



Examining the Japanese History Textbook Controversies

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Textbooks with individuality are multi-dimensional; they are pluralistic; a pluralism must permeate them that allows teachers in the classroom to select what is most suitable for their own use.

—Ienaga Saburo, Court testimony, 1969.(1)

The Importance of History Textbooks in Japan and the United States

The controversy surrounding the adoption of middle school history textbooks in Japan raises the question, Why are textbooks—history textbooks in particular—important enough to fight over? Historians Laura Hein and Mark Selden tell us that "history and civics textbooks in most societies present an 'official' story highlighting narratives that shape contemporary patriotism"; "people fight over textbook content because education is so obviously about the future, reaches so deeply into society, and is directed by the state. Because textbooks are carried into neighborhood schools and homes, and because, directly or indirectly, they carry the imprimatur of the state, they have enormous authority."(2) Richard H. Minear, Japanese historian, answers the question this way: "As a practicing historian, I encounter at every turn the power textbooks exercise over my students' minds. In...Japan it is the government that influences the content of textbooks. In the United States today the problem is not the government but textbook publishers. As far as the effects on students go, the difference is not great. . . . our students believe absolutely what they read in textbooks."(3)

More than one American scholar has suggested that Japan is a mirror for Americans. If so, then we Americans can learn from the controversy over textbooks in Japan. At the very least, this controversy in Japan should raise a related question for Americans: Why aren't there more debates in this country over textbook content? Why don't American teachers—and their students—look more deeply into the authorization process that American publishing companies and state and local adoption agencies follow here at home?

Background on the Japan Textbook Controversies

The present system of screening and approving textbooks dates to pre-war Japan: "Struggles over the national narrative existed . . . before and even during World War II, when official narratives such as the Imperial Rescript on Education and other 'fine militarist stories' played a crucial role in Japanese identity formation."(4) In the early months of the postwar period, Japanese bureaucrats changed existing textbook policy by blotting out passages that might offend the American occupiers. By 1946 the Supreme Command for the Allied Powers (SCAP), in an effort to ensure that textbooks did not encourage emperor-worship and militarism, imposed on the nation a system of government "certification" of schoolbooks. That system continued after the Americans left.

In Japan, each public and private school selects one history textbook from a list of seven or eight authorized by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (*Monbukagakusho*) every four years. This screening process then lasts one full year. In the United States (where adoption takes place on no set schedule at the state or local level), for all the talk of

alternative means of instruction, the conventional textbook remains the core and often the sole teaching tool in most middle and high school classrooms. Japanese textbook companies submit manuscripts to the Ministry of Education, whose appointed committees examine them according to prescribed criteria. The Ministry offers the textbook companies opportunities to revise their drafts, and copies of the Ministry-approved manuscripts are then available for consideration by the local districts.

In 1965 Ienaga Saburo, a prominent historian, filed the first of his three lawsuits against the Ministry of Education, charging that the process of textbook approval was unconstitutional and illegal. The Ministry had rejected Ienaga's history textbook because it contained "too many illustrations of the 'dark side' of the war, such as an air raid, a city left in ruins by the atomic bomb, and disabled veterans."(5) His second suit two years later also involved the issue of constitutionality and, in addition, focused on points related to Ienaga's characterization of Japan's foundation myths and a description of the 1941 Japan-USSR neutrality pact.

In 1982 the screening process in Japan became a diplomatic issue when the media of Japan and neighboring countries gave extensive coverage to changes required by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry had ordered Ienaga to remove critical language in his history textbook, insisting that he write of the Japanese army's "advance into" China instead of its "aggression in" China, of "uprising among the Korean people" instead of the "March First Independence Movement." Pressure applied by China and Korea succeeded in getting the Ministry to back down and resulted in the Ministry's adding a new authorization criterion: that textbooks must show understanding and international harmony in their treatment of modern and contemporary historical events involving neighboring Asian countries.(6)

Ienaga's lawsuits lasted thirty years. Although in 1997—in response to Ienaga's third lawsuit instituted in 1986—the Supreme Court of Japan unanimously upheld the Ministry's right to continue screening textbooks, Ienaga and his fellow critics enjoyed a partial victory. The court requested "that the Government refrain from intervening in educational content as much as possible."(7)

By the time of the final ruling, however, Ienaga and the tens of thousands of Japanese who joined him in his battle against the authorization process had been victorious in fact if not in law. The most widely used Japanese textbooks in the mid- and late-1990s contained references to the Nanjing Massacre, anti-Japanese resistance movements in Korea, forced suicide in Okinawa, comfort women, and Unit 731 (responsible for conducting medical experiments on prisoners of war)—all issues raised in Ienaga's suits.

The Current Situation

A conservative (many would argue ultra-conservative) movement toward reform in the Japanese history curriculum was initiated in the early 1990s by Fujioka Nobukatsu and his Liberal View of History Study Group. Fujioka, a professor of education at Tokyo University, set out to "correct history" by emphasizing a "positive view" of Japan's past and by removing from textbooks any reference to matters associated with what he calls "dark history,"

issues such as the comfort women, that might make Japanese schoolchildren uncomfortable when they read about the Pacific War.

By early 2000 Fujioka and his group had joined with others to form the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, now headed by Nishio Kanji. It is the Society's textbook, *The New History Textbook* (one of eight junior high school history textbooks authorized by the Ministry of Education in April 2001), that has caused such debate in Japan over the past year. Nishio summarized the views of the Society in an article in the August 2001 *Japan Echo*, a bimonthly journal of opinion on a wide range of topics of current interest within Japan. The article maintained that rather than asserting the Society members' personal views of history the textbook aims to restore common sense to the teaching of the subject. Nishio insisted that "history stop being treated like a court in which the figures and actions of the past are called to judgment." (8)

Widespread protests against the textbook erupted much earlier in Japan, China, and North and South Korea. By December 2000, reacting to a draft textbook circulated by the Society and shown on national television, a long list of Japanese historians and history educators expressed misgivings about the content of *The New History Textbook* and its rendering of Japan's past. Their complaints centered around the text's presentation of Japan's foundation myths as historical fact and its characterization of wars launched by modern Japan as wars to liberate Asia.

The intellectuals' appeal to people inside and outside Japan appeared on the internet prior to authorization of the textbook by the Ministry. Following authorization, their voices were joined by an international group of scholars. This "International Scholars' Appeal Concerning the 2002-Edition Japanese History Textbooks" aimed to "ensure that textbooks are consistent with values of peace, justice and truth." It declared *The New History Textbook* "unfit as a teaching tool because it negates both the truth about Japan's record in colonialism and war and the values that will contribute to a just and peaceful Pacific and World community." (For more information on the scholars' claim, visit their Web site [9].)

Reactions in China and Korea took various forms. China Radio International announced that the Chinese government and people were "strongly indignant about and dissatisfied with the new Japanese history textbook for the year 2002 compiled by right-wing Japanese scholars." Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Banzao warned that the Chinese people would not accept the interpretation of wartime events put forth by the new textbook. (10) An article in the August 25, 2001 issue of *Korea Now*, a biweekly magazine published in English, reported that as Seoul prepared to celebrate its Liberation Day (from the Japanese) on August 15, angry Koreans continued to stage anti-Japan protests ignited by the new Japanese "textbooks that allegedly gloss over atrocities by Japanese soldiers during World War II." (11)

Under the Japanese system, local school authorities determine whether the new textbook is to be used in district classrooms. On August 15—the deadline for school districts to make their selections—Associated Press writer Mari Yamaguchi reported in *The Japan Times* that the new textbook had been shunned, that nearly all of Japan's school districts had rejected it. She quoted a spokesman for the civic group Children and Textbooks Japan Network 21 as saying, "We have gained nationwide support to say 'no' to the textbook. . . . it's the conscience of the Japanese public." (12) According to a Kyodo News Service survey released August 16, not a single municipal government run or state run junior high school in the country adopted *The New History Textbook*. (13)

Lessons for Americans

Why should American teachers and their students bother themselves about this textbook controversy? What can they and their students learn from it?

First, as a mirror for Americans, Japan's textbook controversy may shed light on what could happen here if the dominant narrative—our "official" story of our past—were challenged by a counternarrative, one that threatens to alter or even replace a textbook narrative. Japan lost the war that is the center of the textbook controversy. American teachers and students might ask how that fact has influenced Japan's textbook narrative. Does the victor's interpretation of the past differ from that of the vanquished? For example, James Loewen, author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, points out that most American history textbooks published before 1990 omitted all the important photographs of the Vietnam War. (14)

Second, many Americans see Japan as a harmonious, one-dimensional society; the fact that teachers' brought this textbook controversy—which involved lawsuits supported by tens of thousands of Japanese people—to the attention of their students may help to break down that stereotype. At least two individuals are prominent in the textbook controversy in Japan. By introducing to students Ienaga Saburo and Fujioka Nobukatsu, American teachers add a human dimension to Japan's textbook controversy. The more human faces put on Japan, the better.

Third, Japan's history textbooks have for years come under the scrutiny of Japan's past adversaries, its Asian neighbors. Together with their students, American teachers might examine American textbook narratives while imagining that Mexican, Japanese, Vietnamese, or Middle Eastern scholars and students are reading over their shoulders as they teach and learn about American interpretations of the war with Mexico, the war in the Pacific, in Southeast Asia, or in the Middle East. Finally, American teachers might also consider presenting this passionate debate in Japan as an example for Americans to follow.

SOURCES

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