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War-Like History or Diplomatic History?
Historical Contentions and Regional Order
in East Asia

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ABSTRACTS: East Asian countries have been engaged in disputes over history. While their historical contentions have caused suspicions and frictions among them, I argue that they have also served as a medium of dialogue that helps establish a common understanding about the individual countries' contemporary reality and future direction. Historical contentions contribute to such a dialogue if and only if regional actors recognize each other as legitimate participants in a dialogue about the salient past and when they contend over the past within a common framework of meaning, can contentions over history contribute to the creation of a regional public sphere. The regional public sphere is a discursive area where regional actors exchange their understandings of the past and their desires for the future, out of which emerge a new focal point for regional issues and a shared understanding of their own and others' identities. East Asia, through historical contentions in the 1980s and 1990s, produced an embryonic form of a regional public sphere but now stands at a fork between strengthening the regional public sphere and fracturing it into a contentious public sphere.

KEYWORDS: history, regional public sphere, contentious public sphere, China, Japan, Korea, nationalist spheres, parallel national spheres, regional order, history textbooks, Yasukuni shrine

Asian countries wrangle over history. China, Japan and Korea are locked in disputes over Japan's history textbook. Japanese prime minister's apology about

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Japan's past has been a sore issue for China and Korea for over half a century. A Chinese study of a local history (東北工程) suddenly became a concern for Koreans in 2004, degenerating into a source of tension between the two countries that were otherwise fast becoming close friends. A territorial dispute over a tiny island claimed by Japan and Korea or by Japan and China routinely escalate to a "history war" as the pair of governments turn to their respective versions of history as the source of the authenticity that prove their claims. These historical contentions are not mere academic disagreements. They have led to emotional street demonstrations, exchanges of accusatory government statements, and even recalling of ambassadors. They have had chilling effects on otherwise booming and mutually beneficial economic relationships. They often overshadow, and even forestall, summit meetings. Historical contentions are central to international relations in East Asia.

The central location of historical contentions in the region's international relations raises a number of questions. Why are the East Asian countries so concerned about the past of their neighbors as to make it an international political issue? Will these historical contentions condemn the region to a fractured and conflictual arena of diatribes where they remain a source of suspicions, contentions and possibly conflicts in the future? Do historical disputes hold the potential to contribute to the emergence of a regional public sphere in which East Asian countries engage each other in dialogues about their identities, desires, and worries? These are some of the questions I address in this project. In other words, I am not so concerned with questions of historical accuracy: What are historical facts, and who, if any, got them right? Rather I am more interested to analyze the phenomenon of historical contentions itself as a way to think about the possibilities and difficulties in creating and maintaining a stable, and even

peaceful, regional order. The central task of the paper is to understand the ways in which disputes over history widen the emotional fissure between the East Asian countries or lay a discursive foundation for a community.

Current scholarship is divided about the impact that history has on East Asia. Some point to recent uproars about Japan's history textbook in Korea and China as just one of the many lingering sources of deep-seated historical animosity that have the potential to disrupt the stability and peace in the region. But others turn to such historical legacies as Confucius world order as evidence that the region's current peace has deep historical roots and thus is likely to continue into the future. In this project I develop a third perspective of history: an institutionalist argument that a history represents an institutionalization of memory that reflects a political pact made by state actors at a particular time. My argument has two parts. First, the history, once institutionalized, constitutes a common social reality as well as a focal point, both of which help the three countries carry out "normal" (in a Kuhnian sense) diplomacy. Second, the history, if its institutionalized form creates a dissonance with the reality on the ground, serves as a medium of communicative actions, through which the countries in Northeast Asia attempt to establish a set of new parameters of the diplomatic game. The two arguments suggest that "history wars" reflect, as the first group of pessimistic scholars suggests, fault lines among China, Japan and Korea but they contribute, as the second group suggests, to maintaining the stability and peace in the region. Seen from the institutionalist perspective, historical contentions look war-like but act like diplomacy. In order to flesh out the argument and test the hypotheses derived from the argument, this article focuses on the controversy over Japanese history textbooks, leaving other cases of historical contentions for future research.

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This article is organized as follows. The first part critically reviews the existing conventional views of the historical contentions, and argues that they fail to account for the pattern of the historical contentions because they are based on a common and problematic understanding of history as a set of objective facts. It suggests that the pattern is better accounted for if the historical contentions are conceptualized as discursive diplomacy. The second part of the article develops the concept of regional public sphere and examines the conditions under which historical contentions can contribute to the emergence of a regional public sphere. In the final section of a prognosis of the current status and possible future directions, the article concludes that while the historical contentions have in the past contributed to the creation of a public sphere of regional dialogue, they now run the risk of degenerating into nationalist or parallel public spheres.

Contending Explanations and Expectations

Some scholars argue that the long history of conflicts and recent contentious experiences make it difficult, if not impossible, for East Asian countries to maintain a peaceful relationship among themselves. They find lingering sources of suspicion, competition and contention likely to lead to a future tempered with a prospect of conflicts (Friedberg 1993/94). Some of them point to the memory of war as a factor that hinders efforts to build peace (Berger 2000). Some refer to the contentions history as an explanation for the glaring absence of a regional multilateral security organization that can ameliorate contention and facilitate cooperation (Duffield 2003; Rozman 2004).

The “animosity emanating from historical enmity often generates political passion that defies economic rationality and causes strains” in the relationships among East Asian countries (Deng 1997, 385). To this group of scholars, historical contentions both reflect and reinforce feelings of national difference and historical enmity.

Another group of scholars, however, finds in the region’s history much that contributes to peace. Some in this group argue that Asian countries’ historical pattern of bandwagoning behavior will be repeated, which is likely to lead the region away from conflict-prone anarchy (Kang 2003/04). Some find ideational sources of peace in Asia’s past culture (Acharya 2003/04) whereas others focus on domestic culture and institution of more recent vintage as a source of peace (Katzenstein Okawara 1993; Busse 1999). To the second group of scholars, East Asian history is riddled with harmonious past, which orients the region toward cooperation and peace.

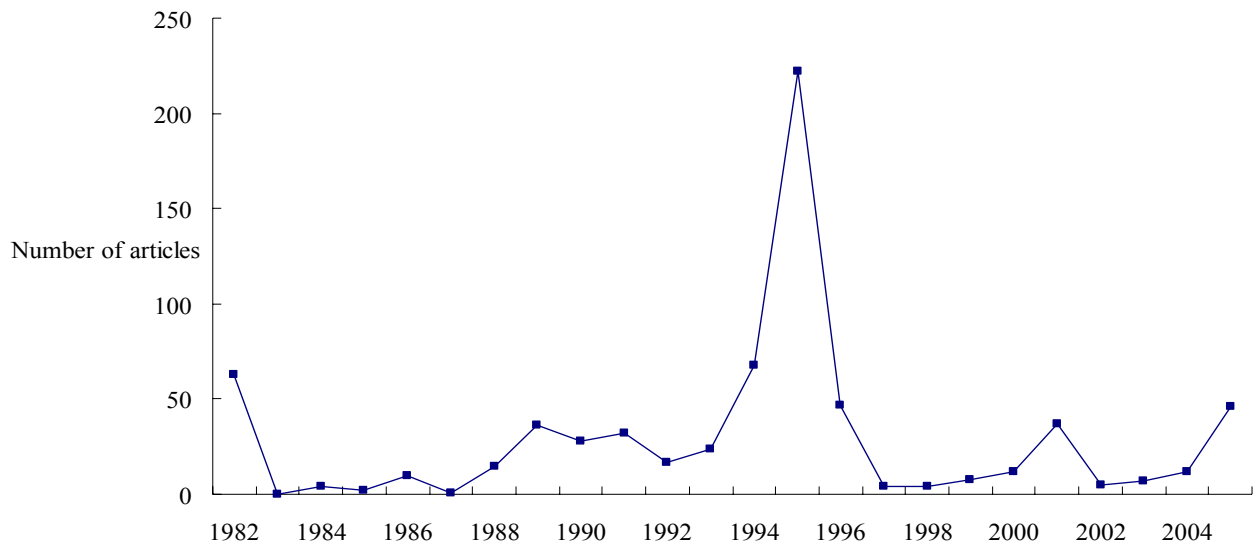
Despite their opposite interpretations of history and their divergent predictions of future, these two groups of scholars share a common epistemological stance. They treat history as a given fact whose discovery unproblematically reveals its true meaning. To them, history consists in one set of objective facts that everybody sees eye to eye. Although some in the second group acknowledge the constitutive nature of history and culture, they tend to start with history as constituted and use it to explain other political phenomenon rather than to analyze the constitutive process. Both groups agree history is an established fact, disagreeing only about the fact’s content.

A common problem that both share in explaining the relationship is illustrated by the following graph. As they postulate a fixed set of objective facts, they expect constancy in observed behavior: either a high or low level of contentions. But concerns about Japanese history textbooks, measured in terms of the frequency of

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articles on them in Chinese media, show a great deal of variation over time.

Chart 1) Historical Contentions Reported by Chinese Media



Sources: *For January 1, 1982 to December 31, 1996*

Search limited to Subject: Japan AND History; Region: EAS/CHI

Foreign Broadcast Information Service Publications, FBIS; Available from National Technical Information Service, United States Springfield, VA.

(No publications search criteria available to the database)

For January 1, 1997 to August, 2005

Search limited to Subject: Japan AND History; Publication: Xinhua AND Renmin Ribao [FBIS publications online database World News Connection \(http://wnc.fedworld.gov\)](http://wnc.fedworld.gov)

Note: Because different search criteria were applied to two different sets of data, the results should not be compared in absolute terms. Nonetheless, they provide a useful way to see the general trend over time in the frequency of reporting.

The pattern of variation too defies the conventional expectations. Given that the Ministry of Education authorizes a list of textbooks every four years, each after a

full year of screening proposed textbooks, and that at least some of the approved textbooks have had expressions that either Beijing or Seoul find acceptable, the above two groups might adjust their expectation to a four-year cycle – the only difference being that the pessimistic group would expect a high level of baseline that is punctuated by a high peak every four years whereas the optimistic group would predict a low level of baseline that shows a moderate increase every four years. Either way, one should expect to see a peak in the frequency of articles every four years corresponding to the authorization schedule. Such an expectation, however, is not met. While some years, such as 2001 and 2005, fit the expectation, some years of authorization went by without much notice and some years of no authorization witnessed a high level of protests.

Not only do the two conventional narratives fail to account for the irregular pattern of the “history textbook contentions”, but they also have difficulties in explaining the ways in which China and Korea have reacted to Japanese Prime Minister’s visit to the Yasukuni Shrine. Although a majority of Japanese prime ministers has visited the shrine and although even the emperor visited it seven times, such visits did not elicit any protests from China or Korea until 1985 when Nakasone made a visit. Nakasone received such strong criticisms from Beijing and Seoul that he cancelled his planned visit to the shrine’s autumn festival later in the same year and never went back while in office. Even after 1985, a number of prime ministers made a visit, without much notice, let alone protest, until 2001 when Koizumi visited the shrine. Contrary to the conventional expectation of a same reaction to prime ministerial visits – the pessimists would expect a consistently high level of concerns expressed for every visit whereas the optimists a consistently low or continuously decreasing level – some visits have been more strenuously protested than others. Both of the conventional

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accounts fail to explain the irregular fluctuation of historical contentions in East Asia.

I argue that both of the conventional perspectives are not so much wrong as incomplete. History is not an objective fact that waits to be discovered. Nor can it adjudicate different claims to the truth. History is a memory socially constituted and politically institutionalized (Halbwachs, 1992). As such, history is part of a social reality that state actors commonly share at an international level. It also provides a focal point around which their expectations converge. At the same time history provides a medium through which state actors renegotiate their positions and directions. Contentions over history, seen from this institutionalist perspective, are communicative diplomacy carried out in an international public sphere. Historical disputes help state actors reduce the level of uncertainty in each other's intention and establish a focal point around which normal diplomatic negotiations may be conducted.

Realists argue that uncertainty or disagreement about relative power is settled in war (Blainey 1973); but I argue that history provides a cushion, a proxy over which power disputes can be negotiated without resorting to war. Historical disputes can, under a set of conditions, help state actors reduce the level of uncertainty in each other's intention and establish a focal point around which normal diplomatic negotiations may be conducted. Although China, Japan and Korea operate under the condition of structural anarchy that generates conflictual tendency and in the absence of formal multilateral institutions that ameliorate conflictual pressures derived from the anarchy, they have managed to develop the relationship of vigorous economic exchanges and booming cultural intercourses without war. Realists and liberals find such relationships confounding because they fail to see the role history plays in mediating power politics. Historical contentions serve as a shield that dampens brute power

politics, and disputes over history help reduce the level of uncertainty in the international system, the role that neoliberals expect formal institutions to play. History wars are, to paraphrase Clausewitz, an extension of international institution by other means.

Once history is institutionalized, however, it may lag behind changes on the ground. There may be dissonance between the institutionalized history that reflects a particular political pact at a given time and the actors' current power position, concerns and aspirations. The dissonance creates the desire to renegotiate history to bring it in accordance with the current reality or future desires. In such an instance, history serves as an object of communicative action, the stuff that political actors talk about as a way to communicate their intentions and to negotiate a common understanding.

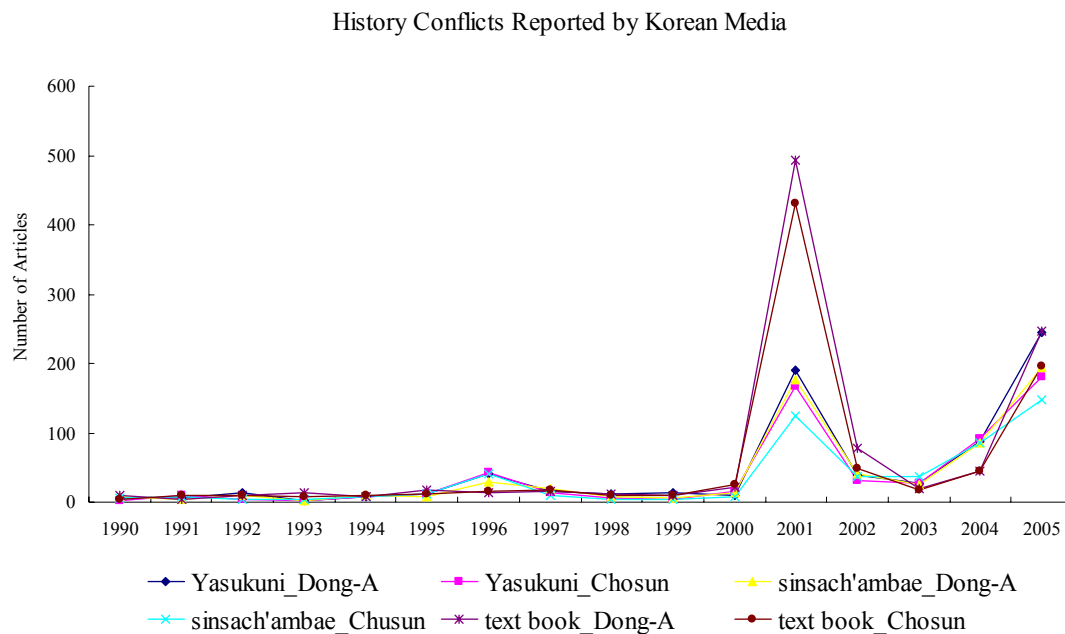
History is not just about unearthing a distant past but it is also engaged in constituting the present and creating a future through “an unending dialogue” with the past. As Gong argues, “remembering and forgetting issues will provide the vocabulary for and the battlefield on which strategic alignments in the contemporary world will turn” (2001: 56). History, disputed among countries, is a communicative diplomacy carried out in an international public sphere where the disputing countries express their intentions, test others', and develop (or at least try to) a common understanding about a new focal point. History is, according to Carr (1962), a continuous dialogue between the past and the present and between the past and the future; history wars are such a dialogue on a regional level.

That history wars are a dialogue on a regional level about shared political concerns is illustrated by the following chart. Japanese prime minister's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine and Japanese history textbooks have nothing in common, except that

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they are both related to the past. As the prime minister makes his visit according to his schedule and the textbook authorization is done according to a fixed schedule, they do not always coincide. One therefore should not expect to observe any correlation between Koreans' concerns about the shrine visits and textbooks. If Japan's neighbors' concerns about Japan's future political direction are expressed in terms of Japan's past in a dialogue on a regional level, however, one might expect a high correlation between Koreans' concerns about the shrine visit and history textbook. Chart two, that plots the level of Koreans' concerns measured in terms of the number of articles on the respective issues in two leading Korean dailies, shows a matching pattern between the Yasukuni Shrine and textbooks, confirming the latter view.

Chart 2) History Contentions Reported by Korean Media



Note a: shinsach'ambae means the visiting Yasukuni Shrine of worship in Korean

Regional Public Sphere

Historical contentions do not always contribute to a dialogue; they may just end up being the diatribes that have the potential to escalate to an open conflict. Only when regional actors recognize each other as legitimate participants in a dialogue about the salient past and when they contend over the past within a common framework of meaning, can contentions over history contribute to the creation of a regional public sphere. A commonly shared historical reality, which emerges out of such a dialogue, institutionalizes and consolidates the regional public sphere. The regional public sphere is a discursive area where regional actors exchange their understandings of the past and their desires for the future, out of which emerge a new focal point for regional issues and a shared understanding of their own and others' identities.

Modern media such as newspapers, radio, and television have played, through the stories they tell, a central role in the construction of national identities, in the composition of an imagined community of people who believe that they resemble one another and are different from others who are not seen as belonging to the nation (Anderson 1991). There are two essential aspects of this process according to Anderson: the existence of national media institutions; and the dissemination of stories that encourage individuals to see themselves as belonging to a community of fate.

The significance of public space is not limited to the process of national identity construction. Such a process of public sphere formation is also crucial for the development of democracy, as Habermas argued (1989). He developed the concept of the public sphere not simply to understand empirical communication flows but to contribute to a normative political theory of democracy. In his theory, a public sphere

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is conceived as a space for the communicative generation of public opinion, in ways that are supposed to assure a degree of moral-political legitimacy. In addition, a public sphere is supposed to be a vehicle for mobilizing public opinion as a political force. It should empower the citizenry vis-à-vis private powers and permit it to exercise influence over the state.

The public sphere that is constituted in part by mass media institutions and narratives is seen historically as a national space but not one that is necessarily restricted either empirically or philosophically to the nation-state (Fraser 2002). This gives rise to the possibility of a transnational public sphere that may help to engender transnational political identities in a changed technological and geopolitical environment. Some scholars have pointed to the existence of a regional public sphere, for example, in Middle East (Lynch 1999; Barnett 1998) while others suggested the possibility even of a global public sphere (Buck-Morss 2000; Bohman 1998; Bohman 1999; Calhoun 2002).

That a regional public space is not only possible but also critical to a regional community is well illustrated by European experiences. While the European Union is commonly presented as the leading example of regional integration, it is also as commonly asserted that it is hampered by a 'democratic deficit' and the absence of a common European identity because system integration has greatly outpaced social integration. One way in which this democratic deficit might be addressed, it is claimed, is if media institutions could play a similar role in the development of the EU as they did in the development of nation-states (Bohman 2003). The creation of a European public sphere is thus seen essential to addressing the double deficit within the

European Union: the democratic deficit and the common identity deficit.¹

Even if we acknowledge a regional public sphere is possible and necessary, realizing one is a difficult task because this project not only faces potential resistance by national public spheres but also lacks the kind of opportunity structure that enabled the emergence of national public spheres. Several studies on framing have shown that both the national institutional and cultural opportunity structures have serious consequences for the discourses that evolve within these structures (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Ferree 2002; Koopmans and Statham 1999). For a long time, it has been argued that a common public sphere presupposes a preceding institutional setup (Anderson 1991). Even if we drop the assumption that such a setup is a necessary precondition for a public sphere, we would expect that the absence of such structures would render the convergence of national public spheres difficult (Downey and Koenig 2004).

Then, where do we begin to find the possibility of a regional public sphere in Northeast Asia? We begin with Risse and van De Steeg's counterintuitive observation that "contestation is a crucial pre-condition for the emergence of a European public sphere rather than an indicator for its absence" (2003). While they made the observation in the context of European politics, their insight is equally applicable to Northeast Asia. The more contentious a regional issue becomes and the more social mobilization occurs on the regional issue, the more we should observe Northeast Asian public debates. It is well possible that the increased salience of Northeast Asian issues

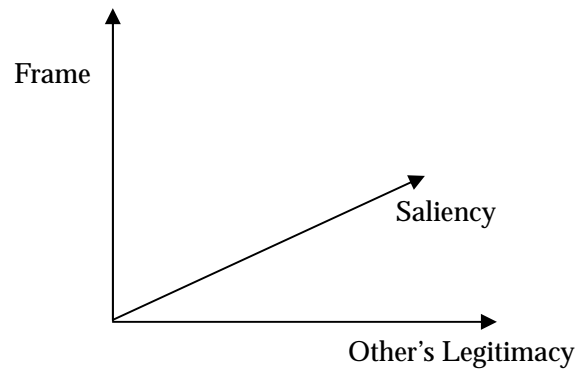
¹ There seems a consensus on the need for a European public sphere but scholars disagree on whether or not one exists. Some (Schlesinger 1999; Trenz 2004) argue there is a fledgling European public sphere while others (Downey and Koenig 2004) remain skeptical.

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in news media results from increased contestation of regional affairs. In order for a Northeast Asia public sphere to emerge, there must be an issue that all the regional actors deeply care about.

A high degree of salience of regional issues, however, provides for only one of the conditions necessary. Even if such a condition is met, a region's discursive space may take on different characteristics, depending on two additional variables: the degree to which such regional issues are discussed within similar frames of reference and meaning structures across national public spheres; and the degree to which regional actors recognize each other as legitimate participants in a transnational space (Risse and van De Steeg 2003:16). A regional public sphere materializes when a transnational community of communication emerges in which speakers and listeners recognize each other as legitimate participants in a common discourse that frames particular issues as common regional problems. A meaningful concept of public spheres requires that media communicate the same issues at the same time using the same criteria of relevance. The "same criteria of relevance" requires that issues are framed in similar ways across national public spheres and that we can observe similar meaning structures and interpretive reference points irrespective of national background or political standpoint of the respective media.

Figure 1) Dimensions of a regional public sphere



The region's order becomes a contentious regional sphere when the actors recognize each other as legitimate participants but they bring different, if not conflictual, frames of reference to the regional issues of a high saliency. In such a sphere where the actors tend to make unilateral claims and end up exchanging accusations, they find it difficult to have a meaningful dialogue where they increase their understanding of each other. But to the extent that they recognize each other as legitimate partners of communication, the contentious sphere holds open the possibility that they can develop a similar frame of meanings.

If the actors do not recognize each other's legitimacy in the region's discursive space, they turn the regional order into a set of parallel national spheres when they bring similar frames of meanings to bear upon their exchanges. They do not allow outsiders to intervene in their domestic discourses; or they find illegitimate other's efforts in intervene. But because their respective domestic discourses are framed with the same criteria of relevance, their internal debates run parallel to each other, creating a *de facto* commonality.

If the actors do not recognize each other's legitimacy and embrace different

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frames of reference in their respective domestic discourses, the regional order fragments into a collection of nationalist spheres. The regional actors share a concern about regional issues of a high saliency, but they treat others as illegitimate outsiders in their domestic discourses while they frame their internal debates in incompatible, if not irreconcilable, terms. The nationalist spheres are the most volatile of the regional discursive spaces as they are most likely to lead the regional actors to passionately disagree over issues of a common concern and to reject not just the accuracy of other's views but even the legitimacy of other's expression of concern. Table 1 summarizes the four ideal types of regional order discussed above.

Table 1) Ideal Types of Regional Order

Other's Legitimacy	Low	High
Frames of Reference		
Different	Nationalist spheres	Contentious regional sphere
Similar	Parallel national spheres	Regional public sphere

Historical Contentions and Regional Order in East Asia: Saliency, Frame and Legitimacy

This article argues that the historical contentions in East Asia have contributed to the emergence of a regional public sphere where Japan, China and Korea are engaged in dialogues about their past and future identities. East Asia began with a parallel public sphere in the 1940s, only gradually developing the regional public sphere through three

stages in terms of saliency, framing and legitimacy. The first period, characterized as a parallel public sphere, lasted through the early 1980s. Northeast Asia saw the emergence of a regional public sphere in the second period that began when the Chinese government officially registered its complaint about Japanese history textbooks and lasted through the end of the 1990s. The third period started in beginning years of the 21st century when concerns about historical issues exploded, producing both the forces that strengthen the regional public sphere and the factors that can undermine it to a contentious regional sphere.

At the end of World War II, the global power distribution had a decisive effect on creating a fragile order in East Asia that is described by two contradictory expressions: “separate peace” and “dependent independence” (Dower 1999). The region was divided into two zones, within each of which there was peace maintained by the global power, but there was no peace between the zones. The countries in the region gained independence, but their independence was contingent on dependence on one of the global powers. The communist countries, initially dependent on Moscow’s power, soon grew less dependent on and more confrontational with it whereas Japan and South Korea never graduated from the post-war arrangement (Cumings 1991).

The first period was that of relative calm as the countries in East Asia remained within the identity framework that had been forged largely by the global order at the end of the World War II. The region’s structural characteristics of “separate peace” and “dependent independence” did not so much impose a particular order as they served as a structural constraint within which East Asian countries had to negotiate their relationships. Until the end of the 1970s, history remained salient to the relationship between regional actors who shared a common understanding that “history not forgotten

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is a guide to the future”, but East Asian countries did not recognize outsiders as legitimate participants in domestic deliberations about history.

In the first period of calm, Japanese history textbook embodied the political pact made between Washington and Tokyo in the immediate post-war period. The textbook served as a marker of Japanese identity as a defensive status quo power that denounced war and dispossessed military. Although Japan adopted many institutional arrangements – Article 9 of the Constitution, the Self-Defense Force, etc. – that established Japan’s pacific identity, there still remained a degree of uncertainty about its future direction, particularly after the “reverse course” that encouraged Tokyo to adopt a more aggressive posture. Together with Shigeru doctrine and Miki’s three non-nuclear principles, the textbook provided a focal point around which state actors’ expectations could converge under such a condition of uncertainty. Occasional references to history helped maintain the convergence.

With the emergence of what E.P. Thompson called “the second Cold War” in the early 1980s, however, Japan’s identity as the defensive status quo power was increasingly called into question. Not only did Japan possess a substantial military capability by 1980 but its leadership, headed by Prime Minister Nakasone, seemed to begin the process of transforming Japan into a “normal state” with a regular military that would participate in collective defense missions. Washington too seemed to support, if not encourage, Japan’s such transformation. China and Korea viewed the development as a challenge to the post-war consensus, an attempt to revise the rule of the game that had guided the relationships among the countries in the region. The “second Cold War” in East Asia increased the level of uncertainty about the social reality as Japan’s identity increasingly lost its ability to serve as a focal point.

The period of history textbook controversy began in earnest in 1982 when China began to charge the Japanese Ministry of Education of “cleansing” its history textbook of war descriptions. While most studies of the first textbook controversy, and the subsequent ones, focus on Beijing’s instrumental use of the issue to gain maximum concession in loan package from Tokyo or to increase its legitimacy, I argue that the textbook controversy was a case of communicative act that the two countries were engaged in through which they negotiated their identities and the terms of their relationship. The history textbook controversy, and Nakasone’s 1985 visit to the Yasukuni Shrine and subsequent Chinese protests, served as a tug of identity war that would reestablish the position of Japanese identity marker. Whereas in Europe the “second Cold War” elicited a direct public challenge and ultimately led to formal institutional solutions – such as the INF and CFE treaties – designed to address the increased uncertainty and insecurity, in East Asia the “second Cold War” took a detour via history through which the countries negotiated the uncertainty and insecurity. History textbook controversy, despite the apparent conflictual postures and high emotions it prompted, drew on the contentious past to mitigate the hard impact of contentious contemporary realpolitik. Historical contentions mediated, rather than exacerbated, contemporary contentions.

The historical contentions contributed to the emergence of the regional public sphere because the regional actors took concrete steps to intervene in other’s history while at the same time explicitly recognizing the legitimacy of other’s intervention. When the Chinese government raised its concerns about Japanese history textbooks in 1982, the Japanese government recognized the legitimacy of its intervention by adopting the so-called “international understanding and cooperation” clause as part of

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its criteria for textbook authorization. After Prime Minister Nakasone was criticized for paying an official visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, he recognized the legitimacy of the Chinese concern by canceling his planned visit later in the same year. The legitimate position of neighbors has been so entrenched that even such nationalists as Fujioka who claim that the question of what Japan should always be considered from a Japanese point of view acknowledges the necessity to consider “how that must look from the perspective of others” (Fujioka 1996: 135). Japanese history textbooks and Japanese Prime Minister’s visit to the Yasukuni Shrine provided the medium through which the East Asian countries exchanged their understandings of their identities and quickly restored the status quo ante. As the regional actors started intervening in each other’s history as a legitimate player, so did the parallel public spheres begin to be transformed into a regional public sphere in the 1980s. Prime Minister Murayama’s official apology for the past wrongs in 1995 dramatically intensified the regional dialogue and deepened the regional public sphere. The regional public sphere, constituted through the medium of historical contentions, helped the countries in the region manage uncertainties and insecurity in their relationships without open conflicts throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Throughout the decades, history issues were consistently framed as concerns about the region’s future and peace, contributing to a shared meaning structure on the basis of which the East Asian countries could carry out their interactions. Following the Sino-Japanese Joint Declaration of 1972 that tied the past to the future,² subsequent statements and announcement have all framed the issue of the past in terms of the region’s future and peace. On Prime Minister Kaifu’s visit to Korea in 1991, Chosun

² The declaration contained a very specific formula: “history not forgotten is a guide to the future”

Ilbo column raised concerns about Japan's security policies by situating the history textbook in the context of regional security concerns: the textbook revision, it suggested, must be "seen as Japan's pursuit of militarization" (Sin 1991). In 1998 when Chinese President Jiang visited Japan, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs made sure that the past, formulated in a specific way, is a basis for the future relations between China and Japan by releasing a public statement:

The Japanese side for the first time recognized aggression against China and expressed profound self-reflection and apology, and jointly reaffirmed that correct understanding of and dealing with history is an important basis for developing China-Japan relations.

The statement was made more concrete the following year when Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi visited China: "The Japanese side also expressed the willingness to squarely face history on this basis [of the above statement], to join hands to create the future, and to continue to contribute to peace with concrete actions."

The communicative negotiations continued into the 21st century with new domestic and regional twists as the three East Asian countries sought to adapt their identities to the new reality of post-Cold War world and societal changes. Changes in the global power distribution and the nature of power created new possibilities for regional order while maintaining—and some cases deepening—the Cold War legacies. In response to these changes, East Asia continued its dialogical binding whereas Europe accelerated and expanded its process of formal institutional binding. History textbook controversy, despite the apparent conflictual postures and high emotions it prompted, drew on the contentious past to mitigate the hard impact of contentious contemporary

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realpolitik. Historical contentions mediated, rather than exacerbated, contemporary contentions in East Asia. All in all, historical contentions facilitated regional communication, laying a foundation for a regional public sphere. But the 21st century also began to see a rise of counter currents, some of which were triggered by what conservative elements viewed as an excess of the 1990s. At the current writing, the regional public sphere seems caught between two opposite forces: one that may strengthen the regional public sphere and one that may fracture it into a contentious public sphere.

The Future of East Asia's Order: Diabolic or Dialogic?

More needs to be done in order for the nascent regional public sphere to grow into a fully functioning one that provides a basis of deliberative democracy and regional identity for a regional community. Two tasks call for immediate attention: one, for regional actors to recognize each other as legitimate speakers in their own public spheres; and two, to develop a regional common frame within which differences in opinion over regional issues are negotiated and hopefully resolved. It does not require an agreement on the issues, but it does require more than taking notice of each other in a common public sphere. The regional actors must learn to treat each other as legitimate speakers in one's own public sphere.

Historical contentions have heightened the saliency of issues that regional actors commonly share and deeply care about. They have been communicated by officials, media, and citizens almost simultaneously throughout Northeast Asia. The contentions

have also been framed as common concerns about the future direction of the region, whether regional actors are moving along the path of stability and peace or a disastrous warpath. In the process, national public spheres have been interpenetrated, networked, complicated, producing what might be called a nascent regional public sphere. Some Japanese reporting of the history contentions as infringement of Japanese sovereignty goes against the spirit of the regional public sphere. It needs to be further intensified, deepened, and expanded in order for it to flourish a regional public sphere that anchors the Northeast Asia community.

The tasks will be eased by such developments as the formation of Solidarity for Asia Peace and History Education (March 2002) among historians and educators in the three countries who recognize each other as legitimate interveners. The fact that a common history textbook was written and published by them also represents an important breakthrough in developing a common framework of meanings. That they are seeing the past as a possible path to common peaceful future is reflected in their slogan: “No to Historical Distortions; Yes to East Asia Peace.”

Such positive developments are, however, counterbalanced by negative developments. Some politicians began to openly question the legitimacy of foreigners to intervene in what they consider domestic deliberations of their own history. News media reports and public’s discussion of history issues also show diverging frameworks that are tinged with nationalist sentiments.

The region’s order, therefore, seems to be at a fork between a regional public sphere and a contentious public sphere. The future of the regional order, and the region’s stability and peace, hangs in the balance between these contradictory developments.

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Northeast Asia has since the end of World War II existed under a strong influence of global power distribution and global schism as well as in the absence of regional institutions. Under such a condition, the countries in the region have managed their relationships by negotiating their positions and desires in terms of historical contentions. At the turn of the century, the structural conditions, institutionalized at the end of World War II, are increasingly coming under pressure as the global bipolarity is being replaced with a more complex pattern of power distribution. The increasing uncertainty--created by power shifts at the global and regional levels--has not been accompanied by a corresponding level of institutional activities in the region. Instead such a structural and institutional condition has prompted regional actors to be engaged in a higher level of historical contentions in order to establish a set of new identities and new focal points. The future shape of the region's order will be determined by the outcome of the negotiations that the regional actors carry out in terms of the past.

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