Abstract

Along with its rise as an economic giant, China has rattled the international community of its Asian neighbors with its unprecedented maritime assertiveness over Senkaku/Diaoyudao and the disputed islands in the South China Sea. Chinese government-funded researchers all of sudden started to claim that the ancient Korean kingdoms, Goguryeo and Balhae, belonged to China. The Chinese unwelcome claim that ancient Korea was a part of Chinese Empires are often based on arguments politically-driven and fabricated from Japan’s colonial assimilation education process in the occupied Korea since 1920s. This co-work explores a possibility whether Koreans and Japanese can open new window of academic cooperation regarding the Chinese ancient history distortion and territorial expansionism. The small step of good will rendered by Japan can snowball into self-amplifying resonance of mutual trust between Korea and Japan, working positively for settlement of the mounting territorial disputes among the concerned parties in the region.

Keywords: Korea-Japan relations, History Expansionism, Dongbukgongjeong, Territorial Dispute, Confidence Building

1. Beijing’s history expansionism on the "Unwelcome" Rise

Asian countries in the West Pacific are moving into a collective action with respect to rising Chinese historical expansionism. Beijing has bluntly expressed its assertiveness over islands on the South China Sea as calling them historically sovereign part of China. China boldly claimed that the Sea and islands surrounded by Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines were first sailed and named by Chinese fishermen since 3 AD century. With America’s hinted sponsorship, Japan came first among the discontent Asian countries in disputing Beijing’s ambitious claim. Notably, Beijing’s coercive diplomacy over Japan’s law enforcement during the Senkaku/Diaodao fiasco already alarmed the Japanese public in 2010.
Intensifying Chinese historical and territorial claims over the Senkaku/Diaodao Islands and in the South China Sea prompted Tokyo to draft the newly staffed National Security Council’s strategy document in 1913. Based on directives of the premier’s security advisory team, the Ministry of Defense published the National Defense Program Outline 2013 highlighting Chinese maritime ambitions. In April 2014, Prime Minister Abe passed the decision regarding Japan’s right of exercising collective self-defense. It marked a distinct departure from the old restriction on use of force as means of dispute settlement. Tokyo and Washington released another Defense Guidelines in 2015, which was made possible thanks to the reinterpretation of the Article 9. These joint efforts are all prompted by growing assertiveness of Chinese navy.
This paper concerns another security threat stemming from more serious ancient history expansionism by Chinese historians and their government. China has raised an alarming argument that the biggest and most glorious Korean kingdom of the ancient Korea, Coguryeo (BCE 37-AD 668) and Balhae (AD 698-926), belonged to China. They went further drawing maps showing that half of ancient North Korea occupied by the ancient Chinese Han dynasty (BCE 202-AD 220). When the new claims are overlapped with increasing buildup of expeditionary Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) forces along the Yalu River (current western border between China and North Korea), watchful suspicions over anachronistic irredentism surfaced in Seoul. As international community is putting collective efforts to dissuade Beijing’s reckless history expansionism, new light needs to be shed over this issue as well. This paper will explore a possibility whether Koreas and Japanese can open new frontier of cooperation regarding Chinese history expansionism regarding the North Korean territory.

2. Beijing’s History Expansion in the context of Korea-Japan relations

Discussing security cooperation with Japan was seen dangerous or unwelcome by most of Korean media. Whenever Seoul attempted to upgrade its security cooperation with Tokyo, backfire was lit by the lingering Korean suspicion of Japan’s re-militarism among civic groups. A Japanese scholar has aptly put, “as was shown by the failure in 2012 to finalize a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) between Seoul and Tokyo that would permit greater security cooperation, deep-rooted suspicion and antagonism over “history problems” have intruded even in the security realm.”[3] He further added that in order to bring peace and security to the region, we should broaden concept of security that includes historical reconciliation as an important diplomatic goal.

The anti-Japanese civic groups often voice loud that allowing Japan’s military activities will eventually lead to greater Japanese political influence in the region. They insist that until Tokyo reassures Koreans that the SDF does not forcefully intervene in Korean affairs Seoul should not allow them inside Korean sovereign area even as rear-supporting units. Their strict stance has something to do with the distrust that Japan’s far right still dream of patronizing Korea, if possible. In fact, Japanese rightwing society has adamantly promoted revival of nationalism, and relentlessly sponsored revision of Japanese school textbooks. Fusoshia textbook, for example, brought back the scientifically disproved claim that Japan had occupied a part of South Korea and had subjugated Baekche and Shilla dynasty during 4-6 AD centuries. Those very unfriendly and fabricated theories do dismay even pro-Japanese pundits in Seoul. Often Korean media
take the very minority view among senseless ultra-rightists in Japan seriously through delivering to Korean audience, thus setting back any progress in the bilateral security relations. In short, the Achilles tendon is readily found in the combination of suspicious Koreans’ fear of return of Japan’s militarism on the one hand and the anachronistic nostalgia among Japanese ultra-rightists on the other hand. Considering the complex military-economic interdependence and solid democratic institutions built across the Korean Strait, the former can be labelled quasi-paranoia and the latter can be described megalomania. Their lingering distrust and tardy reconciliation between the two leading Asian democracies encountered a bigger, common history expansionist challenge posed by Chinese historians since early 2000s.

Beijing startled Koreans all of sudden in 2003 with the claim that Goguryeo (BCE 37-AD 668) belonged to China, departing from the Chinese traditional view of the Korean history. To many strategists in Seoul, China’s ambush claims over the ancient Korean kingdoms are a much graver threat to the Korean identity than denial of war atrocities by Japanese far right-wingers. Especially, the Chinese map highlighting ‘their colonies’ inside North Korea between 108 BCE and AD 313 and that Balhae was a mere local Chinese regime is perceived threatening by Korean military strategists. Critics view it as a potential precursor of future territorial claim (irredentism) like Putin did over Ukraine Crimea, justifying its occupation of North Korea in the event of the latter’s political turmoil.

It is rumored in Seoul that China’s PLA has an invasion plan called the “Chick Plan,” meaning that North Korea is a baby chicken to be protected at all costs, even by force if necessary, under the patronage of China (meaning the “mother hen chicken”). Considering the geostrategic value of the buffer state, North Korea, Beijing is very likely to intervene should South Korea-U.S. allied forces come close to Pyongyang.

North Korea under the Chinese PLA’s occupation, or having a Chinese puppet regime across the East Sea (meaning the Sea of Japan to Japan), would be a security nightmare for Japan. China will deploy thousands of missiles for surprise salvo attacks on U.S. bases on the archipelago country. North Korean ports will be transformed to homeports for dozens of Chinese attack submarines. Chinese naval forces will hold a large portion of the Japanese naval vessels whose capability is already preoccupied in dealing with the Taiwan and Senkaku (Diaoyudao) contingencies.
[Fig. 3] Chinese ancient territory drawn to encroach into the Korean Peninsula (Liaoning Province Museum)

Seoul and Tokyo in that regard have common interests in disputing Chinese distortion of the ancient Korean history. According to a political-military game played by strategists, the distorted Chinese historical irredentism will surface when Beijing mulls patronizing North Korea, the moment the latter’s sudden change appear imminent. Seoul might then face contention with Beijing over the legal status of the post-crisis North Korean regime, if installed by Beijing, near the Yalu River. Korean critics urge that Korean government should start disputing Chinese claims that Korea was most of the times historically under Chinese suzerainty as a tributary state and started as a colony from the beginning.

3. Colonial Legacy in today’s Korean history studies

President Park has held that history is to the soul what territory is to the body in her 2013 speech commemorating the end of Japan’s occupation in 1945. The phrase is taken from a book authored by an influential medieval scholar-premier (Ahm Lee) of Korea during the later part of the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392). He allegedly wrote the “Book of Dangun (Dangunsegi),” in which he described the Ancient Joseon kingdom as a balancer in Asia, comparable to the UK in post-Westphalian Europe. The representative Korean literature, “Romances of the Three Kingdoms” recounted likewise that Ancient Joseon was established in BCE 2333 as an ancient state. It was the times when Sumerian or proto-Egyptian kingdoms prevailed in the West. Historians’ opinions on Premier Lee Ahm’s book in today’s Korea, however, are sharply divided. Mainstream historians in Korea avoid quoting Dangunsegi as an authentic writing published during the Goryeo kingdom period because it conflicts with their conventional views. [4]
During the occupation (1910-1945), such Japanese government-funded historians as Imanishi Ryu flatly concluded that ancient Joseon was a mere myth. The Japanese Government-General ordered their historians to reduce the length and scale of Korean ancient history and describe Koreans as genetically dependent on foreign powers. For example, Japanese colonial-government's description of the territory of Goryeo never went beyond the Duman River, which however conflicts with the official records written in Goryeosol (History of Goryeo Dynasty), an official record of the Joseon court.[5]

Out of political calculation, Japanese Governments-General during its rule over Korea extensively distorted the ancient history in a similar fashion. Japanese Government-sponsored researchers claimed that northern Korea (including a part of Manchuria) originally started out as a Chinese colony, and thus for Koreans there was nothing to complain about being part of Japan.[6] Apparently, Japanese historians fabricated archaeological relics and sites nationwide in the occupied Korea. Their academic misconduct process as for Mitama claim that ancient Japanese Yamato had a colony inside Korea was soon revealed groundless by careful investigation by both Korean and Japanese scholars of today. It was said to have aimed at cultivating historical "defeatism" in the Korean identity and thus effectively dissuade anti-Japanese sentiment among the nationalistic Koreans.

Yonhui College (today's Yonsei University), being protected by American missionaries, during that time was a haven for those Korean scholars studying Korean identity and the Ancient Joseon studies. Korean language and their original history textbooks was taught and preserved under watchful surveillance of Japanese police. When Korea was liberated by Americans in 1945, there were two sharply different historian schools in Seoul: One was those educated by Japanese government-historians, and the other was those who refused to join the colonial socialization process and kept their original Korean identity and own history studies. The leader of the latter, Inbo Jeong of Yonhui University, was unfortunately kidnapped by the North Korean army during the Korean War (1950-1953) and his academic influence disappeared in the South. After the Korean War, the former-followers of Japanese colonial education ironically dominated major university's history departments. Writings of Inbo Jeong and Chaebo Shin which detailed proud governance of Ancient Joseon independent from Chinese kingdoms therefore was treated as untrustworthy and unorthodox in post-Korean War universities.[7]

4. A United Front of Seoul and Tokyo against Chinese History Expansionism

With respect to the descendants of colonial history school, the Korean civil society has been
recently beefing up criticism, labeling them as followers of the colonial legacy. A problem the Korean National Assembly recently has recognized is that South Korean textbooks exclude the minority arguments inheriting those nationalists’ theories. Minority historians represented by Taeyeong Choi, former professor of Seoul National University Law Department and Naehyun Yoon of Danguk University have long claimed that their views must be included in the textbook. Followers of the nationalist history camp insist that thereby the Korean government can effectively dispute the Chinese expansionist claims over North Korea.[8]

A U.S.-based Korean historian, Hongbeom Rhee, educated at the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard University, has concurred with the minority view. He wrote that “from 1910 to 1921, between the Terauchi Government-General and the Saito Government-General, the Japanese burned and destroyed more than 200,000 volumes of Korean history, mainly ancient ones.[9] He further noted that due to lack of original Korean sources after the blinding process, most Asian experts in the U.S. have had to depend on interpretations influenced by the colonial legacy. The reason why President Park deliberately quoted the controversial book in 2013 is not clearly known to the public. New trends might have encouraged her to quote the theories of minority scholars.[10] It also could be interpreted as a mild and diplomatic criticism on the part of the president over the historical revisionist moves made by Beijing. President Park inherited his father’s understanding that history and identity are key non-materialistic elements in national cohesion and morale. It was the late President Park who glorified General Yi Sunshin and built memorials for national heroes.

Unfortunately, those Japanese historians in colonial Korea who have already retired or died, unwittingly jeopardize their national security of today’s Japan by supporting Chinese expansionist theories. The Japanese historians of almost a century ago in that sense can be accused of committing a kind of “academic treason” to today’s Japan. Critics in Seoul complain that their Korean offspring are still disseminating the false claims, neglecting and hiding numerous counter-examples.[11] Their fabricated claims that there were Chinese colonies inside North Korea for example can be used by Chinese as a justification of their unlawful military intrusion. The Chinese tend to see Korea as their former tributary state, which was partly true as for Joseon kingdom (1392-1897). Beijing’s hidden or overt claims over Joseon’s preceding kingdoms including Goryeo, Balhae and Goguryeo however is not only unacceptable but also groundless, thus seen very unfriendly and threatening. This ironic and unfortunate consequences pioneered by Japanese colonial historians and their Korean legacy-offspring is called the “boomerang effect” which does not serve Japan’s security interests at all. Correcting ancient history distortion on the part of Japan, which serves the two democracies’ strategic
interests vis-à-vis China, can be an easy agenda to sit and discuss about together. For Japan there is nothing to lose by recognizing that there was academic misconduct, committed by a handful of archaeologists and historians during the occupation Japanese premiers apologized repeatedly.

Here, an peace-making and confidence-building proposal is presented as an international history joint study process. As examples of strategic academic cooperation, officials of Japan’s Ministry of Education and Science can hand in their research guidelines, research notes and history materials preserved in Japanese university libraries which were used during the fabrication process. Materials showing assistance of the Gwandung Army in Dairen and the South Manchurian Railway Company’s Investigation Center kept in stacks of the Military History Library of the National Institute of Defense Studies will also help. Korea’s historical materials forcefully collected and confiscated by Japanese authorities during the occupation could be returned for joint research. This small goodwill, a mutually winning measure, can amplify mutual trust between Korea and Japan.

5. What will Korea and Japan, and even China win from the cooperation process?

The aforementioned small good-will of correcting distorted history narration through Korea-Japan academic cooperation can jump-start recovering the all-time low bilateral relations which stumbles despite the much larger stakes the two nations share. As distrust erodes among Koreans about Japan thanks to Tokyo’s goodwill and the research support, Japan would win the Korean public’s growing confidence in Japan’s greater engagement in regional peace-making efforts. Those Korean civic organizations could then overcome their lingering suspicion that Japan again aims to patronize Korea. Japanese political leaders will also return home after much welcome summit in Seoul with the honor of enhancing Japan’s international standing, Seoul and Tokyo then could reach an agreement on broader strategic issues as well, based on the restored confidence.

Beijing will no longer trumpet the threatening history distortion, when facing scientific and objective evidence-based counter-arguments jointly presented by Korea and Japan. Seoul could offer Beijing a face-saving exit with respect to the ancient history issue. The wave of apparent academic misconduct from Beijing, squeezed out of political calculation, will soon recede and remain as a trivial episode of ill-trained historians. Koreans’ suspicions based on the Chinese “Middle Kingdom Complex” will soon rescind and peoples’ mutual confidence and respect will return across the Yellow Sea.
Resolution of the Korea-China ancient history friction will bring about a spiral of benign repercussions concerning other maritime disputes in the region. Beijing will less tempted to quote the flawed historical claim over islands in the South China Sea. Seoul, through this peace-making success, could enhance its international standing as a facilitator or mediator of reconciliation between China and Japan. The three Asian powers will altogether benefit as the currently looming clash scenarios gradually dissipate among pessimistic international observers. The small step good will rendered by Tokyo can snowball into self-amplifying resonance of mutual trust in the region. A viable solution overcoming the Asian paradox will then emerge within our sight.

References


[6] For related studies, see Gidae Bok, The Location of Hansagun [Commandary] basing[based] on the clay tablet that recorded the achievements of the Governor-General in Imdon, The Paek-San Hakpo (2001), Vol.61, pp.47-65; According to Bok, contrary to their current claims, Chinese historians had consistently written that four Chinese commanderies of Han were located in Hebei Province near northeast of Beijing. All China’s official records were analyzed by Bok to have concurred so before an expansionist Tang Dynasty started to encroach into Goguryeo’s western borders in the early 7th century.


