

WHITE PAPER PROJECT

We do not represent the views or positions of Big Hit Entertainment, BTS, or ARMY as a whole. All opinions and errors are our own.

ENGLISH

Last update in December 2018

 [@TeamWhitePaper](https://twitter.com/TeamWhitePaper)



ABOUT US

We are a group of ordinary BTS fans who believe in the power of knowledge and discussion.

For the past two weeks, we have spent much of our time studying, debating, writing, and debating again about the series of events we observed during the months of October and November. The fact that we hail from five different continents made us wake up to hundreds of messages every morning. But we loved it.

We are students, writers, engineers, translators, scientists, teachers, economists, artists, editors, and designers with degrees in history, literature, journalism, theology, English, Japanese, Korean, international relations, intercultural communication, chemistry, business, economics, philosophy, engineering, translation & interpretation, graphic design, and digital media.

We are Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Deist, Methodist, Catholic, and Agnostic. We speak English, Korean, Arabic, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, Russian, Portuguese, and German.

We are also diverse in age. Some of us were born earlier than Jungkook by a narrow margin and managed to obtain the noona status. Some of us get to enjoy the privilege of showing off their son's beautiful hair in our group chat.

We acknowledge that our diversity does not represent that of ARMY as a whole. It is also not our intention to represent anyone other than ourselves. We, however, hope that our collective knowledge and research, and our love for BTS and ARMY can reach and touch many people of greater diversity.



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Table of Contents

0. Authors' Note	4
1. Introduction	11
2. Overview of the Recent Events	14
2-1. Overview of the Recent Events	14
2-2. Investigation of the Claims	17
2-3. Media Coverage: Misinformation & Disinformation	32
2-3-1. Korean Media Coverage	32
2-3-2. Japanese Media Coverage	39
2-3-3. International Media Coverage	44
3. Historical Context	54
3-1. Historical Context	54
3-1-1. A Colonized Korea, Japanese Imperialism, and Post-War Relations	55
3-1-2. Politics of Memory	66
3-2. Why BTS and Why Now	74
3-2-1. Why BTS	74
3-2-2. Why Now	76
4. Fandom Response	79
5. Closing Remarks	95
6. References	100
7. Appendix	113
7-1. Big Hit's Statement	113
7-2. Korean Media Coverage	116
7-3. Recommended Resources	127



0. Authors' Note

Since publishing our white paper on November 30, we've received an incredible amount of feedback.

Some of you shared with us how much you learned while reading this. Some of you shared personal stories of how your family or your country was affected by World War II. We're so pleased we were able to shine light on blind spots for you and are honored that you shared your stories with us.

We've also received critical feedback, and we'd like to take this opportunity to address a few of the constructive comments and critiques.

Clarifying Our Aim


This project was born out of frustration.

We were frustrated by the coverage we were seeing from the international media.

When the Simon Wiesenthal Center (SWC) released its statement, that frustration morphed into the kind of anger that inspires action.

We wanted to show that there was more to the story than what was being reported. We wanted to show that the SWC's statement was problematic. We wanted to show that the skewed reporting by the media and perceptions by some members of the public erased Korean experiences of history. We wanted more of the situation to be told. We all wanted to do something.

So because of this, and because we are all fans of BTS and care about how they are perceived, we decided to work together to write this paper.




Our team aims to provide two types of explanations:

The first is regarding the misinformation and disinformation about BTS that were circulated by the media and the SWC. To do this, we outline the development of the online controversy in the media and in fandom circles; present the main narratives found in the Korean, Japanese, and international media coverage; summarize the key points of accusations made about BTS; and provide a thorough inspection into the validity of each.

The second is to do with the need for greater historical context to understand some of the Korean opinions regarding the T-shirt. Many international people looking in perceived a willful stubbornness and lack of sympathy for those who did not denounce the T-shirt outright. Often, those people were Koreans and other Asians who hail from nations who were occupied by the Japanese, and who did not always have the ability to effectively explain the reasons for their stance in English. Because of this, we wanted to help in explaining and clarifying these opinions. We do not ask you to change your opinion on the T-shirt. We simply hope that we can raise awareness of why others may have come to hold the opinion that they do. To do this, we give an overview of Korea under Japanese imperialism, as well as modern politics of memory in the region.

The best method we found to present our findings was to write a research paper with a binding narrative. We hoped it would help those in the fandom and anyone from the outside looking inwards, who had questions about the recent controversy.

That being said, we never intended this paper to be taken as a comprehensive authority that covers all the necessary factors. We do recognize, however, that many of those involved are considered influential in some fandom circles because they know Korean and translate it for a fan audience, and that that influence was easily transferred over to a project like this. We further recognize that this, on top of the structure that suggested rigorous academic research, did give a sense of weight that we apologize for. This is not a submission to a scholarly journal, nor is it a dissertation or a book. We simply wanted to provide more information and context for those who were looking for it.



Our hope is that when you, as the reader, finish this paper, you feel like you have a bit more clarity on the events that occurred, both in the past month and the past century, and that you might be inspired to learn more about the complexities that this paper has only begun to shed light on.

Clarifying Our Stances

Many people have pointed out that by virtue of being ARMYs, we are biased.

This is true.

Though we made an effort to be as objective as possible in presenting the facts, there are certain points in this paper where we do take a position.

So we'd like to take this opportunity to discuss our stances.


(1) Presenting Information

We made a conscious effort to be objective about the facts and to be critical when necessary – but because our main aim was to shed light on what was not covered by the international media at large, we often did not touch on some of the fair criticisms that were brought up in other outlets.

Additionally, we are human and we are ARMYs. Because of this, there are some points in this paper that we do feel emotional about, and others that we do want to defend. We believe these emotions are a strength, not a weakness, and that it would be disingenuous to completely censor them.

(2) The Decision to Wear the Shirt

Though we as a group generally believe that the design of the shirt is ill-advised, we differ on whether or not we believe the shirt should have been worn. We know



that there are many opinions on this topic – the hope is that we are able to explain a little more on why this is the case.

(3) The Atomic Bomb


Digging deep into a discussion of the atomic bombs is beyond our scope, and we do not aim to make any claims regarding justification, or lack thereof, for the bombings themselves.

However, we as a team agree that it was an undeniably heinous act. Not only that, we recognize that the use of nuclear weapons caused “intolerable” and “unacceptable suffering and damage” to victims of the atomic bombs that has firmly been acknowledged in the international community, as has been specified in the multilateral Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons adopted at the July 2017 United Nations Conference.¹ Authors of this paper believe that it is imperative to recognize these undue, “intolerable,” and “unacceptable” sufferings inflicted upon victims of the atomic bombs.

We also understand that to many people from the countries who were ruled by Imperial Japan, the bombings are considered to go hand-in-hand with their liberation because Japan surrendered soon after. As such, it is possible to understand the bombings as atrocities that killed thousands as well as an event closely linked with the freedom from Japanese rule soon after the catastrophe.

Taking this viewpoint into account, the mixed reactions surrounding Jimin’s T-shirt become clearer. Multiple viewpoints are possible on this issue, and we do not attempt to advocate for any specific interpretation. Some will condemn the shirt,

¹ The Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons was adopted by the United Nations Conference to negotiate a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons (by vote of 122 States in favor, with one vote against and one abstention) on July 7, 2017. It advocates for total elimination of nuclear weapons and includes a comprehensive set of prohibitions on any nuclear weapon activities. This multilateral treaty recognizes the “intolerable damage from the A-Bomb” and the “unacceptable suffering and damage” caused by the use of nuclear weapons. (United Nations Treaty Collection. (2017, July 7). Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Retrieved from <https://treaties.un.org>)



and others will approve of it. But it is also possible to both detest the bombings and understand the shirt as well as why someone from a former Japanese colony may see the two events – the bombings and their liberation – as inseparable. Showing the reasons for this viewpoint is, after all, one of our two primary concerns.

The J-ARMY Narrative

Regarding the coverage of J-ARMYs' responses in the initial version of this paper, we are very well aware that it was superficial and insufficient. Our team reached out to several Japanese-to-English translators to ask for their assistance with this project but almost everyone approached could not at the time. Many had been attacked to the point of having to choose between going on hiatus or closing their account, and others understandably wanted to remain quiet on the issue. Though we did have two volunteers with Japanese backgrounds at the outset of the project, they ultimately did not join the team.

Furthermore, linking to popular online responses is difficult for several reasons. First, it is impolite in Asian fandom circles to use or quote other people's tweets without consent for your own uses. Second, a high number of posts regarding the situation have been deleted, either due to backlash or after being proven wrong. Third, many fandom acts that were vilified or celebrated are either based on conjecture or cannot be proven to have happened by the individuals or groups suggested. However, even taking all of this into account, to not include even a cursory discussion about how J-ARMYs responded was certainly inadequate on our part. We did the best we could – unfortunately, that best was lacking.

Since the publication of the paper, we are pleased to report that several J-ARMYs have reached out to us on an individual basis, joined the team, and have contributed a section on their experience, which can be found in Section 4 of this paper.



Timing

As for the timing of this paper – we did the best we could. We had hoped to release it on November 25, but when that day came, the paper was not ready. It needed more work, so we extended our deadline to November 30. We did not want to delay its release further because in a digital world, time is of the essence.

That said, we do not believe that this paper came out too late, especially since the issue has not disappeared entirely from the media. The conversation about the shirt is still ongoing in Korea and Japan, and as the two nations battle in court over reparations decisions, the shirt is being referenced in international news articles,² and opinion pieces³ about the garment continue to be published. Though the topic isn't as loud as it once was, that does not mean that it has or will disappear for good. This is especially because the historical and sociopolitical forces that influenced this controversy will continue to exist. Therefore, we firmly believe that there is value in taking the controversy as a learning opportunity and raising awareness on why and how the controversy spread.


Tone

We also received feedback from people who found the tone of the paper off-putting, or who thought specific sections had a particularly slanted point of view. We've discussed this and agree that some sections needed work, tonally, so we've made edits throughout the paper to decrease bias when presenting pieces of evidence without changing the original perspectives of the writers.

Please also understand that because sections were written by different people with different backgrounds and specialties, sometimes the tone is more or less scholarly. For

² It has been mentioned in articles by the [Wall Street Journal article](#) and [The Washington Post](#) published on November 30 (KST).

³ An op-ed on this was published on December 2 in [Ryuku Shimpo](#).



example, the history section is more erudite than the journalism section due to the nature of the topics and the way we felt they should be addressed.

Other Changes

- Corrected small grammatical errors throughout the piece
- Added an “Authors’ Note”
- Changed the opening section name from “Preamble” to “Introduction,” changed much of the content, and included links to sources and other sections of the paper
- Restructured the paper to lead with “Investigation of the Claims” and “Media Coverage” before moving into the history section
- Removed our mention that the T-shirt was gifted by a fan because the fan has since deleted their tweet and thus there is no remaining evidence
- Restructured the way the information in the Korean media section is presented without changing any information
- Added “Final Remarks” to summarize the Japanese media reports
- Added an introduction to the Historical Context section, as well as further information in ‘Post-War Relations’ and ‘Politics of Memory’
- Added additional sources as footnotes to the history section
- Updated the conclusion for “Investigation of the Claims” to more clearly break down and rebuild some arguments
- Added a section written by J-ARMYs to the Fandom Responses in Section 4 of the paper
- Changed “Concluding Remarks” to “Closing Remarks”

1. Introduction

In mid-October, an image of BTS member Jimin surfaced online.


Taken from the YouTube Premium series *Burn the Stage*, the screenshot showed Jimin wearing a T-shirt with a depiction of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, a rendering of Korean people celebrating their liberation from Japanese occupation at the end of World War II, and the words “Patriotism,” “Our History,” “Liberation,” and “Korea” in English. The T-shirt ignited debate about the intention and the consequences of Jimin’s wearing the garment. On November 8, TV Asahi canceled BTS’ scheduled appearance on Music Station, specifying the debate around the T-shirt as the reason for cancellation. Four days later, the Simon Wiesenthal Center (SWC) issued a statement, condemning Big Hit Entertainment and BTS for “mocking the history.” On November 13, Big Hit Entertainment published a statement, which seemed to bring the fire under control.

It is no surprise that BTS’ fans, officially known as ARMYs, tracked this series of events closely. We, the team of the White Paper Project, were some of them.

In fact, we came together due to the frustrations that we shared: we were all frustrated by the online conversation surrounding the T-shirt incident, by the one-sided coverage from the international media, and by the statement released by the SWC.

We wanted to show that there was more to the story than what was being reported. We wanted to show that the skewed reporting by the media and perceptions by some members of the public erased Korean experiences of history. We wanted to show that the SWC’s statement was problematic. We wanted more of the situation to be told. We all wanted to do something.

So because of this, and because we are all fans of BTS and care about how they are perceived, we decided to work together to write this paper.




For this reason, the White Paper Project is not an expansive study of this entire issue, but one that focuses on two particular concerns that we felt had not been given a voice in the general discussion surrounding it.

The first is regarding the misinformation and disinformation about BTS that were circulated by the media and the SWC. To explain this, we outline the development of the online controversy in the media and in fandom circles; present the main narratives found in the Korean, Japanese, and international media coverage; summarize the key points of accusations made about BTS; and provide a thorough inspection into the validity of each.

The second is to do with the need for greater historical context to understand some of the Korean opinions regarding the T-shirt. Many international people looking in perceived a willful stubbornness and lack of sympathy for those who did not denounce the T-shirt outright. Often, those people were Koreans and other Asians who hail from nations occupied by the Japanese. Because of this, we wanted to help in explaining and clarifying these opinions. We do not ask you to change your opinion on the T-shirt. We simply hope that we can raise awareness of why others may have come to hold the opinion that they do. To do this, we give an overview of Korea under Japanese imperialism, as well as modern politics of memory in the region.

Once the concerns are drawn out, discussed, and evaluated, we leave you with a letter of encouragement and a call to learn more about the complexities that we have only begun to address. After all, we are more than fans or spectators of a group that exists in this environment, but citizens of a world whose perspective often seesaws on the fulcrum of online discourse. As actors in this environment, we owe it to ourselves, and to others, to be responsible with our words and educated in our discourse.

With increased fame comes increased scrutiny, and the crucible of scandal can either divide a fandom or unite it. Ultimately, it's up to each individual to decide how to approach the issue and what to take away from it; for as much as the fire of controversy can burn, it can also serve as a guiding light.



We recognize that the first release of the paper was two full weeks after Big Hit's statement. The second, another week later. However, the conversation about the shirt is still ongoing in Korea and Japan, and as the two nations battle in court over reparations decisions, the shirt is being referenced in international news articles,⁴ and opinion pieces⁵ about the garment continue to be published. Though the topic isn't as loud as it once was, that does not mean that the controversy has or will disappear for good. Certainly, the complex web of the historical and sociopolitical forces that influenced this controversy remains unresolved and continue to shape many aspects of life in the region. There is value in taking the controversy as a learning opportunity and raising awareness on why and how the controversy spread.

⁴ It has been mentioned in articles by the [Wall Street Journal article](#) and [The Washington Post](#) published on November 30 (KST).

⁵ An op-ed on this was published on December 2 in [Ryuku Shimpo](#).

2. Overview of the Recent Events

2-1. Overview of the Recent Events

In October 2018, an image of BTS member Jimin began to circulate. In the image, taken from the group's 2018 YouTube Premium series *Burn The Stage*, Jimin [wears a T-shirt](#) featuring an aerial photo of the mushroom cloud from the atomic bombing of Nagasaki on August 9, 1945. The photo is accompanied by the words “Patriotism,” “Our History,” “Liberation,” and “Korea” in English, as well as a rendering of Korean people celebrating their liberation from Japanese occupation at the end of World War II. The T-shirt was controversial and ignited debate about the propriety of the design, as well as the impact of an idol wearing it.

BTS was due to release a new Japanese album on November 7 amid soaring popularity in the country. They were also gearing up for the Japanese leg of their 2018 world tour. Several appearances on Japanese TV programs were scheduled, and there was rumor of an almost unprecedented appearance on the hugely popular year-end television program *Kōhaku Uta Gassen*.

Meanwhile, an [October 30 ruling](#) by South Korea’s Supreme Court stoked Korean-Japanese political tensions. In the ruling, Japanese steelmaker Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal Corporation was ordered to pay 100 million won⁶ each to four Korean men in compensation for forced labor rendered during WWII.

As the image was circulated and debated, the thread of the discussion was picked up by several interested parties, including Japanese and Korean nationalists, music fans, and anyone with an interest in Korea-Japan relations. The volume grew until the topic attracted the attention of the media.

⁶ The equivalent of US\$87,680.

In late October, it gained greater traction as media outlets covered the issue with varying levels of quality and integrity, often as an addendum to the larger story on the Supreme Court ruling. The new media coverage widened the audience for the discussion considerably, with English-language searches on the topic quintupling in the period spanning October 28 – November 4.⁷


While news of the controversy spread, a scheduled November 9 appearance on Japan's popular Music Station program [was canceled](#) and the rumors of a Kōhaku Uta Gassen appearance were quashed. The controversy was ostensibly the cause for both.

Jimin's intentions in wearing the shirt and his culpability versus that of his management company – Big Hit Entertainment – were as hotly debated on social media as the actions and words of fans and anti-fans during the controversy. But the discussion also quickly branched into a much wider one about the lingering wounds of WWII. As the public argued over the responsibility of government and individual actors in WWII and the consideration newer generations owe victims and survivors on both sides, other controversial images of BTS began to circulate.

[One of these images](#) showed BTS member RM wearing a hat with the logo of the Nazi SS-Totenkopfverbände, a picture taken during a 2014 photoshoot for CeCi Magazine. Others – tweeted by Big Hit in 2015 to promote a photobook – depicted [members posing](#) at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, colloquially known as the Holocaust Memorial, in Berlin. Recordings and pictures of BTS waving flags at Seo Taiji's 25th anniversary concert in September last year were also brought forward, as some felt that the logos printed on the flags were [“eerily similar to the Nazi Swastika.”](#) With the controversy at the height of its popularity, these images spread even faster than the first.

On November 12, the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center issued a [statement](#) condemning Big Hit and BTS for “mocking the past,” and demanded a formal apology be issued to victims of the atomic bombings and Japan in general. Even though the

⁷This is based on the Google Trends analysis with the search keywords “BTS,” “Jimin,” and “Shirt.”



statement was largely based on the images circulated on social media and contained factual and misinformed assertions, it was widely reported by the media.

On November 13, Big Hit Entertainment issued a formal [statement](#)⁸ that strongly refuted any affiliation with, or support for, fascist or Nazi ideology. The company also apologized to victims of the atomic bombings, to those who suffered under “totalitarian regimes,” and to “anyone who may have experienced distress and discomfort by witnessing an association of our artists with imagery reminiscent of political extremism.”

The company took responsibility for its artists’ wardrobes and promised to “carefully examine and review” such items in the future. The statement also reported that Big Hit contacted the Simon Wiesenthal Center and reached out to atomic bomb victim/survivor associations in Japan and Korea to provide apologies and explanations.

While subsequent statements by involved parties contributed further addendums and context to the controversy, the statement by Big Hit marked its zenith. Media coverage and search popularity dropped precipitously in the following weeks.⁹

⁸ We provide a detailed analysis of the statement in section 7.1.

⁹ This is based on the Google Trends analysis with the search keywords “BTS,” “Jimin,” and “Shirt” from November 5 – November 29.

2-2. Investigation of the Claims

In this section, we will outline each criticism leveraged against BTS during the controversy in question. This includes the denunciation of the group for the wearing of the offending T-shirt, as well as additional accusations of historical insensitivity from the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

We will then attempt to provide contextual information for each issue in the aim of giving readers a more nuanced understanding of these controversies.

The Simon Wiesenthal Center Statement

On the afternoon of November 11 (EST), the Simon Wiesenthal Center (SWC) released a press statement which expanded the scale of the controversy considerably. ([SWC, 2018](#) [20]). In a statement titled “Popular Korean Band Whose Japan Performance Was Cancelled For T-Shirt Mocking A-Bomb Victims, Once Posed With Nazi SS Death Head Symbols, Flew Nazi-Like Flags At Concert,” the associate dean of the center, Rabbi Abraham Cooper, stated, “...wearing a T-shirt in Japan mocking the victims of the Nagasaki A-bomb, is just the latest incident of this band mocking the past.” Referencing a hat with a historically Nazi-linked symbol a BTS member was seen wearing during a 2014 photoshoot, he stated that “the result [from wearing the hat] is that... young generations in Korea and around the world are more likely to identify bigotry and intolerance as being ‘cool’ and help erase the lessons of history... those designing and promoting this group’s career are too comfortable with denigrating the memory of the past” ([SWC, 2018](#) [20]).

The Center further claimed that the group waved flags at a concert that “were eerily similar to the Nazi swastika” and demanded that they owed “the people of Japan and the victims of the Nazism an apology,” directly citing a video thread with Japanese captions found on Twitter ([SWC, 2018](#) [20]). This video thread had been uploaded by a Japanese Twitter account by the name of “TAro”, which was created in November 2018 and

deactivated soon after the scandal faded from the international media landscape. Before it disappeared, “TARO” was following a total of nine other Twitter accounts, one of which belonged to Katsuya Takasu – a plastic surgeon, Nazi sympathizer, and denier of the Nanjing Massacre who the SWC made it their mission to see removed from the American Academy of Cosmetic Surgeons in 2017 ([SWC, 2017](#) [21]).



Figure 1. Simon Wiesenthal Center. (2017).

[Screenshots of Takasu Katsuya’s twitter account with translations].¹⁰

¹⁰ Retrieved November 8th, 2018, from <http://www.wiesenthal.com/site/apps/nlnet/content.aspx?c=lsKWLbPJLnF&b=8776547&ct=15007267¬oc=1>. Screenshot by author.

After the SWC released this statement, many international media outlets, including ABS-CBN ([ABS-CBN, 2018](#) [1]), The Sun ([du Cann, 2018](#) [5]), The Korea Times ([Lee, 2018](#) [11]), and The Guardian ([McCurry, 2018](#) [15]), picked up the story and circulated the SWC's list of accusations against BTS. However, these accusations were circulated without regard for their factual accuracy and in the absence of a more nuanced understanding of contemporary Korean-Japanese relations, a central contextual ground on which this controversy developed. In the following, we examine the factual accuracies of each of the accusations that have been made against the group over the course of this scandal and reflect on how these accusations have been received and reported on by the general media. Both BTS' past choices and the media's faulty reporting practices that we observe in detail below reveal how critical cultural sensitivity is for anyone that strives to successfully navigate global interactions today. We reflect on these lessons about cultural awareness at the end of this section.

The T-shirt



Figure 2. Allkpop. (2018).

[Screenshot of Jimin wearing the Ourhistory T-shirt and closeup of back design].¹¹

¹¹ Retrieved November 8th, 2018, from <https://www.allkpop.com/article/2018/11/designer-of-the-controversial-shirt-that-jimin-wore-speaks-up-about-the-issues-on-the-atomic-bomb-photo-and-more>. Screenshot by author.

The T-shirt was worn by Jimin while filming the YouTube Premium series Burn the Stage in the summer of 2017. According to the designer Lee Kwang-jae, the shirt's purpose was "to inform the younger generation [in Korea] of their history by incorporating it in streetwear...the inclusion of the atomic bomb image was never meant to mock victims, but rather to show the timing of the independence of Korea" ([Lew, 2018](#) [12]). The group's agency, Big Hit Entertainment, released an official statement after the media storm, stating that "the outfit had not been designed originally to injure [hurt] or make light of those affected by the use of nuclear weapons," and that the wearing of the T-shirt was "in no way intentional." The company went on to apologize for "failing to take the precautions that could have prevented the wearing of such clothing by our artist" ([Big Hit, 2018](#) [2]). Representatives of the agency also visited the Korea Atomic Bomb Victim Association at Hapcheon, South Korea, as well as the Japanese Atomic Bomb Victims Association (Nihon Hibakusha) in Japan to personally deliver an apology and hear the victims' voices and perspective on the matter of moving forward together ([Shin, 2018](#) [19]).

The Flags

The performance with the flags was not at a BTS concert; it was at Seo Taiji's 25th anniversary concert in September 2017. Just like BTS is well known for their socially conscious music, Seo Taiji is widely acclaimed to be the pioneer of producing music that criticizes governmental and social issues ([Chang, 2017](#) [4]). At the concert, BTS performed the 1995 megahit "Gyosil Idea (Classroom Idea)," dressed in school uniforms, and waved red flags as Seo Taiji sang behind a lectern with a logo.¹² Many creative elements were utilized to create a strikingly dark and oppressive atmosphere on stage with a clearly stated purpose to effectively deliver the overall message of the song ([Herman, 2017](#) [9]). "Classroom Idea" is a harsh and explicit criticism of South Korea's

¹² The costumes were not military uniforms but a creative interpretation of school uniform. It is a specific rendition of がくらん (gakuran), Japanese school uniform, which many Korean students wore until the 70s.

hierarchical and oppressive education system of the 1990s that exposes the society's pressure placed on youth to perform well academically through its lyrics (Mitchell, 2002 [17]). The original 1995 stage – the blueprint performance that became the basis of the 2017 performance featuring BTS – resonated deeply with millions of Korean youth in the 1990s as it utilized effective visual and creative elements on stage to deliver a powerful satire and commentary on the suppression of students' freedom in school ([Mendez, 2017](#) [16]).



Figure 3. Theqoo.net. (2018).

[Screenshot from [SEOTAIJI 25 TIME : TRAVELER](#) DVD].¹³

¹³ Retrieved November 29th, 2018, from <https://theqoo.net/square/920160218>




Figure 4. Theqoo.net. (2018).
[Screenshot from SEOTAIJI 25 TIME : TRAVELER DVD].¹⁴



Figure 5. Theqoo.net. (2018).
[Image of flag design used by Seo Taiji].¹⁵

¹⁴ Retrieved November 29th, 2018, from <https://theqoo.net/square/920160218>

¹⁵ Retrieved November 29th, 2018, from <https://theqoo.net/square/920160218>



The symbol on the red flag bears integrated images of a clock, a school, and school uniforms, like the ones BTS and Seo wore, in a white circular logo with a red background. The only similarity between this flag and the swastika flag used by the Nazi regime is the red background and white circle located in the center of the flag. Additionally, far from glorifying Nazism, Seo's message in the song and performance is clear: to expose all systems that suppress human freedom and fight for liberation.

It should also be noted that falsely comparing any red, black, and white logo to the swastika without sufficient evidence does great disservice to the important goal of preserving the history of the Holocaust. Jonathan Greenblatt, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League, has explicitly stated that “misplaced comparisons trivialize this unique tragedy in human history” ([Malloy, 2017](#) [14]).

The Hat

In October 2014, the Korean magazine CeCí published photos of BTS under the title “Boy, Turn Up the Music” as part of the magazine's 20th anniversary celebration issue. It was in this project that BTS' leader, RM, was photographed with a hat with a German Schutzstaffel (SS) symbol. The hat faced criticism among international fans of the group; yet, CeCí has not issued any statement to this day.

In response to the statement from the SWC that “members of the band posed for a photo shoot wearing hats with the Nazi SS Death Head logo” however, it should be noted that the overall photo shoot was in no way themed around the hat or Nazism. As mentioned, the photo spread was to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the magazine. All other photos of the band, including those with RM, do not feature the hat or any form of Nazi iconography.



Figure 6. Seoulbeats. (2014).

[Picture of Kim Nam-joon of BTS wearing hat with the insignia of the SS].¹⁶

Following the recent accusations, the photoshoot stylist Kim Wook, who is listed as the owner of the hat in the magazine, gave a phone interview in which he said, “It was not my own hat...nor was the hat one of their personal accessories. If I had to guess, I’d say that we just ended up using a product that happened to be in the studio at the time.” (Hong, 2018 [10]) While Big Hit’s official statement clarified these circumstances and their intentions, they fully accepted responsibility in “failing to strictly review the clothing and accessories [their] artists were made to wear,” and offered their “sincere apologies for inadvertently inflicting pain and distress to anyone affected by totalitarian regimes in the past... as well as to anyone who may have experienced distress and discomfort by

¹⁶ Retrieved November 29th, 2018, from <http://seoulbeats.com/2014/09/dont-need-hugo-already-boss-south-korean-nazi-chic/>.

witnessing an association of [BTS] with imagery reminiscent of political extremism” ([Big Hit, 2018](#) [2]).


The Photoshoot



Figure 7. Seoulbeats. (2015).

[Picture of BTS’s Suga and RM,
taken at the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin].¹⁷

¹⁷ Retrieved November 29th, 2018, from <http://seoulbeats.com/2015/01/bts-holocaust-memorial-im-not-letting-go/>



Though not directly included by the Simon Wiesenthal Center in its statement, older images of BTS have emerged from a photoshoot at the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. These images were taken during the summer of 2014 and were planned to be released as part of a photobook in early 2015. After preview images of the shoot were released, fans quickly identified the location and contacted Big Hit to explain the significance of the memorial in question. In response, Big Hit took down all of the related tweets and did not publish the photos in the photobook.

It is also worthwhile to note the contentious discourse surrounding the memorial itself, as there have been heavy criticisms that question the efficacy of the memorial in fulfilling its purpose to encourage solemn remembrance of Jewish victims. Amid criticisms that the site is too ambiguous and does not feature a sign that explains its intention of being a memorial ([Brody, 2012](#) [3]), German artist Shahak Shapira has created art pieces that expose how the memorial site has commonly been relegated as a backdrop for tourist photography ([Oltermann, 2017](#) [18]). In response to such wary criticisms, the memorial's architect, Peter Eisenman, has commented that "[p]eople are going to picnic in the field. Children will play tag in the field. There will be fashion models modeling there and films will be shot there. I can easily imagine some spy shoot 'em ups ending in the field. What can I say? It's not a sacred place" ([Hawley, 2005](#) [7]). These criticisms, of course, do not make holding a photoshoot there acceptable, and Big Hit did remove all photos from that site on all of its social media.

The Jacket



Figure 8. TVBS News. (2018).

[Screenshot of BTS's RM wearing a jacket with the depiction of a mushroom cloud on the back].¹⁸

Another controversial picture that accused BTS of cultural insensitivity surfaced over the course of the scandal's development showing a member of the group wearing a jacket with an image of a mushroom cloud. During BTS' 2015 "Hwa Yang Yeon Hwa" concert, a VCR film depicted RM dressed in a jacket with a mushroom cloud on the back. Due to the nature of VCRs (footage shown during concerts), the garment went unnoticed until this year. There was no apology from the group or Big Hit Entertainment regarding this specific item of clothing, and the scene is still included in the footage.


¹⁸ Retrieved November 29th, 2018, from <https://news.tvbs.com.tw/entertainment/1027810>.



Figure 9. Hypebeast. (2015).

[Promotional photo of jacket worn by BTS's RM, from the ANTIMATTER 2015 Fall/Winter "SCARED" Lookbook].¹⁹

¹⁹ Retrieved November 29th, 2018, from <https://hypebeast.com/2015/9/antimatter-2015-fall-winter-scared-lookbook>.




This jacket was from the 2015 Autumn/Winter collection of the Korean fashion brand ANTIMATTER, titled “SCARED.” The lookbook described the collection as “killing basic human instinctive fears such as the crushing defeat, the brutal war, the savage beast, the heartless god and the inevitable death” ([Fox, 2015](#) [6]). As explained in [Section 3-1-2](#), the picture of RM in the jacket was used by some Japanese media outlets – mostly right-wing ones – to show that BTS, and by extension, Big Hit, had always been callous towards atomic bomb victims. It should be noted that the brief clip only shows the top half of the jacket, not the bottom half that has the word “ANTI” written in big block letters. According to the description of the collection, the jacket is meant to portray an anti-fear of war sentiment.

A Closing Note: Reflecting on the Importance of Cultural Awareness

The series of incidents we have examined above raise a heavy question about the importance of cultural sensitivity in our increasingly globalizing world. As past choices from BTS and Big Hit came under international scrutiny, Big Hit recognized its failure to make every decision with acute cultural awareness and apologized to those whom the management inadvertently hurt as a result.

On the other hand, we saw proliferation of misinformed accusations primarily rooted in cultural insensitivity when the SWC and international media hastily labeled a wholly unique and unrelated stage performance “Nazi” without sufficient cultural and historical context. The unfortunate and disturbing blunders that we observed from all parties above raise a universal alarm and emphasize, again, the importance of cultural awareness for participants in a global world. It also shows that there is much space for everyone to learn and grow as we strive to become more aware of unfamiliar histories and cultures.




This gap in historical and cultural education is a general and widespread problem. Cultures and histories of distant geographic origins are often systematically not taught, as they ideally should be to local populations. Across many locations in East Asia, where the influence of the unique tragedy of the Holocaust has not had a strong impact on the region's culture, there has been heavy criticism that the education system fails to properly address tragedies pertaining to the Holocaust with due and appropriate emphasis.

Compounded by a lack of education on the Holocaust and the lack of emphasis on its historical significance, there is a noticeable ambivalence in the memory of the Holocaust in some Asian countries. Fashion trends that appropriate Nazi-like uniforms referred to as “Nazi chic,” or “swastikawaii” in Japan, have swept through Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Thailand, Japan, and other countries ([Hay, 2015](#) [8]). Outlets like TIME have reported on the fascination with Nazi paraphernalia and Adolf Hitler in countries like South Korea, Japan, China, and especially Thailand, where there are pubs named after Hitler and teenagers dress in Nazi-inspired clothing ([MacIntyre, 2000](#) [13]).

On the other hand, this lack of cultural competency regarding the Holocaust in East Asia can be compared to the Western public's considerable lack of awareness on the sheer scale and weight of Japanese imperialism in modern Asian history, as well as the level of wartime atrocities that occurred in the Pacific theater of the WWII.

Vastly unaware of this distant side of world history, many Western brands and the general public see no problem in fashioning the symbol of the Japanese rising sun flag, which, to many Asian countries that had once been colonized by Japan, represents a Japanese empire inseparable with the history of its brutal war crimes. Much like casual appropriation of the swastika, normalization of the rising sun flag symbol inflicts deep offense and pain to the victims of the Japanese imperial mission; but the general Western audience is usually unaware of that side of history, as Japanese imperialism had limited effects on their societies and cultures.



Moving forward, it would be productive to reflect on these realistic grounds and limitations that shape different region's experience of cultural navigation. Squarely facing the reality and recognizing one's mistake is the first step to improvement. Big Hit, for its part, has pledged to "carefully examine and review not only these issues but all activities involving Big Hit and our artists based on a firm understanding of diverse social, historical and cultural considerations to ensure that we never cause any injury pain or distress to anyone" ([Big Hit, 2018](#) [2]). The SWC has yet to acknowledge or correct its misinformed accusation regarding the flag, which itself has revealed the center's own lack of regard for cultural understanding about a unique artistic product.

2-3. Media Coverage: Misinformation & Disinformation²⁰

After a photo of Jimin in the T-shirt surfaced online in mid-October, the debate around the T-shirt was quickly picked up and spread by Korean and Japanese Internet users and media. After TV Asahi canceled BTS' appearance on Music Station over the T-shirt, international media joined the reporting race. Surprisingly (or, not so surprisingly) and interestingly, the focus of each – of Korean, Japanese, and international media – have been vastly different from each other. This inevitably made different consumers gather different understandings and interpretations of the same situation.

Do note that because of how the story was handled – and how it changed – when international media began reporting on the story, the section addressing international coverage provides both a summary of the news cycle and an analysis of it.

2-3-1. Korean Media Coverage²¹

Due to the extensive coverage this topic received in Korea, we have compiled an overview of articles from November 8, 2018 to November 19, 2018 from major news outlets with different political leanings.

Liberal/left-wing: *The Korea Times*, *JTBC*, and *Hankyoreh*

Moderate/center: *KBS*, *MBC*, *SBS*, *Yonhap News*

Conservative/right-wing: *Chosun Ilbo*, *DongA Ilbo*, and *JoongAng Ilbo*

Entertainment news outlet *Newsen* was included for its important role in reporting breaking stories and updates throughout the 12-day affair.

²⁰ Due to the large number of articles we cite and for sake of space, in this section we do not follow the citation method we adopt in the rest of the essay. All articles we directly mention or base our argument on are still hyperlinked.

²¹ A full, 11-page version of this section is available in Appendix.

On November 8, Newsen [broke](#) the story that BTS' Japanese schedule was cancelled after [questions](#) were raised when they did not show up to board the KE711 plane from Gimpo Airport to Haneda Airport on November 8 at 7:30 pm for a scheduled appearance on TV Asahi's *Music Station*. [TV Asahi](#) and [Big Hit](#) released statements confirming the postponed appearance.

[The Korea Times](#) explained that the South Korean Supreme Court's decision ordering a Japanese company to compensate workers for forced labor during wartime caused a spark that spread to popular culture and arts in "Amidst the Worsening of Korean-Japan Relations, BTS' Japanese TV Appearance Suddenly Cancelled."



Figure 10. Newsen. (n.d.). [One of the first Korean-language articles addressing the cancellation of BTS's Japan Music Bank performance: "Amidst the Worsening of Korean-Japan Relations, BTS' Japanese TV Appearance Suddenly Cancelled"].²²

²² Retrieved November 29, 2018, from <https://entertain.naver.com/read?oid=609&aid=0000013468>. Screenshot by author

The next day, [JoongAng Ilbo](#) expressed dismay at the situation, and [Newsen](#) asked why a photo of Jimin wearing a t-shirt two years ago was an issue now before [sharing](#) the t-shirt designer's creative and patriotic intent. [JTBC](#) and [KBS](#) included this during their morning news segments. [Newsen](#) then [asked](#) if Japan was politically retaliating by using BTS and Hallyu, and [DongA Ilbo](#) [revealed](#) that 6,000 comments by Japanese netizens showed BTS' immense popularity in Japan. [DongA Ilbo](#) and [Hankyoreh](#) said BTS' global popularity caused extensive international media coverage which led to the world learning about Japan's past war crimes. [KBS](#), [SBS](#), and [MBC](#) shared Japanese media (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, *Kyodo News*, and *Asahi*) reports while [The Korea Times](#) asserted that BTS proved their chart and ticket power through the Oricon chart and a sold-out dome tour.

As the situation continued to develop on November 10 (Day 3), [DongA Ilbo](#) published an article on the "strong aftermath" of the Supreme Court decision that was "hitting Hallyu." [MBC](#) and [KBS](#) continued to inform viewers with a summary of events. [Newsen](#) revealed that *Sponichi Annex* said, "BTS were in talks to appear on NHK's *Kōhaku Uta Gassen*, *FNS Music Festival*, *Music Station Super Live*, but they're no longer happening" and named Jimin's shirt as the reason for these plans falling through. According to [JoongAng Ilbo](#) on November 10, Japan's past war crimes caught the attention of the international media thanks to the help of ARMYs on Twitter. [Yonhap News](#) emphasized that *Billboard* and *CNN* wrote that history played into the cancellation of BTS' TV appearance. Korean lawmakers showed a united front in voicing their support for BTS and/or against Japan in the matter as reported by [KBS](#), *Yonhap News*, and [JoongAng Ilbo](#).

November 11 (Day 4) saw Japanese ARMYs showing [support](#) for BTS on social media despite far-right [protests](#). On November 12 (Day 5), [Chosun Ilbo](#) mentioned previously contentious times in Korean-Japan relations that led to the exclusion of Korean singers on NHK's *Kōhaku Uta Gassen*. [DongA Ilbo](#) said a far-right group's protest in front of Tokyo Dome on the first day of BTS' concert was cancelled because of ARMYs. [Hankyoreh](#) gave insight on Japan's new generation with the article, "Despite BTS' T-shirt

Controversy, Their Popularity in Japan Remains the Same. Why? Global YouTube Fans Are Different.”

On November 13 (Day 6), [Korean](#) media outlets [reported](#) on Simon Wiesenthal Center’s [statement](#) as well as ARMYs’ [explanations](#). [MBC](#), [KBS](#), [The Korea Times](#), and more touted BTS’ Oricon accomplishments despite ongoing controversies. The press extensively covered BTS’ [successful first](#) Tokyo Dome [concert](#). [Jimin’s](#) statement during the concert was printed followed by Big Hit’s official [statement](#).

On November 14 (Day 7), [Chosun Ilbo](#) wrote about pre-sale numbers for BTS’ documentary “Burn the Stage: the Movie” while the Japanese media continued to spread [negative](#) articles about K-pop. Korean singer Kim Jang-hoon also [spoke](#) up about the incident. [DongA Ilbo](#) reported on Simon Wiesenthal Center’s response “welcoming” Big Hit’s statement. BTS was [not](#) included in the final lineup for NHK’s *Kōhaku Uta Gassen*, but [TWICE](#) was. A Big Hit employee also personally [apologized](#) to the Japanese Atomic Bombs Victim Association. The [second](#) day of BTS’ Tokyo Dome concert was also a success [without](#) a protestor in [sight](#).

By November 15 (Day 8), [MBC](#) said the “anti-Korean atmosphere” had calmed down. ARMYs continued to support BTS by making [donations](#) to the House of Sharing²³ with a total of 10 million won (\$8,875) in 2018. The following day, Big Hit’s operations representative Lee Jin-hyung personally [apologized](#) to the Korean Atomic Bombs Victim Association in Hapcheon, and the association accepted the apology.

²³ The House of Sharing is a shelter for comfort women. It also holds The Museum of Sexual Slavery by Japanese Military.



Figure 11. [Big Hit Entertainment official Lee Jin-hyung (left) meets with Korean atomic bomb victims]. (2018)²⁴

[TWICE](#) became the next target by Japanese right-wing members on November 16 (Day 9), as Japanese politician Onodera Masaru shared a photo of member Dahyun wearing a Marymond T-shirt from 2017. Marymond is a company that works to promote active remembering of the Korean victims of Japanese sex slavery, colloquially known as “comfort women,” by making products in living memory of their lives and donating at least half of its profits to support surviving victims. Masaru claimed that Marymond uses its funds inappropriately for “anti-Japanese” campaign purposes and pointed out that despite this, TWICE would be appearing on *Kōhaku Uta Gassen*.

On the same day, [JoongAng Ilbo](#) reported that a Japanese far-right wing member made a bomb threat to a university in Nagoya to suspend a female college student who’s a BTS fan. Despite such incidents, the outlet emphasized that BTS’ popularity is at an all-time

²⁴ Retrieved from <https://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=102&oid=055&aid=0000689681>

high and that the group will continue its sold-out dome tour after successfully completing two nights at Tokyo Dome.

According to [The Korea Times](#), 100 ARMYs participated in donating to the House of Sharing. From November 16, donations such as \$5 and \$10 amounted to a total of around 2 million won (\$1,803). News about donations for the comfort women victims spread through BTS' Twitter community through November 17 and 18 (Day 10 and 11). A source from House of Sharing said, "It means a lot that the movement of remembering Japan's invasion and Japan's 'comfort women' issue is expanding worldwide."

[SBS](#) also reported that word about donations spread on Twitter. A fan stated, "The hearts of many fans abroad were hurt after they learned what the grandmas (victims) went through when they were teenagers. Let's help the victims and correctly learn history."

Final Remarks

As its name states, the Korean media reports its news in Korean for a Korean audience, which is already aware of – and often passionate about – their own history and contemporary international relations. [Newsen](#) was not only the first Korean outlet to break the news about the cancellation of BTS' Japanese schedule, but also the first to contextualize the situation and label the shirt: "In the background of this is Jimin's T-shirt. Jimin recently wore a Liberation Day T-shirt."

The articles that followed from other Korean media outlets also frequently called it "a Liberation Day T-shirt," rather than "an atomic bomb shirt" (though there were some [instances](#) of that), and [described](#) it as "a T-shirt that has a picture of Korean citizens celebrating liberation and a picture of an atomic bomb explosion." They highlighted the words "patriotism," "our history," "liberation," and "Korea" on the T-shirt. Some even presented it as "the T-shirt the Japanese media outlet has found a problem with,"

suggesting that the T-shirt was not necessarily a problem until the Japanese media made it out to be one.

It also gave political context for the issue, immediately referencing the October 30 [South Korean Supreme Court decision](#) and growing anti-Korean sentiments by the far-right wing. It seemed to present the shirt onto a larger scope of contemporary and historical events to diffuse the blame from BTS to other variables at work.

Some even began their articles by introducing BTS as “global idols” and concluded with mentions of BTS’ latest round of accomplishments, including a sold-out dome concert tour in Japan and Oricon daily music chart achievements. Although Korean entertainment articles usually end with a summary of the artist’s upcoming schedule it could be read as a pointed remark that BTS’ popularity is secure in this particular scenario.

When the issue gained traction in Western and Japanese media, the Korean media welcomed the coverage as more proof of BTS’ global popularity. It celebrated the number of international fans, who as a result of this issue, became more conscious of Korean history and Japan’s past war crimes – and it was perhaps too quiet on the outrage that a large number of fans felt in regards to the shirt.

Although media outlets usually differ in their tone when reporting certain topics based on their political leanings, BTS seemed to be a shining exception. Lawmakers of different parties presented a united front in condemning Japan’s far-right movements towards BTS and the Korean media outlets also largely sympathized with BTS. Throughout this incident, it was clear that being pro-BTS meant being pro-Korea in the eyes of the Korean media; the two entities seemed to be indistinguishable in the reports. BTS was Korea personified, and the Korean media rose loudly to the occasion as they took on the angle that their cultural diplomats had become tarnished by their past colonizer.

2-3-2. Japanese Media Coverage

In the first half of October, matome sites, blog sites that summarize daily posts of 5ch, the biggest Japanese online community, and other social media, began to spread information about the issue. One of the earliest Japanese articles covering the incident was published on October 18 by Myjitsu and shared on Nifty, a Japanese portal site. The article has since been taken down, but according to an archived post on [Shared News Japan](#), an online news forum, it talked about the T-shirt controversy and a rumor that BTS is almost certainly to appear on this year's *Kōhaku Uta Gassen*, an annual New Year's Eve television special produced by Japanese public broadcaster NHK.

On October 20, [the same news forum](#) posted a translation of [a Korean article](#) published on October 16, “A nation that forgets its past has no future – BTS, 6 years of solid historical awareness despite its Japanese antis.” The translated portion of the article describes different reactions of Korean and Japanese fans of the group to the controversial T-shirt and continues to talk about BTS’ past actions indicative of their solid historical awareness. Examples mentioned were V and J-Hope’s use of Marymond merchandise and RM and Jin’s tweets on National Liberation Day of Korea, celebrating the liberation and soliciting their readers to take a moment to remember those who fought and died for their independence. The comment section was filled with people suggesting to ban BTS’ appearance on *Kōhaku*, its concerts in Japan, and even its entry to Japan. [Tokyo Sports](#), citing the same Korean article, argued that BTS continue to show “anti-Japanese” behavior after the group allegedly had been confirmed to appear on *Kōhaku*.

韓国・防弾少年団（BTS）の非常識「原爆Tシャツ」 リーダーは日本批判ツイート

2018年10月26日 11時00分



韓国の人気K-POPグループ「BTS」（ロイター）

あまりに非常識！ 韓国の人気K-POPグループ「防弾少年団（BTS）」の“反日活動”が同国内で絶賛されている。韓国のネットニュースで今月中旬「『歴史を忘れた民族に未来はない』防弾少年団、反日にも6年間、堅固な歴史意識」というタイトルで、BTSのメンバーが原爆Tシャツを着ている様子を振り返るまとめ記事が掲載された。

日本のメディアや著名人も、このニュースを取り上げて批判しているが、そもそも、なぜ韓国を代表するグループが、こんな行動に出るのか。

Figure 12. Tokyo Sports. (n.d.). [Tokyo Sports article accusing BTS of anti-Japanese sentiment: “Korean Group BTS’s Senseless “Atomic Bomb Shirt”: The Leader’s Tweets Criticizing Japan, published on November 13th, 2018].²⁵

A number of internet users came together to demand cancellation of BTS’ appearance on *Kōhaku* (although nothing had been officially announced regarding the group’s appearance). The movement, which also included refusal of subscription fee payment²⁶, was immediately picked up and reported by *Asagei Plus*. On November 1, two days after the Supreme Court of South Korea’s ruling that a Japanese steel firm must compensate

²⁵ Retrieved November 29, 2018, from <https://www.tokyo-sports.co.jp/entame/entertainment/1167181/>. Screenshot by author.

²⁶ All TV owners are legally required to sign up with NHK and pay a subscription fee.

living victims of forced labor, [Tokyo Sports](#) published an article on the possibility of NHK's elimination of BTS and TWICE from the performer list of this year's *Kōhaku*.

On November 8, the day before BTS' scheduled appearance on *Music Station*, TV Asahi announced its decision to cancel the appearance due to the controversy surrounding the T-shirt. Multiple news outlets, including [Sponichi](#), reported on the cancellation, and added their prediction of the shutdown of "the third Hallyu boom" in Japan. They revisited the case of Fuji TV, which faced a huge backlash for "favoring" Korean artists and pointed to the increasing tension between the two countries. On the other hand, an article posted on [LITERA](#) offered a different angle, suggesting the true reason behind the cancellation was Netouyo²⁷'s anti-Korean sentiment and hypothesizing that the T-shirt was simply used as a scapegoat. The article also revealed that Sakurai Makoto, the former president of Zaitokukai and an ultranationalist and far-right extremist, encouraged his blog readers to "spam call" *Music Station*'s sponsor companies three days before the announcement of the cancellation.

On November 9, during the opening remarks at [a press conference](#) on the Korean Supreme Court's decision on forced labor, Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tarō Kōno, said, "Thus, despite these incidents, I would like people-to-people exchanges, exchanges between municipalities, and sports and cultural exchanges to firmly continue."

However, more rumors started to surface online, and some media outlets consequently reported them. [BuzzPlus](#) was one of the news outlets that spread unconfirmed rumors. Specifically, the outlet made a claim that the miniature airships BTS held during their launching event of LOVE MYSELF, a part of UNICEF's END VIOLENCE campaign, resemble nuclear bombs – specifically those that were used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On the same day, [Buzzfeed Japan](#) published an article to rebut the rumor and argue that misinformation is spread by online media.

²⁷ ネットウヨ; Japanese neo-nationalists who interact almost entirely within their own cyber community

In the morning of November 14, after the release of Big Hit's statement on November 13, [NHK](#) published an article with the title "An apology by the agency of BTS on wearing a mushroom cloud T-shirt." However, later in the afternoon on the same day, [Sankei](#) reported that BTS was not included in the list of performers for *Kōhaku*. Further, major news outlets such as [Tokyo Sports](#) and [Weekly Asahi](#) predicted in articles published on November 17 that BTS' future Japanese activities would be negatively affected by the recent events and that they would not be able to appear on Japanese TV this year.

On November 18, *Leave it to Atko*, an entertainment show broadcasted on TBS, narrated, "on the 13th, during the BTS Tokyo Dome Concert, Jimin apologized over the controversial T-shirt issue," then showed a clip of Jimin along with a Japanese dubbing that stated "I'm aware that I worried not only Japanese fans, but also fans all over the world," and "I'm sorry, everyone in Japan (ごめんなさい、日本の皆さん)."²⁸ [J-Cast](#) published an article on TBS' fabrication on November 20, reporting that it had inquired TBS for clarification but was told that TBS has no comment on the issue. On November 23, TBS aired a [correction and apology](#) on *N Star*, a Kantō region local news program.²⁹


Final Remarks

From the beginning, the Japanese media's focus was on BTS' appearance on *Kōhaku Uta Gassen*, an NHK year-end TV show that first aired in 1951. The program boasts great popularity, achieving 80 percent in viewership ratings.³⁰ Thus, appearances on *Kōhaku Uta Gassen* became a natural way for singers to measure their success in the Japanese music industry.

²⁸ What Jimin said during the concert is, "It saddens me to think that not only you ARMY, but many people around the world must've been surprised recently because of the many circumstances."

²⁹ *Leave it to Atko* is a nationally aired program.

³⁰ The show, however, is [not as popular](#) as before especially among younger generations.



After controversy arose surrounding the shirt, Japanese media continuously asked if BTS would still be able to appear on *Kōhaku Uta Gassen* despite the recent events. The day that the controversy reached its peak following the cancellation of BTS' scheduled appearance on *Music Station* also happened to be the day NHK announced their lineup for the 2018 *Kōhaku Uta Gassen*. Although it was unclear if BTS' appearance on the year-end show was actually confirmed prior to the controversy, the internet was flooded with Japanese articles with headlines such as “BTS Eliminated” and “BTS Not Included in Lineup” as if their appearance on *Kōhaku Uta Gassen* was canceled as a result of the controversy. There were very [few](#) articles about the atomic bombing, recognition of the victims, or actions to be made going forward.

In online forums, netizens debated about BTS' past actions, such as celebrating National Liberation Day and showing support for companies linked to helping comfort women survivors. Many people felt that these kinds of actions were the result of South Korea's anti-Japanese education. There were also those who felt that it was absolutely unacceptable to have people with this kind of education and thoughts coming to Japan and earning money. A vicious cycle then ensued, wherein many outlets continued to produce articles based on online rumors and speculations, and these kinds of reports were then spread further through social media.

It is worth noting the Japanese media's tendency to generalize the T-shirt issue as a problem solely related to Koreans, Korean education, or Korean culture as a whole. There were reports that predicted a halt in Hallyu after the T-shirt issue and [Korean Supreme Court's ruling](#) on forced laborers. Similar to how the Korean media portrayed BTS as the symbol of Korea, the Japanese media, too, presented BTS as national representatives of Korea rather than a boy group.

2-3-3. International Media Coverage³¹

Though it took weeks for the rest of the world to become involved in the debate Korea and Japan were having over an idol's T-shirt, once they did, the conversation quickly escalated.

The Article Read Around the World

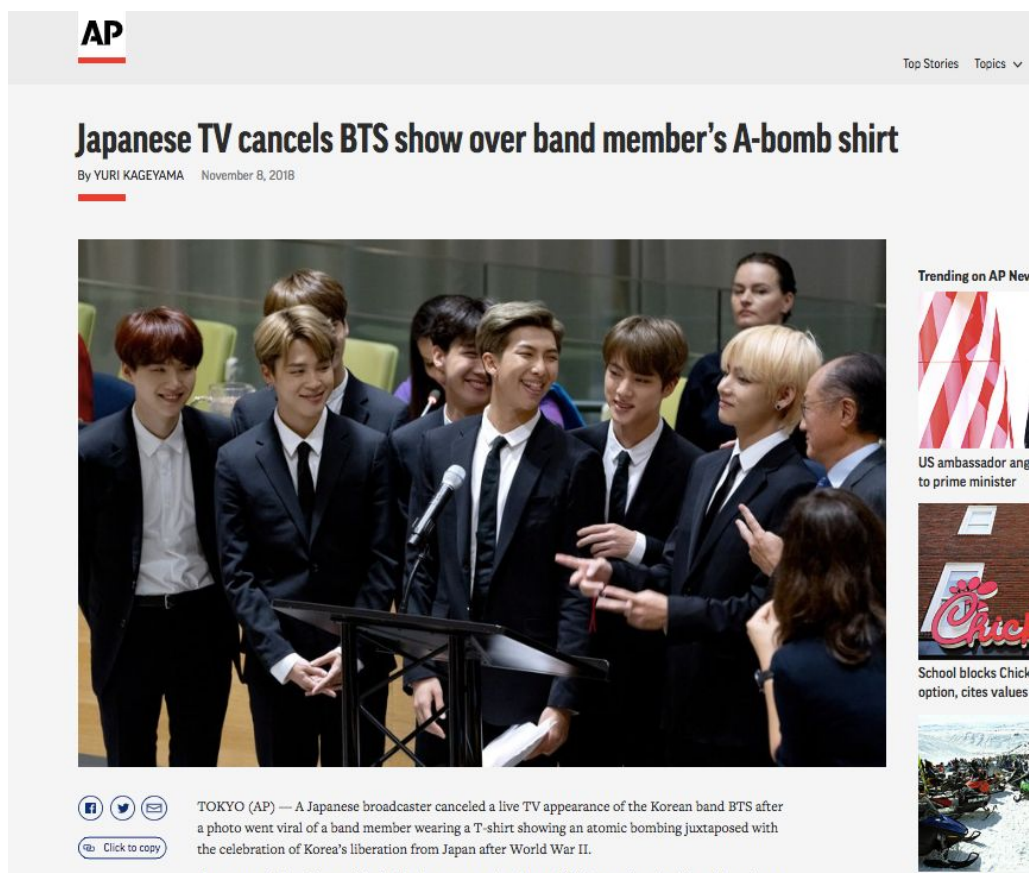


Figure 13. Associated Press. (n.d.). [Associated Press initial article on shirt controversy, published on November 13th, 2018].³²

³¹ As mentioned in the media section's introduction, the international media subsection is different from the others because the way the story was handled – and how it changed – when international media began reporting on it requires not just a summary, but analysis.

³² Retrieved November 8th, 2018, from <https://apnews.com/81bfc490e29d46fda0e61495bf29fb38>. Screenshot by author.

Global coverage began on November 9, when news agency³³ *Associated Press* (AP) published [an article](#) about TV Asahi's cancellation of BTS' *Music Station* performance due to a controversy over the T-shirt. Other news agencies³⁴ also put out similar stories on the same day, which ensured that coverage would be international. This is due to how news agencies operate: media outlets ranging from newspapers with global readership to those that cater to small towns subscribe to a news agency's service and receive stories on a variety of topics and then usually reprint them verbatim. These word-for-word transmissions only offer basic facts and little context. For this particular story, context about Japan's 20th century occupation of Korea (see [Section 3-1-1](#).) and how the effects of that oppression impact the present-day diplomatic relationship between Japan and South Korea is crucial for a balanced reading.

Unfortunately, thorough context was not provided by news agencies. Instead, the only angle of the story provided in English to the international media was the Japanese interpretation of the shirt. It should be noted here that the story AP reported originated from the [statement released by Music Station](#). This statement informed its audience that the BTS performance was canceled because of the debate surrounding the T-shirt, which in turn validated the online interpretations of the-shirt that originated from predominantly right-wing Japanese online forums.³⁵ Because of this, the story was already objectively compromised, even when the facts as they were presented by *Music Station* were reported accurately by news agency reporters.

Thus, the news agency articles that followed propagated the idea that the shirt seemed to be celebrating the bombing of Nagasaki, which in Western society is widely considered an atrocity. However, it can be argued that this view of the event is [an opinion](#) that ignores the Korean – and wider Asian-Pacific – WWII narrative, and that frames Japan as a victim of war, rather than as an aggressor. Due to this, the majority of

³³ AP is a news agency. News agencies have offices and reporters around the world, and provide international news coverage to their subscribers: other news sources.

³⁴ The other news agencies were [Reuters](#), Agence France-Presse, and [Bloomberg](#), to be specific.

³⁵ Though the shirt has been a topic of discussion online for months, it flared up in mid-October when it was posted to Pann – a Korean forum – and then spread to right-wing Japanese forums.

articles discussed the Japanese reaction to the shirt from a Western point of view, but did not address how the garment was being interpreted by people in Korea and of the Korean diaspora.

But even if each of the more than 100 articles had all been thoroughly researched and carefully reported with a full representation of the complex topic, there is no guarantee that the general public would have read them – and that very much has to do with the headlines that were crafted for these articles.

Getting the All-Important Click

Since the advent of newspapers, [headlines](#) have been used to grab the reader's attention, appeal to their curiosity, and entice them to pay to read the story. Though journalism has evolved significantly from the era of newsboys barking headlines, the same basic principle is still at play when it comes to headline writing.

But in this era of online publications and social media, headlines are often the only part of an article that people read. In fact, a 2016 study conducted by [HAL-Inria](#) found that 59% of people who shared articles via social media did not read past the headline. So copy editors creating headlines have a very important job, because they aren't just working to command attention in order to make their publication money anymore; they are shaping the landscape of online discourse.

In this case, the very nature of the story – the cancellation of a beloved Korean music group's much-anticipated performance on a Japanese music show because of a T-shirt with an image of an atomic bomb – provided a perfect storm of words that lead to headlines that were textbook attention grabbers:

“Japanese TV cancels BTS show over band member’s A-bomb shirt” – [The Associated Press](#)

“Pop Band BTS Is Dropped From Japanese TV Show Over T-Shirt” – [New York Times](#)

“Japan TV cancels show of K-pop's BTS over atom bomb t-shirt furor³⁶” – [Reuters](#)

“BTS performance axed by Japanese TV show over atomic bomb T-shirt” – [The Guardian](#)

These examples are indicative of how the majority of news outlets fashioned their headlines, which include enough vague information to pique interest, while also ensuring solid [search engine optimization](#).³⁷ These factors made it possible for people to feel as if they knew what was happening, even if they did not actually read the article.

And thus the story – or, at least, the one told by the headlines – spread.

However, these articles came out on the Friday before a public holiday in the United States, and throughout the three-day weekend, the story seemed to be losing momentum outside of Korea and Japan.

But then, an unexpected statement changed the course of the conversation and spurred a whole new wave of disinformation-laden international news coverage.

SWC Intervenes, and the Narrative Takes a Turn

On Monday, November 12 (KST), the Simon Wiesenthal Center (SWC) [released a statement](#) that denounced BTS, stating that the group had an established pattern of

³⁶ Though this word is a relevant choice, it is hard to ignore its phonetic similarity to the German word “führer.”

³⁷ Search engine optimization is the practice of crafting headlines that are similar to how people search for information online in order to maximize website traffic.

promoting Nazism. Furthermore, they demanded the members of the group apologize to Japan and to victims of the atomic bombings.³⁸



Figure 14. Simon Wiesenthal Center. (n.d.). [Simon Wiesenthal Center statement on BTS, published on November 11th, 2018].³⁹

With this rebuke, the SWC pivoted the international conversation⁴⁰ from a young man's ill-advised wardrobe choice to an internationally renowned Korean music group repeatedly and flagrantly displaying WWII imagery.

The statement was particularly newsworthy because it introduced "new" evidence: a 2014 photograph of RM wearing a hat emblazoned with the Nazi Death's Head Unit logo,

³⁸ It's notable that the SWC is located in California and that their statement was released on the Sunday (PST) ahead of a U.S. public holiday (read: slow news days).

³⁹ Retrieved November 8th, 2018, from <http://www.wiesenthal.com/site/apps/nlnet/content.aspx?c=lsKWLbPJLnF&b=8776547&ct=15022213>. Screenshot by author.

⁴⁰ These images cited by the SWC were being discussed together in Japan, though.

and concert footage⁴¹ of BTS carrying flags with a design the SWC deemed similar to a swastika. Despite the facts that claim about the flags was not just misleading, but incorrect, and that the statement based its claims on a Twitter thread with Japanese captions posted by an account that had been created just weeks before the controversy caught international attention, news outlets ran stories quoting a rabbi's scurrilous allegations without fully investigating the validity of these claims. This in turn led to a news cycle filled with the disinformation the SWC introduced.

Big Hit Attempts to Reclaim the Narrative, With Limited Success

Big Hit [released a statement](#) addressing the allegations on Tuesday, November 13 (KST). This set off another round of international media coverage, including more articles from news agencies.⁴² In addition to the statement, Big Hit also sent a private letter to the SWC.

Between the statement and the letter, Big Hit thoroughly debunked the SWC's claim about the flags and explained why it was inappropriate to allege Nazi association given the different social and lyrical contexts. Even so, the Jewish organization still did not acknowledge that their claim was inaccurate. Their [public response](#) to both Big Hit's statement and the separate letter stated:

"The Simon Wiesenthal Center today welcomed an apology from Korean pop group BTS' management for incidents – a band member wearing a hat emblazoned with the Nazi SS "Totenkopf" emblem, another member wearing a t-shirt with pictures of the WWII atomic bombs, and the band performing in costumes resembling SS uniforms and flying Nazi-like

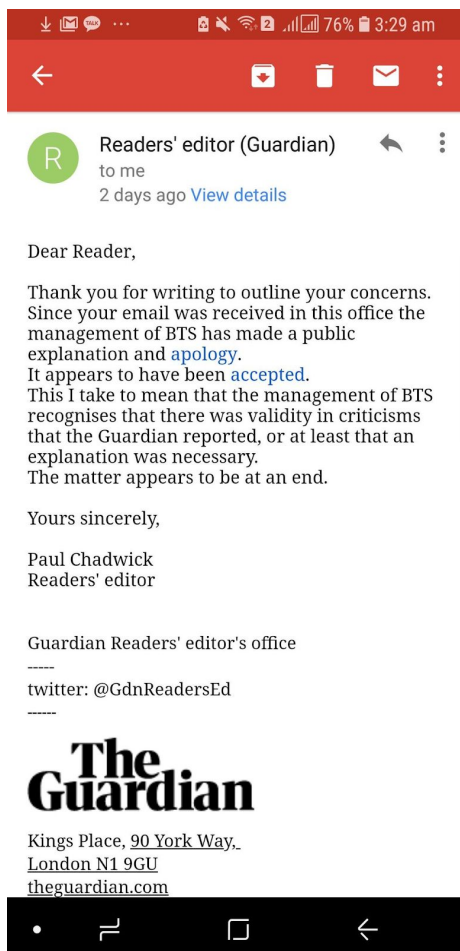
⁴¹ The statement made it seem as if the flags were used at a BTS concert, but it was actually the Seo Taiji 25th Anniversary Concert BTS performed in in 2017.

⁴² AP, Agence France-Presse, and Bloomberg all published stories, while Reuters did not.

flags...”

As such, the SWC conclusively lumped all allegations together and released a final statement void of the same type of reflection and apology they demanded from BTS. Many people following the story found the response to be purposefully misleading and disturbing, especially considering the SWC’s reputation as a well-known humanitarian organization that international journalists regard as a newsworthy source.

In another example of a reputable organization refusing to admit their factual errors, *The Guardian*’s Readers’ Editor, Paul Chadwick, responded to ARMYs’⁴³ request for a factual clarification regarding their report on the Nazi flag accusation, which was included in Justin McCurry’s November 12 [article](#):



“Thank you for writing to outline your concerns.

Since your email was received in this office the management of BTS has made a public explanation and [apology](#).

It appears to have been [accepted](#).

This I take to mean that the management of BTS recognises that there was validity in criticisms that the Guardian reported, or at least that an explanation was necessary.

The matter appears to be at an end.

Yours sincerely,

Paul Chadwick

Readers' editor

Guardian Readers' editor's office

⁴³ @4oclock_bts, who worked on this project, provided a screenshot of the email.

twitter: @GdnReadersEd”

Chadwick provided no link to Big Hit’s official statement of clarification in his email and instead cited the SWC’s purposefully misleading response, one which failed to acknowledge its own factual inaccuracies regarding the flag accusation, as reason not to correct the article. The editor’s overall response is even more confounding given that the second link provided by him – an article by [The Korea Times](#) – actually quotes Big Hit’s explanation on the inappropriateness of the flag accusation:

“Regarding the controversial stage performance, the company explained it was during a 2017 concert commemorating the legendary Korean musician Seo Taiji where the band performed ‘Gyosil Idea’ (classroom ideology).

The flags and images were created to carry the message of criticism against restrictively uniform and authoritarian educational systems, but had no relation with Nazism, said the agency. ‘In fact the performance includes creative elements that are designed to direct criticism against these very elements of totalitarianism,’ read the [statement](#).”

It’s unclear whether Big Hit’s clarification on the matter bypassed Chadwick or if it was not considered significant enough to warrant a factual correction in *The Guardian*. Whatever the case, both the SWC and a number of international news outlets⁴⁴ have yet to publicly acknowledge the factual inaccuracy of their misinformed accusation and reporting regarding the flag.

⁴⁴ See, out of many, reports from [ABS-CBN](#), *The Sun* ([du Cann, 2018](#)), *The Korea Times* ([Lee, 2018](#)), and *The Guardian* ([McCurry, 2018](#)) for international reports spreading SWC’s claims on Nazi flag accusation without due process of factual verification.

Context Too Late

The [first article](#)⁴⁵ covering Big Hit's statement and the SWC's response was released by the *Associated Press* on November 15, accompanied by the headline "BTS's agency apologizes for atom-bomb shirt, Nazi-emblem hat," and the majority of the headlines were framed in a similar fashion. There were headlines that took a harsher tone, such as "[BTS: Korean band's managers apologise over Nazi photos](#)," as well as more diplomatic headlines, such as, "[BTS's management issue apology for band's controversial clothes](#)" – but, ultimately, the general consensus was that Big Hit had apologized for their wrongdoings.

It should be mentioned that *AP* updated their article on this issue: [the first version](#) included one of the harshest quotes from the SWC's response, but shortly after it went live, the article [was updated](#) to remove the quote, add information about how Korean politicians were responding to the matter, and provide details of the Japanese leg of BTS' tour.

Indeed, this round of coverage saw much more historical and political context woven into articles, addressing at least some of the political reasons why the image of Jimin wearing the shirt – which was worn more than a year before becoming a topic of controversy – had been unearthed and spread at the time that it was. But, the headlines undermined the contextual background provided in the full text and contributed to the spread of a reductive narrative. The opportunity to educate readers about the truly complex, nuanced story playing out in real time was ultimately lost.

⁴⁵ AP does not cache previous versions of their articles, so it is impossible to link back to the original version. The link included here is to a source that published the first version of the AP story– link provided by @msbeatrice_81.

Final Remarks

As the week of November 12 came to a close, it saw [opinion](#) pieces, [think](#) pieces, and [in-depth explorations](#) about why a T-shirt created such a uproar.

But the global release of *Burn the Stage: the Movie*, a documentary about BTS, on November 15 and the debut of the music video for Steve Aoki and BTS’ “Waste It On Me,” on November 20 brought coverage of [the box office results](#) and [the response to the music video](#). By November 21, the international conversation had largely moved away from a T-shirt and on to other topics.

That said, as news surrounding [the recent reparations decisions](#) made by the Supreme Court of South Korea are being discussed, it is likely the T-shirt will continue to be referenced as evidence of the two countries’ fraught relations. Indeed, it was mentioned in articles by the [Wall Street Journal](#) and [The Washington Post](#) published on November 30 (KST), as well as in an opinion piece in [Ryuku Shimpo](#) published on December 2 (KST) and a [Vox article](#) about K-pop and fashion, published on December 4 (KST).

3. Historical Context

3-1. Historical Context

Introduction

As the saying goes, there are multiple sides to every story. Yet, as in the case of the recent events regarding the controversy and the following international coverage of the events, the told story may not always be a balanced one, given that different agendas, biases, and knowledge bases can produce vastly differing narratives. Such discrepancies in narratives can affect the way the general public consumes, responds, or acts on the given information.

Construction of history works much in the same way. While absolute objectivity is idealized in history, historical narratives are by definition constructions inevitably subject to differing interpretations and selections of facts. Historical narratives are often far from absolutely objective, as different peoples bring in different memories and interpretations of historical events for different reasons.

The layered relationship between Korea and Japan is a prime example of multiple historical narratives at work. It is our belief that the international media and public response largely neglected or misconstrued the Korean perspective, and that Japan's past imperial ambitions in Korea must be understood in order to contextualize these recent events and geopolitical tensions.

The scope of this section thus outlines Korean history from 1900 to the present with a strong emphasis on its history of colonization. It will also briefly refer to Japanese colonial rule in China and Southeast Asia, as it provides some global context and understanding of the far-reaching scale and legacies of Japanese imperialism. For those who are

interested in this topic and would like to know more, we have compiled a [Recommended Resources section](#) that can serve as a starting point.

3-1-1. A Colonized Korea, Japanese Imperialism, and Post-War Relations

Before 1910: Pre-Colonization

The Korean peninsula has historically been a region at the center of many territorial disputes, as it is located in a geographically advantageous position for countries like Japan, China, and Russia. From the late 1800s to the early 1900s, Japan and Russia battled for control over the Korean peninsula. The 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War resulted in Russia's defeat and consequently led to the signing of the 1905 Treaty of Portsmouth. This treaty made Korea a Japanese protectorate, granting Japan explicit governance over Korea in addition to other regions such as Manchuria and Liaotung. The Treaty of Portsmouth marked the end of Korean autonomy and sovereignty and handed over the Korean peninsula to external forces ([Treaty of Portsmouth](#), 1905 [6]).

But it was not until August 22, 1910 that Korea was officially annexed as a colony under the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty. Thus began a tumultuous 35 years of colonization under Japanese rule.

1910–1919: Military Rule

The first decade of colonization is characterized as a period of military rule due to “the heavy hand of [colonial] control and oppression,” (Hwang, 2017 [9]). During this time, the Japanese aimed to eliminate resistance movements in order to preserve a stronghold over the Korean peninsula (Hwang, 2017 [9]). The basic rights of Koreans – press, education, and assembly – were suppressed as part of this effort. Military rule was

enforced through significant Japanese military and civilian police presence, which was met with a rise of resistance forces.

Despite these resistance efforts, Korean independence was elusive because Western powers supported Japan in pursuit of their own geostrategic interests ([National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, 2018](#) [15]). Even during the Paris Peace Conference, an event that saw Western nations champion self-determination (Manela, 2017 [16]), those nations did not support this cardinal principle for countries outside of Europe. The belief was that self-determination belonged to the “civilized” people of Europe, not to those of Asia and Africa (Manela, 2017 [16]).

1919-1931: The Effects of the March 1 Movement and Cultural Rule

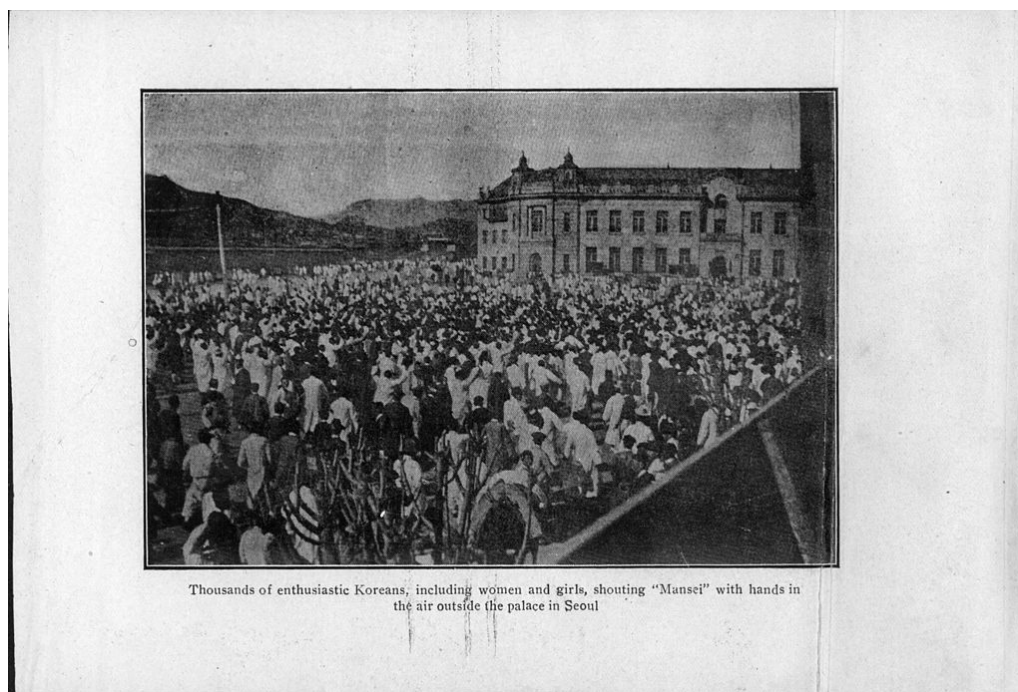



Figure 15. Thousands of enthusiastic Koreans, including women and girls, shouting "Mansei" with hands in the air outside the palace in Seoul. [Digital image]. (n.d.).⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Retrieved from <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/>.



On March 1, 1919, thousands of Koreans gathered in Seoul's Pagoda Park and made a public declaration of independence against the Japanese Imperial government⁴⁷. While the exact demographics of what is known as the March 1st Movement are still contested, it is said that of the estimated 500,000–1,000,000 participants, up to 7,000 individuals were killed, 1,400 injured, and over 14,000 arrested (Baldwin 1969, [3]).

In light of this resistance, the Japanese government relaxed some of its policies in order to assuage the rebellion of Korean civilians. Previously, newspapers were forbidden, but the Japanese government gave Korean newspapers permission to publish under strict oversight from 1920 to 1931, releasing a limited level of political tension. In addition to policy changes, it should also be noted that this period saw significant infrastructural growth marked by material progress with new construction of roads, railroads, schools, and non-agrarian industry (Hwang, 2017 [9]).

Overarching reform programs instituted by Saito Makoto, the newly instated Japanese Governor-General at the time, “[combined] a discrete strengthening of bureaucratic and police forces with an outwardly more benign governing approach that allowed Koreans to pursue social, economic, and cultural activities more freely” (Hwang, 2017 [9]). These reforms created division amongst Koreans by co-opting them into the colonial system. Resistance groups that existed from the beginning of Japanese colonization were pitted against their own countrymen, who promoted joining the Japanese empire.

1931–1945: Wartime Mobilization and Cultural Assimilation

Despite the loosening of regulations in response to the March 1st Movement, Japan regressed to an even harsher system during the 1930s as it engaged in more militarized

⁴⁷ Hyun, Soon. “Declaration of Independence: English Translation ” Texts. East Asian Library, University of Southern California, March 1, 1919. Korean American Digital Archive. <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15799coll126/id/14680>. This is an original copy of the English translation of the Declaration of Independence that was read in Pagoda Park in 1919.

conflict with China and entered WWII. Japan aligned itself with Nazi Germany and together they formed the Axis Alliance.

For Koreans, Japan's wartime activities not only stripped them of their unique ethnic identity, but also exploited and brutalized them (Hwang, 2017 [9]). In an attempt to control Korea and stifle their independence movements, Japan instituted a "cultural genocide" known as 내선일체 (*naeseonilchae*, "Korea and Japan are one entity") ([The Cyber University of Korea](#), 2016, 17:37 [21]; Eckert, Lee, Lew, Robinson, & Wagner, 1990 [5]). The Japanese government intended to erase Korean national identity by forcing Koreans to assimilate by taking on Japanese customs such as participating in Shinto ceremonies (Japan's native religion) and taking Japanese names. The Korean language was banned from secondary schools in 1938 and from primary schools in 1943, and Japanese language instruction was enforced ([The Cyber University of Korea](#), 2016 [21]; Eckert, et al., 1990 [5]).

Japan's manpower shortage resulted in forced labor and the conscription of Koreans, who were brought to Japan at the beginning of 1938. By the end of the war, 360,000 Korean men had been conscripted into the Japanese army. Roughly half of the conscripted Korean soldiers died, and around a total of 6 million Koreans were mobilized for Japan's war efforts ([The Cyber University of Korea](#), 2016, [21]). Korean laborers led difficult lives with little food, no pay, and slim chances of survival (Hwang, 2017 [9]). It should also be critically noted that of the estimated 100,000 total Korean victims of atomic bomb,⁴⁸ thousands were firstly victims of slave labor, having been forcibly taken from Korea to Hiroshima and Nagasaki to work at Japanese shipyards and factories, before they became victims of nuclear weapons ([Lee, 2018](#) [14]; [English translation](#)).

However, it was not just men who faced exploitation – Korean women and girls ranging in age from 12 to 40 were forced into prostitution, serving as "comfort women" for

⁴⁸ 100,000 Korean victims of atomic bomb encompass those who died instantly with the nuclear catastrophe as well as survivors, whose lives have been impacted by the bombs, and second-generation victims of nuclear radiation health effects. Other sources identify that immediate and instant Korean casualties are estimated to be between 40,000 and 50,000. See [Choe](#) and [Taylor](#) for more information.

Japanese soldiers. Many were “lured with promises of economic opportunity, while others were kidnapped or otherwise coerced”; survivors only began to “gradually [come] forward with wrenching accounts of their ordeals” in the 1990s (Hwang, 2017 [9]). An estimated 100,000–200,000 Korean women were victims of rape and abuse at the hands of Japanese soldiers ([The Cyber University of Korea](#), 2016, [21]).

The Japanese Empire Outside Korea

Japanese imperialism extended to include parts of China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Myanmar and the Philippines, among others, all of which were subjected to suffering.

Japan’s brutal and well-known use of forced labor in the construction of the Burma-Thai Railway aptly captures the far-reaching extent of their imperial endeavors. The Burma-Thai Railway construction began in 1942 to link the railway networks of the two countries (Kratoska, 2005 [13]). In this project – the largest construction project during the Japanese empire – more than 180,000 laborers (numbers are disputed depending on source) made up of people from Malaysia, Burma (now Myanmar), Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam as well as European prisoners of war (POWs), were brought in to work on constructing the railway. A majority of European POWs died in 1942, thus Asian laborers were brought in in mid-1943. Many of these Asian laborers then deserted or died due to a cholera epidemic (Kratoska, 2005 [13]).

Japanese exploitation of sex slavery also extended beyond the scope of Korea, as women from many countries across the Asia-Pacific region were forcibly abducted and exploited. Colloquially referred to as “comfort women,” majority of the victims of Japanese military sex slavery were from Korea, but there were also many who hailed from Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia ([Amnesty Report, 2005](#) [2]). While the victims often were disguised as volunteer workers or nurses to work at stations euphemistically referred to as “comfort stations” in Japanese military

camps across its empire, it was found after the end of the war that these “comfort stations” were in fact brothels serving the Japanese army by providing them the “comfort” of forced sex (Kratoska, 2005 [13]).

Even after the end of the war, victims of Japanese sexual slavery testify that the dark memories of their reality during wartime continue to haunt them. Lola Piding, a Filipina survivor of sexual slavery, recounts the difficulty she had in trusting her husband years after the war:

“My thoughts were very painful, I could not express what happened to me, I’d been a virgin...It took me three years to consent to sleep with my husband, I buried everything and tried to forget. When I saw men in uniform I’d panic and get scared.” ([Amnesty Report, 2005](#) [2])



Figure 16. Lemon, A. (n.d.). Chinese and Malayan girls forcibly taken from Penang by the Japanese to work as 'comfort girls' for the troops [Digital image].⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Retrieved from <http://media.iwm.org.uk>.

While there are many other harrowing accounts of Japanese colonization from other areas that experienced Japanese imperialism, due to the scope of this paper we can primarily address Korean experiences. However, we have gathered a host of [Recommended Resources](#) that can serve as a starting point should you want to learn more about this topic.


Liberation and the End of Japanese Colonization

Despite the efforts of independence fighters who worked outside of Korea⁵⁰ to organize resistance efforts,⁵¹ Korean nationals were ultimately unable to secure independence by themselves without external intervention.

The August 6, 1945 atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki helped lead to Japan's admission of defeat during WWII as Japan could not recuperate after the devastating consequences and casualties of the bombs. This in turn initiated independence for many countries under Japanese colonial rule, who celebrate their independence days in August and September – including Korea, which celebrates on August 15. Celebrations of liberation and a return to autonomy serves as the focus of independence days for countries that experienced long lasting colonization, which for some were only possible because of Japan's defeat in the war. Meanwhile, August 6 is a day of mourning and

⁵⁰ Korean Economic Society. Correspondence. “고려경제사 - Koryo Kyongjesa. 1944-1945.” Correspondence, December 1944. Korean American Digital Archive. <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15799coll126/id/3675>. “Necessary that the Korean people show – through practical demonstration and future planning – their capacity to administer freedom and independence.”

⁵¹ “Gov't Designates 669 Korean Independence Movement Sites Overseas.” *YON - Yonhap News Agency of Korea*, May 10, 2005. *General OneFile* (accessed November 29, 2018). http://link.galegroup.com.ezproxy.neu.edu/apps/doc/A132280483/ITOF?u=mlin_b_northeast&sid=ITOF&xid=322c2126. “South Korea has designated a total of 669 places overseas as historical sites linked to the movement for Korea's independence from Japan's colonial rule in the early part of the last century... Monuments and memorials have been set up in many of the sites, mostly in China, Russia and the United States... The government will establish a committee aimed at protecting the historical sites”



commemoration in Japan; it is also remembered solemnly around the world as a day when many lives were lost.

To provide context, in March 1945, the firebombing of Tokyo had already killed approximately 100,000 people, and the subsequent atomic bombs in August killed nearly 200,000 in Hiroshima and 70,000 in Nagasaki (Schirokauer & Clark, 293 [18]; [Hall](#) [8]). Many were injured or forever sickened by the radiation poisoning. The bombings have been controversial since 1946, when the U.S. released its post-war report, which concluded Japan would have likely surrendered without the atomic bombs or a land invasion (“[United States Strategic Bombing Survey](#)” [25]). Many scholars on World War II have also taken this stand, but there are some who still advocate for the necessity of the bombs.

After Japan surrendered, the sudden power vacuum created by Japanese withdrawal in Korea allowed other powers to intercede in Korean affairs. The 38th parallel was drawn up to divide the North and South at the end of WWII, leaving the North under Soviet Union influence and the South under U.S. influence. Even though the Korean War of 1950–1953 attempted to dissolve the divide, the war ended in a ceasefire and the division between North and South has yet to change.



Figure 17. Hyun, I. (1945). People Rejoicing the Moment of Liberation [Digital image].

South Korea and Japan's Post-War Relations

In 1965, South Korea and Japan signed a treaty to normalize their diplomatic relations in pursuit of their “mutual welfare and common interests” ([Article IV: Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea, 1965](#) [22]). The treaty established South Korea’s government as the only lawful government in Korea and voided any agreements made between Korea and Japan prior to 1910.

A separate agreement was signed to settle issues of “property of the two countries and their nationals and claims between the two countries and their nationals,” and was meant to terminate all settlement issues related to the colonial period. Both countries agreed that Japan would provide Korea with \$200 million in loans and \$300 million in grants to be used in such a way that the money would be “conductive to the economic development of the Republic of Korea.” The agreement also arranged for the transfer of

technology and investment opportunities ([Article I: Agreement on the Settlement of Problems Concerning Property and Claims, 1966](#) [24]).

In 1996, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights released a special report regarding the comfort women of WWII. The report called the phenomenon a “clear case of sexual slavery,” clarified that the 1965 treaty was not “concerned with human rights violations in general or military sexual slavery in particular,” and thereby explicitly established that individual claims against Japan were not covered under the 1965 agreement ([United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 1996](#) [23]). Additionally, the report recommended that Japan accept its legal responsibility towards reparations for “comfort women,” pay restitution directly to victims, and raise awareness via its education system as possible methods for fully atoning for its crimes ([United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 1996](#) [23]).

Much later, in 2015, Japan and Korea appeared to have solved the issue of comfort women for good with a new agreement that required Japan to pay roughly \$8.3 million USD to support survivors. Korea was to “consider the matter resolved ‘finally and irreversibly’ if Japan fulfills its promises” ([BBC News, 2015](#) [10]).

However, many former comfort women were unsatisfied with this agreement, as it was established without consulting any survivors. Not only that, it failed to provide direct compensation to individuals and did not require Japan to take legal responsibility. Lee Yong-soo, a former comfort woman, stated, “I wonder whether the talks took place with the victims really in mind.” ([BBC News, 2015](#) [10]).




Figure 18. Young-joon, A. (2015). SOUTH KOREA US JAPAN COMFORT WOMEN

[Former comfort women who were forced to serve for the Japanese troops as a sexual slave during World War II shout slogans during a rally against a visit by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the United States, in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, South Korea].⁵²

Despite the supposed finality of the 2015 pact, disagreements over the comfort women issue continued to pop up. In a speech made on the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe avoided using vocabulary that explicitly addressed reparations and averted any direct acknowledgement of comfort women or forced laborers. Although it is apparent that he refers to comfort women when he talks about “women behind the battlefield,” there is no acknowledgement that these women were coerced and forced into their “work” (Abe, 2015 [1]).

⁵² Retrieved from <http://www.apimages.com>.




This statement was widely criticized by Asian media as being indirect and avoidant. What's more, Abe's ill-defined speech was a departure from former Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama's 1995 address on the 50th anniversary of the war's end, in which Murayama explicitly apologized for Japan's colonial rule and aggression. Japan's unclear and changing views on whether or not they forcefully coerced comfort women and laborers into their fates is reflective of the variety in Japanese sentiment regarding the degree of responsibility that they hold in their victims' suffering ([Mizoguchi, 1993 \[17\]](#); [Joyce, 2007 \[11\]](#)).

In January 2018, it was reported that Moon Jae-in's administration decided not to alter the 2015 agreement despite speculations ([Tatsumi, 2018 \[19\]](#)). However, after the recent escalation in tensions due to the Supreme Court ruling on forced labor, the Korean government decided to end the foundation set up by the 2015 agreement. The decision comes partially as a result of public and survivor backlash over the deal, which many felt did not hold Japan fully accountable for its crimes ([Kim, 2018 \[12\]](#)). The fund has not been officially closed, but the Korean government is preparing to take legal action to do so – a move that has angered the Japanese administration ([Haas, 2018 \[7\]](#)).

3-1-2. Politics of Memory

By beginning to understand different perspectives of history, we come to a deeper recognition of how different narratives are used by different groups in power, as in the case of conflicting Japanese and Korean historical narratives. These disputes of historical interpretation, also known as “politics of memory,” continue to shape many contemporary geopolitical conflicts we observe in the region today.

Gi-wook Shin, professor of sociology and director of the Asia-Pacific Research Center at Stanford University, succinctly summarizes this ongoing tension fraught by politics of memory in East Asia:



Divided memories of war and colonialism create serious perception gaps and misgivings, hindering historical reconciliation. Consequently, an important first step toward reconciliation is to identify and understand the key factors that influence the formation of historical memory in each nation and to recognize the different weight of these factors. Koreans and Chinese, for example, need to know how and why the victim identity of conservative Japanese elites (unlike their German counterparts) came about and how it has posed a chief obstacle to Japan's reconciliation with its Asian neighbors. Likewise, Japan must become cognizant of just how central the historical legacy of its aggression has been in shaping the collective identities of Chinese and Koreans ([Shin, 2015](#) [9]).


As Shin aptly notes, a mutual understanding between countries in conflict is crucial in moving towards reconciliation. However, in order for there to be a mutual understanding, each country's different interpretation of their shared history must first be known. Seeing that the Japanese perspective has been shared considerably in the international community from this incident, and recognizing the comparative lack of awareness of the Korean side, this section aims to shed light on the less known side of the Korean-Japan historical relationship from the Korean perspective.

We sincerely hope that it can contribute to the achievement of a common understanding and movement towards reconciliation.

Historical Revisionism and Western Accountability

In the eyes of many Korean people, Japan has yet to offer a satisfactory apology⁵³ – one which keeps actions consistent with verbal proposals.

⁵³ As represented in [The Korea Herald](#), [The Diplomat](#), and [The New York Times](#). This [Huffington Post article](#) gets to the root of what a satisfactory apology from Japan should do.



Despite the international acknowledgment (as examined in the previous section with the 1996 UNHRC special report) of outstanding Japanese responsibility and demand that Japan abide by international humanitarian law, Japan continues to insist⁵⁴ that the 1965 treaty terminated all possibilities for future claims to be raised by individuals against Japan or its private companies, rejecting all demands for compensation.⁵⁵ Further, Japanese textbooks to this day severely gloss over the history of Japanese aggression during WWII and fail to sufficiently address the war crimes of its imperial past, contributing significantly to what many criticize as Japanese historical revisionism ([Oki, 2013](#) [6]).

Active denial of the realities of sexual exploitation and forced labor during Japan's occupation of Korea continues to this very day. As recently as November 29, 2018 *Japan's Times* published an Editor's note that actively revised its use of terms "forced labor" and "comfort women" in line with the current government's conservative agenda; in full, it stated:

"In the past, The Japan Times has used terms that could have been potentially misleading. The term 'forced labor' has been used to refer to laborers who were recruited before and during World War II to work for Japanese companies. However, because the conditions they worked under or how these workers were recruited varied, we will henceforth refer to them as 'wartime laborers.' Similarly, 'comfort women' have been referred to as 'women who were forced to provide sex for Japanese troops before and during World War II.' Because the experiences of comfort women in different areas throughout the course of the war varied widely, from today, we will refer to 'comfort women' as 'women who

⁵⁴ Japan consistently points to the 1965 treaty in response to Korean complaints surrounding comfort women, atomic bomb victims, and forced labor. See [The Washington Post](#), [CNBC](#), and [Yonhap](#) for examples.

⁵⁵ Though the Japanese government did not enact the suggestions as made by the United Nations, it did make an attempt with the Asian Women's Fund, established in 1994. The fund was private and contained donations from the Japanese public as well as government money. The AWF met criticism from many as it was viewed as a way for Japan to evade legal responsibility. For more information, please see "[Japan's Responsibility Toward Comfort Women Survivors](#)" by the Japan Policy Research Institute.

worked in wartime brothels, including those who did so against their will, to provide sex to Japanese soldiers” ([Japan Times](#), 2018 [11]).

Such an unabashed effort to revise Japan’s history rightfully instigated a truly global outrage, with critics denouncing that “it is a very frightening and troubling development... a classic [history] denier move” attempting to rewrite Japan’s wartime history and that Japan’s media is bowing down to pressure from right wing politicians ([Romo, 2018](#) [8]; [McCurry, 2018](#) [5]; [South China Morning Post, 2018](#) [2]).

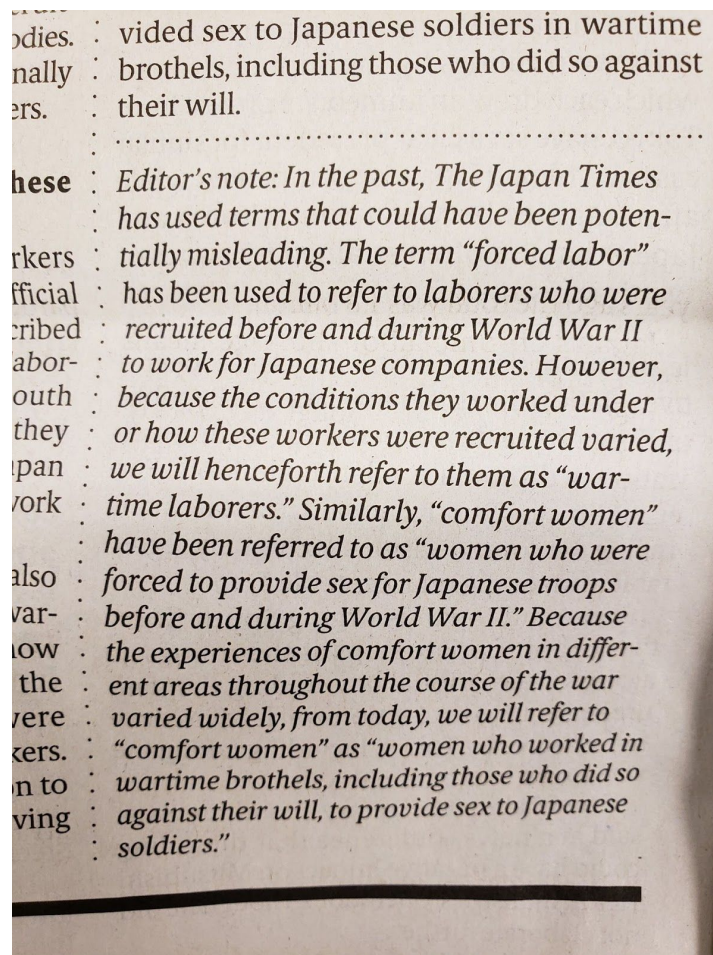


Figure 19. The Japan Times. (November 29, 2018).

[Editor’s note that redefines terms from Japan’s WWII history, causing deep concern and outrage amongst historians and activists globally.]⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Retrieved December 5, 2018, from <http://twitter.com>

Post-war Japanese effort to revise its wartime history is not a recent phenomenon.

On the June 14, 2007 issue of *The Washington Post*, a paid advertisement titled “[The Facts](#)” was published by a group of Japanese conservatives called the “Committee for Historical Facts.” The ad categorically denied that the Japanese government had any involvement in forcing women to perform sexual labor for the Japanese military and argued that any women who did perform such acts did so as voluntary prostitutes (Soh, 2008 [10]).

This advertisement was an attempt to lobby against Japanese progressives who urged that Japan “embrace ... the globalizing human rights culture and their active advocacy for the comfort women” and dissuade U.S. House of Representatives from adopting a resolution “calling on Japan to formally apologize and take responsibility unequivocally for its wartime sex slavery (Soh, 2008 [10]). A revised version of the advertisement, “[Yes, We Remember the Facts](#),” was published in 2012 in *The Star Ledger*. Shinzo Abe, the current Prime Minister of Japan, was one of the many prominent political leaders who co-signed the advertisement published in 2012, the year he took office.

Such denial of responsibility extends consistently in Japan’s dealing with the issue of its wartime forced labor. On this issue, a comparison between German and Japanese confrontation of the dark sides of their histories demonstrates a stark difference.

While both Germany and Japan utilized forced labor for private corporations , with Japan’s use of foreign slave labor exceeding that of Nazi Germany by far, Germany has shown significant effort to take accountability and work towards reconciliation.⁵⁷ Germany has made wartime records public and its government and private firms – including Siemens, Krupp, and Daimler-Benz – have long paid individual survivors and organizations that aided them.

⁵⁷254 Quoting Haberstroh: “Chinese scholars estimate that Japan made use of fifteen million forced laborers in occupied China during the war, nine million in Manchuria alone. By and large, Japan’s large corporations were fully aware of and actively encouraged the Japanese army as it seized workers for Japanese mines and factories in Manchuria.”

In comparison, to this day both the Japanese government and its private corporations refuse to make direct payments to forced labor victims, despite the moral and legal pressure they face internationally⁵⁸ (Haberstroh, 2003 [4]).

Mitsubishi, for instance, exploited not only thousands of Korean slave laborers, but also hundreds of British, Dutch, Australian, and American prisoners of war at shipyards, coal mines, and many factories in Nagasaki. While the corporation has publicly apologized for its use of POW labor at many sites, it has yet to apologize to those POWs at countless other sites (including the Nagasaki shipbuilding complex), let alone acknowledge Korean victims of forced labor. (Palmer, 2015 [7]).

Meanwhile, many Western nations – and the U.S. in particular – are gravely responsible for the pivotal role they played in setting up the initial Japanese path for historical revisionism during its military occupation of Japan and South Korea that started at the end of WWII.

The Allied occupation of Japan actively worked to protect the Japanese Imperial family from facing war crime responsibilities at the 1946 Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal under U.S. American General Douglas MacArthur's leadership.⁵⁹ As the most powerful

⁵⁸ Haberstroh, John. (2003). In re: World War II Era Japanese Forced Labor Litigation and Obstacles to International Human Rights Claim in U.S. Courts. Asian Law Journal. Vol. 10. No. 253. Retrieved from <https://heinonline.org> pp. 254-257. A committee in the International Labor Organization investigated WWII-era forced labor in Japan. It found that 17.5 percent of the 39,935 Chinese taken to work in Japan had died by war's end; he adds that no reliable death figure exists for the Korean labors; For Japan's refusal to release documents about its forced labor and its systematic destruction of WWII documents, See the [Japan Times](#) article: "The only reason we now know in detail about the Chinese forced laborers is because the only one of the many meticulous wartime reports on the subject not to suffer destruction at war's end accidentally fell into the hands of the Taiwan authorities and could not be denied." The Japanese government insists that its records estimate only 110,000 Korean forced laborers. However, research suggests a staggering estimate of between four and six million Koreans slave laborers used by Japan, with 725,000 Koreans worked in mines and construction sites in Japan. For estimates on Japanese forced labor, see Macintyre, Donald. (1996, November 15). WWII: Imperial Japan on Trial. Asiaweek; Leicester, John. (2000, August 24). Chinese Forced Laborers Are Suing Japanese Firms for Compensation. Seattle Times.

⁵⁹ Dower, J. W. (1999). Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II. W.W. Norton & CoPrint. Dower emphasizes the unparalleled level of total power that MacArthur wielded during the so-called Allied occupation. While technically, allied nations were to have a considerable level of consultative status in Japanese occupation, in reality the occupation operated in strict hierarchical structures that placed almost


decision-maker in Japan's occupation, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, MacArthur single-handedly insisted that exonerating the imperial family and thereby gaining the support of the Imperial House of Japan serve the best strategic interests of U.S. and Allied occupation, as it would provide them with political stability and necessary support. Thus, MacArthur's subordinates went to extraordinary lengths "to attribute ultimate responsibility for Pearl Harbor to Hideki Tojo," the Prime Minister of Japan for the duration of the war, by orchestrating each criminal's testimonies months before the Tokyo Tribunal commenced. on grounds that total exoneration of the imperial family was necessary to maintain political stability and historical continuity in Japan. As a result, Japanese Emperor Hirohito was never charged with war crimes and was instead "turned into an almost saintly figure who did not...bear moral responsibility for the war" (Dower, 2016 [1]).



Figure 20. View of the Tribunal in session: The bench of judges is on the right, the defendants on the left, and the prosecutors in the back [Digital image]. (1945).⁶⁰

total decision making power on MacArthur. As a result, historians analyze that U.S. occupation laid the foundations for post-war Japan.

⁶⁰ Retrieved from <http://www.tante2.com/>.



Needless to say, such U.S. policies had an indisputable impact on how Japanese people themselves would come to understand their past as well as the present: if the commander in chief of Japan's imperial forces himself was not guilty, how could ordinary Japanese people wrap their heads around their share of collective and individual guilt and responsibility? As Dower put it, "Emperor Hirohito became postwar Japan's preeminent symbol, and facilitator, of non-responsibility and non-accountability" (Dower, 1999 [1]). U.S. military occupation's role in enabling Japan's historical revisionism simply cannot be denied, as the choices made by the U.S. essentially laid the foundations for the construction of post-war Japanese identity (Gady, 2015 [3]).

The historical revisionism spearheaded by the United States paved the way for Japan to continue denying the impact of its imperialist past on the rest of Asia. This selective memorialization continues to haunt political relations between Japan and its neighbors, as the country continues to show resistance towards addressing its past war crimes, complicating issues of sex slavery, forced labor, reconciliation, and compensation.

Many other nations with histories of colonial activity have made substantial efforts to right historical wrongs and educate their citizens on past transgressions. Japan, however, has taken no such consistent actions to show its sincere regret for the violence it inflicted towards South Korea and other Asia-Pacific countries under its empire, as it continues to revise its wartime history.

3-2. Why BTS and Why Now

3-2-1. Why BTS

While an argument can be made for the presence of Japanese Koreaphiles since the colonial rule of Korea, contemporary interest in Korean cultural imports can largely be traced back to the box office success of Kang Je-kyu's 1999 film *Shiri*, paired with the subsequent popularity of NHK-aired Korean drama *Winter Sonata* (Atkins, 2010 [1]). With *Shiri* seen by 1.2 million Japanese theatergoers and *Winter Sonata* finding strong public support, particularly from older Japanese women (Shim, 2008 [7]; Michel, 2011 [4]), Hallyu (a neologism meaning “Korean wave,” which refers to the spread of Korean entertainment throughout the world) was born in Japan.

Increasing popularity of Korean cultural imports in Japan was the impetus for a 2011 demonstration, during which more than 2,000 people gathered in Tokyo's Fuji TV headquarters to protest the network's airing of Korean dramas. Espousing “anti-Hallyu sentiment” spurred by what Yoon called “a sense of crisis among certain Japanese entertainers who have been losing ground, coupled with interest from Japan’s ultra-nationalists who criticize Korea” (Yoon, 2011 [9]). This demonstration and others of its kind did impede Hallyu in Japan until the overwhelming popularity of third-generation idols, including BTS and girl group TWICE, reignited Hallyu interest. However, anti-Korean sentiments in Japan again flared over the Korean Supreme Court's recent decision regarding compensation for forced labor victims of wartime Imperial Japan. (Min, 2018 [5]). With rising tension, the backlash came against the only Korean musicians to sell more than 500,000 albums in Japan the previous year: BTS.



Figure 21. [Taken on Aug. 22, 2011, the top photo shows right-wing activists staging a rally to denounce Japan's Fuji TV for airing Korean entertainment shows and dramas.].
(2011).⁶¹

BTS is not the first group to become ensnared in scandals in Japan when diplomatic tensions are high, though most other notable scandals have involved entertainers who verbally expressed support for Korea's territorial claims to the Liancourt Rocks.⁶² Korean actor Bae Yong-joon drew the ire of Japanese media outlets, who demanded the actor be banned from any money-making activities in Japan, after declaring the disputed islets Korean territory in 2005 (Park, 2013 [6]). Actress Kim Tae-hee voiced support for Korea on this issue in 2012, then suffered the loss of a commercial appearance for a Japanese cosmetics company (Lee, 2012 [3]). Similarly, a 2012 Independence Day swim from mainland Korea to the Liancourt Rocks by singer Kim Jang-hoon and actor Song Il-gook to show support for Korea's territorial claims spurred Japanese broadcasters to put off

⁶¹ Retrieved from <http://koreatimes.co.kr>.

⁶² The Liancourt Rocks are a group of small islands in the East Sea (Sea of Japan) and are in dispute between South Korea – with North Korea also claiming the islands – and Japan. These islands are referred as “Dokdo” in Korean and “Takeshima” in Japanese. Whilst referred as a “colonial name” used “by various Western explorers and colonial writers”, “Liancourt Rocks” is still the most neutral term used in the issue and the one chosen for this paper’s purpose (Van Dyke, 2007 [8])

airing dramas in which Song played a leading role. Choi Si-won of Korean idol group Super Junior encountered controversy after being accused of retweeting a message from Korea's presidential office that read, "Dokdo is our true territory and it is a place of value that must be protected with our lives. Let's protect it with pride – at Dokdo" (Kim, 2012 [2]). In each of these cases, controversies could be directly attributed to a public assertion of support for Korea's claim, either verbally or via social media.

3-2-2. Why Now

To many fans, the backlash against Jimin and his wearing of the shirt in question (and the subsequent resurfacing of other various issues) appeared at first to have come out of nowhere. However, the timing of this issue and its spread across various media outlets in Japan, Korea, and the world, was not a coincidence.

Prior to the first international news stories about BTS and the shirt, the Korean Supreme Court passed an important ruling on October 30 that set a domino effect in motion. The court ruled that Japanese company Nippon Steel and Sumimoto Metal Corp must pay 100 million won⁶³ to each of the four South Korean men who were forced laborers during WWII. However, due to the Japanese government's penchant for censoring its imperial history, the response from Japanese officials was indignant.

In 1965, Japan paid a settlement of \$300 million in grants and \$200 million in loans to repair South Korea's economy, absolving them of any further restitution for damage done during colonial rule ([United Nations Treaty Collection, 1966](#) [8]). However, up until 1991, when Kim Hak-soon (a former comfort woman) demanded restitution for her suffering, even Japan's government had acknowledged that the settlement did not prevent any individual citizens from making settlement claims ([Lee and Lee, 2016](#) [5]). When Kim came forward with her story, Japan refused to compensate her, citing the 1965 agreement ([Memory Reconciliation in the Asia-Pacific](#) [6]). With Korea's most recent

⁶³The equivalent of US\$87,680

Supreme Court decision, the ruling was upheld that the 1965 agreement did not absolve Japan of any illicit activities, and individuals can still make claims. Since the courts ruled in favor of the Korean forced labor victims, the door is wide open for similar cases to be made against the Japanese government (Kim, 2018 [3]).



Figure 22. Young-joon, A. (2018).

[People forced to work on behalf of Japan's World War II efforts rallied outside the Supreme Court in Seoul, South Korea, on Thursday.].⁶⁴

But what does this have to do with BTS? As it happens, Jimin wore the shirt in the YouTube Premium series *Burn the Stage*, which ran from March 28, 2018 to May 9, 2018. The footage was shot as BTS embarked on their “2017 BTS Live Trilogy Episode III: The Wings Tour,” which took place in cities across the globe from February to December

⁶⁴ Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com>.

2017. Despite the episode in which Jimin wears the shirt airing in early 2018, the media did not pick up the issue until October 2018 – six months after the episode aired and approximately a year and a half after Jimin wore the shirt. This large gap between the actual incident and the media coverage is suspect given that the scale the story reached caused some to dig up. On the day of the Supreme Court ruling in South Korea, a Japanese newspaper published a piece titled “A past points of contention to exacerbate the situation even further.

On the day of the Supreme Court ruling in South Korea, a Japanese newspaper published a piece titled “A spark from the forced labor problem! From NHK's *Kōhaku Uta Gassen* to Hallyu expulsion... TWICE and BTS are out?,” feeding into far-right wing anxiety over Korean cultural influences in Japan ([Tokyo Sports, 2018](#) [7]). The import of Korean culture into Japan has been a point of contention for years ([Gibson, 2018](#) [2]), and the photos of Jimin wearing the shirt made their way across forums in Japan, causing outrage and action. Japanese right-wing threats, protests, and pressure on the media coupled with the government’s desire to erase imperial history and war crimes contributed to the cancellation of BTS’ performance on *Music Station* during this turbulent time.

Following Korea’s Supreme Court ruling, on October 31, a district of Daegu that was set to create sister city ties with the Gifu prefecture in Japan was notified that the plan had been canceled due to the Korean Supreme Court’s ruling. The Suseong-gu office in Daegu noted that the “decision is of both the local and central government” of Japan. Additionally, Japanese Prime Minister Abe did not send a congratulatory message to the Shitennoji-Wasso Festival, an annual cultural event that celebrates the close ties of Osaka and Korea since the sixth century and highlights how Korean culture was brought to Japan. This festival had received congratulatory messages from Japan’s Prime Minister and Korea’s President each year since 2004, but this year, only South Korean President Moon sent a message ([Cho, 2018](#) [1]; [Lee, 2018](#) [4]).

4. Fandom Response

In this section, we look at some of the loudest responses of K-ARMYs, I-ARMYs, and J-ARMYs surrounding the media storm surrounding Jimin and the T-shirt on social media. We have worked to contextualize the responses from K-ARMY, J-ARMY, and I-ARMY so that people from any background can better understand how these groups generally reacted.

Evaluating a T-shirt

K-pop fans in Korea have established a distinct culture over the past couple of decades, and international fans have adapted such mindsets and customs in their own ways. As one might imagine, the cultural disparity has resulted in the divergence of responses among Korean BTS fans (“K-ARMYs”), Japanese BTS fans (“J-ARMYs”), and international BTS fans (“I-ARMYs”), as we could observe at each turn of events as the controversy unfolded.

When the screenshots of the shirt surfaced in October, the initial response from many K-ARMYs was to ignore it. They felt there was no need to bring attention to it and that doing so would only subject them to trolls and antis in an age of relentless online harassment and fandom politics. Some would merely say this is ignoring a non-issue; others, a case of sweeping it under the rug.

Indeed, international fans of K-pop are increasingly convinced that censorship of Korean news material occurs at every stage: from Korean fans, from fan translators, and even from the most protective of international fans who often ignore criticism or brand it as unfair, even when it is constructive or valid.

While there can certainly be selective bias at play in order for fans to focus on the positive aspects of their idols, such dismissive remarks reflect a lack of knowledge about

the constant barrage of articles by Korean media and forum groups that fans sift through on a daily basis.

For example, while there are many well-established news sources that report on entertainment news, a vast array of “articles” are from forums where fans primarily post and comment (Nate PANN, theqoo, instiz, etc.), or from “news” media (Insight, WikiTree, e.g.) that draw their unsubstantiated material from social media. Thus, articles translated by English online outlets such as *Soompi* or *Allkpop*, and by fans of varying language skill, are *always* selective in nature, whether it be by degree of circulation or by what catches personal interest.

In this case, several factors prompted many fans to see the initial coverage as a non-issue in the beginning: the T-shirt had not been worn recently, the news had not been picked up by many outlets, and the story, such as it was, was unworthy of more than a few lines when first being noticed. Some Korean fans may have even recognized that if international fans caught wind of the articles, the conversation would quickly get ugly due to the nature of the issue, and they kept it quiet for that reason. So it was considered a non-issue – or at least by those who had the liberty of making a decision, it was kept as a non-issue.

However, two unexpected interventions soon drastically changed how this controversy was perceived. First, it was covered by English online outlets that focus on Asian news such as [Sang \(2018\)](#) [6], giving it a wider viewership. Second, comments from Japanese forums that negatively referenced BTS and this shirt were translated into English and posted on general K-pop forums, which meant that the story first gained greater traction internationally from outside of the BTS fandom.

Because of this, news rife with misinformation and disinformation spread in a skewed manner. Much disgust was expressed in regards to what had already been deemed an “atomic bomb T-shirt.” I-ARMYs began to rally in panic. Some encouraged one another to

“clear Jimin’s searches,⁶⁵” while others wrote passionate defenses on the shirt. Those who desired to place it in a wider political context were largely considered illogical.


Of course, whether the shirt and the wearing of it warranted the controversy was also a point of contention. The average international onlooker or fan who sought to understand the issue was particularly concerned by two points: First, why was there a seemingly stubborn sentiment from Korean fans that refused to be apologetic, pressured Big Hit Entertainment not to cede in this matter, and made it an issue of nationalistic pride? Second, why did it seem like there was a lack of remorse about the T-shirt in some circles?

K-ARMYs Responses and Frustrations: To Clarify and Defend

When the news of *Music Station*’s abrupt cancellation of BTS’ appearance was released, it sparked outrage among K-ARMYs. Not only was the last-minute cancellation perceived as disrespectful to BTS and the Big Hit staff, but the show’s reason – Jimin’s wearing of a T-shirt with an image of an atomic bomb mushroom cloud – seemed to reflect that TV Asahi was making a political move directed by the Japanese government, and was also legitimizing a campaign led by Japanese ultranationalists.

Many K-ARMYs wanted to clarify that the message of the shirt celebrates the liberation of Korea, not the atomic bomb itself, and that, in fact, the depiction of the atomic bomb was merely an image to convey the sequence of events that were instrumental in leading to liberation. Calling the shirt an “atomic bomb shirt” (“원폭티”) rather than “liberation shirt” (“광복티”) was a sticking point, as they believed the moniker framed the issue in such a way that the entire message of the shirt was twisted to be either celebrating the atomic bomb or mocking its victims.

⁶⁵ A process where fans search positive words along with “Jimin” in order to try and change the automated suggestions that pop up when someone types “Jimin” into a search bar.



To those fans with a strong sense of national pride, though, BTS had become martyrs standing up for their country, voicing themselves against Japan. In fact, the shirt in question was celebrated by many as an appropriately firm declaration of patriotism. The shirt even sold out online ([yckim214, 2018](#) [7]), but much of the support for the label was retracted once they felt that the merchant was taking advantage of the situation.

Further, fans with this particular view did not think an apology from Big Hit or BTS was due in any sense. They not only perceived the imagery of the shirt to merely be a factual depiction of historical events that led to the liberation of Korea, but also believed that it was preposterous to say that the victims of decades of atrocities perpetrated by Japan cannot celebrate the demise of their aggressors in the war. Some also argued that there was no reason to apologize for such a trivial matter when the Japanese government refuses to take an apologetic stance toward the victims of its war crimes.

Even fans who did believe that the design of the shirt was in poor taste were ambivalent about whether an apology was in order, as there was nothing desirable about giving the right-wing movement in Japan any validation, and because an apology could be misconstrued and misrepresented as a national apology from Korea to Japan.

Though not a majority opinion, it should be noted that there were wary Korean voices amid the louder currents that emphasized the need to depoliticize this issue and look at it from a humanitarian angle. This line of thinking argued that the image of the atomic bomb, regardless of the T-shirt's intention, was an undeniable display of insensitivity, which could not be justified under any political narrative. They contended that the victims' pain should not be trivialized or dismissed, especially since the catastrophe took thousands of Korean lives as well.

Upon the issuance of Big Hit's statement, fans appreciated that the apology portion specifically addressed victims of the atomic bomb, and not Japan as a whole. But those


who had associated BTS with being the national symbol of South Korea⁶⁶ considered it somewhat of a betrayal. To them, addressing the issue with any trace of an apology was tantamount to bowing down to Japan and chasing after Japanese capital over their values as Korean nationals. Many of those fans congregated in closed online communities, where they devised a plan to flood social media with [a leaflet](#) stating their demand for a new statement from Big Hit and to launch a campaign for large-scale boycotts.

These plans, however, were foiled as other fans caught wind and reacted quickly to circulate [another leaflet](#) that preemptively counteracted these campaigns by advising fans to be wary of propaganda designed to incite division in the fandom.

Moreover, K-ARMYs had recently experienced a contentious online movement of riled-up fans who wanted to communicate to Big Hit their opposition to the inclusion of the single “Bird,” penned by Yasushi Akimoto, a Japanese songwriter with supposed right-wing political leanings, in BTS’ new Japanese album (Kwak, 2018 [3]). Many fans who were frustrated with such practices of aggression had wished to prevent repeating such missteps.

Once the dust settled since the issuance of Big Hit’s statement, some fans reflected on how things unfolded among Korean fans at each step of the way and what those responses signified. While there was some Korean press coverage that proclaimed these events exposed Japan’s horrific past acts to the international community and raised consciousness about the Korean side of history, this was refuted by K-ARMYs who categorized such a claim as naïve, wishful thinking. In fact, they maintained that close examination of the international coverage revealed nothing more than a sobering reality check on just how poorly the Korean side of the WWII history had been documented and

⁶⁶ This is not based solely on their global popularity: BTS are ambassadors for Seoul Tourism; were the recipients of a congratulatory letter from President Moon Jae-in when their album debut at #1 on the Billboard 200 chart in May; spoke at the UN Headquarters in New York, an event attended by First Lady Kim Jung-sook, who gifted each member a bespoke presidential watch; were invited to perform at the 2018 Korea-France Friendship Concert where the members met President Moon; and also in 2018 were awarded the Presidential Order of Cultural Merit Award.



communicated to the larger audience, as many international perspectives by and large neglected the historical complexities of Korean experience.

For instance, many international outlets included Japanese reports and allegations of BTS mocking Japanese victims of the atomic bombs without critically questioning the implicit notions in the presented narrative. While the insensitivity of the use of the image is not in question, the insistence that the shirt was designed to mock victims of the atomic bombs contributes to the harmful, denigrating, and ongoing erasure of Korean victims of the atomic bombs from historical memory; Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings claimed around 100,000 Korean victims, among whom 15,000 were children. The idea that Japanese were the only victims of the atomic bombs still to this day looms over and actively threatens these Korean victims' every day livelihoods as they struggle to get their due governmental and societal support ([Lee, 2018](#) [4]; [English translation](#)).

It should also be duly recognized that thousands of these victims were double victims of unforgettable violence: first as victims of forced labor and second as survivors of the atomic bombs. Many of them had been taken away forcibly from their homeland to work at Japanese shipyards and factories before the atomic catastrophe struck ([Palmer, 2015](#) [5]).

Because international responses failed to introduce such historical complexities and expand on the reduced and arguably one-sided narrative, many Koreans expressed deep frustration, along with an internal reflection on just how poorly the Korean experience of history has been communicated to the broader audience.

But K-ARMY make up only one part of the collective fandom – and the reactions from the international branches of ARMY bring other lessons.



I-ARMYs Responses and Frustrations: To Rally and Learn


The international fan response to the shirt was multifaceted due to the simple fact that the collective I-ARMY is massive. I-ARMYs hail from all around the globe and, as such, hold different perceptions and impressions of the imagery of the atomic bombings and the events themselves.

Many did not feel they had enough knowledge about the relationship between Korea and Japan, about the Pacific front of WWII, or about current politics, to form an opinion of their own. More than that, though, was the popularity of the idea that fans who are not Korean or Japanese should not weigh in on the situation, which led many to keep their thoughts private.

However, that idea did not extend to everyone. Some initially reacted to the imagery of the shirt with shock; some were offended; some expressed disgust in what they perceived to be hypocrisy in such a shirt being worn by someone promoting UNICEF's #ENDviolence campaign; some quickly identified the shirt as celebrating Korean liberation from Japanese imperialism and took to social media to explain the context of the shirt in order to destigmatize it and educate others. Despite the range of responses, I-ARMYs overall wanted to an apology issued in order to quash the story.

When drama arises surrounding BTS, Big Hit often stays quiet and waits for the issue to play out in the news cycle before releasing positive news. In these instances, I-ARMYs look to K-ARMYs for an explanation in order to understand the issue from the perspective of the nation where BTS is from, which was the case here as well. But as a diverse group of fans comes together to discuss politics, there were wildly different ways of interpreting the message of not just the shirt, but the history referenced by the shirt.

Meanwhile, ARMYs wary of nationalist narratives urged people to refrain from justifying violence and asked others to recognize humanity before accepting or spreading nationalist logic in order to defend or decry Jimin's decision to wear a certain T-shirt.



To do this, the line of thinking was often to consider the motivations for why the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on Japan, to think about how the bombs affected not just Japan and the U.S., but also the countries Japan colonized, and to encourage people to question nationalist narratives in order to form a common understanding.

An encouraging, proactive action was spurred by this conversation when I-ARMYs recognized their gaps in knowledge and voiced their need to educate themselves. This led to many ARMYs working together to share knowledge, recommend reading material, and work to expand their understanding of world history according to cultural narratives that were not their own.

While these discussions were occurring online, it became clear to many I-ARMYs that Big Hit was between a rock and a hard place. If they made a statement, it would be seen as an apology, and some were no longer certain there was anything to apologize for; but if the company didn't make a statement, the media would potentially keep the story alive.

That said, Big Hit wasn't entirely silent – they were simply silent on the news surrounding Jimin and the divisive shirt. Though none of the company's official accounts posted on November 8, on November 9 – the day the international news agencies broke the stories – Big Hit⁶⁷ and official BTS-adjacent accounts posted the following:

Friday, November 9

[9.25AM](#), @BigHitEnt: Article that recorded BTS' *LOVE YOURSELF 結 'ANSWER'* reaching a new record of 2.03 million copies since its release.

[4PM](#), @bts_bighit: Simultaneous release of Jimin-related content – a series of photos titled, “#BTS Try It Like Jimin!” that was posted on on fancafe, and a video titled in English, “Today JIMIN has not done ‘JIMIN’,” which was released on YouTube.

⁶⁷ Do note that news regarding announcements and logistics of the Tokyo Dome concerts and other Japan-based events continued on the @BTS_jp account.

[6PM](#), @BT21_: The account for the BTS-curated line of cartoon characters for LINE released a drawing that included Chimmy – the character created by Jimin – and Shooky, SUGA’s creation, with a caption that read,

“[#Harmonica](#) of mine 🥰
Whistle of yours 🥰
Perfect harmony
Blow all worries away~ 🥰🎵
[#Fruit_of_CHIMMYs_efforts](#)
[#CHIMMY](#) [#SHOOKY](#) [#BT21](#)⁶⁸”

Saturday, November 10

[5:47PM](#), @BTS_twt: “💜 [#JinHyungsHand](#)”. A picture of Jin making a heart with his hands, this was the first tweet posted by a BTS member since the news of the shirt broke worldwide.

[7:11PM](#), @BTS_twt: “We’ll be back ✈️”. Two selfies of RM before flying to Japan. This is a common occurrence from BTS to signal to fans that they are leaving in good spirits.

[7:37PM](#), @BTS_twt: [#JIMIN](#) [#Hobi](#). An additional selfie of the two members on the plane posted by Jimin.

Sunday, November 11

⁶⁸ The BT21 account had been posting artwork of every day from November 5–November 9, and this particular Chimmy and Shooky piece was the second in a series began on November 8 that showcased Chimmy learning to play the harmonica. Though the timing was likely coincidental, the November 9 post felt particularly poignant. After posting on November 9, BT21 paused releasing new artwork until November 12.

4:28PM, @BTS_twt: “가을아 가지마” (Autumn, don’t leave) 🥺🍂. Two selfies of RM walking along an autumn path. The location of the photos is Yun Dong-ju’s Museum. A Korean resistance poet who died in a Japanese prison in February 1945, Yun Dong-ju is a figure who looms large in Korean memory and literature. Despite the fact that there was a wariness to assume intention among fans, many fans, and even media, interpreted RM’s tweet as a subtle message regarding the situation ([Channel A News \(Korea\), 2018](#)) [2]).


On November 12, the SWC published a statement which turned the media conversation to one filled with disinformation. ARMYs, unsurprisingly, went on the defensive.

Those with a strong grasp of the claims and correct information commented on news publications’ social media posts with long, earnest threads about how the information being reported was incorrect; some simply commented “delete this.”

Some emailed editors to appeal to their senses of journalistic integrity in hopes of winning a correction to the stories and encouraged other ARMYs to do the same; some claimed that all of the news outlets were publishing stories because they wanted the traffic ARMY would bring to their sites. They suggested that the best course of action was to only engage with news stories sympathetic to BTS and to ignore or share screenshots of the less-than-sympathetic articles.

Some panicked, concerned that BTS might lose their UNICEF ambassadorship, a point of particular pride; some were angry; some maintained that unless you were Korean, Japanese, or Jewish, you shouldn’t speak your opinion on the matter.

But overall for I-ARMY, the change in discourse further cemented the idea that an authoritative statement from Big Hit defending BTS and clarifying the allegations were needed.



When Big Hit released a lengthy statement on November 13, I-ARMYs at large felt a sense of relief. The entertainment agency was able to find a way to apologize to bomb victims and anyone distressed by the imagery without making a political statement, and defended the BTS members. There was also immense appreciation throughout the fandom for the fact that Big Hit also used the statement to reiterate their company motto – “music and artists for healing.”

J-ARMYs’ Responses and Frustrations: To Support and Learn⁶⁹

November 2018 was supposed to see a series of happy events for J-ARMYs. A new Japanese single *Fake Love/Airplane Pt. 2* was due November 7 (JST), and the Dome Tour would commence on November 13 (JST) in Tokyo Dome. However, things started to deteriorate in September when Big Hit announced that one of the songs, “Bird,” was being removed from the Japanese album following vehement opposition to the group’s collaboration with a Japanese lyricist who is believed to have right-wing views.

Dark clouds were looming when the term “atomic bomb” was beginning to be associated with BTS. Up until mid-October 2018, however, those who were aware of the emerging reactions to the T-shirt were limited to either fans or those constantly on the lookout for any Korea-related news (both with positive and malignant intentions). The initial reactions from J-ARMYs were seen on social media in October 2017. At the time, some were even curious as to why Jimin had any connections to atomic bombs at all. As time passed, the image was shared on social media more widely. While some J-ARMYs pointed at the possibility that Jimin may have been unaware of the implication of the design, others objected by saying that he should have known what it meant. Some even described Jimin and BTS as “anti-Japanese.”

⁶⁹ As mentioned in the Authors’ Note, this section is written by J-ARMYs who reached us after the first release of this project..

On October 20, Katsuya Takasu, a renowned doctor and the director of Takasu Clinic in Tokyo, denounced Jimin for wearing the said T-shirt in a series of tweets to his 414,000 followers. Despite being denounced by the Simon Wiesenthal Center in the past, Katsuya later posted nine tweets on a single day to urge the SWC to take action to publicly criticize the group. Makoto Sakurai, the founder of ultra-nationalist organization Zaitokukai, expressed anger toward “Genbaku Shonendan” (“Atomic Bomb Boy Scouts”) and revealed that he had sent protests to TV Asahi for allowing BTS to perform on *Music Station* ([Sakurai, 2018](#) [13]). The comments by these two public figures did not go unnoticed: multiple media outlets as well as online forums began to report and question the issue ([Daily News Online, 2018](#) [4]; [BTS Matome, 2018](#) [2]).


It was not until TV Asahi announced the cancellation of BTS’ performance on November 8 by directly referencing the T-shirt, however, that the news became public on an unprecedented scale. The following day, major TV stations, as well as respected newspapers and media outlets such as *Asahi Shinbun*, *Yahoo News*, *Tokyo Sport*, and *Sankei*, covered the incident ([Asahi Shinbun Digital, 2018](#) [3]). The words “Boudan Shonendan” (Bangtan Sonyeondan in Japanese) entered the national psyche, but not in the most ideal way for fans.

Waves of sadness and anxiety took over J-ARMYs, whose desperation quickly exacerbated. There were mainly two reactions: some defended Jimin by pointing out that he had worn the shirt only once and that the commotion over it was excessive ([Kubota, 2018](#) [10]), while *Yukashiki Sekai* called attention to the “[anger stirred] among some Japanese BTS fans, who called [the T-shirt] an ‘insult’” ([Yukashiki Sekai, 2018](#) [17]). Their loud demands for an apology perhaps stem from other events that have taken place during BTS’ four years of Japanese promotions, in which, some considered, an apology was due but Big Hit had failed to provide one. Fans were also simply confounded as to why the T-shirt was brought up almost two years later, and why Big Hit Entertainment chose not to issue a statement at the time ([Kyarikone News, 2018](#) [11]).

Outside the fandom, those who were vocal about the issue mostly demanded an apology of some form. It took over two weeks from the time the controversy began in Japan for Big Hit Entertainment to release a thorough explanation and apology regarding the situation. Some fans and members of the public were content with the statement and saw it as reaching a settlement. Others with ultra-nationalistic inclinations saw it as insufficient and claimed that it was not directed to anyone rather than the Japanese general public who felt uncomfortable with the T-shirt. The latter also similarly expressed discontent toward Jimin's comment during the concert on November 13, in which the idol did not use direct words of apology but rather referred to the fact that he had caused trouble and concern ([Herman, 2018](#) [7]). They pointed out the poor taste of the shirt's design and raised concerns about the overprotective fans who blindly affirm everything BTS does ([Ito, 2018](#) [8]). But the most vocal voices were the negative ones, and consequently the general atmosphere was against BTS.

Media outlets were also eager to capture and perpetuate the image of “uncontrollable fans” brainwashed by their love for their idols. Problems concerning dissenting opinion toward the public began when some fans blamed Takasu's outspoken reaction for *Music Station's* cancellation of BTS' performance. From there, some turned to more violent rhetoric and even threatened Takasu's life ([Japan Times Digital, 2018](#) [9]; [Editorial Department of Career Connection, 2018](#) [5]).

Following these threats, a Japanese fan working at the media rental store indirectly threatened a man who presumably labeled the “male idols responsible for *Kōhaku's* cancellation of Korean performances” “wrong in the head”. The worker tweeted that she would not forgive the customer, and suggested that she had the power to release the personal information of the customer including their “name” and “sexual preferences” ([Breaking News Japan, 2018](#) [6]). A bomb threat was then sent within the next 36 hours to her school, demanding immediate punishment of the student for her alarming tweets ([Mainichi Shinbun, 2018](#) [1]).



Non-fans and fans alike agreed that such extreme responses further exacerbated the situation. Regarding fans' inappropriate responses, there was also mutual agreement that while these sentiments did not highlight the fandom as a whole, they only served to undermine BTS and their fans' images in Japan ([Kyarikone News, 2018](#) [11]).

Other reactions from J-ARMYs toward the general public carried varying degrees of concern and resentment. It was undeniable that some BTS fans agreed with the public's negative reactions and chose to leave the fandom. The louder voices however, came from those who believed that the T-shirt scandal had unfairly dragged BTS into the complex political ties of Japan and Korea. Subsequently and partially consequently, a majority of fans chose to take a non-reactive approach in order to avoid fanning the flames of the dissenters ([Shin, 2018](#) [14]). This was visible on the first day of the group's Tokyo Dome concert when demonstrators and media went largely ignored by fans who were instead eager to file into the concert venue ([Kyarikone News 2018](#) [11]).

The T-shirt controversy also inevitably invited the reminiscence of the Japanese Empire's imperialistic and barbarous past war alongside the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There is a fundamental reason why the negative response toward the T-shirt gained huge traction, and this lies in the education system of Japan itself. Japanese history textbooks' treatment of its country's war atrocities, or lack thereof, does not go without criticism. It is difficult to find the effects of imperialism and colonization in these textbooks despite their essential role in Japan's growth following the Meiji Restoration; the extent to which and how the textbooks describe the details vary, and this has been a controversial issue in Japan. As Daniel Sneider writes, when such events are mentioned, textbooks "offer a rather dry chronology of events without much interpretive or analytical narrative" ([Sneider, 2013](#) [16]).

For example, comfort women are either not covered at all, or their role is squandered to essentially a footnote. In this way, limited perspective is given of the colonized countries. This is partly due to the formality of school entrance exams, in which students are

required to memorize only factual information such as the names of events and when and where it happened, as well as to avoid overt interpretation ([Sneider, 2012](#) [15]). Abundant resources outside of textbooks that outline different opinions or bring about other perspectives of the war are also often overlooked in Japan as a result of both intense nationalism and simple lack of interest.

On the contrary, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the impacts of U.S. occupation during the post-war years are heavily emphasized in curriculum. Schools often organize excursions to the Peace Memorial Museum in Hiroshima so that students can hear the stories of the survivors. In the process, the youth learn to be advocates of peace as to avoid the repetition of the use of nuclear weapons. Indeed, Japan has become a relatively peaceful and orderly nation, and most, as a result, have become apolitical and unaware of the impact of Japan's past atrocities. As Tamaki Matsuoka, a former history teacher and scholar, points out, "[Japan's education] system has been creating young people who get annoyed by all the complaints that China and South Korea make about war atrocities because they are not taught what they are complaining about" ([Oi, 2013](#) [12]).

Amongst J-ARMYs, there were many people who noticed the need to learn history, encouraged each other to stay strong, and learned the perspective of the Korean side from K-ARMYs' sincere and patient messages. Although supportive fans also had various opinions about the T-shirt itself, their general conclusion was to believe in BTS' future and to keep loving "our boys" and their music. Although a majority of J-ARMYs could only reach the international responses to the issue via translations due to language barriers, encouraging messages from I-ARMYs and K-ARMYs were circulated (sometimes with Japanese translation). J-ARMYs who read them realized once again that BTS and their love for the group connect ARMYs around the world – no matter their nationalities.



ARMYs Unify

The aftermath of the statement saw more headlines abound, as well as the emergence of projects spearheaded by ARMY. While K-ARMYs began donating to House of Sharing, an organization that supports former comfort women, I-ARMYs began #ProjectBuy23.

In contrast to the divisive nature of opinions on the T-shirt and whether or not Jimin should have worn it, these projects managed to unite much of the fandom. The success lay in the recognition of basic values that all ARMYs are proud to stand by.

Almost as soon as TV Asahi announced the cancellation of BTS' appearance on *Music Station*, K-ARMYs started donating to House of Sharing. Some of them chose to make a direct donation to the facility while some raised funds to make in-kind donations to purchase winter jackets and subsidize court fees for the survivors. K-ARMYs' large-scale donations were soon picked up by Korean media. *Yonhap News* reported on November 15 that 130 separate donations had been deposited to the House of Sharing account since November 8.⁷⁰ I-ARMYs joined the donation on November 16, earning its due spotlight in Korean media.

After Big Hit's statement was issued, I-ARMYs championed #ProjectBuy23, which urged ARMYs to buy and stream the song "2! 3!" from BTS' 2016 album *Wings*. As the first official 'fan-song' written by BTS for their fans, it relays the promise that "there will be many good days ahead" and that "there will be more good days than bad." It asks ARMYs to respond in affirmation by counting "1, 2, 3." This meaningful song saw a 17,610 percent increase in sales, which led to it debuting at #1 on the Billboard World Album Music Chart and recording #47 on the Digital Sales Chart for the week ending November 15 ([Benjamin, 2018 \[1\]](#)).

⁷⁰ See Appendix 7-2 for details and reference.

5. Closing Remarks

by Editors-in-Chief

In years past, Koreans set dry paddies and fields ablaze on the night of Jeongwol Daeboreum, the first full moon of the lunar year. In doing so, it was said that the harmful rats and insects would be killed, the frozen ground would warm, and all previous misfortune would dissipate. As the fire died and the smoke cleared, the farmers would get to work once again, rejoicing in the more fertile ground.

As we survey the results of this most recent fire and reflect on so many others that we have seen in our time, it seems that we must choose between two options: The first is to eradicate anything deemed remotely harmful to the safety and good cheer of BTS and ARMY, wipe our hands of it, and busy ourselves with positive news in the hope that it buries all else. The second is to dirty our hands with the ashes and give an honest assessment of the previous crop and soil in order to allow for greater flourishing. This project is our assessment report that we share with you in hopes of achieving the latter.

Know Their Influence – and Yours

Kim Namjoon said that in his adolescence he had begun to feel like a ghost: unnoticed and unheard. He had one sanctuary, and that was music. ([Washington Post](#), 2018 [7]; [transcript](#)) He wanted people to hear his stories, and for them to be presented in front of many people – to be for many people. (Dicon, 2018 [1]) Min Yoongi also found music to be an escape and wanted to create similarly healthy experiences for others. ([Frankenberg, 2018](#) [2]). Of course, in the search to make their dreams a reality, they would join Big Hit Entertainment, meet each other, and band together with five others who would adopt the same goal. Eight years later, Min Yoongi, promoting under the

name SUGA, sat at a press conference for the group's most recent album, *LOVE YOURSELF 結 'Answer,'* and confidently said, “we told our story, and the story of those who are of the same age.” ([Kim, 2018](#) [4]; [English translation](#))

From these two sentiments, we can sense how the group has grown. First, there has been a transition from the first-person singular to the first-person plural; it is not an individual telling their own story, but a unified group telling their story together. Second, there is a recognition that their stories and their lives do not exist in a vacuum; not only do they speak to their generation, they speak for their generation.

We travel with BTS on a journey to love ourselves, and in the growing security of this knowledge, they invite us to speak confidently about our convictions and to reach out to others who undoubtedly are walking the same path.

And so we ask that as much as you recognize the influence of BTS, that you also recognize your own, especially in a group of like-minded people – perhaps as a part of their active fandom, and certainly as a fellow human being who is just as capable of spreading a positive message.

So, with this in mind, we suggest two areas for you to consider - to know what is true, and to know what is just.

Know What is True

As fan translators, we are frightfully aware of the way in which news and opinions are consumed by fans through various platforms. We stand in the intersection of language and have to make deliberate choices every day, if not every minute, to choose what is correct over what is popular, what is wise over what is fun. We bear much of the responsibility – but it is not just ours.



Be Proactive

Media outlets of various political leanings, with different interests, and with varying degrees of background knowledge describe the same situation differently. Information can be unintentionally or intentionally omitted, manipulated, and described to suit a particular angle. This, unfortunately, is not limited to the media coverage of recent events; it happens every day. Be patient, read critically, and research as you digest what you read. Ask, discuss, and strategically interact with the media.

Be Willing to Learn

As much as we want BTS to stay out of politics, music is, to some extent, inherently political. The members of BTS have been showing their socioeconomic and political awareness and sending their own messages through music since their debut. In addition, their recent, unprecedented global success, coupled with the fact that they are unapologetically Korean, has led the group to become entangled in political and diplomatic situations. It is our responsibility to build a full understanding of the political, historical, and cultural background and climate rather than unquestioningly absorbing superficial and potentially biased presentations of the story.

It is our wish that this not be a short-term damage control strategy, but a long-term goal that we all carry as we move forward. Living in a time when information is more rampant and easily accessible than ever, we encourage you to take advantage of resources⁷¹ that are readily available. Reading articles and books on history, watching documentaries or docudrama videos and movies, and visiting historical sites and museums can be done individually and independently. We want you to understand the value of learning history. This is not just to learn the history of Korea and its geopolitical environment, but to refuse to selectively remember the history of all the defeated, the colonized, and the exploited.

⁷¹ We have our own recommendations in the Appendix.

Know What is Just

A representative from Nihon Hidankyo (Japan Confederation of A-and H-Bomb Sufferers Organizations), when asked about the meeting with a representative from Big Hit, said that the organization delivered its wish to rightly promote the knowledge of atomic bombings and to continue to communicate with the company ([Hong, 2018](#) [3]). Two days later, the Korean Atomic Bomb Victims Association released a statement⁷² ([Lee, 2018](#) [5]; [English translation](#)) in response to Big Hit's apology.

“In consideration of the above, we the victims of the atomic bomb understand and empathize with BTS, which has been under fire from multiple sides, and we humbly accept Big Hit's apology. For a moment we would like to set aside the perspective that the atomic bombs liberated Korea from Japanese colonialism, and instead wish for everyone to reflect on the inhumanity of dropping nuclear weapons on Japan, at that time already a nation on the verge of defeat, for the purposes of experimentation which indiscriminately killed not only humans but all life forms in its path.”

Humbled by the responses of atomic bombing victims of Korea and Japan, we wish that ARMYs as a collective can take this opportunity to remind ourselves of the values we share – empathy, nonviolence, and peace. We hope that we can put aside politics and empathize with the victims of violence of all forms, stand with them, and raise our voice against violence of all forms as we move forward.

This is much in line with BTS' LOVE MYSELF campaign, which promotes UNICEF's #ENDviolence campaign. BTS' message of eradicating violence carries serious implications. We need to recognize that the distinctions between the subject and object through the use of “you” and “me” have brought forth prejudice and division, and become a source of prevalent conflict. And we need to understand that the only way to fix this is to realise that “you” and “I” are the same; to empathise, and to experience this love ([Park, 2018](#) [6]; [English translation](#)).

⁷² We urge you to take time to read the full statement.



Last Words

Our heart goes out to the Japanese fans, for the shock they must have experienced and the resulting discourse that must have been difficult for them to bear. We thank them for showing their unwavering love and support in this difficult time.

We thank the Korean fans for standing their ground in the middle of emotional turmoil, for patiently teaching other fans about the historical and geopolitical context, and for rationally reacting to and interacting with the media.

We also thank all the international fans. We appreciate their willingness and desire to learn and understand, their endeavors to correct false information, and their efforts to spread positivity.

Lastly, we extend our sincere gratitude and appreciation to everyone who has offered their time, wisdom, knowledge, skills, and love to this project.

Like all trials of life, the past three weeks have exhausted many of us in mind and spirit. However, like most trials of life, the recent events also presented us with an opportunity to learn. To learn to doubt, question, and wait. To learn to communicate wisely and lovingly. To learn to consider, understand, and empathize.

Above all, we were extended the opportunity to stand up for the values we believe in, and to stand with the victims of violence.

From this trial, we find hope.

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7-1. Big Hit's Statement

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7. Appendix

7-1. Big Hit's Statement

Big Hit Entertainment released a statement ([Big Hit Entertainment, 2018](#) [1]) on their official Facebook and Twitter at 9:15 PM KST on November 13⁷³ to address the T-shirt Jimin wore and the hat and flags mentioned by the Simon Wiesenthal Center ([SWC, 2018a](#) [5]). In addition to explaining its fundamental position on the issues arisen,⁷⁴ the company clearly communicated (1) what it believes in, (2) what it apologizes for, (3) who it apologized to, (4) what it will do in the future to make sure that a similar situation will not arise again, and (5) what it has done to properly address the issues. In the following, we break down the statement into the 5 categories and add our own interpretations as well as some follow-up information.

(1) What Big Hit believes in

The company states that in all activities involving any artists associated with it, it is adamantly against any activities of war or the use of atomic weapons and any organizations or groups oriented towards political extremism and totalitarian beliefs. It also mentions that it has, and will continue to have, no intention of causing distress or pain to anyone affected by those activities.

⁷³ BTS had two shows at Tokyo Dome on November 13 and 14. During the first show, Jimin himself addressed fans vaguely about the situation, “It saddens me to think that not only you ARMY, but many people around the world must've been surprised recently because of the many circumstances. I believe there will be many more opportunities for us to meet each other. I won't be able to forget my first Tokyo Dome performance with you today. I'm so happy to be with you guys, ARMY. I hope you feel happy seeing us too.” ([Herman, 2018](#) [1])

⁷⁴ Big Hit clearly states that the wearings of the outfit containing image of atomic bombing and a hat “displaying a logo reminiscent of Nazi” (direct translation of the original Korean statement is “that includes the Nazi logo”) were absolutely unintentional. The company, however, acknowledges and apologizes for the distress and pain caused by the actions. Regarding the flags, on the other hand, it offers explanations to clarify the misunderstanding. Refer to items 3 and 4 of the original statement for more details.



(2) What Big Hit apologizes for

Big Hit admits all responsibilities for not providing the necessary and careful support by failing to take the precautions (T-shirt) and to strictly review the outfit (hat). It also acknowledges that the wearing of such clothing items has inadvertently inflicted pain and distress to those affected by atomic weapons or totalitarian regimes and by allowing its artists to be associated with imagery related to atomic bombings or reminiscent of political extremism.

(3) Who Big Hit apologizes to

Big Hit makes it clear that its apology is dedicated to those who are hurt, not those who hurt. The apology addresses those who were distressed either because they had been directly affected by the use of atomic weapons or totalitarian regimes or because they felt uncomfortable by witnessing an association of its artists with such imageries. It is not towards those who made accusations, any specific institution, or any country.

(4) What Big Hit will do in the future

Big Hit promises to carefully examine all activities involving Big Hit and its artists based on a firm understanding of diverse social, historical and cultural considerations to ensure that it will not cause any injury, pain or distress to anyone. The statement highlights that the company's apology and future actions are rooted in its ideals and recognition of current world context; it is an innate responsibility that it holds, not just a damage control of the recent issues. Its apology, first and foremost, is an apology for not upholding its own vision due to lack of vigilance.

(5) What Big Hit has done to properly address the issues

Big Hit has contacted associations in Japan and Korea representing those affected by the atomic bombings to provide explanations and apologies. The fact that Korean victims are included really indicates that Big Hit cares for and apologizes to anyone and everyone who suffered, regardless of nationality, by the atomic bombings.

Representatives of the company visited the Japanese victim association on November 14 ([Hong, 2018](#) [2]) and the Korean victim association on November 16 ([Kim, 2018](#) [3]). Both associations expressed their understanding of the situation and suggested taking this opportunity to reflect on the meaning of atomic weapons. The company also sent a letter to the Simon Wiesenthal Center, which published a statement ([SWC, 2018b](#) [6]) that it welcomes the apology on November 14 (KST).

7-2. Korean Media Coverage


The following is an analysis of media reports from November 8, 2018 to November 19, 2018 by select Korean media outlets that represent a small but representative sample of Korean reports and reactions to the situation surrounding BTS and Japan.

Major news outlets with distinctly different political leanings were chosen for the following analysis. This includes The Korea Times, JTBC, and Hankyoreh (liberal/left-wing), KBS, MBC, SBS, Yonhap News (moderate/center), and Chosun Ilbo, DongA Ilbo, and JoongAng Ilbo (conservative/right-wing). Due to the nature of the incident involving a Korean boy group, entertainment news outlet Newsen was also included for its important role in reporting breaking stories and updates throughout the 12-day affair.

Day 1 (Thursday, November 8)

Newsen was the first to break the story on BTS' cancellation of the Japanese schedule. BTS was scheduled to board the KE711 plane from Gimpo Airport to Haneda Airport on November 8 at 7:30 pm. Newsen reported that BTS' plans to leave for Japan was "suddenly cancelled" and added that the press, fans, and security officers prepared and waited for BTS to show up before wrapping up. Initially, no reason was cited for the reason for the cancellation.

Shortly after, Newsen printed another article asking questions about BTS' upcoming appearance on the live broadcast of Japan's TV Asahi's "Music Station" scheduled for November 9 at 8 pm. This is when speculations began about the sudden cancellation. Newsen reported that some Japanese far-right groups had been complaining about Jimin's t-shirt and was protested for the cancellation of BTS' appearance. Newsen said the t-shirt explained how Korean Liberation Day was the day Korea found light again after Japanese colonization ended. It also described some of the images on the t-shirt which




included Korean citizens cheering and the explosion of the atomic bomb. The article ended on a relatively positive note that BTS would be carrying out a Japanese dome tour at four domes and that all tickets were sold out.

An hour later, Newsen expanded on its previous article. With a summary of the events up until now including the sudden cancellation, a lack of response from Big Hit Entertainment, and added, “This might not just be a cancellation of plans to leave the country, but possible speculation as to the cancellation of the previously scheduled Japanese broadcast appearance.” It added, “Jimin recently wore a Liberation Day t-shirt” as some possible background for the cancellation before quoting Japanese far-right media outlet Tokyo Sports:

“It’s so absurd. Popular Korean group BTS’ anti-Japanese actions are being praised in Korea. A group that’s representing Korea is wearing a t-shirt with a picture of an atomic bomb and touching the nerves of Japan. It shows the deep-rooted complex of their home country’s history.”

Later that day, Newsen printed a Korean translation of TV Asahi’s official statement that specified Jimin’s controversial t-shirt and its discussion with the agency and label before deciding to postpone BTS’ appearance. Newsen followed up with Big Hit’s statement about the appearance on BTS’ Japanese fanclub website, each time ending its article with information about BTS’ upcoming dome concert.

The Korea Times quickly provided some political context regarding the cancellation of BTS’ Japanese TV appearance by bringing up some recent issues surrounding Japan and South Korea. Its headline read, “Amidst the Worsening of Korean-Japan Relations, BTS’ Japanese TV Appearance Suddenly Cancelled.” It opened with the South Korean Supreme Court’s recent decision that ordered a Japanese company to compensate workers for forced labor during wartime, before noting that the spark from this had spread to popular culture and arts.




Yonhap News reported that the Japanese media outlet had created a controversy out of Jimin's t-shirt and that it had also criticized RM's SNS post from 2013 celebrating Korean Liberation Day. Like Newsen, it concluded with their success in Japan including topping Oricon daily singles chart with "Fake Love/Airplane pt.2" and upcoming dome tour.

Day 2 (Friday, November 9, 2018)

Since the cancellation of BTS' scheduled appearance and statements from Big Hit Entertainment and TV Asahi broke at night, many Korean outlets reported and reacted to these developments on the next day. JoongAng Ilbo expressed dismay at the news with the headline, "BTS is an anti-Japanese group? Japanese Media Outlet Makes Something Out of Nothing, Suddenly Cancels Broadcast."

Newsen asked more questions about why a photo of Jimin wearing a t-shirt two years ago was now becoming a big enough issue for BTS' TV appearance to be cancelled the day before, even citing some sightings of BTS' dancers who had already arrived in Japan. It also shared the t-shirt designer's creative and patriotic intent behind the t-shirt as stated on the brand's website and publicized Professor Seo Kyeong Deok's SNS post where he defended BTS. "Tokyo Sports is nitpicking at BTS over nothing," he wrote. "It's clear by this nitpicking that they've become aware of the fact that BTS can impact the world with one statement. Thus, this shows that they're feeling a lot of fear about BTS' global impact."

JTBC and KBS informed its viewers about BTS' "Music Station" appearance cancellation during their morning news segments and suggested TV Asahi might've been influenced by Japanese media outlets' claims that BTS might be taking part in anti-Japanese actions.




Newsen continued to share its thoughts on the ongoing situation and asked if Japan was politically retaliating to the South Korean Supreme Court decision by using BTS and Hallyu. Noting the immense popularity of K-pop singers in Japan at the moment, it even brought up the possibility of TWICE and BTS' elimination from NHK's year-end program "Kōhaku Uta Gassen". It revealed that articles about the issue had garnered over 6,000 comments by Japanese netizens and concluded that the amount of interest showed BTS' immense popularity in Japan.

International media outlets also began to report on the story, and coverage by outlets such as CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera, was welcomed. Korean media outlets such as DongA Ilbo and Hankyoreh took this opportunity to say that BTS' global popularity led to extensive international media coverage which in turn spurred the world to learn about Japan's past war crimes. KBS, SBS, and MBC also covered Japanese media reports (Yomiuri Shimbun, Kyodo News, and Asahi) on BTS' "Music Station" cancellation and how the photo of a group member wearing a t-shirt with an atomic bomb explosion made ripple effects that led to such consequences.

Not surprisingly, Korea media outlets came to BTS' defense and touted their accomplishments in light of the "Music Station" cancellation. The Korea Times said that BTS has many stages to perform on in Japan despite the latest cancellation and that the group proved its chart and ticket power through the topping of its Oricon daily singles chart and a sold-out dome tour. Elsewhere, BTS achieved success on big TV shows and award shows in the U.S. and Europe.

Day 3 (Saturday, November 10, 2018)

DongA Ilbo published an article on the "strong aftermath" of the Supreme Court decision that was "hitting Hallyu". It chronicled a timeline of events that led to this moment: SNS posts that read, "BTS wore a t-shirt with a picture of an atomic bomb" began circulating



bout a month ago, Japanese sports newspapers published articles about this around the end of October, and riled up anti-Korean sentiments. They added all of this was right around the time when the Korean Supreme Court announced its decision regarding compensation of forced workers during wartime.


MBC and KBS continued to inform its viewers with a summary of events that had unfolded thus far while waiting for new developments. Newsen then reported that Japanese media outlet Sponichi Annex said, “BTS were in talks to appear on NHK’s ‘Kōhaku Uta Gassen,’ ‘FNS Music Festival,’ ‘Music Station Super Live,’ but they’re no longer happening” and named Jimin’s t-shirt as the reason why these plans fell through. Other media outlets echoed similar sentiments of seeing BTS at Japanese year-end shows, but didn’t forget to remind its readers that the group would still be holding a dome tour.

ARMYs [BTS’ official fandom] wasted no time in circulating facts about the recent situation. As reported by JoongAng Ilbo, Japan’s past war crimes caught the attention of the international media thanks to the help of ARMYs on Twitter. Yonhap News emphasized that Billboard and CNN wrote that history played into the cancellation of BTS’ TV appearance.

Korean lawmakers showed a united front in voicing their support for BTS and/or against Japan in the matter as reported by KBS, Yonhap News, and JoongAng Ilbo.

Day 4 (Sunday, November 11, 2018)

Despite international political rumblings and domestic protests, Japanese ARMYs remained unchanged in their support for the group, which they voiced through social media. Much of Sunday’s reports were a summary of the developments thus far and repetitions of lawmakers’ support, BTS’ immense popularity, and Japan’s continuous revolt.




Far-right groups held protests using historically offensive “Rising Sun” flags to show their stance against BTS and Korea. Japan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tarō Kōno indirectly responded to the cancellation of BTS’ appearance by stating, “The [Supreme Court decision] should not have an impact on people’s exchanges between the two countries. Please continue to have exchanges [so that it won’t have an impact].”

Day 5 (Monday, November 12, 2018)

Chosun Ilbo didn’t hold back its opinion on current events with the headline, “Narrow-minded Japan broadcastings.” After stating that BTS’ other possible Japanese TV appearances were cancelled due to Jimin’s t-shirt, it pointed to the Japanese far-right online community “2ch” where it was first suggested that BTS’ participation in “Kōhaku Uta Gassen” should be stopped. It also noted years 2012-2016 as another period of contentious Korean-Japan relations that led to the exclusion of Korean singers in this year-end show’s lineup.

ARMYs showed their support for BTS by selling out the “Liberation Day” t-shirts online and by spreading hashtags to inform others about the situation. Chosun Ilbo also quoted an article by Sponichi Annex that said, “It looks like cold water was splashed onto the third Hallyu boom that would’ve gotten bigger with the support of teenagers and female middle and high school students.”

ARMYs continued to fight against the far-right movement retaliating against BTS. According to DongA Ilbo, a far-right group’s plan to protest in front of Tokyo Dome on the day of BTS’ concert on November 13 had to cancel their plans after fans spread information about the meeting and the posts were deleted after they aired their complaints. The protest cancellation was confirmed from one of the organizers who responded via email that there were no plans for a meet-up on the 13th.



With one day left before BTS' concert at Tokyo Dome, tensions rose as people took sides on the ongoing issue. A new group emerged against hate speech in Japan, and protested against the far-right group's protests on November 10 and 11. Despite some opposition to BTS' arrival in Haneda Airport on November 10, Japanese ARMYs welcomed the band with the hashtag, "We'll protect BTS."


Hankyoreh gave insight on Japan's new generation with the article, "Despite BTS' T-shirt Controversy, Their Popularity in Japan Remains the Same. Why? Global YouTube Fans Are Different." Noting BTS' fifth consecutive day of topping the Oricon daily singles chart, pop culture critic Jung Deok Han said that BTS' popularity remains due to a changed media platform (YouTube over TV broadcasts) and a change in the generation that's consuming pop culture.

Day 6 (Tuesday, November 13, 2018)

BTS decorated various headlines on this day. Korean media outlets reported on the statement posted by Jewish human rights group Simon Wiesenthal Center criticizing BTS for wearing items with Nazi symbols on them at a photo shoot in 2014 and performance in 2017. Hankyoreh and JoongAng Ilbo added ARMYs' clarifications about the hat and non-Nazi flags used during Seo Taeji's 25th anniversary concert.

Meanwhile, MBC, KBS, The Korea Times, and more touted BTS' accomplishments such as becoming the first foreign artist to score over 400,000 Oricon points during the first week of release and topping Oricon singles chart for "Fake Love/ Airplane pt.2" despite ongoing controversies.

This was also the first day of BTS' Tokyo Dome concert and the press extensively covered the outside and inside of the venue before and during the concert. Around 45,000 ARMYs filled the stadium to purchase goods and attend the concert. Many outlets noted one lone far-right wing member who shouted in protest, but was not given



any attention by the throngs of excited fans. The Korea Times remarked that the far-right movement's efforts to mark BTS as an anti-Japanese group and slow their popularity had failed.


The media covered BTS members' statements during the concert, especially Jimin's who spoke about the group's dream of performing at Tokyo Dome and how his heart hurt due to recent events. Big Hit Entertainment also released a statement on the recent events. The agency apologized for causing unintentional pain to victims, clarified accusations about the usage of Nazi-symbol items, and revealed its plans to correct the situation by meeting and apologizing to atomic bomb victims.

Day 7 (Wednesday, November 14, 2018)

Many Korean outlets continued to report on Big Hit Entertainment's statement as well as the successful first day of BTS' Tokyo Dome concert. Chosun Ilbo noted the impressive pre-sale ticket numbers for BTS' upcoming documentary "Burn the Stage: the Movie" and the 50,000 fans who showed up for BTS' concert compared to the two protestors.

The Japanese media were unrelentless in spreading negative articles about K-pop according to MBC. It quoted Yomiuri Shimbun's article about Japanese students getting scammed on SNS for goods and tickets and pointed the finger at Koreans, as well as NHK's report about the demand for BTS' apology over hats with Nazi symbols.

Singer and longtime Japan critic Kim Jang Hoon spoke up about the latest incidents revolving Japan and BTS. On his Facebook page, he criticized Japan for demanding an apology from BTS when they are the "aggressor," and laid out some of Japan's past atrocities. Park Ki Tae, the founder of advocacy group Voluntary Agency Network of Korea (VANK), also voiced his opinion about latest issues surrounding BTS. In a Facebook post, he accused the far-right Japanese group of disguising itself as a victim and vowed to spread awareness about Japan's wrongdoings to the world.



DongA Ilbo also reported on Simon Wiesenthal Center's "welcoming" response to Big Hit Entertainment's statement. It also revealed Big Hit's separate apology to the organization and attached it on a post on the website. As expected, BTS was not included in the final lineup for this year's NHK's "Kōhaku Uta Gassen," but TWICE was included.

BTS' apology to the atomic bomb victims was also well received. According to MBC, a source from Big Hit Entertainment personally apologized to the Japanese Atomic Bombs Victim Association and announced plans to do the same to the Korean victims as well.

The second day of BTS' Tokyo Dome concert was also underway. Yonhap News likened the atmosphere to a festival and covered the fans' excitement and support at the venue. SBS noted that unlike the previous day where one protestor showed up, there were no protestors at all on the second day of the concert, which was also echoed by KBS.

Day 8 (Thursday, November 15, 2018)

MBC reported that the "anti-Korean atmosphere" had calmed down. It also summarized the latest actions by Big Hit Entertainment where it apologized to the Japanese Atomic Bombs Victim Association with plans to also apologize to the Korean victims.

ARMYs continued to show their support for the band by doing good in the name of the band. Yonhap News revealed that 130 separate donations had been deposited to the account for the House of Sharing, a shelter for comfort women since November 8. The organization said that the total amount of donations received in the name of BTS or ARMY in 2018 total 10 million won.



Day 9 (Friday, November 16, 2018)

Following the visit to the Japanese victims, Big Hit Entertainment operations representative Lee Jin Hyung met with the Korean Atomic Bombs Victim Association and apologized for the latest controversy in person. He went to Hapcheon, where 600 victims reside, and met with 10 officials for a private discussion. The association released an official statement saying they accepted the apology and that they sympathize with the latest events. They also expressed anger at Japan's lack of apologetic behavior and accused the country of victim cosplay.


Day 10 (Friday, November 17, 2018)

TWICE became the next target by Japanese right-wing members, as Japanese politician Onodera Masaru brought to surface a picture of TWICE member Dahyun wearing a Marymond T-shirt in 2017. The politician accused the organization of inappropriately using the funds from the clothing for "anti-Japanese" campaigning and said Dahyun and, by extension, TWICE should be removed from NHK's "Kōhaku Uta Gassen" end of year performances.

JoongAng Ilbo also reported that a Japanese right-wing member made a bomb threat to Sugiyama Women's University in Nagoya to suspend a female college student who's a BTS fan. Despite such incidents, they emphasized that BTS' popularity is at an all-time high and that the group will continue its sold-out dome tour after successfully completing two nights at Tokyo Dome.

Day 11 (Saturday, November 18, 2018) & Day 12 (Sunday, November 19, 2018)

International fans have rolled up their sleeves to show their support for BTS. According to The Korea Times, 100 ARMYs participated in donating to the House of Sharing in



Gwangju. From November 16, amounts such as \$5 and \$10 amounted to a total of around 2 million won. News about donations for the comfort women victims are spreading through BTS' Twitter community. A source from the House of Sharing said, "It means a lot that the movement of remembering Japan's invasion and Japan's 'comfort women' issue is expanding worldwide."

SBS also reported that word spread on Twitter. A fan stated, "The hearts of many fans abroad were hurt after they learned what the grandmas (victims) went through when they were teenagers. Let's help the victims and correctly learn history."

7-3. Recommended Resources

For History on Japanese Empire In Korea:

(1) Books

Lost Names: Scenes of A Korean Boyhood by Richard E. Kim

[Amazon](#) | [Google Books](#)

Under The Black Umbrella: Voices From Colonial Korea, 1910-1945 by Hildi Kang

[Amazon](#) | [Google Books](#)

When My Name was Keoko by Linda Sue Park

[Amazon](#) | [Google Book](#)

Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes by Eleanor Coerr

[Amazon](#) | [Google Books](#)

The Narrow Road to the Deep North by Richard Flanagan

[Amazon](#) | [Google Books](#)

(2) Videos

Life As A Comfort Woman by Asian Boss

[YouTube](#)

[Infinite Challenge] Haha, visited 'Hashima Island' Grandparents survivor's story

[YouTube](#)

[Infinite Challenge] Crew go to LA and visits the family of and landmarks related to Korean Independence Fighter Dosan Ahn Chang Ho

[Youtube](#)

(3) Drama

Bridal Mask (각시탈)

[IMDB](#) | [Dramabeans](#)

(4) Movies

Assassination (암살)

[IMDB](#) | [Amazon](#) | [YouTube](#)

Age of Shadows (밀정)

[IMDB](#) | [Amazon](#) | [YouTube](#)

Dongju (동주)

[IMDB](#) | [Viki](#)

Spirits' Homecoming (귀향)

[IMDB](#) | [iTunes](#)

Anarchist from the Colony (박열)

[IMDB](#) | [Amazon](#)

For History on Japanese Empire Outside Korea:

(1) Books

Asian Labor in the Japanese Wartime Empire: Unknown Histories

[Amazon](#)

Fifty Years of Silence: The Extraordinary Memoir of a War Rape Survivor

[Amazon](#)

The Railway Man

[Amazon](#)

The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II

[Amazon](#)

Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience and Redemption

[Amazon](#)

War Crimes in Japan-Occupied Indonesia: A Case of Murder by Medicine

[Amazon](#)

(2) Online Resources

94-year old survivor has vivid memories of Bataan Death Match

[Independent Mail](#)

My Grandmother's Story

[National Library Board of Singapore](#)

Revisiting Wartime: 66 Miles of Cruelty

[New York Times](#)



(3) Movies

The Railway Man (based on book)

[Youtube](#)

Unbroken (based on book)

[Youtube](#)

(4) Documentaries

731: Two Versions of Hell

[Dafilms](#)

Bataan: The Making of A Memory

[Youtube](#)