

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

The History of East Asia as Newly Recognized from the Perspective of Korean Historians

Miyazima Hiroshi and Bae Hang-seob, eds. *Tong Asia nŭn myŏt si inga?: Tong Asia-sa ūi saeroun ihae rŭl ch'ajasŏ* 동아시아는 몇 시인가?: 동아시아사의 새로운 이해를 찾아서 [What time is East Asia? In search of a new understanding of East Asian history]. Seoul: Nŏmŏ puksŭ, 2015. ISBN: 9788994606392.

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For those who lived in the first half of the nineteenth century, it would have been extremely difficult to foresee that the United States would become the world hegemon in the following century. It is even more unlikely that anyone who lived in the second half of the nineteenth century could have predicted that China would become a superpower that would pose a threat to American hegemony in the following century. However, against people's expectations and speculations, history since the nineteenth century has unfolded in just this way. The historical moment that we are now living in may also be unfolding counter to the ideas and expectations of the majority of people.

On that note, the Eurocentrism and modern-centrism that have established themselves as the predominant discourses of historians may need to be further pushed aside by new discourses. Sinocentrism, decentralism, multiple modernities, alternative modernity—these are just a few of the candidates. No one knows what the dominant discourse is going to be down the road.

Fourteen authors, including editors Miyazima Hiroshi and Bae Hang-seob, contributed to the collection *What Time Is East Asia? In Search of a New Understanding of East Asian History* in 2015. This book presents a new historical discourse that emerged in

Korea as a critique of Eurocentrism and modern-centrism. The title refers to a question posed by Alexander Woodside in his 2006 book, *Lost Modernities*, and is meant to suggest that the historical experience of East Asia cannot be grasped by historical perspectives based on Eurocentrism (10; see Woodside 2006, 31–36).

As eloquently summarized in Bae Hang-seob's preface and article—"Tong Asia yŏn'gu ūi sigak: Sŏgu, kŭndae chungsim-juŭi ūi pip'an kwa kŭkpok" [Perspectives of East Asian studies: Criticizing and overcoming Western-centrism and modern-centrism]—the most important characteristic of the book is that its primary subject of analysis, the nineteenth century, is perceived as the historical period when double colonization was carried out. This double colonization of East Asia was manifested both spatially and temporally, in the form of the "non-West" being colonized by the "West" and "premodern" society being colonized by the "modern." The book represents a collaborative search for an alternative theoretical approach and focuses on the following key concepts: East Asia, nineteenth century, Eurocentrism, modern-centrism, and collective research by the academic community of East Asia. These concepts all carry weight as hot topics in the current intellectual community in Korea, so none can be overlooked.

Among these five key concepts, the one that particularly caught my interest is the reformulated perception of modern-centrism. While Eurocentric ideas have been continually put under the microscope in Korean academia with the objectives of voicing criticism and finding alternatives, modern-centrism has received relatively little attention. However, this book brings the concept of modern-centrism to the center to try to understand it as something organically related to Eurocentrism. This focus arouses a strong awareness of existing conventional thinking, which easily equates the West with the modern and the non-West with the premodern, along with an awareness of developmentalist and teleological perceptions of history. Through this attention, the reader becomes aware of how easily one can shift toward another version of "-centrism," such as Sinocentrism or ethnocentrism, while emphasizing those characteristics of East Asian historical development that are different from those of Western or European development. There are certainly connections between *What Time Is East Asia?* and the new ways of understanding world history presented in historian-sociologist Andre Gunder Frank's *ReORIENT*, historian Roy Bin Wong's *China Transformed*, or California School scholar Kenneth Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence*. While the views of these scholars have proven useful in criticizing Western-centric

perceptions of history, they lack a skepticism toward the developmentalist approach to history borne from modern-centric ideas.

The book under discussion here focuses on the East Asian experience of double colonization, which leads to a double-layered critical mindset that exercises caution against both Eurocentrism and modern-centrism. This, in my view, is the book's greatest strength. John Duncan's "Han'guksa yŏn'guja ūi tillema" [Dilemmas for the historian of Korea] (translated from English for the collection) and Park Hun's "Samurai ūi sahwa: Meiji yusin kwa 'sadaebu chŏk chŏngch'i munhwa" [Samurai's transformation into the scholar: Meiji restoration and "Confucian political culture"] are offer a similar critical mindset by looking at the general picture and case studies, respectively. Duncan thinks the notion of "early modern" that has been regarded as important by recent works in world and global history cannot be suitably applied to the Korean case. Instead, he presents historical demographer E. A. Wrigley's concept of "advanced organic societies"—as cited by Jack Goldstone (Goldstone 1998, 262; Wrigley 1988, 60ff)—as an alternative (126–133). This concept also seems applicable to Chinese and Japanese society. Park Hun presents a counterargument to the existing idea of interpreting Meiji Reform as being based on Eurocentrism or modern-centrism. As a political background for the Meiji Restoration, Park puts forth the proliferation of Confucianism starting in the late eighteenth century, which, in his view, led to the formation of "Confucian political cultures" and an increasing number of "well-read samurai" or "Confucian literati bearing swords" (287–299).

Another key concept in *What Time Is East Asia?*, along with modern-centrism, is the nineteenth century—more precisely, the extension of the nineteenth century. In general, the nineteenth century is regarded as a period of transition and transformation, during which the encounter between East Asia and the West took place, and when the premodern and modern overlapped and transitioned from one to the other. It was, at the same time, the period in which Eurocentrism and modern-centrism, the ideologies that are critiqued in this book, were transplanted to and accepted in East Asia. According to this perspective, the nineteenth century was a period of humiliation and agony for East Asians (with the exception of the Japanese), as they were forced to discard their traditions and adopt new, modern ideas and ways of life. For this reason, among Korean and Chinese historians, whose international status rose considerably in the late twentieth century based on the growth of their economic power, there is a strong trend to re-illuminate the eighteenth century as "the flourishing century," while paying little or no attention to the nineteenth century. The contributors to this

book, however, take particular notice of the nineteenth century, approaching it from a long-term perspective. Such an expansion of perspective is an attempt to escape modern-centrism by looking at the modern from the standpoint of the premodern, just as one could be freed from Western-centrism by taking the perspective of looking at the West from the non-West, which is a reversal of the Western-centric perspective. Cho Sung-san's "19segi Chosŏn ūi tongmun ūisik kwa hanmun kŭndae" [The awareness of a common cultural identity and the modernity of classical Chinese in nineteenth-century Chosŏn] and Youn Dae-Yeong's "Indoch'aina ūi 'yŏllin pada: 'Kŭndae' haip'ong ūi p'unggyŏng kwa aehwan" [The "open" sea of Indochina: The landscape and joys and sorrows of "modern" Hả Phòng] are case studies of Chosŏn and Vietnam, respectively, that effectively manifest such a critical mindset. They take note of nineteenth-century events and phenomena, but interpret them in relation to the lasting historical context that existed prior to this era. This approach makes it possible for Cho and Youn to develop their discussions in a manner that is relatively free from the teleological pursuit of modernity or the conventional division of modern and premodern. Most of the articles in this book make good use of such "transhistorical" methods.

The crucial analytical category and key concept of this book, along with its temporal focus on the nineteenth century, is its spatial focus on "East Asia." It is a well-known fact among Korean historians that a wide variety of East Asian discourses have been pouring into Korean academia since the 1990s. Also, the subject of "East Asian history" that was abruptly included in the high-school curriculum by the Korean Ministry of Education in 2007 has been taught to students since new textbooks were introduced in 2012. Within this context, "East Asia" is hardly a fresh subject in Korea. Also, the "East Asia" treated in this book concentrates on Korea, Japan, and China, with Vietnam, Taiwan, and Manchuria also mentioned occasionally—countries that are not homogenous at all. So, what does "East Asia" refer to in this book specifically? In *What Time Is East Asia?*, the contributors reject the notion of East Asia that had been constructed by the West. As explained in the preface, East Asia is not bound as a historical space with a homogeneous or common quality, as it is in the "East Asian history" textbook. Rather, in this case, "East Asia" refers to "a method or perspective of reconstructing Korean and East Asian history, or furthermore, world history" (19).

Defining East Asia as a method or perspective may seem like an ambiguous definition. It is, however, possible to draw a rough outline by contemplating the title of part 2—"East Asia Interlocked"—and reading the articles by Kwŏn Naehyŏn and Kim Seonmin,

respectively: “Tong Asia ūn kyoyōk kwa Chosŏn” [The silver trade in East Asia and Chosŏn] and “Ilguk-sa rūl nŏmŏ pyŏn’gyōng-sa ro: Yŏjin-manjukok kwa Chosŏn ūi kwan’gye” [Beyond national history to border history: The relationship between Jurchen-Manchu and Chosŏn]. East Asia is interlaced so complexly that it can neither be understood in terms of just one nation, nor be limited to Korea, Japan, and China alone. During the nineteenth century, in particular, when contact with the Western world became more frequent and regular, East Asia naturally expanded to include Europe and America. In this process, “the transnational agent that traverses the areas that cannot be delineated by one nation, or the multicultural agent that crosses the boundaries of diverse nations” (198) became prominent. Also, the notion of “Japan and Chosŏn as the periphery of the Confucian modern” is put under the spotlight, with a strong sense of caution against the idea of prioritizing only some form of “-centrism” (57).

The momentum that allowed such diverse perspectives to be put into one volume was the “collective search by the academic community,” as mentioned previously. A seminar titled “The (Long) Nineteenth Century of East Asia” convened in January 2012, and this book is the cumulative product of more than forty monthly seminar meetings and conferences. The common idea that connected almost three dozen seminar participants for nearly four years was breaking away from the perspective of one nation and the stress on the “continuity” of the modern and premodern. The attempt to share a common and spontaneous critical mindset about East Asia among the scholars and to create a collective theoretical perspective is not unprecedented. However, achieving an end result such as this book is quite exceptional. Surely, the “collective search by the academic community” that was performed by this particular group of scholars is one of spontaneity and flexibility. Hence, as the first product of “The (Long) Nineteenth Century of East Asia” project, which will in the long run create five or six more books, the fourteen articles included in this book address a variety of different issues from a range of perspectives, rather than focusing on one particular theme or topic to create a homogeneous whole. In addition, even though the book presents a critique of Eurocentrism and modern-centrism, the question still remains as to what the next historical discourse could be. This book is a critique of modern-centrism, but it hardly argues for discarding the concept completely (21). And while Western-centrism is also scrutinized, the West’s role as the “significant other in absentia” can never be overlooked (103). Nevertheless, the forthcoming series is greatly anticipated, as its critical questions hold such relevance in this era and are sure to prove effective catalysts for future scholarship as well.

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