Korea in World History Textbooks: A Look through a Narrow Window

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The majority of colleges and universities in the United States offer World History survey courses designed primarily for freshmen. The University of Hawaii at Manoa has offered World History courses, History 151 (World History to 1500) and 152 (World History since 1500), for many decades, and these courses were required of all undergraduate students until 2001. Each semester, well over a thousand students enroll in these courses on this campus alone.

Textbooks that come with the World History survey courses are staples of college education. Several versions of World History survey texts are available at bookstores at any given time, and instructors of the courses usually assign one of them to students. These books discuss human history from the earliest civilizations to the post-Cold War world in the late twentieth century, and are typically over a thousand pages long including many maps and illustrations. They are either in a thick single volume or chronologically divided into two volumes, and new volumes, both in hard and soft backs, can cost approximately a hundred dollars each. Although the total circulation of these books is unknown, we can assume that a good portion of nearly 18 million students, enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States, take World History courses and therefore use these texts. One of the newer textbooks, Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past, was authored by two University of Hawaii at Manoa History professors, Jerry H. Bentley and Herbert F. Ziegler, in 1999 and published in several editions since. According to the publisher, the book assisted over a million students at thousands of schools studying human history of over 5,000 years (Bentley and Ziegler 2006, backcover).
The authors of *Civilization Past & Present* state that this book was the first of this kind when initially published in 1942 (1996, xix). Since then, many followed suit and published at least a dozen versions of similar World History survey texts for college students, and many of them turned out several editions. I was able to access seven versions, including four in multiple editions, published between 1965 and 2007, through the libraries and the history department at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. In this brief paper, I attempt to shed light on the ways these textbooks have treated Korea and Korean history. My findings are based on a small portion of the books and, therefore, do not represent a comprehensive study of the subject. As a student of Korean history, I identify and discuss issues and problems that may already be apparent to those who have come in contact with these textbooks before.

**The Prototype Portrayal of Korea**

The oldest textbook I examined, the 1965 edition of *Civilization Past & Present*, briefly refers to Korea at five different locations. First, the book first mentions that Emperor Wu Di (r. 141-87 B.C.) of Han China “expanded his domain to include part of Korea and much of southern China” in the late second century B.C. (1:176). Second, it refers to the Sui dynasty’s (589-618) “ill-planned and futile war in Korea” and the Tang’s (618-907) “expansion from Korea and Manchuria through Tibet and central Asia to the borders of India and Persia” (1:279-280). Thus, the first references to Korea concern the early Chinese empires’ military expansion and attempt to control the Korean peninsula with no discussion of Korea’s internal development. The next references to Korea concern Japanese aggressions to Korea in later centuries. Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a unifier of warring Japan, sent troops to the Korean peninsula with an ambition for China beginning in 1592. The book relates that because Korea appealed to China as suzerain for
help “Chinese armies were thrown into the peninsular war” until stalemate was reached (1:550). A later chapter mentions the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910 following the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) (2:296). Finally, the chapter on the post-WWII era refers to the Korean War. An account of the war from the viewpoint of the United States and a photo of U.N. soldiers and fleeing Korean civilians occupy nearly a page under the title “Korean Police Action.” Thus, from the beginning to the end, the book never discusses Korea’s historical development or culture, but it merely refers to Korea in relation to the expansions of the Chinese and Japanese empires and in the context of the Cold War confrontations.

We see a similar treatment of Korea as a periphery of the extended Chinese empires in the 1974 and 1982 editions of World Civilizations. It relates that “southern Manchuria and northern Korea were annexed to the Han Empire” (1:296), and, much later, “Korea, Burma, Nepal, and parts of Indochina were tributary dependencies” of the Manchu Qing dynasty (2:90-91). Furthermore, the book presents the view of Korea as a target of Japan’s overseas expansion. Its section titled “Early Civilization in Japan” (1:310-317) asserts that the early Japanese “controlled a small section at the southern tip of Korea from about 100 to 560 A.D. (1:311). It also states that Hideyoshi, when invading Korea in the late sixteenth century, “lacked sufficient naval support to control the supply lines between Japan and the mainland” and died in 1598 with his dream unfulfilled (2:97). It continues to take the side of Japan and relates that Korea in the late nineteenth century was “an ideal breeding ground for war” and had “degenerated into one of the most backward regimes of Asia.” Korea’s “administration was corrupt and predatory, the peasants ignorant and wretched, and conditions in general thoroughly belied the country’s poetic name Chosen [sic] (“Land of the Morning Calm”) (2:361-362). The 1991 edition of the book
shows revisions, but still implied early Japan’s dominance over Korea by saying: “The Japanese invaded southern Korea in 396 A.D. and intervened in Korean politics to maintain a balance of power, siding with one and then another of the three kingdoms into which Korea was divided during this time” (91).

Both *A History of World Societies* and *World Civilizations: The Global Experience* in their 1992 and earlier editions also argue that Korea was under Japanese dominance in early centuries. The former states that “from the dawn of their history the Japanese had held parts of Korea but by 562 the Koreans had driven them out” (McKay and al 1988, 311; 1992, 323). The latter maintains that “by the late fourth century A.D. their [Japanese] sway also extended to southern Korea” and “this overseas extension of the Yamato domains brought intensified contacts with Chinese civilization” (Stearns 1992, 223-224).

It is obvious that their notion of early Japanese control over southern Korea was taken from earlier publications influenced by Japanese studies from many decades ago. The “Suggested Reading” in *A History of World Societies* in 1988 lists no source on early Korea while it names three books for early Japan: *Japan A Short Cultural History* by G.B. Sansom, *Japan Before Buddhism* by J. E. Kidder, Jr., and *East Asia The Great Tradition* by Edwin O. Reischauer and John K. Fairbank (1:319). All of them, published between the 1930s and 1960s, in fact assert that Japan had maintained a foothold in southern Korea, particular in the kingdom of Mimana (Sansom 1932, 34; Kidder 1966, 135; and Reischauer and Fairbank 1960, 468).³

Their “Suggested Reading” lists point to numerous secondary sources on China and some on Japan, but very few on Korea, if any. Up until the early 1990s, virtually all World History survey books were written by scholars specializing in Western histories, and yet their objective was to depict the development and growth of civilization “not as a unique European experience
but as a global one” by including “all great culture systems that have interacted to produce the present-day world” (Wallbank 1996, xix). As non-specialists, they uncritically adopted prevalent perspectives on Korea presented in the histories of China and Japan, which were considered major culture systems. Consequently, Korea came to play subservient roles in their accounts.

The World History survey textbooks up until the early 1990s referred to Korea only in relation to the expansion of early China and Japan and in the context of the Cold War. Korea was treated as a periphery of the early Chinese empires and the target of Japanese overseas ventures, and not as an independent culture or nation contributing to world civilizations.

Improvements and Lingering Issues

World History textbooks published since 2000 show many improvements. First, the controversial view of early Japanese influence over southern Korea is nowhere to be found. Second, many of them now contain small but independent sections on Korean culture and history. The 2007 edition of A History of World Society by McKay has a one-page section on early Korea (181-182) under the chapter on “East Asia and Spread of Buddhism 256 B.C.E.-800 C.E.” The section includes discussions of the establishment of Wiman Chosŏn (194-109 B.C.), the Han-Chinese commanderies, and the development of the Three Kingdoms, along with a small colored photo of a Silla gold crown. Further, under the chapter “East Asia, ca 800-1400,” the book spends nearly two pages on political and cultural developments of Koryŏ (333-335), and then under the chapter “East Asia, ca 1400-1800,” nearly three pages on Chosŏn Korea (639-641). The last two sections include the photos of a Koryŏ celadon, King Sejong’s water clock, and a painting of Diamond Mountains by Chŏng Sŏn.4
Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past has a short section on “Korea and Vietnam” (1:395-397) in the chapter “The Resurgence of Empire in East Asia.” Although its accounts of Korea are less than a page long, it surveys Silla’s unification and relationship with Tang China and discusses the adaptation of Confucian education systems to Silla and later Koguryŏ that retained strong aristocratic traditions. The 2004 edition of World History contains a short section titled “Korea: the Hermit Kingdom” (2:466) that summarizes the rise of the Chosŏn dynasty, Hideyoshi invasions, and Korea’s isolation later in the dynasty and at the same time mentions the invention of han’gul, rising agricultural production, and the appearance of a small urban industrial and commercial sector. All of these books published after 2000 make a marked contrast with their predecessors by discussing Korea’s cultural and social developments in the traditional periods.

Despite such improvements, the recent editions and versions contain a number of factual misrepresentations. A History of World Societies states that Queen Min was “regent for the child king” (McKay et al. 2007, 818) though she was in fact the wife of King Kojong. It asserts that “Korea became a protectorate of Japan” with “Japan’s decisive victory” in the war with China (1894-1895), ignoring Korea’s autonomy and reform attempts in the next decade (819). World History: Compact Edition is the only book that mentions the Tan’gun legend, but it fails to convey the legend accurately. It states that “the mating of a tiger and a bear produced a human son called Tan’gun,” who in fact was born of the union between a divine figure and a bear. It incorrectly relates that “written Chinese was the only script used in Korea up to the thirteenth century,“ when “a phonetic alphabet suitable for transcribing spoken Korean was invented,” and due to the prestige of written Chinese “the Korean alphabet was not adopted officially until the mid-twentieth century” (Upshur et al. 2005, 328-329).
The larger issue, however, is their perspectives. The recent editions and versions continue to underscore China’s political control over Korea. An account from “Korean mythology” that *A History of World Societies* refers to is not the Tan’gun legend but the legend of Kija, who allegedly came from Shang-China and founded a state in northwestern Korea. The book then refers to Wiman, who fled Han China and built his Chosŏn state in the same region in 194 B.C. and the Chinese commanderies established by the Han emperor Wu Di in 108 B.C. (McKay et al. 2000, 200-201; 2007, 181). *Traditions and Encounters* writes, incorrectly, that “during the seventh century Tang armies conquered much of Korea before the native Silla dynasty rallied to prevent Chinese domination of the peninsula” (1:395). Similarly, the 1996 edition of *Civilization Past & Present* states that Tang China under Empress Wu “decisively defeated the northern Koreans, making Korea a loyal vassal state (208).

Korea’s embrace of Chinese culture is emphasized markedly but inaccurately. *A History of World Societies* states that “in all three Korean kingdoms Chinese was used as the language of government and learning” and that “for the next century Silla embarked on a policy of wholesale borrowing of Chinese culture and institutions” (McKay 2000, 201; 2007, 181). *Traditions and Encounters* relates that “the Silla kings even built a new capital at Kumsong modeled on the Tang capital at Chang’an” (1:395-396). *Civilization Past & Present* argues, in a small section titled “Korea: Cultural Intermediary,” that Korea had “survived for centuries by periodically accepting tributary status under Chinese emperors and adapting imported Chinese culture, much of which it passed on to Japan” (460). These accounts simply project the image of Korea as a faithful imitator of the Chinese civilization and fail to communicate that the Koreans in fact adapted Chinese culture and institutions into their own indigenous values and traditions.
The maps printed alongside these narratives reflect the China-centered views. In *Traditions and Encounters*, the map of East Asia at the time of the Han dynasty incorrectly shows China extending to as much as three quarters of the Korean peninsula (1:196). Conversely, the book’s later map shows Silla, at the time of the Sui and Tang dynasties in China, with a small territory occupying only a southern third of the peninsula (1:377). The maps in *A History of World Societies* (2007, 183) and *World History* (2004, 306) assign only the land south of the Yalu and Tumen Rivers to Koguryŏ (-668) and labeled its north as China. They thus overlooked the historical fact that Koguryŏ encompassed a large territory including present-day Chinese northeast and instead applied today’s borderlines to the territorial divisions over a millennium ago. Incidentally, all of the textbooks that I examined label the East Sea as the Sea of Japan.

The reason for the heavy emphasis on Chinese influence can be manifold. The majority of the authors of the World History survey books used to be scholars of Western histories. Faced with the challenge of presenting a worldwide history in the era of globalization, they have added scholars of non-Western histories, often China specialists, in their teams since the 1990s. In 2000, *A History of World Societies* added a fourth author, Patricia Buckley Ebrey, whose expertise is in medieval Chinese history. William J. Duiker, an expert on China and Vietnam, published *World History* in the early 1990s. Jiu-Hwa L. Upshur, a specialist in Chinese art and history, authored *World History: Compact Edition*. These experts in Chinese culture and history naturally incorporate China-centered views in their narratives.

Korea, of course, is not the only country or culture given roles subservient to larger civilizations. Vietnam is often portrayed next to Korea as a periphery and offshoot of the Chinese civilization (Duiker and Spielvogel 2004, 308-312; Bentley and Ziegler 2006, 1:395-
396). Further, Southeast Asia as a whole is often treated as an extension of the South Asian civilization. With the intent to present major cultures and civilizations in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe, the textbooks place their primary focus in Asia on China and India, and perhaps their secondary focus on Japan (Lockard 2007). Adjacent regions and countries are presented as political or cultural extensions of the larger civilizations. Although it is unreasonable to expect these survey books to discuss all areas and countries in detail, the subordination of the smaller cultures to the larger is inexcusable.

Enhancement for the Future

If the World History textbooks are to spend more pages on Korea, I suggest that they discuss Korea under the Japanese colonial rule. Currently, their accounts of Korea stop at its annexation to the Japanese empire in 1910 and resume after its liberation in 1945, leaving out the entire colonial era. There is no mention of Korea under Japan’s harsh colonial rule or its fight for independence.

The textbooks deal with Western imperialism as one of their important themes in their later chapters. They relate not only the penetration of Western powers in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific but the methods and patterns of their rule over their colonies. Some of the atrocities committed by the colonizers and the independence movements by the indigenous population are also discussed (McKay et al. 2007, 801-810; Bentley and Ziegler 2006, 910-929). The extensive treatments of these colonies under the Western powers are indeed necessary to understand the world in the post-WWII and even post-Cold War eras.

In the same vein, Japanese imperialism is drawing more attention. A History of World Societies announces in its preface that it has expanded discussions of Japanese colonialism,
including the occupation of Manchuria and aggression in China (2007, xxvii, 923-925). It has also inserted a new section titled “Japan’s Asian Empire” (980-982) on Japan’s invasion of Southeast Asia between 1941 and 1945. Yet, the discussions focused on the Japanese puppet state Manchukuo, the Sino-Japanese War of 1937, and the Pacific War of 1941-1945 only reaffirm the authors’ interest from Chinese and Western perspectives. When discussing Japanese imperialism, its full-fledged colonies, Korea and Taiwan, must be examined. Accounts of Korea’s hardship and fight for independence in the first half of the twentieth century are long overdue as they are indispensable in understanding post-liberation Korea.

In the final analysis, although the treatment of Korea in the World History survey textbooks has expanded and improved particularly since 2000, further changes are due. Their factual errors must be rectified by consulting Korea experts and their recent publications. The authors need to make concerted efforts in elucidating the past relations between Korea and Japan not only in early times and but in the twentieth century. Further, they must outgrow their long-standing favoritism toward larger civilizations and rethink their China-centered narratives regarding Korea. Additional attention to “non-major” cultures and civilizations can enhance the global perspective that they seek to deliver to millions of college students.

Notes

1. At the University of Hawaii at Manoa, World History courses are now among a dozen or more “Global and Multicultural Perspectives” courses, which include courses in anthropology, art, geography, music, and religion. Undergraduate students take two courses in this category before graduation.

2. Approximately 17.9 million students are estimated to be enrolled in institutions of higher education in the United States in 2007. See U.S. Census Bureau Statistical Abstract of the
United States Section 4 Education Table 206 School Enrollment, Faculty, Graduates, and Finances-Projections: 2005 to 2011  http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/07statab/educ.pdf


5. The “Further Reading” (401-402) suggests no book on Korea.


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**Other References**


