



East Asian Community: Facing up to History

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Introduction

Recently the movement seeking to establish an economic political community in East Asia has become increasingly active. The movement originally emerged in 1997 when East Asian countries responded to the Asian financial crisis by holding the summit talks of ASEAN+3 (Japan, China and South Korea). Since then ASEAN+3 summit talks have been held annually, and in 2005 India, Australia, and New Zealand also began to participate. Therefore it is possible to say that, following the example of the European Community/Union, a route to the unification of the region has now been established. In this situation it is not wise to have political disputes among East Asian states. Actually, the first step to regional integration is to build trust among the respective countries of the region. To build trust a concrete policy is required. Therefore the main aim of this essay is to highlight an attempt to publish single history teaching material in three East Asian countries as an example of developing regional trust. Firstly, in this article, we

shall trace the development of an East Asian Community. Secondly, we shall introduce the issue of school history textbooks in Japan, which has the potential to lead to political disputes. Finally, we shall consider the example of single history teaching material as a way for building harmonious relationships among East Asian countries.

The development of the East Asian Community

The movement which envisages the regional integration of East Asia emerged from the summit talks of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) + 3 (Japan, China and South Korea) in 1997. However, a precursor can be found in the institutional frameworks of the early 1990s, such as East Asian Economic Group (EAEG) and East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC), which were advocated by Mahathir, who was then Prime Minister of Malaysia. Mahathir emphasized 'the need to work together with the East Asian economies through the formation of EAEG'.²

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However, the EAEC was criticized by the US Secretary of State, James Baker, who suggested that 'the EAEC would draw a line in the Pacific, dividing Japan and the United States'.³ Japan took a cautious attitude towards the EAEC as a result of this strong US opposition.⁴

The first ASEAN+3 Summit was held in Kuala Lumpur in 1997. The Japanese Prime Minister, Hashimoto, contributed to the realization of this summit while proposing that 'a Japan-ASEAN summit be held in conjunction with the ASEAN informal summit'.⁵ ASEAN countries responded by broadening the framework to include China and South Korea in the talks. Although the first ASEAN+3 Summit did not generate substantial achievements, this meeting was a historic first conference for the leaders of East Asian countries.⁶ The Asian financial crisis proved a 'vital impetus to the subsequent development of the new regional framework'.⁷ During the crisis Asian countries recognized that both Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia were interdependent.⁸ Therefore the crisis helped to institutionalize the ASEAN+3 framework.⁹

The second ASEAN+3 Summit held in Hanoi in 1998 was more substantive than the previous one and focused on cooperation to cope with the Asian financial crisis.¹⁰ This Summit adopted the decision to regularize the ASEAN+3 meeting, and therefore the ASEAN+3 framework was to be institutionalized. During the Summit the South Korean President, Kim Dae Jung, suggested the establishment of the East Asian Vision Group (EAVG), 'composed of eminent intellectuals charged with the task of drawing up a vision for mid-to-long-term cooperation in East Asia for the Twenty-First Century'.¹¹ In the meantime the ASEAN countries

indicated 'their high appreciation for the role and contribution by the three countries of the People's Republic of China, Japan and the Republic of Korea in overcoming the economic and financial crisis affecting the region'.¹² The report of the EAVG was published at the ASEAN+3 Summit of 2001.

In 1999 the third ASEAN+3 Summit was held in Manila, and the heads of governments issued a 'Joint Statement on East Asia Co-operation'. At the summit it was agreed that the organisation's scope of co-operation should be comprehensive and cover the following fields: economic co-operation, financial and monetary co-operation, social and human resource development, scientific and technical development, culture and information, development co-operation, political-security, and transnational issues.¹³

In 2000 the ASEAN+3 Finance Ministers Meeting was held at Chiang Mai. At the meeting there was 'growing support to create a region-wide mechanism on financial governance for East Asia'¹⁴ and it was agreed to create 'a system of bilateral currency swap agreements' among ASEAN+3 member states.¹⁵ This was called the Chiang Mai Initiative. At the forth Summit in Singapore a range of new ideas such as 'the desirability of transforming the ASEAN+3 Summit into an East Asian Summit and desirable forms of free trade in the region'¹⁶ were discussed. In order to promote practical co-operation among East Asian states the East Asian Study Group (EASG) was to consider a framework for free trade and an East Asian Summit.¹⁷

In 2004 the movement to realize the East Asian Summit was accelerated, and in 2005 the first East Asian Summit was held in Kuala Lumpur. The Summit included all 13 ASEAN+3 states with India,

Australia and New Zealand as associate members. Nevertheless this did not mean that the ASEAN+3 framework was transformed into the East Asian Summit. According to Dent the ASEAN+3 framework can remain 'the main vehicle for advancing regional economic co-operation and integration in East Asia' while the East Asian Summit framework provides 'a broader and more outward-looking dialogue forum for discussing a wide range of political, economic and other foreign policy-related issues'.¹⁸ The East Asian Summit was to be held once in two years, and therefore, the second East Asian Summit was held in Beijing in 2007.

The issue of school history textbooks in Japan as a generator of political disputes within the East Asian region

Within the framework of the East Asian Community, which emerged from the summit conference of the ASEAN+3, not only economic issues but also those of national security were discussed. Therefore it may be possible to say that, following the example of the European Community/Union, a route to the unification of the region has now been established. Why did it take until now to establish an economic and political community in the East Asian region? One of the reasons lies in the fact that 'Japan has found it particularly hard to gain the trust of other East Asian nations with regard to adopting a regional leadership role'.¹⁹ As the past horrors of Japanese military actions in World War II remain in the memories of many of East Asia's older generations,²⁰ East Asian states remain divided by security concerns and historical animosities.²¹

There are two historical issues in Japan that still anger people in East Asia. One is the continued visit by Japanese top politicians to Yasukuni

Shrine which honors about 2.5million Japanese war dead including 14 convicted Class-A war criminals.²² For example, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited Yasukuni Shrine annually, and it created considerable controversy. The other is the issue of Japan's school history textbooks, which have been criticized for demonstrating a 'distorted view of Japanese military practices in East Asia during the Second World War'.²³ This situation has angered many East Asian people and is in sharp contrast with the example of Germany, which has reconciled with those countries that it invaded during the Second World War and which was one of the first to join the European Union.

How can we overcome this historical obstacle, which has provoked political disputes, and undermined trust within the East Asian region? Here I would like to focus on the issue of school history textbooks and to explore a solution for creating better relations between Japan and East Asian countries. As the issue of school history textbooks has been debated since the early 1980s I shall divide the process of debates around the issue into three stages: the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s.

In 1982 the issue of school history textbooks came to the surface. In June the Japanese media reported that the Education Ministry's screening of school textbooks had been forced to amend the description of the Sino-Japanese War ('invasion' was transformed to 'move in' and 'intervention'), and also the Nanjing Massacre in high school history textbooks. The Chinese government criticized the Japanese Education Ministry's action, which permitted the amendment of history relating to Japanese imperialism and the invasion of China. The South Korean government also criticized the description of colonial rule there.²⁴ In response, the

Japanese government sent top Foreign Ministry and Education Ministry officials to China and South Korea in order to broker a solution while announcing that the Government would accept the amendments that China and South Korea requested.

In November 1982 the Japanese government created a neighboring country clause as one of the criteria for the Education Ministry's screening of school textbooks. The clause states that 'the government should consider the treatment of events of the modern history among neighboring Asian countries in the eyes of international understanding and international cooperation'.²⁵ This may be thought as the safety valve that prevents the glorification of the Second World War and Japanese imperialism, and therefore, it may be possible to interpret that the Japanese government prioritized the creation of good relations among Asian countries while addressing China and South Korea's demands.

In 1993 nine high school history textbooks passed the Education Ministry's screening process, and all of these textbooks included a description of wartime comfort women. In 1996 all seven junior high school history textbooks, which passed the screening process contained a description of wartime comfort women. This was due to the fact that many historians and intellectuals in the countries concerned actively called for this addition and highlighted the issue of wartime comfort women.²⁶ This issue encountered criticism from several groups including right-wing organizations in Japan. It has been suggested that the formation the following year of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform was created as a direct response and that they started to plan for market penetration of their own textbooks as a

consequence.²⁷

In 2001 a textbook by the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform cleared censorship by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. The Society called existing history textbooks masochistic and announced that the organization had written a textbook which contributed to building the confidence of children towards being Japanese and to help them to contribute to world peace and prosperity.²⁸ The South Korean government protested and requested the amendment of 25 sections of the textbook while China took a similar stance to the South Koreans.²⁹ Nevertheless protests by the Chinese and South Korean governments calmed down due to the very low level of adoption the Society's textbook achieved, despite its stamp of approval from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.³⁰

Overcoming the issue of school history textbooks

In short, the issue of school history textbooks has come to the surface in every decade since the early 1980s, and this issue continues to be a generator of political dispute among East Asian countries. How can we overcome this issue and develop trust within the region? Firstly, we shall consider and critique a textbook produced by the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform. Secondly, we shall review a method for understanding history in order to advance harmonious relationships among East Asian countries. Finally, we shall investigate a concrete example that may help us to build trust among states within this region.

The textbook published by the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform can be criti-

cized in many ways. To begin with, the description is Japan-centrism: it does not place any blame at the feet of Japan and aims at emphasizing the pride of Japan and the Japanese.³¹ Secondly, it lacks balance: it misidentifies historical fact, obscures the interpretation of history emphasizing nationalism, makes myths historical facts, glorifies the emperor and imperial system, denies the invasion of Asia, disdains other Asian countries, denies peaceful principles within the Japanese constitution, emphasizes armament and stresses the national anthem of Japan.³² Ultimately, this textbook admires Japanese nationalism, the imperial system and ethnocentrism while disdaining Asian countries.³³

The above indicates that this textbook clearly has faults, mainly in terms of emphasizing the nationalistic pride of Japan and its contempt for other Asian countries. Consequently, Chinese and South Korean government protests regarding the contents of this textbook are obviously problematic for building harmonious relations among East Asian countries. So how can we advance harmonious relationship building with our neighbors? One way to realise this is to reconsider a sharing of historical interpretation.

Okuda and his friend, who have studied the subject of school history textbooks in relation to Japan, China and South Korea, suggest that it should become a priority for all the actors in this scenario to listen to the voice of others consciously and to work towards the creation of a shared understanding of history through the reconstruction of perception.³⁴ In their book relating to the issue, Sato and his colleagues highlight that it is decisively important that perpetrators reflect on their past invasion and colonial rule and reconstruct their national identity by working towards

the harmonious coexistence of the people of the East Asian region, as the victims will only ever take a protesting stance unless the perpetrators show an apologetic one.³⁵ Liu, who wrote about the future relationship between Japan and China, suggests that looking back on history is an emotional issue and that by giving a thought to the heart of the opponent by listening and respecting their arguments is the first step to realising true reconciliation between Japan and China.³⁶ Kondo, who is a specialist on the issue of school history textbooks in Europe, suggests that it is not enough to admit responsibility and to realise a history education that reflects past conduct. This is just a starting point for reconciliation; we also need to understand the experiences and views of those people who suffered during this time period.³⁷

Almost all of above commentators describe the importance of listening to the voice of opponents and reconstructing a shared perception of history. This approach would lead to harmonious relationship building among East Asian countries, a prerequisite for establishing an East Asian Community. How can we realise a humble understanding of opponents and a shared perception of history? Is there any concrete project currently doing so?

In 2003 Sato and his colleagues, who considered the issue of school history textbooks, suggested the possibility of editing a single teaching manual and materials by history specialists from Japan and South Korea in order to overcome the issue of school history textbooks.³⁸ This idea was realised in 2005 with the publication of *The History for Opening a Bright Future: A Modern History of Three East Asian Countries* edited by Japan, China and South Korea, the Single History Teaching

Material Board.³⁹ This project started as a reaction against the publication of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform's textbook in 2001.⁴⁰ The teaching material produced aims at sharing an understanding of history among children of East Asia. Mitani, a specialist in the issue of school history textbooks, gave positive feedback on the publication of *The History for Opening a Bright Future*, indicating that 'it is possible to regard this as a great advance since history educators in East Asia got to be acquainted with each other and they noticed the whereabouts of matter in dispute through the editing activity'.⁴¹ Projects like this can help us to listen to the voice of opponents and to reconstruct a shared historical perception that may contribute to the building of harmonious relations among East Asian countries, a critical first step towards establishing an East Asian Community.

Conclusions

In this article we mainly considered a way to overcome the issue of school history textbooks that has undermined Japanese relations with Asian countries and could be considered one of the causes for political dispute within the East Asian region. In the course of the article, we first traced the development of an East Asian Community. Although the Community has not officially been established, a framework for economic and political union within the region has been institutionalized since the first meeting of ASEAN+3 in 1997. The development has been dynamic, and some subsystems such as EAVG have also been created. Following that discussion, we introduced the issue of school history textbook in Japan, and identified the fact that this issue has come to the surface during every decade since the 1980s. Especially as a

result of the publication of the history textbook by the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, the perception gap between Japan and Asian countries widened further. Additionally, we reviewed a way forward for overcoming this issue and building trust among East Asian countries. What we found was that only way to develop trust among our neighbors was to reconsider a sharing of historical interpretation: Listening to the voice of opponents and reconstructing a shared perception of history. A joint project by Japan, China and South Korea, the Single History Teaching Material Board, was insightful in this sense. Finally, it may be possible to say that our attempt to build trust within the East Asian region, a first step toward regional integration, has just commenced.

Notes

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- ² Akihiko Tanaka, "The development of the ASEAN+3 framework", in Melissa G. Curley and Nicholas Thomas (eds), *Advancing East Asian Regionalism* (Routledge, 2007) p. 56.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ Christopher M. Dent, *East Asian Regionalism* (Routledge, 2008) p. 153.
- ⁶ Tanaka (2007), *op. cit.*, p. 62.
- ⁷ Dent, *op. cit.*, p. 167.
- ⁸ Melissa G. Curley and Nicholas Thomas,

- 'Introduction', in Melissa G. Curley and Nicholas Thomas (eds), *Advancing East Asian Regionalism* (Routledge, 2007) p. 15.
- ⁹ Tanaka (2007), *op. cit.*, p. 69.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Dent, *op. cit.*, p. 153.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 156.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Tanaka (2007), *op. cit.*, p. 65
- ¹⁷ Akihiko Tanaka, 'Higashi ajia kyodotai ron no haikai to hokosei' (The background and orientation of debates around the East Asian Community) in Kenichi Ito and Akihiko Tanaka (supervisors), *Higashi ajia kyodotai to Nihon no shishin* (The East Asian Community and guiding principle of Japan) (NHK Shuppan, 2005) p. 54.
- ¹⁸ Dent, *op. cit.*, p. 172.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Gurley and Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
- ²² Dent, *op. cit.*, p. 174.
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ Sumio Hatano, 'Rekishi wakai eno douhyou' (Signpost for Reconciliation of History), in Houshu Soetani and Masayuki Tadokoro (eds), *Nihon no higashi ajia kousou* (Japan's Vision for the East Asia) (Keio Gijyuku Shuppankai, 2004) p. 331.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 333.
- ²⁶ Hiroshi Mitani, 'Nihon no rekishi kyokasyo no seido to ronso kozu' (The System and Debating Patterns of Japanese History Textbook), in Jie Liu, *et al.* (eds), *Kokkyo wo koeru rekishi ninshiki* (The Historical Perception which Crosses the Border) (Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 2006) p. 217.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 217-8.
- ²⁹ Hatano, *op. cit.*, p. 340.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ Manabu Sato, *et al.*, 'Rekishi kyokasyo wa douarubekika' (How should History Textbook Be), in Masaru Kaneko, *et al.*, *Higashi ajia de ikiyo* (Let's Live in East Asia) (Iwanami Shoten, 2003) p. 188.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Takaharu Okuda, *et al.*, *Ajia kyostu gendaishi kyokasyo hensan kenkyukai - dai yonki no ayumi* (Study Group for Editing Single Asian Modern History Textbook: The Record of Phase Four) (Bunkyo Daigaku, 2009) p. 91.
- ³⁵ Sato, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 191.
- ³⁶ Jie Liu, 'Hashigaki' (Introduction), in Jie Liu, *et al.* (eds), *Kokkyo wo koeru rekishi ninshiki* (The Historical Perception which Crosses the Border) (Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 2006) p. ix.
- ³⁷ Takahiro Kondo, *Rekishi kyoiku to kyokasyo* (Iwanami Bukkureito, 2001) p. 46.
- ³⁸ Sato, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 191.
- ³⁹ Japan, China and South Korea's Single History Teaching Material Board (ed.), *Mirai wo hiraku rekishi* (The History for Opening Bright Future) (Kobunken, 2005)
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 221.
- ⁴¹ Mitani, *op. cit.*, p. 222.