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## **The Past in Relation to the Present**

### **Korea's Search for Historical Reconciliation with its Neighbours**

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## Introduction

By Joke van der Leeuw-Roord and Marloes Mulder

Europe is not the only region in the world where different accounts of a certain history can lead to heated debates between scientists, citizens and, not in the last place, history teachers. East Asia is another region in the world where the interpretations of historical events play a dividing and sometimes tension-rising role. Since 5 years the International NGO History Forum for Peace in Northeast Asia and the Northeast Asian History Foundation have been organizing international meetings, inviting civil society organizations and institutions committed to peace building in the region and beyond, with a special target on history and history education. The organizations that organize these events are trying to introduce experiences of reconciliation and mutual understanding from other parts of the world to a Korean and wider Northeast Asian audience. Since two years invitations to participate have also been extended to the EUROCLIO network.

Under the title *Rewriting the Next Hundred Years of East Asian History*, the 4<sup>th</sup> Forum was held from the 18<sup>th</sup> until the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August 2011, at the beautiful campus of the Yonsei University, Seoul. The Conference involved over 300 Korean and international participants, who were asked to think about rewriting the next hundred years of Northeast Asian History, while reflecting on the slogan *A Historical Step, A Peaceful Future*. The organizers of the Forum wanted the next hundred years of history to be totally different from the previous hundred, which were characterized by tensions, conflicts and wars.

EUROCLIO was represented during the Forum in Seoul by its Executive Director, **Joke van der Leeuw-Roord**, who co-chaired the meeting and was asked to give her input during the event, which she did on several occasions. The Korean organizers also asked for best practice examples on teaching controversial history in order to find keys to reconciliation from the experiences in the EUROCLIO network. **Slawomir Czerwinski** from Poland was able to convince the audience that practical solutions are at hand. His presentation focused on innovative learning about the suffering of the Poles during the Second World War and the role of Willy Brandt in the process of reconciliation.

This report includes the report of Joke van der Leeuw-Roord's experiences during the Forum. In addition, **Marloes Mulder**, EUROCLIO trainee, will give a short overview of the current state of affairs in history education in Korea and Japan, which will hopefully make it easier to understand the complexity of the matters discussed during the 4th International NGO History Forum.



## History education in Korea and its neighbours

By Marloes Mulder

On April 10<sup>th</sup> of 2011 more than 3000 elementary school students and parents marched in Seoul, South Korea to protest against a new set of history textbooks approved by the Japanese government. The marchers charged that the publications whitewashed Tokyo's



subjugation of Korea and other nations of Asia in the first half of the 20th century by describing it as a crusade for national independence of the affected countries. The governments of China and North-Korea also protested "the attempt to gloss over Tokyo's brutalities", according to the Socialist newsweekly *The Militant*.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the decision of the Japanese Government to approve the middle school textbook *Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho* (New History Textbook), issued by the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, sparked huge controversy, both at home and abroad. As **Takashi Yoshida**, associate professor at the Western Michigan University recalls:

'in publishing the book, the authors issued a challenge to the seven textbooks then approved for use in Japan. The textbook's account of Japan's involvement in the Asia-Pacific War sought to rehabilitate an image of Japan as a righteous and heroic nation and de-emphasized the crimes the Japanese government and military had perpetrated against civilians in other Asian nations with the support of the Japanese people'.<sup>2</sup>

Several Japanese historians and educators as **Tawara Yoshifumi**, **Komori Yōichi** and **Rekishigaku Kenkyūkai** in Japan pointed out the errors and deceptive interpretations in the textbooks. Also, the Chinese and South Korean governments formally protested the Japanese government's approval of the volume.<sup>3</sup> Research has shown that the New History Textbook was used by only 0.039% of junior high schools in Japan as of August 15, 2001. According to the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, in 2004 there were eight private junior high schools, one public school for the disabled in Tokyo, three public junior high schools and four public schools for the disabled in Ehime that used their textbook.<sup>4</sup> In this sensitive issue, the Japanese government tried to defend its decision to approve the

<sup>1</sup> 'Korean students protest Japan's new history textbooks', *The Militant*, vol. 65, no. 18, May 7 2001. See: <http://www.themilitant.com/2001/6518/651861.html>

<sup>2</sup> Takashi Yoshida, 'Advancing or obstruction reconciliation? Changes in history education and disputes over history textbooks in Japan', Elizabeth A. Cole (ed.), *Teaching the Violent Past: History Education and Reconciliation* (Rowman&Littlefield 2007) 51-79, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> Howard French, 'Japan's refusal to revise textbooks angers its neighbors', *New York Times*, July 10 2001, p. A3

<sup>4</sup> Sven Saaler, *Politics, Memory and Public Opinion: The History Textbook Controversy and Japanese Society* (2005). See also, *Mainichi Shimbun*, September 27, 2004.



New History Textbook by claiming that the Society that issued the book, had the right to do so according to the laws on freedom of speech.

The issue about the Japanese New History Textbook shows how sensitive a certain account of history can still be, and that time doesn't always heal the wounds felt by people who lived through these experiences and their descendents. The issue also shows how strongly intertwined history, memory, history education, politics and public opinion can be. Yoshida shows how the newspapers failed to position the dispute in a broader framework:

**Takashi Yoshida:** 'the repeated controversies over history textbooks in the postwar period mirror the evolution of societal views about the impact Japan's war policies had on neighbouring nations'

'The debate over how to teach the history of the Asia-Pacific War has divided Japanese opinion for generations. Indeed, the repeated controversies over history textbooks in the postwar period mirror the evolution of societal views about the impact Japan's war policies had on neighbouring nations'.<sup>5</sup>

However, the question about the representation of Japan's imperial history is not the only affair causing heated debates in the Northeast Asia area. **Ronald Bleiker** and **Hoang Young-Ju** have researched the uses and abuses of Korea's past, and conclude that 'the memory of violence and death continues to dominate politics on the peninsula'.<sup>6</sup> They note that in both Korean states history teaching is part of a larger and highly politicized process of nation building: 'South and North Korea have each promoted a historical awareness that legitimized its own government while demonizing the archrival on the other side of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)'.<sup>7</sup>

One of the ways the governments on both sides of the DMZ try to promote their particular political agendas is through history education. As EUROCLIO has shown in Special Reports on other countries and areas such as Bulgaria and the countries of former Yugoslavia, history education is often used for political purposes, which can be done quite easily by the government because education is mandatory in most societies, and because education is often dominated, or at least regulated, by the state. Using history education as a means to foster a national identity amongst the citizens of a certain state does not necessarily have to be a bad thing, as not all kinds of group identities lead to tension and conflict. History education which creates a group identity might even help the reconciliation process between two groups, as long as it is not a one-sided account of the history discussed.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Takashi Yoshida, 'Advancing or obstruction reconciliation? Changes in history education and disputes over history textbooks in Japan', Elizabeth A. Cole (ed.), *Teaching the Violent Past: History Education and Reconciliation* (Rowman&Littlefield 2007) 51-79, p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Bleiker and Hoang Young-Ju, 'On the use and abuse of Korea's past: an inquiry into history teaching and reconciliation', in: Elizabeth A. Cole (ed.), *Teaching the Violent Past: History Education and Reconciliation* (Rowman&Littlefield 2007) 249-274, p. 249.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth A. Cole, 'Introduction. Reconciliation and history education', Elizabeth A. Cole (ed.), *Teaching the Violent Past: History Education and Reconciliation* (Rowman&Littlefield 2007) p. 1-28.

EUROCLIO had always tried to establish multiperspective and inclusive history education, in which there is room for a national account of events, but also for critical reflection on the role of the own state and fellow citizens of all the countries involved.

Unfortunately, as we have seen above, this is not yet the case in history education in Northeast Asia. In Korea, both governments do not refrain from expressing their goals for history education. **Kim Il Sung** stressed that 'we must intensify the political-ideological education of pupils and thus make all of them workers and revolutionaries who (...) fight vigorously for socialism and communism'.<sup>9</sup> In South Korea anti-communism is also transferred to students through education.

Not only Japan's imperial past and the division between North and South Korea sparks controversy, but also the alleged hierarchy of nations and races in Northeast Asia, which led to a millennium-old China-centered world and internalized imperialism 'to form the diplomatic underpinning of each country'.<sup>10</sup> **Yu Yongtae**, Seoul National University, has written about the historiographical wars of Northeast Asia, which, according to him, 'are rooted in the inter-country relationship prone to clashes'.<sup>11</sup> He suggests the cross usage of history textbooks, to objectify historical understanding.

Teachers and several NGOs have expressed their concerns about the state of history education in Northeast Asia, which resulted in the organization of the International NGOs Conference on History and Peace. The 3<sup>rd</sup> International NGOs Conference in 2009 paid attention to memories of wars and violence and tried to reflect on peaceful solutions for historical conflicts. Subjects discussed included the teaching of the Vietnam War in the U.S., the description of wars in pre-modern times in Korean textbooks and the role of museums. There was also time for reflection on the achievements of Toronto ALPHA, the Association for Learning and Preserving the History of WWII in Asia, experiences of history teachers, outcomes of projects aiming at the exchange of students from China, Korea and Japan and lessons learned from Indonesia. During the Conference, Joke van der Leeuw-Roord was given time to present a lecture in which she stressed the achievements of EUROCLIO in Europe. **Francis Daehoon Lee**, lecturer at the Sung Kong Hoe University, presented a very interesting lecture, in which he asked questions like 'can compassion rewrite histories, to replace nations writing histories?'<sup>12</sup> He expressed the need for re-written history textbooks on history 'to take account of an event from many different accounts from many different people'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Kim Il Sung, 'For the successful introduction of universal compulsory eleven-year education, *Works*, vol. 30, January-December 1975 (1987) p. 207

<sup>10</sup> Yu Yongtae, 'The logic of Historical disputes and their origin in Northeast Asia: Reflection for Communication', *Journal of Northeast Asian History*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2007) 213-239.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Francis Daehoon Lee, 'History education seen from peace education perspective', Lecture at the 3rd International NGOs Conference on History and Peace, August 21, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Despite all these pessimistic images on the current state of affairs, there are some developments which seem to paint a more positive picture for the future on history education in Northeast Asia. As Yoshida explained, in general

‘as many more Japanese begin to explore Japan’s wartime atrocities and colonialism, Japanese history textbooks gradually abandoned a self-centered narrative that emphasized Japan’s own victimhood in favor of an account that includes more discussions of those who suffered under Imperial Japan. In response to this liberalization, apologists for the Japanese war effort intensified their opposition, and their challenges became increasingly persistent and visible. To a certain degree, fierce conservative challenges to the postwar narrative of Imperial Japan are an indication of the increasing tendency among Japanese to accept a critical historical view of their country’.<sup>14</sup>

As Bleiker and Young-Ju argue, ‘investigating how the past is represented and taught is an essential element in understanding the causes of conflict and the conditions for peace’.<sup>15</sup> They also state that ‘a more tolerant and peaceful future can be constructed only once the notion of a single historical narrative gives way to multiple visions of the past and the future’.<sup>16</sup> But Bleiker and Young-Ju show that ‘while such a goal of agreeing to disagree seems modest, the way toward it is littered with seemingly insurmountable obstacles’.<sup>17</sup>

**Ronald Bleiker and Hoang Young-Ju:**

‘Investigation how the past is represented and taught is an essential element in understanding the causes of conflict and the conditions for peace’.

Although true multiperspective and critical history education might be hard to achieve in practice, EUROCLIO feels critical reflection on history education is indispensable when trying to achieve some kind of mutual understanding and fostering of peace in areas where deeply entrenched hostilities play such a dividing role as in Northeast Asia. This was exactly the statement issued by Joke van der Leeuw-Roord, as representative of EUROCLIO, during the 4<sup>th</sup> International NGO History Forum.

<sup>14</sup> Takashi Yoshida, ‘Advancing or obstruction reconciliation? Changes in history education and disputes over history textbooks in Japan’, Elizabeth A. Cole (ed.), *Teaching the Violent Past: History Education and Reconciliation* (Rowman&Littlefield 2007) 51-79, page 72.

<sup>15</sup> Roland Bleiker and Hoang Young-Ju, ‘On the use and abuse of Korea’s past: an inquiry into history teaching and reconciliation’, in: Elizabeth A. Cole (ed.), *Teaching the Violent Past: History Education and Reconciliation* (Rowman&Littlefield 2007) 249-274, page 253.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, page 250.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

## Report of The International NGO History Forum

By Joke van der Leeuw-Roord

China, Korea and Japan share a wide diversity of historical experiences, which until the present day create misunderstanding and even tensions between the three countries. In the Forum it was clear that the mutual relations are certainly hampered by relatively recent historical experiences such as colonization, war and territorial claims. In Korea deep emotions are stirred due to the colonization of the country by Japan in 1905. The colonization is referred to in almost each historical debate and everyday conversation and features on the many information panels related to national heritage throughout Seoul. The Koreans are also dissatisfied with the fact that Japan has not adequately apologized for the occupation of their territory and that facts regarding the colonization period are at least diminished but often omitted in history textbooks in Japan.

The Second World War has left deep scars in Korea as well as in China. Both countries regard that Japan does not enough acknowledges its guilt and responsibility for the suffering it caused during this period. Especially the *forced sexual services* of Korean and Chinese women for the Japanese soldiers, the use of chemical weapons and the cruel behavior of Japanese soldiers are issues which still stir the emotions. And also in this case Japan is accused of not acknowledging these facts in their history textbooks. The numbers of the *Nanking massacres* of 1937 are especially debated between China and Japan. Both sides accuse each other of misusing the events, either for respective over or under estimating the amount of people murdered. The visits to the *Yasukuni Shrine* in Japan, where victims and acknowledged world war criminals both are commemorated, raise deep anger among many in both countries. Both China and Korea are also dissatisfied with the way Japan handled the damage compensation after the war, and point out that Germany on the contrary was forced, and eventually choose, to re-compensate individuals far better than Japan.



In the same area, there are also heated debates regarding territorial claims. A small rocky and inhabited *Dokdo/Takeshima Island*, presently Korean, is claimed by Japan on territorial grounds, whereas Korea considers it theirs due to historical reasons. I asked whether there could ever be a territorial claim that is not based on historical arguments. However, for those participating in the regional discourses there seems to be a clear distinction, which made the debate clear for them but most of the people from abroad were at loss. In a list of contested issues I noticed Korean indignation about Japanese accusations that Korea uses historical issues such as the Island question for political gain. However, also, Dr. Francis Deahoon Lee, Senior Researcher at Bradford University, South Korea thought that this issue is being used to cover other national political issues. He considered it the responsibility of

academics to make governments aware that they are walking a dangerous road. This opinion was also shared by others.

Examples of different geographical names are also leading to tensions. Using the names *Japanese Sea* or *East Sea* is a big issue for Korea. The argument for Korea is that they have been using the name *East Sea* for already 2000 years. Korea demands that this name is internationally recognized as the correct name instead of the name *Japanese Sea*, although that name was accepted in 1929 in an article by the International Hydrographical Organization. The History Foundation has published a beautifully illustrated brochure under the title *The Name EAST SEA Used for Two Millennia* about the Korean argumentations.

The Korean historians are trying to convince their Chinese and Japanese counterparts to accept the *East Asia Concept*, including China, Korea and Japan and excluding other countries in the region, as a leading theoretical concept for their historical research. However neither the Chinese nor the Japanese historians seem to be convinced that this should be the common understanding of such a concept.



The fact that the historians in the three countries still generally adhere to the idea that facts lead to one truth, one correct understanding, one correct historical perspective and one common historical interpretation, complicates the historical dialogues even further. As long as the word in Korean for *different* and *wrong* is the same, it might take time before plural perspectives on the same historical events are an acceptable practice for the regional professional group.

Quite some speakers pointed out that the historical discourses between the three countries started relatively recent, since the ending of the Cold War. The issue North Korea was hardly ever mentioned. While preparing for this conference, I found some references, also about the Chinese attitude towards the Korean minority population in the North East region. However, to my surprise, during the meetings with the historians and history educators this issue, at least via the interpretation, never came up.

## Two Foundations

As the memory and the interpretation of the past regularly surfaces in the present relationship between the three countries, the two foundations, **the International NGO History Forum for Peace in East Asia** and **the Northeast Asian History Foundation**, see it as their task to address the sensitive and controversial history of the region. Their mission statement repeatedly speaks of the necessity of finding the historical truth and correct historical understanding, and using correct names. It promotes the East Asian approach, rather than a national centered approach and stresses the importance of a widened, even



truly global network. The Foundations have an interest in school history, as a subject to promote peace and understanding. The developments in Europe, where Germany has given apologies and where textbook committees between France and Germany and between Germany and Poland have been working together to create new textbooks, are used as examples by these Foundations. In the elaborate Mission paper *A Window to the Future of North East Asia* both organizations consider themselves a remedy for peace in the region.

The efforts of these Korean Foundations to establish peace in the region are impressive. The events they have organized over the last years have brought together hundreds of historians and history education specialists, activists, educators and students, both from Korea and abroad. The Foundations have been very active in promoting a trans-border, instead of a national-centered, approach to history, and they stress the important role of civil society and the responsibility of independent history professionals for the setting of peace and reconciliation.

### Challenges

However, there are certainly challenges to consider. The literature that I have studied before attending the Forum, as well as through the contributions during the conference, made it clear that the controversies are determined by misuse or negation of facts as well as



by problems connected to the perspective or interpretation of the beholder. In order to start real dialogue, it would be helpful if those involved would make a clearer differentiation between these matters. The invariable quest for one historical truth makes it questionable if reconciliation can ever be achieved. Already in my contribution to the Toronto meeting I stressed, that reconciliation also requires *the ability to disagree about interpretations*, although this is still far from being an accepted practice. Instead

of reflecting on the different perspectives, most of the regional historians wish to force one commonly acknowledged and accepted interpretation on all other historians. In the case of the issue of the East Sea, it looked as if the people concerned with this question, were hardly aware of the fact that in Europe very different names are used for the same streets, cities, countries and waters, depending on geographical perspectives, languages or historical developments. Some examples could be Oost/Ost or Baltic Sea, Lemberg, Lvov or Lviv, Hrvatska or Croatia and FYROM or Macedonia. And off course, also in these places some people can get really upset about these names, but there is (fortunately) little movement in Europe to get such issues resolved.

The question of the use of concepts is also more complicated. It certainly depends on the national, regional or even individual perspective, whether wordings are used such as *annexation*, *occupation* or *penetration*. A striking example occurred during the conference, when a Korean participant accused Japan of colonization and occupation, while at the same

time he considered the territorial gains of Korea as friendly penetration. He added that the indigenous population had been so happy about the arrival of the Koreans that they even erected a monument.

One can question why it is important to impose only one name or concept on the others and what actually the purpose of such demands is. Sometimes one might get the impression that burdening next generations with old wounds is more important than working for a peaceful future. The international discourse in history education on relevance and significance has certainly not yet impacted the thinking of the East Asian professionals. The example of the disappointment in 2010 of **Mikang Yang**, as Chairperson of International NGO History Forum for Peace in Korea, that people in North America did not show enough interest in the issues presented in the meeting in Canada, is perhaps enlightening. It could quite well be that in Canada, even for the migrant from Korea, there were more pressing matters than the historical arguments used by their former homeland. And if historical issues do not impact a national history, it is rarely addressed in national history. Native Canadians chose to look at their own controversies.



The developments in Europe and especially the textbook committees between France and Germany and between Germany and Poland were repeatedly mentioned as exemplar developments for the East Asian region. However there was little questioning about the real impact of these committees on the practice of national textbook writing and school history. The positive political process in Germany towards reconciliation is highly appreciated in the region, but in this case too there seems to be little awareness about the difficult political process behind the apologies and compensations at the time they were offered. There was sometimes little differentiation, both in the papers of previous forums as well as in this event, between the attitudes and policies of official national governments and the opinions of individuals and certain groups, as for example the Japanese military establishment. Overall, it felt as if the complexity of the matters at stake were sometimes simplified.

And last, but not least, in the work of the Foundations and the related history professionals, the distinction between the purpose of historical studies and history education is rather vague, which shows in all publications and debates. But although they are inseparable, they have different goals. However, in the approach we saw in Korea, there is a somewhat blurred mixture of their roles and aims. As a result the academics historians cover both fields. The present Chinese, Japanese and Korean school history textbooks reflect therefore the national historical perspectives, but pay hardly any attention to learning through methodology and pedagogy.

### School History Education

All three countries have a strong national focus in their history education, and they make a clear division between courses on National and World history. Only in Shanghai historians



have developed an integrated approach, which is used only to a limited extent in Chinese schools. In Korea a similar attempt was made to offer an integrated course, with 60% Korean and 40 % World history. Unfortunately this approach was blocked by the government. Consequently, the national histories are not placed in a wider framework such as imperialism, nationalism and the creation of empires. World history seems to play only a minor role. From the literature, as well as from several speakers

in the conference, one gets the impression that some reforms are taking place, however the color of the political leadership still directly influences the content of the history textbooks.

In general there is little reflection on the history of the native country. During a visit to the beautiful and overwhelmingly rich National History Museum of Korea, I realized how the narrative of the past in Korea was orchestrated. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Korea became more and more influenced by Western/ American and Japanese practices, the history of the country suddenly ended. From then on, the history and culture of the country are absent. And also in the textbooks a critical assessment of the recent history is forbidden by the government. South Korea considers itself still a country at war, and therefore criticizing the past is considered a crime. People can actually be summoned to court when they violate this rule. The result is that opinions are restraint, in writing as well as well as during conversation. It was obvious that such an attitude, which more or less exists in all three countries, does not foster real open discourse. It was puzzling to detect the hidden agendas of several of the contributors during the Forum, as it was very difficult for me to discern what backgrounds they represented.

In all three countries the approach to learning history is still very traditional. While the textbooks focus on politics, war and diplomacy, gender approaches are absent, except for the mentioning of a few female heroines. Students are supposed only to memorize. One of the Japanese delegates mentioned that some textbooks in Japan have already been on the market for 50 years, and that their content has changed little over time. Some of the school- and university students complained about the national bias and the lack of innovation and multiperspectivity in the textbooks. History is not a very popular course in Korea as the demands for the exams are high, and it is hard to obtain good marks for the knowledge-based multiple choice examinations. History is also considered not useful for the future, in the sense that historical knowledge is not considered useful in trying to obtain well paid jobs, and many parents do not encourage their children to opt for history in upper secondary education.

### Common Work on History Education

Since the early 2000's the examples of the official academic and textbook committees have been followed in the region. The Koreans have taken the initiatives, however the response from Japan has not been very positive. However groups of historians and history educators have been working on common textbooks: one was produced in 2005, including Chinese, Japanese and Korean history, using the (by Korean Professor **Juback Shin** favored) East Asia concept. The project was a common effort between Japan and Korea. The last one is not published, due to a manifold of controversies, despite the more than 60 national and bi-lateral meetings. The 2005 common textbook is sold to the public and teachers, however the authors complained that it was hardly used. The reasons they gave were that the books were not approved by the Chinese, Japanese and Korean governments and that the book addresses issues not required for the national University entry exams. Therefore it did not support students in preparing for such examinations.



During the conference one of the Japanese teachers, **Masamichi Kikuyama**, stated that the common textbook is also too difficult for high school students, as it was written only by scholars. He stressed the importance of participation of teachers and students in future common textbook procedures. The same speaker also stressed the importance of using historical sources in such books, and the need to develop empathic skills among the students.

### Earlier Forums and Preparatory Meeting in Toronto

In the period 2007-2009 three earlier forums were held. In October 2010 a Coordinating Committee Meeting in was held Toronto, Canada. The Coordinating Committee wanted to assess the previous results first, before organizing the next forum, aiming at enhancing the impact of the forum of 2011. The event took place in cooperation with Toronto ALPHA, the Association for Learning & Preserving the History of WWII in Asia. During this event it became clear that both youth and teacher exchanges and constructing a furthered global network were key elements for organizing the next event. However, also the quality of publications that would grow out of the 4<sup>th</sup> forum, and the widening of the comparative perspectives were mentioned as special point of attention. During this meeting it was also evident that, apart from specialist discussions, personal testimonies of people affected by war and disturbances were needed in order to make a future Forum successful.

### 4<sup>th</sup> Forum: Rewriting the Next Hundred Years of East Asian History

The Forum, which took place on the 18<sup>th</sup> until the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August 2011, involved more than 300 Korean and international participants and was held at the beautiful campus of the Yonsei University, Seoul. The delegates were asked to reflect on the slogan *A Historical Step, A Peaceful Future* and to think about rewriting the next hundred years of East Asian history,



as an answer to the past hundred years, which were characterized by tensions and wars. The International NGO History Forum for Peace in East Asia, the Northeast Asian History Foundation and the Yonsei University Institute for Korean Studies as conference organizers aimed at promoting the role of civic society in the process of peace building in East Asia, to enhance solidarity and networking among NGOs working in various related fields, to develop global youth leadership through peace education and build peaceful societies based on common historical understanding of mutual prosperity.

A wide variety of activities were organized, from NGO and youth forums to discussions about different case studies on reconciliation, model lessons for students and workshops for educators. It became clear that many professionals, civil society organizations as well as individuals in China, Japan and Korea, but also in the rest of the world, are aware of their role and responsibilities, and try to contribute (with passion and creativity) to the good causes of peace, mutual understanding and reconciliation. Somewhat unfortunate about the Forum was that there were so many options, so many interesting lectures, discussions and



case studies to choose from, that it was hard to decide where to participate. Consequently some very interesting and exciting contributions suffered by a reduced participating audience. They would have been entitled to have been presented to a bigger community of listeners.

During the Forum, I concentrated on lectures, panels, round tables and workshops related to history and history education. The contributions of the, predominantly male, speakers and delegates demonstrated that the past is still far from being history in the region, and that the governments in all three states still have a big influence on the national school narrative, curriculum and on the publication of textbooks. In all three states, textbooks have to be submitted for official approval before being published and used. In the case of the new, ultra conservative Japanese textbook, such a procedure makes the state responsible for the dissemination of a certain textbook, which provides ground for the Korean and Chinese accusations that the textbooks represents the opinion of the government.

What struck me in these meetings was the rather repetitive information and argumentation of some of the speakers and the lack of sense of direction of the local historians. Their programme did often not exceed pushing for using the *East Asia Concept* by Korean representatives and the desire, stated by representatives of all three countries, for a better development and implementation of common textbooks. However, the representatives from China, Japan as well as Korea stated that the opportunity that a common textbook was used, was very small, as the whole school system in all three countries is based on preparing the students for the University entrance examinations. The teachers refused the common books as they address topics which do not feature in the examination programme. Several

experts from abroad suggested that it might be time to take a closer look at this ridged examination system, but the local historians and history educators did not react and kept silent.

As the emphasis on the importance of the *East Asia Concept* was not really shared by most historians, and all continued to hammer on constructing one historical truth and the rectification of incorrect interpretations that still prevailed, a further in-depth exchange of point of views was missing. The rather traditional format of the plenary presentations - and the numerous eager speakers - might also have hampered the dialogue, since often very little time was left for questions and remarks. The case studies sessions were much better



examples of interactive dialogue and interactive discourse. In 2010, during the meeting in Toronto, this point also came up, and I believe forums that might be held in the future, would really benefit from using this approach.

The Toronto event had also stressed the need for young people from the three countries to learn about national and international experiences of reconciliation through history and other forms of peace education. The first morning of the event was fully dedicated to a series of model lessons, about a variety of topics such as using sources on World War II by the Canadian history educators **Katy Whitfield** and **Margaret Wells**, or looking at conflict resolution between Germany and Poland by **Slawomir Czerwinski**, Member of the EUROCLIO network in Poland. This element in the forum was highly appreciated.

The suggestion in Toronto to include more teachers in future forums was also followed. The programme offered two evening classes by the Canadian history educators **Katy Whitfield** and **Margaret Wells**, and by me. It had not been easy for the organizers to bring the audience for these classes together, but as workshop leaders we were very happy to have been able to reach out to some real teachers and university students (mostly young and female) in an interactive format. I hope that this programme element can be strengthened in the coming activities of both Foundations.

One of the big challenges for genuine cross-border communication is a lack of a common language for communication. Most representatives from China, Japan and Korea spoke their own languages, and (almost) all people from abroad used English, although **Igor Churbanov** from Uzbekistan made a deep impression with his fluent Korean language skills. This lack of a common language to communicate made all the participants depend on their own interpretation. Although the translations were probably of a very good quality, the complex and not all publicly known matters, certainly sometimes mystified the participants understanding of the papers and contributions. Unfortunately, the lack of innovative presentation modes made it even more complicated to comprehend the exact line of reasoning about the issues at stake.

### Positive developments

It was good to notice that, despite the many sensitivities and controversies, there were clearly positive developments. In China, especially in Shanghai, there was real movement towards change. Professor **Biao Yang**, Department of History, East China Normal University, Shanghai, informed the audience that the concept of an integrated national and world history course in education was developed in Shanghai since the early 1990s, and that this idea had started to change the perception on history in the country. At the moment one, officially approved, textbook offers this approach. It is still limited used, but nevertheless, it is used. The method also introduced some new themes. The speaker noticed, despite the still ideological approach of the government, that there is some freedom for the publisher of this method. The Chinese history teacher **Shengxiang Xiang** too, gave some clear examples how the highly ideological phrasing, such as “*US Imperialists*”, in the textbooks slowly developed towards a more impartial type of language as the “*US government*”. Also the narratives related to the Chinese revolution were revised. His final reflection that discussing these changes in the Chinese school history narrative could be part of his lessons, showed his awareness of the issues people in the region had to deal with. A small Chinese experiment with students from the 3 countries to discuss sensitive history related to WWII also showed that cross-border working with young people from the region is supporting the development of mutual understanding.



In Korea, textbook authors have also promoted to discontinue the differentiation between the courses for world and national history. They proposed an integrated course, with 60% Korean history, but the government unfortunately prevented the implementation. Since 2007 Korea has new guidelines for the revision of the curriculum and textbooks. The emphasis was always on wars and the many confrontations with outside forces. In the new curriculum this emphasis is decreasing, but is still substantial. There is however more space reserved for culture. The curriculum is perceived as slightly less descriptive too. Some authors said that there is also an interest among them to address topics which are currently not taught in schools, such as the lack of democracy in Korea in the period after the *Korean War*. But up till this day, such topics are not allowed by the government. There was talk that the *East Asia Concept* might become the leading concept for school history, which could be an interesting cross-border approach, but it seems difficult to combine this with the content of the present examinations to enter university. **Haengman Lim**, a Korean high school teacher, shared some results of a survey among Korean school history students, which revealed that young people in Korea, both girls and boys, still most appreciate the history of wars, but that they also want to know more about East Asia.

The developments in Japan are not very promising according to **Kazuharu Saito**, a Japanese teacher, representing the Japanese Society of Textbook Reform. The Yokohama Educational Board accepted the new conservative textbook in 2011, which would be used in public junior high schools in Yokohama. Another conservative textbook is under development.



Such books lack content about East Asia, especially regarding World War II. The speaker saw a general tendency to make the textbooks in Japan more conservative. But there were also some positive movements, as many students have protested against the use of the book in Yokohama, and many people have signed a petition against it. Their efforts were, unfortunately, unsuccessful. It is important to realize that these *New History Textbooks* are officially approved by the government, but are not imposed on all schools. Perhaps one percent of all students use currently the problematic textbook, which might be a sign that indicates that also in Japan, many people oppose using the book. The Koreans I have spoken with believed their protests were the cause for the low percentage of schools that actually use the book. The position of the Japanese delegates in the conferences was far from easy. However, even some of the Korean speakers concluded that it was a bit unfair that the Korean experts attacked the Japanese colleagues, despite the fact that they were representing alternative positions and work on history. And such a conclusion was a positive sign in itself.

### The role of EUROCLIO

I had received the honorable request, as EUROCLIO's Executive Director, to co-chair the meeting and to give several inputs to the event, sharing several experiences, how the EUROCLIO community tries to address innovative and responsible history education in Europe. In the teacher training programme I chose to raise more awareness for the *European Reference Framework* and the role of innovative methodology. A workshop *Do*



*Facts Lead to the Truth? Competencies based Learning in History Class* looked at the key concept of interpretation. Teachers and students participated actively. As case study I presented the new EUROCLIO project *History that Connects*, under the title *Volunteer History Professionals Try to Make a Difference. Daring to Address Historical Controversies in Former Yugoslavia. A case study*. I explained to the audience, using the work in this region of Europe, how important it is to build trust among participants before starting working with sensitive and controversial issues. I also emphasized that using the new historical paradigm and innovative pedagogy are essential for a history supporting cross border understanding. In the plenary session *Research and History Education for Regional History: Europe and East Asia in Comparison* on the last day of the conference, I

introduced the EUROCLIO *Historiana* Programme to the audience, which is an on-line educational tool under development. *Historiana* could serve as a possible alternative for the East Asian demand for common textbooks. In my talk I demonstrated the present state of the art of the project, but did not hide the many challenges EUROCLIO is still facing. The audience was very interested in the project, but when I asked my panelists whether or not the *Historiana* model could serve as a model for East Asia, they were complete silent. Even after I rephrased the question, on request of the moderator, they did not answer. Finally the



Chinese teacher took the floor. He argued that each culture had its values, and that the Chinese culture would not allow such open approach to school history. He also stressed that the examination requirements would possibly prevent the use of the materials. I hope that the organizing Foundations could consider a pilot project, since the region offers so many appropriate topics such as the role of Confucianism, the modernization and World War II, for such an approach.

The Korean organizers also asked for best practice on teaching controversies and finding keys to reconciliation from the EUROCLIO network. **Slawomir Czerwinski** from Poland was able to convince his audience that practical solutions are at hand. His presentation focused on innovative learning about *the Suffering of the Poles during World War II and the Role of Chancellor Willy Brandt in the Process of Reconciliation*. In his speech during the closing session of the conference he stressed the personal responsibility of the individual to create a better future.



In my final concluding remarks I suggested a structured cross border Life Long Learning Programme for history educators in the region. Such capacity building should not only concentrate on teaching history from a wider, cross border (possibly East Asian) perspective but also present a modern history learning based on the new paradigm, innovative methodology and creative pedagogy. The newly build capacities would allow the history and history education to engage in collaborative work with their colleagues in neighbouring countries. Such work would not necessarily focus on writing common textbooks but would give their colleagues and students access to a transborder approach in their history lessons.

## Conclusion

By Joke van der Leeuw-Roord

While preparing for the conference and listening to the manifold of contributions I became again aware how important international encounters are for historians and history educators, as many historical trends are not totally recognized as long as we operate within the national borders. The introduction of history courses in Japanese schools in 1872 as a basis of the national project is often presented as a special event in Korea, even though it was a common step to taken by governments during this epoch, used as a tool for the creation of a common national identity. Acknowledging such a fact, does not diminish any impact of such steps taken by a certain government, but makes this step not abnormal, and therefore Japan not necessarily more abnormal and more aggressive than other countries.

In the Toronto meeting of 2010, there was reflection about which target groups should be addressed. In the 2011 a wealth of people participated in the event, which made it very enriching. However it seems that for history and history education further task setting and specification of the audiences could make the symposium and workshops even more effective and productive. The lecture of Professor **Ulrike Hirschhausen**, about new trends in historiography could have been more embedded in this particular aspect of the subject, which could have lead to a true interaction with the audience about the challenges of writing history.



The goal to exchange experience with people from abroad lead to presentations with very inspiring examples from countries such as Austria, Cambodia, Canada, former East and West Germany, Kosovo, Poland, the UK, the USA, Uzbekistan, and of course the two common textbooks from the region. However in general I would say that there was too much time for general talks and too little for reflection and in depth thinking. The question what we would like to achieve with our work, could be considered even more thoroughly. Unfortunately, possible concrete future projects were not considered.

A clear obstacle in the Conference was the lack of a common language between the historians in the region and between them and the wider global audience. Coming from a small language country, I know that it does not always makes you happy to be forced to speak in another language. However from my almost twenty years experience in cross-border discussions on history education in Europe, it has become clear that using the same language and using the same concepts is vital for a true understanding of the issues at stake.



The forum showed how impressive the efforts of the NGO's in the region were in their search for peace and reconciliation in the region. I did wonder about the political commitment, which in the end is necessary to mainstream the results. Some of the Korean representatives stressed that their government is (financially) involved and tries to support the dialogue, but at the same time they pointed out that the Korean government should not intervene in the process. I am not entirely

sure whether or not such an attitude is helpful, but it was clear that the Korean government cared more about history education than the governments or even charities from China and Japan. The representatives from those two countries considered it impossible that one of their countries would organize the next Conference on Peace in history.

The Conference was a wonderful learning opportunity for all of the attendants. Many of the difficult issues came on the table without using angry language or violent tones. The European delegates demonstrated in their contributions, that their common work under auspice of, amongst others, the **Council of Europe**, the **Georg Eckert Institute** and **EUROCLIO**, has really led the way to a better relationship and an almost common understanding how historical challenges of sensitivity and controversy might be addressed and overcome.

The efforts of both the **NGO History Forum for Peace in East Asia** and the **Northeast Asian History Foundation** to bring together youth, teachers, academic historians and many others working in the field of peace building, both in Asia and beyond, were impressive. The input of volunteers, young and old, demonstrated the invaluable contribution of civil society. I would like to thank all involved, for the invitation to come to Seoul and the trust they put into the value of my contributions. I am especially indebted to **Jay Kwan**, who was my personal assistant through the days, and who gave me so much information and offered such an excellent sounding board for my thoughts and observations during the days.

## Websites and Suggestions for Further Reading

The History and Peace Forum [http://www.historyngo.org/index\\_e.php](http://www.historyngo.org/index_e.php)

The Northeast Asian History Foundation and the NGO History Forum for Peace in East Asia  
<http://www.historyfoundation.or.kr/eng/>

The Toronto ALPHA , the Association for Learning and Preserving the History of World War II in Asia <http://www.torontoalpha.org/>

The Georg Eckert Institute <http://www.gei.de/nc/en/georg-eckert-institute-for-international-textbook-research.html>

Gut Gödelitz , Ost/West Forum <http://www.ost-west-forum.de/>

*A Window to the Future of North East Asia*, North East Asian History Foundation (undated, around 2006)

*East Sea, The Name EAST SEA Used for Two Millennia*, published by the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the North East Asian History Foundation. (Undated, around 2008)

Gotelind Muller (ed) *Designing History in East Asian Textbooks. Identity politics and transnational aspirations*. (2011)

*Report 2010* Coordinating Committee Meeting for the International NGOs Conference on History and Peace (2011)

*Sino-Japanese Relationship and the Problem of History Textbook*, China Federation of demanding Compensation from Japan (2009)

Yu Yongtae, 'The logic of Historical disputes and their origin in Northeast Asia: Reflection for Communication', *Journal of Northeast Asian History*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2007) 213-239.

Takashi Yoshida, 'Advancing or obstruction reconciliation? Changes in history education and disputes over history textbooks in Japan', Elizabeth A. Cole (ed.), *Teaching the Violent Past: History Education and Reconciliation* (Rowman&Littlefield 2007) 51-79.

Roland Bleiker and Hoang Young-Ju, 'On the use and abuse of Korea's past: an inquiry into history teaching and reconciliation', in: Elizabeth A. Cole (ed.), *Teaching the Violent Past: History Education and Reconciliation* (Rowman&Littlefield 2007) 249-274.