

Back to History in East Asia?

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*N.B. Characters in red are read out as written in the forum

I have three points to make:

First: Yes, History is back particularly in the 3 North East Asian countries: Japan, Korea and China. So how it came back has to be explained.

Second, the world with renewed history does not seem to be a comfortable world. But understanding the nature of this world in my view gives hope that the three countries all have completely different possibilities in the future of history.

Third, what I say here may sound overly optimistic, but I want to refer to one person who possibly could have shared my view in the past, that is An Chung Gun.

So very quickly “back to history” in Japan. Abe is now elected as Prime Minister likely to serve for three years, getting away from the impasse of revolving PMs which continued for six years.

He first seemed to have succeeded well with his “Abenomics” and then won the two elections and now began his long waited political agenda of “Getting out from post-war regime”.

What does it mean? Abe is stating that during the seven years of occupation from 1945 till 1952, there was something important that Japan has lost and now he wants it to recuperate. He wrote his basic thinking in his book “Toward a new country” but it’s not easy to grasp its essence. I interpret that there are three factors:

- (1) From irresponsible and selfish pacifism
- (2) From unworthy and undue humiliation
- (3) From egocentric society, lacking respect for real public values, and where “profit and loss” only play decisive role.

My understanding in fall last year after house of counselor’s’ election was that Abe is going to tackle the agenda (1) of getting out from irresponsible pacifism, (it should have been done 20 years ago, in my view), freeze (2) of “unworthy humiliation” (political turmoil in April-May last year has shown that the issue is too controversial to tackle

straightforwardly not only in relation to China and Korea but also to the US), (3) and the most important aspect would become how he should treat the agenda of regaining truly meaningful “public values”.

As expected, Abe opened a new course to change the interpretation of Article 9, but my expectation to freeze the humiliation agenda completely proved to be wrong. Abe visited Yasukuni on 26 December after careful deliberation. As expected that was a diplomatic disaster only to have exalted the Chinese hardliners, distanced the Koreans, and anguished the Americans.

History came back in a most unfortunate manner.

As for Korea, Korea is an amazing example of success in post-war history. It succeeded in developing its economy from one of the poorest to one of the richest in Asia, it succeeded in creating a democratic society from militarist regimes by their own hands,

and recently fascinated the world with its Korean cultural waves. In the way human minds work, success creates confidence and confidence creates ability to accept others.

But in case of Korea–Japan relations, the last few years showed that the situation was exactly the opposite, and Korea-Japan political relations are in no time lower. Five issues are just creating vicious cycle to pull the relationship to bad to worse: mistrust between the two leaders, comfort women, Takeshima/Dokto issue, Korean Supreme Court decision on enforced labor and Yasukuni visit.

In Japan, even for whom there are many things which the Japanese side is expected to do in each of the five issue, some began to feel that deeply grounded indignation by Koreans from the colonial ruling combined with Korean sense of superiority over Japan which may possibly be the vestige of the 19th century Sino-centric world order may be coming back.

For China, we have seen in the last four decades an amazing phenomenon of China rise. Starting from Deng Xiaoping’s Reform and Opening, China’s rise started from economic development, turning into political, military and cultural development.

But the physical power which it began to display on territorial issues both in East China

Sea and South China Sea are, seen from surrounding countries, an exertion of hegemonism as if to go back to the history of 19th century imperialism.

What to do? It is not difficult to suggest that each side should implement a little of restraint:

Abe, in relation to Korea, began introducing some restraint as was expressed on comfort women, obviously under strong pressure from the US. He may be able to expand its policy toward China, for example by not visiting Yasukuni any time soon.

Korea could come forward in discussing comfort women issue with the Japanese side to seek for a mutually acceptable solution and also try to take some initiative on possibly other issues, such as the issue of enforced labor.

China could become more serious in resolving the territorial disputes only through dialogue and not through “proving their claim by physical evidence”.

But my own recipe goes to the nature of the emerging back to history phenomenon and turns this aspect around and seeks for future hope of history from there. The biggest factor of all is the issue of rise of China, **seeking to establish a new world order, going beyond the established Eurocentric world order based on Greek Philosophy, Christianity, industrial revolution and Euro-American values of democracy and law.**

If that is the case, why does not China seek to establish a new world order with all its civilizational values, but encompassing some of the best of Western values of democracy and rule of law?

Why cannot Korea, in this rising age of new Sino-centrism, act as a bridge between China and Japan, not from the position of superiority over Japan but from the position of truly equitable partner among the three?

Why cannot Japan reorient itself with a new civilizational vision of its own, just like it did for 260 years in the Edo period, but now under an entirely different openness in the age of globalization?

Are these questions unfounded dream of over-optimist? No, at least there is one person in history who has shown to the world, through his act, given his life, trying to leave a message to the world that this is not a dream, that is An Chung Gun.

An Chung Gun

Right from the time of his assassination of Ito Hirobumi in 1909 till his execution half year later, there were Japanese Meiji intellectuals who saw in An a patriot, highly educated, worthy of respect. His calligraphy was already valued by many in Japan.

The amazing story of respect by An's prison guard Chiba Jyushichi, and the friendship that emerged between the two, and the last calligraphy An left for Chiba in the morning of his execution "To devote to the country is true mission of a soldier" is a story where many came to tears in Japan.

Most amazingly Okazaki Hisahiko, known to be Abe's mentor on foreign policy, 30 years ago, serving as a young diplomat in Seoul wrote in the book which he published then his discovery of An as a patriot, and how his homage of An moved many Japanese and American visitors.

Finally one of An's last will was his dream for a creation of East Asian Community consisting of Korea, China and Japan, with common banks, common police, and shared cultural values.

In that context, the latest construction of An's Memorial Museum in Harbin is deeply disappointing.

Did President Xi Jingpin know when he reportedly proposed to build the joint museum, An's future vision of East Asia?

Did President Park know when she agreed to this proposal, the longtime legacy and respect given by many Japanese to An?

Is there any realization in China and Korea that, by way of utilizing An as a symbol of anti-Japanese coalition in going back to history, something extremely important for the future creation of history, is just evaporating?

As An's admirer, this breaks my heart. Certainly it must be An himself who would have lamented most about this forgotten past history for the creation of future of history. Thank you very much.