

Teaching the Korean War from Multiple Perspectives

Yali Zhao, Ph.D
College of Education
Georgia State University
yzhao@gsu.edu

Lin Lin, Ph.D
School of Education
The State University of New York at Cortland
linlin@cortland.edu

Teaching the Korean War from Multiple Perspectives

“Technically, the Korean War continues today, as only an armistice agreement halted the fighting in 1953. The Korean peninsula remains one of the world's most dangerous flash points, and the West knows less about the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) than about any other nation on earth. The intentions and behavior of its leaders remain shrouded in mystery. To maintain the uneasy armistice, some 37,000 U.S. troops remain in the Republic of Korea. A solution to the Korean problem seems as far off as ever.”

- Spencer Tucker

Introduction

History is typically mandated in schools throughout the world. One of the primary missions of history, more than any other subject in the school curriculum, is to offer unprecedented opportunities for students to cultivate a sense of national identity, heritage and common values. Across international settings, history textbooks are the primary source for the young people to obtain knowledge about the history of their own country as well as the other parts of the world (Foster and Nicholls, 2005, p. 214-243). Hein and Selden (2000) suggested that school history textbooks are central to the transmission of national values in most societies in that they present an “official” story highlighting narratives that shape contemporary patriotism. Therefore, many countries’ debates over the content and format of history textbooks are sites of considerable educational and political conflict (Foster and Crawford, 2006). For example, in April, 2005, reactions to the distorted content about Japanese atrocities in World War II found in Japanese textbooks were strong in Asian countries, with widespread protests erupting inside and outside Japan, particularly in China and South Korea (Zhao and Hoge, 2006, p. 422-428).

In recent decades, history scholars have been challenging the nature of knowledge presented in history textbooks by asking “Whose knowledge is of the most worth?” (Apple and Christian-Smith, 1991, p. 12-19; Loewen, 1995, p. 266-270). They wondered what kind of historical knowledge teachers should present to young students (Zhao and Hoge, 2006). Textbook analysis has been used by scholars and classroom teachers to help students develop historical thinking (DeRose 2007, p. 36-39; Gordy, Hogan, and Pritchard, 2004, p. 80-91). Comparing international textbooks to examine how past events involving several countries were viewed by these and other nations has become a desirable approach to help students analyze historical events from different points of views and identify bias in historical accounts in textbooks. (DeRose, 2007, p. 36-39; Lindaman and Ward, 2004, p. 18; Loewen 1995, p. 266-267).

A number of studies have examined different countries' textbooks, reviewed textbooks from a bilateral perspective, and analyzed other countries' cultures and historical events to show the influence of textbooks on information that is taught in schools about other cultures. Many researchers around the world have critiqued textbooks for the last 30 years by assessing clarity of writing, the effectiveness of the format or design, and authors' biases or political perspectives in explaining historical actors or events. Examination of textbook content and selection processes offers intriguing and illuminating points of contrast that help critics better understand how history is used and portrayed in different national settings. In this global age, international textbook research and analysis has become a crucial means of promoting increased cross-cultural and international understanding, and also as a way of constructing more tolerant and accurate versions of shared individual and institutional pasts (Altbach, 1991, p. 242-258).

No doubt, the Korean War is a war that deserves close and continued study because of its complexity and its tremendous impact on the six countries involved in the war. For centuries the Korean War remained as the “Unknown War” or “Forgotten War” in the history of the United States (Blohm, 1999; Edwards, 2000; Tucker, 2000), although the war had a profound impact on the six countries involved. For both North and South Koreans, the war brought catastrophic civilian and military casualties and resulted in the continued division of their country. For the Chinese, the war was the first military operation that the communist government launched after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. The Chinese believed that they defended both North Korea and China against imperial aggressors (Chinese History, 2002). For Americans, the war found the United States being haunted by fears of Chinese military intervention based on misconceptions born in the Korean War of that nation’s military power (Nichols, 2000, p. 89-112; Tucker 2000, p. 3-5). The military conflicts stiffened U.S. attitudes towards the People’s Republic of China. For the former Soviet Union, the war was just another front, on which the former Soviet Union and the United States endured a high tension face-off (Lindaman and Ward, 2004, p. 266-267). The Soviet Union supported North Korea by providing limited assistance in the form of combat advisors, weapons, and military pilots. For Japan, its economic development owes much to the American military orders during the war and military aids after the war (Stubbs, 1999, p. 337-355). As the citation by American historian Spencer Tucker (2000) indicates at the beginning of the article, the Korean War continues today, as only an armistice agreement that halted the fighting in 1953. To maintain the uneasy armistice, large American troops are still stationed in South Korea today.

The topic of the Korean War provides history teachers with a challenging yet perfect opportunity to teach about a historical event and its current impact from multiple perspectives to

develop students' critical and historical thinking skills. Teachers should address rather than avoid this topic, because the Korean War was a turning point in twentieth-century history, the first shooting confrontation of the Cold War, the first limited war in the nuclear age, the only time since WWII that two of the world's major military powers, the United States and China, have fought one another (Spencer Tucker, 2000).

The authors of this paper strongly recommend that history teachers adopt the comparative approach of analyzing international history textbooks about complex controversial events that might have involved multiple countries such as the Korean War. We firmly believe that presenting multiple perspectives of the same historical events highlights the development of student critical thinking and reasoning skills and global awareness, which are goals and key components of history curriculum.

The authors of this article have worked with professors from Japan and South Korea in the past two years using a comparative textbook analysis approach to understanding the Korean War based on the textbooks adopted in public schools in the United States, South Korea, North Korea, Russia, Japan, and China. We analyzed versions of textbooks used in middle schools of these six countries to examine the Korean War. The comparative analysis focused on four areas: the causes of the Korean War, American involvement in the war, Chinese involvement in the war, and the results of the war. Analysis of the central story lines revealed that there exist some consistent statements about certain events in the Korean War, but inconsistencies and conflicting views seem to dominate the history textbooks in these countries.

As far as causes of the Korean War are concerned, textbooks in these six countries fall into two different views. At one side, the U.S., Japanese, the Soviet Union and South Korean

textbooks agreed that the communist North Korean invaded or attacked South Korea. At the other side, Chinese and North Korea textbooks provided a different account that North Korea was invaded by the South Korea troops backed up by the United States.

The explanation of how the Americans got involved in the war in the textbooks of the U.S. and South Korea implies that the weakened South Korea solicited U.S. military assistance when facing North Korean attack. U.S. troops stepped in mainly because they wanted to prevent the expansion of communist countries led by the Soviet Union. North Korea textbook states that America condemned North Korea as aggressors and ordered the North Koreans to withdraw beyond the 38th Parallel. Neither Chinese, Japanese, nor Russian textbooks offered reasons for American involvement. Textbooks in all six countries recognized the involvement of the United Nations mainly made up by the U.S. troops.

As for the reasons for Chinese involvement, all the nations except North Korea recognized the fact that UN forces approached Chinese border, which was considered a security threat by the Chinese government, and as a result China sent voluntary troops to join North Korean army. Chinese textbooks made it clear that China got involved in the war to defend its homeland because UN forces not only threatened the security of Northeast China but also invaded Chinese territory. Besides, the North Korean government asked for military aid from Chinese government as South Korea sought help from the United States. Textbook in Russia indicates that the fighting between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was mainly engaged in the air.

The analysis of textbook treatments of the Korean War in these six countries shows that each nation's textbook stresses its own perspective and largely ignores the horrors of the war. Middle school level history textbooks almost universally overlook the casualties and damage the

wars had inflicted upon individual civilians and the nations as a whole. The war brought about countless deaths and immense property damage. The total number of casualties suffered by South Korea alone amounted to about 1,500,000 causing a great number of war orphans and displaced families. Virtually all of the U.S. history textbooks put the U.S. death figure at 50,000 soldiers. Only a few U.S. textbooks mentioned the casualties of South Korea and none gave estimates of the death toll of the Chinese soldiers. The Chinese textbooks did not give the number of Chinese soldiers killed in the Korean War.

There is little talk of glory in the U.S. textbooks about the result of the war. The aftermath of the war is neglected in about 50% of the books reviewed in the United States. One version of the textbooks in the United States acknowledged that the war ended in stalemate. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was elected as president in 1952 and took office in 1953, agreed to a compromise to end the war during truce talks with North Korea and China. Japanese and Russian textbooks stated that the war continued with regional battles from 1951 until July 1953 when a cease-fire agreement was reached. Chinese textbooks hailed their victory in the war of defending China and North Korea against the United States. All Chinese textbooks accredited the signing of the cease-fire to the joint efforts and patriotic spirits of Chinese People's Volunteer Army and the North Korean Army. They declared that China and North Korea won the war against aggressors. North Korea declared their victory in their textbooks but did not mention Chinese's contribution. The South Korean textbook depicted the end of the war with a truce signed by UN-South Korean forces and North Korea in July, 1953. The textbook came to a conclusion that "the war, caused by North Korea, was a tragedy and a challenge to freedom and peace." North Korean and South Korea textbooks emphasize the war casualties and damage to

Korean people. Russian textbook talks about the war casualties and damage to all the countries involved.

The following textbook excerpts about the Korean War are taken from middle school textbooks of the six countries involved in the Korean War. History teachers can use these excerpts to help students better understand how the same historical event was depicted and perceived in different countries. We suggest that teachers divide the class into six groups and each group read textbook excerpts from one nation and then present the different perspectives in terms of the cause of the war, reasons for American and Chinese involvement in the war, and the result of the war (see Appendix).

Reference

- Altbach, P. (1991). Textbooks: The international dimension. In *The politics of the textbook*, ed. Michael Apple & Linda Christian-Smith, 242-258. New York: Routledge.
- Apple, M. and Christian-Smith, L. 1991. *The politics of the textbook*. New York: Routledge.
- Blohm, C. (1999). The forgotten war. *Cobblestone*. <http://korea50.army.mil/cobblestone/2.html> (accessed on July 2, 2008).
- DeRose, J. (2007). Comparing international textbooks to develop historical thinking. *Social Education*, 71(1), 36-39.
- Edwards, P. (2000). *To Acknowledge a War: The Korean War in American Memory*. Greenwood Press.
- Foster, S. & Nicholls, J. (2005). America in World War II: An analysis of history textbooks from England, Japan, Sweden, and the United States. *Journal of Curriculum and Instruction*, 20 (3), 214-233.
- Foster, S. (2006). Whose history? Portrayal of immigrant groups in U.S. history textbooks, 1800-present. In *What shall we tell the children? International perspectives on*

- school history textbooks* ed. Stuart Foster and Keith Crawford, 155-178. Greenwich: Information Age Publishing.
- Gordy, L., Hogan, J. & Pritchard, A. (2004). Assessing “Herstory” of WWII: Content analysis of high school history textbooks. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 37, 80-91.
- Hein, L. & Selden, M. (2000). *Censoring history: Citizenship and memory in Japan, Germany, and the United States*. M.E. Sharpe.
- Lindaman, D. & Ward, K. (2004). *History lessons: How textbooks from around the world portray U.S. history*. New York City: The New Press.
- Loewen, J. (1995). *Lies teachers told me: Everything your American history textbook got wrong*. New York City: A Touchstone Book. Simer & Schuster.
- Nichols, M. (2000). The Chinese communist intervention in the Korean War: An exercise in analyzing documents. *Magazine of History*, 14(3). 37-39.
- Roberts, P. (2000). New Light on a "Forgotten War": The Diplomacy of the Korean Conflict. Organization of American Historian (OAH) *Magazine of History*, 14(3).
<http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/korea/index.html>
- Stubbs, R. (1999). War and economic development: Export-oriented Industrialization in East and Southeast Asia. *Comparative Politics*, 31(3), 337-355.
- Tucker, S. (2000). Why Study the Korean War? Organization of American Historian (OAH) *Magazine of History*, 14(3). <http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/korea/index.html>
- Zhao, Y. & Hoge, J. (2006). Countering textbook distortion: War atrocities in Asia, 1937-1945. *Social Education*, 70(7), 422-428.

Appendix

A: Textbook Excerpt from North Korea (Translated from North Korean History Textbook)

Since 1947, the American imperialists have continuously staged many military invasions and they did the attacks 1,863 times in 1949 alone. The American imperialists have already planned to invade North Korea in 1949. However, when the enemies have been defeated by North Korean forces, they have to change their “plan of conquering the north” radically.

On January, 1950, the Secretary of the U.S. Army Kenneth C. Royal, the bastard, sneaked into South Korea and directed their “plan of conquering the north.” On February, Douglas MacArthur, the bastard, asked Lee, Sung Man, the insurgent, and the puppet Chief of Staff, the bastard, of South Korea to come to the United States’ Far East Command (FECOM) and commanded them to attack North Korea specifically.

On June 9, 11, and 13, the American imperialists created an awe-inspiring war atmosphere all over the south and along the 38th Parallel by proclaiming a Special Inspection Guard Decree, a National Emergency Decree, and a Semi-National Emergency Decree respectively. Crept into South Korea on June 18, a special envoy John Foster Dulles, with the U.S military advisors and high-ranking military officers of South Korea, inspected along the 38th Parallel and allowed to execute the “plan of conquering the north” in a foxhole near the foxhole near the line. He ordered Lee, Sung Man, the thief, to attack the north on June 25, 1950.

Dulles, the bastard, ordered his staff to make counterpropaganda that North Korea invaded the south first on July 25 and to attack the north. On the basis of careful plans and preparations, the American imperialists provoked the aggressive war on June 25, 1950. (pp. 18-19)

On June 25, 1950, the American imperialists ordered puppet South Korean forces to attack the north and from the early morning of June 26 the U.S. Marines were mobilized and on June 27, Truman ordered the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Air Force to engage the war. After that, the American imperialists, embarrassed by the counterattack of the North Korean forces,

ordered the U.S. Army to call out. (p. 19)

The American imperialists convened their allies to make an illegal resolution and condemned North Korea as aggressors, and ordered the North Koreans to withdraw beyond the 38th Parallel. The American imperialists formed U.N. forces with troops provided by the United States and 15 other puppet nations. The determination has already been made by the American imperialists beforehand. Therefore, the U.N. forces were formed. (p. 21) .

About 1,500 of modern airplanes such as the B-29, called Superfortress, were used in the early period of the war, over 10,000 in the last period of the war. The American imperialist committed criminal acts by using such weapons of mass destruction as biological weapons and chemical weapons.

According to an American imperialists' shortened report, at the very least, about 4,000,000 U.S. aggressors engaged in the Korean War. During the Korean War, the American imperialists spent 20,000,000,000 dollars of war expenditure. War supplies amounted to over 73,000 tons, 11th times of the supplies during the Pacific War. During the three-year period of war, the American imperialists appointed killer generals such as MacArthur, Ridgway, Clark, Walker, Almond, Vanfleet, Taylor, and Dean. (p. 20)

The American imperialists used cruel and barbaric tactics during the Korean War. Representative tactics are surprise attacks, large-scale landing operations, massive concentrated attacks, and scorched-land strategy. (p. 21)

With the defeats of the American imperialists in the war, on June 1951, in spite of being a super power, the American imperialists suggested a cease-fire agreement. Through the talk, the bastards tried to gain a “glorious” cease-fire by realizing their aggressive purposes. When the talk did not work, they provoked last-ditch massive attacks and threatened to use atomic bombs. However, their maneuvers were crushed by North Korea. The American imperialists, knelt down to North Korean peoples, were reluctant to sign the cease-fire agreement.

The representative massacre of people in Sincheon was committed by the American imperialists using cruel methods.... Hundreds of thousands of people were killed in North Korea by shooting, beating, hanging, skinning, dismembering, burying alive, cutting tongues

and breasts and so forth. In the south, about 1,000,000 of people were massacred by the American imperialists. They used atomic bombs and biological weapons to kill North Korean Prisoners of War (POWs).

The bastards destructed and plundered about 8,700 of factories, over 600,000 of houses, 5,000 of schools, thousands of hospitals, huge rice paddies, 6,700 of historical relics. During the four month period of the war in the south, about 50 cities and 12,400 of farming villages were burned to the ground. (p. 21-23)

Teacher's Note: This is a passage selected from North Korean Textbook entitled "*The American and Japanese Imperialists' Evildoing of Korean Invasion*". Education Books. (2005).

B. Textbook Excerpt: South Korea (Translated from South Korean History Textbook)

When the overthrow of the South Korean government through social confusion became too difficult, the North Korean communists switched to a stick-and-carrot strategy: seeming to offer peaceful negotiations, they were instead analyzing the right moments of attack and preparing themselves for it.

The North insisted on political negotiations between the leaders of the South and the North aiming toward a constitution of a unified government, and openly publicized their policy. By that time the American forces stationed in the South withdrew and announced that the peninsular would be excluded in America's first line of defense in the Far East. Taking advantage of this situation, the North Korean communists prepared themselves for war. Kim Il-sung secretly visited the Soviet Union and was promised the alliance of the Soviets and China in case of war.

Finally, at dawn on June 25th, 1950 the North began their southward aggression along the 38th parallel. Taken by surprise by these unexpected attacks, the army of the Republic of Korea (South Korean) fought courageously to defend the liberty of the country. But with the lack of soldiers and equipment, Seoul had to surrender and the South Korean forces were forced to retreat to a battle line south of the Nak-dong river. The armed provocation of the North Korean

communists brought the UN Security Council around the table. A decree denounced the North Korean military action as illegal and as a threat to peace, and a decision was made to help the South. The UN army constituted of the armies of 16 countries – among them the United States, Great Britain, and France – joined the South Korean forces in the battle against the North.

Teacher's Note: This passage is selected from Kim, Doojin's *Korean History: Senior High*. Seoul: Dae Han Textbook Col, 2001, p. 199.

C. Textbook Excerpt: The United States. (Selected from American History Textbook)

The first major proxy war erupted in 1950. At the end of World War II, the Korean Peninsula was occupied by both American and Soviet troops. Unable to agree on what kind of government the Korean people should have, the superpowers divided the country. The Soviets installed a communist government in North Korea, while in South Korea the Americans encouraged a government that favored capitalism.

In 1950, North Korean troops armed with Soviet tanks and weapons overran most of the South Korea. Their goal was to unite the country under a communist government. President Truman ordered the U.S. military to support South Korea. The United Nations also took action by calling on member nations to assist South Korea. In all, 15 nations sent more than half a million troops to Korea. More than 90 percent of the UN forces were American.

The UN forces pushed the communist invaders back into North Korea almost as far as its border with China. At that point, 300, 000 Chinese soldiers poured into North Korea and drove the UN troops back to South Korea. Fearing that the struggle in Korea could widen into a world war, Truman pushed for a peace settlement.

The agreement ending the Korean War left Korea divided as it has been before the war. Americans were pleased that communism had been contained in North Korea without starting a third world war. But the costs of containment were high. About 54,000 Americans died in a war

that cost the nation over \$20 billion. More than a million Koreans also lost their lives.

Teacher’s Note: This is a passage selected from the U.S. Textbook entitled “*The United States*. (2002). Teachers Curriculum Institute. 442.

D. Textbook Excerpt: Japan (Translated from Japanese History Textbook)

While the Cold War was worsening, war finally broke out in 1950 between the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (the Korean War). As the North Korean army advanced southward rapidly, the U.N. Security Council, with the Soviet Union delegate absent, decided to give military support to South Korea. The United Nations forces, consisting mainly of United States troops, advanced northward to near the Chinese-Korean border. China sent a powerful volunteer army to North Korea. Subsequently, fierce battles raged around the 38th parallel; in 1953, a cease-fire agreement was concluded at long last.

During the Korean War, American bases on the main island of Japan and on Okinawa were used, and a vast amount of military supplies were procured in Japan. The effect was an upswing in the Japanese economy and a speeding of recovery.

Teacher’s Note: This is a passage selected from Lindaman, D. & Ward H. (2004) *History Lessons: How textbooks from around the world portray U.S. History* p. 271. The particular passage was selected from Japanese Textbook entitled “*Japan in Modern History*”. Tokyo: International Society for Educational Information, 1994, 183. 185.

E. Textbook Excerpt: Russia (Translated from Russian History Textbook)

Stalin sided on North Korean leader Kim, Il Sung, who tried to control the whole Peninsula. The Korean War was the first military confrontation. While the Soviet Union supported the north, the U.S. the south. The war broke out during summer in 1950 when the

North Korean troops, armed with Soviet Union-made weapons, invaded the South Korean territory and they drove the enemies down to the far south of the Peninsular. (p. 189)

Under the banner of the U.N., the U.S., prepared for military operations, hurried to support the south. On the fall of 1950, the U.S. troops attempted the large-scale landing operation in Incheon. The North Korean troops were in a position of defense by the U.S. troops. They were forced to retreat to the 38th Parallel and the Peninsula was divided into North and South Korea along the 38th Parallel. The U.S. and South Korean forces pushed the Communist troops up to the Chinese border. The U.S. military airplanes flew over the Chinese and Soviet Union's border areas. At Kim, Il Sung's request, the Soviet Union's military airplanes came to control the air from November in 1950. (p. 190)

China involved in the war on November in 1950. About one million Chinese army, officially known as the Chinese People's Volunteer Troops, pushed down to the 38th Parallel. The front was in a stalemate there. The nature of the war at the time was a war of position. While General Douglas MacArthur tried to attack China with atomic bombs, President Harry Truman did not allow the planned operation. He worried that the attack will cause the Soviet Union to involve in the war. Instead, the fighting between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was engaged in the air. During the war, the aces of the Soviet Union shot down 1,300 of U.S. military airplanes and 345 vice versa. (p. 190)

Truce talks, started in 1951, ended the war in 1953. The boundary line between North and South Korea was set near the 38th Parallel due to the cease fire. The first showdown between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the "Cold War" period finished like that. (p. 190)

Teacher's Note: This is a passage selected from Russian Textbook entitled "*Russia and the World*". (2005). Dropa Publishing Company.

F. Textbook Excerpt: China (Selected from Chinese History Textbook)

人民教育出版社或北京师范大学出版社