

At the Edge of the Breaking Point

Hanguk geundaesa 1 [A History of Modern Korea, vol. 1], by Myeonhoe Do, Jino Ju, and Gapsu Yeon. Seoul: Pureunyeoksa, 2016, 293 pp., KRW 15,000, ISBN: 979-1-156-12066-7 (paperback)

Hanguk geundaesa 2 [A History of Modern Korea, vol. 2], by Jeong-in Kim, Junsik Yi, and Songsun Yi. Seoul: Pureunyeoksa, 2016, 354 pp., KRW 16,900, ISBN: 979-1-156-12067-4 (paperback)

About Thirty Years Old

The Korean History Society (hereafter, the Society) was established in September 1988. The efforts of young historians striving to join the movement for social change in the 1980s by means of academic research and social praxis had resulted in its founding thirty years ago. The Society back then was young. Many of its members were either in the middle of working towards their master's degree or had already received it: at its inception, 81 members were studying for their master's degree, and 105 members had a master's degree or higher. In 1992, members with a master's degree or higher reached over 61% of the Society; however, even then the total number of those with a doctoral degree was 19, a mere 7% of the Society (Korean History Society 2018a, 46). But now, after thirty years, we don't even need statistics to know just how astonishing the increase in people with a doctorate is—the severe unemployment crisis in South Korea tells it all. In thirty years' time, the Korean society and the Society have all entered full adulthood.

Published as part of the Society's history series, *Hanguk geundaesa* reflects the accumulation of research on the modern history of Korea as well as how much the Society has matured. All six authors—the three authors of volume one, Do Myeonhoe, Ju Jino, and Yeon Gapsu, and the other three of volume two, Kim Jeong-in, Yi Junsik, and Yi Songsun—were in fact born between the late 1950s and the 1960s. To these authors, the last thirty years was the times of their youth. In this regard, I see *Hanguk geundaesa* as a memorandum of sorts, representing the writers' and the Society's youth.

The Starting Point of Modern Korea

Volume one and two of *Hanguk geundaesa* each cover the period from 1863 to 1910 and 1910 to 1945, respectively. If we subscribe to the periodization offered here, then modern Korea began in 1863 and ended in 1945. Dividing this period is the 1910 “annexation of Korea,” separating the earlier period from the later. The matter of periodization has long given rise to a variety of opinions from early on. “Toron: Hanguk geundae ui gijeom nonui” (Colloquy: A Discussion about the Starting Point of Modern Korea) published in the June 1993 issue of *Yeoksa wa hyeonsil* during the Society’s earlier years tells us an interesting story bearing on this.

According to Yi Yeongho, the moderator, the reason “the starting point of modern Korea” was put up for discussion had to do with the Society’s earlier publication of history books for the general public including *Hanguksa gang-ui* (*A Course on Korean History*) and *Hanguk yeoksa* (*A Korean History*). The Society had been working together on these books before their publication when the issue of how to structure the history of Korea was raised. This then led to the problem of periodization. Without being able to thoroughly discuss the matter, however, they had “had no choice but to quickly reach a conclusion” to make the publication, and as a result, two books published by the same Society came out featuring different periodization criteria: while *Hanguksa gang-ui* defined the period of anti-foreign-aggression resistance as the beginning point of modern Korea, that point for *Hanguk yeoksa* was the opening of the ports in 1876. Therefore, the Society, bemoaning the lack of sufficient dialogue on this issue, felt the “need to incorporate the achievements of our research during the 1980s in order to advance the discussion about periodization that had been raised and unresolved in the 1960s” and arranged the colloquy accordingly (Do et al. 1993, 179-80).

The discussion opened with Jang Dongpyo, Yi Yunsang, and Do Myeonhoe each presenting arguments that the starting point of modern Korea was the 1860s, 1876, and 1894, respectively. The year of 1894, as a side note, comes from an emphasis on the establishment and role of state authority in the development of the capitalistic mode of production. State authority here refers to the Enlightenment Group, which was in power in 1894, so the starting point of modernity in discussion here is in essence the Gabo Reform they carried out. Do Jinsun, Yi Heonchang, and Yi Seyeong then each respond to

the arguments. Surprisingly, Yi Heonchang and Yi Seyeong both agree with the arguments of the presenter they are each responding to—that is, Yi Heonchang agrees on the starting point being 1876 and Yi Seyeong on it being 1894. Yi Heonchang, though, puts less weight on the possibility of internal development than Yi Yunsang and instead places the opening of the ports as the starting point of colonial modernity. Yi Seyeong emphasizes that the Gabo Reform was the bourgeois revolution that succeeded the failed bourgeois revolution of the Donghak Peasant War.

This discussion was significant, as Yi Heonchang points out, in that the difference in opinion regarding the starting point of modern Korea had become considerably smaller than in the 1960s (Do et al. 1993, 184). In the absence of any conversation on the endpoint of modernity, the discussion was eventually concluded by confirming, as usual, that “the differences between each theory had become clearer and the evidence had become more certain,” and by expressing hope that “there will continue to be new discussions on the starting and end points of a modern society as well as its characteristics” (Do et al. 1993, 203). In that case, which theory does *Hanguk geundaesa*, as part of the history series published after the diachronic history book *Hanguk yeoksa*, follow in its periodization? Does it present us with a solution that lives up to the expectations of the discussion that took place twenty-five years ago?

The authors also appear to be aware of this issue. In the preface, “all of the authors” define “modernity” as “economically, capitalism; politically, the period of imperialistic expansion by several western European states that had achieved nation-state status first and then invaded two thirds of the world, ruling and plundering those lands as colonies or semicolonies” (p. 8). Since Korea achieved capitalism and became a nation-state only in 1948, the authors ask whether this definition means that the starting point of modernity in Korea should be 1948. They go on to describe the periodization debate from the 1960s onward as a search for an answer to this problem and then list a number of theories that had been proposed as the starting point, such as the period from King Yeongjo to King Jeongjo in the eighteenth century, the mid-1860s, 1878, the early 1880s or 1884, and 1894. Then, they finally state that *Hanguk geundaesa* adopts the mid-1860s theory.

What would have been the reason behind this choice? The preface continues on to explain that this is because a fundamental change in policy, from “governance by Confucian political ideals” to a pursuit of “national prosperity

and military strength,” occurred when Heungseon Daewongun was in power. This change, the authors write, was based on a defensive stance towards the invasion of western imperialism, as symbolized by the Opium Wars. From the way the authors add that the goal of abolishing private academies (*seowon*) and of enacting the household cloth tax law (*hopobeop*) was to abolish the hereditary social status system, it appears that they perceive the anti-foreign-aggression and antifeudal characteristics of Heungseon Daewongun’s “rich nation, strong military” policies as qualities befitting to modern Korea. Their explanation, however, appears to be mostly based on the argument of Yeon Gapsu, who wrote the first part of volume one, rather than being a conclusion the Society reached as a group. In addition, whether “modernity” can be discussed only as being the antithesis to foreign-aggression and feudal elements is a point that has been long raised.

We need to modify the question then. What we should be asking is not why the starting point of modern Korea is the mid-1860s, but why any discussion on the starting point has not taken place at all. Was the problem during the publication of *Hanguk geundaesa* again “having no choice but to quickly reach a conclusion” as it had been for *Hanguksa gang-ui* or *Hanguk yeoksa*? If detailed arrangements for *Hanguk geundaesa* had indeed begun in 2002 as they say, then they would have had sufficient time to prepare. Wouldn’t the publication of *Hanguk geundaesa* have been enough to generate a discussion on periodization as *Hanguksa gang-ui* and *Hanguk yeoksa* had? Considering how recent research tends to be largely indifferent to periodization, though, I doubt that this could be the case.

We might take a step further and ask the following: aside from the realistic need of having to publish a diachronic history book or a book on the history of a certain period, why must we periodize at all? In the aforementioned discussion, Do Myeonhoe (1993, 196) says, “why do we periodize? We all know that it is because we have tasks we must put into practice.” If, following his words, periodization is done because there are tasks history-as-practice calls for and everybody knows this fact, then the persistent absence of any discussion on periodization in the Korean society today indicates that either the verdict of everyone being aware of its need is wrong, or that it is not a pressing task any more.

Has the field of history in our times indeed lost its way and come to an end?

The Story of Modern Korea

Let's take a look at how *Hanguk geundaesa* is organized overall.

Volume One

1863-1882 The Rising Sense of Urgency and the Pursuit of National Wealth and Military Strength: Heungseon Daewongun's Policy of Refusing Compliances (*cheokhwa*) and King Gojong's Enlightenment Reforms

1884-1894 The Beginning of the Movement to Establish a Modern Nation-state: From the Coup d'Etat of 1884 to the Peasant War of 1894

1894-1898 The Development of the Movement to Establish a Modern Nation-state: Conflict and Tension over the Issue of Who should Lead the Establishment of a Modern Nation-state.

1899-1910 The Failure of the Movement to Establish a Modern Nation-state, and Japan's Annexation of Korea: The Outcome of Modernizing Policies Led by the Imperial Family

Volume Two

1910-1919 The Incorporation into a Colonial Modernity: Laying Grounds for Governance and Grounds for Resistance

1920-1937 The Empire Ruling and the Korean People Resisting: Stability and Crisis in Colonial Rule

1938-1945 Wars and Colonial Wartime Mobilization: Imperialism Shows Its True Color

As the table of contents above makes obvious, *Hanguk geundaesa* tells an extremely clear and concise story of modern Korea that states: before the "annexation of Korea" in 1910, various domestic forces quarreled and clashed with one another over the demands of the times, i.e., "establishing a modern nation-state," but Korea eventually ended up getting annexed by the Japanese Empire. After the "annexation of Korea," there were those who fought against the pillage by the Japanese Empire for the reclamation of national sovereignty, and there was the ruling power that suppressed these people who fought to reclaim national sovereignty. In short, the former worked for the realization of complete self-governing independence, and the latter, the recovery of self-governing independence. On this point, *Hanguk geundaesa* is none other than

the history of “self-governing independence,” a story we are very much familiar with.

Of course, this story does reflect much of the new research accomplishments. For example, instead of highlighting the antagonism between Heungseon Daewongun and Empress Myeongseong (or members of the Min clan), the entire narrative of volume one consistently places King Gojong at the center of politics in interpreting events. One example is the way Ju Jino explains the political situation of the mid- to late 1880s: “the political power base of King Gojong during this time was the Yeoheung Min clan. They were involved more actively than before and in fact did take over key government positions including the ones in finance. But it would be an overestimation to see the Yeoheung Min clan as an in-law power dominating King Gojong. The clan’s domination of key government posts was merely part of King Gojong’s policies to strengthen the power of the king by making use of loyal clan members” (pp. 124-25). Volume two contains further indications of newer research: Kim Jeong-in looks at how the 1919 March First Movement unfolded in the cities and the countryside separately, while Yi Junsik introduces the various culture and thoughts that were popular in colonial Joseon after the 1920s.

Nevertheless, there is not much change in the overall way the story of modern Korea is told. A substantial amount of research deviating from earlier frameworks has already been amassing on the individual level. Beyond that, however, such accomplishments have not had much influence on the narrative structure of diachronic history texts or books surveying this period, which makes it seem as though the gulf between the two is only widening with time. Perhaps diachronic history texts or books telling a certain period’s history require their own inherent narrative structure, and this structure is what’s actually protecting itself from the penetration of new, potentially transformative views.

The task ahead of us then is not to assess how well the writers incorporated recent research trends into *Hanguk geundaesa* but to problematize the way of narrating history as “diachronic history” or “surveying the history of a certain period,” and seek an alternative.

Attempts to Reconstitute the Story

Let’s return to my earlier question of how or whether the field of history has

really come to an end. The preface of the Society's history series enumerates the problems of the current Korean society—anachronistic interregional antagonism, socioeconomic polarization caused by neo-Liberalism, the failure of the government to guarantee the people's safety and welfare, justice gone and the loss of trust—and asks “what role would the field of history be able to play?” Judging from this, we don't seem to have lost track of the task of history-as-practice itself. But if we nonetheless insist on finding out why the discussion on periodization itself is nowhere to be found in the present, I believe the answer lies not in the disappearance of the pressing need for participatory practice as historians, but in the way we now perceive this task differently. Historians now aspire to undertake this task of participatory practice not by a periodization based on the social formation theory, but by exploring other paths.

These changes are manifesting as new ways of writing. The 2018 book *Hanppyeom Hanguksa (A Handspan of Korean History)* is exemplary in this aspect. It was published by Manin mansaek yeonguja Network (hereafter, Manin mansaek), a group that began as a movement in opposition to the Park Geun-hye government's enactment of state-authorized history textbooks and was formed in 2016 by graduate students and emerging researchers specializing in history. The group states its mission as “putting into practice novel forms and new content based on the diverse areas of concern of young history researchers.”

The fact that Manin mansaek began from a movement opposing the enactment of state-authorized history textbooks and was formed mainly by young historians also has important implications in terms of this review. Their book, *Hanppyeom Hanguksa*, raises the following issue in its preface: since the state always attempts to use history for “educating the people,” the problems of history education cannot be linked only with a certain regime. Furthermore, since even “state-approved” textbooks are strictly regulated by the Ministry of Education, the history textbook problem is not limited to “state-authorized” textbooks. The Korean society has until now treated the nation or the people (race) as the protagonist of history, but “the view of history that underlines only the grand narrative excludes the histories of ordinary people and remembers them only as a monochrome of ‘the people’” (Manin mansaek yeonguja Network 2018, 5-7). This shows how the critical awareness of Manin mansaek started as opposition against the Park Geun-hye government's enactment of state-authorized history textbooks and later expanded to a criticism of grand narratives in which the “people” or the “nation” is the main agent. And

because history textbooks were not reflecting the latest history research, young researchers had resorted to finding other various ways to convey their voices directly. *Hanppyeom Hanguksa* is an example of that very effort coming to fruition.

The table of contents of *Hanppyeom Hanguksa* is as follows.

Part1 Those at the “Base”

How People in Joseon Named and Called Each Other

The War of “the Weak” (*eul*), the 1925 Yecheon Incident

A Dad with Six Children (1915-1994) Sets out to Build a Middleclass Family

Why Wasn't the Man from Vietnam “Sergeant Kim?”

The Two Faces of the New Village Movement at Factories

Part 2 Those Who Were “Taboo”

Men Who Dressed as Women in Korea during the 1950s to 1960s

Supporting Prisoners (*okbaraji*) during Colonial Rule, and Us in the Present Shamanism that Became “Superstition”

Breaking the Taboo! Inter-marriage among the Silla Royal Household

Part 3 Those Outside of State “Borders”

The Life of a Prisoner of War during the Korean War, Recorded in the US Army POW Interrogation Reports

Looking Back on the “Fatherland” of Yanbian-based Ethnic Koreans

The “Great King” Sejong and Northern “Territories”

Disappeared from Ancient Korean History, the People of the Lelang and Daifang Commanderies

Compared to that of *Hanguk geundaesa*, the table of contents above breaks with tradition in multiple ways. The first thing that stands out is the omnibus-style composition of arranging independent anecdotes thematically, instead of having a grand narrative unfold sequentially within a single linear temporality. The so-called themes here are the authors' way of calling the new agents they have unearthed who will replace the previous heroic protagonists of the grand narrative. These new protagonists are ordinary humans who have had to endure everyday life amid turbulent times, or the ones who were excluded for the sake of narrating the “right” history, or those who existed outside the borders of the state or nation. It is clear why the book abandons the grand narrative and

instead calls forth new protagonists: to dismantle the narrative structure that had been erected by diachronic histories or history texts surveying certain periods, including history textbooks.

Such changes do in fact seem to be taking place within the Society. I am thinking of *Hanguksa, han georeum deo* (*Korean History, One Step Further*), which was published around the same time as *Hanppyeom Hanguksa*. This book does not offer a substantial breakaway, compared to *Hanppyeom Hanguksa*, as it still keeps the periodization of ancient, Goryeo, Joseon, and modern and contemporary Korean history. Nonetheless, the narrative traverses in reverse direction, beginning with the contemporary period and moving on to the modern period, followed by Joseon, and then Goryeo, and finally ending at the ancient period. The preface explains that “this new attempt stems from the belief that although the trajectory against time from the present to the ancient is unfamiliar, it is the obvious road sign we should follow as historians studying the past with our feet rooted in the present” (Korean History Society 2018b, 8). I believe this attempt was possible because the aim of the book was not in providing a diachronic history starting from the ancient period and ending with the present, but in offering an opportunity to explore the minds of historians whose work centers on “structuring” the history. In this sense, this book breaks away from tradition in that it doesn’t have a common theme that binds the ten or so entries listed for each period together: in fact, there weren’t any such themes in the first place. Consequently, the readers may at first feel perplexed by all the profound intellectual inquiries each of the sixty-three historians demonstrate. The novelty of the attempt itself, however, of being “an unprecedented book” as its first sentence goes, should be given credit, and these attempts may lead to new ways of writing.

The preface of *Hanguksa, han georeum deo* also includes the publishing committee’s reflections on the past thirty years since the Society’s founding: “the so-called ‘87 regime that was so intertwined with the birth of the Society has now become something yet to be overcome”; “The young scholars who had established the Society are now retiring from universities one by one, and a new generation of scholars is picking up the baton”; and “The previous way of tracing the historiography and conducting research one by one no longer works” (Korean History Society 2018b, 9). The underlying sentiment is an awareness of having reached a limit.

Hanguk geundaesa, Hanppyeom Hanguksa, and Hanguksa, han georeum deo

were all published during a similar period. This I believe tells us that we have reached another inflexion point, between the limit and beyond. Not knowing where the line will curve towards past the inflexion point may be terrifying. But perhaps the task of practicing history is to subdue the fears and anxieties—beyond what science can do—that arise as the myriad of lines diverge widely towards each of their pursuits.

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