

Stepping Stone for Contemplation and Exploration in East Asian History: Review of *Shared Readings of Modern East Asian History* (Revised Edition)*

by YU Yong-tae, PARK Jin-u, and PARK Tae Gyun
Korea: Changbi, 2016

—
Jeong-in KIM

Chuncheon National University of Education

I. The Fruits of Contemplation

When first introduced in the 1990s along with “East Asian discourse (*dongasiaron*),” the field of East Asian History was largely dismissed as unrealistic. Soon China’s rapid rise and the changing political dynamics in the region, however, ensured the subject would begin to attract widespread attention. In Korea, the ever-expanding scope of research on East Asian history prompted the teaching of “East Asian History” as a distinct high school subject beginning in 2012.

The introduction, conclusion, and ten chapters included in this 2016 revised edition of the book were also each originally in the first edition released in 2010, which underwent seven printings. The book’s objective is to present a regional history of East Asia that addresses the conceptual problems and limitations of past attempts to do so.

With the emergence of East Asian discourse in Korea, criticism of ethnocentric and nation-centric conceptions of history began to appear in

* *Hamkke ingneun dongasiageunhyeondaesa* (gaejeong pan).

earnest in the fields of history and historical education. As post-nationalist conceptions of history gradually gained in prominence, the very idea of a “national history” came to be dismissed. Along with nationalistic and ethnocentric historical perspectives, orientalist historical perspectives rooted in the ideas of “civilizational enlightenment (*munmyeonggaehwa*)” and social Darwinism were also subjected to fierce criticism. Behind such critical thinking lay the tacit recognition that conceptions of global history were essentially Eurocentric.

This was a contradictory reality, characterized by the excessive emphasis on national and ethnic identity intrinsic to nationalistic and ethnocentric historical discourse, on the one hand, and the lack of self-respecting historical perspectives emanating from orientalist historical perceptions on the other. Regional histories have accordingly attracted a great deal of attention as a way beyond this impasse in research and education related to East Asian history. Thus, in order to understand the lineage of the Korean people in a more contextual manner, Korean historians shifted their focus away from far away lands to examine the more immediate experiences shared with adjacent neighbors, overcoming the barriers of nationalistic, ethnocentric identity without losing a sense of identity altogether.

East Asian history has garnered widespread interest because, as a regional history, it offers opportunities to move beyond existing historical perceptions. This newfound interest in East Asia, moreover, is quite different from that which originated in imperial Japan. As stated in the book, the goal of a regional history of East Asia is to facilitate ‘an understanding of world history grounded in the history and reality of a single nation, Korea, while engaging in the careful introspection to ensure such an understanding does not become a mere extension of a single national history.’ In order to realize this objective, the book relates and compares imperialistic and nationalistic views of history.

The ultimate goal of this book, by way of such contemplation, is ‘to confront the dichotomous historical narrative of invasion and

exploitation versus cooperation and interdependence and establish a historical framework in pursuit of peace and prosperity in East Asia.’ In other words, to the question, ‘Why is an East Asian history necessary?’ the book replies, ‘For the contribution to the peace and prosperity of East Asia.’ Dialogues between China, Korea, and Japan in the 2000s around the subject of East Asian history have greatly attracted the attention of scholars and educators. Thus, East Asian history has moved beyond mere discourse to attain substantive power. These dialogues recognized the possibility of the politicization of historical conflicts to threaten peace in East Asia. They have produced concrete results in the forms of books and reports.

History Leading to the Future (Miraereul yeoneun yeoksa), a work jointly composed by China, Korea, and Japan, is one such result directly referenced in the book:

‘Discernable attempts have been made to create a shared history between the three nations with respect to Japan’s war of aggression. The reduction of modern East Asian history to Japan’s war of aggression, however, is excessively one-sided. Meanwhile, the subjective roles of other Asian territories resisting Japan are lacking. Korean and Chinese resistance to Japanese aggression, on the other hand, appears passive and inevitable, arising as a reaction to the actions of Japan. Furthermore, the depiction of the subjectivity of Korea and China purely in terms of resistance against Japan may serve but to strengthen the tendency toward nationalistic historiography.’

This passage is a reflection of the concern that the dialogues, although carried out in the name of peace and prosperity for the East Asian community, might rather produce a result opposite to the one intended.

Accordingly, the book moves beyond the limitations of existing historical perceptions while resolving issues related to the efforts thus far to compose an East Asian history. To this end, it concentrates on

‘understanding the dependence, relationships, confrontations, and conflicts between the state and civil society in the East Asian region, while drawing into relief the efforts to pursue liberty and equality through solidarity and cooperation.’

Structurally, while exploring the overall flow of modern and contemporary East Asian history, the book is divided by topic. The ten subjects addressed mostly pertain to politics and economy but there are also those related to society and culture. This approach is reminiscent of the revised 2007 educational curriculum on East Asian history, which divided the subject into twenty-six topics in order to present a comprehensive overview.

The book seeks to address each topic at the regional, state, and civic levels. In turn, the book thus covers the interrelated content at the regional level transcending the scope of the state; content at the state level, where comparisons are possible but interrelationships are difficult to discern; and content at the level of the people, external to state leadership, who were unsuccessful in state formation or deprived of the state altogether. Approaches to East Asian history at regional, state, and civic levels have been greatly explored in the historical dialogues between Korea, Japan and China. This is reflected in the high school textbooks that are the fruits of such dialogues. The distinct character of the book lies in the manner in which it eludes agonizing over what particular image of East Asia is appropriate at each level; like a smelting furnace, it melds each of the images into one. Altogether, the book’s objective, structure and narrative style are the fruits of careful contemplation, that which has been produced in regional historical dialogues as well as research and education pertaining to East Asian history.

II. Reimagining East Asian History

The book is composed of three different parts. A Chinese historian

narrates the history of the nineteenth century, a Japanese historian the first half of the twentieth century, and a Korean historian the latter half of the twentieth century. The authors divide the topics in terms of which country is most important with respect to each individual topic. In this manner, they strive to avoid the shortcomings of existing studies on East Asian history composed of parallel national histories. There are, nonetheless, parts in the book where such an integrated perspective fails to materialize.

To begin, the first three chapters are entitled, “State and Society in the Period of Seclusion,” “Expansion of the Global Market and the Transformation in Regional Order,” and “Nation-state Oriented Reform.” Roughly spanning the seventeenth to late-nineteenth century, the discussions therein cover the prosperity and stability achieved in each country by the eighteenth century, internal collapses that began to take form in the early nineteenth century, demise of the Sino-centric tributary system and the transition to the treaty system brought on by, among other things, the inroads of Western powers, and nation-building efforts. Each of these matters is dealt with from a structural point of view. Establishing the relationship between the regional, national, and civic histories in each nation, they illuminate these historical epochs from an East Asian perspective. Although the terminology and logical development are quite technical, the chapters yield important implications.

Dealing with the first half of the twentieth century, the fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters are entitled, “Imperial invasion and Anti-imperial Nationalist Movements,” “Socialism and the People’s Movement,” and “The Shock of Total War and the Systemization of Public Mobilization.” With respect to the first edition, these chapters were criticized for their careless treatment of Chinese history relative to the treatment of the rise and fall of the Japanese Empire. Taking this assessment into account, in the revised edition these sections feature a supplemented account of Chinese history. However, as the authors acknowledge, this has only led to additional content pertaining to Chinese history. The manner in which

the chapters are divided into subsections, which was also an object of criticism, remains unchanged. Altogether, the aspects of Japan's dominance and wrongdoing are palpable in the Korean and Chinese sections revolving around the Japanese historical account. Finally, the aspects of resistance are discernible in the descriptions of Korea and China, but there is not enough content pertaining to the true suffering of the people.

A shortcoming of this section that has not been addressed in the revised edition is the persistent inadequacy of an international relations historical perspective. The stunningly rapid transformation of China's international status, for instance, is given insufficient treatment—China occupied a seat among top leaders at the Cairo Conference seemingly but a brief moment after lapsing into a pseudo-colony. The chapter topics being what they are, as listed above, it is possible to carelessly handle aspects of international relations history. Overall, one can evaluate this section of the book as an attempt to apply a topic-based approach to the first half of the twentieth century. This is different from existing studies, which commonly adopt an international relations historical perspective reproducing an image of the lives and peoples of each nation with respect to one another.

From chapter seven onward, covering the years since 1945, an international relations historical perspective becomes ubiquitous. The seventh chapter, which is also greatly concerned with the actions of the United States, is entitled, "The Formation of the Cold War System and the Postponement of Decolonization." In this manner, post-war East Asian history is dealt with in terms of the East Asia policy of the United States. The eighth and ninth chapters are entitled, "The Industrialization and Democratization of the Capitalist Bloc" and "The Experiments and Course Corrections of the Socialist Bloc." These concern Cold War East Asian history in both the capitalist and socialist blocs. The tenth chapter, entitled, "Conflicts and Civic Movements of the Post-Cold War Era," deals with post-Cold War East Asian history. The eighth to tenth chapters

provide consistent comparative discussions of contemporary East Asian history from the perspective of democracy. A notable change in the revised version is the addition of a section in chapter eight devoted to women's issues in the capitalist bloc during the Cold War. This allows for comparison with the existing section on women's issues in the socialist bloc in chapter nine.

Overall, the viewpoints and methodologies of the discussions of the nineteenth and early and late twentieth centuries are incongruent. But the intention of the book, 'to focus on a number of discrete events, how they were interrelated, and how they influenced and were influenced by each nation,' is undoubtedly buttressed by a number of revisions in the new edition. Nonetheless, it appears the fundamental objectives of the book—to overcome the limitations of parallel national histories, to reorganize historical facts and periods by topic, and to create a new image of East Asian history—have yet to be ultimately fulfilled.

East Asian history is a field demanding constant cooperation. Reflecting the prevailing nation-centric climate, Korean, Japanese, and Chinese histories each occupy their own particular domain in the discipline of history. Accordingly, research and education pertaining to East Asian history are also concerned with the reconfiguration of this topography. To reimagining East Asian history, one must embark on a journey involving two tasks: daring exploration and harmonious cooperation. Evoking these two tasks in its pages, the book thus becomes a stepping-stone for beginning such a journey.

III. The Korean Guide to Reading and Writing East Asian History

The Korean, Chinese and Japanese history textbooks created through joint Korean-Chinese writings on East Asian history feature comparisons of how to describe the port openings in each country. These descriptions are basically consistent with prevailing historical views based on a

Eurocentric conception of history beginning with the “Western great powers.” Thus, although the joint history textbooks pursued the creation of shared perceptions of East Asian history by “writing East Asian history together,” this only brought into fresh relief the fact that the project could not overcome the inertia of existing historical scholarship. Meanwhile, China’s *East Asian History (Dongasa)* explains the opening of ports in East Asia via the dissolution of the tributary system and the establishment of the treaty system in terms of the transformation of the Sino-centric order. Consequently, the rise of Japan within the treaty system is explained but there is no reference to Korea. *East Asian History (Dongasiasa)*, a textbook used in Korea, focuses on the relations and processes of port openings in East Asia on a “mutual” basis. This is because only when the issue is approached in terms of international relations history can the status and role of Korea be exposed.

In Korea, an issue ever of concern in researching East Asian history is how to narrate East Asian history as a Korean. Should one approach East Asian history with a Korean identity or does East Asian history need to be explored in terms of post-nationalist, post-ethnic identity? This book acknowledges these concerns, but the task of formulating a consistent historical theory for analyzing history from an East Asian point of view is no easy one. Therefore, even while it adopts a future-oriented attitude to thoroughly investigate a historical theory discerning an East Asian history, the reality is that this must be preceded by a compromise regarding how to reimagine East Asian history as a Korean.

In this manner, the book reveals the reality of research on East Asian history. Though it avoids parallel national histories to pursue a comprehensive point of view, a harsh reality is reflected in the fragmented image of East Asian history not easily overcome. Nonetheless, progressing via persistent contemplation and exploration, it is clear the book provides a stepping stone toward exposing the task confronted by researchers on East Asian history in the “here and now.” One cannot but express respect for the authors who, even while knowing the task is not

an easy one, endeavor to reveal a way forward for research on East Asian history.