

# **Korea-China-Japan Historical Disputes: *Structure and Alternatives***

*Lee Sin-Cheol*

## **Abstract**

*In this paper, the author reviews commonalities and differences in the distortions of history by Japan and China and also analyzes the political implications and structure, ultimately to show how the process can be linked with bringing peace to Northeast Asia. Based on this analysis, solutions are sought to address the disputes over history between Korea, China, and Japan.*

*In the long term, the historical debates can be addressed by establishing common historical perception based on academic research. This is possible when causes for debates such as the Sino-Japanese struggle for hegemony and the Gando issue raised by Korea are eliminated. Another premise is Japanese reflection on its modern history of aggression.*

*What matters is to put words into action by calling on Japan to reflect upon the history of aggression in an effort to broaden common historical understanding among the three countries' civil societies and jointly defending the Japanese pacifist constitution as a universal value. When those issues are resolved, the sharing of East Asian history can realize its true significance of peaceful coexistence.*

**Keywords:** historical disputes, Northeast project, Dokdo, Neo-Sino-centrism, Yasukuni shrine, Unified multinational theory.

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## Introduction

In the spring of 2002, an uproar broke out in Korea when Japanese middle school textbooks were found to contain a distorted version of Japanese history. Daily demonstrations ensued followed by a range of responses. Some protesters even severed their fingers to demonstrate their strong animosity toward Japan. Over time, such uncontrolled actions were gradually replaced by rational responses. More surprisingly, the actions of extreme and far-right nationalists were not well received and rather resulted in social avoidance. Academic debate followed in balance with the public's civic movements, even though direct solutions were not found for the historical distortion issue. A consultative body for historical questions was also established by the governments involved.

In contrast, when China's distortion of history regarding Goguryeo surfaced in 2003, reactions were quite different from those to the Japanese issue. Of course, there were also continuous demonstrations and gatherings appealing to the public's nationalistic sentiments. Some aggressively claimed Koreans' right to Gojoseon (Old Joseon) and others tried to expand this as part of a territorial claim over Gando (Jiando) through offensive and nationalistic rhetoric. However, unlike the responses to the Japanese issue, such public emotion did not lead to extreme actions. Rather, the argument that a proper academic response was crucial gained ground. Some raised their voices saying that Koreans needed to be cautious about Chinese expansionist enthusiasm as well as its strategic intentions on the Korean peninsula in a post-unification era, but this idea failed to become mainstream. "Intergovernmental consultation" remained at the level of formal negotiations.

As such, Koreans' reactions to the distortion of history by Japan and China have something in common in that they are based on nationalistic sentiments. However, in a deeper examination, they are different to a large extent. This is because national emotions or sentiments differ toward the two countries. Interestingly enough, even though both issues are historical problems requiring political involve-

ment, they have rarely been analyzed from a comprehensive viewpoint in which both historical and political aspects are incorporated. Extending this notion, the claim that the issues need to be viewed from a perspective of coexistence and peace in Northeast Asia is not yet persuasive enough.

In this paper, the author reviews commonalities and differences in the distortions of history by Japan and China and also analyzes the political implications and structure, ultimately to show how the process can be linked with bringing peace to Northeast Asia. Based on this analysis, solutions are sought to address the disputes over history between Korea, China, and Japan.

From the perspective of Koreans, the Sino-Japanese historical dispute, strictly speaking, boils down to Japan's distortion of Korea's modern history, Chinese distortion of Korea's ancient history, and potential political involvement. It seems very persuasive in the sense that Japan and China's distorted historical perceptions are a regression of their official historical records. Even so, the reason why this paper uses such wording as "Korea-China-Japan historical dispute" or "historical contention" is that the three countries still obviously have a different historical understanding because of their differing interests and positions; and there are many controversies that have not been addressed even in academic circles.

### **Political Implications of the Historical Dispute between Korea and Japan as well as Korea and China**

What do the historical distortions by Japan and China have in common in this historical dispute between Korea, China, and Japan? It is that China and Japan, which are pursuing new hegemony in Northeast Asia, are taking advantage of historical issues. It is no secret that those who take the lead in distorting history in Japan are deeply involved with the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's far right. It is also obvious that their rewriting of the history textbooks is based on the re-evaluation of the "Greater East Asia War" (Pacific War) that was

conducted from 1993 to 1995. Their ultimate goal is to make Japan a “nation capable of war” and they openly reveal their intention of revising the pacifist constitution to that end. They even state that intention in textbooks for middle school students.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the Chinese government strongly denies that they are pursuing hegemony in Northeast Asia. The Korean government accepted the Chinese “explanation.” The two countries agreed to resolve the issue through academic research in February 2004 and those in charge of the task at the foreign ministries agreed to hold a joint academic symposium.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, Korea launched the Goguryeo Research Foundation on March 1. However, on April 20, two months after the bilateral agreement, China deleted references to Goguryeo in describing the Korean peninsula’s history from the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn>).

Only the word Goguryeo was expunged from the original phrase of “After the 1st century A.D., the three nations of Silla, Goguryeo, and Baekje were formed on the Korean peninsula with different government systems and affiliation structures.” When the Korean government strongly denounced this, the Chinese government on August 5 eliminated all references to Korean history prior to August 15, 1948 when the Korean government was established.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding this, China is known to have argued that “Koreans’ response to the historical issue was taken into consideration to a large extent and the Chinese government made its own efforts” and that “not only the Korean section but also the Japanese and North Korean sections were modified in the same way to strike a balance.”<sup>4</sup>

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1. Lee S. (2007, 24, 34).

2. *Kukmin Ilbo*, February 16, 2004.

3. It was reported by various members of the press on August 6, 2004. The exact date Goguryeo was deleted varies depending on the press. *Munwha Ilbo* (on August 7, 2004) reported the date in question was April 20 while *Kukmin Ilbo* (on March 11, 2005) reported April 22. The author believes the difference was due to the fact that the issue became known after the actual deletion had taken place.

4. *Seoul Daily*, August 6, 2004.

The explanation made by the Chinese side was not entirely invalid, but the fact that China decided to erase the pre-Korean government era rather than returning to the original context by leaving Goguryeo in its description means that the Chinese government acknowledged the existence of controversy over Goguryeo history. Moreover, the Chinese government went too far by deleting not only its own ancient history prior to August 15, 1948 as well. It may be too much of a logical jump, but the Chinese measure was risky in that it might be related with the idea behind Article 1 of the Treaty of Shimonoseki of 1895 (“China recognizes definitively the full and complete independence and autonomy of Korea.”) which was signed by China after losing the Sino-Japanese War. The fact that most Chinese think Korea was a subordinate state of China until the Sino-Japanese War broke out deepened such concern. In addition, it served to amplify concerns that the history of the Republic of Korea would be limited to describing merely the history of the area below the 38th parallel after August 15, 1948, given that Korean history during the post-Sino-Japanese War included the histories of Japan’s colonial rule and the national division.

The Chinese attitude became clear when it released the results of its research, called the Northeast Project (Dongbei Gongcheung),<sup>5</sup> to the press and reflected the findings in some textbooks. On July 2, 2004, Chinese state-run news agencies such as the Xinhua News

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5. Many analyses have been conducted over the Northeast Project in Korea. However, as for the background and substance of the project, different views exist. In a narrow sense, it is a research project studying the history and present state of China’s northeastern region over a five-year period. For the initiation of the project, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Center of China’s Borderland History and Geography Research) and the three northeastern Chinese provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang received ratification from the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. In a broad sense, it encompasses all regional development projects spanning from historical projects (regional research and preservation of historic sites) to military modernization. The total budget is known to be 20 billion yuan (around 2.6 trillion won), and out of it, 15 million yuan (around 2 billion won) was allocated for research projects. For more information, refer to Yoon (2006).

Agency and *Renmin Ribao* reported “Goguryeo was a provincial government of China.” Xinhua News Agency reported that historical relics from Goguryeo were to be registered on UNESCO’s World Heritage list, and insisted that “Goguryeo had been subordinated to Chinese royal families and was a regional administration that received its authority from Chinese dynasties.” It then explained, “it is true that Goguryeo created a unique culture, but that culture was later deeply influenced by Chinese culture.” Also, it added that “hard mountain fortress walls, tombs on great scale and splendid wall paintings are important compositional parts of Chinese culture.” *Renmin Ribao* also reported “Goguryeo was a regional Chinese government.”<sup>6</sup>

Taking this one step further, in the process of repairing ancient artifacts, China incorporated mythological components of Old Joseon into its real history to support the political aspect of the Northeast Project. Through the “Dynastic Project” (Xia-Shang-Zhou Duandai Gongcheng) run from 1996 to 2000 and the “Chinese Civilization Origin Exploration Project” (Zhonghua Wenming Tanyuan Gongcheng) that started in the year 2000, China had already included the era of myth and legend known as the “Three Chinese Emperors and Five Kings” into its history, thus claiming it has the world’s oldest origin of civilization. Along with this, China included the mythological figure of Emperor Chiyou (who is considered by Korea’s non-mainstream academia as a Korean national ancestor) as one of its three origins, together with Yandi and Huangdi who had already been viewed as the originators of China. China even constructed and put up “relics” to pay tribute to Emperor Chiyou.<sup>7</sup>

China’s political aims can be ascertained through the Northeast Project’s background that was already made clear and from research carried out on the future of the Korean peninsula. The Center of China’s Borderland History and Geography Research asserts that “After national reform and opening, international relations changed

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6. *Munwha Ilbo*, August 7, 2004.

7. Refer to Woo (2004, 68-104).

regarding the northeastern China, namely Manchuria. As the region became the center of Northeast Asia, it gained an important strategic position." As the reason for initiating the Northeast Project, the center suggests the fact that "research organizations and scholars of some nations distorted facts in the process of historical research with special intentions, and some politicians publicly pushed ahead with several wrong arguments for political purposes, which caused confusion." As such, China argues that there is a need to conduct academic research in regards to the two Koreas' offensive remarks towards Manchuria, but here as well, it does not try to hide its ulterior intention, which is to pursue its strategic objective of responding to the changing political situation in Northeast Asia.

According to analysis by Korea's Northeast Asian History Foundation, the number of confirmed tasks for the Northeast Project within the five-year time frame is 112 in total. An unofficial count identified the tasks by sector: there are 33 issues on Korean ancient history; 18 on Sino-Korean relations; 27 on the history of northeastern provinces; 18 on Sino-Russian relations; 3 on border (*jiangyu*) theory,<sup>8</sup> 5 on issues regarding the Korean peninsula; and 5 not described (excluding official documents). The geographic distribution of those in charge of the tasks is as follows: 47 people from Jilin, 15 from Liaoning, 22 from Heilongjiang, and 18 from Beijing.<sup>9</sup> This shows that tasks on Korea's ancient history and Sino-Korean relations (45.5%) as well as territorial issues and research on the Korean peninsula (7.1%) are mainly conducted by scholars from Beijing and the three northeastern Chinese provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang. Furthermore, political aspects are recognizable in research relating to the Korean peninsula being carried out unofficially in connection with China's Korean peninsula policy and Northeast Asian strategy.<sup>10</sup>

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8. It refers to a theory suggesting that all nationals currently residing in Chinese territory are Chinese nationals and therefore their history is Chinese history.

9. Yi I. (2007).

10. Yoon (2004, 264).

As explained above, it is obvious that China, in the same way as Japan, has strong political intentions when it raises historical issues over the Korean peninsula. Another similarity is that the central governments of both Japan and China argues that they are not directly involved with the issues and instead highlight the role of the private sector and regions as well as academic significance, but in essence the governments are deeply involved after all (refer to Table 1).

*Table 1. Subjects of Historical Distortion in Japan and China and the Governments' Position*

	Subject	Official Position about Protest	Solution
Japan	Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform which receives all-out support from Japan's rightists	of government; textbook publication under authorization system	- recommend partial correction
China	3 northeastern Chinese provinces and Center of China's Borderland History and Geography Research (under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) which are supported by the central Chinese government	No involvement of the central government as it is up to the authority of regional government	- partial correction - academic research

The two countries have also shown similar responses to the Korean government's strong protest. The Japanese government has maintained the position that it can not directly order modification of textbooks or intervene, because textbook publication is subject to an authorization system. The central government states that the selection process of textbooks is controlled by regional committees on education as for middle schools and by each school for high schools, adding another reason for why the central government cannot take

part in the issue. China also has a similar logic to its response. It says the central government does not get involved as the Northeast Project has nothing to do with China's "hegemonism" and the project is implemented by the three northeastern Chinese provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang. Thus, both nations are asking for academic resolution.

However, when it comes to historical disputes between Korea and Japan and between Korea and China, and thus between China and Japan, political factors at home and abroad also matter in addition to the external aspects explained above. As was the case with the former Koizumi cabinet and also with the Abe cabinet, the Japanese government has openly taken advantage of historical issues to solidify public support for themselves and the right wing, and to achieve their political objectives. The best topics for Japanese rightists have been, of course, issues pertaining to North Korea's missiles or nuclear weapons, but historical conflicts with Korea also have played a crucial role. When Korea argued that the description of Japan's colonial rule was distorted in the textbooks, Japan reacted by saying that the textbook issue constitutes interference in domestic affairs.

Nevertheless, the Japanese government allowed the textbooks to glorify war and colonial rule, deleted war crimes, and raised issues with territorial rights to Dokdo. *New History* (for junior high school students) and *Newest Japanese History* (for senior high school students) in question describe the Pacific War as the "Greater East Asia War," which conceals this war of aggression. As for those who are involved with the textbooks, their historical viewpoint was formed by accepting the war criminals' assertion that "Japan waged wars to defend itself, liberate Asia from the rule of the West, and to construct a greater East Asian region."<sup>11</sup> They deleted all references to the

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11. *New History* (2001, 277). A revision authorized in 2005 (p. 204) tempered the expression by stating "This war was declared a war of self-defense. The Japanese government named it the Greater East Asia War." Even though a euphemism was used, the book added a footnote (because the United States banned the use of the term "Greater East Asia War," the replacement "Pacific War" was commonly used.), which gives the U.S. measure a negative tone.

“Japanese military’s sex slaves” (or comfort women), one of the most atrocious war crimes, from textbooks. What is more, they included in the textbooks territorial rights to Dokdo, which had never been mentioned in any textbook before. The relevant passage from *Newest Japanese History* reads as follows:

As for territorial issues, we should not overlook the reality that our nation’s inherent territory is threatened by other countries. The northern territory is now occupied by Russia. Korea claims territorial rights to Takeshima, Shimane Prefecture, while China claims rights to the Senkaku Islands, Okinawa Prefecture.<sup>12</sup>

In the textbooks, the necessity of revising the constitution is even mentioned. The argument is based on the understanding that the pacifist constitution is serving as a stumbling bloc when direct military intervention, e.g. troop dispatch to Iraq, is essential for Japan to contribute to global peace. The *New History* written by the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform states the hope for constitutional revision by saying, “In 2002, a constitution auditing committee was established in the National Diet and began working.”<sup>13</sup>

As such, Japan’s right-wing textbooks proudly stated their political intention and objectives and the Japanese government permitted it. It is a well known fact that this effort was made to gain hegemony in Northeast Asia through a turn to the right.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, in China, historical issues are entangled in a more complicated way than in Japan. China’s practical national objective is represented by reviving Chinese nationalist ideas that maintain the need for a solution for national sovereignty and territory issues, and unification of the two Chinas (mainland and Taiwan). To this end,

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12. “4. Modern World and Japan / Tasks for Modern Japan and Creation of Culture” in *Modern Society and Creation of Culture* (Chapter 16) from *Newest Japanese History* (2003, 270).

13. *New History* (2001, 314-315).

14. Refer to the section titled “Japan’s Turn to the Right and Historical Distortions in Textbooks” in Lee S. (2007).

China is currently suggesting various theories to unite the public. Representative cases include the “Chinese big family theory” and the “unified multinational country theory.” The latter is working as logical ground to support the former historically and theoretically. The theory of the Northeast Project can be understood as a sub-concept of the unified multinational country theory. This ideological current can be dubbed “Neo-Sinocentrism.”<sup>15</sup>

In other words, China has stronger internal necessity than Japan. While Japan’s internal factors are related with militarism and external expansion, China’s are literally for “internal use” to unite Chinese nationals including minorities. However, there are concerns that the Chinese position could turn external any time, in that the Northeast Project aims at unifying Korean Chinese, and the measure was taken considering the potential for a unified Korea’s influence over Manchuria. China’s worries are as follows: “A cohesive Korean nation will make Korean Chinese unite with Koreans. Once the two Koreas are unified, a newly created Korea will absorb the Korean Chinese population. Most Korean Chinese reside near the border between Korea and China, so there is a possibility that they will ask for autonomy or independence.”<sup>16</sup> To prevent such concerns, it is highly likely that China would intervene in issues pertaining to the Korean peninsula by blocking a collapse of the North or by exerting influence so as to form a China-friendly government. That is the tacit political implication of China’s distortion of history.

On the other hand, it should not be overlooked that Korea’s countermeasures to the political intentions of Japan or China also have political implications in various ways. As mentioned earlier, Korea has naturally taken protectionist and defensive approaches to the offensive positions of both China and Japan. However, even considering that, Korea should be cautious about the fact that its position is being taken advantage of for political purposes or for inciting nationalistic expansionism.

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15. Yoon (2006, 23).

16. Zhang (2003); quoted from Yoon (2006, 261).

It is well known that China claims that one of the rationales behind the Northeast Project is “some countries’ intentional distortion of facts” and “political offensive.” The “some countries” referred to is none other than Korea, and what aroused Chinese interest is the nationalistic attitude shown by Koreans who visited China after diplomatic relations were established between the two nations in 1992. To what extent Korean far rightists’ nationalism stretched in the mid-1990s can be ascertained in the following example: ten regiment level officers were forced to retire from service for having run “Damul Academy” (founded in December 1994) within the army in order to restore the lost territory of Old Joseon.<sup>17</sup>

In June 1995, the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs reached the point where it asked the Ministry of Culture and Sports (currently the Ministry of Culture and Tourism) to help restrain the practice, saying “Korean tourists and business people visiting China promote Korean nationalism among Korean Chinese residing in the three northeastern Chinese provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang and their rhetoric about ‘restoration of lost territory’ and instilling the sense of territory in Korean Chinese incite the Chinese government to minority issues.” On the other hand, the Chinese government came up with the direct countermeasure of completely banning visa issuance to Koreans who are suspected of potentially instigating nationalism among Korean Chinese during visits to China for art performances, academic investigation, or group tours.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, it was known beforehand through a Chinese Communist Party internal document that the party had labeled some Korean activities in China or contact with Chinese Korean as “a scheme to split China in a national or religious manner” and regarded them as threatening.<sup>19</sup>

As such, the “embracing Korean Chinese” or “restoring lost territory” movements that spread among Korea’s outside historical community like a violent gale was strong enough to get on China’s

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17. *Kyunghyang Sinmun*, January 19, 1996.

18. *Seoul Daily*, June 5, 1995.

19. *Dong-a Ilbo*, January 28, 1995.

nerves. In addition, the restoration of the tomb of Dangun in North Korea in 1994 and the massive inflow of North Korean defectors into the northeastern parts of China caused China to take precautions and establish special measures for these regions.

Furthermore, the foreign ministry's actions were no more than a diplomatic response to the pressure by China, and there was little caution or criticism against the nationalistic movement by the political or academic communities. Rather, when historical disputes between Korea and China surfaced over the Northeast Project, some politicians even made use of the far-rightist claim.

As for Korean-Japanese historical disputes, there was a tendency to take advantage of nationalistic sentiment according to political gain or loss. For instance, Korean president Roh Moo-hyun, who championed the appeasement policy toward Japan in the early stages of his office, shifted toward a more hawkish policy without offering a persuasive explanation. The Roh administration made a policy shift partly to accommodate pressure by civic groups mostly composed of victims. However, another aspect that cannot be neglected is that the policy turnaround was used as a tool to recover falling approval rates. For instance, the Roh administration changed its Dokdo policy from a "strategy of indifference" to an active response. Japan openly denounced it as being a move for "domestic purposes." This series of instances shows that Korea is not free from the trend of nations using historical disputes to strike up nationalism for political purposes.

### **The Structure of Historical Disputes between Korea, China, and Japan**

As shown earlier, historical disputes between Korea, China and Japan have complicated implications depending on each nation's political interests. However, it seems that Korea fell victim to Japan and China's struggle for hegemony in trilateral historical disputes. Seoul is denied its history of having been attacked by Japan, and its territorial right to Dokdo is being threatened. China is denying Korea a part

in the formation of the Korean nation. However, Korea's responses to these similar denials are quite different in many respects. That is because Korea has a complicated historical perception of the two nations. Korea has maintained a long-standing friendship with Japan while it experienced major events that are reason enough to form anti-Japanese sentiments among Koreans, such as the Japanese Invasion of Korea in 1592 and colonial aggression. At the same time, however, in the post-liberation era, for over forty years since the Korea-Japan Treaty in 1965, the two nations have been bound together under the strong ideological coalition of Korea-U.S.-Japan cooperation.

Korea experienced China as an antagonistic force during the Manchu War of 1636 and the Korean War of 1950. For more than fifty years after liberation, Korea maintained hostile relations with China simply because it was a communist country. Even so, Koreans have more favorable sentiments towards China than Japan. The long-lasting cultural influence of China's Confucianism and diplomatic friendliness seem to outweigh temporary hostile relations.

In a survey conducted in 2007, Koreans expressed the most favorable feelings towards the United States with 60.8% followed by China with 56.4% while the level of favorable impression towards Japan stood at 35.6%. However, it is noteworthy that favorable impressions of China declined for three consecutive years from 65.3% in 2005. In contrast, with Japan, the figure increased three years in a row from 11.2% in 2005 to 17.1% in 2006. In the year 2007, the figure grew by as much as 18.5% year on year.<sup>20</sup>

The reason why 2005 recorded a low figure for Japan is that Dokdo was the biggest issue of the year. The declining figure for China seems to be negatively influenced by bilateral disputes over the Northeast Project and news covering China's food safety issues. Thus, one can conclude that the relations between the three countries have changed rapidly depending on whether or not there were disputes, especially historical disputes.

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20. *Hankook Ilbo*, September 21, 2007.

As much as Korea's public opinion swings according to historical issues, trilateral historical issues are intertwined with each other. That demonstrates the fact that the three countries share much history in common from ancient times. For the current hot issues of the three nations, refer to Table 2.

Table 2. *Controversial Historical Issues among the Three Countries*

	Historical Understanding	Territory	Real Politics
Korea-China	– ancient history, including Goguryeo history	Gando	– Chinese influence over the Korean peninsula (North Korea) and Gando after the unification
Korea-Japan	– theory of “Mimanamiyake” – perception of the Japanese Invasion of Korea in 1592 – glorification of colonial rule, denial of war crimes	Dokdo	– Japan's swinging to the right, including Yasukuni Shrine visit – Japan's apology for colonial rule and individual reparations
China-Japan	modern history of aggression, including Nanking Massacre	Diaoyutai (Senkaku Islands)	– Japan's swinging to the right, including Yasukuni Shrine visit – Japan's acknowledgement of killing civilians during the war of aggression and reparation issue

Regarding ancient history, disputes over the theory of “Mimanamiyake” and Goguryeo are fierce. The theory of “Mimanamiyake” has long been a source of dispute and both sides have come up with convincing arguments. Korea is extremely cautious about the possible reemergence of a specter of Japanese colonialism, which turned to the theory that Japan had once ruled the southern part of the peninsula in ancient times as a basis to justify its colonial ruling. Also, Japanese academic circles are not in a position to bring that argu-

ment to the fore.

As for Goguryeo history, Korea has the upper hand. China came up with the “theory of two sharing one history”<sup>21</sup> in the mid-1980s and tried to incorporate Goguryeo into Chinese history, arguing for “historical perception based on territorial principle.” Even so, this research is believed to have not been sufficient since the relation with North Korea was considered. Efforts were made to overcome logical loopholes after the Northeast Project. However, a logic so persuasive as to convince Korea has not yet been developed. For example, in an effort to separate Goguryeo history from Korea, China has used the “unified multinational country theory,” “national origin theory” (finding the nation’s root), “tribute/investiture relations theory” and “territory theory.” However, an underlying theory that can be applied to all is still lacking. As for finding the origins of ethnic groups that were scattered across the Korean peninsula and China, there are the challenges of overcoming myth and legend. Tribute and investiture relation cannot be incited as an evidence for Korea’s dependency on China. The territory theory also has limitations as it is insufficient in explaining Goguryeo after its capital was moved to Pyongyang.<sup>22</sup> Of course, Korean historians are also facing limitations in that they have not been able to move beyond the national origin theory and historical succession theory.<sup>23</sup>

In the trilateral historical disputes, it is near impossible to expect any one party’s theory to be fully accepted by the others. That is because there are very diverse academic theories, and political interests are intertwined among the countries.

Currently, cooperative areas of the parties concerned are limited to Korea and China urging Japan to apologize for its past wrongdoing and make compensations, and the two nations opposing the Japanese Prime Minister’s visit to Yasukuni Shrine and the nation’s turn to the right. Over the remaining issues, the three countries keep their dis-

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21. 一史兩論. It refers to the theory that states that both nations share a single history.

22. Refer to Yeo (2004) and Lim K. (2006).

23. Lim K. (2006, 16).

tance and maintain a wait-and-see attitude. The three countries' current positions can be summarized as in Table 3.

*Table 3. Three Countries' Attitude to the Historical Disputes*

	Historical Understanding	Territory	Real Politics
Korea-Japan consensus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Japan's modern history of aggression</li> <li>- perception of the Japanese Invasion of Korea in 1592 (high)</li> </ul>	Dokdo (rare)	- Japan's turn to the right, including visit to Yasukuni Shrine
China-Japan consensus		Diaoyutai (Senkaku Islands) (rare)	- Japan's opposition to China's supremacy on the Korean peninsula after reunification
Korea-China consensus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- theory of "Mimanamiyake" (partially realized)</li> <li>- ancient history, including Goguryeo history (rare)</li> </ul>	Gando (high)	
Others			North Korea issue (six-party talks), U.S. influence

Cooperation between Korea and China is strong when it comes to Japan's history issues as Japan did not apologize or offer just compensation for its colonial rule and war of aggression. Another reason is that Korea and China have the same interests since both of them are concerned about Japanese rearmament. Likewise, as both Korea and Japan are on alert for Chinese hegemony, there is much room for cooperation. However, it has not yet become reality. Meanwhile, the only area indicating possible cooperation regarding ancient history is Mimanamiyake, considering the Chinese attitude toward it. In April 2004 when the "Ministry of Foreign Affairs website event" took place, China used an expression in the website's nation overview for

Japan that made it sound as if China supported the theory of Mimanamiyake. The website states, "the Yamato people unified Japan in the mid-4th century, founded the 'Yamato nation' using a slavery system, and ruled Japan for 300 years. At their height in the early fifth century, their influence reached as far as the southern part of the Korean peninsula."<sup>24</sup> Korean scholars also acknowledge the existence of Japanese activities on the Korean peninsula in the early fifth century, but in a different way from the theory of Mimanamiyake. It is noteworthy, however, that China added a description following only the Japanese argument without any additional remarks. This indicates the possibility that China may side with Japan in the Korea-Japan disputes over ancient history.

Among the remaining issues, it is over the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592 that Korea and China are highly likely to support each other's position. It is hard for the two nations to agree with the Japanese historical perception, based on which it argues that the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592 was an "entrance into Joseon," as both Korea and China fought against Japan back then.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, when it comes to territorial issues, no country is likely to embrace the other party's position. That is because it is directly linked to their national interests. Also, the three nations' positions are highly likely to be influenced by strong variables such as North Korea's nuclear issue or changing U.S. policies in Northeast Asia.<sup>26</sup> Amid changing national interests or the international situation, there is a possibility that the three nations will form or break an alliance in line with their interests for each issue and use it for political purposes.

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24. *Munhwa Ilbo*, August 7, 2004.

25. Japan's right-wing textbooks describe the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592 as entrance, not aggression.

26. U.S. policy in Northeast Asia and the North Korean issue are essential components of the historical disputes among Korea, China, and Japan. However, in the paper, the author focuses on reviewing direct factors of the three countries, and the two issues are to be dealt with later.

## **Alternatives to Korea-China-Japan's Historical Disputes**

As explained earlier, because the Korea-China-Japan historical disputes have a very complicated structure and strong implications for international politics, the only way to overcome the disputes is to create a future where Northeast Asia can live together in peace. Primary and joint responsibility for the disputes fall to Japan and China, which aim at taking leadership in a rapidly changing Northeast Asia and further, securing hegemony in East Asia. Korea is responsible for having raised the territorial issue which irked China and for having made China worry that a unified Korea may cause territorial disputes.

As obvious as the problem is, the solution is also crystal clear. China and Japan should not compete with each other for hegemony at the sacrifice of two halves of the Korean peninsula, and further, they should give up on pursuing hegemony in East Asia. For its part, Korea needs to give confidence to the others that it will not try to expand its territory to Manchuria. For Korea, it is not an easy task to give up Gando, which was taken away according to the illegal Treaty of Gando in the process of Japanese colonialization. However, if peace and coexistence can be brought to Northeast Asia in return, the nation needs to consider this seriously.

However, as always, there is a premise. It is all the more so with international politics where the power imbalance between Korea, Japan, and China shapes reality. For Korea and China, Japan's cleaning up of past wrongdoings is a prerequisite. However, Japan does not seem to easily take to that course. Only pressure by the international community and civic society's continuous demands will be able to advance Japan's decision.

A case in point is the resolution regarding comfort women mobilized for Japanese military that was passed by the U.S. Congress a short while ago. After the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed HR 121 on July 30 urging the Japanese government to make an official apology over mobilizing comfort women for its military by force, the opinion of international society boiled over. Similar resolutions were passed by the Dutch Lower House on November 20, and

the Canadian House of Commons on November 29, respectively. On August 13, representatives from the Republic of the Philippines' Congress introduced a resolution to the House of Representative, calling on the Japanese government to apologize and provide compensation to the victims over its armed forces' coercion of 200 Philippine women into comfort women during World War II. The Australian Senate is also pursuing a resolution over the "comfort women" with the Green Party taking the initiative.<sup>27</sup> These pressures made by international society have made a defining contribution to advancing the Abe cabinet's fall from power.

Meanwhile, China's hegemony issue will be difficult to control by the government by itself. It is fair to say that China's Northeast Asian policies are now swinging between "defensive and reactive policies" and "offensive and hegemonic policies." If the North Korean regime faces an emergency situation (a big "if"), China would find itself having no more than four options. The viable options are: help maintain the regime through political or military intervention; try to continuously exert its influence on North Korea by setting up a pro-Chinese regime; tacitly approve the United States or North Korea's intervention and accept the situation (in this case, China would ask for the United States to consent to its unification with Taiwan); or establish neutral authorities on the Korean peninsula through negotiation with the United States. Nobody knows which option China would choose. However, what is obvious is that China is preparing sufficient countermeasures for all those alternatives. One newspaper already reported an article showing that deals were being made behind the scene between the United States and China concerning China's involvement in the changing situation on the Korean peninsula.<sup>28</sup>

Today, there exist two movements in China. One is strong patriotism from the bottom up. The other is the government's position that induces patriotism but tries to prevent it from being viewed as supremacy or a threat to neighboring countries. However, the gov-

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27. *Segye Ilbo*, August 16, 2007.

28. Yi D. (2005) Choe (2007).

ernment position is only for external purposes, and in reality it is pursuing patriotism and Sino-centrism. Such a governmental stance can be identified from the Northeast Project. Provisional governments (the three northeastern Chinese provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang) have shown a strong desire to pursue the project, incorporating research outcomes in textbooks, and using them in museums or other fields for educational purposes. The central government pretends to put a bridle on it, but tolerates it in reality. The websites promoting their project have shut down or denied access. For example, the website for the Northeast Project (<http://www.chinaborderland.com>) was shut down and the Dynastic Project dedicated website (<http://www.china5000.cn/wenming/statics/duandai>) can be accessed only by authorized users. This can be interpreted as meaning that they will continue to carry out research, but will not make the results into controversial issues.

Kojima Shinji, who translated China's high school textbook into Japanese, diagnosed the trend as follows: "The Chinese history textbook reflects the government's strong conviction of infusing youngsters with pride in their own history, and it originates from the fact that China finds it hard to move away from a complex about the West." This is one valid analysis, but there is a need to listen to another insight as well: "The complex is inherent in modern Chinese history, but at the same time, it is linked with the national awareness of its backwardness and delayed modernization after the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution."<sup>29</sup> Given Koreans' strong patriotism during the period of economic growth, one can fully sympathize with Chinese patriotism. Thus, there is a need to understand that Chinese hegemonism is a natural phenomenon that tends to emerge in the process of economic growth and that it has been fueled by China's anxiety about what would happen in Manchuria after the two Koreas' reunification. Thus, it is necessary to persuade China to give up hegemonism.

On the other hand, one should not forget the fact that a latent

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29. Arai (2006, 236); Renmin Chubanshe (2004, 3-4).

favorable mood prevails in China. A Chinese expert in international politics said, on condition of anonymity, "The China Threat Theory emerged with the rapid rise of China on the international arena, and there is the possibility China would conflict with United States or Japan over Taiwan." He also pointed out that "making Korea turn its back and side with anti-Chinese groups because of historical issues that do not help at all in reality is a big mistake in China's foreign policy."<sup>30</sup> His points are valid and the Chinese government is highly likely to take the attitude he predicted. With no reason to make Korea hostile toward China, China does not want to bring historical issues to the fore. Also, there is a need to take full advantage of China's desire for a "denuclearized" and "neutral" Korean peninsula at least after unification.<sup>31</sup> That is, Korea needs to show that it has no intention of building a unified nation on the Korean peninsula that is hostile to China. A non-ideological mindset is desperately required in the post-Cold War era.

Under the existing structure, the policy direction of the powers surrounding the peninsula and geopolitical relations play a crucial role in affecting the choices to be made by the Japanese and Chinese governments. The following remark Chinese foreign policy expert made has many implications: "History has taught us that the two governments on the Korean peninsula will receive a relatively big help and be able to realize their long-aspired desire for unification only when they abide by basic geopolitical principles in a conscious and voluntary manner and help to maintain the interests of neighboring powers."<sup>32</sup>

The remarks made by the Chinese experts clearly show which course Korea needs to take. It was affirmed once again that South Korea can move away from struggles among neighboring powers and competition for hegemony between China and Japan only through discussion with the North for peaceful and autonomous unification.

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30. *Dong-a Ilbo*, August 7, 2004.

31. Ruchang Shenghe 如若生何 (2005, 370); quoted from Yoon (2006, 370).

32. Li Hanqui (2005); quoted from Yoon (2006, 368).

Also, Korea should not slacken efforts to create favorable public opinion about China and Japan. What is equally as important as the international situation and each government's foreign policy is a cooperative response among the three country's citizens. The possibility and power of the coalition were confirmed in the joint response to Japan's history distortion through textbooks.

A prerequisite to expanding common ground among the civil societies of the three countries concerned is enhancement of mutual understanding. The easiest and proven way is to expand common ground between Korea and China to Japan's conscientious civic movement. To this end, an accurate understanding of the Japanese situation is required. One cannot deny the fact that history textbooks of the three countries are teeming with patriotism. It cannot be denied that the least patriotic and nationalistic textbooks among the three nations are Japanese. Japanese civic groups criticize the government's educational policies, saying they are gradually leaning to the right and emphasizing patriotism. Fusosha's *New History Textbook*, which is filled with patriotism, stood at less than one percent in its market share (refer to Table 4). This shows the power of Japan's civil society.

Table 4. Market Share of Japan's Middle School History Textbooks

(Unit: %)

	Tokyo Shoseki	Osaka Shoseki	Kyoiku Shuppan	Teikoku Shoin	Nihon Shoseki Shinsha	Kiyomizu Shoin	Nihon bunkyou- Shuppan	Fusosha
2001	40.4	18.8	18.0	1.9	13.7	3.9	3.3	-
2002	51.3	14.0	13.0	10.9	5.9	2.5	2.3	0.04
2006	51.2	15.4	11.8	14.2	3.1	2.4	1.4	0.4

\* Nihon Shoseki Shinsha (日本書籍新社), formerly Nihon Shoseki (日本書籍).

If a Korea-China-Japan coalition takes issue only with Japan's past wrongdoings without Korea's and China's self-reflection or efforts to revise their own textbooks, the coalition's efforts would easily face

limitations. Entering the 2000s, Korea's textbook movement took the direction of searching for common ground with Japan and China. For example, extreme anti-Japanese protests or reckless boycotts of Japanese goods were ruled out from the beginning. Criticism was aimed at not only Japanese textbooks but "national history" (*guksa*) education. A case in point was the symposium, "Korean History Textbook and Direction of History Education—Centering on the 7th Curriculum" held in November 2002 by the biggest civic group related to textbooks, the "Asia Peace and History Education Network" (then known as the Civilian Movement for Correcting Japan-distorted Textbook). Their work played a pivotal role in replacing "national history" classes with "history" classes in secondary education, creating an "East Asian history" class in high school, and subjecting those textbooks to a rigorous system of authorization.<sup>33</sup>

A Korea-Japan Joint History Research Committee was established to promote historical reconciliation at the national level even though there are limitations, it being a government body. The Goguryeo Research Foundation, founded to actively deal with Northeast Asian historical disputes, and its successor, the Northeast Asian History Foundation, have so far objectively focused on academic activities without being influenced by nationalism or patriotism. It is encouraging that the foundation is also promoting solidarity with civil society inside and outside the nation, albeit insufficiently. However, people should always be on the alert as these organizations have inherent limitations, making them easy prey for political rhetoric based on national interests or nationalistic pressures.

Unlike Korea or Japan, however, there are challenges in China as the public is denied free external communication, and it is difficult to say whether civic society has formed in China. The second best solution is to promote exchange with the Institute of Modern History of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a private organization involved

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33. Korean history classes are to be replaced by a general history class in 2010 for middle schools and in 2011 for high schools. East Asian history classes are to be introduced in the year 2012.

in the joint response to Japan's history distortion as well as the China Foundation for Human Rights Development, a state-run agency. Some criticize such exchange as they are at the center of the Northeast Project.<sup>34</sup> Some in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences are undoubtedly pursuing the project, but at the same time there are some who strive to build a common historical perception by fostering exchange with civic groups in Korea and Japan. These have already published a history of the three nations with researchers and teachers in Korea and Japan.<sup>35</sup> They are currently planning and writing a new joint history textbook. Mutual exchange will surely lay the foundation for writing a common history in the field of ancient history and other controversial items that have caused problems with China.

As mentioned above, to overcome historical disputes among the three countries, policy preparation and compromise from the top down are important, but exchange and cooperation from the bottom up is also essential. In that sense, there is a need to listen to those who argue for dismantling "national history" courses based on a post-nationalist view as well. Lim Jie-hyun criticized Korean historians' response to the Northeast Project, saying that "it reduces research into relations between the past and the present to one that investigates the historical development into today's nation-state."<sup>36</sup> In the same context, Kim Gi-bong points out that the "nationalist historical perception that reduces history to national history is a structural cause that has led to repeated historical disputes among Korea, China, and Japan." He also claims, "In the sense that Korean history is confined to the geographical boundary of East Asia, East Asian his-

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34. Yu (2007).

35. Committee on Joint History Compilation among Korea, China, and Japan (2005). The book was published in Japan and China in their respective languages and is also available in Esperanto. The English version is currently being worked on for release in the United States.

36. Lim Jie-hyun (2007) Lim Jie-hyun's criticism is confined to the works done by Song Gi-ho. However, it is fair to say that the criticism is expanded to other Korean historians in the sense that they have deployed methodologies similar to those of Prof. Song.

tory is a prison for Korean history, but at the same time, East Asian history is the stepping stone for Koreans to make a jump into the world.”<sup>37</sup>

Their arguments are valid for sure, but for that possibility to be realized, many prerequisites are needed. First of all, China and Japan need to agree to such a historical mindset. Also, Koreans should move beyond the perspective that “Koreans will be naturally doubtful of it in that the nation experienced the nightmare of “Sino-centrism and the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere.”<sup>38</sup> We are already facing urgent issues in reality such as China’s hegemonism based on “Neo-Sinocentrism” and Japan’s “New Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere” supported by the militaristic swing to the right. As such, there are inherent risks in dismantling the classes in schools that teach only Korean history and making a hasty transition into “East Asian history” classes. That is, the “Northeast Asian Theory” entails the risk of diluting the history and reality of the national liberation movement against colonialization and the anti-imperialism or anti-capitalism movement, as the theory is basically being suggested under the context of post-modernism or post-nationalism.

The analysis that the root cause of the trilateral historical disputes is the three countries’ return to “their own national history” (that is, nationalism and patriotism), is risky as it may be a one-dimensional view that disregards the fact that three countries followed different paths in the process of modernization. It is hard to buy the argument that the trilateral historical disputes can be addressed by Northeast Asia as a virtual community. It is because this case is no more than an unachievable ideal unless members of each nation change their attitude toward democracy and pacifism. A community that is not based on an accurate perception of history characterized by rule and resistance always invites another form of rule and more resistance. Also, it means that a bigger national confederation has to prepare for a hegemonic competition with another

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37. Kim (2006, 14).

38. Lee Y. (2004, 360).

national confederation (like the European Union).

Looking at the development of each East Asian country, one can easily see that there is a very bumpy road ahead on the way to forming an East Asian community. As of 2007, Japanese citizens' favorable impression of the United States is 65.9% followed by Korea (59.0%), Russia (26.9%) and China (24.9%). On the contrary, that of North Korea, which is at the center of East Asian history and another party to peace in East Asia, registers as low as 1.2%. As if in response to this, Chinese favorable feelings toward the EU record a whopping 84.6% followed by Russia (78.4%), Korea (70.6%), the United States (52.1%) while that of Japan was 15.7%.<sup>39</sup> The indicator also shows that issues such as Japan's reflection on past wrongdoings and China's hegemonism play a very important role in their relations. Although not mentioned in this paper, what is as important as an independent decision or choice by Korea, China, and Japan are U.S. policies on Northeast Asia and North Korean issues, according to public surveys.

Currently, one of the most crucial tasks to address the historical disputes is to publicize Japan's war crimes and share other past wrongdoings that go against humanitarian values, based on an objective and universal historical mindset. The next step is to develop that mindset to the extent that the parties concerned can move to defend the future-oriented values, particularly the value of the pacifist constitution that Japanese society has achieved.

## Conclusion

The historical disputes among the three countries are based on academic aspects, but there are surely political features as well. In the struggle to win hegemony between Japan and China, historical issues are taken advantage of. Korea also showed political intent when the territorial issue was revived. Moreover, as Korea, China, and Japan

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39. *Hankook Ilbo*, September 21, 2007.

have created an inseparable common history from ancient times, it is no wonder the structure of the historical debate is very complicated. In the historical debate related to politics, each issue of the debate has the potential to develop into a political issue threatening others, of course, depending on the attitude of each nation.

In the long term, the historical debates can be addressed by establishing common historical perception based on academic research. This is possible when causes for debates such as the Sino-Japanese struggle for hegemony and the Gando issue raised by Korea are eliminated. Another premise is Japanese reflection on its modern history of aggression. Against this backdrop, East Asia's reconciliation will definitely face a dilemma over a history going beyond a mere collection of histories of various nations. What matters is to put words into action by calling on Japan to reflect upon the history of aggression in an effort to broaden common historical understanding among the three countries' civil societies and jointly defending the Japanese pacifist constitution as a universal value. When those issues are resolved, the sharing of East Asian history can realize its true significance of peaceful coexistence.

Meanwhile, in Korea, East Asian history is an urgent issue that should be immediately taught at schools. There are concerns that East Asian history may heavily center on Korean history or that it may be no more than a simple description of Chinese and Japanese histories. To avoid such risks, the first task is to frankly acknowledge the differences in historical perception among East Asian countries. An accurate description of East Asian history, just like the solution to the historical disputes, seems to be premised on Japan's apology for its past, freedom from the risks of China's pursuit of hegemonism, and Korea's moving away from the nationalist standpoint. All of these depend on the deepening of democratization and pacifism in each East Asian nations including North Korea.

In spite of the various kinds of limitations within and without the nation, Korea's response does not seem that bad. Korea did not confine historical disputes to the academic realm but rather established a joint research agency to promote exchange, albeit a difficult one,

with Japanese scholars. Also, a flourishing civil society is underway. Korea is the first among the East Asian countries to build a comprehensive body (which is also the largest) to respond to Northeast Asian historical issues. Now what matters is to adequately take advantage of the conditions already in place.

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**GLOSSARY**

Dongbei Gongcheng (Ch.)	東北工程	Xia-Shang-Zhou Duan- dai Gongcheng (Ch.)	夏商周斷 代工程
Gando	間島	Yandi (Ch.)	炎帝
Huangdi (Ch.)	黃帝	Zhonghua Wenming	中華文明
Jiandao (Ch.) ▶	Gando	Tanyuan Gongcheng (Ch.)	探源工程
jiangyu (Ch.)	疆域		

(Ch.: Chinese)