*History as Fact and Social Process*

Korean Attitudes toward History in Contemporary Relations with Japan

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**Introduction**

It is but all too obvious that in the relations between Korea and Japan perceptions of history play a major and, at certain moments, decisive role. A casual glance at the daily news in the papers or on television suffices to realize this. It is worthwile therefore to reflect what history actually means when utilized in such a context. That is by no means an easy task and I cannot pretend that in this paper I will deliver a definitive answer to that question. But I hope to stimulate some reflection on the issue by presenting some insights in the matter inspired by a research project entitled “History as Social Process: Unconventional Histories of Korea,” which I engaged in with several of my colleagues while working at Leiden University.[[1]](#footnote-1) Basic to that project was a distinction between the past, everything that has happened before the present moment, and history in the sense of meaningful representations of the past. This goes of course against common usage. Most people use the word history to refer to the past as well as in the sense of a narrative about the past. But it is not just a useful, but also a necessary distinction. The facts of the past are virtually innumerable. Without a selection of what is meaningful these facts “do not make sense”. The logical inference we can draw from this is that from the infinity of (objective or intersubjective) facts different selections can be made, which are equally valid in that they have an authentic relation to the past, that they are based on facts people can agree upon. Whether these selections are meaningful depends on the persons, the social groups, they are presented to and their concerns and preoccupations. To some this may sound as a post-modern effort to destroy common-sense certainties, but it is nothing of the kind. This view of history is more than a hundred years old and was propounded by the likes of the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), who formulated it as early as 1913, and Johan Huizinga (1872-1945), the author of *The Waning of the Middle Ages* and *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga expressed it as follows:

“History does not simply equal the past. The past is a notion of time, and inasmuch as any concept is linked to it, it is one of chaos. *History, by contrast, is a product of the mind – the intelligible representation that generation after generation and civilization after civilization have to create, ever anew, out of the rough chunks of the past visible to their eyes…*” (emphasis added)

For Croce it led to his famous dictum that all history is contemporary history, which is sometimes misunderstood, but means nothing else than what Huizinga said, too, namely that in order to make history meaningful every generation of the living has to reconstitute the narrative of history on the basis of contemporary concerns.

A simple example of the selective rendering of the past is furnished by the Korean genealogies. According to Korean tradition, descent is patrilineal and the main line of a lineage is constituted by the eldest sons. That means that in the Confucian concept of the lineage there is one great-great grandfather, while if we think of inherited DNA there are eight great-great grandfathers (not to mention the great-great grandmothers).

The view of history propounded by Croce and Huizinga recognizes the relativity of any history in the sense that different narratives can be constructed on the basis of the same events in the past. But this does not necessarily condemn us to a post-modern negation of all certainty and mean that narratives are all completely arbitrary and can be fashioned just according to the fancy of the historian. Interminable discussions are possible about the questions what exactly a fact might be, what facts concerning the past are available to us and what facts not, and what are the consequences of the limitations of evidence, and the problem of how facts once we accept them as such are to be interpreted,[[2]](#footnote-2) but there are forms of evidence that with sufficient persuasive force establish certain facts. Examples of such cases are the fact that there was a place called Auschwitz that was the site of mass murder, or the fact that in East Asia numerous women were enslaved to serve the needs of Japanese soldiers.

**The Importance and Authority of History**

Compared with Europe, arguments derived from history, and particularly ancient history, are quite frequently used in both Korea and Japan. If I take the Netherlands as an example for Europe, it is not wrong to say that except for professional historians and history buffs nobody cares much who lived in Holland in the first centuries CE, let alone that it would play a role in debates about the national territory. In contrast, it is striking that almost as soon as the Japanese started to entertain thoughts of expanding their territory on the continent and especially to Korea they looked for historical events in antiquity that might support this. The notorious controversy regarding the Kwanggaet’o stele of 417 CE, celebrating the exploits of the eponymous Koguryŏ king, was ignited in 1883, when a Japanese officer obtained a rubbing of the epigraph, and in the form of a battle of nationalisms the debate still continues. In Korea in certain circles the fact that the territory of Koguryŏ at a certain time covered a large part of Manchuria is seen as a valid argument for the claim that the borders of Korea should be more to the north (cf. the book title 만주는 우리 땅이다: “Manchuria is our territory”), a form of irredentism that has roots in the late Chosŏn period.[[3]](#footnote-3) Another example of the importance attached to ancient history is the controversy with China around the “ownership” (itself an intriguing notion when applied to the past) of the history of Koguryŏ, which aroused considerable public indignation in Korea.

A simple explanation for the importance attached to ancient history, and one that may not be altogether incorrect, might be that both Korea and Japan are in comparison with European countries nations with greater historical depth. Although I have not studied the case of Japan sufficiently to confidently pronounce about this issue, I nevertheless do not think that this means that Japan and Korea have attached great value to history for exactly the same reasons. In Japan it has probably been the (spurious) ideology of the unbroken line of emperors going back to 660 BCE, which was officially promoted after the Meiji Restoration, that has promoted a historical awareness that attaches great value to ancient times. In Korea, I think, other factors have been crucial. From an early date, history has been more than a succession of events. Behind the events of human life there were the principles of the cosmos, with Heaven as the supreme force, a force that was impartial, but not neutral as to morality. Virtuous rulers would earn the Mandate of Heaven, evil monarchs lose it. Heaven might also send warnings in the form of unseasonal weather or strikes of lightning. History therefore was seen as a kind of morality play, which if properly studied might guide humankind. Policy discussions at court invariably would invoke historical parallels and precedents. This gave history a unique authority.

It would be absurd to suggest that present-day Koreans have the same concept of history. But I do think that what has survived is a tendency to attach great value to history and to see history in moral terms. This tendency is certainly not absent in other cultures, but in Korea appears in a particularly pronounced form. It has contributed, I would venture, to inform the nationalistic education of history, itself a common phenomenon in many modern nation-states all over the globe, which in turn has strengthened views of the past as a Manichaean struggle between the forces of good and evil.

**Overcoming the limits of nationalistic history**

Linking historiography to matters of morality is not something to be categorically rejected. Prominent thinkers about the uses of history such as Hayden White have endorsed the connection.[[4]](#footnote-4) But when nationalism is involved there is a problem. It has for a long time been recognized that history writing functions as one of the ways in which nation-states create their imagined communities, usually by focusing on the positive aspects of history, while closing their eyes to less palatable episodes, for instance moments of internal strife and bloody conflict (or deliberately erasing them). Viewing history as a social process leads one to understand the need for such historiography,[[5]](#footnote-5) but becomes problematic when the past one tries to understand also concerns social groups that are smaller than the community of the nation, or social groups that go beyond the nation-state. One instance of the latter is seen when two nation-states confront each other.[[6]](#footnote-6) This is of course the situation of Korea and Japan and it is an all too well-known fact that one of the greatest problems between the two countries is Japan’s refusal to assume responsibility for the issue of sexual slavery forced on women of several nationalities during the wars that Japan fought in China and the Pacific. In Japan’s relations with China a similar case is furnished by the Nanjing massacre. My personal stance on this is simple. I regard it as totally unacceptable that the Japanese government continues to deny responsibility, in whole or in part. Some nuances may be added, but the evidence is overwhelming in both cases and there is a very wide consensus in the international community that Japan should recognize this. Yet, for a resolution of the conflict it may be useful to consider the attitudes toward certain shameful episodes in the past in a more general comparative perspective.

The study of the past tells us that despicable acts have been committed by the people of almost any nation, including countries we usually admire as civilized and enlightened. Americans have been guilty of genocidal killings of the native population of North America and massacres such as in My Lai. The British were guilty, for example, of exterminating the aboriginal population of Tasmania.[[7]](#footnote-7) Israel during its initial push to clear the land in 1948 indiscriminately massacred 300 civilians in a manner we would now rather associate with the Islamic State.[[8]](#footnote-8) The Dutch in Indonesia committed massacres both when they “pacified” the country in the 19th century and when the Indonesians fought for their independence after 1945 (and, I should add, the government dragged its feet in recognizing responsibility for the more recent crimes).

What about Korea? Is it an exception? There are fierce debates about this, but there is a very widely diffused perception that Korea always has been a peaceful nation. Yi Kwangsu in *Na ŭi kobaek* voiced the opinion that Korea never had invaded another country and at a conference I recently attended one of the participants claimed that there was no country on earth as kind as Korea (우리처럼 착한 나라가 없다). I do think that Korea probably has a better record than many other countries, but the view of Korea as 100% benign ignores centuries of war between the Three Kingdoms (an ignoring that, as Benedict Anderson has reminded us in the revised edition of *Imagined Communities*, is quite typical of the way nations remember or do not remember their past). It is moreover not nations but people who are kind-hearted. Seen in this way, the massacres perpetrated by both sides during the Korean War and the killing of civilians by ROK forces in the Vietnam War make it difficult to maintain that the Korean record is totally unblemished in this regard. Nor would the World War II POWs and civilian internees in the camps in Indonesia agree that the Koreans who guarded them on behalf of the Japanese were generally “kind.” On the whole they were more feared than the Japanese. Some were convicted of war crimes.

The relevance of this for the current confrontation between Japan and Korea is not that it exonerates Japan. Japan should recognize the dark spots in its past and where the consequences of its aggression and inhumanity linger take action to atone for it. But when making demands for this, Korea should recognize that Japan is not the only country that prefers to close its eyes to certain parts of its past. When Korea demonstrates an awareness of instances of its own moral frailty, and realizes that abysmal conduct is not the privilege of just a few nations, it will paradoxically gain in moral prestige and be in a position to claim the moral high ground. This will not solve the problems immediately, but will be conducive to creating a climate that allows a resolution. It will also put a brake on efforts to fan a mindless nationalism for which it is an axiom, not in need of further reflection, that Korea is right.

In this context, one might add, as the Tokyo correspondent of the *Hankyoreh* newspaper wrote, that the introduction in the Republic of Korea of a uniform government-controlled history textbook (something not even the Abe government is considering doing in spite of its efforts to efface disagreeable aspects of the past) would weaken Korea’s claim to the moral high ground and “would fundamentally damage South Korea’s national interests in its diplomatic relations with Japan” (*Hankyoreh* August 27, 2014). Affecting freedom of education, it will also have a negative impact on Korea’s image in the OECD countries. In the final analysis, and for various reasons, a teaching of history that also recognizes its less glorious aspects is in Korea’s best interest (and the same, of course, goes for Japan).

**The Dokdo Question**

The Dokdo controversy is a prime example of a conflict in which historical arguments play a major role. I will not repeat all these arguments, which would anyway be impossible within a paper of this kind, but review some of the problems attached to the use of such arguments, as well as reflect on the *way* the arguments are used. Not to keep you in suspense I want to make clear from the outset that I think that Japan should acquiesce in Korea’s domination over the island, although I would like to question the wisdom of some of the policies of the ROK with regard to the issue.

Many of the arguments concern the question who was there first, the most fundamental historical question. In this respect Korea seems to have the strongest claims, be it that that the fact that the island appears to change names over time somewhat diminishes the persuasive force of records and maps. However, unless there is uninterrupted possession and occupation of a particular place, there is a problem with historical evidence to the effect that at a certain date a particular site was in the hands of a particular actor. Which date in history should be decisive? Are the Jews entitled to Palestine because they lived there in the days of the Roman Empire? If so, should the maps of Europe all be redrawn to reflect the state of affairs in Roman times? Should Korea take possession of Manchuria because at a certain moment it was the territory of Koguryŏ? It is obvious that from a pragmatic point of view that is a non-starter. It is also theoretically absurd. If the oldest date would be the most authoritative, we should all move back to Africa, the ultimate origin of *homo sapiens*. If we are to use historical arguments at all (and I think we should), we have to look for dates that somehow carry a meaning that is more than a notch on a time scale, that is look for what we may call qualitative historical arguments.

The year 1905, the date of the supposed agreement that might justify Japanese claims to Dokdo, has exactly the quality I speak about. Viewed in the context of what happened then, it obviously means that the agreement was part of Japan’s encroachment, of Japan’s colonial expansion. Rather than being evidence for Japan’s claims, to the historian the agreement speaks in Korea’s favor (although specialists in international law may take another view). Perhaps it is not necessary for Japan to demonstrate remorse for colonialism in perpetuity, but it should at least take the stance that in the present it will not profit from colonialism at the expense of the colonized.

The importance of the year 1905 has also been emphasized by Wada Haruki, who advocates recognition of Korean sovereignty over Dokdo, but also thinks that “the South Korean government should not designate Dokdo as a starting point of the state’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and should ensure the fishing rights of Japanese fishermen as they stand now” (*Hankyoreh*, November 6, 2013). In reaction to this the paper reported that Lee Won-deog, director of the Institute of Japanese Studies said, “In terms of Koreans’ national sentiment, there are many aspects of [Wada’s] ideas that would be impossible to accept, but his opinion that we must aggressively and swiftly move to solve the Dokdo issue is a very fresh take on the matter.” How should we regard “Koreans’ national sentiment” as mentioned by Lee Won-deog in this case? Is it a given, which cannot or should not be changed? Is it equivalent to Korean patriotism and as such desirable or indispensable?

The issue of Dokdo is potentially connected to concrete interests, the exploitation of the seas around the island (fishery rights) and possible resources under the seabed (oil, gas). It is clear, however, that both parties have aggravated the conflict by inciting the general public to take a stand. In Korea, “national sentiment” has been influenced by concerted calls on ordinary citizens to do something about Dokdo, in various forms, to join committees for the defense of the island, for instance, and show their support by brief visits to Dokdo. The veterans of the marines have demonstrated in front of the Japanese embassy, with blood-thirsty slogans (미친 개 한테는 몽둥이 약이다: “A good beating is the best medicine for a mad dog”), and proclaiming a willingness to go to war over the issue. More innocuously, television spots invite us to love and admire Dokdo’s nature, its flowers, birds and even its insects, which is presented as the duty of a true patriot. In the past two years I have failed to detect any doubts as to the wisdom of this on the part of the Korean public, but it can be argued that all this does more harm than good. To begin with, it is superfluous and thus a waste of resources; Dokdo is firmly in Korean hands. I leave it to others to judge why in spite of that considerable sums are spent on “Dokdo campaigns”. It is clear, however, that Korean actions lead to Japanese reactions, weakening Japanese willingness to take a step back and diminishing options for reconciliation. It should also be noted that the rather strident tone of some of the Korean insistence that Dokdo is Korean does not always go down well overseas. The Japanese claim to the island, although not justified, is moreover not an example of flagrant iniquitousness harming people in a serious way (which makes it very different from the sexual slavery issue). Fundamentally it belongs to a rather simple type of international conflict, a territorial dispute about national interests that does not immediately involve the identity and wellbeing of people. In the final analysis it is the Korean frustration about Japan’s attitude to past history in general that turns the heat up so much in this conflict. In a way this frustration is understandable, but at the same time it is regrettable, because it stands in the way of the resolution of the Dokdo problem, the solution of which in turn might improve relations more generally.

**Conclusion**

We have seen that the past does not always deliver a clear verdict as to what should happen in the present. In the final analysis, there is one issue that should be decisive in the disputes where historical arguments are marshaled to buttress political positions: the interests of people presently living, irrespective of their nationality or ethnicity.Judged by this criterion yet another issue, the debate about the name of the sea between Korea and Japan, is hardly relevant. Neither party has reason to get worked up about this issue. The passions the matter rouses in Korea can only be explained by the linking of the question of the name of the East Sea to other outstanding issues. To a considerable degree it seems motivated by pique that the outside world has tended to follow Japanese usage, also in other instances. This, once again, is understandable, certainly in view of past events, and there is no harm in reminding the world that Japan and Korea have different names for what is in essence a nameless expanse of water, but there is no reason to represent the Japanese claim that the sea is called the Sea of Japan as an act of villainy.

The interests of those presently living may include correct historical representations. This is the case when a representation of the past negatively affects the reputation of the living. An example might be representing the Korean people as fundamentally incapable of taking care of themselves, a stereotype that was promoted by the Japanese to justify the annexation of Korea but not rarely shared by western observers. A representative of the latter was the prominent American philosopher and educator George Trumbull Ladd who in 1908 published *In Korea with Prince Ito*, a title that unabashedly reveals its author’s sympathies.[[9]](#footnote-9) Remnants of such thinking that encourage negative views of Korea in the present deserve to be vigorously condemned. As far as serious professional history is concerned this is not a great problem, but among the general public old prejudices sometimes survive with remarkable tenacity.

In conclusion, it is important to distinguish carefully between different uses and different kinds of representations of history. Some representations contradict historical evidence and are morally despicable; some others are weakly supported by evidence but morally more or less neutral; others, again, can be justified with evidence, even though the events to which they refer might also justify a quite different representation. It may be difficult to accept for the general public, educated as it is with monolithic visions of history, but the past can render different histories, potentially of equal value in their own contexts. If all representations of the past formulated by one nation at a particular moment are regarded as of the same value and order, irrespective of their moral implications, and used indiscriminately as building blocks to fortify the condemnation of the Other, the result will be a climate of distrust in which even comparatively simple problems cannot be solved. Recognizing the creation of histories as the social process it is may help avoid this pitfall.

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1. Results of that project can be found in the online journal that was published as part of the project: Korean Histories (www.koreanhistories.org). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is discussed in detail in Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Boudewijn Walraven “The River of Living History: *Sijo*, history and historical consciousness,” in *Cahiers d’études coréennes 7: mélanges offerts á Li Ogg et Daniel Bouchez* (Paris: Centre d’études coréennes, Collège de France, 2000), pp. 321-342. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Frank Ankersmit, *et al*. ed. 2009. *Re-Figuring Hayden White*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Boudewijn Walraven, “The Parliament of Histories: New Religions, Collective Historiography, and the Nation,” *Korean Studies* vol.25. no. 2 (2001), pp. 157-178. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. There are of course social groups that go beyond the boundaries of the nation-state of a different kind as well. An example would be the Kurdish people, who live in an area that is part of four nation-states, none of which is Kurdish politically. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Tom Lawson, *The Last Man: A British Genocide in Tasmania* (London: Tauris, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ari Shavit, *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Andre Schmid, “Two Americans in Seoul: Evaluating an Oriental Empire, 1905-1910,” *Korean Histories* (online: www.koreanhistories.org) 2.2 (2010), pp. 7-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)