

The Genesis of Distortion in Modern Korean Historiography

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Introduction

Rarely is the composition and distortion of history offered as a significant factor in international relations. Political scientists are prone to assert that national security, ideology, politics, economics, and cultural differences define a nation's foreign policy priorities. In Northeast Asia the clash of ideologies was offered until the Cold War's end in 1990 as the primary explanation for tensions between Japan, a divided Korea and China. Japan was described as pro-democratic and anti-communist, China as the antithesis and the divided Korea represented both political and ideological polarities. Once the Cold War was history and the ideological divide had largely dissipated, some observers forecast the emergence of institutions to promote multilateral political and economic cooperation, i.e. regionalism in Northeast Asia. After all, the Cold War's end facilitated the European Union's (EU) expansion and the nations of Southeast Asia formed the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Indeed the nations of Northeast Asia recognized the need for regionalism and in 1998 launched the first of two efforts to bring China, Japan and South Korea together. A confederation was formed to pool resources to address natural disasters and to convene regular high level diplomatic discussions to expand regional cooperation. Later China initiated in 2002 a forum to promote regional peace and stability by negotiating with North Korea an end to its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, giving birth to the forum that became known as the Six Party Talks. Alas neither effort achieved enduring results. Although ideological differences had evaporated, the region's nations shared a common cultural legacy, similar national interests and priorities; something continued to impede progress toward multilateral collaboration.

[Quinones, "Regionalism verse Nationalism in Northeast Asia." p. 2-5.]

That "something" is history. Frequent are the allegations that Japan has grossly distorted the historical record of its role in East Asia, particularly as it impacted China and Korea. Shin Gi-wook and Michael Robinson point out in the introduction to their excellent study *Colonial Modernity in Korea* that such distortion dates from after 1910 when Japanese colonialist historians presented "elaborate justifications" regarding Japan's annexation of Korea. [Shin and Robinson, p. 3.] They also point out that both Koreas during the Cold War offered their own distorted versions of Korean history to "support their claims to legitimacy." [Sin and Robinson, p. 4.] Convincingly they argue that motivating post-World War II Korean historians to produce distorted versions of modern Korean history was a surge of nationalism which required condemnation of Japanese colonialism accompanied by a desire to explain that Koreans were equally capable of achieving modernity but Japanese colonialism impeded their efforts.

Later in the book Henry Em in his essay entitled, "*Minjok* as a Modern and Democratic Construct: Sin Ch'aeho's Historiography," examines Korean Colonial Era historian Sin Ch'aeho's distinction between the Korean monarch and his subjects, what Sin calls the *minjok*. As he does, Henry Em points out that Sin Ch'aeho criticized many of the early, pre-1910 history books about Korea because they were written by Japanese scholars and journalists. [Shin and Robinson, p. 344.] Henry Em continues that a core theme of Japanese era colonialist historiography, compiled mostly by Japanese historians but also with some contributions from their Korean counterparts, strived to justify Japan's control over Korea arguing that "Koreans lacked the capacity for autonomous development or Koreans lacked a progressive spirit." [Shin and Robinson, p. 345.] The work of Shin, Robinson and their contributors significantly advances and broadens our understanding of the contentious issue of some Japanese historians' distortion of early modern Korean history while also importantly emphasizing that both Japanese and Korean historians distorted Korea's historical record for the Japanese colonial (1910-1945) and post World War II periods.

The Distortion of Early Modern Korean History

But their research did not go sufficiently back in time. Actually the distortion of late modern Korean history can be precisely dated from 1886 and traced to a small book written in classical Chinese and published in Tokyo, the *Gunse Jeoson jeonggam*, or *Political Mirror of Modern Korea*. This small eighty-eight page volume is the sole documentary source for the "*sedo jeongji*" or "era of royal in-law rule" which is by far the most pervasive thesis historians in both South Korea and Japan rely upon to characterize court politics during Yi Korea's final century between 1800 and 1895. The *Jeonggam* purports to present virtually *verbatim*, first hand accounts of confidential court discussions at the end of Kings Heonjong's (1834-49) and Cheoljong's reigns (1849-63), and the

Daeweongun's (1864-74) decade of regency (1864-73) for his son King Kojong. According to the *Jeonggam*, powerful aristocratic families (*yangban* based in Seoul and its immediate vicinity) between 1800 and 1894 competed at court to arrange the king's marriage to one of their young female family members. The queen's male immediate relatives then manipulated her to determine royal succession and to exploit the king to their benefit. The king's ability to rule virtuously subsequently declined, the dynasty's tradition of meritocracy based on the civil service examination system (*munkwa*) was eroded and corrupt government ensued as men lacking ability and virtue filled high governmental office.

Facilitating and perpetuating the "era of royal in-law rule," according to the *Jeonggam*, were a series of irregular royal successions between 1800 and 1864. Royal in-law rule is said to have begun with King Sunjo's succession in 1800 at age eleven. At the age of thirteen King Sunjo married the daughter of Kim Chosun (1765-1831, *munkwa* 1785) of the Andong Kim clan. The marriage allegedly enabled members of the Andong Kim clan related to King Sunjo's wife Queen Sunweon to manipulate the young king to their advantage. When King Sunjo died the throne passed to his only grandson who became Heonjong in 1834, and again the Andong Kim managed to arrange the young king's marriage to one of their female clan members, perpetuating the clan's virtual monopoly of power at court. King Heonjong then died in 1849 without an heir, sparking yet another scramble among the powerful families to determine succession. It is alleged in the *Jeonggam* that the Andong Kim relied on King Heonjong's grandmother of the Andong Kim clan who arbitrarily selected an orphaned royal prince living in poverty far from Seoul to become King Cheoljong (reigned 1849-1863).

During King Cheoljong's reign Prince Heungseon, described as an obscure and ambitious royal prince, relied on unethical methods to advance his selfish interests by striving to ingratiate himself to the king's closest advisers and even the queen, all of the powerful Andong Kim clan. According to the *Jeonggam*, the prince is alleged to have associated with hooligans, visited brothels, and did much drinking and gambling. Lacking respect from both court and officialdom, he flattered the (Andong) Kim at every opportunity. They, however, considered him a frivolous man and eyed him with contempt. [Jeonggam, 5b-6a.] But Prince Heungseon persisted in his efforts by "borrowing a large sum of money to buy silk upon which he painted orchids and wrote poetry and into a folding screen which he presented to State Councilor Kim Byeonggi." [Quinones, *Gunse jeonseon jeonggam*, p. 537.] Next, hoping his first born son Yi Jaemyeon would pass the civil service examination, the prince had his wife of the Yeoheung Min clan sell her gold hairpin, gold bracelets and clothing to pay for a grand birthday banquet which would include dancing girls and musical entertainment. It was hope that the might Kim Byeonggi, the guest of honor would be so flattered that he would allow their son's passage of the examination. [Jeonggam, pp. 5b-6a.] But once again Prince Heungseon was supposedly rebuffed. In 1864, just as the prince focused his attention on King Cheoljong's queen, the king died without an heir. In the *Jeonggam*, Prince Heungseon is said to have convinced the Andong Kim clan's rival at court to designate his twelve year old second son Myeong-bok (1852-1919) as King Kojong (reigned 1864-1907), successor to King Cheoljong. King Kojong's father Prince Heungseon was then designated the regent and granted the title *Daeweongeun* by which he is known in history. [Jeonggam, pp. 13b-14a.]

Determined to end the era of "royal in-law rule" the *Daeweongeun* supposedly chose as his son's consort an orphan girl from what is described in the *Jeonggam* as a politically impotent and impoverished family of the Yeoheung Min clan. The orphan girl became Queen Myeongseong (1851-1895) in 1866 when fifteen years old, a year older than her husband. To students of late Yi Korean history she was Queen Min. Despite the *Daeweongeun's* efforts, Queen Min is said to have perpetuated with her corrupt and ambitious male relatives royal in-law rule until her brutal assassination in 1895 by Japanese soldiers. [Quinones, p. 511.]

Careful comparison of the *Jeonggam's* account with numerous contemporary official and private records firmly establishes that much of the book's claims are fiction and its details erroneous. The complex details of this comparison between historical fact and the book's fiction appears in the author's study "The *Kunse Choson Chonggam* and Modern Korean Historiography." Suffice it to say here that the successions of King's Heonjong and Kojong were determined according to dynastic precedent that if in the event there was no male heir the senior queen at court designated the royal prince to be adopted into the line of succession. Adoption in both cases was necessary because the king and his consort had failed to produce an heir or the male heir apparent had died prematurely because of natural causes. There is no evidence that any family group or individual within the court aristocracy had taken steps to assassinate an heir apparent or disregarded dynastic precedent for determining an heir apparent. Nor is there any evidence that standard adoption practices had been disregarded. In both succession cases the *Veritable Records* recorded that the senior queen designated an appropriate successor to Kings Heonjong and Cheoljong. The *Jeonggam's* claims to the contrary, there was no lengthy period of indecision or discord regarding either succession.

Yet, despite the *Jeonggam's* lack of reliability as an historical source, its thesis of "royal in-law politics" and many of the book's characterizations of prominent people and key events in 19th Century Yi Korean politics appear in virtually every general history of Korea published between 1895 and 1974. One of the first historians to

present this interpretation was Kikuchi Kenjo in his 1895 history of Korea, *Chosen okoku*. Hayashi Taisuke followed in 1901 with *Chosen kinsei shi* which contains two chapters on rule by royal in-laws. The dean of Korea's first generation of modern scholars, Yi Neunghwa, devoted the latter half of his 1925 book on the history of Christianity in Korea, *Joseon gidoggyo geup oegyosa*, to *sedo jeongji*. Actually for several decades historians knew of the *Jeonggam*'s contents only because Yi Neunghwa had reproduced *verbatim* almost half of the *Jeonggam*'s content in his 1925 work. Copies of the *Jeonggam* disappeared after 1925 and it was not until 1964 that a copy of the book was rediscovered in Japan.

Nevertheless historians in Japan, Korea, North America and Europe continued to rely on the *Jeonggam* as their primary source for characterizations of 19th Century Yi Korean politics. The Christian missionary and historian James Scarth Gale included discussion of royal in-law politics in his 1927 *History of the Korean People*. Choe Namseon's brief general history *Choseon yeoksa*, published in 1931, discussed *sedo jeongi*. Tabohashi Kiyoshi soon followed with his highly regarded study of Japanese-Korean relations, *Kindai nissen kankei no kenkyu* in which he discussed *sedo jeongji*'s impact on the two nations' relations. Reliance on the *Jeonggam* continued after Korea's liberation in 1945, at least in South Korea. Yi Byeongdo, who emerged as South Korea's leading historian on the eve of the Korean War, subscribed to the *sedo jeongji* thesis in his widely read 1947 text *Jeoseonsa daegwan*. His students Yi Seongeun in *Hanguksa choe gunsebyeon* (1961) and Yi Sangbaek in *Hanguksa geunsebyeon* (1965) included detailed accounts of *sedo jeongji*. The same was true of the standard general histories of Korea *Hanguksa sillon* (1967) by Yi Gibaek and *Hanguk tongsa* (1970) by Han Ugeun. Even William Henthorn's *A History of Korea* (1971) describes late Yi Dynasty politics in terms of *sedo jeongji*.

After 1971 reliance on the *Jeonggam* as a key source subsided. The book and *sedo jeongji* are not referred to in Takashi Hatada's *A History of Korea* (1969) or *East Asia: Tradition and Transformation* (1973) by Edwin O Reischauer and Albert Craig. In North Korea, no historian referenced either the *Jeonggam* or *sedo jeongji* in their histories of late Yi Dynasty Korea. But historians trained in South Korea and the United States continue on occasion to refer to rule by royal in-laws as Eugene Park did in passing in his outstanding study of the military examination system in late Yi Korea, *Between Dreams and Reality*, pages 184-185.

Clearly the *Jeonggam* and its thesis about royal in-law politics was the virtually universal characterization of late Yi Korean politics for nearly a century. How this came to pass is detailed in my study "*The Kunse Choson Chonggam and Modern Korean Historiography*" and need not be repeated here. Instead our attention will focus on the book's authors and their message. Although published in Tokyo, the authors were all Korean: Yi Sujeong who contributed the preface, Pak Jehyeong who wrote the narrative and Pae Jeon who provided the commentary. [Much of the following information about the *Jeonggam*'s authors comes from my previously published study of the *Jeonggam* unless otherwise noted.]

Yi Sujeong is the best known of the three men. Yi claimed in an article he wrote for the Japanese Christian magazine [*Nana ichi zappo*. No. 34 (April 1883)], and again in a discussion reported by the American missionary Henry Loomis ["The First Korean Protestant in Japan," *Korean Mission Field* (July 1937) p. 139.] that his assistance to Queen Min in her clash with the *Daeweongun* during the 1882 military mutiny (*Imo gullan*) earned him a military rank and permission to study in Japan. This is confirmed in Japanese Foreign Ministry archival materials which listed Yi Sujeong as an attendant (*suweon*) to Min Yoengik, King Kojong's brother-in-law by adoption who passed the higher civil service examination in 1877, and Kim Okkyun, 1872 higher civil service examination passer, on a mission Pak Yeonghyo led to Japan in October 1882. Pak Yeonghyo at the time was considered the leader of the *Kaehwadang* or "Enlightenment Party." Initially more a school of thought than a political clique, the group traced its origins to early 19th Century scholars who advocated the introduction of European knowledge, technology and Christianity into Korea. In 1882 a group of ambitious and capable aristocrats (*yangban*) who believed favoritism for Queen Min's kinsmen was excluding them from gaining government office, gathered around Pak Yeonghyo who gained King Kojong's permission to lead a study group to Japan to learn western thought and military technology. Several language officials, *jungin* who ranked lower than *yangban*, accompanied the group. The group's leaders' aim was to quicken the introduction of Western knowledge, including military technology, into Korea with Japanese help. [Lee Ki-baek (Yi Gibaek), p. 275.] At the time the Japanese scholar and educator who founded Keio University Fukuzawa Yukichi was eager to facilitate Korean and Chinese students' introduction to what he considered to be "cultural enlightenment." [Ryusaku Tsunoda, pp. 116-120.]

Once in Japan, Yi apparently asserted that his close relatives were Catholics who detested the *Daeweongun* because of his persecution of Catholics. After attending Christian church services at a Protestant church in Tokyo's Tsukiji district a Japanese Christian minister baptized him in April 1883. He then turned to his avowed main purpose for going to Japan – translating the *Bible* into Korean. At the same time Yi became the first instructor of Korean language at the Tokyo Foreign Language School attached to Tokyo Imperial University. Two of his students were the missionaries Henry Appenzeller (1858-1902) and Horace G. Underwood (1859-1916) who

achieve considerable success and fame for their missionary and educational work in Korea. [Quinones, pp. 524-525.] Little is known about Yi other than his Christian activities in Tokyo, He claimed to have been a “recorder of events at court” but his name has yet to be found in any official rosters or records.

Pak Jehyeong, listed on the book’s title page as the author, is an equally intriguing figure. Yi Sujeong in his introduction refers to a Pak Isun which was the pen name for Pak Jehyeong, a member of the Enlightenment Party whose fellow Pallam Pak Yeonghyo clansman led the study group to Tokyo in 1882. Yi Sujeong was a member of the same group. In Tokyo Pak Isun joined a small community of Korean students studying Western knowledge that included, among others:

- Yun Chiho, son of the Korean military official and 1856 military examination (*mukwa*) passer Yun Ungnyeol. Yun Chiho became a prominent leader in Korea’s Christian Church movement,
- O Sejang, son of Enlightenment Party co-leader Kim Okkyun’s language official O Kyeongnim. O Sejang became a prominent figure in Korea’s March 1 Independence Movement,
- Yu Hongik, the son of another language official,
- Yu Hyeongno who graduated from Toyama Military Academy with Seo Chaepil who formed the Independence Club in Seoul before going to the United States.

According to Yun Chiho’s diary these young men met frequently in Tokyo but Yun did not record any of their discussions. Pak demonstrated his political allegiance by participating and dying in the Kim Okkyun led Enlightenment Party’s October 1884 failed coup attempt to end Queen Min and her relative’s perceived manipulation of King Kojong. [Quinones, p. 526.]

This brings us to Pae Jeon about whom the least is known. “Hamyang Pae Chasan” is listed on the *Jeonggam*’s title page as the book’s commentator. “Chasan” was the literary name for a poet from Kimhae in Gyeongsang Province near Pusan. Apparently Pae Jeon’s poetry was a noted poet, at least in the kingdom’s southeast. [Quinones, p. 524.] According to the *Kojong sillok (Veritable Records of King Kojong)*, volume 19, page 81b and volume 19, page 82b, the case of the poet Pae Jeon is discussed on October 29 and November 6, 1882. Pae Jeon reportedly wrote a sarcastic poem about a local official Kimhae and signed the name of another official to it, igniting a dispute which came to the Minister of Punishment’s attention in Seoul. Eventually Pae Jeon was banished to an island for an unknown period. How He became involved with the *Jeonggam*, however, remains a mystery. Yi Gwangnin suggests in his *Research into the Korean Enlightenment Party’s History (Hanguk kaehwasa yeongu)*, page 243, that the *Jeonggam* was written in Seoul with Pae Jeon’s assistance and taken by Yi Su-jeong to Tokyo for publication. While quite plausible this cannot be confirmed because documentary evidence is lacking.

Our limited information about the authors nevertheless affords ample insight into their social status and political views. None was an accomplished member of an influential family. Nor had any passed either civil or military service examination, or held an office that would have given them access to confidential court deliberations, particularly as they pertained to royal succession. If anything, they most likely had gathered from other disgruntled officials like Pak Yeonghyo and Kim Okkyun perceptions of court politics extensively tainted by innuendo and ill informed perceptions. The book is replete with evidence of this. On the other hand, the limited biographical information about each man combined with an analysis of the book’s commentary clearly points to the book being political propaganda aimed at promoting the Enlightenment Party’s program to lead Korea away from its Confucian past into modernity. The *Jeonggam*, in short, is not an accurate historical record of late Yi Korean court politics. If anything, it is an intentionally distorted thesis designed to nurture agreement with and support among its readers, whether Korean or Japanese, for Korea to end its dependence on China and follow Japan’s transformation into a modern nation by freeing the king from his royal in-laws grasp.

The distortion of early modern Korean history has its genesis in the *Gunse Joseon jeonggam* and the numerous writings of Japanese and Korean historians published between 1895 and 1975. Despite the book’s profound shortcomings, historians in Japan, Korea and beyond relied extensively and repeatedly on the *Jeonggam* as the main source for their version of late 19th Century Korean history. After all it was an unofficial “wild” history or *yasa* which suggested to some that the book’s content was free of the distortions assumed to plague all officially compiled chronicles. Also historians lacked many of the tools available to modern historians to assess the book’s accuracy. The strong tradition of respecting one’s teachers undoubtedly caused many historians to hesitate to challenge their mentors’ judgment. Reliance on the *Jeonggam* even continued even after the book was lost. The thesis of royal in-law politics may well accurately reflect some general aspects of 19th Century court politics, but additional research must be conducted to ascertain the extent to which this might be accurate, if at all. Resting the theory on the *Jeonggam* alone is insufficient given the book’s pervasive inaccuracy.

Until then, however, the *Jeonggam* is not without utility given its apparent accurate portrayal of the Enlightenment Party’s perception of 19th Century court politics and thus the political motives behind the 1884 coup and its leaders. According to the *Jeonggam*, the *Daeweongeun* and Queen Min had pursued policies that prevented

Korea from breaking with its archaic Confucian tradition to take steps toward modernization. The *Daeweongeun* is accused of having retarded Korea's ability to modernize by excluding foreign knowledge and rejecting opportunities to enrich the kingdom through commerce. His persecution of Catholics and armed rejection of a private American effort to engage in trade invited first France followed by the United States to invade Korea. Lacking a modern army, Korea was twice defeated and plundered. Belatedly Korea signed a treaty with Japan but already Korea's modernization had been retarded and its ability to resist Japan's aggressive approach to the Korean court had been greatly diminished. By 1880, according to the *Jeonggam*, the Yi dynasty was in full decline as *sedo jeongji* facilitated continued usurpation of the king's authority. Alas, in the eyes of the *Jeonggam*'s authors, Queen Min and her relatives clung to China and rejected Japan's efforts to introduce "enlightenment," the adoption of superior Western technology and political practices, to Korea.

The first generations of historians writing about early modern Korean history thus unwittingly broadcast the Enlightenment Party's distorted perception that the policies and actions of the *Taeweongun* and Queen Min and her perpetuation of *sedo jeongji* had thwarted early efforts to introduce Western knowledge and technology into Korea, and fostered corruption of the dynasty's long tradition of virtuous government and meritocracy. One of the *Jeonggam* authors' purposes clearly was to justify the need for the Enlightenment Party's coup attempt to expel Queen Min and her clansmen from court in 1884. Whether the book's thesis played any role in convincing Japanese officials to brutally assassinate Queen Min to clear the way for implementation of the Japanese inspired 1894 *Kabo* Reforms is a possibility yet to be explored. Firmly established, however, is the fact that Japanese and Korean historians extrapolated from the *Jeonggam*'s narrative the thesis that Yi Korea's last leaders made their kingdom vulnerable to Western imperialism, particularly Russian imperialism, by rebuffing Japan's offers to assist Korea's entry into modernity by instead clinging to a corrupt and bankrupt China. Korean historians must therefore share with their Japanese counter parts responsibility for the perpetuation of this distortion in the writing of early modern Korean history.

Distortion of 20th Century East Asian History- the Case of Korea

Early 20th Century historians' reliance on the *Jeonggam* as their primary source for interpreting 19th Century Korea's political history was for the most part a benevolent effort to inform people about late Yi Korean politics. Unwittingly, however, they fostered a distorted perspective, but did so without any government's prodding. Historians in the United States have long done similarly. One need only read the book, *Lies My Teacher Taught Me* [Loewen] which catalogues the extensive distortions contained in North America's elementary and high school textbooks. Rarely are Spaniards recognized as the first settlers of North America. European immigrants' westward migration across North America is glorified and justified in terms of "Manifest Destiny" but ignored President Andrew Jackson's, among others, policies of genocide against native Americans. President Woodrow Wilson is correctly praised for his championing of international cooperation but rarely condemned for his racism. Gradually the accomplishments and contributions of women, black Americans and minority immigrant groups are being recounted with greater accuracy. Like the *Jeonggam*, the U.S. government did not compel historians to present distorted history.

In East Asia the situation has long differed dramatically. Governments in East Asia throughout history have intentionally and routinely distorted the historical record. The goal has and continues to be the same – promote the government's goals by distorting the historical record to conform to contemporary political preferences. The practice can be traced to an ancient reliance on official chronicles to determine precedents for policies and to assess whether a ruler's and his officials' conduct conformed to Confucian values. Necessitating this was the absence in East Asia of codes and laws to distinguish between acceptable and offensive conduct. The Judeo-Christian and Islamic religious traditions from ancient times relied on codes such as the Ten Commandments recorded in the *Bible* and the *Koran*'s laws to define morally acceptable behavior and policies. The belief that these codes and laws represent the "word of God" elevates them above human tampering. But Confucian virtues are concerned with etiquette, not morality, and were defined by infallible humans, the ancient sages Confucius and Mencius among others, not "God." These sages professed that only men of virtue – those who embraced selflessness, loyalty, filial piety and practiced benevolence toward their peers and subjects qualified to assist a similarly virtuous ruler in fulfilling his foremost responsibility of sustaining social harmony. But mere mortals' selection of these values made them subject to possible reinterpretation and political manipulation. Hoping to minimize this possibility, Confucian historians compiled detailed official chronicles as guides for later generations to discern examples of good and evil conduct, and to determine which actions best served as precedents for maintaining social harmony. Some rulers of pre-modern East Asian kingdoms inevitably perverted the recording of history to serve their selfish political aims by compelling official chroniclers to distort the historical record in ways that rationalized the ruler's misdeeds or violent elimination of a predecessor or challenger.

Many would argue that East Asia's Confucian legacy today lacks validity and currency, but in East Asia history persists as the basis for assessing a nation and its leaderships worthiness of respect. East Asian governments even today occasionally "adjust" their official historical records to reflect contemporary political preferences, something the authoritarian governments of China and North Korea routinely do, but the democratic governments of Japan and South Korea also still practice. In Japan and South Korea this is now done by overseeing the editing and approval of all elementary and secondary schools textbooks to ensure consistency with the government's preferences. The practice is most pronounced in Japan where the Ministry of Education continues to "edit" the historical record of 19th and 20th Century Imperial Japan, a practice the Basic Act on Education, paragraph 1 of Article 16 authorizes. The purpose is clearly political - rationalize and marginalize Japan's perceived misdeeds during Imperial Japan from 1868 to 1945. On occasion the Japanese government has gone so far as to attempt to ban the publication of books deemed offensive to the imperial family, a tradition dating from Japan's Peace Preservation Law of 1925. An example of this is the book *Princess Masako – Prisoner of the Chrysanthemum Throne*, by the Australian journalist Ben Hills. [Ben Hills, *Princess Masako – Prisoner of the Chrysanthemum Throne – The Tragic True Story of Japan's Crown Princess*. New York: Penguin Group, 2007. Pp. 288-292.]

The South Korean military dictators Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo-hwan concentrated more on press censorship than the distortion of the historical record, but after democratization began in 1988, South Korean administrations have shifted from press censorship toward routinely managing the content of elementary and secondary school textbooks.

Since the "textbook issue" erupted in 1982 between South Korea and Japan, disputes over several historical issues continue to spark tensions. Of particular concern are official explanations regarding Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910, whether Japan contributed to Korea's "modernization," whether Korean men and women were exploited as slave laborers and prostitutes during World War II, whether a tiny island in the Sea of Japan (East Sea) belongs to Korea as Tokdo Island or to Japan as Takeshima Island, prime ministerial visits to *Yasukuni Shrine*, among other issues. A great deal of effort has and continues to be invested in debating the accuracy of each side's claims and possible ways to resolve these highly contentious issues. [See Quinones: "Impediments to Northeast Asian Regionalism: The Case of Japan and Korea," *Eurasia Cultural* (Volume I) May 2015. Pp. 25-47. Also of value is: HYUN Dae-song, editor, *The Historical Perceptions of Korea and Japan*. Seoul: NANAM Publishing House, 2008.] Debating these issues, often in highly emotional terms, does draw attention to some previously unknown or ignored knowledge which may contribute to eventual mutual understanding and respect between Japan and its neighbors, yet generally ignored in these debates are the underlying factors sustaining the Japanese government's perpetuation of distorted history.

This study contends that the problem of Japan's persistent distortion of history is rooted in Japanese society's deep political schism which pits unrestrained allegiance to the emperor, as the dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) advocates, against allegiance to the nation as the fractured political opposition prefers. This schism causes the Japanese government to vacillate between the LDP's rationalization of Imperial Japan's misdeeds and the opposition's apologies for Imperial Japan's perceived misconduct.

Japan's "Right" Historical Perspective

Japan's national schism is reflected in the deep divide in Japanese politics. The "conservatives" or "rightists" align with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) while the "leftists" align with a coalition of smaller opposition parties under the tentative Democratic Party of Japan's (DPJ) leadership. The LDP has dominated Japanese politics since the end of the U.S. occupation in the early 1950s. Its basic platform has promoted a highly centralized but essentially democratic political system, close alliance with the United States, and a capitalist, anti-communist but socialist economy. The opposition is critical primarily about the specifics of implementation, not the broader issues.

Dividing the two political camps is Imperial Japan's legacy, particularly responsibility for the "Great Pacific War," as the Japanese call World War II in the Pacific. The self-proclaimed "rightists" claim Japan never engaged in an "aggressive" war but instead fought a "defensive" war to defend itself and its neighbors by establishing the "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere" which necessitated the expulsion of the Western imperialist from East Asia. This was the essence of war time Prime Minister Tojo Hideki's defense as he recorded in his prison diary; "Japan's existence was endangered. The decision to go to war was made for that reason. Thus, the main reason for the decision to make war was self-preservation and self-defense."

[TOJO Hideki, "Hideki Tojo's Prison Diary," *The Journal of Historical Review*, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 31-85. http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v12/v12p-31_Tojo.html. pp. 20 and 27.]

A visit to *Yushukan* Museum attached to *Yasukuni Shrine* in Tokyo enables one to gain a comprehensive understanding the “rightist” interpretation of modern Japanese history as summarized in the book sold at the shrine, *Yasukuni Jinja - Yushukan Record in Pictures*. Imperial Japan is depicted as a victim of Western imperialism and Euro-American racism which compelled it to occupy Korea both to nurture Korea’s “enlightenment,” i.e. modernization, and to keep it free of Western imperialists. But then Communism’s penetration of East Asia compelled Japan to “advance” into China. The United States and its allies “threatened” Japan’s economic viability with an oil blockade in 1941, forcing Imperial Japan to attack the United States and to invade Southeast Asia to ensure access to raw materials vital for its self defense against communist in China and Western imperialism. Japan’s “leftist” opposition counters that militarism, ultra-nationalism, submission to the emperor’s authority, and the greed of Japan’s industrialists caused Imperial Japan to engage in grievous misconduct prior to and during the war.

From these diametrically opposed positions flow a multitude of related disagreements. Rightists “hawks” advocate Japan’s complete rearmament and abrogation of the Constitution’s Article 9 which bars Japan from using armed force to pursue its national interests. Leftist “pacifists” ardently support Article 9’s retention. Meanwhile Japan’s mass media has split itself into dueling camps. The huge daily newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun*, another daily the *Sankei shimbun* and monthly magazines *Sapio* and *Seiron* lean far to the right. Leaning to the left and competing commercially and politically with the rightist mass media are the massive *Asahi shimbun*, English language *Japan Times* and monthly journal *Seikai*.

The LDP, however, has the clear advantage because of its virtual domination of political power since 1952 except for brief periods in the 1990s and 2010’s. The LDP’s majority in the National Diet enables it to name the prime minister and to virtually monopolize appoints to the bureaucracy’s highest positions. These include the president of the government owned NHK radio and television network and the Ministry of Education. While NHK’s president oversees the network’s program offerings and editorial content, the Minister of Education determines the content of the nation’s school textbooks. Nevertheless, many Japanese continue to reject the LDP’s “rightist” views of the war, champion pacifism and actively support a free and objective mass media. Also significant elements of Japan’s mass media remain proud of their independence and take serious their role to ensure government transparency through freedom of the press.

Incumbent Prime Minister Abe Shinzo first held that position in 2006 and appears destined to retain it until 2022. His family is no stranger to high political office. He is the grandson of KISHI Nokusuke who was accused of and imprisoned for alleged war crimes while Minister of Labor during the Great Pacific War but released in 1948 without being charged. Kishi’s brother served as prime minister, his son-in-law as foreign minister and his grandson Abe is now Japan’s longest serving prime minister since 1945. Before becoming prime minister in 2006, Abe served as chief cabinet secretary to Prime Minister KOIZUMI Junichiro, the first post WWII prime minister to make an official visit to Yasukuni Shrine. Koizumi is the son of LDP Diet member KOIZUMI Junya. Abe’s current deputy prime minister and concurrent finance minister is ASO Taro who previously served as prime minister. Aso’s great-great-grandfather was OKUBO Toshimichi, a prominent statesmen of the Meiji era (1868-1912) and his grandfather employed thousands of unpaid Chinese and 300 European prisoners of war during the Great Pacific war in family owned coal mines. Aso’s father was elected to the Diet’s Lower House after the war. While prime minister in 2008, Aso outraged Australian, British and Dutch WWII veterans by refusing to admit his grandfather’s exploitation of slave labor during WWII. The ancestry of many other prominent members of the LDP can be traced to who played important roles during the Great Pacific War.

Nippon Kaigi

One of the LDP’s most potent political allies is the *Nippon Kaigi* or “Japan Conference,” an organization that has attracted little attention outside of East Asia. Few in North America and Europe know of its existence scope of its influence in Japan. The group formed in 1997 following the merger of several right wing advocacy groups whose members included veterans of the Imperial Army and Navy, Shinto, Buddhist and other religious groups, LDP politicians, academics and some prominent members of the business community. Mass media professionals tend to shun the organization. As of 2016, the organization claimed about 34,000 fee paying members active in 230 local chapters across Japan.

The *Nippon Kaigi*’s influence emanates from the political, academic and religious influence of the membership, not the number of members. The chairman is a former Chief Justice of Japan’s Supreme Court. Prime Minister Abe and Deputy Prime Minister Aso plus seventeen other members of the cabinet belong to the *Nippon Kaigi*. The organization in 2014 claimed 289 of 480 members of the Diet were active in the *Nippon Kaigi*. Also members are prominent retired diplomats, Self Defense Force general officers, professors, businessmen, and Shinto and Buddhist religious leaders. The chief priest at Yasukuni Shrine, the great-grandson of the last Tokugawa

Shogun, is a member. LDP Diet member Shingo Nishimura, who was kicked out of LDP Prime Minister Hashimoto's cabinet for saying that Japan was full of Korean Prostitutes, is a member. The *Sukyo Mahikari* cult founder's daughter belongs to the *Nippon Kaigi*. Followers of this cult believe that "the Creator God" blessed Adolf Hitler and his war. Hideaki Kase, chairman of the Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact and son of World War II diplomat Toshikazu Kase, is a member of the Nippon Kaigi representation committee. Kase's organization is devoted to the publication of historical materials supportive of distorted history's core themes.

Nippon Kaigi's agenda is to promote:

- Respect for the Imperial Family,
- Promote a new Constitution based on Japan's "true characteristics, that is replace the co-called "American" constitution adopted in 1952;
- Protect Japan's sovereignty;
- Revive tradition in education and nurture pride and love of nation among young people;
- Cultivate a spirit to protect the nation and contribute to world peace;
- Promote the nation's image and status in the world and friendship with other nations.

Despite the relatively benign sounding agenda, the Nippon Kaigi with Japan's LDP dominated government has for the past decade grown increasingly bold in its efforts to "revive tradition in education and nurture pride and love of nation" by deleting from textbooks passages that fault Japan's conduct during the great Pacific War, fund through the Japan Foundation research and publication that "promote the nation's image and status." Millions of dollars to promote support the same goals have gone to establish research and teaching positions at Columbia, Georgetown and MIT universities.

[David McNeil, "Nippon Kaigi and the Radical Conservative Project to Take Back Japan." *The Asia-Pacific Journal/Japan Focus* (Volume 13, Issue 48, No. 4) December 2015, pp. 1-2.]

Japanese Nationalism

Political dueling in Japan between the LDP, backed by the *Nippon Kaigi*, and its political opposition over contending views of history and definitions of Japanese nationalism perpetuate vacillation in Japanese government's official statements regarding its neighbors' allegation of Imperial Japan's misdeeds. It is not a consequence of insincerity as some critics of Japan allege to be a pervasive flaw in the Japanese character. A generic definition of nationalism holds that it is an "ideology based on the premise that the individual's loyalty and devotion to the nation-state surpass other individual or group interests," a concept that first emerged in 17th Century Great Britain and gained acceptance across Europe by the late 18th Century. [Hans Kohn, "Nationalism, in *Encyclopedia Britannica*.] Nationalism as defined by the European political tradition requires the individual to subordinate their personal preferences to the nation's priorities. While this may be the universal essence of nationalism, the characteristics of nationalism in a particular nation vary according to its distinctive culture, ethnicity, political and historical traditions, etc. Understanding Japanese nationalism requires at least an acquaintance with its philosophical and political genesis.

Japan's political schism and the LDP's motives for distorting history can be linked to the genesis of Japanese nationalism's unique characteristics. These are a complex blend of myth, religious beliefs, racist assumptions and political ideology which emerged from the 18th Century philosophical school called *Kokugaku*, School of National Studies. [Varley, p. 18.] Japanese *samurai* scholars seeking to distinguish Japan's ancient cultural roots from Chinese Confucianism and Buddhism focused on what they called *Shinto*, the "Way of the *Kami*" or spirits. Pre-19th Century *Shinto* was not an organized religion but initially a shamanistic fertility cult practiced in rural villages to nurture bountiful crops and to ensure one had a male heir. Late 18th Century Tokugawa Japan (1600-1868) Confucian scholars Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) and Hirata Atsutani (1776-1843), having discovered in primitive *Shinto* beliefs and practices what they believed to be Japan's truth cultural roots, initiated an intellectual movement which ultimately elevated Japan's emperor and people above all other human beings. [Varley, pp. 185-9 and Earl, pp. 76-81.] Motoori focused on *Shinto's* concept of *kami* which he defined as "the spirits that abide in and are worshipped at shrines. In principle human beings, birds, animals, trees plants, mountains, oceans – all may be *kami*." [Varley, pp. 185-9.] The supreme *kami* is *Amaterasu omikama*, the "sun goddess" and legendary mother of Japan's imperial dynasty and the Japanese people. Her it is important to emphasize that the concept of "divinity" is alien to all religious traditions in East Asia. The Japanese have never seen their emperor as "divine" in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic sense. Rather, as the mythological direct descendant of the "Sun Goddess," he is the ultimate source of nature's life force or "*kami*." This elevates him above all humans because he is considered innately virtuous, benevolent and even infallible, but not as being "divine."

Thus neither the emperor nor his subjects objected when America's "shogun" General Douglas MacArthur required Emperor Hirohito to deny his divinity.

This assertion linked the Japanese emperor's right to rule to a source of legitimacy superior to that of humans just as Europe's medieval monarchs claimed "God" had bestowed upon them a "divine right to rule." Chinese and Koreans instead subscribed to the Confucian philosopher Mencius' teaching that a ruler's legitimacy dependent on his virtue as defined by adherence to Confucian values. Should he cease to be a benevolent ruler, he lost his legitimacy and his subjects could replace him on the throne, known as the "Mandate of Heaven." Medieval Japanese *Kokugaku* scholars rejected this Chinese view, preferring instead to advocate the view that Japan's emperor, being a direct descendant of the "sun goddess," was innately virtuous and thus superior to all other rulers, a source of perpetual tension between Japan and its neighbors.

Hirata Atsutane, a disciple of Mootori Norinaga, expanded on his mentor's teachings. Hirata was a native of Akita, a northwestern feudal domain ruled by a feudal lord (*daimyo*) whose ancestors had opposed Tokugawa rule, who served at the Kyoto Imperial Court as a tutor to imperial princes. He taught a highly racist form of *kokugaku* in which he asserted that the Japanese were racially superior to all other people because of their descent from the Sun Goddess;

Japanese differ completely from and are superior to the peoples of China, India, Russia, Holland, Siam, Cambodia and all other countries of the world, and for us to have called our country the Land of the Gods was not mere vainglory. It was the gods who formed all the land of the world at the creation, and these gods were without exception born in Japan. Japan is thus the homeland of the gods, and that is why we call it the Land of the Gods. This is a matter of universal belief, and its quite beyond dispute. [Ryusaku, *et. al.* p. 39.] Hirata's advocacy of his mentor's teaching that the emperor was Japan's only legitimate ruler focused the Tokugawa *Shogun's* ire on Hirata and he was eventually banished from Kyoto and died in obscurity in his homeland. But later advocates of the Meiji Restoration adopted Hirata's belief in the Japanese people's racial superiority.

A sense of intellectual and political inferiority to China had motivated the birth of *Kokugaku* which asserted Japan's spiritual and racial superiority *vis a vis* China. Eventually discontent *samurai* such as Yoshida Shoin, whose thoughts and deeds many contemporary Japanese considered the essence of nationalism, seized on *Kokugaku's* teachings to justify learning Western military technology to "revere the emperor" by "expelling the barbarians" (*sonno joi*). This led to the overthrow of Japan's military monarch the *Shogun* in 1868 and restoration of the emperor to power, the so-called "Meiji Restoration." Japanese nationalism by the early 20th Century had blended *Shinto* myth with a conviction of racial superiority relative to China and Korea with Korea viewed as China's inept little brother. Victory over China in 1895 and Russia in 1905 bolstered this conviction to the extent that Imperial Japan's leaders considered their nation and subjects the equal of Europe and the United States. Whereas nationalism in most other nations developed as a popular sentiment among the general population, Japanese nationalism by the early 20th Century had become a "top down" phenomenon propagated by the nation's leadership through the educational system.

The Imperial Japanese government's effort to impose its version of nationalism on the people of Japan climaxed in 1937 with the Ministry of Education's distribution of the *Kokutai no hongu* (Fundamentals of the National Polity). [Bix, p. 13-14.] This was part of the effort to mobilize the nation to support escalation of the so-called "China Incident" into full scale war. The *kokutai* theory asserted that Japan's emperor, descended from the Sun Goddess *Amaterasu Omikami*, was the personification of the supreme "kami" or "life force" which made him infallible, the embodiment of benevolence and thus infallible. The Japanese were taught to view themselves as members of the emperor's extended family. [Bix. p. 10-11.] Imperial Japan's military leaders, declaring themselves the emperor's shield, wrapped themselves in the nation's flag and compelled the nation to follow them as they expelled the Western imperialists from East Asia so they could fulfill the emperor's ultimate mandate – achieve social harmony by creating the "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere." Anyone who criticized their mission was declared unfaithful to the emperor and nation, and thus a traitor.

Some historians attempt to distinguish between pre-Great Pacific War and post-war Japanese nationalism by declaring the characterizing the former "ultranationalist" and the latter merely nationalism. But the essence of Imperial Japan's nationalism persists today as the core of Japanese nationalism except for the rejection of military force to expand Japan's empire. The LDP with increasing ardor beginning in 1982 and with the *Nippon Kaigi's* assistance since 1997 asserts that Imperial Japan fought a justifiable defensive war, not an aggressive war as outlawed by the Kellogg-Briand Treaty of 1928 which banned war as a method to achieve national interests. The emperor sanctioned the Great Pacific War to defend his domain and subjects from Western imperialists' oppression and to sustain harmony, i.e. peace, in East Asia. The only error Japan's war time leaders committed was their failure to achieve victory. At the core of the LDP's claim is the *Kokutai* ideology's central precept that Japan's emperor is the supreme, all benevolent and infallible life force, *kami*, in the world, and thus incapable of committing misdeeds.

Japanese nationalism today still requires that all Japanese citizens revere and obey their emperor. Any who question this are deemed unpatriotic.

Abe, Aso and other descendants of the men who led Imperial Japan during the Great Pacific War therefore harbor an obligation to “rectify” the historical record by deleting from it “distortions” that cast Imperial Japan’s leaders, including the emperor, as villains rather than patriots fighting to defend the nation and to preserve Japan’s rightful role as the leading nation in East Asia. Through their eyes it is Koreans and Chinese, Japanese leftists and anti-Japanese foreigners who are distorting Japan’s history. To some extent this allegation is justified in light of the Chinese and North Korean authoritarian governments’ sanctioning publications, including textbooks, which present highly distorted claims of Imperial Japanese misconduct. South Korea’s government is not entirely innocent in this regard because in recent years it has begun encouraging and sanctioning the publication of text books containing distortions which reflect excessive nationalistic fervor and insufficient historical objectivity.

Conclusion

An historian’s professional responsibility is to present an accurate and precise comprehension of our ancestors’ deeds and misdeeds, to pursue “*veritas*,” the truth, with ardor by gathering as much information as possible, to evaluate it to delete inaccuracies and distortions, and to present a comprehensible and objective narrative. From this emerges new knowledge. Ideally this is what should happen. But the historian is an infallible human immersed in a society awash with numerous cross currents that impede one’s ability to achieve the truth. Rather than forsake achieving perfection, the historian instead should recognize the limits reality imposes on their endeavor and instead strive to accomplish the best their innate abilities and resources allow. As for achieving the “truth,” the historian can promote it by passing on to their students and a new generation of historians a refined, albeit not perfectly accurate perception of the past. The study and writing of history must be a perpetual process; one the historian understands will never achieve perfection but continuously improves humanity’s perception of the past. Critiquing the work of earlier historians thus is not an effort to belittle or to embarrass, rather to contribute to the perpetual endeavor of better comprehending our ancestors’ conduct. Recognizing this, we must always be open to criticism, prepared to correct our errors, and patient and ready to assist those who have yet to achieve ideal academic standards. This is the primary lesson I learned from my mentor Dr. Wagner.

In other words, historians seeking to rectify Korea’s historical record would do well to develop a strategy focused on encouraging and assisting their counterparts in Japan to achieve a more candid, less distorted perception of Imperial Japan’s misconduct.

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