
The phenomenon of nationalism in northeast Asia has received much attention in recent years, with the discussion generally focused on popular and official responses in China and Japan to the publication of Japanese textbooks and the presence of nationalism in areas such as spectator sports, manga (Japanese “comic books”) and popular culture. However, much of the work on nationalism in the region has consisted of superficial assessments of the phenomenon. Part of the problem is that the very term nationalism, which is, as many authors do point out, fraught with complexity, is nevertheless seldom well defined by those who seek to document it.

To that extent, *Contested Views of a Common Past* is a welcome addition to the literature. Focusing on the narrower concept of historical revisionism, this edited volume examines a range of texts to show how counter-narratives have recently surfaced to challenge dominant, and often official, views of the nation in South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). By recognizing, comparing and critiquing a plethora of contesting national stories, the book delves deeper into the subject matter than many existing studies.

The book is well organized, beginning with chapters by Yonsan Ahn and Daqing Yang that lay the conceptual foundations for approaching revisionism, and is divided into four sections. The first and last sections seem to be “catch-all” parts of the book and, apart from the chapters by Yang and Tessa Morris-Suzuki, are less satisfying for it. The other three chapters focus on, variously, academic historiography, history textbooks and popular culture, and offer deep readings of a variety of texts—including movies, manga and television shows—that are used to show how concepts of the nation have changed over time, often challenging official narratives even in non-democratic polities such as the PRC.

Many readers interested in how national narratives are presented in official histories will enjoy the section on textbooks, and some of the chapters in that section reach surprising conclusions. In her comparison of history textbooks used in Korea and Japan, Lim Jye-Hyun shows that history can be a tool for educational elites looking to emphasize the place of national myths in both nations, rather than a means to help students unravel and interpret past events for themselves. However, there are problems with Lim’s case selection. In pointing out similarities between a mainstream textbook from an official Korean source with the privately authored *New History Textbook* (*Atarashii rekishi kyōkasho*), which, due to its controversial nature, has only been adopted by a fraction of Japanese schools, Lim tars official Korean history
education with a brush belonging to some of the most strident nationalists in Japan. I doubt this is his intention.

While the *New History Textbook* is government approved, and an interpretation of many mainstream Japanese history textbooks would no doubt exhibit the officially sanctioned nationalist themes Lim identifies, his chapter highlights a problem with many of the works in this volume, namely, lack of context. Lim’s chapter is corrected to some extent by Claudia Sneider’s later chapter on the textbook authorship and official approval processes in China, Taiwan and Japan, but many of the authors approach their work by taking a narrow approach to the texts in question. Positivist analyses of contemporary and historical events related to nationalism are at best ignored in certain chapters as approaches that may help authors contextualize their work. In other chapters, however, there is a recognition that “it is vital to explain why certain works are chosen and how typical they are” (316). In this and other respects, therefore, the book is an uneven collection.

That said, there are some real gems in *Contested Views of a Common Past*. For example, Yamanaka Chie examines how manga have been adapted with original storylines in South Korea as manhwa, much to the disgust of some Korean commentators who despair at the Japanese influence on “their” national culture. Yamanaka, however, notes that manhwa fans do not necessarily associate the cultural products they consume with any particular national narrative, and indeed, often studiously avoid doing so. She therefore shows that the fiercest critics of “nationalist” content of popular culture are often those who are the least familiar with the works they condemn. Meanwhile, Morris-Suzuki’s chapter on Koreans trapped in the Soviet Union after being put to work for the Japanese Empire on Sakhalin provides an example of thinking about the consequences of war that allows the researcher and her readers to escape the bounds of historical narratives centred on the state. It is, like much of Morris-Suzuki’s work, a touching, yet critical and thought-provoking, piece of writing.

The inclusion of such chapters means that general readers will enjoy this book, but it will be of most interest to scholars examining nationalism and the production and reproduction of unofficial and official histories.

Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, Washington, DC, USA  

Bryce Wakefield