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Contested Views of a Common Past

Revisions of History in Contemporary East Asia

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Introduction: De-nationalising and Re-nationalising the Past

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Revisions of history in East Asia, especially modern history, have in recent years become an increasingly contested enterprise of (re)constructing collective memories and identities, whether ethnic, local, national, or gender identities.[1] In particular, how to (re)interpret national and colonial history has been a significant issue in the region. Revising history is not, of course, an exclusively regional phenomenon, and can occur anywhere whenever changing socio-political power structures and circumstances impel the questioning of hitherto dominant historical narratives and identities. The practice of revising history in East Asia, however, has been especially controversial as it is deeply entangled with contemporary political tensions both within and beyond the boundaries of the modern nation state in the region, while, at the same time, economic and cultural ties draw the countries in the region closer together.

Such "history wars" have become particularly intense since the 1980s, heightening existing tensions in the region. Internationally, there have been territorial disputes such as those over Tokdo/Takeshima between Korea and Japan, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands between Japan and China/Taiwan, the Kuril Islands between Japan and Russia, and Mount Paekdu/Changbai between Korea and China. Secondly, there have been conflicts over the re-evaluation of certain periods of history, such as recent reassessments of Japanese colonialism, not only in Japan itself but also in Taiwan and South Korea. There has also been controversy over the ancient Kingdom of Koguryŏ/Gaogouli between the two Koreas and China. Domestically, issues of re-evaluating the colonial period (in Taiwan, Korea and Japan), and the late Qing period (in China) have been similarly controversial and have been under ongoing debate in academic research, in history pedagogy, and in popular culture.

Part cause and part consequence of these conflicts, "nationalism from below" has flourished, as witnessed, for example, in popular support for the right-wing "revisionists" in Japan and in anti-Japanese sentiment and demon-

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strations in South Korea and China. The phenomenon of "nationalism from below" is not always directed against Japan, but can also be clearly observed between Korea and China; for example, there have been popular demonstrations in China over the issues of Koguryŏ/Gaogouli and Mount Paekdu/Changbai. Investigation, protests and/or cooperation on the matter of conflicts over territory, history and textbooks have increased with the growth of civic groups in the region, too. Some are state supported, especially in China, and some are dissident grassroots groups. The role of historical narratives in (re)constructing the theory and praxis of nationalism and national identity has been evident in recent attempts to revise history in the region. At the same time, globalisation, cross-border trade, population mobility, the development of new communication and information technologies, and intercultural interaction have blurred the boundaries between global, national and local identities. The growth of nationalism in the face of globalisation can also be seen in East Asia. Thus, in the age of globalisation, the boundaries of national and local identities based on historical distinctions are shifted and, simultaneously, intensified.

Since the 1990s, in order to replace the so-called "masochistic view of history" (*jigyaku shikan*), Japanese neo-nationalists have attempted to produce a "bright" historical narrative as the basis for a "healthy nationalism or patriotism". In this attempt, historical revisionists (*rekishi shūseishugi-sha*) of a nationalist persuasion, such as those who produced the recent controversial "New History Textbook" (see the chapters by Lim and Schneider), have explicitly sought to justify Japan's colonialism and wartime atrocities in the 20th century. They have accordingly euphemised or even denied Japan's wartime record on issues such as the Nanjing Massacre, forced labour and "comfort women", who were forced into sexual servitude for the Japanese army during the Asia Pacific War. The anger such revisionist accounts have ignited among Japan's neighbours has been exacerbated by Japanese political leaders, such as former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō, who insisted on making public visits to the Yasukuni shrine, where executed war criminals are revered. They have also been a source of much controversy at home, with many historians and activists trying to confront Japan's war responsibility.

In South Korea, meanwhile, a new generation of nationalist historians has emerged since the 1980s. These historians' (re)writing of the past, especially of modern and contemporary Korea, has challenged hegemonic official historiography. "Settling the past" (*kwagŏ ch'ŏngsan*) has been an important social task advocated not only by dissident historians and activists, but also by the Roh Moo Hyun administration (2003–2007). Cases of state violence against