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Retrospect and Prospect of “East Asian History” in South Korean High Schools

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A. Overview

This report will explore the establishment and practice of the “East Asian History” course in South Korea. It will clarify goals and present situations, while identifying strengths and limitations of the course. Furthermore, it will discuss the measures that are being implemented to overcome these limitations to produce more “desirable” East Asian History textbooks.

B. Background and purpose of the establishment of “East Asian History” course

The course “East Asian History” was started in 2012 as a high school elective in South Korea. It is based on a strategically composed guideline. The word “strategically” is emphasized, as the subject was created for the following purposes:

1. Peace and stability: For the past several years, East Asia has seen the aggravation of historical and territorial conflicts among Korea, China, and Japan. The subject “East Asian History” was created to promote mutual understanding, and it will lead to peace and co-prosperity in the area. To elaborate, in 2002, China launched the so-called “Northeast Asian Project” and tried to incorporate the history of Gojoseon, Goguryeo, and Balhae into Chinese history. The Senkaku/Diayu Islands, which is rooted in the “Ryukyu Disposition” in the latter half of the 19th century, are disputed by China and Japan. As for Korea and Japan, there are other pending issues over the atonement of Japan’s past militarism and colonialism, such as the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute. The subject “East Asian History” is meant to be a measure for relieving East Asia of political and diplomatic tensions of this kind.

2. Economic relations with Korea’s neighbors and top trade partners: The assumption is that in the next ten years, Korea’s economic exchange will be more active with countries such as China, Japan, Vietnam, and Mongolia, just as the present high school students graduate from college and start working. It is intended that along with Korean history, students will gain insight and knowledge of neighboring histories to facilitate trade with them.

Of the two purposes mentioned, the first purpose is the priority. Furthermore, the subject “East Asian History” is aimed at a grander goal for students to grow into knowledgeable East Asian citizens as well as world citizens. Thus, the basic stance of teaching “East Asian History” is to be free from single-nation historiography, which is apt to confine students to narrow-minded nationalism.

C. Present situation and problems

Textbooks

In an effort to eliminate traditional western-oriented historiography, the subject is taught thematically and refrains from using western periodization such as Ancient, Middle Age, Early Modern or Modern. For example, the typical composition of a textbook is as follows:

When “East Asian History” was launched in 2012, the two textbooks for it were *Cheonjae Gyoyuk* and *Gyohaksa*. In 2015, another one was newly added called, *Bisang*. These textbooks are under criticism from

historians, history teachers, and students due to their many content errors, and because they share too little in common. To enumerate, *Cheonjae Gyoyuk* consists of thematic chapters, which is adequate to the “East Asian History” curriculum. However, this format gives students difficulties in understanding each country’s history. *Gyohaksa* gives a chronological account of each country’s history in medium-sized units. This composition enables students to grasp each country’s history with ease, but is irrelevant to the fundamental stance of “East Asian history.” *Bisang* was approved and came into use at the beginning of 2015. It is unique in that its authors are high school teachers. While this new textbook makes up for the shortcomings of the first two, it cannot avoid the criticism that it is essentially a collection of excerpts from the first two textbooks.

The College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT)

The College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), known as *Su-neung*, is a standardized test accepted by all universities in South Korea. For the CSAT, students choose two out of ten “Social Studies” subjects. “Social Studies” subjects include Life and Ethics, Society and Culture, Korean Geography, Ethics and Thought, World Geography, Korean History, East Asian History, Law and Politics, World History, and Economics. “East Asian History” was recognized in 2014 as a standardized test subject.

Percentage of candidates selecting "East Asian History" for CSAT

Subject	2014 CSAT (conducted in 2013)		2015 CSAT(conducted in 2014)	
	# of candidates who selected the subject	% of candidates who selected the subject out of all Social Studies test takers	# of candidates who selected the subject	% of candidates who selected the subject out of all Social Studies test takers
Life and Ethics	137,054	40.7	167,524	50.3
Society and Culture	155,249	46	160,233	48.1
Korean Geography	112,459	33.4	99,137	29.8
Ethics and Thought	71,114	21.1	57,025	17.1
World Geography	37,684	11.2	39,580	11.9
Korean History	42,529	12.6	38,705	11.6
East Asian History	36,979	11	35,637	10.7
Law and Politics	38,203	11.3	31,056	9.3
World History	28,772	8.5	26,932	8.1
Economics	13,420	4	9,089	2.7
Total	337,134		332,880	

As represented by this chart, the number of students who chose “East Asian History” is rather small.

One possible reason is that “East Asian History” is difficult compared to other subjects, as it demands students to learn several countries’ histories and cultures in successive periods. The test questions of 2014 and 2015 were similar both in content and difficulty level. They mostly asked about systems and cultures, or what was happening in each country during particular periods.

Designing test questions for “East Asian History” is not easy, as the nature of the subject dictates test writers to depart from asking about a single nation’s history. One of the difficulties is that there are a variety

of theories and interpretations. Also, each history, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese and Mongolian, have different developmental stages. Moreover, each textbook carries different points of emphasis because of different research interests and orientations of authors, who are mostly university professors. While it is possible to synthesize them all in lectures, it is difficult in terms of assessment.

Fundamental problems

Among the fundamental problems of “East Asian History,” the geographical scope of “East Asia” has always been a concerning issue. But most critical of all is the identity of “East Asian history,” or how to view “East Asian history.”

One aspect of this problem is the dilemma of East Asian history versus Korean history. Some believe East Asian history should be taught as the expanded version of Korean History. That is, to place Korean history at the center of East Asian history and to lead students to think how Korean history developed in its relation to other East Asian countries. Proponents insist that it enhances students’ learning effects to push out the scope of study and to understand the variables of history in a bigger picture.

Another aspect is East Asian history versus western-oriented world history. To put it another way, this means East Asian history written from a Western point of view. For example, the term “open ports” and *kaikoku* (*K. gaeguk*), a Japanese word which literally means “open country,” insinuates that East Asia had no ports or states until the mid-19th century. Also, Hong Kong’s return to China in 1997 is often called *fanhuan* (*K. banhwan, J. henkan*), which literally means “giving back,” instead of *huigui* (*K. hoegui, J. Kaiki*), meaning “coming back.” These are just two cases of East Asian history described from Western-oriented historiography, which is still prevalent in the textbooks of East Asian history. So is the so-called Japanese colonial historiography, which has been deeply inculcated by Japan. This situation leads many scholars and teachers to emphasize that “East Asia” should be the main entity.

Lastly, there are a few more details imperative to “East Asian History” as a standardized test subject. First, regarding colonial modernity, the question begs: Is colonial modernity applicable to narrating Korea and Formosa’s colonial experience under Japan and their postwar economic development? Second is regarding North Korea, to which the current textbooks carry little reference. The difficulty in writing about North Korea comes from ideological problems, lack of information, and other reasons related to the clandestine nature of North Korea.

As mentioned, the guidelines of the “East Asian history” course is thematic, not chronological. The purpose here is the holistic and objective understanding of East Asian history as a whole entity. But this is not an easy task in the classroom. Teachers, many who have never studied Japanese, Mongolian or, especially, Vietnamese histories at collegiate level, find it difficult. Let alone students, who do not have an overall knowledge of history. Furthermore, it will be a greater challenge if the scope of East Asian history goes beyond Korea, China and Japan and includes Mongolia, Vietnam and even other Southeast Asian countries, whose histories have much less in common.

Revised curriculum

Next fall, the Korean Educational Ministry will announce a revised history curriculum which will be

in effect from 2018. Prior to the announcement, a tentative plan was released on May 12, 2015. Despite many issues and shortcomings, the revised curriculum will considerably reflect the direction and goals in which the “East Asian History” subject aspires.

The target of the revision will be the following 4 subjects: middle school History, high school Korean history, high school East Asian history and high school World history. The revised curriculum will dictate middle school History to give synthesized accounts of Korean and World histories. In present textbooks, narratives of each history are provided in different parts. In future textbooks, the content of World history will be merged into Korean history. High school World History will switch their textbook narratives from periodized narratives to area-oriented ones.

In current history textbooks, the ratio of the accounts of pre-modern history and modern history is fifty-fifty. From 2018, it will change to sixty-forty. This will be applied to all of the four history subjects, but Korean history in particular. This decision reflects the opinions that too much space has been spent on modern history.

At the background of this decision are Korea’s domestic issues regarding inter-Korean relations and ideologies. The decision was made for the purpose of leaving less room for controversies. Undoubtedly, there are some who are opposed to decreasing the modern history portion, saying it runs counter to the international trend of history education.

D. Future prospects and improvement measures

I belong to an institution called Northeast Asian History Foundation, which was established in 2006 with the purpose of solving historical conflicts and in pursuit of peaceful coexistence among East Asian countries. As a measure for alleviating the present difficulties, the Foundation offers a program for training experts in East Asian history. The target of the program is high school teachers who want deeper knowledge and insight into East Asian history. We select 100 teachers and train them in about 10 sessions. Also, we often hold advisory councils and colloquiums with professors and teachers who write “East Asian History” textbooks. In addition, we are working on a sourcebook of “East Asian History.” When published, it will be used as a supplementary material for teachers and students. Hopefully, it will make up for the shortcomings of the current textbooks.