

Exposing the Ills of Jingoist History

Review of *Hanguk godaesa wa saiibi yeoksahak*

[Ancient Korean History and Pseudo-historiography]

By Jeolmeun yeoksahakja moim [The Society of Young Historians].

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I.

“Pseudo-history (*saiibi yeoksahak*)” has been an important issue among Korean historians since last year. Also known as “alternative history (*jaeya sahak*),” this historical approach is primarily defined by its jingoistic character. Pseudo-historians, represented by the likes of Yi Deok-il, denounce mainstream historians as succumbing to the influence of “colonialist historiography” established under the period of Japanese rule. They portray themselves as presenting the “legitimate” history of Korea by tracing their intellectual origins to Sin Chae-ho (1880-1936), whose research on ancient Korean history functioned as an “impetus of resistance” against the Japanese.

Chiefly dealing with the so-called subject of “early ancient Korean history (*Hanguk sanggosa*),” which typically refers to the period before that of the “Three Kingdoms (*Samguk sidae*),” pseudo-historians have relentlessly advocated for more “patriotic (*aegukjuui jeok*)” historiography. In this regard, they are particularly preoccupied with substantiating the

territorial boundaries of the Gojoseon Kingdom. According to their arguments, Gojoseon was not merely confined to the Korean peninsula but was a “great empire” stretching into Eastern China and the surrounding area, whereby the land composing China’s Liaoning province was once entirely a part of Gojoseon. Consistent with this claim, they also assert that the Han Chinese Commanderies (Korean: *Hansagun*), including the Lelang (Korean: *Nangnang*) Commandery established following Gojoseon’s demise, were located in Liaoning province and not on the Korean peninsula as is commonly thought. Finally, some among these jingoist historians advance the preposterous claim that the Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla Kingdoms were not limited to the Korean peninsula but extended into continental China as well.

II.

It is no secret that Korea has traditionally been restricted in responding to great powers such as the United States, China, or Japan with respect to commercial friction, diplomatic disputes, historical discord, and so on. In reality, force was never a viable option and this precluded the attainment of any decisive advantage. Those in power, then, have routinely been susceptible to charges of submitting to “humiliating” agreements and have met with popular resistance. Jingoist historians are thus able to seize on a popular sense of injustice to advance their cause. Emphasizing the “perpetuity and splendor” of the Korean nation, they contrast the prevailing conditions on the Korean peninsula with a glorious past.

Pseudo-historians are mainly concerned with purging the “colonialist perceptions” prevalent in mainstream historiography and advancing their own brand of nationalist historiography, which they view as Korean historiography’s “original current.” In the past, this effort generally involved attempts to substantiate Gojoseon territory with reference to forged texts (*wiseo*) such as the *Dan gi gosa* and the *Hwandan gogi* produced by adherents of *Daejonggyo* (Religion of the

Divine Progenitor) in the early twentieth century. More recently, pseudo-historians have strived to imbue their arguments with greater credibility through analyses of literary texts and archaeological artifacts. But the fruits of these labors yet exceed the bounds of accepted modes of historical analysis, more closely resembling fiction than academia. Rather than uncovering the realities of the Gojoseon period, pseudo-historians merely project current nationalistic objectives and expectations onto a distant past.

Nevertheless, the popular influence of such historiography endures. Pseudo-historians are able to manipulate public opinion by colluding with politicians and the media. Meanwhile, their claims have a simple, clear and common appeal. What Korean would object to the idea that Korea was once a great empire in the time of Gojoseon? Would any oppose the mission to cast off the legacy of Japanese colonialism and establish a “proper” historical consciousness?

Be that as it may, the production of rigorous academic research cannot be based on the hopes of the public alone. It is unacceptable to claim that Gojoseon was a “great empire” without evidence, as well as to unconditionally deny all research produced by Japanese historians during the colonial period—some is well substantiated. Jingoist historians, however, have maintained their claims by consistently appealing to the sensibility and support of the general public.

The arguments of jingoist historians pertaining to ancient history have no scholarly value whatsoever. Within academia, it is a foregone conclusion that such third-rate arguments warrant no discussion. In fact, scholars have tended to avoid debate with these historians since they generally respond with groundless arguments, personal attacks, and by manipulating public opinion. Meanwhile, jingoist historians attribute this state of affairs to the fact that established historiography is yet mired in the influence of colonial historiography.

III.

The quality of democracy and human rights in Korean society regressed under the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations. Chaebol-centered economic growth demonstrated little sign of further breakthrough and labor and social welfare issues came to occupy the political agenda. Completely disregarding this need for social change, the Park administration consistently adhered to divisive politics under the monopolistic control of national affairs by unelected officials before succumbing to impeachment.

In order to consolidate the basis of its support, the Park administration avoided confronting prevailing contradictions, turning to nostalgic representations of a glorious past. The historical claims of the New Right, beautifying pro-Japanese history and the developmental dictatorship of Park Chung-hee, have been particularly prominent, and such regressive historical thinking played a decisive role in the approval of middle and high school textbooks by the national government. Meanwhile, the influence of jingoist historical perspectives on the Park administration was by no means small either—the president went as far as to quote from the *Hwandan gogi* in her speech commemorating National Liberation Day (*Gwangbok jeol*) in 2013.

Jingoist historians like Yi Deok-il have been even more explicit in displays of solidarity with the ruling government in the effort to establish headquarters for the so-called “National Movement to Eradicate Colonialist History (*Singmin sahak haeche gungmin undong bonbu*).” This movement pressured the Northeast Asia History Foundation (NAHF) to cancel its funding to the “Early Korea Project (*Godae hanguk peurojecteu*)” affiliated with the Korea Institute of Harvard University. As well, its consistent attempts to sabotage the Northeast Asia Mapping Project (hereafter “mapping project”) carried out over a period of eight years eventually led the NAHF, which had provided funding, to reject the project’s findings. The movement attacked these two projects particularly

by denying the claim that the Lelang Commandery was located around what is now Pyeongyang in North Korea and not Northeast China. It asserted that established history had inherited and perpetuated this view from colonialist historiography.

The failure of the mapping project dealt a particularly harsh blow to the discipline of history in Korea. Despite the fact that this was a meaningful undertaking focusing the efforts of some of the most capable historians in the country, the project was discontinued on the absurd grounds of alleged excessive cartographic errors. On the surface, this appeared the tragic result of collusion between the NAHF chairman and a number of personnel with backgrounds in geography, where all involved lacked any specialized knowledge of Northeast Asian history. However, this was in fact an incident revealing the systematic political influence of jingoistic historical perspectives over the NAHF.

IV.

The Society of Young Historians (*Jeolmeun yeoksahakja moim*) was formed by prominent young historians specializing in ancient Korean history no longer able to tolerate the behavior of jingoist historians such as Yi Deok-il. Under conditions in which even supposedly “progressive” politicians and media accept the distorted historical views of those such as Yi Deok-il, this organization has set out to present scholarly criticism of jingoist history that might attain popular support. *Hanguk godaesa wa saibi yeoksahak* (Ancient Korean History and Pseudo-historiography) is the result of these efforts.

The book labels jingoist historians such as Yi Deok-il “pseudo-historians (*saibi yeoksa hakja*).” This is a term much more aggressive than that applied in the past, “quasi-historians (*yusa hakja*),” explicitly emphasizing the deceptive and spurious nature of such historiography. The majority of the chapters in the book are based upon articles originally published in *Yeoksa bipyeong* (Critical Review of History), a

Korean historical journal, in 2016. This courageous movement of young historians outraged by the behavior of pseudo-historians has received a great deal of attention even among their senior counterparts. It has thus resulted in formal responses to pseudo-history among academics, as exemplified in the “Citizen Lectures on Ancient Korean History (*Hanguk godaesa simin gangjwa*).”

The actions of pseudo-historians can be largely understood in relation to the Park Geun-hye administration’s publication of official school textbooks, a move carried out in conjunction with the discarding of the mapping project. These incidents revealed that pseudo-historians have taken on a clear political role, ignoring prevalent social issues and contradictions and cooperating with the ruling government to preserve its vested interests. Considering such conditions, the determined efforts of the young historians have served to suppress and scale back the activities of pseudo-historians.

Although pseudo-historians counter that these young historians are simply acting at the behest of their advising professors and seniors, their particular brand of jingoist behavior has indeed been somewhat subdued of late. This shows that active resistance and criticism is a better remedy than silence for dealing with the pseudo-historical movement. *Ancient Korean History and Pseudo-historiography* is significant insofar as it is the fruit of such effort. It serves as a guide to the general public, allowing them access to a balanced historical account so as not to be taken in by jingoistic historiography.

V.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section is composed of three chapters, covering the emergence and activities of the pseudo-historical movement, criticism pertaining to Japanese colonialist historiography and the prospects for more forward-looking historiography, and extreme nationalism in official school textbooks over

the years. There are seven chapters in the second section, dealing with the following: the location of the Han Chinese Commanderies; claims that the Han Chinese Commanderies were located on the Korean peninsula; the origins and permutations of the *Imna* annexation theory (*Imna ilbonbu seol*), which claims that an ancient kingdom in the southern part of Korea known as Gaya was ruled by Japanese settlers; the current state of research on the Lelang Commandery; the fictitiousness of astronomical observations recorded in religious texts such as the *Dan gi gosa* and *Hwandan gogi*; changing perspectives with regard to Dangun, the legendary progenitor of the Korean nation; and the potential for new interpretations of Sin Chae-ho's histories. Finally, the third section is composed of a discussion among members of the Society of Young Historians with respect to the "true nature" of pseudo-historiography, the popularization of history, the psychology of a public yearning for a history of a great and vast empire, and the values that Korean historical research should strive for beyond the paradigms of nationalism and development.

For decades, Korean historians have considered silence the most effective response to pseudo-historiography. This was a strategy meant simply to disregard the poor scholarly standards and results of pseudo-historians. In any case, it was difficult to endow Pseudo-historians' criticism of mainstream historiography with any genuine scholarly credibility due to inadequate interpretations of historical materials and reference to forged texts such as the *Hwangdan gogi*. Meanwhile, if by chance pseudo-historians were brought into forums of debate, they were prone to engaging in slander and inflammatory remarks rather than scholarly deliberation. The book's first chapter, "Pseudo-historiography and Historical Fascism (*Saibi yeoksahak gwa yeoksa pasijeum*)," describes these behaviors in detail.

Among mainstream historians, the strategy of silent disregard for pseudo-history and a focus on the publication of academic papers with little effort to convey ideas to the general public has effectively

communicated the wrong signal to the general public, tacitly facilitating the popular dissemination of pseudo-historical views and the legitimization of the claim there is a need to purge Korean historiography of colonialist influence. This situation has only been exasperated by the prevailing reality of a nation wedged between great powers, conducive to the ready acceptance of the view that the Korean nation was once a vast empire among certain segments of the public. In particular, pseudo-historians' chief strategy to gain popular favor involves the juxtaposition of their own historiography, that succeeding the nationalist historiography of Sin Chae-ho, with mainstream historiography succeeding colonialist historiography established under the Japanese Empire.

Considering such circumstances, *Ancient Korean History and Pseudo-historiography* is an important work because it is the first to comprehensively and aggressively criticize pseudo-historiography. It presents a piercing exposure of pseudo-historical research, which lacks in empiricism and is distorted so as to bring about desired conclusions. The book also bluntly criticizes pseudo-historians for seeking to legitimize their claims purely through acceptance among politicians and the media rather than scholarly effort, as well as for seeking popular support while asserting the fictitious need to overcome "colonialist historiography." Finally, it points out how distorted, biased perceptions preoccupied with the substantiation of territorial claims are but a variant of the colonialist historiography pseudo-historians are so apt to criticize.

The book also warns of the dangers of jingoistic nationalism as espoused by pseudo-historians. Particularly, it demonstrates how the field of "early ancient history," concerned with the likes of Dangun and Gojoseon, also provided the representative subject matter by which jingoistic tendencies in official middle and high school textbooks were strengthened under successive dictatorial regimes in Korea. To counter such tendencies, the book provides an accessible overview of the state of research with respect to the main areas of concern for pseudo-historians, including Dangun, Gojoseon, the Han Chinese Commanderies (including

Lelang), and the *Imna* annexation issue, which was a major area of concern for colonialist historiography. Thus, the book exposes the fabrications and academic malpractice of pseudo-historiography with reference to current academic research.

VI.

The tendency of people to support pseudo-historical arguments can largely be divided into two categories. On the one hand there are those on the extreme right, who dream of establishing a “great” Republic of Korea emulating the history of the ancient period in which the Korean nation supposedly composed a vast empire. On the other, there are those who are progressive, reform-minded, and passionate about realizing social justice. Of course it is not uncommon for one to demonstrate each of these inclinations, but those in the latter category generally desire to mitigate prevailing social contradictions and establish a more just community.

Now is the time to sever the links between pseudo-historiography and progressive, reform-minded citizens. To do this, historians must adopt a more active role in conveying the fascist character of such historical views. It is critical that they not devote themselves solely to abstruse scholarly pursuits but carry out a role of intelligibly communicating the fruits of academic research to the general public. And though they have moved beyond the restrictive paradigms of growth and development and the state and the nation, they must continue to contemplate the definition of history.

While the pseudo-historical movement appears to have taken a moment to catch its breath, it will take more for such ideas to lose their grip on the public. Those with power and influence who adhere to such ideas may evolve in any number of ways. Therefore, pseudo-historiography must be met with an active and sustained response. It is the duty and responsibility of established historians endowed with

scholarly authority and honor to stem the tide of pseudo-historiography contaminating historical awareness.