

The Korean Ethno-state: Lynchpin of East Asia?
Getting Over It! Why Korea Needs to Stop Bashing Japan

Sonfa Oh

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(Reviewed by Hama Tadashi)

Yet another interethnic conflict has spilled over into the United States. This time, the parties are allies of America, Korea and Japan. While Americans had no hand in starting this conflict, or possibly any understanding of the fundamental issues, Americans have nonetheless sided with Korea. With American support, expressions of Korean nationalism have sprung up across the US. For example, in 2007, Korean activists and their allies pressed the House of Representatives to issue a resolution compelling the Government of Japan to apologize for the “enslavement” of tens of thousands of Korean women as “comfort women” during World War II.¹ Statues to these “comfort women” have been placed in public areas throughout America well as in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul by Korean activists. These events are merely the ones that are readily accessible to the English-language media. Unfortunately, more strident expressions of Korean nationalism in Korea, by the Korean leadership no less, have escaped the attention of the Western mass media. Thus, the true state of Korea-Japan relations and the extent of Korean anti-Japan hostility are virtually unknown in the English-speaking world. Perhaps the Western media, with its singular perspective of East Asian history, is content to side with Korea as the “victim” and demonize Japan as the “aggressor”.

In an effort to inform the English speaking world, Tachibana Publishing has translated Professor Sonfa Oh’s latest book. Professor Oh is a social-political commentator and professor of international relations at Takushoku University in Tokyo. She has written numerous books concerning Korea-Japan relations and the present book is her first to be published in English. Her book frankly defines Korean-Japanese relations and identifies the source of Korean anti-Japan hostility. Given current South Korean thinking, one wonders how Korea-Japan and Korea-US relations will pan out in the future. Professor Oh also points out that socio-economic conditions have deteriorated in Korea, wherein violent crimes have skyrocketed and official corruption has frequently

¹ The resolution demanding Japan apologize over the “comfort women” issue, House Resolution 121, was approved by the House by a voice vote, under suspension of rules, which is usually reserved for “non-controversial” measures. During the resolution’s markup in the House International Relations Committee, Representative Donald Manzullo asked his fellow committee members “What purpose is served by this body becoming involved in that dispute [between Korean and Japan over a “comfort women” issue]? Why are members of the House of Representatives going to be impaneled as a jury to determine whether or not the ostensible apologies offered by the Japanese are in fact acceptable to the Koreans?...This is not the United Nations...” (Chairman Tom Lantos’ reply, in effect, was that the Congress is the United Nations.) Representative Thomas Tancredo wondered “How many times [do] we expect the government [of Japan] today to apologize for the sins of an Imperial government of the past.” Representative Ron Paul questioned the value of the “perpetual need to apologize” and stated that what bothered him was “Where do we, as a Congress, have the jurisdiction to instruct others? ...When we demand others to do our bidding, that we are overstepping our bounds.”

made headline news; combined with anti-Japan rhetoric, this mixture cannot bode well for the future of South Korea.

Professor Oh was born in Korea and emigrated to Japan for a college education. Thus, as she states, she is fully acquainted with the Korean public educational system that inculcated her generation with anti-Japan hostility enmeshed in Korean nationalism. The effect of this long-standing anti-Japan sentiment taught in Korean schools has filled students with “psychological hate”. Things have not changed, she states, since her childhood in Korea. A typical example of this “hate” expressed by Korean school children is not mentioned in the book but readily available to readers. A Japanese television program showed anti-Japan drawings made by Korean school children from Gyeyang Middle School that were posted at Gyulhyeon Station.² One can characterize the drawings simply as crude expressions of racism. In contrast, Japanese officials have expressed their lack of tolerance for anti-Korean “hate speech”.³

To those unfamiliar with Korea-Japan relations, the magnitude of Korean anti-Japan hostility is quite startling. Professor Oh illustrates this by citing recent actions of the current South Korean President, Guen-hye Park. Right after her election, President Park “launched into her foreign policy of slighting Japan and attaching greater importance to [Communist] China.” At every opportunity, she has “repeated her anti-Japan rhetoric,” including during an address to the US Congress, all the while with the full support of the Korean media and Korean people. President Park has also refused Japan’s request for extradition of a fugitive arsonist, declined returning artifacts that were stolen from a Japanese temple, ignored Japan’s invitation to memorial services for the victims of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and demanded that Japanese companies pay compensation to war-time Korean “slave laborers”. Previous presidents, as well as President Park, have constantly chided Japan on her “wrong perception” of history and have apparently made rejecting out-of-hand any sincere apologies from Japan concerning the annexation and war-time eras official policy. President Park’s predecessor, Lee Myung-bak “sneered” that Korea has “conquered Japan,” based on widespread Japanese enthusiasm for Korean popular culture (“[The Japanese] are drooling as they look at us.”)⁴ and further boasted that should there be any rebuilding of North Korea in the future, “I will make Japan will pay for the entire project.” Furthermore, he also demanded that

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBEXPjDLmRk;>
[http://www.geocities.jp/bxninjin2004/data_room/05/cache/01/indexphp.htm;](http://www.geocities.jp/bxninjin2004/data_room/05/cache/01/indexphp.htm)
[http://www.geocities.jp/bxninjin2004/data_room/05/cache/02/index.php.htm.](http://www.geocities.jp/bxninjin2004/data_room/05/cache/02/index.php.htm)

³ “Japanese right-winger blasts anti-Korean rallies,” July 10, 2013;
<http://blogs.wsj.com/japanrealtime/2013/07/10/japanese-right-winger-blasts-anti-korean-rallies/>
“Tokyo rally against anti-Korean hate,” September 23, 2013;
[http://www.japantoday.com/category/national/view/2000-rally-against-hate-speech-in-tokyos-shinjuku;](http://www.japantoday.com/category/national/view/2000-rally-against-hate-speech-in-tokyos-shinjuku)
“Hate speech debate’ turns ugly between Osaka mayor, anti-Korean leader,” October 14, 2014;
http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201410210052

⁴ At the same time, importation of Japanese popular culture into Korea was prohibited until 1998, when Japanese comic books were allowed. Japanese movies and physical copies of music were not entirely allowed into Korea until 2004. The bans were designed to “protect Korean culture.”

the Emperor of Japan come to Korea and apologize, on his knees, for Japan's actions in Korea during the annexation era.

Readers might dismiss President Park's and her predecessors' rhetoric as nothing more than political posturing contrived to drum up domestic support when their poll numbers are declining. However, Professor Oh points out that Korean anti-Japan hostility goes well beyond politics, that it is based on a Korean perception of history, as taught in public schools ever since the founding of the Republic of Korea, and a strong Korean sense of "blood unity" expressed as xenophobia. Clearly, this hostility is deeply rooted into the Korean psyche and not merely a fad or a fluke of the current times.

Korea constantly protests Japanese views of the annexation of Korea in 1910; one would believe that the source of Korean hostility towards Japan is the annexation. However, Professor Oh points out that even without the annexation, Korean anti-Japan hostility would be no less virulent. Ancient Korean documents have in fact "written condescendingly" of Japan as a "nation of uneducated people" and "barbarians". She suggests that since Korea was a Chinese suzerain for hundreds of years, Sino-centric thinking, China at the "center of world order" and peripheral nations are composed of nothing more than uncultured barbarians, thoroughly permeated the thinking of the Korean elite and transmitted to the rest of Korea.⁵ Thus, the Chinese view, that the Japanese are "barbarians who are aggressive by nature" has dominated Korea up until today. What really infuriates nationalist Koreans, then, is not just that they lost their sovereignty during the annexation, but that they lost it to an "inferior race". With further consideration based on the Sino-centric view, one understands why Korea has in the past looked up to China as a "teacher" and "guardian" and why the current Korean leadership has "cozied up to" China and avoids Japan. Given this historical view point, there is likely to be further interaction between South Korea and China in the future, which may not be in the best interests of the US. The consequences of giving more moral support to Korea over Japan in the current conflict between the two countries on future relations with other Asian countries has yet to be clarified.

From the Western perspective, one would assume that Sino-centric thinking and its attendant racist perceptions would have been quashed over time with a modern, liberal education. However, as mentioned earlier, a source of Korean anti-Japan ideology is in fact the Korean educational system itself—Professor Oh states that "Koreans are all taught one view of history". How a nation conducts its historical educational may not be interesting in and of itself, but Korea's system certainly recalls Orwell—those "who control the past control the future, and those who control the present control the past." While Professor Oh lists a number of distortions and outright fabrications of history, three main categories will describe to the uninitiated Westerners the extent to which Koreans have distorted their own history.

Lack of Korean sacrifice in their independence.

⁵ A contemporary history of Korea, up to the time of the annexation, can be found in G. T. Ladd, *In Korea with Marquis Ito*, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1908.

The preamble to the South Korean constitution states that the “provisional” Republic of Korea was “born of the March First Independence Movement of 1919”. As Professor Oh points out, the anti-Japanese provisional government was established in China, outside of Korea, and run by “intellectuals who lived abroad for a long time”. (A pro-Soviet group of Korean exiles formed in Siberia, which later merged with the group in China.) No country at the time, either Allied or Axis, recognized the Korean provisional government. The establishment of the Republic of Korea was a by-product of the Allied victory over Japan and the emerging Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union. Even Syng-man Rhee, the first president of South Korea and inaugurator of anti-Japan hostility in public education, acknowledged that Koreans did not liberate themselves from Japan. The exiles moved into South Korea when it was safe to do so and with US backing, consolidated power, ruthlessly eliminating rivals who were either communist or who worked with the Japanese during the annexation era. The purging of Koreans who worked with the Japanese left almost no one with bureaucratic or governing experience to run the new Republic.

By contrast, the “fabricated history,” as Professor Oh calls it, states that the Republic of Korea was the result of Korean “independence movements” “liberating” the nation from “Japanese imperialism”. Thus, children are taught that the Republic of Korea was founded on the sacrifice of Koreans. Tied into this false history is the need to characterize the annexation as a period of oppression and to deny any suggestion that Korea actually achieved significant socio-economic progress during the annexation.

Professor Oh could have also pointed out that Korea gives accolades to assassins such as An Jung-guen, who assassinated Hirobumi Ito, the first Resident-General of Korea, in 1909. This attempt in enhancing the legitimacy of the Republic of Korea by honoring terrorists likely reflects the dearth of true Korean sacrifice.

History of dictatorship.

Professor Oh suggests that South Korea today is democracy on paper and points out that that Korea never developed a Western-style liberal democracy. Before the Japanese annexation, Korea was ruled with an “iron fist” during the Joseon Dynasty for several hundred years. Information was tightly controlled. A “nationwide system of secret informants” was utilized to report anyone to the government whose views ran counter to the state. The government violently suppressed the frequent bouts of rioting that sprang up throughout Korea during the Joseon Dynasty, which included killing the relatives of those involved and those suspected of even vaguely supporting the rioters. Torture of suspects and defilement of corpses were standard practices in suppressing dissent. A similar informant system was present during Professor Oh’s childhood in Korea as well—citizens were required to report pro-Japan as well as pro-North Korean sympathizers. As for free speech in Korea, Professor Oh relates her deportation from Korea and her vilification in the Korean media after her non-hostile appraisal of the Japanese annexation period and criticisms of the South Korean government.

One other practice carried over from the old days was violent suppression of dissent by the government. From establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948 until the

mid 1980s, the “republic” of Korea was in fact a series of military dictatorships. The military and police were frequently used to thoroughly suppress numerous antigovernment riots, some of which were instigated by North Korean agents, which resulted in hundreds if not thousands of casualties. What is usually missed, Professor Oh points out, is that South Korea was vulnerable to internal subversion instigated by North Korean agents and North Korea military aggression and that domestic corruption was widespread. Widespread corruption was eliminated and South Korea maintained her territorial integrity during the rule of President Park Chung-hee. During the era of military dictatorships, South Korea experienced a dramatic upturn in economic growth, as exemplified by the “Han-gang (River) miracle,” in which the size of the middle class expanded and the income distribution between rich and poor shrank.

“Coming to terms with history.”

The military dictatorship era then should be viewed within its proper context, of fighting North Korean aggression while raising the people’s standard of living. With the establishment of civilian government in the 1990s, there has been a critical “re-evaluation” of the military dictatorship era, or “coming to terms with history,” as Professor Oh calls the phenomenon. This involved investigation of numerous human rights violations and “compensating” and “restoring” the honor of the people who were “unjustly accused of crimes.” The South Korean government went beyond investigating human rights violations. North Korean guerrillas sent to destabilize South Korea, tried and convicted in South Korean court, were “rehabilitated” and honors were bestowed upon them. South Korean antigovernment terrorists were accorded similar treatment. One example that Professor Oh gives of completely falsifying history is the terrorist bombing of KAL 858 in 1987. A “reinvestigation” found that it was the fault of the South Korean dictatorship that resulted in the deaths of 115 people, rather than the North Korean agents, who planted the bomb on orders from Pyongyang.

With the beginning of liberal democracy in Korea, politicians openly express anti-Japanese and pro-North Korea sentiments. This is in contrast to the military dictatorship era—while an anti-Japan agenda was taught in schools, there were no open expressions of anti-Japanese sentiment by the government. In fact, the presidents at the time spoke positively of the Japanese annexation period, acknowledging the contributions of Japan to the modernization of Korea, and as to the loss of their sovereignty, the Korean people have no one to blame but themselves.

The advent of civilian rule saw a rise in unrestrained anti-Japan hostility. As a tool to promote national unity and patriotism, “anti-Japan nationalism” was used for this purpose and falsification and fabrication of history were “essential elements in the execution of this policy”. One way to promote this agenda was to identify and punish Koreans who worked with the Japanese during the annexation period as “traitors”. Their property was seized and their names made public, all under color of law. To further promote anti-Japan nationalism, a completely false history of the Japanese annexation period was taught to Korean school children, which continues to this day. Professor Oh notes that when she was a child and reported to her parents the “nefarious deeds” of the Japanese she learned in school, her parents and their contemporaries responded that the

“Japanese were very kind.”⁶ The gradual loss of the generation who actually lived during the annexation period will further reinforce the government’s fabrication.

One of the fabrications of history that Professor Oh discusses is the so-called “comfort women”. She states that while there were Korean women who worked as prostitutes during the war, they were not coerced by the Japanese military into doing so. She points out that since the Japanese were a tiny minority in Korea, any attempt by them to forcibly remove women from Korea would have resulted in mass anti-Japanese rioting and massacres. Such riots did not occur, even though Koreans frequently responded to oppression with violence. One point that Professor Oh did not discuss but it is worth exploring within the context of the Korean government’s use of fabricated history is exploring the series of events that led up to South Korea’s use of the “comfort women” issue to impede relations with Japan. It appears that Japanese, not Korean, writers and media were the first to report on the “comfort women” during the late 1970s and 1980s. Koreans picked up on the stories during the time of transition to civilian rule in the 1990s, during a time of rising open anti-Japan hostility, and made them their own. Whether this is a co-incidence or not requires further elaboration.

It is possible that, at some point, history lessons can be changed by the Korean government to show a more positive image of Japan. However, such a change is unlikely to occur and, moreover, it is also unlikely that such a change alone will entirely eradicate anti-Japanese hostility. Professor Oh points out that the second key foundation of Korean anti-Japan hostility is racial antagonism. Korean society is “traditionally based on the continuation of the paternal lineage.” As an extension, the ‘nation-state’ is “no more than the extended version of *jongjok* (paternal lineage), one big family based on paternal lineage.” “Moral and ethical principles are the same,” from the “family, society, to the nation-state.” Thus, the sense is that anti-Japan hostility goes well beyond simply schoolroom leaning and is likely rooted within the ethereal Korean sense of kinship.

Nations “reflect the kinship ideal at its maximal political and territorial extension.” The nation could be thought of as an extended family, with its members linked by common bonds of language, culture and genetic heritage.⁷ Korea then can be described as a nation, more than, for example, a “country,” which is merely a political entity defined by geographical borders. To preserve the strong bonds of kinship, Korea prohibited unions between Koreans and foreigners during the time Korea opened its doors to foreigners in the late 19th century. Such unions were in fact punishable by death, as Koreans placed a premium on their racial purity or “blood unity”.

There is another possible consequence of the long-standing bonds of kinship in Korea. Professor Oh points out that the South “envies” the North’s hereditary dictatorship, in which the “social and political order [is] under strong management.” This sentiment not only reflects Korea’s authoritarian tradition, but suggests that such a form

⁶ Some Koreans resented foreign rule, many being from rural areas where Sino-centric thinking prevailed. The everyday lives of most Koreans, however, were not directly impinged by the government and many prospered. Kang, H. *Under the Black Umbrella*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001.

⁷ Pearson, R. *Introduction to Anthropology*. NY, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974.

of social control was developed by the proto-Koreans during their evolution in Korea. It is speculated that modern Korean authoritarianism developed as an adaptive behavior in an environment where persistent enforcement of in-group cooperation was necessary in order to protect kin from hostile tribes found throughout northern and eastern Asia. Out-group hostility restricted Korean mate selection, thereby keeping the gene pool free of exogenous genes.

The concept of nation, a super-family with common agreed-to behavioral norms and history, has more or less vanished in the 21st century, giving way to counties that emphasize people sharing a common “culture” due to increased migration between populations, which leads to increasing genetic diversity within once generally homogenous populations. With rising genetic diversity, individual valuation of a common language, culture and genetic heritage become increasingly irrelevant. Despite the prevailing trends in North America and Europe, Korea has resisted large-scale migration of non-Koreans. Should this lack of Korean interest in “multiculturalism” be condemned? One should keep this in mind if Korea, is in fact, as she claims, a liberal democracy. Perhaps as a drastic solution to change Korean thinking regarding its racial uniqueness, increased immigration, thereby increasing multiculturalism, would lead to the weakening of kinship ties, and subsequent out-group hostility.

Professor Oh notes that there is nothing that Japan can do, or should do, to change the nature of Korean anti-Japan hostility, as it is based on a socialization process that focuses on Korean uniqueness. It is to Professor Oh’s credit that she does not even try to suggest what the Japanese must do to fix Korean anti-Japan hostility—she points out that Koreans will need to the heavy lifting themselves (“shed their own blood,” and perform “self reproach and self-reflection”). Thus, given the current Korean mindset, the yearly ritual apologies from Japan will have no impact—and should stop. In fact, based on the book, it appears that nothing will appease Korea short of the destruction of the Japanese people. Japan should look to other countries for potentially mutual benefits.

Given South Korean thinking and historical behavior, readers should consider if Korean reunification will occur without any preconditions. While there have been strong words from Seoul concerning recent military actions taken by the North, the North’s nuclear weapons plant is still functional. Perhaps this is all one can expect from the current Seoul leadership as it thinking in terms of retaining kinship bonds rather teaching the communist regime a lesson. Because Seoul (and Pyongyang) thinks in terms of “blood unity,” it is possible that reunification will occur for the sake of reuniting and protecting kinfolk rather than for the sake of vague notions of “economic freedom” or “democratic values”. It is this reviewer’s observation that German reunification occurred for the sake of political convenience rather than to recreate a nation of kinfolk. It is possible that something quite different from German reunification could underlie Korean reunification.

One wonders what America can do to enhance Korea-Japan relations. Readers of this journal can envision what America’s response will be—nothing. There is no expectation that America will demand that South Korean undergo “regime change” any

time soon since South Korea has never been a threat nor is currently a threat to America. Korea's racist views will be overlooked in favor of maintaining the status quo. At the same time, Japan will likely be at the receiving end of more US demands to change her ways. The long-term effect of this on US-Japan relations is left for the reader to speculate.

The current book gives background information that is unavailable in the Western media and offers detailed insight into modern Korean thinking. What is truly lacking in today's Western media is a range of diverse of opinions regarding complex international issues, including opinions from the countries that are directly impacted by the particular issue. Westerners who truly wish to understand relations between Korean and Japan would do well to explore the space that has been overlooked (or ignored) by the Western media.