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WE WERE NEVER FRIENDS: THE NANJING MASSACRE AND THE MEDIA CONSTRUCTION OF THE SINO-JAPANESE DIPLOMATIC STALEMATE

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Abstrak
Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana BBC memframing hubungan Sino–Jepang, dengan fokus pada peran memori sejarah dalam konstruksi ketegangan bilateral. Studi ini berlandaskan perspektif konstruktivis dan menggunakan model framing Entman melalui analisis framing kualitatif terhadap pemberitaan BBC. Analisis difokuskan pada empat elemen framing Entman: pendefinisian masalah, atribusi penyebab, penilaian moral, dan rekomendasi solusi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa BBC secara konsisten membingkai sejarah sebagai sumber utama ketegangan, dengan merepresentasikan China sebagai aktor yang secara aktif mengartikulasikan memori historis, sementara Jepang digambarkan sebagai aktor yang terikat oleh masa lalunya dan bersikap berhati-hati dalam merespons. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa framing media berperan dalam membentuk narasi agensi yang tidak simetris, sekaligus memperlihatkan bagaimana media berkontribusi pada pembentukan makna politik dan identitas negara dalam hubungan internasional.

Abstract
This study aims to analyze how the BBC frames Sino-Japanese relations, focusing on the role of historical memory in the construction of bilateral tensions. This study is based on a constructivist perspective and uses Entman's framing model through qualitative framing analysis of BBC reporting. The analysis focuses on four elements of Entman's framing: problem definition, diagnose causes, make moral judgment, and treatment recommendations. The findings show that the BBC consistently frames history as the main source of tension, representing China as an actor that actively articulates historical memory, while Japan is portrayed as an actor bound by its past and cautious in its responses. This study concludes that media framing plays a role in shaping asymmetrical agency narratives, while also showing how the media contributes to the formation of political meaning and national identity in international relations.

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary International Relations, there is a growing recognition that state behavior cannot be understood solely through current power distributions or strategic interests. Instead, it is profoundly influenced by unresolved historical trajectories that continue to shape perceptions, identities, and security practices. This historical impact is especially evident in East Asia, where the memory of Japanese imperial aggression casts a long shadow over regional diplomacy and remains central to the ongoing volatility of Sino-Japanese relations.

The origins of this troubled relationship can be traced back to the significant power imbalance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period, Imperial Japan underwent rapid modernization and adopted expansionist militarism, sharply contrasting with China's "Century of Humiliation," characterized by internal fragmentation and systematic foreign domination. Key events such as the First Sino-Japanese War, the occupation of Manchuria, and the atrocities of the Nanjing Massacre from 1937 to 1938 entrenched a dichotomy of aggressor and victim, creating deep psychological, socio-political, and normative divides. Importantly, these divides were never fully reconciled in the post-1945 settlement, leaving unresolved questions of responsibility, apology, and historical interpretation that remain politically charged.

These unresolved grievances continue to exert a significant influence on contemporary diplomatic behavior. As China increasingly positions itself as a major regional power, both state and societal actors have strategically mobilized historical memory, transforming past atrocities into active components of present-day security dilemmas. Events like the Nanjing Massacre function not merely as static historical records but as dynamic political symbols that shape national identity, narratives of legitimacy, and threat perceptions on both sides. Thus, historical narratives are not peripheral to regional politics; they are integral to the strategic environment, delineating the limits of reconciliation and reinforcing cyclical patterns of mistrust, symbolic disputes, and diplomatic crises. Understanding this historical continuum is crucial for explaining why Sino-Japanese relations remain volatile despite deep economic interdependence and why the past continues to significantly influence East Asian international politics.

One of the most contested and emotionally charged memories is the Nanjing Massacre of 1937–1938, during which

Imperial Japanese forces committed large-scale atrocities against civilians and prisoners of war in then-capital Nanjing. Historians debate the exact number of victims, estimating deaths to range from 40,000 to 300,000, alongside tens of thousands of cases of sexual violence (Yoshida, 2013). Regardless of the specific numbers, the massacre is deeply ingrained in Chinese collective memory as one of the most traumatic events of the twentieth century, symbolizing national humiliation and foreign aggression. For Japan, however, the massacre remains a point of contention, with views ranging from cautious acknowledgment in some circles to outright denial or minimization in others, particularly among conservative political groups.

The Nanjing Massacre is a fundamental barrier in Sino-Japanese relations and serves as a critical focal point for understanding ontological security, identity politics, and diplomatic trust within International Relations. The controversy surrounding the event goes beyond disagreements over historical evidence; it represents a political struggle over state legitimacy and narrative authority, in which collective memory is strategically mobilized as a diplomatic resource. For China, the sustained remembrance of the massacre is essential for constructing a post-war national identity rooted in resilience, victimhood, and moral rectitude. In contrast, Japan views Beijing's persistent invocation of this history as a challenge to its efforts to normalize its role as a peaceful and responsible international actor, complicating its long-term strategic objectives.

This asymmetry in historical interpretation creates what scholars describe as a "security dilemma of memory," where each state's attempt to secure its historical identity is seen by the other as a threat to its diplomatic credibility and moral standing. Consequently, the Nanjing Massacre continues to impede reconciliation, obstruct confidence-building measures, and reinforce mutual suspicion. This demonstrates how historical memory operates as an active variable in contemporary international relations rather than as a static remnant of the past.

Both nations utilize memory politics to shape diplomatic narratives and national identities (Huttunen, 2025). China's efforts to include documents related to the Nanjing Massacre in UNESCO's Memory of the World register exemplify how historical memory can serve as a diplomatic tool,

aiming to legitimize its narrative and challenge perceptions of Japanese denial (Gustafsson K, 2014). This approach reflects China's broader strategy of employing wartime memory for ontological security, while Japan perceives such actions as political manipulation of history. The persistence of history-related issues in their bilateral relations can be attributed to dominant notions surrounding forgetting, which is often viewed as denial, framing collective memory in terms of security (Gustafsson, 2022). Understanding forgetting as an inherent part of remembering might help to ease tensions over collective memory, fostering a recognition that all parties engage in selective remembrance and forgetting in their historical narratives.

To provide the necessary historical background for this analysis, it is essential to situate this event within China's broader ideological framework. In the Chinese context, the Nanjing Massacre is not seen as an isolated tragedy; it is woven into the 'Century of Humiliation' narrative. This narrative frames China as a victim of imperialist aggression from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century and serves as the foundational context for contemporary Chinese nationalism and foreign policy rhetoric.

This narrative strengthens domestic nationalism and underscores China's contemporary demand for international respect and recognition (Xu & Zhao, 2023). Japan, on the other hand, confronts a more fragmented memory landscape. While progressive voices call for historical accountability, conservative leaders often engage in revisionism or minimize historical events, partly to protect national pride and partly to avoid diplomatic vulnerability) (Dian, 2015).

Despite the establishment of formal diplomatic frameworks—most notably the 1972 Joint Communiqué and the 1978 Treaty of Peace and Friendship—these agreements have repeatedly proven insufficient to overcome the deeper historical dynamics shaping Sino-Japanese relations. While such accords were intended to stabilize bilateral ties and facilitate pragmatic cooperation, they remain structurally vulnerable to the unresolved legacies of Japanese imperial aggression. Historical memory acts as a destabilizing force that continually re-politicizes past atrocities and exposes the fragility of diplomatic normalization. Empirical studies illustrate this pattern: He (2013) notes that the passage of time has not fostered reconciliation but rather intensified "more vivid and bitter recollections of

history," while He (2009) demonstrates that domestic political incentives drive elite mythmaking that radicalizes public opinion on historical disputes. M. Wang & Okano-Heijmans (2011) highlight how nationalist mobilization—such as the widespread anti-Japanese protests in 2005—reveals the underlying volatility of ostensibly stable agreements. Przystup (2012) similarly observes that "the past is ever-present," with events like the Nanjing Massacre leaving an "indelible mark" on bilateral perceptions. These dynamics explain why diplomatic arrangements often stall: conflicting approaches to historical memory continuously reopen old wounds, undermine trust, and foster recurring tensions that inhibit substantive reconciliation. Thus, while formal agreements exist, they lack the socially accepted historical narrative necessary for lasting peace.

However, it is not only states that shape these narratives. In the contemporary global communication landscape, media outlets play a crucial role in constructing and disseminating interpretations of history. News organizations act as "memory agents," deciding which stories to tell, which voices to amplify, and which aspects of history to highlight. Through these editorial choices, media institutions wield significant power in shaping audience interpretations of historical atrocities.

International media such as the BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera are particularly influential due to their global reach, agenda-setting abilities, and authority as primary information gatekeepers (Dencik, 2013; Piburn, 2021; Safa & Barati, 2024). Their reporting not only defines which events gain international visibility but also determines the interpretive frames through which these events are understood (Ering et al., 2025). Media framing constructs causal attributions and evaluations that shape public understanding and elite discourse.

For example, the BBC reaches an estimated 456 million weekly users worldwide, giving it a significant ability to shape global narratives about contentious histories (Sharma & Naresh, 2022). CNN's international edition broadcasts to more than 200 countries and territories, allowing it to frame specific issues—such as "human rights," "aggressor-victim dynamics," and "moral accountability"—which influence diplomatic discussions, NGO advocacy, and public opinion (Robinson, 2013). Al Jazeera, with a viewership exceeding 150 million across the Middle East, Africa, and Europe,

plays a key role in countering Western-centric narratives by amplifying alternative interpretations of historical violence and postcolonial grievances (Powers & Gilboa, 2007). Together, these global media outlets serve as powerful narrative architects whose transnational platforms shape how historical atrocities are remembered, politicized, or contested in international relations.

Unlike domestic outlets, which are often limited by national political pressures, international media repurpose contested histories for a global audience. In doing so, they not only reflect existing narratives but also actively shape international perceptions of bilateral disputes (Safa & Barati, 2024b).

Framing theory offers a useful framework for analyzing this process. Entman defines framing as the selection of certain aspects of a perceived reality, making them more salient in a communication text. This approach helps to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993). When applied to the coverage of historical atrocities, framing analysis can reveal how an event is defined—as a massacre, an incident, or a tragedy—how responsibility is assigned, what moral evaluations are provided, and whether there are calls for justice, reconciliation, or remembrance (Anderson & Brakstad, 2016). Thus, the media does not merely describe the past; it constructs a narrative framework that influences how both domestic and international audiences interpret historical memory.

The BBC article titled "We Were Never Friends: A Massacre on the Eve of WW2 Still Haunts China–Japan Relations," published on August 15, 2025, illustrates how international media frame the Nanjing Massacre not just as a historical atrocity, but as an ongoing diplomatic fault line. The headline itself conveys feelings of estrangement and lingering animosity, framing the event as an obstacle to friendship rather than merely a past tragedy (F. Wang, 2025). Within the article, survivor testimonies, historical explanations, and contemporary political references are woven together to present the massacre as a symbol of unresolved conflict. This framing is not neutral; it makes a particular interpretive choice that emphasizes rupture, continuous grievance, and the challenge of achieving reconciliation without addressing the past.

Despite the importance of such coverage, scholarly attention has often been directed elsewhere. Most existing literature on the Nanjing Massacre focuses on the historical debate between Chinese and Japanese historians, the role of official

government statements, or how domestic media and cultural products—like films and textbooks—contribute to memory politics. While valuable, this scholarship often overlooks the significance of transnational journalism. Few studies have systematically examined how international outlets like the BBC translate and reframe contested histories for global audiences. This gap is particularly crucial because such coverage not only educates international readers but can also impact diplomatic relations by shaping global opinion.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the significance of transnational journalism in constructing global narratives and collective memory. It explores how stories related to China contribute to the history of transnational journalism, highlighting the connections between Chinese and Western media landscapes (Guo, 2021). Li et al. analyze how the portrayal of the Nanjing Massacre has evolved in Chinese media, transitioning from a local incident to a national trauma and collective memory (Li & Huang, 2021). Kitch advocates for expanding journalism studies to include memory construction beyond elite news organizations and major events (Kitch, 2008). Volkmer and Lee (2014). observe that, despite shifts toward transnational public spheres, research on the role of collective memory in journalism remains limited. Collectively, these studies underscore the need for more research on how international media outlets, such as the BBC, translate and frame contested histories for global audiences, potentially influencing diplomatic relations and shaping global opinion.

This study focuses on a specific article from the BBC to fill an important gap in understanding. As a single-case study, it does not claim to represent the entirety of international media coverage. Instead, it aims to provide a thorough exploration of how a globally respected outlet frames the memory of atrocities and places it within the context of ongoing diplomatic tensions. This approach emphasizes the interpretive power of framing and highlights the role of international media as influential actors in the politics of memory.

The purpose of this research is to analyze the textual framing strategies used in the BBC article and assess how these strategies construct historical memory in relation to China-Japan relations. By doing this, the study demonstrates how global media serve as intermediaries between local historical disputes and international

audiences. Rather than viewing the Nanjing Massacre solely through the lenses of historiography or bilateral politics, the research highlights the importance of international journalism in shaping the discourse around international relations.

This study argues that the BBC's framing reproduces a structural moral hierarchy that normalizes the persistence of the Sino–Japanese diplomatic stalemate by positioning Japan as a moral debtor and China as a moral creditor. Through this framing, historical memory is transformed into a moral debt that constrains reconciliation, making normalization appear ethically conditional rather than politically negotiable. By foregrounding this moral asymmetry, the BBC does not merely report on historical tensions but actively contributes to the construction of a global narrative in which reconciliation remains perpetually deferred.

ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

This study adopts an integrated analytical framework that combines constructivist International Relations theory with media framing analysis to examine how historical memory is constructed and stabilized through international journalism. Rather than treating global media, framing theory, and constructivism as separate bodies of theory, the article conceptualizes them as mutually reinforcing components of a single analytical lens.

From a constructivist perspective, international politics is shaped by socially constructed identities, norms, and shared meanings rather than solely by material capabilities (Wendt, 1999).

Historical memory constitutes a key element of this social structure, as interpretations of the past shape national identities and define expectations of appropriate state behavior. In the context of Sino–Japanese relations, unresolved memories of wartime violence function as normative constraints that influence diplomatic interaction and perceptions of legitimacy.

Within this framework, international media are understood as non-state normative actors that participate in the construction and circulation of historical meaning. Global news organizations such as the BBC do not merely transmit information; they select, emphasize, and evaluate historical narratives in ways that shape how international audiences interpret responsibility, victimhood, and reconciliation. This positions global media as important

intermediaries in memory politics, translating contested national histories into globally legible moral narratives.

To operationalize this perspective, the study employs Entman's framing model as an analytical tool. Framing is understood as the selection and salience of particular aspects of reality to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral evaluations, and treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993). Applied to historical memory, framing analysis reveals how media texts transform past events into contemporary moral and political claims. Specifically, framing allows the researcher to identify how responsibility for historical violence is attributed, how moral legitimacy is distributed among actors, and how reconciliation is presented as possible or constrained.

By integrating constructivism with framing analysis, this study conceptualizes media framing as a mechanism through which moral order is constructed in international politics. The BBC's coverage of the Nanjing Massacre is therefore analyzed not simply as historical reporting but as a discursive practice that constructs a moral hierarchy between China and Japan. Through this process, historical memory is converted into a structural constraint that shapes expectations of apology, recognition, and diplomatic normalization.

This integrated framework enables the analysis to move beyond descriptive accounts of media bias or historical disagreement. Instead, it highlights how international journalism contributes to the stabilization of identity-based conflicts by embedding historical narratives within globally circulating norms of responsibility and contrition. In doing so, the framework directly links media practices to core concerns in International Relations, including legitimacy, identity, and the persistence of diplomatic stalemate.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative case study design to investigate how the BBC frames the Nanjing Massacre in the article titled "We Were Never Friends: A Massacre on the Eve of WW2 Still Haunts China–Japan Relations." A case study approach is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth examination of a single, strategically selected text, enabling the researcher to identify subtle patterns of meaning that may not be visible in

broader comparative analyses (Lamont, 2022).

The study employs Entman's framing model as its primary analytical framework, focusing on four key functions of framing: problem definition, diagnosis of causes, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. These functions structure the entire research process.

First, the article is obtained directly from the BBC News website to ensure authenticity and contextual accuracy. Second, the researcher reads the text multiple times to become familiar with its narrative flow, tone, and thematic emphases. Third, significant sentences and narrative segments are identified and organized according to Entman's four framing functions. During this step, the researcher systematically examines how the article defines the historical event as a specific type of problem, attributes responsibility to certain actors, constructs moral judgments, and links the past to present-day China–Japan relations. Finally, the organized findings are interpreted to uncover the deeper discursive logic and narrative strategies that shape the BBC's representation of the massacre. Through this structured process, the study prioritizes depth over breadth, providing a detailed and theoretically guided interpretation of a single international media text.

This integrated analytical framework ensures that theoretical concepts are mobilized analytically rather than descriptively, allowing the framing analysis to remain empirically grounded while contributing to constructivist debates in International Relations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This research analyzes the BBC News article titled "*We Were Never Friends*": "*The Massacres of the Pre-World War II Era Still Haunt Sino-Japanese Relations*", published on August 15, 2025, available at https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp89ed9j5ygo.

Defining Problems: "An Unfinished History"

Following Entman's first framing function, the BBC defines the central problem as Japan's unresolved responsibility for wartime atrocities, with the Nanjing Massacre serving as a key symbol. The BBC identifies the central issue as Japan's failure to "fully own up" to its wartime atrocities, with the Nanjing Massacre serving as a pivotal symbol. The article states: *"What has made it fester is the belief that Japan has never fully acknowledged its atrocities in*

places it occupied – not just in China, but also in Korea, what was then Malaya, the Philippines, and Indonesia." The metaphor of a wound that "festers" implies that this historical trauma is not dormant; instead, it remains an active and painful part of the collective memory in China and other Asian societies.

Through this framing, the problem is constructed as ethical rather than diplomatic. The persistence of tension is attributed not to current policy disagreements but to a failure of moral closure. This representation aligns with constructivist understandings of memory politics, in which historical narratives actively shape national identities and constrain foreign policy behavior (Deacon, 2024).

This definition of the problem presents history not as a closed record of past events but as an ongoing source of international tension. In the context of International Relations, this aligns with the concept of "memory wars," where collective remembrance is used as a political tool to legitimize national identity and foreign policy. For China, the narrative of "national rejuvenation" under Xi Jinping draws upon a selective reinterpretation of history to bolster its aspirations for global power (Carrai, 2021). The persistence of these "history wars" is attributed to conflicting representations of the past, which become crucial to national identities (Deacon, 2024). Conversely, Japan is portrayed as grappling with denialism and minimization, hindering the path to reconciliation. Consequently, the issue extends beyond mere factual disputes over history; it involves a significant lack of mutual acknowledgment of responsibility.

Diagnosing Causes: Divergent National Narratives

In diagnosing the causes of tension, the BBC attributes the stalemate to competing national narratives rooted in identity and historical interpretation. The BBC article attributes the ongoing dispute to conflicting historical narratives, which are influenced by nationalism. It quotes various perspectives, indicating, *"Some believe the Japanese army went to help China build a new order… Of course, some acknowledge that it was, in fact, an invasion."* while acknowledging that others recognize it as an invasion. This juxtaposition highlights internal divisions within Japan while emphasizing the persistence of revisionist interpretations. In contrast, China is portrayed as consistently articulating a narrative of victimhood through

education, commemoration, and diplomatic discourse. From a constructivist perspective, these narratives are not merely reflections of history but socially constructed identities that define acceptable behavior. The BBC's framing thus situates the dispute within a struggle over narrative authority rather than factual disagreement.

This understanding aligns with constructivist theories in International Relations, which assert that identities and narratives are socially constructed and wield political significance. For Japan, focusing on its own suffering from the atomic bombings allows it to assert a form of victimhood, which can obscure or downplay its historical role as an aggressor (Aminah, 2019). For China, emphasizing memories of victimization creates a unifying national narrative, especially in the post-Mao era when communism has lost much of its ideological appeal (Z. Wang, 2008). Therefore, the root of the conflict lies not only in historical events but also in the politics of narration and interpretation, where history becomes a battleground for legitimacy.

Making Moral Judgments: Japan as Morally Deficient

The BBC's moral evaluation is articulated most clearly through normative comparison. The article quotes a Chinese perspective stating that *"they've never issued a sincere apology, they are still worshipping (the war criminals), they are rewriting history – no one will treat them as friends."* This statement frames Japan as morally deficient, reinforcing its position as an actor that has failed to meet international expectations of contrition.

By invoking Germany's post-war reconciliation as an implicit benchmark, the BBC constructs a moral hierarchy in which Japan is evaluated against a European model of atonement. Within this framework, China's demands for recognition are implicitly legitimized, while Japan remains positioned as an unrepentant aggressor. This framing reflects the constructivist logic of appropriateness, where moral recognition becomes a prerequisite for legitimate international identity (Wolf, 2011).

For the relationship to normalize, the aggressor must perform a sincere act of atonement to validly shed its past identity. By framing Japan as failing to meet this intersubjective expectation, the media suggests that the moral debt of the past remains unpaid. This creates a social reality where China is justified in withholding trust,

and Japan remains trapped in the identity of an unrepentant aggressor.

Treatment Recommendations: Symbolic Reconciliation as the Way Forward

The fourth dimension, treatment recommendations, is articulated through comparisons with Germany's model of atonement. The article notes, *"For years, in Chinese history classes, students have been shown a photo of former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt kneeling before a memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1970. The Chinese expect a similar gesture from Japan."* The BBC's proposed solution centers on symbolic reconciliation rather than diplomatic negotiation. By referencing Willy Brandt's kneeling gesture in Warsaw, the article suggests that reconciliation requires performative acknowledgment and moral repentance. The expectation of a similar gesture from Japan frames symbolic apology as the necessary condition for normalization.

This recommendation implies that economic interdependence or strategic cooperation alone cannot overcome historical mistrust. Instead, reconciliation is presented as contingent upon moral recognition, reinforcing the notion that the diplomatic stalemate is structurally embedded in unresolved historical memory.

This proposed remedy emphasizes that diplomacy and economic interdependence alone are not enough. Without symbolic acts of contrition—such as apologies, memorial gestures, or official recognition—mistrust and resentment will persist. This aligns with the idea that reconciliation in post-conflict settings requires not only pragmatic statecraft but also symbolic politics (Kaufman, 2006). Symbolic gestures can transform relationships by reconstituting the moral fabric of interstate trust (Deseran, 1981). Therefore, the media presents a pathway to resolution that relies more on ethical recognition than on strategic bargaining.

Constructivist Dimensions in BBC's Framing of the China–Japan Historical Dispute

The framing analysis of the BBC News article "'We Were Never Friends': A Massacre on the Eve of WW2 Still Haunts China–Japan Relations" reveals a carefully constructed narrative that intertwines historical memory, diplomatic tensions, and competing national identities. Utilizing Entman's four dimensions of framing—problem definition, causal interpretation,

moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation—the BBC presents the dispute not as an isolated diplomatic issue but as a recurring structural feature of Sino-Japanese relations. The analysis indicates that the BBC frames this controversy as representative of deeper unresolved tensions related to the legacy of World War II, which continue to influence both bilateral relations and regional security dynamics in East Asia.

The problem is defined through the BBC's emphasis on historical grievances and their contemporary implications. By highlighting how China accuses Japan of "smearing its reputation" and failing to acknowledge wartime atrocities, the article underscores the persistence of memory politics as a significant barrier to reconciliation. This aligns with Entman's first dimension, isolating the enduring historical dispute as a critical international problem, while also suggesting its potential to destabilize regional diplomacy.

The causal interpretation assigns blame to divergent national narratives: Japan's attempts to project a pacifist, forward-looking identity are portrayed as clashing with China's insistence on recognition and remembrance of past wrongs. Thus, the BBC implicitly positions the conflict as rooted less in current policy disputes and more in issues of identity and historical interpretation.

From a Constructivist perspective, the BBC's moral evaluation sharpens the framing by presenting the dispute as a clash of constitutive identities rather than merely a disagreement over historical facts. China is depicted as safeguarding the moral authority of the victim, utilizing the "politics of shame" to reinforce its national narrative. In contrast, Japan is portrayed as violating the international "norm of contrition" by attempting to distance itself from its militaristic past. This moral framing reflects the Constructivist concept of intersubjectivity: the reciprocal mistrust is not inevitable but is socially constructed through these competing moral claims.

The BBC's subsequent treatment recommendations—calls for "dialogue" and "engagement"—reflect a liberal constructivist belief that repeated social interaction can transform state identities. However, the framing suggests deep skepticism, implying that the "moral gap" between China's demand for atonement and Japan's desire for normalization has solidified into a structural barrier, making it nearly impossible to reconstruct a shared diplomatic reality.

Taken together, the BBC adopts a historical-institutional framing pattern that emphasizes how political processes and social outcomes are shaped by past events and institutional structures. This perspective highlights the concept of path dependence, where initial choices lead to self-reinforcing processes that are difficult to reverse (Pierson, 2000). Critical junctures, or key historical moments, play a crucial role in shaping institutional development and subsequent policy trajectories (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). While institutions constrain and structure political behavior, they are also influenced by actors' ideas and framing strategies (Beland, 2005). This approach contrasts with more policy-centric or realist framings often found in regional outlets, which may emphasize military balance or immediate economic interests. The BBC's approach foreground's identity, history, and moral narratives, reflecting a constructivist sensitivity to how norms and memory shape state behavior.

This broader framing pattern aligns closely with constructivist International Relations (IR) theory, which posits that state interests are not fixed but are socially constructed through identity, norms, and historical narratives. By framing the China–Japan dispute around wartime memory and reputational politics, the BBC implicitly reinforces the constructivist argument that international conflicts cannot be fully explained by material factors such as power distribution or economic interests. Instead, they are sustained by competing historical narratives and the symbolic capital of memory. For China, maintaining a strong stance on Japan's wartime atrocities serves as a cornerstone of national identity and legitimacy for the ruling party. For Japan, resisting ongoing association with its militaristic past is central to projecting itself as a responsible democratic actor in contemporary international society.

This constructivist analysis highlights why reconciliation has remained elusive in East Asia, despite deep economic interdependence and shared security concerns. The BBC's framing captures the paradox identified in academic literature: while realist perspectives emphasize the stabilizing effects of economic ties and the balance of power, they struggle to explain why historical animosities continue to resurface at critical diplomatic junctures (Peou, 2002). Historical memory is a crucial factor in East Asian politics, complicating regional relations even as economic

interdependence grows (Shin, 2015). Scholars argue that acknowledging past atrocities is important, but frequent public apologies can be polarizing domestically and counterproductive diplomatically (Glaser et al., 2009). (This "Asian paradox" of economic cooperation amidst political and security tensions arises from unresolved historical issues, which shape threat perceptions and national identities in the region (Johnston, 2012).

Compared to prior research, the BBC's framing adds nuance by avoiding both overt relativism and a clear moral hierarchy. Recent studies on media coverage of Sino-Japanese disputes have revealed biases in Western reporting. For example, Chen found that The New York Times portrayed China as aggressive and less sympathetic while presenting Japan more favorably (Chen X, 2008) Similarly, Okuda noted that English-language media often depict China's rise as a threat to global stability (Okuda, 2016). Su and Hu observed that Chinese media offered a more biased view of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute compared to Japanese and U.S. sources (Hu, 2020). McNeill and Kato highlighted the media's potential role in exacerbating tensions between China and Japan (McNeill & Kato, 2024). In contrast, the BBC presents a more balanced portrayal, framing both countries as mutually entangled in the perpetuation of antagonistic historical narratives. This difference suggests a subtle shift in international media discourse, reflecting broader global debates about multipolarity, postcolonial memory, and the limits of Western normative authority.

Furthermore, the framing connects directly to current geopolitical tensions in the Asia-Pacific, particularly in the East China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific security architecture. By presenting memory politics as a persistent obstacle, the BBC signals the fragility of regional diplomacy, where unresolved historical issues amplify mistrust, even in the face of pressing shared challenges like climate change, trade interdependence, and U.S.–China strategic rivalry. This aligns with recent scholarship in International Relations, which emphasizes the role of non-material factors—such as identity, memory, and cultural trauma—in sustaining regional insecurity, even when rational incentives for cooperation exist.

The findings extend beyond media analysis, offering broader theoretical and policy insights. Firstly, they reaffirm constructivist critiques of realism and liberalism, demonstrating that materialist approaches alone cannot account for the persistence of Sino-Japanese hostility.

Secondly, they suggest that international media play a significant role in either perpetuating or alleviating identity-based conflicts. By framing both sides as equally entrenched, the BBC reinforces the perception of intractability, which may normalize the stalemate rather than fostering transformative reconciliation.

In summary, the BBC's framing reveals a consistent and concerning narrative pattern that establishes a specific 'moral hierarchy' between Japan and China. The analysis shows that the BBC systematically portrays Japan as the 'moral debtor,' guilty of failing to meet the German standard of atonement, while framing China as the 'moral creditor,' whose demands for justice are seen as historically legitimate, even if their political tactics are viewed as assertive. This pattern is not coincidental but structural; it supports the constructivist argument that 'identity' is not a fixed variable but a dynamic social structure that influences state behavior.

By repeatedly framing the relationship through the lens of 'unrepentant aggressor' versus 'aggrieved victim,' the media normalizes the diplomatic stalemate. This indicates that as long as these identity constructs dominate global discourse, a true resolution to the Sino-Japanese conflict remains structurally impossible, shaping global perceptions of historically rooted disputes embedded in East Asian relations.

The moral hierarchy reproduced in the BBC's framing should not be understood solely as an intentional editorial bias. Rather, it reflects a structural feature of liberal global journalism, where norms of human rights, victim recognition, and moral accountability shape narrative construction. Within this normative environment, historical atrocities are interpreted through universalized standards of contrition that are largely derived from European post-war experiences. As a result, Japan is evaluated against a moral benchmark treated as globally applicable, while China's victimhood claims gain normative legitimacy. This illustrates how international media can appear balanced while simultaneously reproducing asymmetrical moral positions embedded in global liberal discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how the BBC frames Sino–Japanese relations through its coverage of the Nanjing Massacre, employing Entman's framing model within a constructivist framework. The analysis demonstrates that the BBC consistently

presents historical memory as a central and unresolved source of diplomatic tension, framing the bilateral relationship through narratives of moral responsibility rather than strategic disagreement.

The findings show that the BBC reproduces a structural moral hierarchy by positioning Japan as a moral debtor that has failed to meet international norms of contrition, while constructing China as a moral creditor whose demands for recognition are implicitly legitimized. This framing normalizes the persistence of diplomatic stalemate by transforming historical memory into a moral constraint that renders reconciliation ethically conditional and politically elusive.

By highlighting the role of international media as a non-state actor in memory politics, this study contributes to International Relations scholarship by demonstrating that global journalism actively participates in the construction of identity, legitimacy, and moral order. The persistence of Sino–Japanese tension cannot be fully explained by material interests or strategic rivalry alone; it is sustained by competing historical narratives that are continually reproduced in global discourse.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that international media play a significant role not only in reflecting historical disputes but also in stabilizing their meanings. As long as moral hierarchies rooted in historical memory dominate global narratives, reconciliation remains structurally constrained. Future research could extend this analysis through comparative studies of international media outlets to further explore how framing practices shape global understandings of historically rooted conflicts.

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