

The Popularization of National History in South Korea in the Post-Liberation Period

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The Journal of Northeast Asian History
Volume 9 Number 1 (Summer 2012), 91-117

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With the country's liberation from colonial rule in August 1945, the popularization of national history appeared like a "sublime" task for Koreans, as it was widely believed that they should contribute to the establishment of a newly independent country based on a solid identity as a people with systematic knowledge of the country's history. This popularization was carried out in two ways, by bottom-up and top-down methods. The former was adopted by the government through institutional education, including school education, while the latter was promoted by ordinary people through publications and lectures. The two patterns of popularizing national history interacted with each other, and led to the adoption of different objectives and content in the post-1945 national history of Korea. This paper examines the trend towards the popularization of national history in each period in order to review the significance of the popularization of national history and to understand the historical views of the general public, which were influenced by the efforts to popularize national history or gave stimulus to that popularization. This approach will highlight how the interaction between the views of national history scholars and those of the general public have shaped the larger contours of historiography and history education in South Korea.

Keywords: national history, popularization, populism-based historical perspective, history education, historiography, general public

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With the country's liberation from colonial rule in August 1945, the popularization of national history appeared like a “sublime” task for Koreans, as it was now widely believed that they should contribute to the establishment of a newly independent homeland based on a solid identity as a people with systematic knowledge of the country's history.¹ This popularization was carried out in two ways, by bottom-up and top-down methods. The objectives and characteristics of popularization changed according to what Korean society demanded in each period and according to the individual propensities of the leaders of the process of popularization. The objectives and characteristics of popularization appeared in diverse forms in conjunction with prevalent factors associated with each era and society as a whole, as shown by the differences in the concepts and categories relating to the popularization of national history, encompassing 1) the dissemination of basic

¹ Yi Gyeong-sik. (1997). *Hanguk geun-hyeondae sahoe wa guksa gyogwa ui buchim. Sahoe gwahak gyoyuk*, No. 1, 39-40; Seo Ui-sik. (2010). *Hanguk godaesa ui ihae wa guksa gyoyuk*. Hyeon, 249-55.

knowledge about national history; 2) knowledge of and information regarding the dissemination of research results on Korean history; 3) the fostering of self-recognition, reliance, and identity as a people; 4) enhancement of the revolutionary consciousness of classes; and 5) innovation in consciousness through the reinforcement of practice as key actors of history writing. Such diversity defined and influenced the way of realizing the popularization of national history.

This paper examines the trend toward the popularization of national history in each distinct period, along with its characteristics, in the post-1945 era, with a view to reviewing the significance of the popularization of national history and to understanding the historical view of the general public, which was influenced by the efforts to popularize national history or gave stimulus to that popularization. As a study concerning the interrelationship between the views of national history of scholars and those of the general public, this paper examines the popularization of national history by shedding light on the academic achievements of the time, with a focus on introductory national history books which display their authors' overall historical views.

Intense Interest in National History and the Distribution of Introductory National History Publications Following the Country's Liberation (1945-1953)

In the past, the popularization of national history in Korea was carried out in earnest with the objective of establishing a sovereign state and protecting its sovereign rights during the period of reform in early modern times. This can be seen in the history compilation work carried out by the government of the Empire of Korea and enlightenment activists' publication of biographies of great people.² Such efforts were

² Kim Tae-ung. *Geundae gaehyeokgi Gojong jeongbu ui seogu jeonjang tamsaek gwa manguk*

intended to help Koreans confirm their sense of identity and feel a sense of pride as members of the Korean nation, and to encourage them to realize the need to protect the country's sovereign rights. However, the country was ultimately deprived of its sovereignty by the Japanese imperialists despite such efforts, although the national spirit was maintained by various publications in the face of extreme difficulties throughout the colonial period.

Immediately after the country's liberation in August 1945, people expressed their deep love of the national language and history, which they had missed so painfully during the colonial period. The United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) accommodated Koreans' yearnings and tried to normalize the country's school education through the compilation of textbooks on Korean history. National history textbooks for elementary and secondary schools were published in October 1945 with the USAMGIK's financial support and the assistance of the Jindan hakhoe (Chindan Society) and the Joseon haksulwon (Joseon Academy of Sciences). These textbooks contained no foreword or introductory remarks, but simply stated the objective of the country's national history education as follows:

We should work hard to build a new country and a new culture, in addition to feeling regret over past follies, learning from the past, and acquiring a solid understanding of the current situation surrounding the country. We should refrain from taking an egoistic attitude and instead adopt a broad view of the situation. We should resolve to contribute to world peace and culture.

The foregoing remarks show that the textbooks stressed the idea that the

saseojeok bogeup. In Yi Tae-jin gyosu cheongnyeon ginyeom nonchong ganhaeng wiwonhoe (Ed.). (2009), *Segye sok ui Hanguksa*. Taehaksa.

newly liberated country needed to adopt the “right” attitude to its tragic past and fully understand the prevalent international situation in connection with a need to build a new country and culture. In May 1946, the Ministry of Education established the Guksagwan (Hall of National History), which would later be replaced by the Guksa pyeonchan wiwonhoe (National History Compilation Committee), “in response to the people’s strong desire to restore the country’s splendid history upon gaining independence.”

Lecture sessions were frequently held to inform teachers of the contents of such textbooks, including one held in December 1945 by the Gyeonggi Office of Education. In July 1946, the Government launched the history departments of Gyeongseong Sabeom Daehak (Gyeongseong Teachers College) and Gyeongseong Yeoja Sabeom Daehak (Gyeongseong Women’s Normal College) in response to the efforts of scholars and teachers to restore the country’s identity and lost history with the people’s enthusiastic support.³

However, such efforts did not go far, as the curricula set by the USAMGIK in September 1946 were focused on the history of western culture and as such attached little or no importance to Korea’s national history. USAMGIK even attempted to push Korean students into accommodating the American style of social life.⁴ Under such circumstances, studies and education on national history could not be sustained.

Meanwhile, publishing companies started compiling introductory national history books. *Joseon yeoksa (The History of Joseon, 1946)* and *Gochyeosseun Joseon yeoksa (The Rewritten History of Joseon, 1948)* both written by Kim Seong-chil (1913-1951), for example, enjoyed great popularity. The publishing company had originally expected to print 20,000 copies of each book, but after fifty days it changed its plan to

³ Yeoksagwa Yuksipnyeonsa Pyeonchan Wiwonhoe. (Ed.). (2008). *Seoul Daehakkyo Sabeom Daehak Yeoksagwa yuksipnyeonsa*, 18-20.

⁴ Yi Gyeong-sik, *Ibid*, pp. 39-43.

50,000 copies of the regular edition plus 500 copies of the luxury edition. In 1946 alone were sold 60,000 copies. People welcomed the “refreshingly new” history books, which were written in plain yet refined Korean. The writer made the following statement in the foreword of the books, indicating the direction and significance of the popularization of national history at that time:

I have had a number of opportunities to teach national history to school children since the country’s liberation last summer. I perceived an urgent need for national history books to be read by children. I heard about children in advanced countries lying on their Mom’s lap and listening to her telling them about interesting history stories or reading picture books about their countries’ history. After 35 years of repressive colonial rule, our children, whether elementary or secondary school children, knew almost nothing about the country’s history. I saw an urgent need for well-written easy-to-read national history books for children, who were eager to know about the history of their homeland. Such books would help replace the sense of self-contempt that Japanese colonists tried to implant into the minds of Koreans with a refreshingly new sense of self-confidence. I felt the same thing when I taught national history to young people in the provinces.⁵

The writer’s feelings about the need to popularize national history can be reformulated as follows: First, it was important to teach Korean children their country’s history, as they had been deprived of a chance to study it during the colonial period, due to the colonists’ efforts to erase Korea’s history. Second, the country needed to take a drastic measure to replace the sense of self-contempt that Japanese colonists had tried to implant in the minds of Koreans with a sense of self-confidence. In other words, it

⁵ Kim Seong-chil. (1946). *Joseon yeoksa*. Joseon geumyung johap yeonhaphoe.

was urgent to reestablish the country's self-identity. Finally, the author thought that national history books should be written in such a way as would help children to read about history with ease.

These books had a great impact on young people at that time. The poet Sin Gyeong-rim (b. 1936), whose poems mostly concern the scenes or folk customs of rural villages, said that he found them so interesting that he read them five times a year, thus leading him to a love of reading national history books. He added that he did not have a proper chance to learn about the nation's history at school and that these books filled the void.⁶ In this way, the efforts to popularize national history gradually bore fruit despite the difficulties that arose after the country's liberation and during the Korean War.

In addition, the Seoul Daehakkyo Guksa Yeongusil (National History Research Center of Seoul National University) published *Joseonsa gaeron (Introduction to the History of Joseon, Yuinmul, 1946)* in an effort to help history teachers enhance their knowledge of their specialty and their teaching skills. Other noticeable introductory history books published at that time include *Joseonsa daegwan (An Outline of the History of Joseon, 1949)* by Yi Byeong-do; *Joseonsa gyogwa (The Subject of the History of Joseon, 1948)* by Jeon Seok-dam; and *Guksagaeyo (An Outline of National History, 1949)* by Son Jin-tae.⁷

Features of the Government's Popularization of National History in the Period of Social Reconstruction (1953-87)

During the Korean War (1950-53), school education could not be carried out normally. Many school buildings were destroyed and the number of

⁶ Sin Gyeong-rim. (1991). *Sedae-byeol jeungeon nae ga bateun Hanguksa gyoyuk 50-dae: Illeobeorin guksa sigan 12 nyeon. Yeoksa bipyeong*, No. 17, Winter.

⁷ Jo Dong-geol. (1998). *Hyeondae Hanguk sahaksa*. Nanam chulpansa, 342-44.

students attending school decreased. After the war, the government gave priority, including budgetary spending, to economic reconstruction.

The country's illiteracy rate fell from about 80 percent immediately after liberation to 22.1 percent by 1959 thanks to the literacy campaign conducted by the government and private organizations.⁸ By the end of the 1950s, most school-age children came to attend elementary school under the government's free compulsory education policy,⁹ which led to a dramatic increase in the percentage of people able to read and write.

Efforts such as these did not lead directly to the strengthening of national history education. Right after the liberation, the country did not have sufficient resources or abilities to overcome the colonial brainwashing that had dominated people's minds over the 35-year-long colonial period, and the majority of people could not afford to pay much attention to national history anyway. Besides, some people insisted that history, civic education, and geography should be integrated as sociology into one textbook. However, such a view was not adopted due to the opposition of scholars and teachers, who pointed out the problems associated with an integrated sociology class together with the importance of historical understanding and the painful remorse felt for the country's tragic past, but those who so insisted left considerable scars.¹⁰

As it happened, the April 1960 Revolution aroused a spirit of self-reliant consciousness in the minds of the people. The revolution also provided the momentum for scholars and teachers to start making earnest efforts to efface the traces of colonial brainwashing. The need for such an

⁸ Kim Gi-seok & Gang Il-guk. 1950 nyeondae Hanguk gyoyuk. In Mun Jeong-in & Kim Se-jung. (Eds). (2004), *1950 nyeondae Hanguksa ui jaejomyeong*. Seonin, 532-33.

⁹ Op cit., 540-44.

¹⁰ Kim Tae-ung. Haebang-hu Seoul Daehakkyo Sabeom Daehak Yeoksagwa ui iryeok gwa hangmun-gyoyuk. In Seoul Daehakkyo Sabeom Daehak. (Ed.). (2007), *Mirae gyoyuk byeonhwa wa jungdeung gyoyuk: Gwaje wa jihyang*. Hakjisa, 222-23.

initiative had been raised even before the April 1960 Revolution, but had not spread widely among all intellectuals.

Following the normalization of the country's diplomatic relations with Japan in 1965, both the government and the private sector found it necessary to accord priority to the self-reliance of the Korean nation. The government raised the issue as part of an effort to alleviate concerns over Japan's economic or cultural re-invasion of the country. As for the private sector, it rediscovered the roots of the Korean nation in movements against normalization of the country's diplomatic relations with Japan.

In August 1965, the government announced a plan to highlight the philosophies and achievements of the nation's distinguished ancestors and to popularize national history education through the establishment of self-reliance and a refusal to adopt decadent foreign influences under a newly established code of practice. The announcement was followed by efforts to reinforce the country's national history education. Likewise, academic circles established the Hanguksa yeonguhoe (Association of Korean History Researchers) in December 1967 and stepped up similar efforts in line with the popularization of national history.¹¹ The launch of the *Guksa hakgwa* (Department of National History) as an independent department separate from the *Sahakgwa* (Department of History) at Seoul National University was a particularly representative outcome of such efforts.¹²

Guksa sillon (*The History of Korea*), written by Yi Gi-baek in 1961, which pointed to the need to overcome the traces of colonial brainwashing perpetrated by Japanese colonists and contained the results of research undertaken by national history scholars of Korea, is said to have contributed greatly to developing people's historical view as well as

¹¹ Sin Seok-ho. (1968). *Hanguksa yeongu*, No. 1.

¹² *Dong-A Ilbo*, August 6, 1968.

serving as a bridge linking the people with academic circles. More than one million copies of the book had been sold by 2009.¹³ In the 1970s, three introductory books concerning Korean history dominated the market. These were Han U-geun's *Hanguk tongsa* (*General History of Korea*), Byeon Tae-seop's *Hanguksa tongnon* (*An Introduction to Korean History*), and Yi Gi-baek's *Hanguksa sillon* (*A New History of Korea*).

The efforts of the mass media also went a long way toward popularizing national history. An article in the *Dong-A Ilbo* dated December 4, 1969, stated:

A new wave of classical studies about Korea, intended to establish a self-reliant and positive historical view of the Korean nation, has spread to anthropology, archaeology, and art history and has been broadened with the support of economics, politics, and sociology. These studies include Yi Gi-baek's *A New History of Korea*, Yi Gwang-rin's *A Study on the History of Enlightenment in Korea*, and Son Bo-gi's *Development of the Ancient History of the Korean Nation*. Classical studies about Korea stimulated by the desire to rediscover the country's traditions and modernize the country based on self-reliance have achieved conspicuous results, particularly concerning the country's early modern history following the emergence of Silhak.

This comment shows that the mass media played a certain role in the popularization of national history by informing the public of the results of research by local historians.

Concerning Han U-geun's *Korean History in General*, *Dong-A Ilbo* carried the following commentary on March 25, 1970:

The task of the 1960s, namely, re-establishment of the self-reliant

¹³ Jeon Deok-jae. (2009). Yi Gi-baek ui Hanguk godaesa yeongu. *Hanguk godaesa yeongu*, 53, 83.

tradition of research on Korean history was proposed in Yi Gi-baek's *A New History of Korea* and deepened and stabilized by Han U-geun's *Korean History in General*. Han's contribution is thought to be great, as his work reinstated Koreans as the prime actors of Korean history.

The newspaper said that the books had “upgraded” the country's modern history into a process of positive efforts made by the Korean nation, describing it as struggle against foreign powers, citing as an example the fact that certain details, such as those concerning the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War, had been deleted from the book. The newspaper noted that Han's book included statements about the country's ancient history, introducing the results of excavations of relics dating back to the Paleolithic period conducted immediately prior to the publication of the books.

Some people pointed out that the results of such research by scholars were not known to ordinary people. They asked for the compilation of easy-to-read history books suitable for ordinary people rather than remaining complacent about the distribution of knowledge about national history through school curricula and various exams,¹⁴ saying that such efforts would ultimately help enhance the vitality of the Korean nation and individuals' sense of pride through the study of national history. In 1969, Kim Seong-gyun, who served as the Guksa pyeonchan wiwonjang (Chairman of the National History Compilation Committee), described it as a process of making national history part of the people's common sense. It was another way of putting the popularization of national history.¹⁵

In December 1968, the government announced the Gungmin gyoyuk heonjang (National Charter of Education) and said that it was

¹⁴ Kim Seong-gyun, Guksa ui gungmin sangsikhwa jechang: Minjokjeok jabusim yonggi reul gatgi wihayeo. *Dong-A Ilbo*, December 9, 1969.

¹⁵ *Dong-A Ilbo*, February 14, 1970.

important to put national ethics into practice. The government also stated that it would reinforce anti-Communism and national history education.¹⁶ In May 1972, it was pointed out that national history was missing from the list of subjects of an examination held for the recruitment of high-ranking Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, while foreign languages, including English, were regarded as important subjects.¹⁷ The government decided to include “Korean language” and “Korean history” in exams for the recruitment of public officials, which shows that the government played a leading role in the popularization of national history by including it as a required subject for tests related to the recruitment of public officials.

In May 1972, President Park Chung-hee proposed a system of school education based on the proper national identity. Thus, the government established the Guksa gyoyuk ganghwa wiwonhoe (Committee for the Reinforcement of National History Education) as part of the Ministry of Education¹⁸ and announced that the government would make efforts to promote systematic research on national history based on a self-reliant historical view.¹⁹ The government emphasized that even the issue of the popularization of national history would be dealt with by the

¹⁶ *Dong-A Ilbo*, November 26, 1969.

¹⁷ Guksa gyoyuk ganghwa bangan geonui, dated May 11, 1972, in Daetongnyeong Girokgwan (Presidential Archives).

¹⁸ Guksa gyoyuk ganghwa wiwonhoe (The Committee for Reinforcement of National History Education) was originally called the Guksa gyoyuk gaeseon wiwonhoe (National History Improvement Committee), whose functions were limited to deliberation. It is presumed that the name was changed in the course of being reported to the President. Refer to the following records kept at the Presidential Archives: “Minjok jucheseong hwangnip eul wihan gyoyuk gwaje gaepyeon” (draft, Ministry of Education, dated May 10, 1972) and “Guksa gyoyuk ganghwa bangan geonui,” dated May 11, 1972.

¹⁹ *Gyeonghyang Sinmun* dated May 11, 1972. Concerning the background of the establishment of the Committee for Reinforcement of National History Education and its activities, see Jo Mi-yeong. (2006). Haebang-hu guksa gyoyuk ui sahoegwahwa wa “Guksagwa” ui chipye. *Yeoksa gyoyuk* 98, 48-52; Cha Mi-hui. (2011). Hanguk jung-godeung hakkyo ui guksa gyoyuk: Guksagwa dongnip sigi (1974-1994) reul jungsim euro. In *Guksa gyoyuk*. Gyoyuk gwahaksa, 35-45.

committee and that the committee would deliberate the following issues: inclusion of the history of foreign countries in secondary school curricula; systematization of the contents of national history education; training of national history teachers and guidance on how to teach their classes; and popularization of national history and the reclassification of national history as a sociology subject. The plan set up by the Ministry of Education to reorganize the educational curriculum had already obtained the approval of the President in May 1972. The government announced a plan to make it compulsory to include national history in all state-administered exams and even private businesses' employee recruitment tests.²⁰ The plan of the Ministry of Education included the designation of national history as a separate subject in the College Scholastic Ability Test, and required colleges to adopt it as a mandatory subject in their entrance exams. These initiatives were a part of the government's efforts to put an end to the tendency to belittle national history as a school subject.

The government also carried out research on desirable directions for national history education based on a self-reliant view of the history of the Korean nation from a long-term perspective and carried out a drastic reformation of school curricula.²¹ In particular, the government wanted to introduce relevant regulations for providing easy-to-read history books and for adopting history as a required subject in the state-administered exams and tests carried out by private businesses to recruit new employees. The mass media's response was that it was a desirable action to take in connection with the need to foster a sense of ethnic pride in the minds of young Koreans.

²⁰ Guksa gyoyuk ganghwa bangan geonui, dated May 11, 1972, held at the Daetongnyeong Girokgwan (Presidential Archives), *Guksa gyoyuk ganghwa bangan geonui*.

²¹ Concerning the direction and contents of national history and curricula in Je-3ch'a gyoyuk gwajeong-gi guksagwa gyoyuk gwajeong (*The Third Amendment of the National Curriculum*), see Cha Mi-hui, *ibid*, 45-62.

Academic circles declared that they approved of the basic idea concerning the reinforcement of national history education and the encouragement of studies of national history, but that they were opposed to the government's attempt to dominate academic societies and establish a government-run center for Korean studies, pointing out that it would limit scholars' freedom of academic criticism.²² They urged that the government should instead provide an environment conducive to national history research in universities and the invigoration of national history education. They also pointed out that research on national history might take a backward step if used as a political tool and that what the government should do was to train "right-minded" people.

After lengthy discussions, the Committee for the Reinforcement of National History Education adopted the view that the key actor of the country's history is the Korean nation as a whole, and distanced itself from ways of history recognition based on class conflicts or the deeds of the minority elite. It pointed out that the overall capability of the Korean nation was underestimated in the course of stressing the achievements of individual heroes and decided to revise history textbooks with a focus on the need to develop historical consciousness in the minds of secondary school students. National history was adopted as a new course by secondary schools and as a required subject by universities. Academic circles approved of the basic idea concerning the establishment of such an educational objective, but took a cautious attitude nonetheless. They stated that the establishment of a self-reliant view of the history of the Korean nation should be preceded by sufficient research, and that such research could not be undertaken in a short period of time. They also stated that the establishment of an ethnic philosophy was not something that could be accomplished by research on national history alone and that the reinforcement of national history in that way might result in the

²² *Dong-A Ilbo*, May 18, 1972.

belittling of the education of world history.²³

Despite such caution on the part of academic circles, the government-led popularization of national history was carried out rapidly. In the 1980s, the neo-military coup group, the Singunbu, reinforced national history education in schools in response to Japan's attempt to distort historic facts in certain Japanese textbooks. The measure, which was also an attempt to make up for shortcomings in their legitimacy, included the allocation of higher scores to national history in college entrance exams and the supplementation of content about modern history. At that time, the pro-government mass media stressed the need to foster the people's history consciousness in connection with a series of provocative actions by North Korea, including the terrorist attack against the South Korean government delegation visiting Burma in 1983, the terrorist bombing of a South Korean commercial airliner in 1987, the Iran-Iraq War (1980-90), the Lebanon crisis in the 1980s, and others.

The pro-government mass media asserted that Koreans' history consciousness had become blurred and pointed to the need for the popularization of national history based on a solid sense of mission.²⁴ With regard to the need to popularize national history, they stated, "All people, including students, should read many history books and build their own history consciousness. The process will help them obtain the wisdom required to overcome any ordeals they may be faced with in the course of history." This emphasis on the popularization of national history was aimed at the development of an ethnic consciousness. At the ceremony to celebrate the completion of the Guksagwan (National Institute of Korean History) in March 1987, President Chun Doo-hwan said, "The work of overcoming the traces of colonial brainwashing, toadyism, and the materialistic conception of history is an assignment

²³ *Gyeonghyang Sinmun*, May 26, 1972.

²⁴ *Gyeonghyang Sinmun*, February 27, 1984.

given to us today. We should endeavor to inspire a sense of ethnic pride and confidence in our own minds and in those of our children through national history education that focuses on the great achievements of our ancestors.”²⁵ Such a statement revealed the view of national history education adopted by the Singunbu to maintain its dictatorship. We can see that the contents and objectives of the popularization of national history of that time were quite similar to the anti-Communist nationalism adopted by the preceding military dictatorship.

The Emergence of Diverse Historical Theories and the New Trend in the Popularization of National History in the Period of Social Reformulation (1987-Present)

In response to the Singunbu regime’s attempt to popularize national history, young national history scholars and teachers who sympathized with the democratic movement of the 1980s pushed ahead with the bottom-up popularization method, advocating the populism-based historical perspective. This tendency represented a new change among history scholars amid the emergence of the new democratic system following the democratic movement launched in June 1987.

The new change began with the publication of *Hanguk minjungsa* (*The History of the Grassroots in Korea*), which a group of young scholars wrote in 1986. The book insisted that the grassroots were the key actors of the country’s history and criticized the regime’s ethnic view of history according to which the Korean nation was the key actor of the country’s history. This heralded the emergence of the populism-based historical perspective. The book was an introductory national history book that reflected more recent academic achievements in research on the social and economic history of the late Joseon period and the modern

²⁵ *Dong-A Ilbo*, March 24, 1987.

history of Korea amid the influence of the democratic movements of the 1970s and 1980s. The book refused to accept the government-led or school education-based popularization of national history. It criticized young people who studied history only as a means of scoring higher marks in exams. It also criticized attempts to build historical knowledge merely by watching television lectures on history. And it called for an end to the view of history based on anti-Communist nationalism. Instead, the authors attempted to make statements out of the hope that ordinary people would come to acquire the “right” historical consciousness or hold the “right” historical view, based on the presupposition that “they were responding to the grassroots’ requests.” They presented a way of popularizing national history to help people understand history in an easy, interesting, significant, and correct manner. It was the first introductory history book to target grassroots readers.

In 1986, the Yeoksa Munje Yeonguso (Institute for Korean Historical Studies) was established in order “to study various issues of the country’s modern period through joint operation and to inform the general public of them in an effort to popularize history.” Encouraged by the democratic movement of September 1987, the institute launched *Yeoksa bipyeong* (*Critical Review of History*), a quarterly journal dealing with historical and current issues with the aim of “popularizing history research and establishing a new historical consciousness.” In its first issue, the quarterly stated, “Studies of the country’s modern history should not be left only to otherworldly occupants of the ivory tower now that we are standing on the path toward the democratization of society and the unification of the two Koreas. Now, such studies should not be instilled unilaterally into the minds of people. The grassroots are the key actors in the country’s society and history and it is time for them to recover their historical consciousness. We would like to belong to all those wishing to see the establishment of a new historical consciousness in the people.” Scholars sought to leave their offices and get closer to the people in order to spread the new historical consciousness. The journal

also contained records of testimonies concerning events in the history of the Korean grassroots, which were materials showing the relationship between the grassroots populace and the compilers of the quarterly.

The former Guro Yeoksa Yeonguso (Guro Institute of Historical Studies; now the Institute of Historical Studies), which was launched by young historians, published *Baro boneun uri yeoksa (A Correct Perspective of the Country's History)* in 1990. The book criticized existing historical statements as distortions made from the perspective of the ruling class and said that it aimed to systematize the grassroots-led history of the country. In its foreword, the book expressed the purpose of the publication as follows:

The grassroots and young people, including students, who emerged as the key actors in the country's history in the 1980s are determined to create a new future history and call for the establishment of an environment conducive to such. In consideration of such a realistic demand, we blame the version of history dominated by the deeds of the ruling class and hereby introduce our book entitled *Baro boneun uri yeoksa*, which systematizes the country's grassroots-led ethnic history. It is our sincere desire to speak up for the history of the grassroots populace whom the ruling class have always looked down upon and trampled underfoot. At this time of concluding a period of history during the 1980s in which we refused to continue to suffer from pain and submission, we expect this book to remain alive in the hearts of the grassroots, who will not stop marching toward the country's democratization and unification even in the 1990s.

This book received great attention and became a must-read for laborers. More than 100,000 copies of the book were sold. The success of the book was attributable to the contents, which focused on the populism-based historical perspective, the easy-to-read style, and the invigoration of the labor movement of that time.²⁶ In 1992, the Hanguk yeoksa yeonguhoe

(Korean History Research Association) published *Hanguk yeoksa* (*The History of Korea*). Some scholars said that this book, along with *Hanguk minjungsa* and *Baro boneun uri yeoksa*, was an introductory national history book based on Karl Marx's materialistic conception of history and thus similar to Jeon Seok-dam's *Joseonsa gyogwa* published soon after the country's liberation.²⁷

In response to the nationalism-based historical view held by some historians and the populism-based historical perspective held by liberals, Yi Gi-baek, by then an elderly historian, published a magazine entitled *Hanguksa simin gangjwa* (*Korean History Lectures for Common People*) in August 1987, while considering the popularization of national history.²⁸ He thought that sharing the results of research with others was no less important than the research itself. Then, Yi Gi-dong pointed out the problems of the populism-based historical perspective under the following subjects: problems with the theory of the grassroots as key actors and of class struggle; problems associated with presentism and practicality; problems of modernization of the grassroots and ethnic key actors; and the lack of understanding about political history.²⁹

In this way, the issue concerning the popularization of national history developed as a struggle for dominance between the self-reliant view of the history of the Korean nation and the populism-based historical perspective of the grassroots' historical consciousness, thus moving beyond the spread of basic knowledge about national history and of academic results. Such a situation faced a new phase with the emergence of the New Right in the twenty-first century. New Rightists criticized outright both the self-reliant view of the history of the Korean nation and the populism-based historical perspective. They stressed the

²⁶ Regarding this issue, see Bak Jun-seong. (2009). *Bak Jun-seong ui nodongja yeoksa iyagi*. Ihu.

²⁷ Jeong Du-hui. (2001). *Hana ui yeoksa, dugae ui yeoksahak*. Sonamu, 106-7.

²⁸ Kim Deok-jae, *Ibid*, 91.

²⁹ Yi Gi-dong, *Minjusa hangnon*. In *Hyeondae Hanguk sahak gwa sagwan*. Iljogak, 1991.

importance of the development of civilization and economic growth under the banner of neo-liberalism and published an introductory Korean history book aimed at enlightening the grassroots.³⁰ Now, the struggle developed beyond the level of a controversy inside academic circles, and started to dominate the grassroots' historical consciousness before spreading to the controversy surrounding textbooks on the country's modern history.

During the Roh Tae-woo administration, which focused on globalization, both liberals and conservatives criticized at the preceding dictatorship's emphasis on national history. National history lost its status as an independent course and became part of sociology courses again. National history textbooks were in danger of being integrated as elements of sociology textbooks.

Social factions then vied with each other for status as the leaders of the popularization of national history. The mass media joined the competition. This was the prelude to the commencement of a struggle among the grassroots' parties over historical perspectives and between conservative intellectuals and their counterparts for dominance. The grassroots were destined to shoulder the results of the struggle. Matters that should have been discussed among scholars and teachers, and deepened through research, instead became controversial political and social issues in schools and among the grassroots. Instead of finding solutions through mutual dialogue and respect for each other, the grassroots came to hold very rigid ideological positions which greatly increased the possibility of their colliding with each other. If this situation is allowed to degenerate into historical nihilism or presentism, it will end up obstructing the popularization of national history. In such a case, the grassroots will be reduced to mere consumers of knowledge interested only in history books or dramas as a means of stimulating their

³⁰ Gyogwaseo poreom. (2008). *Hanguk geun-hyeondaesa: Dae-an gyogwaseo*. Giparang.

intellectual curiosity or imagination, or those studying introductory national history books to obtain higher marks in tests.

Conclusion

The popularization of national history has gone through many twists and turns since the country made its first strides towards building a sovereign state and safeguarding national sovereignty during the reform era in the early modern period. This popularization was carried out in two ways, by top-down and bottom-up methods. The former was adopted by the government through institutional education, including school education, while the latter was promoted by ordinary people through publications and lectures. The two methods of popularizing national history interacted with each other, and led to the adoption of different objectives and contents, depending on the period.

The country's liberation in August 1945 provided the Korean people with an opportunity to resume efforts to popularize national history, which had been doomed to oblivion by the Japanese colonists' oppression. The Ministry of Education made efforts to instill a sense of ethnic identity into the minds of the young generations and enhance their consciousness about national history through textbooks, while in the private sector some authors and publishers made similar efforts. Together, they went a long way toward popularizing national history by enhancing the level of the grassroots' understanding of national history when the situation was, in reality, highly unfavorable immediately after the liberation and throughout the Korean War.

The efforts to popularize national history were invigorated in conjunction with the self-reliant ethnic consciousness stirred up through the April 1960 Revolution. Following the normalization of the country's diplomatic relations with Japan in 1965, both the government and the private sector found it necessary to place priority on the self-reliance of the Korean nation and pointed to the need to overcome the traces of

colonial brainwashing. As a result, the government, scholars, and teachers stressed the importance of strengthening the research on national history and the relevant education.

Amid such circumstances, introductory national history books, including Yi Gi-baek's *A New History of Korea*, were published. These books also emphasized the need to overcome the traces of colonial brainwashing and contained statements which reflected the results of recent research on national history undertaken by scholars. Thus, they served as a bridge between scholars and the grassroots, and contributed to the enhancement of ordinary Koreans' historical consciousness.

In May 1972, the government established the Committee for the Reinforcement of National History Education in a bid to strengthen research on Korean history and invigorate school education on the subject. At that time, the reorganization of the national history education curricula and the popularization of national history were issues that attracted more attention than any others. National history became an independent subject in schools and an important subject in state-administered exams. The government compelled schools to use government-designated national history textbooks which propounded the so-called ethnic philosophy. Thus, anti-Communist nationalism dominated national history textbooks. The Singunbu seized power in the 1980s and attempted to enhance the national consciousness, attaching importance to the self-reliant view of the history of the Korean nation in an attempt to oppress democratic movements and secure the legitimacy of the regime.

Despite such efforts by the Singunbu, the democratic movement spread and young national history scholars called for an end to anti-Communist nationalism and strove to view the country's history from the perspective of the grassroots. *Hanguk yeoksa*, *Hanguk minjungsa*, and *Baro boneun uri yeoksa* were the leading introductory books written from the populism-based historical perspective.

The publication of such introductory national history books

heralded the beginning of the popularization of national history in earnest. They presented a challenge to the existing self-reliant view of the history of the Korean nation, in addition to being an effort to enhance the people's level of consciousness about national history. Meanwhile, attempts to popularize national history by elderly national history scholars, including Yi Gi-baek, led to a confrontation between the self-reliant view of the history of the Korean nation and the populism-based historical perspective. With the recent emergence of the New Right, which held a critical view of both the self-reliant view of the history of the Korean nation and the populism-based historical perspective, the struggle over the historical view developed beyond the level of a controversy inside academic circles and started to dominate the grassroots' historical consciousness before spreading to the controversy over textbooks on the country's modern history.

However, such controversies should not be allowed to be used as political or social footballs through the intervention of politicians and the mass media. Rather, it should be left to scholars and educators to reach a solution on the basis of highly informed and deepened research. Otherwise there is a danger that the grassroots' historical consciousness will be led toward ideological conflict and the popularization of national history will be obstructed by the spread of historical nihilism.

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