



# Revisionist Historiography as a Tool for State-Building in 20th Century East Asia

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the use of historical revisionism by post-WWII East Asian governments as a tool for state-building. I begin by summarizing how both WWII and the postcolonial legacy of Imperial Japan left many states in East Asia weakened — in need of new national narratives to bolster their legitimacy. Next, I analyze the historiographical trends of China, the Koreas, and Japan, demonstrating how revisionism was a pervasive trend. Finally, I examine case studies of state censorship and organized violence across the region which occurred in response to the methodological threats to revisionist narratives. This paper finds that historiographical revisionism played a key role in East Asian state-building, enhancing state legitimacy by supporting post-war national narratives. Revisionist trends in East Asia are one example of how states can weaponize history — altering collective memory and identity through nationalist lenses, in pursuit of greater legitimacy.

## Introduction

Following the Second World War, emerging states in East Asia struggled to rebuild their nations amidst political disarray. A legacy of colonialism by Europe and Imperial Japan, a lengthy Civil War in China, and the partitioning of the Korean peninsula had severely damaged — if not destroyed — the national identities of East Asia. After WWII, if the surviving polities were to succeed in rebuilding their states, they had to redefine such identities. However, history did not always conform to the new ideologies and images that these emerging polities were attempting to develop. Instead, be it the colonial remorse of Japan, the impact of that legacy in both Korea and China, or even the very cultural traditions at the core of these societies, history served as an obstacle to these new narratives because it maintained a connection to their previous collective identities, despite attempts to reshape them. Therefore, these new polities needed to reconstruct national narratives by reshaping their very histories — and historiographies<sup>1</sup> — through explicitly nationalist lenses as a vital tool for post-war, post-colonial nation-building in twentieth-century East Asia.

## Post-WWII Nation-Building

The end of the Second World War was a pivotal turning point in East Asian nation-building, especially following Japanese colonial rule. Imperial Japan had colonized much of the Pacific even before the war. This was the result of both a need for resources to fuel its rapid industri-

al expansion, as well as a desire to acquire the same imperial prestige its European counterparts had long enjoyed (Oh and Ishizawa-Grbić 2000, 46). By 1910, the Japanese had already conquered Korea, and subsequently launched an invasion of Manchuria (Northeastern China) in 1932 (Oh and Ishizawa-Grbić 2000, 46).

When war broke out several years later, colonial efforts increased both in scale and severity. In Korea, there was a systematic effort to eliminate Korean identity. This was exemplified by the destruction of much of the Gyeongbokgung Palace, which had been the political and cultural center of Korea for the past five centuries, and the mandated use of the Japanese language (Korean Cultural Heritage Administration 2007). In China, the Japanese faced resistance both from the incumbent Republic and Mao's revolutionaries, leading to brutal attempts to quell resistance such as the Massacre of Nanjing in 1937 — in which the Japanese all but razed the city and its population (Oh and Ishizawa-Grbić 2000, 46).

However, it was not just Japanese colonialism that spurred national identity crises in East Asia, but influence from Western powers as well. In China, since the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century, the Qing dynasty was forced to offer considerable concessions to European powers, dividing China into 'spheres of influence' for exclusive economic exploitation. This eventually prompted the overthrow of the monarchy in 1911 by the government of Chiang Kai-shek (Dorrill 1969, 36). However, by the 1930's, many viewed the republican government led by the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) as equally willing to compromise

<sup>1</sup> Historiographies refers to the ways in which history is studied, written and interpreted.

Chinese sovereignty to garner Western support, prompting the communist revolution headed by Mao Tse-Tung (Brugger 1986, 643). In turn, supporters of the Kuomintang's republican government viewed the revolutionaries as being compromised by the influence of the USSR. Even though the movement was only loosely connected to the Soviets, this resulted in a general sentiment in China — by all parties — of perpetual subjugation by foreign powers, an attitude that Japanese influence would only catalyze (Huaiyin 2010, 350).

Though Japan was a colonial power, or indeed because of it, they too faced an identity crisis by the end of World War II. Facing the carnage of the Tokyo firebombing and atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the once-proud empire was devastated physically and psychologically. Surrender terms such as Emperor Hirohito's public rejection of his divine mandate, the forced disarmament of the Japanese military, and indefinite occupation by allied forces compounded this (Japanese Constitution 1947, Article 4; 9). As a nation, Japan was both humiliated and humbled by the war, shattering its national identity after losing 'Great Power' status.

Foreign interference in Korea was perhaps more intrusive than either China or Japan. Following the war, the peninsula was forcibly partitioned as a direct result of foreign interests, and by 1950 this led to the outbreak of the Korean War as a proxy conflict between the West and China (with the U.S.S.R.) (Sato 1990, 98). After decades of Japanese rule, partition, and now war, Korean national identity was literally fragmented in two. Following this legacy of hu-

miliation, decimation, and fragmentation, the surviving polities in East Asia were now faced with two tasks: rebuilding their national identities and gaining legitimacy for their new states.

### **The Emergence of Revisionism**

One of the most potent ways that East Asian states accomplished these tasks was by establishing a new national narrative — often done through historical revisionism: the reinterpretation of historical events to engrain modern narratives into collective memory.

Exceptionalism is one example of revisionist methods, focusing on instances of historical pride and accomplishment, and then crediting them to the new ideology of the state. A clear example of exceptionalist revisionism in East Asia is the historiography surrounding the Shin Ganhoe in Korea, a political front aimed at liberating the peninsula from Japanese rule (Wells 2001, 183). The Shin Ganhoe attempted to accomplish this by combining both the nationalist-oriented rhetoric of the South with the more socialist-oriented rhetoric of the North, creating a unified force with the primary goal of freeing Korea (Wells 2001, 183). After the peninsula was partitioned, the organization was therefore lauded by the North and the South as integral to liberation and a demonstration of Korean exceptionalism, with each side crediting such to their unique national narratives (Wells 2001, 183).

In the North, socialist historiography portrayed the front as a force fighting primarily for class liberation amidst the economic oppression of the Japanese (Wells 2001, 187). In the South, however, nationalist historiography instead

portrays the front's liberation movement as being ethnically centered, reasserting Korea as a unified people amidst the cultural oppression of the Japanese (Ibid). In actuality, the Shin Ganhoe advocated for both these things — but far less fiercely than each narrative would lead one to believe (Wells 2001, 189). However, because colonial trauma was so integral to the collective memories of all Koreans, both sides were able to capitalize on the liberation efforts of the Shin Ganhoe. This was done by first inflating their successes, and then retroactively projecting modern nationalist narratives as being driving forces in those successes. The effects portrayed both the organization — and their ideology by proxy — as exceptional for state-building.

China also used postcolonial rhetoric to its advantage as a base for its national narrative. The use of postcolonial rhetoric is best shown through *The Quotations* from Mao Tse-Tung, a de-facto manifesto for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that came to be synonymized with their new national identity. The text quickly invokes anticolonial rhetoric, claiming that the enemies of the Revolution are “all those in league with Imperialism,” linking its ideology inextricably with the liberation struggle (Zedong 1976). Mao extends this reasoning — stating that if the Revolution is the enemy of the colonizers, counter-revolutionaries are therefore Imperial sympathizers (Zedong 1976). Through this linkage, Mao legitimizes the Revolutionary cause by equating it with the colonial struggle, while simultaneously delegitimizing the competing national narrative of “paper tiger” reactionaries (Zedong 1976).

In conjunction with postcolonialism — and

in many ways through it — Marxism quickly became the basis of mid-twentieth-century Chinese historiography. Mao's writings explicitly established material-based interpretations as the only legitimate historiographical theory, dismissing all others as “historical idealism” (Zedong 1976). This is best reflected in the work of Fan Wenlan, a prominent 20th century Chinese historian who often used a Marxist lens for revisionist purposes. Wenlan gave particular emphasis to the significance of past rebellions in China, doing so through a post-colonial and/or Marxist interpretation (Huaiyin 2009, 271). For example, in his analysis of the Opium Wars, Wenlan focused on the triumphant resistance to foreign subjugation, as well as the theft of Chinese resources by colonial powers (Huaiyin 2009, 275). Elsewhere, Wenlan praised the leader of the 1850 Taiping Rebellion, Hong Xiuquan, as an exemplar of Revolutionary values, claiming that his views on wealth distribution and class relations reflected “utopian communist ideals” (Huaiyin 2009, 276). In both instances, Wenlan's use of postcolonial and Marxist theory, as well as his exceptionalist portrayal of Hong Xiuquan and resistance during the Opium Wars, helped legitimize the nascent state by reinterpreting history through a Revolutionary narrative.

### **Dueling Narratives**

The Kuomintang Nationalists, however, held a counter-historical narrative more suited to their competing vision of a Chinese state: the Modernization narrative. Jiang Tingfu was one of the earliest and most notable practitioners of Modernist theory in this Chinese

historiography. Where Fan Wenlan applauded the socialist undertones of resistance during the Opium Wars, Tingfu interpreted the rebels as being “ignorant and apathetic” opportunists, with some corrupt to the point of aiding in the plundering of Guangzhou (Huaiyin 2009, 276). Similarly, unlike Wenlan’s praise of Hong Xiquan, Jiang Tingfu saw his Taiping Rebellion as hollow populism, unwilling and unable to follow through on progressive social ideals (Ibid). Tingfu frequently criticized Wenlan for deliberately framing these struggles not only as anticolonial but against “the oppression of the Manchus;” a direct reflection of Revolutionary narratives that sought to scapegoat the Northeastern ethnic minority group who posed a threat to their vision of a unified national identity (Huaiyin 2009, 282). In all such instances, Jiang Tingfu presents a counter-historiographical theory of Modernization: one that focuses on progressive reform and Revolutionary corruption, both vital in the efforts to present an alternative national narrative by the Kuomintang.

This Modernization narrative, and historiographical scholars like Jiang Tingfu, were consequently suppressed and discredited by the CCP. By the 1980s, however, after the disastrous Cultural Revolution and efforts such as ‘The Great Leap Forward,’ Marxist-oriented reforms had led to massive forced famines and economic isolationism (Brugger 1986, 646). As a result, the Revolutionary narrative was no longer sustainable. Once the Kuomintang was effectively exiled to Taiwan and no longer a political threat, the Modernist ideology became a viable replacement. The failures of Revolutionary rhetoric and policy prompted the CCP to

shift focus from agrarianism towards industrialism; now that it reflected the national vision of the CCP, the Modernization narrative was readily adopted (Huaiyin 2010, 348).

This historiographical paradigm shift in China, therefore, represents a double-revisionism of sorts: previous Marxist-Revolutionary interpretations were reinterpreted through Modernism. Following this shift, China underwent transformative economic and technological advancement. Modernist theory and scholars such as Jiang Tingfu, once shunned by the mainland, were embraced as the new orthodoxy while Marxist theory was simultaneously phased out as a legitimate historiographical tool (Huaiyin 2010, 348). In both cases, historiographical practices were used to alter collective memory, reshaping national identities to the benefit of the state — first through a Revolutionary lens, and later through a Modernist one.

In Japan, the rebuilding of national identity was not supported by victorious postcolonial rhetoric, but instead undermined by it. For one, Japan did not triumph over foreign interference — after the war, they were fully at the whims of the allied forces, and forced to surrender their right to an independent military (The Japanese Constitution 1947, Article 9). This cognitive dissonance from both submission to foreign powers and the shame of colonial atrocities resulted in a national narrative of victimization — something that revisionist historiography would bolster (Oh and Ishizawa-Grbić 2000, 46).

Japanese historian Hayashi Fusao’s 1964 book *The Great East Asian War as a Just War* is an excellent example of this narrative.

As the title suggests, the text seeks to justify the actions of Japan in World War II. For example, it claims that the conflict was merely the inevitable outcome of defiant Japanese modernization in the face of Western imperial ambitions (Oh and Ishizawa-Grbić 2000, 48). Furthermore, Fusao claims that Japan annexed Korea and Manchuria not as acts of aggression, but as a defensive measure for all parties: the invasion was justified because the West would have taken their place if they had not acted (Oh and Ishizawa-Grbić 2000, 48). This interpretation portrays Japanese imperialism as both unavoidable and self-defensive, serving as “a catalyst for Asian national liberation” (Oh and Ishizawa-Grbić 2000, 47). Thus, Japanese historiography reinterpreted its legacy to directly reflect the new state’s narrative of victimhood and benevolence following WWII.

### Threats to New Narratives

Although revisionist theories are a powerful way to support a state’s national narrative, certain historiographical methods can threaten these attempts. For example, prioritizing material evidence in historiography can undermine the legitimacy of revisionist narratives. Methodologies found in environmental and material historiography make revisionism significantly more difficult, as they provide objective, physical evidence. The immutability and irrefutability of such sources makes them resilient to attempts at revision, compromising the validity of a nationalist interpretation.

Oral testimony is another such method. Although not as easily verifiable, oral accounts of direct witnesses can directly contradict a na-

tionalist historical narrative. A key example is the testimony of various *Ianfu* in modern Japanese historiography. These ‘comfort women’ were military sex slaves for the imperial forces of Japan who have been able to provide detailed, eye-witness accounts of various colonial atrocities including mass rape, mass murder, and cultural genocide (Oh and Ishizawa-Grbić 2000, 51). The testimony of these *Ianfu* not only discredits claims of colonial benevolence, but also contradicts nationalist historians like Hayashi Fusao’s denial of their very existence (Oh and Ishizawa-Grbić 2000, 51).

Political elites in East Asia were not idle in the face of these threats, however. Historical erasure is a particularly pernicious form of revisionism, as it does not just reinterpret events but seeks instead to erase them altogether. Erasure, therefore, became a key tool used to destroy material and oral sources.

One of the most blatant attempts at erasure in East Asia is the Cultural Revolution in China. After Chairman Mao declared non-Revolutionary histories as illegitimate, the CCP underwent a deliberate attempt to destroy what Mao called ‘the four olds:’ the traditional ideology, culture, habits, and customs of China (Zedong 1976, Ch. 1). To fully replace the collective identity with a Revolutionary one, Mao’s Red Guard systematically destroyed cultural sites, a plethora of historical documents as well as the suppression of dissidents (Brugger 1986, 646). Those who clung to their past identities — be it protecting historical material, retaining unsanctioned mementos, or teaching alternative histories — were arrested, beaten, and executed (Brugger 1986, 646). This resulted in the death

of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of anyone who did not fully conform to the new narrative (Brugger 1986, 646). The Cultural Revolution, therefore, managed the threat of material, textual and oral histories posed by destroying physical evidence and silencing dissident voices.

### **Modern Revisionism**

Even in modern East Asia, there are attempts at erasure. In China, for example, rigorous censorship has replaced large-scale cultural destruction. Even if certain records or material evidence survived physical destruction, the use of such evidence is severely restricted in modern Chinese historiography if it undermines national unity. Additionally, such materials are heavily regulated because of the state's control of archives, and its censorship capabilities regarding academia.

One such example would be the discourse surrounding the Fukien Rebellion of 1933, a communist insurgency that ended in resounding defeat and the defection of its leaders to the Kuomintang (Dorrill 1969, 43). The speed and totality of this defeat represent a particularly embarrassing incident for early communist efforts, and so modern Chinese historiography has attempted to disassociate the group from the wider Revolution to erase a glaring failure of Revolutionary rhetoric (Dorrill 1969, 45).

Beyond academic censorship, oral testimonies are silenced just as effectively through similar censorship but also grave criminal penalties for contradicting the national narrative, which may be seen as critical of the government and therefore a subversive act. Meanwhile

in Japan, although there are no active attempts at silencing oral voices, a consequence of their imperial legacy in Korea and Manchuria is that very little oral testimony remains after systematic mass killings. The absence of these erased voices was therefore used for many years in revisionist historiography as proof that colonial atrocities were either exaggerated or invented by Western adversaries (Oh and Ishizawa-Grbić 2000, 47). Furthermore, what little evidence remained, such as with the Ianfu, was discredited or denied (Oh and Ishizawa-Grbić 2000, 50). And so, throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, East Asia historiographies not only engaged in revisionism but specifically erasure through material destruction, the suppression of oral testimony, and censorship of academia to preserve the nationalist narrative of the state.

### **Conclusion**

Postcolonial historiographies of East Asian states often reinterpreted events to rebuild national identities. History was reinterpreted by projecting modern national narratives onto past events, actions, and institutions, with such narratives legitimized by invoking colonial struggles and emphasizing historical exceptionalism. These narratives were accomplished largely by preferencing certain methods and theories in their historiographies that were better suited to these identities, while simultaneously suppressing historical methods that contradicted them. Because of these historical and historiographical manipulations, new state narratives would sometimes reject dissident lenses altogether, either choosing to deny — or outright



erase — historical events from collective memory. In short, the promotion of nationalist historiography was both a product and a tool for state-building in East Asia after WWII, altering collective memory by reshaping it through reinterpretative theories, thereby allowing emerging polities to remake national identities. As we have seen throughout East Asia, the alteration of history can serve as a potent tool for nation-building. In shaping collective memory, states can shape collective identity to support whichever narrative is most conducive to their interests.

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