

The Political Uses of History in East Asia

By

C. Kenneth Quinones, Ph.D.

**Director of Global Studies and
Professor of Korean Studies
*Kokusai Kyoyo Daigakku, Japan***

Introduction

Teaching Korean history to Japanese students in Japan has sensitized me to the profound importance of the so-called “distorted text book” issue. While in the United States, the disputes between Japan and its neighbors over alleged distortions in Japanese history textbooks seem relatively trivial compared to what many believe are the more substantive issues that threaten to destabilize Northeast Asia and envelop it in a second Korean War. Such concerns include North Korea’s persistent pursuit of a nuclear “deterrent” capability and the development of long range ballistic missiles. Recently, while discussing the distorted text book issue in my Korean history class, a Japanese student asked, “How did the Japanese learn about Korea at the end of the 19th Century? There were no text books and no teachers of Korean history in Japan at that time, so there were no ‘distorted’ textbooks.” The inquiry launched me on this quest, one that has led me to an unexpected conclusion.

Japan’s alleged distortion of the historical record since the rise of Imperial Japan in 1868 is indeed an extremely important concern today. Referring to such disputes as the “text book” or “historical” disputes, or some similar phrase is a misnomer. Clashes over textbooks, shrine visits and islands are just the tip of an iceberg that has severely damaged inter-state relations in Northeast Asia. Cold War concerns about ideological preference and alliance allegiances previously restrained such regional disputes. But as these differences evaporate, long smoldering anti-Japanese sentiment is nurturing new alignments across the region. The resurgence of anti-

Japanese sentiment is nurturing discord in Northeast Asia that cuts across ideology and supersedes national and region wide security concerns. Observers of East Asian affairs from areas beyond the region are perplexed. (See David Kang's excellent paper, "Japan-Korea Relations: More Squabbling, Little Progress").

The disputes over history have accomplished what few thought possible just a decade ago. Prior to the Cold War's end in 1990, the Korean War's legacy and ideological rivalry between communism and capitalism aligned South Korea with Japan and the United States, and against North Korea and China. Today, however, rancor over history is intensifying bilateral rivalries and is obstructing regional cooperation. Seoul and Pyongyang engage in parallel, albeit uncoordinated, tongue lashings of Japan. At the same time, China has echoed its own very similar concerns and even has gone so far as to break off high level dialogue with Japan's leadership.

Consequently, regional cooperation is fractured at the Six Party Talks intended to forge a negotiated end to North Korea's nuclear weapons program. The U.S.-South Korea-Japan trilateral cooperation of the 1990s has given way to today's new trilateral cooperation between Beijing, Seoul and Pyongyang. Also, the lack of regional cooperation impedes the formation of a regional economic association akin to the European Community that could further promote Northeast Asia's prosperity and stability.

Japan's Initial Response

Japan, beginning in the 1980s with Prime Minister Nakasone's visit to Seoul, has attempted to address its neighbors' concerns. High ranking Japanese officials, including even Emperor Showa, have repeatedly apologized publicly for Imperial Japan's domination, exploitation and brutalization of its neighbors in the 20th Century prior to Japan's defeat in 1945. The Japanese government has reluctantly provided some monetary compensation, as it did with the 1965 Treaty of Normalization with South Korea. Tokyo finally established a fund to compensate the thousands of East Asian women that the Imperial Japanese Army exploited as "comfort women" to provide sexual services to its soldiers. Well intended Japanese scholars, many working with their counterparts from China and Korea, have worked diligently for the past quarter century to rectify distortions in Japan's historical record and school text books.

China's Persistent Dissatisfaction

The emotionally charged disputes, however, persist. In 1996, anti-Japanese rage exploded in China over Japan's insistence that it, not China, owns the Diaoyu or Senkaku Islands. Prime Minister Hashimoto's visit to Yasukuni Shrine in 1997 caused the Chinese government to organize massive anti-Japanese demonstrations. A contributing factor was the relocation of the ancestral tablets of Japan's fourteen convicted Class A World War II war criminals to the privately owned shrine. Subsequent visits by Japan's Prime Minister to this Shinto shrine have triggered protests from the governments in Beijing, Seoul and Pyongyang.

Massive and sometimes violent anti-Japanese demonstrations exploded again in China in April 2005. Prime Minister Koizumi's annual visits to Yasukuni Shrine had been aggravating China-Japan relations, but this time the immediate cause appears to have been the content of a new Japanese history text book. China alleged that the book's narrative marginalized the significance of Japan's war crimes against the Chinese during World War II. (He Yinan, pp. 24-25.)

Korean Discontent

Disputes over history have long disrupted Japan-Korea relations. No sooner had the 1965 South Korea-Japan Treaty of Normalization been signed than huge anti-Japanese demonstrations erupted across South Korea. President Park Chung-hee, South Korea's president at the time and a graduate of Japan's Manchurian Military Academy during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945), did not share his countrymen's animosity toward Japan. He suppressed anti-Japanese outbursts during the remainder of his rule until 1979, but not necessarily because of any pro-Japanese feelings on his part. Probably of greater consequence was his concern for deterring another North Korean attack by demonstrating solidarity with his closest ally the United States and its closest ally Japan. Also, Japan was the source of technology and large amounts of investment that Park eagerly sought to industrialize Korea.

Chun Doo-hwan, Park's successor from 1980 to 1987, followed Park's example in dealing with Japan. When in 1982 South Korean politicians and scholars ardently protested the content of history textbooks used in Japanese

schools, Chun promptly channeled this anti-Japanese sentiment by having his majority political party in the National Assembly form a joint History Textbook Committee with members of Japan's Diet. The endeavor assuaged Koreans' concerns and prompted Japanese authorities to make some changes in their textbooks.

The relative calm was disrupted in January 1995 when South Korean President Kim Yong-sam (1992-1998) asserted Seoul's claim to Tokto Island (or Takeshima Island as the Japanese prefer) and sternly lectured the Japanese government. Washington quickly reminded Seoul that the foremost enemy at the time remained Pyongyang, not its ally Tokyo, and that trilateral cooperation was vital for successfully halting North Korea's nuclear weapons program. South Korea soon engaged in diplomatic discussions with Japan that temporarily calmed the situation and facilitated trilateral cooperation. But nothing was resolved.

President Kim Dae-jung, Kim Yong-sam's successor) pursued a generally successful effort to improve relations with Japan, but this proved temporary. Kim's successor, President Roh Moo-hyun, in the spring of 2006 lashed out at Japan over the Tokto/Takeshima Island, distorted textbooks and Yasukuni Shrine visits. North Korean leader Kim Jong Il rather surprisingly joined his southern counterpart in a joint verbal assault on Japan over these historical issues, as well as contemporary concerns such as Japan's alleged return to "militarism."

A Matter of Nationalism

Close examination of the root causes suggest something much more deeply rooted and culturally oriented than just the alleged distortions in history books and visits to Shinto shrines. Recently, Japan's Foreign Minister Aso Taro, in a May 3, 2006 speech at Washington's Center for Security and International Studies (CSIS) suggested the cause is the rise of "excessive nationalism" in Japan's neighbors. His point of view, however, is highly debatable, particularly when we consider that many Japanese politicians at the same time have been pressuring for passage of a new law that would required increased emphasis on teaching "patriotism" in Japan's secondary schools.

From both South and North Korea's perspective, a contributing factor is the resurgence of "rightist conservatism," a polite reference to militarism, in

Japan. Scholars and some politicians in Seoul and Pyongyang argue that as Japan comes under the leadership of a new generation of politicians, this new leadership is increasingly “rightists” in its political orientation. They claim that Japan’s leading place in the international community qualifies it to be the leading nation in East Asia. Members of this group include Prime Minister Koizumi, Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe and Foreign Minister Aso Taro, among others. They subscribe to the Japanese pre-World War II concept of “*kokutai*” and defend the prime minister’s right to visit Yasukuni Shrine in a demonstration of respect of all Japanese, including its fourteen convicted class A World War II war criminals. (See Ahn Byung Woo’s very interesting discussion of this perspective.)

A Question of Sincerity

Modern nationalism cannot be excluded entirely as a cause for the historical disputes, but still another factor appears to be greatly aggravating the situation. China and the two Koreas have long been displeased with Japan over its conduct between the rise of imperial Japan in 1868 and its defeat in 1945. Japan’s apologies since the 1980’s initially assuaged their sensitivities. Today, however, Japan’s neighbors’ continuing preoccupation with Japan’s prior misdeeds appears to be tied directly to the region’s Confucian legacy.

According to this tradition, individuals, rulers and nations were judged according to their perceived sincerity as documented in the historical record of their deeds. Prime Minister Koizumi’s insistence upon visiting Yasukuni Shrine, among other things, strongly suggests a lack of “sincerity” on Japan’s part. Japan’s continuing reference to “*kokutai*” renders further evidence of Japan’s perceived insincerity.

Perpetuating “*Kokutai*”

Many Japanese politicians and educators insist on the need to teach the concept of “*kokutai*, literally “national essence,” in Japanese secondary schools. Once a politically neutral philosophical concept developed in the mid-Tokugawa era, it was elaborated upon and politicized during the highpoint of Japanese militarism, 1931-1945. Imperial Japan’s military rulers used it to rationalize Japan’s imperialism in East Asia. At the concept’s core is the belief that the emperor is the divine descendant of Japan’s creator, the Sun goddess *Amateratsu*. The emperor, as the divine

“head” and “father” of the nation, is worthy of unrestrained loyalty and obedience. The Japanese people, as the emperor’s descendants, were proclaimed to be East Asia’s superior race, a claim taken from late 19th Century European racism. At the end of World War II, Emperor Showa rejected the idea of divinity and the claim of Japan’s racial superiority. Japan’s so-called “rightists” (as opposed to leftists who completely reject “*kokutai*”) continue to champion the modified version of the concept. (See: Hiyama Hiroshi, “Japan’s Abe Defends War Shrine Despite Growing Opposition,” *Agence France Presse*, July 24, 2006.)

For Japan’s East Asian critiques, the stance of Japan’s rightists and Japanese educators’ hesitancy about deleting reference to “*kokutai*” from history textbooks is further evidence of Japan’s perceived insincerity regarding its political leaders’ previous apologies. In short, Japan’s neighbors are telling Japan that “actions speak louder than words,” to cite an American adage.

History’s Purpose

Europe and American scholars, not sensitized to the Confucian tradition and its core values, often find East Asia’s “history disputes” dismaying, even childish. In “Western” nations (Europe and the Americas), maintaining an accurate historical record is generally viewed as being primarily an academic exercise. From this Western perspective, Northeast Asian nations’ disputes over Japan’s historical record unnecessarily distracts from effectively addressing more substantive issues such as jointly promoting the region’s economic prosperity and halting North Korea’s nuclear program. The writing of history in East Asia, however, is not merely an academic exercise. The region’s Confucian legacy ensures that the compilation of history remains primarily a political process.

Nations with a long Judeo-Christian heritage distinguish between “morality,” “virtuous” rulers and good government. Definitions of morality are found in the Bible and apply to individuals seeking eternal salvation in life after death. Thus theologians and religious leaders concentrate on matters of religion and morality. Historians busy themselves with defining the record of human conduct as accurately as possible. They concern themselves more with the consequences of conduct and less with whether it was moral or virtuous.

Confucius and his disciples, particularly Mencius, focused on life here and now. They were not concerned about morality or life after death and heaven. Confucius' initial goal was to nurture "gentlemen" who would foster social harmony by adhering to proper human relations and acting virtuously. Virtue required loyalty, sincerity, benevolence, selflessness and the avoidance of extremes in one's thoughts and deeds.

Mencius refined this by assigning similar responsibilities to a ruler. He claimed that only a benevolent gentleman, in the Confucian sense, merited receiving the "mandate of heaven" from one's ancestors which qualified a man to become ruler of a nation. So long as the ruler maintained his virtue by respecting the basic human relationships and acted in accordance with Confucian values, he could maintain social harmony. He and his successors could then retain the "mandate of heaven." Otherwise, social chaos would ensure, the ancestors would unleash the forces of nature to wreck havoc across the domain, and the people would discard their ruler in favor of a more virtuous one.

As Confucianism permeated East Asia, the compilation of detailed historical chronicles became wide spread and served the purpose of recording whether a ruler had been virtuous or not. Despite a century and a half of "westernization," communization and Cold War, this Confucian tradition continues to echo in the thoughts and actions of East Asia's current governments. Specifically, the Chinese and Korean government's chorus of protest against Japan's perceived "insincerity" echo the Confucian tradition of judging a ruler and his nation according to whether his conduct conforms to the values Confucius cherished.

China and Korea point to Japan's "distorted textbooks," territorial claims and Yasukuni Shrine visits as evidence of Japan's insincerity for its apologies not just as a matter of nationalistic concern. At least equally important is their continuing allegiance to the views of Confucius and Mencius regarding the use of history to determine a nation's virtue, and thus whether it merits other nation's respect. In East Asia even today, the nation's conduct as reflected in the historical record, has a profound impact on international relations within the region.

Distorted History's Double Edged Sword: The Case of Korea

Japan is not alone when it comes to distorting history for political purposes. This is a tradition shared by all the nations of East Asia for at least the past two millennia. Both China and the two Korea in modern times have almost routinely rewritten history to reflect changing political priorities and to discredit political adversaries. Rather than illustrate this point with a contemporary example, an example taken from the past can just as well establish the point without prompting defensiveness on Korea's part. For our case study, we go back in time to 1880.

Yi Choson Korea's king and court confronted a profound dilemma in 1880. They had to choose between perpetuating tradition by keeping Korea within China's world order, or break with the past and realign Korea with Japan or some other nation. Korea's king did what all the other rulers of East Asia had done. He dispatched officials in all directions to conduct study tours and report back to him with advice on how best to proceed. Several groups of Korean officials and students journeyed to Japan between 1880 and 1884. Many came under the influence of Japan's foremost modern educator, Fukuzawa Yukichi. He urged them to open Korea to the outside world, discard its allegiance to China and its Confucian heritage, and instead pursue the study of Western technology, governance and economics. Impressed with Japan's rapid "modernization," many heeded his advice and formed the so-called "*Kaehwadang*" or "Enlightenment Party."

But to enlighten Korea, they first had to gain the support of their ruler, King Kojong. Between 1882 and 1884, however, he rejected their overtures and instead favored the advice offered by more moderate advocates of reform who had been to China. Frustrated, the "Enlightenment Party" turned to the traditional Korean way for asserting one's position. They compiled an "unofficial" history or *yasa* about the Korean court in the 1860s which they called, *Kunse choson chonggam, Commentary on Modern Korean Government*. This small book of eighty eight pages chronicles in Chinese the reigns of King Ch'olchong (1849-1863) and the Taewon'gun's decade of regency over King Kojong, 1864-74.

A thorough assessment of the book establishes that it was a political statement, not an accurate historical chronicle. The book's depiction of Korea between 1847 and 1874 is thoroughly distorted and marred with errors that firmly establish that its authors did not have access to the royal court or ranking officials. At the same time, however, the book reveals

much about what Korea's Enlightenment Party believed wrong at court and how to rectify the situation.

The book's main thesis is that King Kojong was the hapless victim of "*sedo*" or "in-law" conspiracies at court. Also he was depicted as being dominated by his father who clung to China and Confucianism. His authority has been usurped first by his father and then his dominating wife Queen Min. The father is accused of having retarded Korea's ability to modernize because of his clinging to China. Queen Min is depicted as a ruthless conniver who fills the court with her relatives. She and the king's father are portrayed as being consumed in their rivalry while obstructing the king's efforts to look after matters of state. Given such a situation, the author's conclude that first they must "restore" the king's authority, rid the court of the father, and the queen and her relatives. Only then could Korea pursue "enlightenment."

Paradoxically, this "unofficial history" became the most widely read and relied upon source for leading Japanese and Korean historians from the late 19th to the mid-20th century. To answer my student's question, the Japanese at the end of the 19th Century obtained their information about Korea's court politics and late 19th Century policies from a single, thoroughly distorted book published in Tokyo in 1884 and written by three Koreans: Yi Su-jong, Pak Che-hyong and Pae Chon.

Today, the *Chonggam's* distorted depiction of the late Yi Choson court as having been dominated by *sedo chongchi* is presented in virtually every general history of Korea published since the book first appeared 120 years ago. This includes general histories written and published in Japan, Korea and the United States, including: Kikuchi Kenjo's *Chosen okoku* (1895), Hayashi Taisuke's 1901 general history, *Chosen kinsei shi*, and the American missionary student of Korea James Scarth Gale in his 1927 general history, *History of the Korean People*.

Even the dean of modern Korean historians, Yi Nung-hwa, relied extensively on this single source when writing his history of Christianity in Korea, *Choson kidokkyo kup oegyo sa* (1923). As a matter of fact, he reproduced verbatim half of the *chonggam* in his 1923 work. Every leading Korean historian subsequently relied extensively on the *Chonggam*, including Choe Nam-son and Yi Pyong-do. Korea's first leading popular novelist, Kim Tong-in, even popularized the *Chonggam's* version of history in his 1933 novel, *Spring at Unhyon Palace*. The *chonggam's* depiction of

the Korean court continues to appear in leading such as Peter Duus', *The Abacus and the Sword, The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1855-1910*.

Possibly the most startling fact about the *Chonggam* is that it was lost for more than a quarter of a century. Korean scholars knew about it primarily because Yi Nung-hwa had reproduced so much of the book in his early work on Christianity. A copy of the book was eventually discovered in 1964 in the library of a Catholic missionary who had died in Seoul in 1933. A second copy was found at Korea University in 1967.

Conclusion

Obviously, the distortion of history is not a uniquely Japanese endeavor. Yi Choson Korea's first "modern" historians did so with their work, the *Kunse choson chonggam*. They intentionally distorted information about Korea for the political purpose of winning Japan's support for their formula to achieve Korea's "enlightenment" by restoring the king's ability to rule. Their account of Queen Min's alleged manipulation of her husband and staffing of high offices with her relatives may have convinced some in the Japanese government that she needed to be removed as an impediment to Korea's independence from China and political modernization. Thus she was eventually assassinated at the hands of the Japanese army. We may never know for certain. But we can say with greater confidence that it was Korean advocates of reform who distorted Japan's view of late 19th Century Korea. Paradoxically, Koreans have no one to blame except their own historians whose continued reliance on this distorted record perpetuates its distortions today.

Because of books like the *Chonggam*, and the East Asian tradition of writing history to promote a political agenda, a reliable and comprehensive record of modern Korea has yet to be written. To achieve this goal, it will be necessary to erase the distortions that sources like the *Chonggam* and countless similar works have infused into our view of early modern Korea. Also, it is essential that there be more research done in the archives of Beijing, Seoul, Moscow, Tokyo and elsewhere. This work is well underway, but its completion will require time and patience.

As for the broader question of Japan's "insincerity" about its past misdeeds, historians alone cannot rectify the situation. As we have discussed, the fundamental problem is not distorted textbooks or other historical sources.

Candidly speaking, the problem is to be found in the attitudes of some powerful politicians, particularly in Japan. The first step they must take is toward recognizing that the problem is not academic, but rather that it is fundamentally political. Japan's current leadership must accept responsibility for contributing to the problem with its inclination to dismiss China's and Korea's concerns as having already been addressed with monetary compensation and apologies.

China and Korea no longer seek compensation and apologies. They demand instead concrete action by Japan to demonstrate its sincerity. In this regard, Emperor Showa, although deceased for many years, recently has literally spoken from his grave on the matter of visiting Yasukuni Shrine. Emperor Showa visited the shrine eight times between 1945, the end of World War II and 1975. He ceased going to the shrine after Japan's 14 war criminals were also enshrined at Yasukuni. According to the historical record maintained by the emperor's close aide, the emperor ceased his visits because he felt "in his heart" that it was inappropriate for him to continue the visits since they could be seen as an expression of respect for the war criminals. His son, Emperor Heisei, has never visited the shrine after becoming emperor.

As a consequence of this recent revelation, Japanese public opinion abruptly changed regarding visits by the prime minister to Yasukuni Shrine. Polls by two major Japanese newspapers, *Mainichi shimbun* and *Nihon keizai shimbun*, registered a majority of Japanese (between 53% and 54%) now oppose the visits. Even before the polls, Japan's leading opposition political party had advocated the establishment of a national memorial where officials could pay their respect to those who have died while in serving the nation. As for the war criminals' ancestral tablets, they could remain at Yasukuni Shrine, which is a private religious place of worship.

Clearly, the majority of the Japanese people, their emperor and a major political party recognize the need for Japan to demonstrate sensitivity to its neighbor's concerns and to substantiate past apologies with concrete action. It is now for Japan's new leadership to demonstrate respect of the wishes of the majority of Japanese. But if Japan's political leadership insists on clinging to Prime Minister Koizumi's current position, disputes over history will persist in causing tensions in the region and to impede regional cooperation. If Japan earnestly seeks to play a leading role in East Asia's future, it is imperative that Tokyo take the first steps toward resolving the problems caused by its historical legacy.

List of References

Ahn Byung Woo, "Japan's Inclination to the Right and Problems of the Japanese History Textbooks," unpublished manuscript, 2005.

Asahi Shimbun, "Editorial: Yasukuni Visits," July 26, 2006.

BBC, "Japanese 'Oppose' PM Shrine Trips," BBC News, July 24, 2006.

Daily Yomiuri, "Emperor Showa Spoke from Heart in Memo," *Yomiuri Shimbun*, editorial, July 24, 2006.

Peter Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword, The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1985-1910*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995.

He Yinan, "Historical Mythmaking, Nationalism and China's Reaction to Japanese Textbook Controversy of 2005," unpublished manuscript dated July 2005. (This is an abridged and modified version of a paper presented at the conference "Nationalism and Chinese Foreign Policy" held at Harvard University, March 2005.)

Hiyama Hiroshi, "Japan's Abe Defends War Shrine Despite Growing Opposition," Agence France Presse, July 24, 2006.

Wolfgang Hopken, "From Eliminating Stereotypes to Common Perspectives: The Experience of Textbook Cooperation Between Germany and France, and Germany and Poland," undated draft version, 2005.

David Kang, "Japan-Korea Relations: More Squabbling, Little Progress," *Comparative Connections*. July 2006.

Yoshiko Nozaki, "The 'Comfort Women' Controversy: History, Testimony and Restitution," undated draft, 2005.

C. Kenneth Quinones, "*Kunse choson chonggam* and Modern Korean Historiography," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 40, no. 2 (December 1980) 507-548.

Andre Schmid, "Colonialism and the 'Korea Problem' in the
Historiography of Modern Japan: A Review Article," *The Journal of Asian
Studies*. Vol. 50, no. 4 (November 2000) 951-976.