



Reexamination of the Case of Chinese Textbooks to Enhance Mutual Understanding and Friendly Cooperation Between Korea and China

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Abstract

The Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) of Korea, China, and Japan has designated 2025-2026 as the Years of Cultural Exchange and agreed to actively promote exchanges between future generations. However, due to the deterioration of Korea-China, Korea-Japan, and China-Japan relations, mutual animosity has intensified, and academic exchanges have been shrinking, as evidenced by the decline in the number of students majoring in the respective languages in both Korea and China. In this context, examining cases of positive descriptions of the other country in history textbooks can contribute to enhancing mutual understanding and narrowing differences in historical perceptions. This paper aims to analyze cases of positive descriptions of Korea in current Chinese history textbooks and suggest directions for the future development of Korea-China relations.

Ultimately, the descriptions related to Korea in Chinese history textbooks have been significantly supplemented compared to the past. Notably, the addition of narratives recognizing the independent cultural development of both Korea and Japan is particularly noteworthy. This can be evaluated as a positive change that promotes mutual understanding. Meanwhile, in Korea, efforts should be made to explore the direction of history education for the formation of an East Asian peace community through joint historical narratives among Korea, China, and Japan. Continuous efforts are needed to improve mutual perceptions through history textbooks.

Keywords : *Inventory Control Mutual Understanding; Friendly Cooperation; Human and Cultural Exchanges; Korea-China*

1. Introduction

Recently, the Korea-China-Japan Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) announced that it will further promote human and cultural exchanges after designating 2025-2026 as the year of cultural exchange between the three countries at the 9th trilateral summit. To achieve 40 million human exchanges annually by 2030, it was decided to actively promote exchanges between future generations through the actual summit.

Specifically, they agreed that exchanges between future generations are very important in solidifying

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the long-term foundation for cooperation between the three countries and declared that they will seek to deepen the ties of cooperation in the field of exchanges between future generations.

The annual trilateral summit has not been held due to the deterioration of Korea-Japan, Korea-China, and China-Japan relations, and the increase in anti-China, anti-Japanese, and anti-Korean sentiment has led to a shortage of Korean language majors at Beijing University in China, and the number of students at Seoul National University's Chinese department is decreasing.

According to a study by Joseph Nye, nationalism is currently mentioned as the cause of the US-China conflict rather than ideological confrontation between socialism and capitalism. As a suitable historical metaphor for this, it was pointed out that the outbreak of World War I was owing to the fluctuation of nationalism in Europe.

It is important to note the recent findings of Joseph Nye in that Japan's right-leaning and strengthening of its history and territorial education both affect Korea and repeat the vicious cycle, and China also tends to take the initiative in the East Asian regional order and equate China's interests with those of the international community.

In the same vein, it is necessary to re-examine the results of analyzing the Chinese impression of the Japanese through the 2013 China-Japan relations poll by the Japan-China-Japan Network. It was revealed that there was a marked difference between the general public and the intellectuals, and that the more knowledge of Japan's history and culture, the worse the impression was, and the more knowledge of history and culture, the better the impression was with an attitude of understanding and respecting the other country. This can be seen as a structure that applies equally to Korea-China relations.

As is well known, the situation in which the conflict over the deployment of THAAD directly affected academic exchanges between Korea and China and the case in which academic exchanges were cut off due to COVID-19 are important discussions in that the suspension of cultural exchange projects between Korea and China limited the opportunity to form mutual awareness between the two countries.

In particular, as jointly declared at the Korea-China-Japan trilateral summit, this is especially true in that it recognized the importance of cooperation in the field of education in promoting exchanges between future generations.

At a time when it is difficult to deny the spread of anti-Korean sentiment in China and the serious deterioration of anti-China sentiment in Korea, it is necessary to reexamine the favorable descriptions of the other countries in history textbooks between Korea and China.

In other words, it is necessary to contribute to mutual understanding and awareness between Korea and China by discovering favorable or positive narrative cases related to China and Korea, as well as focusing on the recognition and narrative issues of history textbooks, which have been mainly focused on by Korean and Chinese academia.

Therefore, this paper intends to review the case of favorably describing the other country, focusing on the current Korea-China history textbook. This will be a suggestive consideration that will narrow the gap between the two countries' historical perceptions in the future and increase positive descriptions of the other country in history textbooks based on mutual understanding. Ultimately, it is hoped that it will be a reference in seeking a future-oriented direction for the development of Korea-China relations and drawing implications.

2. A Case of Improving the Description of Korea in The Current Chinese History Textbook

Table 1 simulation framework China's school system, like Korea, has a 6-3-3-4 school system, and Chinese students begin to learn history independently from the "Chinese History" (7th grade upper volume),

the first year of middle school. “Chinese History” (7th grade upper volume) passed the Ministry of Education’s examination before the Chinese Ministry of Education formalized the textbook nationalization in 2016, and nine new textbooks were published one after the other, “Chinese History” (7th and 8th grade upper volume and lower volume each) and “World History” (9th grade upper volume and lower volume), which passed the examination until 2018. In this process, textbooks published by the People’s Education Publishing House were selected as “universal textbooks,” and new middle school students began to use a single textbook from the fall of 2017. On the other hand, high school history textbooks produced “Chinese Foreign History Lecture,” which are “universal textbooks,” and were used by freshmen in six regions, including Beijing, from the fall semester of 2019, and gradually expanded nationwide in 2022 with the aim of full use.

In addition, according to the newly announced “Standard for Ordinary Middle and High School History Course” in 2017, students must complete the history mandated elective history course. The textbook includes 『National System and Social Policy1 (mandated elective required 1)』, 『Economic and social life (mandated elective required 2)』, and 『Cultural exchange and propagation (mandated elective 3)』, which have been used since September 2019 along with 『Chinese and Foreign History Guidelines (mandated elective)』. Therefore, the current Chinese history textbooks include “Chinese History” (7th, 8th grade, upper, and lower each) for middle schools, “World History” (9th grade, upper and lower), “Chinese History Lecture” for high schools, “National System and Social Policy (mandated elective 1), “Economic and social life (mandated elective 2),” and “Cultural Exchange and Spread (mandated elective 3).

Before reviewing cases of favorable descriptions related to Korea, the overall change before and after China’s national curriculum revision show that the content related to Korean history has increased.

This will play a positive role in the mutual understanding of future generations of both Korea and China. For example, in the case of “Chinese History” (7th grade, lower volume), the conventional problem was corrected and described as “Three times of conquest of Liaodong” in Unit 1 of “Chinese History” (7th grade, lower volume): The Sui Dynasty-The Age of Prosperity and Open Society’s collapse. Although there is a limit to avoiding a direct description of Goguryeo by using the indirect expression “Yodong Conquest,” it is significant in that it restored the Sui and Goguryeo wars.

It can be seen that in Unit 6 of the 1st chapter of the Central and Foreign History Lecture and the “Rise and Fall of the Sui Dynasty” of the Sui Dynasty from the heyday of Sui and Tang to the 5th to 10th countries, unlike the “Chinese History” (7th grade, lower volume), it clearly states that the Sui Dynasty tried to conquer Goguryeo three times. The fact that Sui’s attack on Goguryeo was one of the main causes of the fall of Goguryeo can be seen as an improved example compared to the old edition textbook.

In addition to Goguryeo, descriptions dealing with Goryeo and Joseon have slightly increased in content related to the pre-modern history of Korea. In the new edition of “Chinese History” (7th grade, lower volume), the fact that type printing in the 13th century was introduced to Joseon and then spread to Japan and Southeast Asia was added. This can be said to be a positive change compared to the ambiguous description that type printing was later passed down to various parts of the world in the old edition.

Additionally, in the territorial map of transportation routes during Yuan Dynasty, the newly revised edition of “Chinese History” (7th grade, lower volume) explains the Maritime Silk Road and adds content on maritime trade with the Song Dynasty, Japan, Goryeo, Southeast Asia, India, and the Arab regions.

In the same context, it is also worth noting that the number of descriptions related to Korean history has increased in 『Central and Foreign History Lesson』 (upper and lower), which is an essential textbook for Chinese high school history. This is compared to the very small description of Korean history in 『History Required』 (former edition, 2017 printed version), a standard experimental textbook for ordinary and middle

schools that completed the review of the examination in 2004. At that time, there were only about three descriptions related to Korean history in the textbooks. For example, in 1894, the background of the Gabo-China-Japan War, “Joseon Explosion Farmers’ Movement” (History 1 p.58), “The Joseon (Korea) War” (History 1 p.110), and “The Ming Dynasty’s Jusan Law spread from Joseon, Japan, and Southeast Asia to the world” (History 3 p.38). However, in the 『Central and Foreign History Lesson』 (upper and lower), the number of descriptions related to Silla increased significantly more than four times compared to the old high school history required textbook and the new middle school history textbook.

First, in Unit 8 of Unit 1 of the “Chinese and Foreign History Lecture” (upper), and the sub-items of the “Chinese and Foreign Cultural Exchange” theme of “Culture during the Sui Period in the Three Kingdoms,” the academic victories sent to the Tang Dynasty to learn the law in detail were described. Second, Silla and Japan, which had frequent comings and goings with the Tang Dynasty, dispatched many merchants, envoys, and international students to explain the situation that they were influenced by the Tang Dynasty culture. In the text of the textbook above, it was described in the order of ‘Japan, Silla’, but this time it was described in the order of ‘Silla, Japan’. This can be seen as an example of a description that considers the positions of neighboring countries. Third, while explaining land and sea passages, it described external transportation with neighboring countries, including Joseon (the Korean Peninsula).

Moreover, descriptions related to pre-modern history of Korea were added in the fourth chapter of the “Medium and Foreign History Lecture” (lower volume) and “Asia in the Middle and High Period.” This content was previously covered only in the middle school “World History” (9th grade, upper volume) textbook and was not included in the old high school history textbook.

It is noteworthy that the description of “Imjin War”, which had been emphasized as a historical event of friendship between Korea and China in the previous Chinese history textbook, was deleted after the 2005 edition of “Chinese History” (7th grade, lower volume) but later reinstated. This is because the part that called “Imjin War” in the old edition of the textbook and said, “The Joseon and Chinese troops fought shoulder to shoulder and built a deep comradeship” disappeared, and a new item called “Dongnae of Western missionaries” was added instead. In response, the domestic academic community took issue with the deletion of the description of “Imjin War,” a major event that shook the entire East Asian region in the 16th century and pointed out that academic and diplomatic efforts were needed to include it in the textbook again.

Therefore, the addition of the “Imjin War” description of the 『China-foreign history lecture』 (lower) can be interpreted as an outcome of continuous academic exchange and cooperation between the two academia. In particular, it can be seen as an important process contributing to mutual understanding and coordination of East Asian historical awareness in that it enabled a more balanced description of historical events.

The following introduces the case of “Cultural Exchange and Transmission (mandated elective 3),” which has relatively many descriptions related to Korean history among required subjects for history elective.

As can be inferred from the textbook title “Cultural Exchange and Propagation” (mandated elective 3), it emphasizes the excellence of Chinese culture and China’s contributions to the development of global culture. For example, in the introduction part of the section 2 and “The Global Significance of Chinese Culture,” it is described that “Chinese culture, which is a historical cause and internal driving force for China’s development, provided nourishment for the development of the world.” This is in accordance with the learning goal of “recognizing the characteristics, values, and global meanings of the excellent Chinese cultural tradition in the development of human civilization and world cultural exchange.” What’s more, following the sub-item of “Chinese culture that develops through exchange,” it is described as follows in “The Impact of Chinese culture on the World.”

Chinese culture was constantly radiating and spreading to the outside world while accepting foreign cultures. Between the 4th century B.C. and the 3rd century B.C., Chinese characters were already passed down to the Joseon Peninsula, the Japanese archipelago, and Southeast Asia. Later, each country made its own characters based on Chinese characters. For example, Joseon made Eonmun, Japan made Gana, and Vietnam made Tsunom to promote cultural exchange and development in the region. Studying abroad between the 3rd and 5th centuries was popular in East and Southeast Asia. After the Sui and Tang dynasties, schools at all levels in the country such as Joseon and Japan made studying abroad a textbook. After about the 4th century, Buddhism passed down to countries such as Joseon and Japan through China, and Vulgyo developed in each country.

This can be seen as a positive change in the Chinese middle school textbook “World History” (9th grade, upper and lower) compared to the fact that Unit 4 describes only “Ancient Japan” and “Arab Empire” for feudal Asian countries, and the “Ancient Joseon” item was dealt with in the “Knowledge Expansion Corner,” an auxiliary study material, not in the text.

It is encouraging that the amount of description of Joseon (the Korean Peninsula) has been increased more than four times while dealing with major elements of so-called East Asian cultures such as Chinese characters, Confucianism, and Buddhism.

3. A Case of Friendly Description of Korea in the Current Chinese Ancient History Textbook

Subsequently, the following description was newly added to the auxiliary item of the “window of thought” in 『Cultural Exchange and Propagation (optional required 3)』.

Table 1. 2020 Edition of Chinese High School History Selection
Description of Korean History in <Cultural Exchange and Propagation> Required (1)

Contents
<p>a window of contemplation 上國羈棲久，多慙萬里人，那堪顏氏巷，得接孟家隣，守道唯稽古 交情豈憚貧，他鄉少知己，莫厭訪君頻 (長安旅舍與于慎微長官接隣)</p> <p>In ancient Joseon and Japan, there were many poets who used Chinese characters, so they left many excellent poems.</p> <p>I'm ashamed of myself for living in a foreign country (唐). I only knew how to live in the neighborhood of the An (顏) clan, but I can't believe I'd get a good neighbor like the Maeng family. How can I blame poverty for sharing affection by only widely appealing to the old days? Don't hate it even if you visit me often, as I know it is a foreign country</p> <p>In the early 9th century, Choi Chi-won, a Korean, “To 于慎微 Minister Woo Shin-mi, who lives next door at an inn in Jagan. 接隣 與于慎微, and 旅.”</p>

Note: Cultural exchange and propagation (optional mandatory 3), 2020 (third issue of 2022), p.11.

Choi Chi-won praises Minister Woo Shin-mi, who received a lot of help while living in poverty at the time, by comparing her to “Pyeon” and “Mencius,” describing the strong friendship between the two. Compared to the brief introduction of “Gyewon Pil-gyeong,” a collection of writings by Shin-line Choi Chi-won, in the old middle school history textbook and “Chinese History” (7th grade, lower) after the transition to state affairs, this work is a new attempt as it presents much more specific historical sources.

On the other hand, while Unit 1 dealt with the excellence of Chinese culture and China's contribution to the development of global culture, Unit 2 shows new changes in Chinese history textbooks by presenting various topics dealing with mutual exchanges between China and global culture, including examples of the impact of foreign cultures on China.

In the Unit 5 “Culture of South Asia, East Asia, and America,” a sub-unit called “Ancient Joseon and Japanese Culture” was formed separately. First, in the learning focus section, it was described that ancient Joseon and Japan developed their own unique ethnic cultures on the basis of accepting Chinese culture. This is a difficult example to find in previous Chinese history textbooks and is important in that it acknowledges the independent and traditional systems of pre-modern Korea and Japan. In particular, the text describes the following, including the fact that the ancient culture of the Joseon Peninsula was passed down to the central region of China.

As described above, the description of Korean history in Chinese history textbooks has been drastically reduced since the revision of the textbook in 2005, and Korean history has not been covered in the section of ancient history. In contrast, the expansion of the description of pre-modern Korean history in 『Cultural Exchange and Propagation (mandated elective 3)』 is a remarkable change. In particular, 『Goryeosa』, which was introduced in relatively detail in history vertical and horizontal, is an important data for studying the history of ancient Joseon in Chinese history textbooks, and it can be said to be a positive development compared to the past, when only the compilation of 『Samguk Sagi』 and 『Samguk Yusa』 was dealt with.

The ancient culture of the Korean Peninsula was also spread to the central region of China, and it appears to be a newly supplemented part that states the Korean music and dance already existed in the Chinese court during the Northern and Southern Dynasties period. This change is similar to the description of Korean history in the 2000 edition of the Chinese secondary vocational school. In this book, it was mentioned that “Joseon culture was also introduced to China” and described that Joseon’s singing, dancing, and music were loved by the Chinese people.

Until now, a representative example in “World History” textbooks of Chinese secondary vocational schools have been the independent, chapter on “ancient Joseon (Korea)” and the favorable depiction of cultural exchanges between China and Korea. In this context, the content of “Cultural Exchange and Propagation” (mandated elective 3) can be seen as a newly noteworthy case in the current history textbooks.

4. Conclusion

As we have seen so far, the description of Korean history in the current Chinese middle and high school history textbooks has been substantially supplemented compared to the old edition. In particular, the description that ancient Joseon and Japan developed their own national culture by accepting Chinese culture by forming a separate sub-unit called “Ancient Joseon and Japanese Culture” is a difficult example to find in existing Chinese history textbooks. This is highly significant in that it acknowledges the traditional and unique institutions of pre-modern Korea and Japan. In addition, the fact that some cultures of the ancient Joseon Peninsula were passed down to the central region of China can be evaluated as an advanced description that can form a positive and friendly image for the other country.

In the case of Korea, the East Asian History, a textbook designed to future-oriented understanding of the relationship between mutual exchange and friendly cooperation in East Asian history, introduced photographs of the 14th Korea-China-Japan Youth History Experience Camp held in Shanghai, China in 2015 to young people. Such activities are expected to serve as a cornerstone for building an East Asian peace community. This is because it proposes to explore the past and present from an objective and balanced perspective, beyond restoring trust in neighboring countries and an exclusive attitude, and to design the future.

Table 2. 2020 Edition of Chinese High School History Selection
Description of Korean History in <Cultural Exchange and Propagation> Required (2)

Contents
<p>Ancient Joseon and Japanese Culture</p> <p>Around the 5th century B.C., the Bronze Age appeared in Joseon, and the Iron Age also appeared shortly afterwards. In the 7th century, the residents of the Joseon Peninsula established Cheomseongdae to observe celestial phenomena. Completed in the 12th century, “Samguk Sagi” is the earliest librarian existing in the Joseon Peninsula. Joseon’s music and dance have a long and clear history.</p> <p>Cross history</p> <p>“The History of Goryeo”</p> <p>Organized and compiled by the Joseon Dynasty in the mid-15th century, “Goryeosa” consisted of “Sega,” “Yeoljeon,” “Ji (志),” and “Year Table,” imitating the formality of Chinese librarians. “Goryeosa” recorded the historical history of important figures of the Goryeo Dynasty in relatively detail and the political, economic, and cultural situations at that time, making it an important biography of the history of the Goryeo Dynasty.</p> <p>Joseon and China were adjacent to each other with a river in between, leading to frequent exchanges since ancient times. Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism were passed down from China to Joseon, and also Joseon’s battlefield system, letters, and academic and cultural customs were all influenced by China. Since the Joseon Peninsula used Chinese characters for a long time, many Joseon scholars had deep knowledge of Chinese characters. The people of Joseon created their own national script based on the study of Chinese characters. The ancient culture of the Joseon Peninsula was also passed down to China’s Jungwon district, and the Chinese royal chambers during the North and South dynasties already had music and dance of the Joseon Peninsula.</p> <p>The ancient Japanese acknowledged that the sun, sea, river, tree, mountain, turtle, snake, etc. all contain spirits and must be worshiped. Shintoism gradually developed.</p> <p>(...)</p> <p>Chinese institutions, study abroad, and Buddhism also had a profound influence on the development of Japanese culture.</p>

Note: Cultural exchange and propagation (selective mandatory 3), 2020 (2022 3rd issue), p.28

In addition, it highlights the importance of publishing a joint history textbook to contribute to peace in East Asia by expanding each other’s understanding of history and learning the values of peace and human rights.

This is presented alongside examples of practical activities carried out by global civil society organizations that shared experiences to overcome historical conflicts between Korea, China, and Japan.

Although the East Asian History course was abolished in the 2022 revised curriculum and the new curriculum was converted to the optional East Asian History Travel, we hope that common historical awareness for peace and reconciliation and cooperation in East Asia in the 21st century will continue to spread by taking advantage of the advantages of existing textbooks.

History textbooks are products that reflect the policies’ will of the educational authorities and can be said to be an important medium that reproduces the official memory of each country. In particular, given that it directly affects the historical perception of future generations, a deeper understanding of the trends and approaches of depiction of each country in the history textbooks of both nations are required. To this end, academic circles in Korea and China should continue their efforts to actively share recent research findings.

Ultimately, the description that promotes mutual understanding and awareness improvement should be further expanded in textbooks between the two countries in order to narrow the gap in historical perception

between the two countries and achieve a balanced history education. Through this, it will be possible to promote friendly relations between Korea and China and provide an opportunity for cooperation based on mutual respect.

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