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Autobiography by Kim Gu “Baekbeom Ilji” as the source of historical information: methodological problems

역사 정보 일차자료로 본 김구 자서전 “백범일지”: 방법론의 문제

Abstract

Kim Gu (1876 – 1949) was one of the leaders and the last president of the Provisional government of the Republic of Korea, which was located in China in 1919 – 1945. He was also one of the political leaders who played important role in the process of establishing of the Republic of Korea after 1945.

During his life in exile in China he has written a personal diary, describing his life in connection with the Korean independence movement.

At the present time the diaries by Kim Gu are published in modern Korean language and they are a very popular source for studying both the private life of Kim Gu and Korean independence movement in general.

The paper describes the diaries “Baekbeom Ilji” (Recordings by Baekbeom made in solitude) and discusses a number of the methodological problems helping to get the proper knowledge from writings of this type.

They are:

- 1) Categories of historical facts: “simple” (describing events and objects of material world) and “complicated” (describing spiritual activities of human beings).
- 2) Possibility of use “Historical Spectral Analysis” (HSA®) method based on the system of classification of historical facts for evaluating quality of autobiographies texts.
- 3) Special features of biographies and autobiographies genres, main reasons and types of information distortion in them.

The paper concludes that the “Baekbeom Ilji” (Recordings by Baekbeom made in solitude) by Kim Gu is a *comparatively* reliable source of information except texts of conversations and direct speech. In addition, the author makes an assumption that Kim Gu wrote another (unknown) daily based recorded diaries / or wrote his “Baekbeom Ilji” not only in 1928 – 1929 and 1942 – 1943, but during longer period of time.

Key words: Kim Gu, Independence movement, Provisional government of the Republic of Korea, diaries, the “Baekbeom Ilji” (Recordings by Baekbeom made in solitude), facts, classification of facts, “Historical Spectral Analysis” (HSA®) method, biography, autobiography, accuracy of historical recordings, evaluation of historical personality.

PAPER

1. Historical science and historical records

1. Introductory notes. Since the very beginning of its existence, the historiography has been a subject of disputes about its essence: whether it is “science” or “fiction”, whether it reflects the past in “right” or “wrong” way.

Continuous historiographical debates in various countries have resulted in appearance of multiple historical schools insisting on their own truthfulness and often denying validity of others. For example, one of the most famous schools of the 20th century was the French “School of Annals” which paid special attention to the problem of “reconstruction facts”.

The author of the present paper, basing on studying various theories of historical science and his own personal experience in studying history¹, has developed new approach to the methodology of historical science which was introduced in a book published in 2016².

The paper presents a number of theoretical propositions from the book indicated above. They will help to find instruments to analyze the autobiography by Kim Gu (1876 – 1849).

2. Definition of facts. Historical science is a part of present. There is no history in the past. All the history in the form of records³ and artifacts exists in the ever-changing present. This postulate implies the definition of the category of fact: “historical fact is the *record* about an event or process that took place in the past” (Kurbanov, 2016: 13). The more accurate is the record of the past, the more accurate is the “historical fact”.

Here one can raise a question: is the responsibility of records accuracy lies fully on an historian and his qualities, or may there exist some objective circumstances that affect on the degree of accuracy of the fact?

One of the circumstances that can affect the historian is political situation in the country of his residence. If the historical process which is the object of historical research is not completed, the political influence on the historiography is highest (Kurbanov, 2016: 29 – 30).

Besides obstacles pointed above, the *category of fact* itself can determine degree of its reliability.

3. Categories of facts.

There are objective categories of facts which derive the degree of historical recordings accuracy. In general all the facts can be divided into 2 big categories: 1) *simple facts* and 2)

¹ For example, in 2002 and 2009 S.O. Kurbanov has published a volume monograph covering the whole history of Korea: “History of Korea from Ancient Times to Beginning of 21st Century”, St. Petersburg University Publishing House. 680 pp., in Russian.

² S.O. Kurbanov. Reflections about Historical Science and Role of a Person in History (With Examples from History of Korea). St. Petersburg, RHGA Publishing House, 2016. 212 pp., in Russian.

³ Including bio-chemical records in human memories.

complicated facts.

Simple facts are the records describing events of the physical world. For example, this could be a record about a train arrival to the designated station at the designated moment of time (Kurbanov, 2016: 14). *Complicated facts* describe events of spiritual life of people, including politics, culture etc. The spiritual life is often invisible and immeasurable. So this kind of records (facts) is less reliable in history.

In more detailed classification *historical facts* can be divided into a much greater number of categories. Below is given one of possible ways of classification of facts:

A. Simple facts.

1. *Information about moving bodies (groups of bodies) in space and time.* (For example, arrival of a bus; delivering of a parcel etc). This kind of facts as reflecting events of simple physical world can be the mostly precise (scientific). But at the same time this category of simple fact can be also distorted by the following kinds of errors:

- inaccuracy of recording itself;
- inaccurate determination of geographical points;
- inaccuracy of time measurement system, calendar etc.

2. *Description of physical bodies' condition, including natural phenomena.* In this case the degree of accuracy of fact is a little bit lower than of type 1. In addition to the aforementioned types of errors there is another one: inaccuracy of condition (state of things) measurement due to absence of proper measuring instrumentation.

3. *Description of human beings physical activities.* (Similar to the type; for example, selected travels of a king).

4. *Description of human beings physical condition.* (Similar to the type 2).

5. *Description of physical activities of groups of people and 6. Condition of groups of people.* (Similar to the types 1 and 2; for example, arriving of an armed unit to designated geographical place at designated time).

B. Complicated facts.

7. *Description of an inner world of a human being: his intentions, plans, feelings etc.*

8. *Description of "inner world" of a group of people:*

8.1. *Psycho-sociological aspects of the groups' activities.* In this case some amount of knowledge about the psychology and sociology of masses can help in getting more or less scientifically based facts.

8.2. *Intentions, plans, policies etc of groups of people* (Kurbanov, 2016: 17 – 20).

9. *Artificial facts:* assumptions made by an historian as based on subconscious feelings, rather than on some proved records.

The classification of facts presented above is not a fully completed system. It is just an attempt to draw attention of historians to some possible methods of scientific based "objective evaluation" of recorded facts and historical writings

Besides, the classification of facts presented above may be used as the basis for "Historical

Spectral Analysis” method (HSA©)⁴ which can help for scientific evaluation of historical text reliability.

2. Historical Spectral Analysis method and evaluation of autobiographies

The HSA© method is applicable to any text describing past. After choosing the text for analysis, it is necessary to perform the following steps:

- 1) Compile the separate list of facts recorded in a historical text;
- 2) Classify facts according 9 (or more) categories of facts pointed above;
- 3) Calculate number of facts of each category. Then it is useful to compose a “spectral table”, demonstrating types (and “color”) of facts used by historical text compiler (see Paragraph 5 of the present paper);
- 4) Then follows the stage of final evaluation of the historical text. Quantity of “simple facts” used in historic writing indicates its accuracy. And vice versa.

As to the “complicated facts” or “artificial facts”, their accuracy is not the subject of the HSA© analysis method. In this case some other methods of accuracy proof should be developed and used.

3. Biographies and autobiographies as historical records: basic features and issues

3.1. Biographies.

Life of a person is the most difficult subject of scientific historical description. Unlike large scale mass events observed by *many* people, such as war, revolutionary changes in society, economical activities (which operate mathematically accurate data), the life of one single person, if not specially observed and recorded by many people in accordance with preliminary adopted plans, is very difficult to evaluate in “objective” way.

First of all, when some person is still very young (except when he / she is a member of a ruling family of kings etc), there is hardly someone (except parents) who is interested in his personal life. And, as a rule, the facts of his childhood and youth (including life of future “historical personality”) are unrecorded, and therefore unknown. The man himself, being subjective by definition, and in connection with personal memory lack, is unable to reliably restore the facts of his childhood and adolescence. Thus, usually the early years of life of anybody tend to remain outside the biographical descriptions.

Second, if a person becomes famous, important for human society while being alive, then,

⁴ This method is described in an article: Kurbanov S.O. Historical Spectral Analysis method: its essence and ways of use // Proceedings of the Center for Korean Language and Culture. Vol. 18. St. Petersburg University Publishing House, 2016. (ISSN 1810-8008).

starting from the moment of his becoming well known, the facts of his life become to be recorded in terms of two main aspects: 1) actual facts of famous personality life (which he can also record by himself in the form of diaries) and 2) the facts of the most important historical events, which are connected with this person.

At the same time, after somebody becomes famous, facts about his “current life” usually are recorded in a biased. Not *all the facts* are taken from a person's life for records, but only those which are related to his / her historical role, because they should explain somebody's special historical value.

Thus, if somebody becomes an object of biographical description before his / her death, it makes impossible to compile an “objective” and “neutral” biographical sketch.

3.2. As to *autobiographies*, most of historians regard them as a very unreliable source of information, because of 1) possible mistakes originating from imperfection of human memory and 2) natural bias that seeks to show the author of autobiography in the best light, to justify his own missteps.

Otherwise we should like to discuss the question of reliability of autobiography by Kim Gu (including usage of the HSA^① method described above).

4. Kim Gu and his life: historical evaluation

Kim Gu (1876 – 1949) is one of the most prominent political figures of the 1st half of the 20th century. He was a selfless fighter for Korean independence from Japanese colonial rule (1910 – 1945), the last president of the Provisional government of the Republic of Korea (1919 – 1945) and one of the founders of modern Republic of Korea.

Lately his personality became a matter of special attraction of historians, especially in the Republic of Korea at the beginning of the 21st century. All this growth of public attention to personality of Kim Gu at that time can be explained by inter-Korean rapprochement which took place in 1990s – beginning of 2000s. The reason of such growth of attention to Kim Gu is in his activities in late 1940s. At that time Kim Gu was an influential politician who organized social movements both against Soviet-American plans of trusteeship over Korea and against separate establishing of North and South Korean states.

The growth of attention to personality of Kim Gu has resulted in publication of a huge numbers of works devoted to him. The residence of Kim Gu, Gyeonggyojang (경고장), where he lived after his return from China in 1945 and where he has terminated his life being assassinated in 1949 became a museum in 2013. (Before it was used as Embassy of the Republic of China, as a part of Hospital of the Korea University etc)⁵. In 2002 in the Yongsan district of

⁵ 경교장 (Gyeonggyijang). Electronic resource. Available at: <https://ko.wikipedia.org/wiki/%EA%B2%BD%EA%B5%90%EC%9E%A5> (2016.01.15).

Seoul the “Kim Koo Museum & Library” (백범 김구 기념관) was opened. It was built in the Hyochang park near the tomb of Kim Gu⁶.

In this context, all primary sources which can help to get proper knowledge about life and activities of Kim Gu are very important. The most famous and best studied primary source is the diary by Kim Gu: “Baekbeom Ilji” (白凡逸志) which name can be translated as “Recordings by Baekbeom made in solitude”.

5. “Baekbeom Ilji” as historical source

5.1 Some words about the diaries by Kim Gu. Baekbeom (백범, 白凡) – is one of the nom de plume of Kim Gu which meaning is “White ordinary man”. Kim Gu has selected it for himself in 1913. The same year Kim Gu has changed hieroglyphic record of his name too (from 金龜 to 金九). This was done for the two main purposes: 1) to “disappear” from state records of Japanese colonial administration and 2) to proclaim the aim of his life: to achieve happiness (independence) of ordinary Korean people (Baekbeom Ilji, 1997: 250; Kurbanov, 2016: 152 – 153).

Being a person who has got traditional Confucian education during his childhood, Kim Gu was predisposed for some traditional literati activities, personal literary work, including writing diaries⁷. Kim Gu wrote his Diaries in two stages. In other words, the Diaries consists of two volumes (上下卷). Kim Gu began to write the first volume in 1928 and terminated it in 1929. It was written mostly for his two young sons, because he was afraid of his sudden death which could come any moment as a result of his underground independence activities (Lee, 1997: 17). The second volume was written in 1942 – 1943 and was intended for his “comrades”⁸ in struggle to demonstrate the right history of Korea independence movement.

The “Baekbeom Ilji” covers the life of Kim Gu from early childhood to “latest years” close to the time of compiling the first and second volumes of Diaries(1928 and 1943).

So, by definition, the Diaries already contain two types of information distortion:

- 1) Substantial distortion due to the remoteness of events in time, which could not be remembered absolutely properly. It is hard to suppose that Kim Gu, as any other person, could remember his childhood and youth in full detail.
- 2) Tendentiousness originated from the aim of “true and positive” description of the history of independence movement.

As to the historiographical quality of the text of Diary of Kim Gu, to evaluate it let us try to

⁶ Refer to a homepage of the “Kim Koo Museum and Library”. Available at: <http://www.kimkoomuseum.org> (2016.08.01).

⁷ As an example one may refer to famous diaries by Li Sunsin, the Korean admiral during Korean-Japanese war (1592 – 1598) “Nanjung Ilgi” (난중일기; 亂中日記).

⁸ The word “comrade” (동지) was often used in 1920s – 1930s to indicate Korean fighters for independence and has no direct relation with Communist ideology.

use the HSA[©] method mentioned in the Paragraph 2 of the present paper.

5.2 Example of HSA[©] analysis of the “Baekbeom Ilji”.

Most of present editions of the Diaries by Kim Gu are published in adopted (“translated”) version. Original text of the “Baekbeom Ilji” exists only in the form of facsimile reprint and it is difficult to be understood not only because of handwriting style of Kim Gu, but because of language itself: it is a hangul-hieroglyphs mixed script of old Korean language of the 1st decades of 20th century with a number of pure Chinese expressions used in the way of “proverbs” (古事成語) etc.

In our analysis we are using Korean text adopted by an acknowledged Korean scholar Lee Manyeol (이만열), the chapter, where Kim Gu describes his first meeting with the president of the Republic of China Chang Kaishi (蔣介石) in Nanking (Kim Gu, 1997: 322 – 323)⁹.

TABLE 1. Part 2 of the “Baekbeom Ilji”. Chapter “Meeting with Chang Kaishi”
A portion of text analyzed with the HSA[©] method

Category of fact	1,2. Bodies physical movement & condition	3,4. Men physical movement & condition	5,6. Group of men physical movement & condition	9.1 Artificial facts / statements (possible to prove)	7.1. Inner world of men: outer look	7.2. Inner world of men: inner look	8. Inner world of group of men	9.2 .Artificial facts (not possible to prove)
	GREEN			YELLOW				RED
		Indication on men who were together with Kim Gu: Park Changik, Eom Hangseop, Sin Am, An Gonggeun		Kim Gu said: financial help arrived to Kim Gu from friends in China and Korean compatriots in the US		Kim Gu stated: he lived in secrecy and concentrated on external relations activities		
		Pak Nampa worked in Nanjing as a member of Guomindang Party		Park Nampa new many important persons in Chinese central government				
		Park Nampa agreed for meeting of Kim Gu with Chang Kaishi with the help of Chen Guofu, governor of Jiangsu province						
		Kim Gu arrived to						

⁹ In his book S.O. Kurbanov has described the whole life of Kim Gu mostly based on his Diaries (Kurbanov, 2016: pp. 124 - 208).

		Nanking together with An Gonggeun and Eom Hangseop						
		In Nanking Kim Gu was greeted by Gong Pucheng and Xiao Zheng on behalf of Chen Guofu						
		The next day Kim Go moved to the private residence of Chang Kaishi in the car of Chen Guofu together with Park Nampa as interpreter						
		Chan Kaishi wore traditional Chinese garment when he met Kim Gu			Chan Kaishi met Kim Gu with warm expression			

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Thus, the table above has presented an example of HSA[©] method analysis of an extremely short portion of the text from “Baekbeom Ilji” by Kim Gu.

If we assume that the facts in the “Baekbeom Ilji” have been accurately recorded by Kim Gu, his Diaries seems to be as quite reliable.

From the other hand, many other parts of the “Baekbeom Ilji” contain numerous dialogues and direct speech, which are unlikely to have been written correctly enough.

So, the main question arises: how accurately have Kim Gu recorded events of the past?

The memory of a human being is very imperfect. One can pose an experiment: call 10 people, show them one event and give them task to describe it immediately. And each participant of the experiment will describe this event in his own way, missing, adding or distorting something.

The portion of the Diaries, which we have examined with the HSA[©] method, is describing events that are 10 years old by the time of writing the text. No one can remember events of his own life of 10 years before in full details. The exception is when someone keeps his personal diaries constantly making notes every day on the regular basis. This can provide in some way the acceptable level of accuracy of later autobiography records.

So, we can suppose that 1) Kim Gu could write another personal diaries which later became basis of the “Baekbeom Ilji”; or 2) the 1st and the 2nd parts of the “Baekbeom Ilji” were compiled not in 1927-28 and 1942-43, but were written during longer period of time on the regular basis and the years of 1928 and 1943 were just the years of termination of the two parts of Diaries.

In anyway, our HSA[©] method together with other arguments presented above proves the “Baekbeom Ilji” being a comparatively reliable source of primary information about life of Kim Gu and history of Korean Independence movement.

Conclusion

Autobiographies are a very specific source of information. From one hand it can be evaluated as a sort of “primary sources”, because usually they are being compiled by direct participants of events. And even this kind of personal, often not accurate description of events made by a participant, has an important value at least as a primary source of information about attitudes of people involved in historical events.

From the other hand, autobiographies may be sources of primary “objective” information if records are precise.

The primary level of recordings accuracy may be measured with the HSA[©] method.

But the “absolute measuring” of accuracy of autobiographies is hardly possible and depends on personal abilities and position (aims) of the author of autobiographical records.

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