

Kan Kimura, trans. Marie Speed, *The Burden of the Past: Problems of Historical Perception in Japan-Korea Relations*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019. 249 pp. 978-0-472-05410-7, \$29.95.

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The relationship between Japan and her counterpart in the southern half of the Korean peninsula has changed over time. As circumstances have shifted, the Japan-South Korea affairs have grown in complexity and depth. Their long-shared history, both beneficial and rancorous, freights whatever new exchanges the present brings. And yet, despite – or perhaps because of – this manifold depth, there is a tendency for the parties of this relationship to lose sight of the past in the heat of the moment. Proximity does not necessarily engender familiarity, and it can be as easy to reduce one's neighbor to a mere caricature as one's distant rival. Stereotypes readily pass for analysis when in close quarters, and we often tune out the nuances of a given situation on the assumption that we have heard it all before.

Kobe University professor Kan Kimura's *The Burden of the Past: Problems of Historical Perception in Japan-Korea Relations* provides an in-depth study of the historical strains between Japan and South Korea. In recent years, there has been a spate of unpleasant incidents, which have come to overshadow all other interactions between the two nations. These occurrences can make it all seem as though bad blood and ill will were the only aspects that South Korea and Japan ever had in common. Kimura's book (the deft English translation of the 2014 Japanese original from Minerva Shobo) is a welcome opportunity to take a step back and see the granularity and detail that are so often washed out in the glare of rhetoric. It is also vital to remember that the way the situation is now is not the way it has always been.

Take the comfort women issue, for example. Japan-South Korea relations took a nosedive in 2014 and 2015 after hundreds of US scholars issued a statement condemning the Japanese government for protesting counter-factual passages on comfort women in a world history textbook. Relations also went south after the *Asahi Shimbun* retracted comfort women-related articles from the previous two decades once it became clear that the source of the articles' narrative, Yoshida Seiji, had fabricated claims of having abducted young women on Jeju Island during the Second World War. What had been a reasonably effective working bond darkened into open enmity. The leaders of the two governments tried to create a resolution by

signing an agreement on the comfort women issue in late 2015 but to no avail. Comfort women statues continued to multiply in South Korea – and around the world – and poll after poll found that people in both countries had grown weary of interacting with the other side. Newspapers in Korea and Japan blared one comfort women headline after another. Whatever else was going on between the two nations got drowned out in the latest comfort women-themed round of the “history wars.”

However, this one-issue filter obscures the complicated interplay of factors that allowed for comfort women to become a point of discord between Japan and South Korea in the first place. As Kimura shows, it was mainly the local and global modulations of the Cold War in the 1980s that cleared the field for historical memory of sexual labor to become a bone of contention in the 1990s and beyond. Although it is difficult to imagine today, comfort women had been a non-issue for most of the postwar. But then two poignant factors occurred: Japan got rich, and South Korea transitioned – messily – to democracy. Kimura clearly explains that Japan’s rise to a world economic powerhouse, particularly during the “bubble era” of the 1980s, caused consternation and unease in South Korea. Was Japan preparing to reassert its might militarily and economically? At the same time, the loosening of censorship controls in South Korea led to what Kimura calls an “explosive receptiveness to Marxism.” This 1980s-style Marxism arrived on the shores of South Korea in large part as “dependency theory,” which was the ideological mix out of which the comfort women issue would eventually emerge (95–96).

According to dependency theory, Kimura explains, many in South Korea came to believe (96–97):

the modern world was controlled by multinational capital, and particularly that of the economic superpowers, Japan and the United States. This capital was using the power of its agents—the Japanese and US governments—to control the Korean peninsula, ruthlessly exploiting the Korean people. As the military regime ruling South Korea was no more than a puppet of Japanese and US giant capital, there was no way that it could seriously serve the interests of the South Korean people. The democratization of South Korea was a battle with this foreign-controlled regime, so the South Korean people had to take on not only the military regime but also its US and Japanese backers.

Kimura goes to point out that the comfort women issue took on an important meaning in this context:

Which group among the exploited South Korean people was in the weakest position? The answer was women, and particularly sex workers, who were placed in the most humiliating position of all. As exemplified by the fact that most of their customers were American soldiers and Japanese tourists (this was the peak of the *gisaeng* tourism era), prostitutes were the ultimate embodiment of the oppression and exploitation of the South Korean people. Comfort women represented the past of those Korean women exploited through their engagement in prostitution. In other words, in addressing the comfort women issue, one was also addressing the issue of women in capitalist society, and indeed contemporary South Korea in general.

Kimura concludes that, “In this manner, the comfort women issue was imbued with symbolic status within the new framework of the historical perception dispute, which clearly identified South Korea’s ruling elite as the enemy while positioning the ‘conscientious intelligentsia’ and the women’s movement in Japan as allies of the movement in South Korea.”

Coupled with this rapidly evolving ideological situation in South Korea, the Japanese government failed to understand that the political landscape of its peninsular counterpart was transformed by the democratic shift and its breakdown of elite hegemony. Japanese politicians, nonplussed by the sudden irruption of an issue that had been settled in the 1965 treaty, attempted to engage with the South Korean side, but to no avail. The comfort women issue had taken on an emotionally charged, nationalistic valence, and countless apologies by a long train of Japanese politicians from across the political spectrum did little but further antagonize the South Korean public. What we see as a historical issue today, then, is two historical issues at once: the comfort women issue, and the changes in East Asia – especially South Korea – brought about by the ongoing transmogrification of the Cold War.

Kimura’s book shines in foregrounding this intervenient Cold War period. Throughout his text, Kimura reminds readers that the Japanese-South Korean past did not end in 1945, but continued to unfold thereafter, often in counterintuitive ways. Particularly enlightening is Kimura’s use of databases to show how newspapers in both countries have focused on various issues

over the past eight decades. Comfort women, for instance, merited just eight mentions in the *Asahi Shimbun* from 1945 to 1989, and then 600 from 1990 to 1994, while there were only three mentions of the same issue in the *Chosun Ilbo* from 1945 to 1994, and then 459 from 1995 to 1999. As the Cold War waned, the comfort women issue was moved to the fore. Kimura also skillfully uses databases to show that the “textbook issue,” much touted in both South Korea and Japan as indicating a hard lurch to the right by the Japanese public, was almost entirely the product of bad *Asahi* reporting and picayune revisions to educational review procedures among Japanese bureaucrats (who are hardly known for their strident nationalism). What we think we know about the Japan-South Korea relationship has been greatly distorted by “historical memory” failures of our own. The data do not support the past version of the Japan-South Korea history rehearsed today.

Divided into three parts and seven chapters, *The Burden of the Past* is a step-by-step re-introduction to these and many other complexities between South Korea and Japan. The “theoretical examination” comprising part one is a helpful entrée to the case studies – the textbook and comfort women issues – which make up parts two and three. Serialized over a three-year period from the spring of 2011 to spring of 2014 for *Kiwameru* magazine, Kimura’s book has a lively immediacy. The English-language translation is especially welcome as it will make accessible to a wider public (both academic and lay) Kimura’s balanced approach to this topic. Students are especially encouraged to read it as an antidote to the often-shrill voices that portray Japan-South Korea interactions in stark, one-dimensional terms.

I have one quibble, however. Like many others in the academy and the media who write about East Asian history, Kimura speaks of South Korea’s “colonial” history under Japanese rule, but this is not quite correct. It is more than semantic hairsplitting to point out that, after 1910, the Korean peninsula was not a colony of Japan, but a part of Japan proper. Annexed in August of that year, the Korean peninsula became just as Japanese as Hawaii is American. This distinction has enormous consequences, some of which Kimura details. Indeed, the peace treaty signed between Japan and South Korea in 1965 contains language reflecting a compromise between these nations over whether the 1910 annexation was legal at all. Kimura’s use of the word “colonial” to describe the annexation period is likely an irenic linguistic gesture by a scholar striving to present his subject in a balanced way. Nevertheless, as the legality of the 1910 document impinges upon all subsequent Japan-South Korean matters, Kimura might have spent a little

more time explaining how his choice of terminology fits in with the larger rhetorical field.

That said, this cavil should not deter anyone from reading *The Burden of the Past*. Kimura's fine-tuned historical analysis and perceptive political insights stand to bring some much-needed perspective to a contested subject. The University of Michigan Press (in cooperation with the steadily growing Japan Library series) is to be commended for bringing into print this valuable addition to English-language scholarship on Japan-South Korean relations.