

Thinking Anew through a Critical Mind

*The Korea-Japan Normalization Talks – The First Republic’s
Diplomatic Policy toward Japan and the Development Process of the
Korea-Japan Normalization Talks*

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I. Research History of the Topic

The Korea-Japan Normalization Talks that lasted for fourteen years is one of the major topics in the study of Korean-Japanese relations, along with Japan’s invasion and control of Korea. Although I have never done an exact count, from experience as a reviewer, these issues are likely the most discussed topic in numerous papers on the relationship of Korea and Japan, especially in doctoral dissertations.

The Korea-Japan Normalization Talks has been a frequently recurring topic of doctoral dissertations since the 1990s, when related materials from the United States were made accessible to the public and hence allowed researchers to view the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks within the context of the structural relationship among Korea, Japan, and the U.S. Lee Won-deok’s book (1996) is a representative achievement of this time, as it looked at the entire process of the Normalization Talks from the beginning to the signing of the treaty, especially focusing upon

‘Japan’.¹ Lee Jong-won (1996) also paid attention to the relationship of the three countries during the 1950s with respect to the regional integration strategies of the U.S., although he did not make much mention of the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks.² Lee Jong-won’s work has changed the previous perception that the 1950s was a stagnant period, by bringing out the fact that it was a time of transition to the 1960s.

While these books by Lee Won-deok and Lee Jong-won dealt with the entire process of the Talks, focusing on the structural aspects of that particular era, from the 2000s, doctoral dissertations began to appear that discuss individual topics in the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks. Among them, Oota Osamu’s work (2003) needs particular notice.³ He has drawn the attention to the political nature of the reparation negotiation and included factors such as the Cold War, the division between North and South Korea and the political agenda into his analysis of the reparation suits made by the Korean government. Then he has concluded that the Syngman Rhee government had incorporated anti-Japanese sentiment with anticommunism.

However, Park Jin-hee (2008) finds that Lee Won-deok, whose focus was mainly on the moves by Japan during the Talks, and Oota Osamu, whose major concern was the Rhee government’s political motives behind the reparation suits, both failed to characterize properly Syngman Rhee’s and the Korean government’s policy toward Japan. Neither of them considered the ‘Korean government’ as an independent

¹ Lee, Won-deok [이원덕]. (1996). *The Start of Korea-Japan History Negotiation* [한일 과거사 처리의 원점, hanil gwageosa cheoliui wonjeom]. Seoul: Seoul National University Press.

² Lee Jong-won [李鍾元]. (1996). *The Cold War in East Asia and US-Japan-Korea Relations* [東アジア冷戦と韓米日関係, higashi asia reisen to kanbeinitikankei]. Tokyo: Tokyo University Press [東京大学出版会]

³ Oota Osamu [太田修]. (2003). *Negotiations between Japan and Korea: A Study on Reparation Demands* [日韓交渉: 請求権問題の研究, nitkankoushou: seikyukennonkenkyuu]. Tokyo: Kurzin [クレイン]

policy maker. Park therefore criticizes them for failing to understand how Syngman Rhee utilized anti-Japanese sentiment in domestic politics and for failing to understand what Syngman Rhee's policy toward Japan actually entailed.

II. Research Purpose

Park (2008) states that the aim of her book is “to analyze the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks and the relationship between Korea and Japan in the 1950s with a focus on the Korean government as an independent policy maker” (p. 15). Following the procedure and tracing the key agenda of each critical stage of the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks, the author shows how the Korean government's policy and political logic influenced the process and outcome. The following contents of her book reflect this research purpose:

- I. Preface

- II. Korea's diplomatic policy toward Japan after the establishment of the Republic of Korea (1948~1951): To get involved in the Peace Talks between the Allies and Japan
 1. Korea's perception of Japan and policy orientation
 2. Korea's demand for its participation in the Peace Talks and the Allies' rejection

- III. From the First to the Third Korea-Japan Normalization Talks and Korea's policy toward Japan (1951~1953): Peace Line, Korean-Japanese fisheries disputes, and reparation claims
 1. The preliminary meeting for the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks
 2. The declaration of the Peace Line and fisheries disputes
 3. Korea's reparation claims and the collapse of the Talks

- IV. The deadlock of the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks and negotiation for resumption (1953~1957): Disputes over detainee release
 - 1. The negotiations to resume the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks
 - 2. The mutual release of detainees and signing of an agreement

- V. The resumption and suspension of the Fourth Korea-Japan Normalization Talks (1958~1960): The issue of the repatriation of Korean residents in Japan to North Korea
 - 1. The resumption of the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks
 - 2. The repatriation of Korean residents in Japan to North Korea and the suspension of the Talks

- VI. The characteristics and limitations of the First Republic's diplomatic policy toward Japan
 - 1. The characteristics of the First Republic's policy toward Japan
 - 2. The limitations of the First Republic's policy toward Japan and its legacy

- VII. Conclusion

The author's reconstruction of the process of the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks from the 'Korean perspective' does not add anything new to the previous research on the topic. However, she has based her analysis on a clear theory that the slow, bumpy progress of the Talks was due to differences in historical understanding between the two governments, and not due to differing economic interests or military and diplomatic conflicts.

If this were all that was included here, her work would not be considered original to those already possessing basic knowledge about the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks, for everybody knows that the

greatest obstacle to the diplomatic normalization of Korea and Japan was their different perceptions of historical facts. However, the author argues that when evaluating the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks, we need to pay attention to the influence of the historical consciousness of the then Korean government or the Syngman Rhee government. Rather than just listing the various differences in historical understanding between the two countries, the author argues, the process and outcome of the Talks should be carefully investigated in connection with the historical understanding of the participants.

This approach allows us to measure the fundamental characteristics and limitations of the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks. In addition, it provides an explanation for two things. One is “the reason why the Korea-Japan agreement was not resolved even though solutions to most of the points of conflict were submitted in the 1950s (p.17).” The second point explained by this approach is why these issues continue to simmer even up until the present day. In other words, the approach followed here can tell us why the agreement which was not resolved during the time of the Syngman Rhee government could be concluded by the Park Chung Hee government and the significance of this fact.

With Park’s research and analysis, we have gained three new historical perspectives on the 1950s. First, we can learn that the Syngman Rhee government had an anti-Japanese policy that reflected the national demand. Second, if we accept this, we can conclude that Korea’s Japan policy was not subordinated to the Korea-US relationship or the Japan-US relationship. Third, we must correct our past understanding that the Syngman Rhee government undertook discussions with Japan only because of economic need and failed to conclude the agreement due to Syngman Rhee’s obstinate anti-Japanese policy. Consequently, these new historical perspectives can contribute to reshaping our perception of the 1950s, which we often think of as a time of Korean history characterized by just a primeval animal instinct for survival, without any ideological or political thought, due to the disasters of the Korean War. It should be

regarded as more than a trivial, ancillary achievement of the study.

III. Conclusion and Implications of the Work

According to the author, the fundamental goal and premise of the Syngman Rhee government's policy on Japan was to resolve the historical and diplomatic disputes of Korea and Japan by making Japan regret its errors in the past. This was the result of the Rhee government accepting the strong popular demand of the Koreans that Japan make reparations for her past wrongdoings. Therefore, "Japan's formal declaration of regret over her past wrongdoings" was not enough for the Syngman Rhee government. Rather, what the Rhee government was really concentrating on was "demanding Japan's reparations, signing a Korea-Japan fisheries agreement and securing the status of Koreans in Japan." The Japanese government, however, believed that the previous Japanese colonial rule of Korea had been legitimate and was interested in resolving the problem of Koreans residing in Japan, but they were indifferent to the Korean government's other demands. This is the reason why the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks dragged on for fourteen years.

While the policy of the Syngman Rhee government in the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks was very clear, the driving force pushing the Korean agenda at those talks came from Syngman Rhee's perception of Japan and his personal leadership. This was because the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which dealt with all international affairs, did not function as it was supposed to as the system of government was not yet well established.

Because of this, there is a mistaken notion that Syngman Rhee's emotional anti-Japanese sentiment was what impeded the progress of the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks. Syngman Rhee may have had strong anti-Japanese sentiment, as a person with a long history in the Korean nationalist movement, but he used this sentiment as "a strong restraint against Japan and as a mediator in the Korea-US relationship,"

incorporating it with anti-communism. That sentiment was not simply 'emotion' or 'obstinacy'. Rather, it was the supporting pillar of his consistent foreign policy.

In the view of this reviewer, by perceiving 'Korea' as an independent political player with historical consciousness, the author succeeded in proving that the differences in historical understanding were the fundamental cause for the disagreement between the two governments during the Normalization Talks. The author also clarified the fact that Syngman Rhee's policy toward Japan was carried out based on a clear nationalist consciousness. Through these new perspectives, the author incidentally provides an important basis for us to correct our image of the 1950s. Her analysis also suggests historical grounds to evaluate Syngman Rhee in a more positive light.

IV. Unresolved Points

Despite the clarity of the issues the author raises, there remain a few points that the author fails to fully address.

First, the author should have taken a more critical approach in her analysis. For example, a more critical analysis on the US's support for Japan would have been desirable. Japan claimed that its invasion and colonial rule of Korea had been legitimate under international law, and demanded Korea to pay reparations, as a countermeasure to Korea's reparation suits. The author's statement that the U.S. supported Japan although they knew it was baseless, is not sufficient. She should have pointed out the fact that the U.S. acted based on the same imperialistic drives as Japan did, against historical justice or universal values. Therefore, it is necessary for Korea to critically assess its approach toward the U.S. in order to resolve the long-lasting problem of Japan's historical consciousness. If we approach this question more critically, then we can objectify the presence of the U.S. in modern Korean history, and this can help us understand the role of the U.S. in historical disputes

in East Asia from a more critical standpoint.

Second, the author was not very successful in portraying the Korean government as an ‘active player’ in the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks. As the author herself acknowledges, Syngman Rhee was directly involved in the process of the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks of the 1950s, appointing the Korean delegates and guiding Korean policies. He even listened to and sorted out the related information directly from the delegates, without going through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Apparently, any systematic operation at the government-level could not be expected at that time. Nevertheless, the author should have justified her claim that the Korean government, not just Syngman Rhee the individual, played an active role in the Normalization Talks by clarifying the following issues: (i) what approach the Korean government took; (ii) for each different issue of the talks, whether there were any complexities arising from different opinions and intricate relationships among the involved parties of the Korean government; (iii) how these matters were related to President Syngman Rhee.

In addition, we not only need to clarify the various concrete movements of the personnel involved in the Talks, but also the diverse movements of the Korean people as an active political player. For example, my recent research has found that Koreans began to carry out academic research on Dokdo around the time of the First through Third rounds of the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks. It was when the gap in historical understanding between Korea and Japan clearly emerged and the tension rose between the two countries with the declaration of the Peace Line. Also, around this time, articles on Gando first appeared. In this backdrop of foreign policy and research environments, the Korean school textbooks issued under the First Curriculum Guidelines taught Dokdo and Gando as Korean territory.

Finally, Park (2008) fails to describe adequately how the protracted Normalization Talks and Korea’s domestic politics affected one another under the Syngman Rhee government and how this in turn influenced

policy making. The author writes “this research shall examine how differences in historical understanding are manifested, cause conflicts, and are mediated in the context of real politics” (p. 356). However, from this reviewer’s perspective, the author does not provide sufficient evidence of this. For example, members of the National Assembly as well as intellectuals, must have harbored strong disbelief in and hostility toward Japan, just as Syngman Rhee did. However, they would have reacted differently from one another at the moment Syngman Rhee’s Japan policy was connected to domestic politics. This is why we need to pay attention to how Syngman Rhee utilized his Japan policy in extending his power through drastic revisions to the Constitution.

It is a fact of life that there is always some discord among those involved in a problem. Then, it is hard to imagine that there was never any dispute among the President, the bureaucracy, politicians and the people, for more than 10 years, as they were dealing with important diplomatic problems. The following questions, for example, should have been addressed and explained to make the work more complete: the question of the political dynamics among the various agents involved in the Peace Line; the question of deporting ethnic Koreans in Japan to North Korea; the question of returning detainees to Japan; and the question of Japan’s demand for reparations from Korea. Only then can historical research that intends to explain specific issues spanning the period of the Korea-Japan Normalization Talks be more interesting and meaningful.