstands an attack, but how it shapes the conditions under which an adversary decides whether to launch one.

VI. RYUKYU: CULTURAL CONTINUITY WITHOUT SOVEREIGN STATEHOOD

Japanese on the Outside

Naoya Oshiro, curator at the Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum in Japan, opened with a description of his own identity that illustrates how a distinct sense of belonging can persist after the loss of sovereign statehood. "I am thirty years old. I am Japanese – administratively, legally, and on the outside. But when people ask whether I am the same kind of Japanese as someone from the mainland, the answer is no. Inside, the culture is too different."

He highlighted two surviving traditions. The first was the Shīmī (Tomb-Sweeping Day) ancestral observance: "We gather at the family tomb once a year, on Okinawa's own calendar, not Japan's, and we share food with the

ancestors.” The second was the kamekōbaka (turtleback tomb) burial architecture: “Okinawa’s tombs are enormous compared to Japan’s. This is distinctly Ryukyuan. You see them everywhere.” His examples locate cultural continuity in familiar places and repeated gatherings, where relationships with earlier generations remain part of everyday communal life.

In Connerton’s terms, these traditions combine commemorative ceremonies with bodily practices. The annual gathering explicitly remembers the ancestors, while participation teaches the gestures and shared routines through which that relationship is maintained. Ryukyu therefore illustrates how commemorative practices can sustain a distinct community even without sovereign institutions. In Oshiro’s examples, remembrance centers on ancestral ties and shared belonging, without necessarily expressing a demand for separate statehood.

Literary scholar and Japan specialist Norma Field’s account of Okinawa examines tensions between local historical experience and Japanese national belonging. Oshiro’s self-description illustrates how cultural distinctiveness and membership in the Japanese state can coexist. He describes himself as Japanese in legal and administrative terms, yet culturally different from mainland Japanese. His account suggests that maintaining a distinct identity does not necessarily entail seeking a separate state. For this comparison, the significance is clear. The abolition of the Ryukyu Kingdom ended its sovereign institutions, but did not erase the community’s sense of itself.

Strategic Value and Erosion of Autonomy

Curator Oshiro described Ryukyu’s historical importance as an intermediary in regional trade. “China’s maritime prohibition policy meant Chinese merchants could not freely trade abroad. Ryukyu stepped in - we went to Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia, and China, carrying goods between all of them. We were the middlemen. That made us indispensable to everyone.” In his account, Ryukyu’s position between larger powers created opportunities rather than merely exposing it to danger. Its trading role gave other states reasons to maintain relations with the kingdom.

Oshiro then identified a turning point: “In the 1870s and 1880s, national borders began to be fixed across East Asia. Western powers were drawing lines everywhere. Suddenly, Ryukyu - which had always been ‘between’ Japan and China - became a problem. A marginal territory that everyone needed to resolve.” His description points to a change in the political significance of Ryukyu’s intermediary position. An arrangement that had accommodated overlapping relationships became increasingly difficult to sustain as states asserted more exclusive territorial claims.

While Korea’s strategic position gave outside powers reasons to oppose its absorption by a rival, Ryukyu’s position between Japan and China did not secure equivalent protection against annexation. The crucial change was not simply a loss of strategic value, but a weakening of the incentives to preserve its autonomy.

This was not merely a failure of Ryukyuan strategy, but a regional transformation that undermined the conditions under which that strategy could work. Much like the defenses at Jinju in 1593, Ryukyu’s established advantages could not ensure survival when the surrounding conditions changed.

Failed Shelter Seeking

Curator Oshiro described Ryukyu's efforts to obtain foreign protection by invoking its diplomatic relationships. He summarized the appeal in direct terms. "You made treaties with us. We are being annexed against our will. Restrain them." In his account, Japanese diplomacy undermined these efforts by persuading Western powers to prioritize their relations with Japan. The efforts by Ryukyu were cut short as "the Meiji government was a step ahead. Foreign Minister Soejima contacted the Western powers before the Ryukyuans arrived and told them: ignore them when they come. And they did. Japan was more valuable to them than Ryukyu. Even the American diplomat DeLong, who wrote to Washington that the annexation violated treaty obligations, was overruled. Future US-Japan relations took priority." The failure of these appeals illustrates the distinction between securing diplomatic recognition and obtaining protection when sovereignty is threatened.

The curator also emphasized the limits of Ryukyu's domestic preparation. "Right up to the annexation, Ryukyu's strategy was entirely external – to foreign powers. There was almost no internal reform. No attempt to build military capacity, develop industry, create the kind of domestic capacity that might have changed Japan's calculation." His interpretation identifies a reliance on external intervention that was not matched by comparable efforts to strengthen the kingdom's capacity to resist. It does not establish that reform would have prevented annexation, but it helps explain why the refusal of foreign support left Ryukyu with few alternatives.

External protection can be an important part of invasion management, but its availability depends on interests the weaker polity cannot control. The Korean and Taiwanese examples suggest how domestic military, institutional, or economic capacities can complement outside support. Ryukyu's experience shows the vulnerability of shelter-seeking when those alternatives are limited. Its diplomacy could appeal to existing relationships, but could not compel foreign powers to defend its autonomy once they judged relations with Japan more valuable.

Constraints on Public Commemoration

The ryōzoku (dual subordination system) arrangement established after 1609 required Ryukyu to accommodate Satsuma's authority while maintaining its relationship with China as a separate tributary kingdom. Oshiro described the arrangement: "The kingdom became a permanent performance. You could not know which audience you were performing for." Any attempt to hold a public commemorative ceremony expressing resistance to Japanese domination would have challenged Satsuma's authority and risked exposing the subordination that Ryukyu's diplomatic presentation to China sought to conceal. The dual-subordination system therefore constrained the development of openly anti-Japanese commemorative ceremonies. These limits should not be read as evidence that Ryukyuans lacked the will to resist. Rather, the institutional conditions made such ceremonies politically and diplomatically difficult.

Furthermore, the Battle of Okinawa (1945) destroyed much of the material heritage that had survived earlier political subordination and annexation. The Japanese military established its headquarters beneath Shuri Castle, making the site a target of American bombardment. The curator explained that "Most written records, court documents, and architectural heritage from the kingdom period were lost in 1945. We research the early period using Korean and Chinese sources, because our own records barely survived." The Chosŏn Wangjo Sillok (The

Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty), an extensive chronological collection of official Korean state records, was copied and stored across multiple repositories, helping preserve it through war and colonial rule. By contrast, the losses described by Oshiro left major gaps in Ryukyu's surviving documentary record. The destruction of Shuri Castle also removed a central physical link to the kingdom's past. Occurring decades after annexation, these losses did not cause the disappearance of the sovereign kingdom, but made it harder for later generations to reconstruct its history and sustain public remembrance.

VII. CONCLUSION: POLITICAL SURVIVAL AND COMMUNITY CONTINUITY

The Okinawa curator ended the interview with two statements that capture the distinction at the center of this paper. "The kingdom was destroyed. But the people who carried this culture are still here, still living with Ryukyuan identity," and "Our role is to send proof to the world that a kingdom existed here." The Taiwan curator expressed a related concern: "What we want to do is make Taiwan's voice heard in the world. Taiwan is a distinct society with a distinct political system, and more people should know that." Both curators seek recognition for a community whose history and identity cannot be fully understood through the claims of larger powers. Their emphasis differs, however. In these accounts, the Okinawa museum is demonstrating that a sovereign kingdom once existed. The Taiwan museum is arguing that a distinct political society currently exists and deserves recognition. One reconstructs a history of lost sovereignty; the other advocates recognition of continuing political autonomy. Both speak for living communities, but their different relationships to statehood capture the divergence this paper has examined.

On the basis of this comparison, the argument can now be restated. Political survival is shaped by three interacting factors. The first is structural. Great powers may have strategic reasons to preserve a weaker polity's autonomy, and that polity may strengthen those reasons through its own development. The second is strategic. A community's ability to adapt the conditions of confrontation can sustain resistance when its initial defenses fail or raise the anticipated costs of an attack. Such invasion management draws on inherited knowledge as well as institutional learning from failure. The third concerns remembrance. Commemorative ceremonies and embodied practices transmit experiences of conflict across generations, allowing people without direct experience of an invasion to develop a shared understanding of resistance and survival. These practices do not automatically preserve military expertise, but they can provide a sense of belonging and obligation on which later political action draws.

"What the history of invasions left us is a community consciousness – a shared knowledge that we have been here before and survived." Curator Kim's observation captures the central argument of this paper. Expertise in invasion management is not an inherent property of an ethnicity. It is an institutional achievement, developed by adapting available strategies to changing conditions and sustained through the transmission and reinterpretation of knowledge. The histories of Korea, Taiwan, and Ryukyu show how strategic opportunities, local capacities, and practices of remembrance interact, and why their combination does not always produce the same political outcome. The comparison between Taiwan and Ryukyu, in particular, demonstrates both the importance and the limits of collective memory. It can sustain a distinct community without securing sovereign statehood. Invasion management helps explain how political institutions may withstand threats, while commemorative practice helps explain how a community's sense of itself can endure even when those institutions are lost.

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