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Textbook Nationalism: Perspectives on China, Japan and Korea

by Jin Hyun-joo

[Among the debates critical of Japanese textbook nationalism that have raged in Korea, China and internationally in recent months, this is a rare example of a self-reflexive discussion among Korean historians of the logic and limits of nationalist perspectives on their own history and that of East Asia.]

For weeks, Japan's textbooks have been sparking strong criticism in Korea and China for whitewashing Japanese colonial rule. But, historians say, Korea's textbooks, published by the government for students in the first to 10th grades, also exhibit strong nationalism.

"Voices of the far-right are loud in Japan, but they do not represent the whole Japanese population. On the other hand, Korean nationalism is quiet and not provocative, but is supported by a thick layer of Korea historians," said Lee Gil-sang, a professor at the state-funded Academy of Korean Studies.

Nationalism is defined in the dictionary as "the belief that nations will benefit from acting independently..., emphasizing national rather than international goals." In a positive sense, nationalism is considered to be "devotion to the interests or culture of one's nation." Lee, a specialist in history education, said that what all three major countries of East Asia -- Korea, Japan and China -- have in common is the nationalism exhibited in their textbooks.

"Nationalism in Japanese textbooks is shown in a less obvious but more clever way. The degree of nationalism in Korean texts is also very serious. China is no different from Korea and Japan. Its textbooks tends to stress ideology," he said.

Critics say that Korean textbooks promote nationalism by describing Koreans as having a history of cooperation as a mono-ethnic group from ancient times. But, they point out, the concept of "we" did not exist in the hierarchical society which collapsed in 1894.

"The idea of race is based on homogeneous feelings that 'we are one' among members of society, said Lim Jie-hyun, professor of history at Hanyang University in his book, "Hostile Accomplices."

Lim is a representative of a historians' group from Korea, Japan and China, called the "East Asia history Forum for criticism and solidarity," formed to urge East Asian countries to overcome their self-centered perspectives on history.

For example, he says that nationalism is evident in the textbook statement that all Koreans, regardless of whether they belong to the lower or upper class, cooperated in combating outside forces such as Japan and China which often invaded the Korean Peninsula.

What historical records show, however, is that the poor often sided with the Japanese invaders. "In the 'Imjinwaeran,' or Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592, O Hui-mun, general of the Korean loyalist troops, wrote about his concern that the lower classes welcomed Japanese forces rather than joining his troops. That was because Japanese occupiers distributed rice to villagers," said Lim.

"If the people had been armed with a nationalistic conscience, as the textbooks say, they should have resisted the Japanese."

However, Han Young-woo, a member of the National History Compilation Committee, said the concept of race based on an identical cultural background has been inherited from early times so it is dangerous to simply negate Korean nationalism.

"Brushing off Korean nationalism is a new historical distortion," he said. Han nevertheless said that exclusive and ultra nationalism should be criticized, as in the Korea-China row over the historical character and territorial sovereignty of the ancient kingdom of Goguryeo (Koguryo).

The dispute started in early 2004 when China claimed Goguryeo, which had dominated the vast territory from central Manchuria to south of Seoul, as an ethnic kingdom of ancient China. China's claim ignited outrage in among Koreans who honor Goguryeo as rulers of the largest among Korea's ancient kingdoms.

Historians say, however, that neither China nor Korea controlled Goguryeo. Rather, the kingdom encompassed multiple ethnic groups.

"Obviously, in Manchuria, people lived with various ethnic groups who had immigrated to the area. Korean textbooks, however, see it as their history, neglecting coexistence with other groups," said Tokyo University Professor Ishiwata Nobuo in his book "The World's Textbooks."

Lim observed that "The battle is quite unhistorical. In fact, . . . at that time, there existed neither China nor Korea. What existed was only Goguryeo. We have to return the history of Goguryeo to the people of Goguryeo (not the Chinese or Koreans)."

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