Korea–China–Japan Joint History Committee. *Mirae-rŭl yŏnŭn yŏksa* [History Opening the Future]. Seoul: Hankyoreh Publishing, 2005. 252 pages. ISBN: 9788984311541.

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Shared Historical Memory of Korea, China, and Japan: Rethinking "August 15"

East Asia's Shared History of "August 15"

> On August 15, 1945, each East Asian country experienced different versions of this day. In Japan, the announcement of defeat came through Emperor Hirohito's radio broadcast. While it marked the "day of defeat"—the day Japan lost the war—it is also referred to as the "end of the war," symbolizing the cessation of hostilities. However, on the same day, the experience was completely different for other Asian countries. In Korea, the streets were filled with people shouting, "Long live Korean independence!" celebrating liberation from Japanese colonial rule. Koreans call this day *kwangbok* ("liberation"), which literally means "restoration of light" after 35 years of Japanese rule from 1910 to 1945. In China, which had fought Japan for 15 years since 1931, August 15 marked the victory in the anti-Japanese war. While China officially commemorates September 3 as "Victory of War of Resistance against Japan Day" (also known as Victory over Japan Day or V-J Day), the significance of August 15 remains profound (pp. 196–197).

So, what does "August 15" mean to us Koreans? Of course, we understand the historical significance of the date and the meanings it carries. However, when we reduce August 15 to a single historical event, we risk oversimplifying its meaning and causing misunderstandings. A key issue we face when reflecting on August 15 is its significance in the context of "East Asia." As noted in the quotation above, the meaning of this day differed across the three East Asian nations. Ultimately, August 15 is not a single event confined to the Korean peninsula, but rather a key historical moment shaped by the collective historical processes of East Asia, with lasting effects

that continue to influence "us, here, now."

When we examine East Asia more closely—particularly the region surrounding the Korean peninsula—we are inevitably confronted with the intertwined themes of "colonialism and war." East Asia, a vast region, is home to both the perpetrators and victims of colonialism and war. In the late 19th century, the region experienced a shared encounter with Western "modernity" following the intrusion of Western powers. This sudden incursion deeply affected Korea, China, and Japan, prompting each to pursue its own path to modernization. However, this engagement with Western modernity occurred alongside imperialist expansion, compelling each country to respond in its own way.

As a result, various ideas emerged to navigate the tension between Western influence and native traditions—such as Korea's "Eastern Way, Western Instruments" (*tongdo sŏgi* 東道西器), Japan's "Japanese Spirit, Western Learning" (*wakon yōsai* 和魂洋才), and China's "Chinese Leaning as Substance, Western Learning for Application" (*zhongti xiyong* 中體西用). Yet the outcomes were starkly divergent: Japan rose as an empire, China was reduced to a semicolonial state, and Korea was fully colonized.

Furthermore, the Cold War in East Asia during the mid-20th century was deeply entangled with these prior colonial experiences. The U.S.–Soviet Cold War order in the region, reinforced by Japan's alliance with the United States, echoed the earlier structure established under Japanese imperial rule. The lasting tensions of the Cold War in East Asia cannot be separated from the shared legacies of colonialism and war. Disputes over colonial rule, reparations, and historical responsibility—particularly between Korea, China, and Japan—attest to the profound interconnectedness of the region's past. With this historical framework, August 15, 1945, takes on particular significance. It marks not only the end of World War II, a war shaped by imperialism and colonialism, but also the beginning of the Cold War, driven by the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. This is the historical weight of August 15.

Naturally, the historical consciousness of Korea, China, and Japan diverges in many respects, but the issue is not

just about acknowledging these differences in historical perspectives. These three countries, having experienced multiple wars stemming from imperialist colonialism, internalized different experiences of invasion and resistance, domination and subjugation. These divergent histories continue to fuel contemporary conflicts and tensions between the three nations. Emotions of exclusion and animosity, such as "Korea-phobia," "anti-Japan sentiment," and "anti-China sentiment," are deeply entrenched in all three countries. These are not merely bilateral issues between Korea and Japan or Japan and China, but shared problems that affect the entire East Asian region. Therefore, historical consciousness for peace and the future of East Asia is a critical and urgent task, but this task remains difficult and complex. For example, in 2001, Japan's Fusōsha published *Atarashī rekishi kyōkasho* [New history textbook], which was criticized for distorting history by denying Japan's wartime aggression and claiming Dokdo as Japan's "inherent territory." This textbook sparked strong backlash from both China and Korea, as well as within Japan itself. While the book did not gain widespread popularity in Japan due to voices of self-reflection, attempts to publish such revisionist history textbooks continue to this day.

On the other hand, efforts to create joint history materials for East Asian reconciliation and peace have also been made. In the early 2000s, East Asian historical issues gained increased attention, and the need for a shared historical memory of the region became more urgent. One such initiative is *History Opening the Future* created collaboratively by the Korea–China–Japan Joint History Committee in 2005. This book was especially significant because it was created in direct response to the historical distortions in Fusōsha's *New History Textbook*, offering a counter-narrative and providing potential pathways for resolving historical conflicts within East Asia. While European countries have long developed joint history textbooks with state support, the production of such a collaborative work in East Asia is meaningful in its own right. It represents a foundational step toward genuine peace and solidarity in the region.

History Opening the Future came to life after eleven meetings across the three countries, following an agreement

to produce joint history materials at the first Forum on Historical Understanding and Peace in East Asia held in Nanjing, China, in March 2002. The book's primary goal was to encourage middle and high schools in the three countries to use it as a supplementary resource, fostering mutual understanding of East Asia's shared history. Rather than focusing on each nation's individual past, it encouraged a broader view of modern and contemporary East Asian history, grounded in universal values such as peace and human rights. The book was published under the title *Mirae-rŭl yŏnŭn yŏksa* [History opening the future] in Korea; *Mirai wo hiraku rekishi: higashi ajia san koku no kingendaishi* [A history to open the future: modern history of the three countries of East Asia] in Japan; and *Dongya sanguo de jinxiandaishi* [Modern history of the three countries of East Asia] in China. The contributors included 23 Koreans, 17 Chinese, and 14 Japanese—among them not only university researchers but also secondary school teachers, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives.

The true value of this book lies in its role as a joint history project aimed at fostering peace, anti-war consciousness, and reconciliation in East Asia. It also sought to promote solidarity among East Asian citizens by highlighting the perspectives of ordinary people that had been overlooked in previous history textbooks. As its introduction states, "Peace, human rights, and democracy are essential values for the desirable future of East Asia and the world," this book emphasizes that a shared historical awareness grounded in these values is vital for the region's future. It is clear that East Asia's modern history cannot be fully understood without confronting the legacy of Japanese imperial rule and the suffering it inflicted. The trauma of Japan's colonial rule in Korea and its invasions of China form central chapters in this history. What temporarily brought an end to this suffering was August 15, 1945. Thus, "August 15" has become a cornerstone of East Asia's collective historical memory.

Positioning "August 15" within the East Asian Context: The Structure of *History Opening the Future*

> *History Opening the Future* is a collaborative history book focused on modern and contemporary East Asia, centering on Korea, China, and Japan. During the 19th and 20th centuries, East Asian history has been stained with indelible wounds from invasions, wars, and human rights oppression. However, East Asia's past was not entirely bleak. East Asia also holds a long-standing tradition of cultural exchange and cooperation, with many individuals working across national boundaries toward a shared vision of a bright future. It is only by embracing the positive legacies of the past while seriously reflecting on historical wrongs that we can pave the way for a more peaceful and bright future on this beautiful planet. What lessons can we learn from history to build a future East Asia grounded in peace, democracy, and human rights? This is the central question the book encourages readers to contemplate (pp. 10–11).

The structure of *History Opening the Future* is dual in nature. It represents the histories of Korea, China, and Japan in parallel chronological narratives, allowing readers to understand both the individual historical developments of each nation and their interconnections within a broader East Asian context. This structure aims to move beyond the binary framework of "perpetrator and victim"—a narrative often shaped by the region's shared experiences of colonialism and war—and instead seeks to foster a historical consciousness that can envision a peaceful and cooperative future for East Asia through objective and reflective engagement with difficult issues. The book's preface clearly articulates this purpose, highlighting peace, democracy, and human rights as core values for reconciliation and coexistence in the region. However, the book does not portray these ideals as easily attainable. Rather, it emphasizes the need for mutual understanding of each nation's historical experiences—as reflected in the above quotation.

August 15 carries profound historical significance for Korea, China, and Japan. For Korea, it marks liberation; for China, victory; and for Japan, defeat. At the same time, it represents the starting point of the East Asian Cold War and forms part of the foundation for the "new Cold War" sweeping across the region today. Yet, the book does not directly foreground August 15. Instead, it focuses on the divergent historical trajectories of the three countries following this date. This should not be interpreted as downplaying its regional significance. From the perspective of other countries, emphasizing August 15 might center a Korean perspective. In fact, the true significance of August 15 emerges only when it is understood within the broader East Asian context, as previously outlined. The structure of *History Opening the Future* reflects this intention.

This book is composed of three main sections. The "Introduction" offers a brief overview of the histories of the three countries prior to the opening of their ports. The "main text," comprising Chapters 1 through 4, spans the period from the opening of ports through the post-World War II era. The Conclusion addresses unresolved historical issues that must be tackled in order to realize a peaceful future for East Asia. Organized this way, the book presents modern and contemporary East Asian history organized in the following chronological sequence: the internal dynamics of the three countries before opening their ports; the opening of ports and the onset of Western-style modernization; Japanese imperialist expansion and regional resistance; and the aftermath of World War II and East Asia's future. In short, the shared historical experience of opening ports and modernization led to "imperialist expansion and resistance," which in turn shaped the postwar histories of each country. Within this framework, August 15 emerges as a critical turning point—marking both the peak of imperialist expansion and resistance, and serving as a reference point for understanding the divergent paths the three countries took after the war. It also stands as a vital historical moment for reimagining a future East Asia grounded in peace, human rights, and democracy. Let us now examine the contents of each chapter in more detail.

The Introduction, titled "The Three Countries before Opening Ports," emphasizes the exchange and cooperation that existed among Korea, China, and Japan. It notes, "Before the modern era, official diplomatic ties and active civil-level exchanges were developing among the three countries." It also highlights a people-centered historical perspective, discussing internal social divisions in each country: samurai versus commoners in Japan, *yangban* (aristocrats) versus commoners in Korea, and local gentry versus commoners in China. The book's aim is clear: to present the organic, interrelated relationships among the three countries, rather than division, and to lay the groundwork for theorizing peaceful solidarity in East Asia through the lens of each country's people.

Chapter 1, titled "Opening Ports and Modernization," explores how the opening of ports marked the point at which the historical paths of the three countries began to diverge significantly. It discusses each country's responses to Western pressure: Japan's Freedom and People's Rights Movement, China's Hundred Days' Reform, and Korea's Peasant War of 1894 and Independence Club Movement. The chapter also identifies moments when internal division and external tension began to take root in the three East Asian countries, particularly through the lens of regional conflicts like the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War, illustrating the historical turbulence that swept across East Asia.

Chapter 2, titled "Japanese Imperialist Expansion and Resistance in Korea and China," examines Japan's imperialist expansion and the corresponding resistance movements in Korea and China. It documents Japan's path of territorial aggression—including its invasion of the Chinese mainland via Korea and Taiwan—and its forced annexation of Korea. The chapter vividly depicts the deepening of Japanese colonial rule in Korea and highlights resistance movements such as Korea's March First Independence Movement and China's May Fourth Movement. Presented in parallel, these events illustrate the region's shared memory of resistance against Japanese imperialism.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore Japan's wars of aggression and the consequences of its eventual defeat. Chapter 3, titled "Wars of Aggression and People's Suffering," focuses on Japan's wars

of aggression following the 1931 Manchurian Incident. It critically examines the Japanese Empire's military expansion, from the establishment of Manchukuo and the Sino-Japanese War to the Asia-Pacific War and the ideology of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. It does not shy away from addressing atrocities such as the Nanjing Massacre, Three Alls Policy, germ and chemical warfare, forced labor, sexual violence, and the imperial subject system. Its significance is heightened by its candid discussion of contentious issues such as massacres and the exploitation of "comfort women," shedding light not only on the brutalities inflicted on the Chinese people, but also on Korea's transformation into a war base and the suffering that ensued. Importantly, the chapter aims to provide an objective critique of imperialist warfare by addressing the dual role of the Japanese people—as both perpetrators and victims.

Chapter 4, titled "East Asia after World War II," addresses the postwar histories of the three East Asian countries, each of which took markedly different paths: Japan underwent defeat and reforms; Korea experienced liberation and division; and China established the People's Republic. The chapter argues that the end of World War II marked the beginning of the East Asian Cold War and introduces the international dynamics that continue to shape the region today. It also highlights efforts toward reconciliation, such as the normalization of diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan, China and Japan, and eventually Korea and China. These developments, though limited by unresolved issues of colonialism and war, point toward the possibility of building a foundation for peace in East Asia—reinforcing the core purpose of the book.

The Conclusion, titled "Toward a Peaceful Future for East Asia," addresses the historical challenges that must be confronted to achieve lasting peace among the three countries. Although the modern and contemporary histories of East Asia are marked by painful memories of colonialism and war, the chapter posits that values such as peace, human rights, and democracy must guide the path forward. It explores a range of topics including reparations for colonial exploitation, the issue of the Japanese military "comfort women," controversies surrounding the Yasukuni Shrine, youth exchange programs,

anti-war peace movements, grassroots civic activism, and broader efforts at reconciliation and peace in East Asia.

Different Memories of "August 15": A Starting Point for Future Reconciliation and Coexistence in East Asia

As noted earlier, *History Opening the Future* does not treat August 15 as an independent or self-contained historical event, nor does it provide a detailed, isolated account of it. Nevertheless, its importance is never diminished. Rather, August 15 is framed as a pivotal historical experience, one that encapsulates the core developments of modern history across Korea, China, and Japa, and marks the true beginning of contemporary East Asian history. That is, the shared experiences of Western modernization, imperialist expansion and colonial rule, and the subsequent efforts to build new societies after the devastation of war are all synthesized in the significance of August 15. It is the starting point for postwar trajectories involving division, war, and Cold War. Accordingly, the meaning of August 15 varies across the three East Asian countries.

What stands out in *History Opening the Future* is its detailed account of Japanese imperialist aggression and rule, as well as the suffering endured by the peoples of East Asia. However, the significance of this book would be diminished if it merely focused on exposing and criticizing Japan's colonial rule. Rather, the book aims to foster historical dialogue among Korea, China, and Japan. It provides a framework for mutual understanding and recognition of the imperialist and colonial dynamics that defined 20th-century East Asian history. Based on this shared understanding, the book calls for envisioning a future grounded in peace and human rights. In this light, it does not treat August 15 as a single historical moment. Instead, it emphasizes how this date marked both the conclusion of East Asian's modern era, marked by struggle and conflict, and the beginning of each country's divergent

path into contemporary history. This is why Chapter 4, Section 1 of *History Opening the Future* is titled "A New Departure of the Three Countries," with Japan's experience addressed first.

> With the defeat in World War II, Japan came under Allied occupation. The Allies sought to dismantle Japan's military capabilities (demilitarization) and establish democratic institutions (democratization) so that Japan could never again instigate wars of aggression that caused such widespread devastation across Asia. How exactly did Japan change through these reforms? (p. 198)

For Japan, August 15 above all meant defeat in the Asia-Pacific War initiated by imperial Japan. However, *History Opening the Future* does not depict this date solely as the day of Japanese defeat. In Japanese history, August 15 represents a critical turning point—a moment that raised profound questions about how to build a new nation and spurred genuine postwar reflection. The book presents August 15 as a moment that signaled the need to redirect Japanese society toward democracy and pacifism. Yet these ambitions for reform were short-lived. The rise of the U.S.–Soviet confrontation, the Chinese civil war, and the division of the Korean peninsula quickly unfolded in East Asia, and the Cold War order came to dominate the region. As a result, the opportunity for Japan to fundamentally break from its imperialist past and reestablish itself as a democratic state was curtailed. The book underscores how the historical momentum created by August 15 could not be sustained. Though Japan was reintegrated into the U.S.-led international order through the Far East International Military Tribunal and the San Francisco Peace Treaty, its relations with China and Korea remained unresolved, laying the groundwork for persistent tensions in the region.

In contrast, for Korea, August 15, 1945, was the long-awaited day of liberation, marking the end of Japanese colonial rule as Japan surrendered to the Allies. However, this liberation was far from complete. The newly liberated Korean peninsula faced complex challenges in its attempt to stabilize society and build a new nation. The various ideas, ambitions,

and movements for creating a postcolonial future could not follow a single unified path. Differing visions for Korea's political and social system led to significant internal divisions. In this sense, *History Opening the Future* does not portray Korea's liberation as the beginning of a bright era, but rather as the onset of another period of turmoil.

Just as August 15 carried different meanings in East Asia, Korea's liberation also bore dual significance: it was both the end of colonial rule and the beginning of internal conflict. So, this book discusses the Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers held in Moscow in December 1945, where the U.S., the U.K., and the Soviet Union agreed to establish a provisional government in Korea under a proposed five-year trusteeship to prepare for full independence. However, this plan sparked fierce debate. Some saw the provisional government as a necessary step toward sovereignty, while others viewed the trusteeship as a new form of foreign domination that underestimated Korean capabilities. The U.S.–Soviet Joint Commission, formed to implement the Moscow Conference decisions, ultimately failed to produce results.

As the United Nations began pushing for general elections in Korea, opposition from North Korea and the Soviet Union, along with the promotion of separate elections in the South, escalated the peninsula's internal conflicts. Attempts at North–South negotiations by those concerned about a permanent division and uprisings protesting South-only elections followed. But the hope of a unified, post-liberation Korea quickly faded, and the prospect of division became increasingly inevitable.

> Exactly three years after liberation, on August 15, 1948, the Republic of Korea was established in the South. The following month, in September, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was founded in the North. Korea, unable to establish a unified government amidst the Cold War and domestic strife, was ultimately divided. The confrontation between North and South Korea and the deepened Cold War system drove Korea to war (p. 201).

As such, August 15 carries the dual meanings of "liberation"—

achieved through a long and desperate struggle for national independence—and "division," which followed soon after. Although three years separated the liberation of 1945 and the formal division in 1948, the transition felt abrupt and compressed. The events of those three years—such as the April 3 Jeju Uprising in 1947 and the Yeo-Sun Incident in 1948—remain historically significant even today. Despite the eventual tragedy of division, August 15 cannot be understood without recognizing its historical significance as the day of Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule. It was a brilliant moment in history when hopes for democracy—rooted in national autonomy, freedom, equality, and modern statehood—were realized as the fruit of decades-long national liberation movement across the Korean peninsula. Admittedly, the light of that liberation did not last long, but its meaning remains undiminished.

Just as August 15 signifies "defeat" for Japan and "liberation" for Korea, its meaning in China was also distinct. When imperial Japan launched the Asia-Pacific War in 1941, China joined the Allied forces and waged fierce resistance. *History Opening the Future* defines China's response to Japanese aggression as part of the broader "World Anti-Fascist War," highlighting how Chinese resistance evolved from localized engagements into a full-scale national offensive. Japanese troops ultimately surrendered in Nanjing in September 1945.

While China celebrates Victory Day on September 3, August 15 remains significant. Unlike in Korea—where Japan's surrender meant immediate liberation—fighting continued on Chinese soil until that September. Still, from a broader East Asian perspective, Korea's August 15 and China's September 3 both symbolize the culmination of protracted national liberation movements against imperial Japan and the beginning of the equally complex task of nation-building.

> Thus, the Chinese people could finally achieve complete victory in the anti-Japanese war, in which 35 million were injured or killed and property losses totaled 600 billion dollars. The Chinese paid a heavy price for their independence and liberation. China's anti-Japanese war

> greatly contributed to the global anti-fascist war. Due to this, China's international status rose significantly after the war (p. 185).

However, as in Korea, August 15 also marked the beginning of another war for China. With the onset of the Cold War, the wartime alliance between the Chinese Nationalist Party and the Communist Party collapsed, giving way to the so-called Nationalist-Communist Civil War. Eventually, Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists retreated to Taiwan, and Mao Zedong's Communist Party emerged victorious. On October 1, 1949, Mao proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China from Tiananmen Gate in Beijing. The newly founded China aligned itself with the Soviet-led socialist bloc and began to exert considerable influence on global politics.

Peaceful Coexistence in Future East Asia and "August 15"

August 15 holds different meanings in the three East Asian countries, each with its own historical context. Yet, a common thread can be identified: August 15 marked a pivotal moment when the nations of East Asia began earnestly considering the creation of new countries and societies. However, these opportunities did not lead to positive outcomes. The international order quickly shifted, with the United States and the Soviet Union at the center, reorganizing East Asia according to the Cold War framework. Korea, China, and Japan were all forced to accept their roles within this new order.

In the latter half of *History Opening the Future*, the focus shifts to the sharp confrontations of the Cold War, which overshadowed the aspirations for peace that August 15 had symbolized in East Asia. The text outlines the emergence of the East Asian Cold War order, examining key events such as the Korean War—which further entrenched the Cold War system in East Asia—and the normalization of diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan, which marked their

incorporation into this Cold War order. At the same time, the book continues to emphasize the enduring hope for peaceful future in East Asia.

August 15 was not only a moment for East Asia to reflect on how to build a new world and countries but also a time when the region's historical pains were reproduced. The Cold War and divisions that began on August 15 still persist. Within this, the hegemonic competition between China and Japan, the military tensions between North and South Korea, historical conflicts among Korea, China, and Japan, and America's oppressive capitalist globalization strategy all show how far East Asian peace and reconciliation still are. Despite this, *History Opening the Future* does not abandon the vision of a peaceful East Asia.

History Opening the Future is a history textbook born out of extensive discussions aimed at reconciling the divergent historical perspectives of Korea, China, and Japan. As such, the book carries multiple meanings. First, it offers valuable insight by providing a detailed account of Japan's invasion, highlighting the suffering and resistance of the Korean and Chinese peoples. It addresses key issues such as the international legal implications of aggressive wars and imperial Japan's inhumane massacres and forced mobilization of people. Additionally, the book departs from state-centric historical narratives, instead adopting a comparative approach to modern and contemporary East Asian history that underscores shared historical experiences and collective memory. Given the enduring mistrust and hostility rooted in the region's history of domination, subjugation, perpetration, victimization, invasion, and resistance, understanding East Asian history requires reflection, healing, and mutual respect.

As seen in *History Opening the Future*, the foundation for East Asian historical solidarity is built by the lives of ordinary people in Korea, China, and Japan. This solidarity is essential because the wars and invasions that shaped East Asia in the modern and contemporary periods caused immense suffering for the peoples of these countries. To overcome the lingering hostility and hatred in the region and realize peaceful solidarity, it is vital to develop a shared understanding of history—particularly a common historical consciousness in

East Asia. The reason we must reflect on and practice the significance of August 15 within an East Asian context—cultivating a more open consciousness of this day—lies in this very need for mutual understanding. *History Opening the Future* concludes with precisely this orientation.

> We must reflect on the history of invasion and war and make every effort to ensure that such events are never repeated. The Japanese government must first offer a clear and sincere apology for past wrongs and provide compensations to the victims. Once this is done, Korea, China, and other neighboring countries and their citizens will also wholeheartedly accept it. Peace, human rights, and democracy are universal values that are essential for a desirable future for East Asia and the world. To realize this, not only Japan but also the governments of each Asian country must move beyond overly self-centered policies, and citizens must gather the wisdom to live together with neighboring countries, overcoming narrow, self-centered thinking. International solidarity and cooperation of citizen movements will be one of the paths to achieving this goal. Learning from history and achieving true reconciliation and peace is the task of each and every one of us living in today's East Asia (p. 245).