

Deconstructing History Textbook Controversies:

A Comparative Study of Chinese, Japanese and Korean History Textbook Accounts

on World War II

[1,994 words]

Objectives

This study explores the similarities and differences among Chinese, Japanese and Korean history textbook accounts on WWII. During the last several decades, international debates have surrounded the issue of teaching WWII among East Asian nations – especially Japan, which assumed a role of an aggressor, and China and Korea¹ which experienced Japanese colonization as a “victim” from 1910 to 1945.

The current research also focuses on Japanese history textbooks’ portrayal of WWII. Researchers found that Japanese history textbooks describe the origins of the Pacific War as an inevitable decision for the security and well-being of the nation at risk (Crawford, 2006; Nicholls, 2006) and reported that Japanese history textbooks negligently discuss Japanese military actions during WWII such as the Nanjing Massacre, comfort women and biological warfare experiments (Gerow, 2000; Heiden & Seldon, 2000; McCormack, 2000; Zhao & Hoge, 2006).

The limitations of current scholarship on history textbook controversies are three fold. First, research often ends up with whether certain “facts” are included in Japanese history textbooks rather than generating conversations about teaching WWII among nations. Second, few researchers ask questions about how nations such as China or Korea who assumed the role of “victims” portrayed WWII. Third, except a few studies (Crawford, 2006; Nicholls, 2006), previous studies were conducted given what is *told* about history textbook controversies rather

than what is represented in the textbooks.

Addressing these limitations, this study examines secondary history textbooks in China, Japan and Korea and answers the following questions: How do Chinese, Japanese and Korean history textbooks represent WWII including causes, consequences and progress of the war? What are the similarities and differences among Chinese, Japanese and Korean textbook accounts on WWII?

Theoretical Framework

This study builds on the concept of “an imagined community” as a nation where the common accounts and narratives of the past are shared (Anderson, 1983). Chinese, Japanese and Korean cases are unique because of the geopolitical framework among these three nation-states, which, some argue, can be traced back more than 2000 years ago. This is misleading because this framework aligns national history to a past in which there was no nation-state framework (Lim & Lee, 2003; Yurita, 2007). There was no China, Japan or Korea as a nation-state back 2000 years ago. We argue that recent international debates among China, Japan and Korea clearly show how these three nations use discourses around history textbook accounts to teach their national histories and create a citizenship for this imagined community.

Methods

Data source

Two Chinese history textbooks, four Japanese history textbooks and four Korean history textbooks at the secondary level were selected for the study. In China, there is one nationally certified textbook in the middle and high school levels – respectively. One from the middle school and another from high school history textbooks were chosen for the study. In Japanese case, two at the junior high school level – one most popularly adopted and one least popularly

adopted – and two at the high school level – one most popular and one least popular – were selected to represent the range of historical accounts taught in schools. In Korean case, one middle school history textbook and three most popular high school contemporary history textbooks were examinedⁱⁱ.

Data analysis

Textbook chapters were analyzed using content analysis method (Krippendorff, 1980). Data was analyzed in Chinese, Japanese and Korean first while analytic memos were written in English. When necessary, textbook excerpts were translated in English. Our analysis consists of two stages:

First, the authors analyzed textbooks, answering the following questions (Werner, 2002):

- How much and where is the war represented in the textbook?
- What are the textbook authors' positions on each wartime event?
- How are the wartime events portrayed in pictures, labels, charts, and questions?
- What is missing?

Second, authors compared the patterns, and created common themes and patterns to discuss further the differences and similarities among the three nations' history textbooks.

Findings

Analysis of Chinese history textbooks

People's Education Press publishes two sets of Chinese history textbooks, one set for high school (Chinese Contemporary and Modern History, 2006) and another for the middle school (Chinese History, 2006). High school history textbook depict WWII as Chinese Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945), an inseparable part of the world anti-fascist war against imperialists. The chapter focuses on the Chinese contribution to the world event and how the joint anti-

Japanese coalition by the Communist Party and National Democratic Party led the Chinese people to the victory of the war. The maps, charts, and tables serve for the same purpose. Together with the pictures of the Nanjing Massacre, maps such as a distribution map of Japanese Germ Warfare and Poisonous Gas Troops in China by August 1945 justify the Chinese defensive anti-Japanese war and the later efforts to fight against the Japanese invaders.

In the middle school textbook, the chapter has a sidebar that features a well-known song filled with the fury and sorrow of Chinese people, particularly those living in Manchuria after losing their land to the Japanese army. The chapter included photos that illustrate the brutality of Japanese army during the Nanjing Massacre. The Japanese army was described as invaders who were responsible for the rape, looting, burning, and killing of more than 300,000 Chinese civilians and disarmed Chinese soldiers. These chapters focus solely on the Chinese involvement in the WWII and present such involvement purely from the Chinese perspective.

Analysis of Japanese history textbooks

The history textbook published by *Osaka Shoseki*, the most popular history and the one by *Fusosha*, the least popular one, were analyzed at junior high level. Different publishers draft these textbooks of history, but the chapter outlines are identical since textbook publisher are to follow the Ministry's curriculum guideline. However, there is a striking difference between these two textbooks. The most popularly adopted textbook carries passive voice to describe both the causes and consequences of WWII. They are almost identifying that the war happened outside of people's own will. The least popularly adapted textbook—*Fusosha*—assigns Japan and the Japanese to carry an active voice. In this respect, *Fusosha's* textbook goes in detail about the nation's rationale for entering the war.

The high school history textbook published by *Yamakawa*, the overwhelmingly popular

history textbook, and *Meiseisha*, the least popular one, were also chosen for the analysis. Similar to Junior high school textbooks, *Yamakawa* narrates what happened during the war using chronology and passive voice whereas *Meiseisa* uses a nation-state centered narrative and active voice. *Yamakawa* also focuses on its narrative on domestic conflicts avoiding discussing controversies whereas *Meiseisa* focuses on international conflicts that led Japan enter the war, which can be, to some scholars, considered as “imperialistic and justifying the invasion” (Komaki, 2002). Both textbooks rarely discussed experiences of individual Japanese. Japanese individuals are portrayed as people who were deceived by the military and the government.

Analysis of Korean history textbooks

One national history textbook – *Kuksa (National history)* - is used at the middle school level in Korea. This history textbook carries WWII in the chapter that covers the time period from 1910 when Japanese colonization began to 1945 when Korea gained political independence from Japan. WWII is mentioned briefly at the beginning of the chapter. The Pacific War is highlighted as part of WWII. The textbook also emphasizes the contributions of Korean Provisional Government and military forces which fought in China, India and Myanmar in collaboration with Allies. Despite the close relationship during the war, no picture of individual Japanese is represented.

The similar patterns are found in high school contemporary history textbooks. All the three textbooks carry WWII in the chapter that covers 1910-1945. Three noticeable patterns are found. First, the three textbooks use the same perspective: Korean history is a story of overcoming obstacles, specifically Japanese colonization in this chapter, and ending happily with political independence from Japan. Second, the three textbooks represent WWII indirectly, associated with how the war influenced the Japanese colonization policy in Korea. Third,

individual Koreans are described as those who suffered during this historical period while the Korean Provisional Government is described to make major decisions with a support from the Allies. No individual Japanese appears either in the text or photos.

Discussion

All the three nations' textbooks have weaknesses. Popular Japanese history textbooks tend to describe war events during the war, in a chronological order using a passive voice. By doing so, Japanese history textbook avoids discussing the responsible agent for the war, which confirms findings from the previous studies (Nicholls, 2006). Chinese and Korean textbooks, on the other hand, portray their past during WWII as a war against Japanese imperialism. For China, it is an Anti-Japanese war that allowed Communist Party and National Democratic Party to work together. For Korea, it is a struggle to claim its political independence from Japan and grow into a new nation. In doing so, both Chinese and Korean history textbooks miss to discuss WWII in the global context and provide an in-depth look at the relationship between Communist and National Democratic Parties and the Japan-Korea relationships.

Invisible in these history textbooks is a perspective from another nation and ordinary Chinese, Japanese and Korean perspectives. Subjects of the narratives are abstract, including nations such as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean government. How Chinese, Japanese and Korean individuals responded to and experienced the war has not been discussed. This is dangerous because by portraying individual Japanese as people who were simply deceived by the military or government, Japanese history textbooks offer indulgence to individual Japanese support and decision-making for their nation to enter the war. By not including both individual Japanese and Korean experience, Chinese and Korean textbooks miss the opportunities to discuss the complex relationship among China, Japan and Korea during the war.

Given our findings, it is perhaps most notable that dichotomy between Japan as an aggressor and China and Korea as a victim in the history textbook controversies gives limits to build historical understanding beyond what has already been dichotomized into an aggressor and victim because of the past experience. As result, by representing WWII in a chronological order or through one single perspective, we argue that three nations' textbook representations of WWII prohibits the kind of historical understanding we hope students would be able to develop, one that promotes *historical empathy* as perspective-taking (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Foster, 2001; Wineberg, 2001).

Significances of the Study

Compared to research on history textbooks in North America and Europe, there have been relatively thin research on history textbooks in East Asian nations. This comparative study will add new knowledge to the field and offer insights to create history textbooks and resources that better represent WWII and promote mutual understanding among nations.

*We will present this paper, using overhead monitor.

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ⁱ In this proposal, unless otherwise noted, “Korea” is used interchangeably with the Republic of Korea (South Korea), and the united ethnic nation that existed before the end of the Korean War in 1948.

ⁱⁱ It is worthwhile to mention the textbook certification process in Japan and Korea. In Japan, all textbooks have to go through the national certification process. The private publishing companies develop the textbooks by hiring professors, teachers and researchers, and finally the Ministry of Education authorizes the textbooks (Tani, Hasuko, Lankiewicz, Christodlous, & Natoli, 1993). In Korea, contemporary history textbooks are nationally certified, following the same procedure in Japan while national history textbooks are created differently. There is only one national history textbooks at middle school level and one at high school level. The Korean Ministry of Education creates these national history textbooks by hiring historians and history teachers (Lee, 2004). In Korea, the national history textbook at the middle school level covers Korean history from the start of Korea as a nation to the present while the national history textbook at the high school level covers from the start to the late 19th century. The time period after the late 19th century is covered in contemporary Korean history textbooks.