

# Special report on

## The 2016 International NGO Conference on History Education for Peace in East Asia and Europe



By Minuk Nam (Korean Studies at Leiden University/LIAS)

Leiden, the Netherlands September 2016



## Foreword

When asked to write a report on the recent 2016 international conference on history education for peace in East Asia and Europe **“Teaching for Peace, History in Perspective”** that was co-organized by the European Association of History Educators (henceforth EUROCLIO<sup>1</sup>) and the History NGO Forum for Peace in East Asia (henceforth History NGO Forum)<sup>2</sup>, I was at first hesitant – or even reluctant – in accepting the suggestion not only because of procrastination that not a small number of us are somehow struggling with, but also because I had not yet found clear answers to a series of questions having arisen as to teaching history. I still remember I was confused with and diffident about what to write until the last day of the conference, then when **Aysel Gojayeva**, project manager of the EUROCLIO, told me something which all of a sudden struck me and cleared up the clouds in my head: “How did you like the conference Minuk, as *both an insider and an outsider*?” Being told so, I decided to take advantage of being in such a wonderful position, and therefore this report may seem very personal because it will be primarily about what I, myself being a participant crossing the borders of (the part of) two continents, understood and learned throughout the programs. Let me first begin by introducing what my motivation for participating in the conference was and which questions I had had to deal with and wanted to answer.

## Reflections from the conference

While teaching a course **“Historical Reconciliation in East Asia”** for undergraduate students in their second year of the Korean Studies Program at Leiden University in the Netherlands, I had come to be concerned with the following matters: first and foremost, both the co-instructor and I were from South Korea, whose national narrative in history education is still heavily centred on the ‘superpowers (Japan for example) as invaders who destroyed and distorted our glorious past vs. the brave resistance movements that attempted to achieve the independence of Korean nation’s framework. Furthermore, in such a narrative, some other important issues such as those related to North Korea and democratization movements in South Korea are only briefly mentioned. Can I be completely free from the background in which I was born, raised and educated? Would not the course, even talking about historical reconciliation, provide biased points of views? Well, my colleague and I tried our best but were not 100% satisfied with the results. In the curricula, for

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<sup>1</sup> [www.euroclio.eu](http://www.euroclio.eu)

<sup>2</sup> [www.historyngo.org](http://www.historyngo.org)

example, issues regarding North Korea and territorial disputes between East Asian countries and Russia were not included in the end due to relative lack of our interest or knowledge. And the discussions in the classroom had a tendency of being concluded with 'Well, it is difficult to reconcile the past unless people (in East Asia) overcome (their) national identities,' 'Those superpowers caused such and such problems, and it is THEM who should face their pasts squarely,' or 'The San Francisco Treaty was unfair and is still the biggest obstacle. But what can we do about it?' Of course, what our students said was true to a certain extent. But, is that it? What can we as instructors or students, then do about it other than just pointing out hindsight causalities and whose fault it was?



*Antoon de Baets and Joke van der Leeuw-Roord discussing the role of historians in dealing with historical injustice. Antoon de Baets reflecting on Joke van der Leeuw's question "Is it really possible for history educators to avoid passing moral judgements in the classroom?"*

Secondly, our primary aim in teaching the course was to make our students -- most of them who were born and grew up in the Netherlands -- interested in what has been going on in East Asia, part of continent often regarded as being remote and idiosyncratic, and aware that those on-going issues are not only 'theirs' but also 'ours'. To do so, issues such as regarding victims forgotten from the national narrative compared to those of Nazi Germany, for example the Dutch nationals who were interned in concentration camps by the Japanese Imperial Army during the World War II in Indonesia (Dutch East Indies back then) and are currently requiring sincere apology and compensation to the Japanese government, were brought up and discussed during the course. However, even in so doing, the fact that such victims also took part in the broader imperialist world system which eventually gave rise to the world wars was a point we were hardly able to touch upon: furthermore, the 'victims' narrative' still seemed to be represented by the white European subject (and how ironic, Leiden University was THE institution to train young elites working at the core of the Dutch colonial bureaucracy). As an instructor, I wanted to introduce exhaustive narratives to the course, but it was practically impossible. Juxtaposing one new or different narrative next to the other was not enough either. Adopting certain narratives may broaden and diversify our perspective, but by so doing we may inevitably result in silencing other stories and voices.



*Jonathan Even-Zohar engaged in discussion with panellists questioning: "It is easy to say teach history differently. But, how?"*

EUROCLIO Chair in History, Ethics and Human Rights, Professor **Antoon de Baet's** presentation on theoretical framework for responsible history, which strengthens the struggle against historical injustice, and the following discussion with the founder and special advisor of the EUROCLIO **Joke van der Leeuw-Roord** on the first day of the conference reminded me of such dilemma once again. *"Historians are not judges,"* as de Baets, professor of history, ethics and human rights at the University of Groningen, put it, *"but they have some power and a distinct role to play. Responsible history can strengthen the struggle against historical injustice by offering accurate accounts and plausible interpretations of the past."* Yet



Remco Breuker: *“What we were supposed to talk about was Europe-East Asia collaboration on history, what, why and how. And one thing that I found very noticeable both from my professional and personal points of view was, if we want to reach some kind of cooperation and recognition, the strong attachment we have to our national identities is a huge problem even though it is difficult to do away with those identities. The Netherlands is not different from most other countries when it comes to history. Nor is Korea, Japan, or Germany...”*

again, as van der Leeuw-Roord asked back, *“Is it really possible for history educators to avoid passing moral judgements in classroom? Is there a difference between the role of historians and that of history educators? What is the concept of truth, accurate accounts, establishing the facts? How could we move from heated historical debates to conversations?”* **Jonathan Even-Zohar**, Director of **EUROCLIO**, also said: *“It is easy to say teach history differently. But, how?”*

Lastly, my colleague and I tried to promote in-class engagement and participation and wanted to run the course as democratically and interactively as possible. And I still do think such principles are what history education should aim for. However, every moment I encounter with my students (or even myself

playing the role of instructor) in the classroom makes me ask more questions about the underlying premises as well as the actual practice of class participation. **Joan Brodsky Schur**, Education consultant from the United States of America, brought up the very question which I had always had in mind: *“What does it mean to participate? Being a bystander?”* I still remember what one of my students told me about ‘Dutch nationalism’ in the midst of discussing the reasons for which historical reconciliation is so difficult to achieve in East Asia (and again, strong nationalism was pointed out as one of the reasons): *“I don’t think nationalism exists here in the Netherlands. Even if it does, it is not as strong as that in East Asia. Being Dutch is also very different from being Asian... Maybe, being sarcastic about our own country is Dutch nationalism.”* Putting aside whether other Dutch people would agree with the student’s interpretation or not, I am still not sure if such a stance, or even indifference, is a better attitude when dealing with historical issues and conflicts. *What is then the alternative stance that history educators can suggest for students?*

The goals agreed upon to be achieved in history education seemed to be already summed up from the beginning of the conference in a number of keywords such as multiperspectivity, cross-border and sustainable peace, all of which I had thought very important and wanted to bring to my own classroom. But there were substantial discrepancies in taking approaches to and assuming the prerequisite for historical reconciliation and peace, particularly between the South Korean delegation from the History NGO Forum and the participants from the (mostly Western) European countries. The question that kept being raised in the workshops and discussions on the second day (and in the course I taught too) spoke volumes about such discrepancies: Why is Korea so obsessed with its colonial past? After holding a day-long debate on overcoming historical conflicts, professor **Remco Breuker** of Korean Studies at Leiden University<sup>3</sup> remarked, *“What we were supposed to talk about was Europe-East Asia collaboration on history, what, why and how. And one thing that I found very noticeable both from my professional and personal points of view was, if we want to reach some kind of cooperation and recognition, the strong attachment we have to our national identities is a huge problem even though it is difficult to do away with those identities. The Netherlands is not different from most other countries when it comes to history. Nor is Korea, Japan, or Germany...”*

<sup>3</sup> [www.universiteitleiden.nl](http://www.universiteitleiden.nl)

Some reflections on the Euro-centric point of view were also offered while attempting to bridge the gap. **Ethan Mark** in Japanese

Studies at Leiden University answered to the question regarding the difference in focus of attention as the following: *“I found the observation about Europeans asking why Korea is obsessed with colonialism was just incredibly ironic, and the question asked indicates that Europeans are somewhat blind to their own history. A well-known American historian John Dower pointed out that Americans tried to conduct a Nuremberg type of trial in Tokyo while also leaving the empire and imperialism out of the discussion. They basically treated war crimes as a dispute between Japan and the Western powers, the United States in particular, and this emphasizes the US- and Euro-centric view of the war.”*



*Ethan Mark (sitting on the right corner): “I found the observation about Europeans asking why Korea is obsessed with colonialism was just incredibly ironic, and the question asked indicates that Europeans are somewhat blind to their own history. A well-known American historian John Dower pointed out that Americans tried to conduct a Nuremberg type of trial in Tokyo while also leaving the empire and imperialism out of the discussion. They basically treated war crimes as a dispute between Japan and the Western powers, the United States in particular, and this emphasizes the US- and Euro-centric view of the war.”*

*“One of the things that struck me today was that criminal justice system itself was one of the causes of injustice. We know that, in case of Tokyo tribunal for example, the US did neither indict Emperor Hirohito nor declassify the related documents because it wanted to keep Japan under control. In case of the tribunal held in Batavia, B- and C-level war criminals are now claiming for compensation against the Japanese government because those are the ones who were ordered to serve as the guards of the concentration camps. This kind of feeling of injustice is still continuing at this moment, so when being asked why Korea is obsessed with colonialism I am wondering why then the Netherlands does not need to deal with colonialism. Working with friends from Asian countries for a long period time, I at the same time have to meet regular Japanese people every day in the museum. And I have been asked why only Japan has to be accused. Why is then, for example, what the United States of America is doing in Okinawa not being accused? There are so many injustices and questions that I have to deal with, but it is so difficult to be talked by the Japanese even though there were many Japanese civilian victims as well.”*



*Mina Watanabe: “One of the things that struck me today was that criminal justice system itself was one of the causes of injustice...”*

**Merit Rickberg** from the University of Tartu, Estonia, added a comment to point out the hierarchies existing even within the so-called ‘European perspective’ and Euro-centrism itself and: *“There is not a single European perspective; it also has different sides, especially from the Eastern European point of view.”*

The second day's program began with case studies on how history and historical conflicts are being taught, and ended with confirming difficulty, complexity and dilemmas we may come across in real life, with workshops and activities provided by the EUROCLIO and Utrecht University<sup>5</sup>. The third day focused more on practical methods to bring multiperspectivity to the classroom. For example, in the first workshop of the day, "Teaching Multiperspectivity in History -- Practical Lessons on the Cold War, Holocaust and Slavery", I was asked to write down the five most important events in explaining the World War II based on my understanding on a big sheet of paper shared with other educators from the Netherlands,



*Educators engaged with analysing variety of viewpoints developed within Historiana programme presented by Steven Stegers and Judith Geerling*

France and Estonia sitting next to me. What gave rise to the World War II? What were the most decisive moments in the World War II? The Great Depression? German occupation of Poland? The battle of France, the Netherlands or Stalingrad? The Holocaust? Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor? The Yalta Conference? Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Then, we selected four events (although being asked to select only three) among those each of us wrote down in order to create a timeline and imagined how different actors felt about each event. Did a German soldier feel happy about the Holocaust? How about a Korean farmer? An interesting project on exchanging multiple aspects of historical truths was also introduced. In the project, groups of Dutch and Russian students were asked to interview their grandparents, parents and their friends on the experiences and the matter of responsibility of the Cold War and share the results via Facebook and Skype. As the communications between two groups took place, both the Dutch and the Russian students came to view each other as the same students who like to enjoy holidays and support the same football team, not the awkward 'the other'. Furthermore, by doing so, the discussion could successfully move onto the recent issue of Ukraine. Bjorn Wansink, history teacher educator at the University Utrecht who led the workshop, concluded with his remark on the definition of multiperspectivity, which left a great impression on me: "I really like the idea of Bakhtin, 'multi-voiceness'. The idea is that every person has multiple voices in itself. Teaching history is about teaching multiple perspectives, and teaching history is construction and interpretation. It is not about changing someone's voice, but about 'adding a voice'. Identity is really strong, so we won't be able to change identities of, for example, Russian people, Dutch people, Palestinian people, or Jewish people. But by adding a voice that did not exist before, Dutch people can add a Russian perspective on Ukraine and vice versa. I think this is a very open perspective on the multiperspectivity."

The conference took it one step further from 'adding a voice' to 'giving a voice' to an actual victim/survivor of the military sexual slavery by Japan during the World War II, better known as 'comfort women', and I believe it also met the purpose of the workshop run by EUROCLIO Programme Director **Steven Stegers** and EUROCLIO project manager **Judith Geerling** on understanding and learning multiple perspectives of history through personal life stories. During the three day-long conference plus one special interview with **Peter Keppy** from the NIOD<sup>6</sup> (Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies), **Ms. Yong-soo Lee**, a women's rights activist from South Korea who was forced to become a comfort woman at the age of 15, had a number of opportunities to deliver

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<sup>5</sup> [www.uu.nl](http://www.uu.nl)

<sup>6</sup> [www.niod.nl](http://www.niod.nl)

her testimony. Still battling after effects of electric torture, she felt proud of herself being able to remember detailed memories and speak up for herself in front of the audience despite her age, nearly 90. Her message was very clear and powerful: *“this testimony itself is like my life. I want you to fight with me, because I don’t have strength to do so by myself. I have always asked myself, “Why those terrible things happened to me? What did I do wrong...? I believe only by solving this problem together we can accomplish world peace. From deep down in my heart I want you and the future generation to live in the world where there is no violence against women. And I thank you very much for giving me love and strength that enables me to be here.”* Ms. Lee did not forget to ask after Jan Ruff O’Herne, a Dutch former comfort woman who also played an active role in making the stories of comfort women known to the world. Following Ms. Lee’s testimony, **Rebecca Mbuh DeLancey**, Researcher on conflict resolution including Rwandan genocide, also strongly urged to work on the issue together: *“What are we doing here? We are now in the position to do something about it. The power we have is enormous.”* This is, I felt,



*Peter Keppy interviewing Ms Yong-soo Lee about her experiences. Ms Yong-soo Lee: “This testimony itself is like my life. I want you to fight with me, because I don’t have strength to do so by myself. I have always asked myself, “Why those terrible things happened to me? What did I do wrong...? I believe only by solving this problem together we can accomplish world peace. From deep down in my heart I want you and the future generation to live in the world where there is no violence against women. And I thank you very much for giving me love and strength that enable me to be here.”*



*Friederike Meith discussing how the legacy of Nuremberg can inspire human rights education’*

indeed the power of including personal stories in history education as **Joan Brodsky Schur** argued on the second day of the conference, and by so doing, we can also invite students with their diverse backgrounds and perspectives to the classroom. *“We get very different images about what was happening in this country and what was happening in some other countries. Learning historical events and their multiperspectivity in a personal way is definitely very important to get students engaged.”* said **Meenakshi Chhabra**, Associate Professor of the Global Interdisciplinary Studies and the International Higher Education and Intercultural Relations at Lesley University<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> [www.lesley.edu](http://www.lesley.edu)

## Conclusions

Wrapping up this report, I once again came to realize how invaluable the opportunity of participating in the conference was. After all the workshops and programs, what I earned in the end was the sense of solidarity: solidarity to ask the world to fight against historical injustice as **Friederike Meith** from the International Nuremberg Principles Academy<sup>8</sup> emphasized. That it was in the end the demands of outside world that drove Germany to apologize for its past and offer compensation to the victims; and solidarity to protect history educators from difficulty that may hinder those who attempt to teach what they want to teach, as professor **Jung-ok Lee** of sociology at the Catholic University of Daegu<sup>9</sup> pointed out. Last but not least, as history teacher and member of History Teachers Association of Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>10</sup> **Senada Jusic** suggested, hope and patience as well as honesty and openness would be the virtues that keep us working on teaching history for peace -- and I have just embarked on the long journey.

## About the author of this special report



**Minuk Nam** is a PhD candidate in Korean Studies at Leiden University/LIAS in the Netherlands and currently participating in the ERC-funded research project "A War with Words" (PI: prof. Remco Breuker at Leiden University). She has particular interests in knowledge construction and translation in the 19th-20th centuries, writing national history, historical reconciliation, and history education in a particular context of East Asia. Prior to enrolling at Leiden University, she did her BA and the first MA in international relations at Seoul National University in South Korea including one-year exchange program at Kyoto University in Japan. In 2015, she taught a course "Historical Reconciliation in East Asia" at Leiden University for BA2 students in Korean Studies with her colleague Dr. Sungjun Bae.

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<sup>8</sup> [www.nurembergacademy.org](http://www.nurembergacademy.org)

<sup>9</sup> [www.cu.ac.kr](http://www.cu.ac.kr)

<sup>10</sup> [www.cliohipbih.ba](http://www.cliohipbih.ba)