



## Two to Tango: A Life Journey Towards Reconciliation

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**C**lang! Clang! Clang! There goes the break time bell. I was new to this country, to this elementary school.

On my first day, I remember being surrounded by pupils as soon as the break time started. They were all saying something to me to which I could only smile back since I did not speak their language. *Maybe they are welcoming me*, I thought. It was only a month later that I realized what was going on. One of my classmates lived nearby and came to our house one day to tell my mother that pupils were saying bad words to me and enjoying watching my innocent (?) reaction. I certainly looked like them—my parents are also from South Korea. Nonetheless it was not enough to my compatriots. The fact that I had never lived in this country seemed to make me become unacceptable to be part of their group.

My earlier childhood in Switzerland was the opposite. In the kindergarten, there were Swiss of course, but also Spanish, Vietnamese, Greek, Iraqi, Bolivian, Senegalese... We did not know what was *different* among us. We just enjoyed being together and playing with each other. Our language was *Schwyzerdütsch* (Swiss German)—a spoken language in the Alemannic region that Germans from Germany often consider incomprehensible?! But we also had many chances to introduce our own culture by sharing food, wearing traditional cloths or inviting our parents to tell us stories from different parts of the world.

I now know words like *Multiculturalism*, *Diversity*, *Discrimination*, *Ijime* or *Xenophobia*. But at the age of ten, these two contrasting experience I had in South Korea and Switzerland penetrated deep into my heart without necessarily knowing why it was happening. What I at least knew was that I was happy in a world where *being different* was perceived as a gift to each other while the other world brought me tears and pain. I do not know

whether my childhood experience is *the* element that has influenced my way of life. In any case I chose diplomacy as my first career. To borrow Amin Maaloouf's expression from his essay *Les identités meurtrières*, I probably wished to be a bridge, a go-between, and a mediator between cultures and among countries.<sup>1</sup>

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Life as a diplomat was cool. Each time I had to present my ID card, people looked at me one more time and said, "Wow!" At the department store, on the street, during a *gōkon* (合コン)—roughly translating into a matchmaking party, impossible issues sometimes became possible. Strangely I do not remember anyone asking me what I was actually doing at the foreign ministry. The most frequent questions I received were: "How much do you earn?" "Do you fly first class?" "Which hotel do you stay on your business trip?" What made them say wow was not me—or my professional achievement. It probably had more to do with my title and the privilege that came along with that.

In the Division of Protocol, my first mission was to welcome Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo—during his first mandate—and his wife Abe Akie *san* in Seoul. Every single task was tough but exciting. I think it was during this period that I learned how to drink and how to work overnight. The most important task was to keep on time between schedules on the day of their visit. And for this, becoming close to the drivers was crucial, one of the main reasons for the endless *nomikai* (飲み会)—drinking party to socialize—to break the ice between diplomats and drivers. Escorting Akie *san* was my personal duty as she had a separate schedule after the official visit to Seoul National Cemetery. It was impressive to see young Japanese tourists politely greeting her on the street wherever she went—I *did* feel like a bridge between cultures and countries.



<sup>1</sup> Maalouf, Amin. 1998. *Les identités meurtrières*. Paris, France: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle.

I loved my job but I should also admit that a fundamental inner struggle was rolling up. When we had a series of preparatory meetings with our Japanese counterparts, there was sometimes an inexplicably awkward atmosphere. Nothing was wrong. Everyone was smiling. But I could easily grasp the gap between what was going on the surface and what each of us actually had in our mind—we may call it *tatemae* (建前) against *honne* (本音) in Japanese language. And this bothered me.

I started questioning myself: ‘How come, after more than half a century since the end of the Second World War, can hostile feelings exist among us who did not even experience war and colonialism? What makes us believe what we believe *true*? What hinders me from saying what I think is important? Does my job really allow me to be a channel between countries? After all what does it mean to be a go-between, and not a traitor, to contribute to rebuilding a broken relationship?’

Obviously as a diplomat, I was representing Korea, not Japan. Imagine that we have four apples. My country has one citizen suffering from hunger and my counterpart has three. My job is not to say, “Ok, I will keep one apple and you can have three so that everyone suffering from hunger has something to eat today”. What I probably have to do at that moment is to do my best so that my one citizen can have food for four days. I am exaggerating a little bit, but it is not totally wrong. I did not choose to be born South Korean. I could have been born North Korean, Japanese, French, Syrian, or Sudanese. Nevertheless, trying to put human being before nationality was perhaps not *politically correct* in my job.

I decided to become student again. I was not sure whether it was the right thing to do. But I saw myself crying on my way back home from work, probably because I already knew that I would soon quit the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Prestige, stable income, taste of power, national pride and the way people looked at me... It was not bad at all. But deep inside my mind, there was something else I was looking for. My life and professional experience taught me that it is easier to break a relationship than rebuild a broken one—it is easier to hate someone we once loved than to love someone we once hated. Not everyone can reconcile. I wanted to learn more about countries that successfully transformed (or are trying to transform) their long time enmity to amity. I wanted to analyze how their political leaders, religious actors, businessmen, journalists, artists and youth have contributed to reconciliation. That was my starting point of an academic career. I flew to Geneva to write my five-year-long doctoral dissertation.

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The first challenge I was confronted with was to find a research supervisor. This was an unexpected huddle. I thought my topic was unique and meaningful—*Gosh, I gave up so many things to come back to this dusty old library. Someone should be interested in my research theme!* Alas, none of the faculty members in the department accepted my research proposal (It was about comparing the Franco-German and South Korean-Japanese reconciliation processes). Their main argument was the same, ‘your theme is not *à la mode!*’

One of them told me: “Emilia, you are smart and intelligent. Do not waste five years on writing something that no one will read. Choose a topic that will sell itself like terrorism, climate change, human rights, hunger or global financial crisis. These are *hot* issues that will bring you more money, and perhaps a stable academic position. If you work on a topic and there is no conferences or journals around the world to present your work, you will not be able to survive.”

A question I did not ask, or to be honest, never wanted to ask myself came up: ‘did I make a wrong decision? Should I have stayed at the ministry?’ The real challenge was not coming from outside—finding a director. It was about myself. Although *I* was the one who decided to step down from the diplomatic career, I saw myself constantly comparing my current situation with my *glorious* past. A doctoral student’s ID card was certainly not the same as the diplomat’s one. I also saw myself comparing me with my friends who were on a fast track at work in addition to their happy—at least that is what it looked like to me—marriage life. I was a single thirty something years old woman without a stable monthly income and without a man. I was frustrated. But I think my childhood experience engraved into my heart helped me to move on. I was convinced that there is something to be done to rebuild broken relations between enemy states and that I have my own way to contribute to it.

The day I decided to continue my phd, I finally found a research supervisor, Bruno Arcidiacono. He was the only faculty member I actually did not talk to. Professor Arcidiacono, Head of the Department of International Politics and History, was notorious for being the most fastidious professor. Rumors said that he is even able to fail a student’s five-year-long work on the final day of the thesis defense, which was not completely wrong. Just like most of my classmates who tried to avoid him, I probably wanted to take an easier path to graduate. But I decided to work

under his guidance and it was the right choice. During the laborious and lonely academic journey, he was always there to support me, to give me advice, and to push me forward whenever I was lost.

On the day of my thesis defense, the administration office told me that it was the first time they had to limit the number of the audience inside the defense room. What I would never forget is not compliments or honors I received but the atmosphere in the room. Among the audience, there were



family members, eminent scholars from all over the world, housewives, friends, students, and even businessmen. I knew that it was the day of evaluation for what I had done during the last five years. But it was such a pleasant moment to talk *with* them—not *to* them—about contemporary reconciliation

issues that I almost forgot I was being judged. There were Koreans, Japanese, Chinese, French, Italian, German, Australian, Swiss people in the room. What I was trying to argue on the paper was palpable in reality: “Reconciliation is not a monologue but a dialogue.” *Yes this is it!* What I think and what I do finally became one.

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**N**ow I am assistant professor at Sophia University. I laughed at my supervisor’s endorsement—or joke, I thought at that time—before I left Switzerland: “Who knows? You might one day work for reconciliation in Japan!” One month later, it became true. I was in Tokyo.

While working as a research fellow at the United Nations University with joint affiliation at Tokyo University, I received a handwritten letter from the Secretary-General of the United Nations to congratulate my first book publication.<sup>2</sup> During his visit to Japan, Mr. Ban Ki-moon invited me to meet him at a hotel near Tokyo Tower. I worked for him while he was Foreign

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<sup>2</sup> Heo, Seunghoon Emilia. 2012. *Reconciling Enemy States in Europe and Asia*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Minister of the Republic of Korea and also briefly in the Department of Political Affairs at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. But it was the first time we had *yoyū* (余裕), *relaxing state of mind*, to talk to each other. He repeatedly said, “Good! Reconciliation is indeed an important issue and it is so encouraging to see young scholars working on this topic. Continue, continue!” Doubts expressed by some professors about the unpopularity of my research theme were *fortunately* groundless. International reconciliation has become popular in the academia and received much media coverage, especially in 2015.<sup>3</sup>



If my previous research focused more on conceptualizing the term reconciliation in the field of international relations, my current research interests include exploring actors in promoting peace and reconciliation beyond national borders, especially intellectuals (historians, writers, professors), religious groups, artists and the younger generation. At the Johns Hopkins University in 2012, I started working on the potential of interreligious dialogue in promoting international reconciliation. Inspired by the successful trio concerto among Christians, media circle, and political elites during the 1950s and 1960s in the Polish-German reconciliation process, I am currently analyzing the various positions Catholics, Protestants, and Buddhists have been taking towards the Japanese-South Korean reconciliation issue.<sup>4</sup> With my former colleague Ingvild Bode at the United Nations University, I conducted a joint research on the dynamics of narratives that German and Japanese university students tell us about World War II and postwar reconciliation with their neighboring states. Scholarly attention has focused mainly on analyzing governments' influence on

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<sup>3</sup> 2015 marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian genocide, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel as well as between Japan and the Republic of Korea.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Heo. 2012. “Who Can Lead the Change?” *Transatlantic Perspective*, The Johns Hopkins University.

Available online: <http://www.aicgs.org/publication/who-can-lead-the-change/>

creating official narratives through school curricula and how it is reflected in history textbooks. However little is known about how the official version of national and international history are retained, shared or challenged among younger generations. We found out that the degree and the variety of knowledge sources students are exposed to largely affect the way they assess their home countries' role during World War II. Furthermore, it also influences the way they perceive their relations with former enemy states.<sup>5</sup>

From my teaching experience, I realized that our students rarely took their time to think about *how* to rebuild a broken relationship with their neighboring countries. As our research outcome proved, German students showed a high familiarity with the names and the roles of political or social actors who contributed to promoting reconciliation between Germany and its former enemy states whereas Japanese and Korean students showed the opposite. Furthermore, Japanese and Korean students had little awareness of themselves as potential agents of reconciliation while German students offered various original ideas when asked about their own role to promote reconciliation. For this reason, I think it is crucial for our younger generation to be exposed to various ideas and have a *locus* to think and share their reflections, not only among themselves but also with youth from their neighboring countries.

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**A**t Sophia, I teach global studies and international reconciliation. I still remember my first class in Japan when one of my students asked me: "*Sensei*, Japan is such a peace-loving country. Why are Koreans and Chinese angry at us?" I also remember what my students said in South Korea: "What is wrong with them? Why are they not apologizing for their misdeeds?" There was little space for any reflection why the other side does not think the way we do. When I asked my Korean students to tell me whether their argument would have remained the same if they had been born Japanese, their reaction was violent. When I asked my Japanese students to do the same exercise,

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<sup>5</sup> Bode, Ingvild, and Seunghoon Emilia Heo. 2015. "The Dynamics of Narratives: What German and Japanese University Students Tell Us about World War II Today," *Korea Forum* 24 (Special Issue no. 3). We aim to publish a detailed examination of our findings (including South Korean students' answers) in a longer article entitled "Choosing Ways of Remembering: Comparing Student Narratives about World War II in Germany, Japan, and Korea".

they looked at me not as their professor any more but as the *other* side. Teaching peace and reconciliation in Japan and in South Korea is not an easy



experience. Most of my students had something to say either to blame the other side or to defend one's position. However the classroom often became silent when I asked: "What is needed to rebuild a

broken relationship?" or "What contribution can we make to transform an enmity relation into a friendlier one?"

I believe that education can be an effective tool for reconciliation depending on the purpose and the method of teaching.<sup>6</sup> I feel a strong responsibility not only as a researcher but also as a professor in promoting international reconciliation. Each academic discipline such as international relations, history, law, politics, economy, philosophy, theology, natural science or art has its contribution to provide for reconciliation studies. As an IR scholar, I am convinced that my life commitment is to help students see the issue from the eyes of others as a first step to reconciliation. Without any willingness to understand the difference, there will be no true dialogue. All efforts will just end at blaming, ignoring, or falling back into the vicious circle. What I can do is to stir up one's curiosity about reconciliation issues and plant seeds of change through the interaction I have with students inside and outside classrooms.

I sometimes wonder why I chose reconciliation—or rebuilding a broken relationship—as I prefer saying. Working in the field of reconciliation practically means to constantly stay inside the world of division, hatred, conflict, blaming, ignoring, or suffering in order to understand how to *transform* an enemy relation into a friendlier one. How many times did I receive this skeptical question from the audience at international conferences and seminars: "Is there any hope in Northeast Asia when it comes to reconciliation?"

To this question, I now answer *yes*. Yes, because I see hope in my students:

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<sup>6</sup> See Heo. 2016. "Challenges of Teaching International Reconciliation in Japan and Korea," in *Reconciling with the Past: Resources and Obstacles in a Global Perspective*, Routledge. (forthcoming).



“I’d like to say I always appreciate from deep in my heart your sincere efforts inside/outside class and caring approach to students. What I learned about reconciliation by you at Sophia became my lifetime question and also a mission. Yes some would rather hate their enemy, keep an absolute distance from it or just ignore it maybe because it seems easier to stay in a broken relationship just keep blaming the other out of hatred or not interacting honestly with each other and 'hurting each other' out of mistrust or fear. However, there are and will be some people that get hurt or feel insecure and terrified in a broken relationship. To stop this vicious circle, we need to be brave enough to get out of our own comfort zone and tackle the past and causes. Maybe somebody should take a challenging initiative, which might be criticized, or even worse paid little/no attention after all. This certainly is accompanied by a lot of pain and hard work, even at the interpersonal level, but overcoming them is essential and will be a stepping-stone. I believe you are pulling it off and your voice is reaching our minds, even if not everyone at the moment, and heard by God and it will be! I'm really glad I was in your class and wanna be there again!”

(N.T. Japan)

“I have good Korean and Chinese friends. So I thought everything going on between our nations does not consider me. But now, I feel like there is something more I should do.”

(K.K. Japan)

“I want to learn more about the past. I hated history class since it was all about memorizing. But now, I want to understand how Japanese and Chinese friends learn about our past, and understand why we learn different things. Maybe I will start reading sources from outside my country.”

(Kim J. Korea)

“I never had a chance to think about reconciliation before taking your course. I learned how to blame but not how to transform the relationship. I always thought that *Takeshima* is our land and

Koreans are illegally asking it. But I wonder how I would see the issue if I were born Korean. What sources do they have?"

(M.N. Japan)

"I am sometimes surprised myself how angry and furious I can become against Japan after watching TV news. I am Korean but I am also Catholic. I would like to see how sharing and forgiveness work between nations. Maybe I will start first at personal level."

(Choi Y. Korea)

"My major is French literature and I was never interested in what is going on around the world. But your class changed my life. I am now an exchange student in France to study international relations, not French literature!!!"

(S.M. Japan)<sup>7</sup>

Just like the expression "It takes two to tango," reconciliation implies two sides. The beauty of the tango does not depend on how perfectly you make your own step or master your skills. It rather relies on how well you feel and understand your partner through eye contact, body gesture and hand pressure. You cannot make your next move without knowing what your partner has in her or his mind. Reconciliation goes the same way. You do not unilaterally deliver a message. It is not like "I said what I wanted, I am done!" When you talk, you care about the reaction of your counterpart:—*You listen even though you do not want to*. Mutual dialogue requires practice and patience. With my students, I discover that the journey towards reconciliation is a step-by-step process. We are sometimes lost in a thousand pieces of a puzzle. We may not be able to see the whole picture of this puzzle right now. But by talking and listening to each other, we discover how to put two, three, four pieces together. And this is my lifelong commitment. I hope that our younger generation, at least my students, can learn with me *how to tango*.

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<sup>7</sup> These comments are selected from student's evaluation sheets of my courses in Japan and Korea.



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