Why Northeast Asia Feels the Need to Rewrite the Past

Disputes over differing textbook accounts of events mask a deeper problem with how history is taught in the region.

Attempts to hide Japan’s World War II atrocities pit those who want to respect history against those who don’t.

Why are apologies so hard to come by, and what if perpetrators of wrongdoing were more forthcoming in admitting mistakes?
History Education and Nationalist Phenomenology in East Asia  
By Jie-Hyun Lim

Present-day disputes in East Asia over differing accounts of relatively recent historical events such as Japan’s behavior during World War II mask a deeper problem with how history is conceived and taught in school textbooks in the region. Jie-Hyun Lim examines the flaws in Japanese and South Korean conceptions of nation-centered history and how these have obscured and distorted, rather than revealed, the story of the past.

IN THE MIDST of tumultuous historical debates provoked by the publication of the revisionist Japanese New History Textbook in 2001, Sankei Shimbun, a conservative Japanese daily newspaper that fully supported the contents of the textbook, published a peculiar series of articles analyzing South Korean history textbooks. To one’s surprise, Sankei Shimbun’s Seoul correspondent praised South Korean history textbooks for their firm basis in ethno-centric national history. In comparing South Korean and Japanese history textbooks, he located a master narrative common to both, one in which “our nation” is the subject of history. South Korean history textbooks thus confirmed his conviction that history textbooks should teach children of all nationalities “national pride” and “love for our own history” (Sankei Shimbun, June 25/26, 2001).

This seemingly ironic episode helps to illuminate the topography of competing national histories in East Asia. Leaving aside some obvious falsehoods, distortions and intentional silences, the history textbook conflict in East Asia appears not as a question of “right or wrong” to be proven by objective facts, but as the inevitable collision of conflicting nation-centered interpretations. If reality is a cognitive construction, then “historical facts” — in this context at least — may be said to be constructed by the nationalist episteme; that is, the reality of the past is constructed by the present “idea of the nation.” I would call this a “nationalist phenomenology,” because nationalism not only informs, but actually determines the construction of historical narratives in East Asian history textbooks.

The parallel lines of nation-centered histories have no meeting point at which a reconciliation of historical interpretations might take place, and prevent the opposing parties from moving “beyond national history” towards a re-conceptualization of their shared pasts as “entangled history,” “trans-national history,” “border history” and so forth. Instead, they simply force the general public to choose between “our own national history” and “their own national history.” Any serious academic attempt to go “beyond national history” is typically denounced as “anti-patriotic” or “renegade.” The nationalist phenomenology and its historical narratives in East Asian history education can be summed up as follows:

Collective Subject: “We the Nation”

Reading the preface of a 2002 state-produced middle school history textbook in South Korea, one might be perplexed by the frequent usage of “we,” “we the nation” and “our own history.” As an example, I counted the number of times these words were used in the two-page preface: “we” appeared 12 times, “our own history” seven times, and “we the nation” once (NHT 2002: p.2-3). Twenty instances of words emphasizing that this textbook, history, is all about “Us!” If a contextual reading confirms that “we” implies “we the nation” or “our nation,” “our Korean nation” clearly occupies the subject position in the narrative structure of that history textbook. The first sentence in the preface of the 2002 high school history textbook, also produced by the state textbook monopoly, declares that “national history plays a role in making our national identity through exploring the substance of our national soul and lives” (NHT 2002: p.2). It is based on the implicit assumption that every society calls for some kind of common identity and that national history should respond to that demand by creating national identities.

As long as “we the nation” as a homogenous entity occupies the exclusive position of historical agency, the organic unity of Gemeinschaft cannot disintegrate into the various fragmented interests of Gesellschaft. And as long as “our nation” essentially remains the collective subject of the narrative, it would constitute national blasphemy to ask “whose imagined community” this nation is because that question presumes the nation to be a Gesellschaft, thereby challenging the unity of the nation-as-Gemeinschaft.

The New History Textbook in Japan similarly presupposes the nation as the collective subject of history. The preface of the textbook states explicitly that, “in other words, Japanese history means the history of forefathers who share the same blood-line as you [student readers]” (NHT 2005: p.7). This clearly indicates that the New History Textbook considers the nation in terms of biological descent, something it has in common with South Korean history textbooks. The epilogue of the New History Textbook also states that its aim is to restore national pride hurt by the defeat in World War II and to give the nation more self-respect (NHT 2005: p.227). While South Korean history textbooks aim at nationalization of the masses in a newly independent nation-state, the New History Textbook contributes to the re-nationalization of post-war generations of Japanese.

An Organic Geo-body: Naturalizing Borders

It is surprising to find places labelled “Chinaw (Zhongguo), “Korea” (Choson) and “Japan” (Nihon) in the historical atlas of ancient Asia, which encourages readers to understand the categories of today’s nation state as natural and eternal. It should also be noted that contemporary place names such as “Japan,” “Yellow Sea” and “Eastern Sea (Sea of Japan)” are inscribed on these maps. Maps in South Korean history
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...textbooks are second-to-none in attempting to persuade their readers to understand today’s political entities as natural and eternal. In this way, maps in history textbooks contribute to inculcating a sense of “geo-body” among their readers. The concept of nation as a “geo-body” presumes a naturally and organically integrated territorial unit that persists throughout time (Winichakul 1994).

In this conception, a violation of the organic geo-body of a nation equals an amputation of some part of the human body. That explains how contemporary political claims to the Dokdo/Takeshima, Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands or the southern part of the Chishima/Kurile Archipelago in East Asia have been inflamed by nationalist historiography. In both Japan and South Korea the notion of geo-body has been relatively powerful because its geography of either island or peninsula contributed to the image of a naturally self-contained homogenous entity. These claims resist examination and other public spectacles. There is no doubt that the history textbook is one of those institutions that inscribes spatial borders as a geo-body onto readers’ minds.

3 Originism: We Were first, You Followed

The “originism” inherent to the nationalist narrative tends to mean “the older, the better.” The discourse of national origins, often assisted by historical anthropology, stresses ethnic homogeneity or even purity and cultivates a disinclination for ethnic mixing. The first edition of the New History Textbook, for example, describes “Jomon pottery,” produced 16,500 years ago, as the oldest pottery in the world (NHT 2000: p.24). While the second edition revises this claim to “one of the oldest” (NHT 2005: p.18), “the oldest in the world” syndrome lingers on in a few other examples, such as the five-story wooden Pagoda of Horyuji Temple. In fact, both editions put an emphasis on the historical investigation of origin in their introductions. The broad usage of words such as “Japanese” and “Japanese culture” in the ancient past makes it quite natural and plausible to seek the origins of the nation in the immemorial past. This tenacious originism conceals a secret of national history as “a curious inversion of a conventional genealogy” by starting from “originary present.”

Once attached to originism, reciprocal transcultural exchange is denied. Rather, a cultural diffusion from one nation to the other is empha-
sised as culture is presupposed to flow from the developed to the underdeveloped. For example, the highly developed Korean culture of the time has been believed to have diffused to the islands of Japan. The high-school South Korean history textbook gives two pages to cultural diffusion from the kingdoms of Paekche and Silla to the Japanese islands under the heading “our culture went to Japan.” In this section, it enumerates cultural items that Japan received from Korea: Chinese literature, Confucianism, Buddhist architecture and sculptures (such as the meditating half-seated Maitreya figure of Horyuji Temple), medicine, mural paintings, shipbuilding, music and much more (NHH 2002: p.267-68).

The New History Textbook, on the other hand, interprets this “cultural diffusion” as a way of Paekche paying tribute to the Yamato kingdom or as a result of Japanese intervention in the politics of the Korean peninsula. A few sentences in this Japanese textbook make it explicit that this culture originated not in Korea, but in China (NHT 2005: p.33). Stress is also laid on the direct contact between “China” and “Japan,” skipping over Korea. Despite the interpretational differences, both stress their own national uniqueness and superiority, and attribute eternal characteristics to their nations. The uniqueness and superiority of “our nation” is thrown into relief...
by providing negative examples of nations that were/are “inferior.” The primordialist concept of nation upon which the two rival history textbooks are built has strengthened the originist tendency in this way.

With regard to understanding culture, the originist stance assumes national culture as “the Real.” It poses the question, “What is the essence of the national culture?” and provides a framed answer. Living culture, namely the way in which people produce, consume and interact on multiple levels in their everyday lives, is replaced by the fossilised essence of the so-called national culture. This particular discourse helps to construct national culture because it implies the peculiarity of the national experience. In this way, the discourse of national culture in history textbooks essentializes not only their own national cultures but also the national cultures of “Others,” which in turn results in cultural reinforcement of national essentialism.

In East Asia, autochthonism is most palpable in the controversy between Korean and Japanese historians over the alleged Japanese prefecture called Imna established in Kaya around the 4th century CE. The New History Textbook states that the “Yamato royal court led its army across the sea to Chosŏn and established a military base in Imna — on the southern coast of the Korean peninsula — in the late fourth century.” It goes on to say that the Yamato army helped Silla and Paekche to fight against the army of Koguryŏ, and, in return for Japanese assistance, Silla and Paekche paid tribute to Yamato. Japanese colonial historians constructed the image of the Japanese prefecture of Imna to justify Japanese colonial rule over Korea in the 20th century. That explains why Korean historians react vehemently to the claims regarding the Imna prefecture, criticizing it as neo-colonialist history. As a result, Imna exists only in Japanese history textbooks.

But South Korean historians do not stop at negating the Japanese enclaves in “our own territory.” Confronting the undeniable fact of the “Han prefectures” in the north of the Korean peninsula, South Korean history textbooks describe them very vaguely in just one sentence (NHM 2002: p.19). Never using the word “prefecture,” it merely mentions the end of Old Chosŏn in the year 108 BCE, the territory of which is said to have extended into Manchuria as far as the lower reaches of the Liao River. Regardless of historical facts, South Korean history textbooks reflect the sentiment that foreign enclaves on the Korean peninsula should not be recognized. Such autochthonism never makes room for understanding the “Han prefectures” as a historical moment at which a developed culture was introduced to the Korean peninsula; rather, it finds in the prefectures a proto-colonial relationship between Han-China and Chosŏn-Korea, a shameful history. It is certain that nationalist presentism has overwhelmed historical contextualism in this debate.

It is this same autochthonism that dominated the controversy between Korean and Chinese historians over the historical sovereignty of Koguryŏ. The controversy broke out when the Chinese historians began to insist that Koguryŏ was part of the “local history” of the ancient Chinese state and attempted to incorporate Koguryŏ into Chinese national history. That view reflected a basic principle of Chinese national history that defines the present territory of the People’s Republic of China (as well as some currently disputed territories) and the 56 ethnic groups who inhabit it as China’s historical space. Koguryŏ’s shift from the barbarian others to China’s “own history” is attributable to the magic of “national history.” A retrospective genealogy inherent in the national history paradigm looks back on the pre-modern past with the multinational state of the PRC as a reference point. In South Korean history textbooks, however, Koguryŏ belongs to Korean history from the perspective of historical origin, not territorial integrity within the present borders. They presume that the Koguryŏ people were descended from the Yamaek people of Buyeo who eventually developed into the Korean nationality. They emphasize that the Korean peninsula and Manchuria-Liandong have been closely linked to each other in cultural and physical terms since the prehistoric era. It is not a coincidence that some ultra-nationalist Koreans, under the slogan of “restoration of former territories,” argue for the extension of Korean state sovereignty to include Manchuria. This desire for sovereignty manifests itself in a “drive towards Manchuria.”

But neither historiography makes room for the Khitan, Mohe, Jurchen and other nomadic peoples who also established their own polities or states within these regions, such as Liao and Jin in present-day Manchuria. Their traces are suppressed, ignored and erased for the linear development of either China or Korea. At best, histories of these nationalities are marginalized in a teleological writing of history, the final destination of which is the existing unitary nation-state, the PRC and the Republic of Korea. Thus, in Chinese history textbooks, for example, the states established by the Jurchen and other steppe peoples serve principally to bolster the grand narrative of “ethnic integration” and “national unification.” The paradigm of national history thereby re-frames plural “histories” into a single “History.” As such, it cannot but be violent as well as shameful. The controversy over Koguryŏ between Korean and Chinese historians shows that the autochthonism is not peculiar to the primordialist ethnic nation but is also elemental to the modernist political nation.

Beyond National Histories
What history textbooks in East Asia teach seems to be not history, but a political idea. The anachronisms inherent in projecting the conceptual framework of the modern nation-state onto the remote past do not appear to matter. By disseminating the idea that a modern nation-state is a natural entity with a communal destiny dating from the immemorial past, these anachronisms serve to strengthen national legitimacy; indeed, in the presentist cause of serving the nation, such anachronisms are positively encouraged. The past in East Asian history textbooks thus seems clearly to be subject to political manipulation. What has been taught in the history class is not the past per se but the past as the nationalist project. That is why one should ask the phenomenological question before the positivist question.

Finally, it should be remembered that it is mostly the ruling regime’s speech rather than the speech of scholars that dominates history textbooks in East Asia, due largely to government
supervised textbook inspection systems. The result of regime-dominated speech is a nationalist phenomenology which sets the nationalist episteme as the cognitive norm by which historical facts are constructed. Viewed from the perspective of this nationalist phenomenology, the antagonistic complicity of national histories, which has been hidden behind a thick curtain of vociferous disputes, controversies and arguments over the past, is revealed. I would hope that the past is not completely defenseless thanks to scientific criticism, but only through deconstructing the national history paradigm can a path be cleared for the development of a mature culture of scientific criticism. Scientific criticism never means a return to naïve positivism; rather it demands a deconstruction of the positivist myth. And perhaps the greatest myth in modern historiography has been the claim of nationalist historians to the “scientific status” of their knowledge.

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