

Ancient Japan-Korea Relations, as Narrated in Japanese History Textbooks

Atsushi Nito

National Museum of Japanese History

Introduction

As an introduction, I shall have a look into the state of history education in Japanese schools. In Japan, the significance of history education as a form of national culture varies between elementary, middle and high school.

The focus of elementary school history education is placed on biographies: Students are not required to learn about history or foreign relations comprehensively. In middle school, history courses focus on Japanese history. They do cover world history, but the subject is currently the least prioritized among the required subjects and provides only the minimum level of understanding for students to understand national culture. The inclusion of world history is a large benefit of middle school history, as it offers a broader perspective on East Asian history.

In contrast, high schools require students to take world history, while they allow students to choose whether to take Japanese history. Students have tended to avoid the latter as a subject of the university entrance exam because it imposes a heavier burden of memorizing facts. Before the recent curriculum reform, there was a division between *Japanese History A* and *Japanese History B*. Japanese history A focuses on modern and contemporary history and provides a simplified version

of pre-modern history whereas *Japanese history B* provides a comprehensive history of Japan.

In 2018, the *Governmental Instructions on High School Study* was revised, establishing new subjects and merging old ones. Previously, there had been four subjects in high school history education: *World History A*, *World History B*, *Japanese History A*, and *Japanese history B*. These were reduced into three subjects: *Comprehensive History* (required), *World History Inquiry* (optional), and *Japanese History Inquiry* (optional). The required *Comprehensive History* course is reputed to be a course on world history with a focus on modern and contemporary history while the optional course of *Japanese History Inquiry* includes the following sections on ancient history: (1) The Japanese Archipelago and its Historical Environment in the Dawn Period, (2) Historical Findings and a View of Primitive and Ancient Times, and (3) Development of Ancient States and Societies and Turning Points (Interpretation, Explanation, and Description of History).

The division between world history and Japanese history in high schools, unlike in middle school history, makes it difficult to fully grasp the overall history of East Asia, including Korea. Furthermore, world history traditionally describes oriental history as if centered around the history of China, treating the states on the Korean Peninsula or Japan as secondary.

Historical Awareness of Japan-Korea Relations

The *Kojiki* (古事記), compiled in 712 (5th year of the Wado Era), and the *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀), compiled in 720 (4th year of the Yoro Era), are the two most important historical records compiled before the establishment of the Ritsuryo (律令) system. However, both records were compiled in the 8th century with the purpose of providing historical evidence for the legitimacy of the Ritsuryo state and imperial rule. Thus, when considering them as historical records compiled in later periods, we need caution in how we interpret them. Therefore, when examining the historical records before the Ritsuryo system, it is necessary to consider them in

conjunction with epigraphic inscriptions and historical records from China and Korea, which, though fragmentary, are excellent contemporary records.

In historical studies after the Second World War, there were flourishing attempts to view East Asia as a single historical world—a complete ‘region’ in itself—, position Japanese history within it, and finally overcome its self-righteous national history of the pre-war period. Research on international relations in East Asia has developed on two main theories: the theory of international order centered on China (‘The Chinese Suzerainty System (冊封体制論)’ and the ‘international impetus theory,’ which posits that international interactions mediated by transportation as well as internal conflicts were to be independent impetuses toward the forming of ancient states. But the overcoming of ‘its own proper national history’ based upon the model of modern nation state has not been fully achieved. The theory of Chinese suzerainty has contributed to simplifying the political order of East Asia as centered on China. Yet, in positing Sino-centric order, it neglects the independent trends of surrounding countries and the existence of the ‘Another Center (Small China)’ ideology. The ‘international impetus theory’ has clarified the inseparable relationship between internal and external affairs, but it has not overcome the limit that it is a state-building theory built on the premise of ‘Mimana (任那) rule.’ There have been many arguments that implicitly assume the existence of historically formed states, citizens, nationalities, and borders, and the recent issue of the ‘Mimana-Nihonfu’ is no exception.

Before the end of the Second World War, it was generally believed that the Yamato Court, on the premise of internal unification, had advanced militarily into the Korean Peninsula by the 4th century and taken control of the area, and that there had been repeated conflicts and confrontations with the Korean states over control and management of the southern part of the peninsula. Thus, it was viewed that diplomacy with China had been conducted in response to this situation, and that Japan had lost its previous ‘rights and interests’ after its defeat in ‘The Battle of Paekch’ on River’ (白村江). This pre-war view, which emphasizes ‘control

of the southern part of the Korean Peninsula' and 'the role of the Japanese envoys to Tang China,' was due to the 'invention' of the 'ancient' period as a self-portrait when constructing the 'epic of the nation-state' after the Meiji Restoration.

There has been a scholarly emphasis on similarities between the ancient and modern periods with regard to the historical trends since the Meiji restoration: the adoption of foreign laws, the development of diplomacy, subjugations of different races, overseas military expeditions, and the adoption of foreign cultures. The emphasis is merely a projection of Japan's modern national ideals—which aimed to adopt Western culture, abolish unequal treaties, and advance into the peninsula—onto the ancient era. Naturally, the focus regarding ancient diplomatic relations are placed on China, which is analogous to modern Western powers, while exchanges with Silla and Palhae during the Nara Period are relegated to the periphery. Even today, due to the framing of the Japanese nation-state as a 'single race,' the independent histories of the neighboring ancient Korean states, together with those of the Ainu and Ryukyu, are not fully discussed. This presupposition must be overcome.

On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the claims of 'Korean colonial settlements in Japan,' 'Korean migrants into Japan,' and 'Korean cultural influence within Japan,' which were made in Korea after the Second World War, excessively emphasized the cultural superiority and benevolence of the ancient Korean states. These were a kind of a reversal of the claim of the 'common ancestry of Japan and Korea,' the assertion of which had implicitly rationalized modern colonial rule and its claim to be a civilizing force. These claims, which stress Korean cultural superiority and ethnic independence, can be said to be an 'epic of the nation-state.' The claim that the Monument of King Kwanggaet'o was tempered with, which is now being disproven by the detailed chronology of the original stone rubbings, was also aimed at denying Japan's invasion of Korea in ancient times.

In recent years, the claim for Mimana-Nihonfu being a base for territorial control in the southern part of the Korean Peninsula, as was put forth in the *Nihon Shoki*, has been rejected. Meanwhile, a more convinc-

ing view has been brought forth: that they might have been temporary envoys or military diplomatic missionaries from Wa State, operating under recognition of independence and self-reliance from the Kaya states. Nevertheless, this is just one of various views on the issue and there is no single view that can be called the prevailing theory. The same holds true for the identity of the people buried in the keyhole-shaped tombs in the Yōngsan River basin.

There were many assumptions implicit in the traditional interpretations of ancient Japan-Korea relations: the existence of clear-cut national borders, citizens and nationalities based on the concept of modern nation-state, military and diplomatic power embodied in a single monarch, and the separation of internal and external affairs. At least, however, in ancient times, there were royal powers and states made up of a variety of clans. The presence of borderless beings that served the King of Paekche, the Great King (大王), and the Otomo Clan (大伴氏), as typified by the Nichira (日羅) during the Bidatsu (敏達) period, have also been confirmed. Furthermore, it can be observed that the various forms of military and diplomatic authority were expressed in ‘bribes (賂)’ and ‘offerings (別獻物),’ and the relative nature of internal and external affairs was seen from the forms of marriage and the similarities between ‘Tax of Tōgoku (東国の調)’ and ‘Tax of Mimana (任那の調).’ And, given that diplomacy is the imposition of its self-centered worldview, it is clear that, unlike Sil-la’s attitude of compromise, ‘Tax of Mimana’ was nothing other than a ‘collective illusion’ in the court of Wa State that managed to distribute tributes within itself.

Issues in the History of Japan-Korea Relations and Textbook Narratives

Based on the scholarly situation described above, I shall turn to the ancient history section of the Teikoku Shoin (帝國書院) version of the middle school history textbook that I wrote, and point out the key points and problems in its description of the ancient Korea-Japan relations. I would like to indicate in advance that the content could not be fully described

due to the *Curriculum Guidelines of the Governmental Instructions* and its restriction of one-theme-per-spread.

(1) Regarding the spread of Yayoi culture, the textbook describes wet rice farming and metal utensils, introduced from the Korean Peninsula, as well as dolmens and bronze bells. Although there is a description of the route of migration, there is little explanation of historical trends in East Asia that prompted the migration. There is no mention of the origin of the dolmens.

<Origin of Rice Cultivation>

Toward the end of the Jomon period, people who came to Kitakyushu from China and from the Korean Peninsula introduced rice cultivation, and rice cultivation spread from western Japan to eastern Japan. The people who arrived at this time interacted with the Jomon people little by little, and the Japanese people and culture that would become known later were formed.

<Origin of Bronze Bells>

Along with rice cultivation, bronze and iron tools were also introduced from China and Korea.

(2) There is no mention of Wajin (倭人) sending envoys to Nangnang Commandery (樂浪郡) or Queen Himiko paying tribute to Wei (魏) Dynasty through Taebang Commandery (帶方郡), but it is described as direct negotiations with China.

<Nangnang Commandery/Taebang Commandery>

Han dynasty gave seals to kings of surrounding states and recognized their rule. On the other hand, surrounding states established diplomatic relations as vassals of the emperor.

A historical book from the mid-1st century [*Book of Later Han dynasty* (後漢書)] states that the king of Nakoku (奴国, near present-day Fukuoka

City) sent a messenger to the Han Dynasty and was given a gold seal by the emperor.... [A]ccording to the Biography of Wa State in *Book of Wei* (魏志, 倭人伝), they sent envoys to China in an attempt to gain an advantage over other nations by receiving rare gifts and the status of king.

(3) In the Kofun period (古墳時代), the culture of horizontal stone chambers, horse harnesses, and Sueki were introduced from the Korean Peninsula. In recent years, there have been conflicting interpretations of key-hole-shaped tombs in the Yöngsan River basin in Korea.

<Relations with the Kaya States' Confederacies>

In order to enrich their states, the local warlords tried to strengthen their ties with the Yamato court, which had connections with the Korean Peninsula. In exchange for providing the warlords with iron and technology from the Korean Peninsula, the Yamato royal court required them to make tributes and mobilize soldiers.

(4) In the negotiations with the states of the Korean Peninsula, various issues were discussed, such as: the Seven-Branched Sword (七支刀) brought from Paekche, tempering with in the Inscription of King Kwanggaet'o, the conflict with Koguryo, the interpretation of 'Wa (倭)' and 'subjects (臣民),' and the interpretation of 'Title of Shogun (將軍),' Kaihō (海北) or Kaihoku (辺隸) in the titles of King Mu of Wa, the naming of the Kaya states, and their relationship with the Wa state. In recent years, the extent of the Kaya states' maturity and self-reliance has become a point of contention in relation to the Mimana-Nihonfu theory. 'Mimana' is a name specific to the *Nihonshoki*. Topics such as 'misgovernment,' 'advance,' 'territorial possession,' and 'reconstruction' tend not to be described in detail.

<Establishment of the Three Kingdoms of Korea> <Inscription of King Kwanggaet'o>

The kingdom of Koguryo expanded its territory to the north of the

Korean Peninsula between the 3rd and 4th centuries, and small states were consolidated to form Paekche and Silla in the south. According to the Monument of King Kwanggaet'o, the Yamato Dynasty, which was established in the Yamato region of the country of Wa (southeast of the Nara Basin in Japan), strengthened its ties with the Kaya states at the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula. It then fought against Koguryo and Silla, cooperating with Paekche.

<Unrest on the Korean Peninsula>

In the 6th century, Wa State lost its influence on the Korean Peninsula as the Kaya states, which it had allied with, fell apart and Paekche and Silla strengthened their influence.

<Five Kings of Wa>

Defeated in battles on the Korean Peninsula, the Yamato monarchy was unable to secure stable access to iron. Thus, the Yamato dynasty often sent messengers to the emperor of the southern dynasty of China and sought to gain an advantage over the states on the Korean Peninsula by using its power to secure iron.

(5) The acquisition of advanced culture, technology, and iron resources are pointed out, but it is also necessary to address domestic agricultural production and development.

<Acquisition of Iron Resources>

Since the later period of the Yayoi, the use of iron cutting edges for plows and hoes became popular in Japan, as it greatly increased productivity. The production of iron weapons was also popularized. At that time, however, the Japanese Archipelago did not yet have the technology to produce iron, and iron was brought from the Korean Peninsula in the form of slabs.

(6) The position of immigrants (naturalized people) is discussed in relation to the Buminsei (部民制), Shinabae (品部) · Zakko (雑戸), migration

to Tōgoku (東國) and its development, the fall of Paekche and the surname given to the Paekche kings due to the defeat at the ‘Battle of the Paekch’ on River,’ and the construction of Korean style walls by the surviving Paekche vassals, the ratio of Shoban (諸番) recorded in Shinsen Shōjiroku (新撰姓氏錄), etc. The textbook needs to describe, with a focus on the claim of Korean cultural influence in Japan, mutual exchanges between Japan and Korea, including Nichira (日羅) engaging in both Wa state and Paekche, *karakuni no umare* (韓子) of mixed blood, Paekche officials of Wa descent, remains of Wa origin, etc. There are few clear explanations as to when and why immigrants were introduced. And it needs to annotate ‘naturalized people (Kikajin, 帰化人)’—which means the people who returned to the king’s virtue—in the Nihon Shoki and explain the subordinate position of immigrants to the royal authority, as seen from Shinabe (品部) · Zakko (雑戸) and the organization of Hans (Shoban, 諸番), etc. Immigrants (Torai jin, 渡来人) are more frequently employed than ‘naturalized people,’ so that it seems proper to refer to the ethnic complexity of the nation rather than its uniqueness.

<Immigrants> <Use of Kanji (漢字)>

During this period, people who immigrated to the country of Wa from war-torn China and the Korean Peninsula were called immigrants (渡来人). The immigrants passed on many techniques that were useful in daily life, such as the manufacture of earthenware (Sueki) and ironware, weaving, and kanji. Furthermore, they played an active role in diplomacy, politics, and finance in the Yamato kingdom. In the 6th century, Buddhism and Confucianism were introduced, greatly influencing the beliefs and culture of the Japanese people.

<Battle of the Paekch’ on River> <Korean-style Mountain Fortress>
<Paekche Exiles>

On the Korean Peninsula, Tang Dynasty, allied with Silla, attacked Paekche, so Wa State sent a large army to support Paekche and fight against the combined forces of the Tang and Silla. However, in 663 the army of Wa suffered a crushing defeat at the Paekch’ on River and

retreated from the Korean Peninsula. After that, the Korean Peninsula was unified by Silla. In order to strengthen its defense against attacks from Tang and Silla, Wa established the city of Dazaifu (大宰府), responsible for the politics and defense of the Kyushu region, and built amountain fortress throughout western Japan. They also promoted state-building by incorporating the knowledge and skills of the Paekche people who fled to the Japanese Archipelago. They then embarked on full-fledged domestic reforms, including the creation of a nationwide family register for the first time in Japan's history.

(7) Regarding the Asuka Culture, the textbook describes its influence on the style of Buddhist statues and temples. There are few references to Hakuho Culture (白鳳文化). There is no mention of the relationship between the trade goods of the Silla envoys and the Shosoin (正倉院) treasures in the Tenpyo Culture (天平文化). It seems necessary to devise ways to understand Kanji, Confucianism, Buddhism, etc. as cultural traditions common to East Asia.

<Asuka Culture>

When Buddhism was introduced from Paekche in the mid-sixth century, the Soga (蘇我) Clan worked to spread it within Japan.

After Buddhism was introduced, Buddhist statues and scriptures were brought to Japan via the Korean Peninsula. Buddhism, which was believed to cure diseases and preached reincarnation after death, was a new and advanced addition to Japanese culture, and played a major role in helping the ruling class of the time maintain ties with powerful local families.

(8) After the unification of Silla, the textbook narrates little about it. The focus shifts to China, with Japan's rivalry fully exposed: There are no mention of events within Silla. After the rivalry between Japan and China takes the foreground of the textbooks' narrative, there is no further mention of events within Silla. In light of this deficiency, it seems necessary to make additions showing that, during the Tenmu (天武) Reign, ex-

changes with Silla were in fact more frequent than with China. Furthermore, the textbook does not provide a discussion of how international relations and foreign preconceptions between Japan and Silla affected each state's attitude toward dealing with envoys. Finally, Japan's state control of trade—specifically, the relationship between the treatment of Silla merchants and xenophobia—does not receive coverage in the textbook, even though it has recently become a subject of much scholarly attention.

<Erection of the Great Buddha Statue>

When the Great Buddha statue was completed, monks from a variety of countries, including China, participated, and music from Tang, Koguryo, and Vietnam was played.

<Fall of Tang Dynasty>

Around the same time as the fall of Tang, Koryō arose and destroyed Silla on the Korean Peninsula.

<National Culture>

In the 9th century, with the decline of the Tang and the collapse of stability in East Asia, surrounding states ceased their formal exchanges with China and began to move on their own in terms of politics and culture. Japan also stopped sending envoys to the Tang, but merchants and monks from the Song dynasty continued to bring books, ceramics, medicine, and other Chinese artifacts to Japan.

(9) Japan's friendly exchanges with Palhae are described in more detail than those with Silla, but Palhae's own internal institutions, such as the chieftain system, are not mentioned.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Historical Education Research Group, ed., *Perspectives on Reading Japanese and Korean History Textbooks*. Tokyo: Rinokisha, 2000.
- Japanese-Korean Dialogue on History Textbooks*. Tokyo: Ohtsuki Shoten, 2004.
- Lee, Söngsi. 1995. 'The Story of the Nation-State as Seen in Ancient History.' *Sekai* 611:135-144.
- Nito, Atsushi. 2022. *'Taika Reforms' as Seen from East Asia*. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan.
- _____. 2024. *Ancient Royal Power and the East Asian World*. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan.
- Otsuki, Ken, et al., trans., *New Edition: A History of Korea*. Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 2001.