

CURRENT STATUS AND CHALLENGES OF EAST ASIA'S HISTORY WARS

Introduction to History Wars in East Asia

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East Asia is in the midst of a “history war.” Although this conflict takes the form of historical debates, its essence is territorial warfare. This history war began in the late 19th century during Japan’s Meiji era, and today, China has taken over its execution. During the imperial era, Japan defined the Korean Peninsula as its lifeline and Manchuria as its line of interest, crafting historical justifications to occupy these regions. Japan established a history and geography research office, the Mansen¹ Historical Geography Research Room [만선역사지리연구실 滿鮮歷史地理研究室] within the Tokyo office of the South Manchuria Railway, a base for Japan’s continental invasion, to study the history and geography of Manchuria and Joseon (Korea). Moreover, academic institutions—like the Department of History at Tokyo Imperial University (the predecessor of today’s University of Tokyo), the Faculty of Law and Letters at Gyeongseong Imperial University (the predecessor of today’s Seoul National

University), and the Joseon History Compilation Committee [조선사편수회 朝鮮史編修會] of the Japanese Governor-General of Korea—created colonial historical perspectives to legitimize Japan’s occupation of Korea and Manchuria.

The most significant theoretical orientation of this colonial historiography was the Imperial Historiography [황국사관 皇國史觀]. It posited that the Yamato Japan of ancient times was a military powerhouse, advocating for the so-called “Unbroken Line of Emperors” [萬世一系 만세일계] from the first Emperor Jimmu [신무 神武] in the *Nihon Shoki*, *The Chronicles of Japan* to the Meiji.

Soon after occupying Korea in 1910, Japan established various state-controlled academic institutions to propagate the “Peninsula History Perspective” [半島史觀 반도사관]. Although historical records, sites, and artifacts indicate that the territory of ancient Korean history spanned the continent, the Korean Peninsula, and the Japanese archipelago, Japan distorted it by excluding the continent and the

¹ “Mansen” [만선 滿鮮] refers to Manchuria [만주 滿洲] and Joseon [조선 朝鮮, the Korean Peninsula].

archipelago from the scope of Korean history, thus restricting Korean history to within the peninsula. Specifically, they claimed that in the north of the peninsula, there was the Four Han Commanderies [한사군 漢四郡], colonies of ancient China, with its center being the Lelang Commandery, allegedly located in present-day Pyongyang, North Korea. In the south, they argued, there was the Japanese Government of Imna [임나일본부 任那日本府], a colony of the ancient Yamato Japan. The core argument of the Peninsula History Perspective was that the northern part of the peninsula was a colony of ancient China, and the southern part was a colony of ancient Japan. It implied that the modern Japanese occupation of Korea was not an invasion but a restoration of ancient history. As ancient Korea started as a colony, they argued that the modern colonial rule by Japan was also a natural conclusion of history.

Paradoxically, Japan also promoted the Manchuria-Korea History Perspective [滿鮮史觀 만선사관] which argued that Korea's history was part of the broader history of Manchuria, despite its contradictions with the Peninsula History Perspective that confined Korean history to the peninsula. The primary purpose of advocating the Manchuria-Korea History Perspective was to separate Manchuria from China and annex it.

In 1931, Japanese imperialists initiated the Manchurian Incident and occupied Manchuria. In 1937, Japan launched the Second Sino-Japanese War with the ambition of dominating all of China. Later,

in 1940, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, triggering the Pacific War. Each time, Japan's historical academia provided theoretical support to justify the empire's territorial expansion. However, the unconditional surrender of the Japanese Emperor on August 15, 1945, fundamentally changed the political situation. Following Japan's defeat in World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union occupied South and North Korea, respectively, along the 38th parallel.

After World War II, the U.S. East Asia policy initially aimed to contain Soviet expansion by supporting the victory of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party in China's civil war. Simultaneously, the U.S. sought to democratize Japan by purging war criminals. However, contrary to American expectations, Mao Zedong's Communist Party emerged victorious in China's civil war. In response, the U.S. adopted the "Reverse Course" policy, allowing former war criminals to regain influence within Japanese society. In this environment, Japanese historians, who had once reflected on their country's imperialistic past, began either defending or remaining silent on colonial historical perspectives that had supported imperialism.

Although no Korean wanted division at the time of Japan's defeat, the U.S. and the Soviet Union completely ignored the will of the Korean people and divided the country along the 38th parallel. Contrary to the expectations of the Korean people, the U.S., which controlled southern Korea,

reinstated pro-Japanese traitorous forces that had sided with Japanese imperialism into the mainstream of society. This anti-historical policy by the U.S. has left deep scars in various parts of Korean society to this day.

In the midst of this anti-historical atmosphere, where pro-Japanese forces regained control of society, Korea's academic circles were completely dominated by Lee Byungdo [이병도] and Shin Seokho [신석호], who had served the Joseon History Compilation Committee of the Japanese Governor-General of Korea. They elevated the colonial historiography of the Japanese Governor-General of Korea's office to the status of the only orthodox historical theory. The voices criticizing the historical views of those who control Korea's university history departments and national history-related institutions, which continue to perpetuate the colonial historiography of the Japanese Governor-General, are the byproducts of the U.S.'s anti-historical post-WWII policies.

From the moment of division, North Korea positioned historiography as a key area of systemic competition. Many Marxist historians, who were referred to as socio-economic historians during the U.S.-Soviet military administration, defected to North Korea and formed its historical academia. Before the Korean War, they already set overcoming Japanese colonial historiography as a major task for historical studies. North Korean historians defined as the core of the Japanese colonial historiography those

theories such as "Lelang Commandery = Pyongyang," "the Japanese Government of Imna," and "Baekje as a vassal state of Yamato Japan," and made their overcoming a central task for North Korean historiography.² As a result, Ri Jirin's 1961 Ph.D. dissertation, *Study of Gojoseon* at Peking University effectively falsified the theory of "Lelang Commandery = Pyongyang," and in 1963, Kim Seokhyeong [김석형], a historian who defected to North Korea, disproved the Japanese Government of Imna theory and replaced it with his theory of "Korean Territorial Expansion into the Japanese Archipelago." Kim Seokhyeong argued that "Imna" was not a colony established by ancient Yamato Japan in southern Korea but a small state or territorial expansion [분국 分國] established by the Gaya in the Japanese archipelago. North Korea's ability to maintain its regime, even amidst extreme economic hardship, can be found, among others, in the ideational foundation laid by overcoming colonial historiography early on.

China, after Japan's 1931 Manchurian Incident, strongly resisted Japan's Mansen History Perspective, which sought to separate Manchuria from China. Today, China is rewriting history through various state-led historical projects, and its main premise is that "all history that occurred within the territory of the current People's Republic of China is Chinese history." The Chinese Communist Party claims that modern China is a multi-ethnic state with

² Hong, Ki-mun [홍기문]. 1949. *Historical Issues* [역사제문제 歷史諸問題].

56 ethnic groups; in reality, the Han Chinese, who make up 91% of the population, dominate all spheres of power, even in regions designated as “autonomous areas” for minority groups. Historically, Han Chinese dynasties controlled only about 36% of the territory within modern China’s borders. Apart from the Han, Song, Ming dynasties, and the current regime, the history of China was largely dominated by nomadic northern peoples. The Xianbei [선비족 鮮卑族] established the Northern Wei [북위 北魏], Sui [수 隋] and Tang [당 唐] dynasties; the Mongols established the Yuan [원 元] Dynasty, and the Manchus established the Qing [청 淸] Dynasty. They were the history of ethnic minority groups and nomadic horse-riding peoples who occupied all of China or its northern territories. China’s state-led historical project, which forcefully subsumes all these histories under the pretext of being a multi-ethnic state, is nothing more than an anti-academic act that subordinates past history to present political purposes.

The biggest problem with China’s national historical project is that it does not exclude territorial ambitions over neighboring countries. Currently, the Chinese Communist Party heavily promotes the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) as the greatest source of legitimacy for its rule, despite the fact that it was not the Communist Party but the Nationalist Party that fought on the front lines against Imperial Japan. Putting aside this fact, the Communist Party’s use of its fight against Imperial Japan to legitimize its rule, while at the same time adopting

the key theories of Japanese colonial historiography as part of its own state-led historical project, contradicts the very rationale for its governance.

There are many such examples, but one of them concerns the theory about the eastern end of the Great Wall of China. The farthest eastern point ever reached by the Great Wall was at Shanhai (Shanghai in Chinese) Pass [산해관 山海關] in Hebei Province during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). The main reason for extending the Great Wall to Shanhai Pass was to prevent invasions from the Manchus. However, in 1910, Inaba Iwakichi of the Japanese Governor-General of Korea distorted the history by claiming that the Qin Dynasty [진 秦] extended the Great Wall all the way to Suan [수안 遼安] in Hwanghae Province in northern Korea. This was part of the Peninsula History Perspective of Imperial Japan, which aimed to confine Korean history to the peninsula, falsely claiming that the northern part of the Korean Peninsula was already under Qin control.

In the 1930s, Wang Guoliang [王國良] in China slightly revised and accepted this distortion, claiming that the Qin Great Wall extended to Pyongyang. Today, numerous museums in China, including the National Museum of China, display distorted maps showing the Great Wall of the Qin and Han dynasties extending to northern Korea, reaching as far as Pyongyang. These claims by both Japan and China are inconsistent with China’s ancient primary sources on the Great Wall and fall outside the boundaries of historical scholarship. Despite the fact that

ancient Chinese sources such as Sima Qian's *Shiji, Records of the Grand Historian* [사기 史記] unequivocally state that the Qin Great Wall reached as far as ancient Liaodong [요동 遼東],³ it is being distorted for political purposes to suggest that it extended into northern Korea.

In 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping openly revealed China's ambitions regarding North Korean territory when he told U.S. President Donald Trump that "Korea was once a part of China." This statement makes it clear that China's historical distortion is not just a scholarly issue but also reflects its territorial ambitions toward North Korea.

Given this situation, it is critical to academically scrutinize the ongoing East Asian history war. This task is important not only in the academic realm but also

for its broader implications for real-world politics. However, the solution to this issue should not involve countering Japan or China's historical distortions with those of our own. Instead, we must first establish historical accuracy based on primary sources and build correct interpretations upon that foundation. The defining characteristic of the East Asian history war, once led by Japanese imperialism before World War II and now spearheaded by China, is the disregard for historical facts in favor of unwarranted interpretations that serve current political purposes. Returning to the true nature of historical studies—reconstructing and interpreting the past based on the historical records left by those of the time—is the best way to end the current history war in Northeast Asia.

³ Currently, Liaodong refers to the area east of the Liao River [요하 遼河] in Liaoning Province, but before the fall of Goguryeo in 668, ancient Liaodong encompassed what is now the Hebei Province [하북성 河北省] region.