

The Japanese History Textbook Controversy

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Cartoon by Dave Simonds for the Economist

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Introduction

The content of Japanese history textbooks has been the subject of a long standing debate since the end of World War II. While previously a domestic issue, the textbook controversy became an international issue in 1982. In a nutshell, the Japanese History textbook controversy centers on concerns regarding the Japanese whitewashing of history. The standard claim has been that there is a government agenda to revise textbooks through omissions or denials of key events that pertain to Japan's wartime aggression towards Asian peoples, and in particular, the Chinese and Korean peoples.



Within this debate, the Nanking Massacre and the “Comfort women” issue have emerged as hot button issues. Any changes and omissions related to these historical events are the most likely to be perceived as signs of revisionism and denialism under an allegedly Japanese nationalist agenda. Indeed, Japanese nationalist revisionism and the denial of Japanese atrocities during World War II by right wing movements have garnered worldwide criticism and condemnation, as well as from within Japanese society.

Before entering the local textbook adoption procedure, Japanese textbooks require approval by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). During MEXT screening process, authors and publishers may be required to revise textbook content in order to get approval.

As far as history textbooks are concerned, it is not too difficult to see why this review process might be interpreted as “state censorship” or even “self-censorship” undertaken by publishers and authors. However, scholars who have conducted research on this controversy, have pointed out that the matter is much more complicated than it appears. Roger Jeans warns, “(T)he struggle over textbooks in Japan is not a simple, one-sided matter” (Jeans, 184). Similarly, Peter Cave observes that even some of the research on the issue contributes to the oversimplification (Cave, 578).

It is worth noting, for example, that Inega Saburo, a textbook author who fought against the MEXT from 1960s to 1990s, successfully secured a court ruling declaring that the Ministry’s demand to delete descriptions of Japanese wartime atrocities was illegal. Saburo’s petition, which ultimately sought to declare the entire process of textbook certification unconstitutional, was rejected by the court (Jeans 184). This tends to demonstrate that there can be no true winner or loser in this so-called history war. Saburo’s successful challenge in the first instance disproves the theory that rightists have captured the entire government.

Objective

This review of literature discusses the Japanese history textbook controversy and examines the findings of ten studies, in order to introduce a more holistic view of this complex debate. The problem with framing the Japanese textbook controversy simply as a case of Japanese denial under the auspices of a government agenda, is that it ignores local progressive actors that actively resist revisionist political agendas in Japan, as well as overlooks the contemporary geopolitical context. It also portrays, quite problematically, the government of Japan as a single monolithic entity.



Photo of Japanese soldier's diary collected by Kenji Ono

Bukh, Alexander. "Japan's history textbooks debate: National identity in narratives of victimhood and victimization." *Asian Survey*, vol. 47, no. 5, 2007, pp. 683-704.

Bukh's study covers an analysis of textbook content over a period of 20 years, and classifies narratives into those of victimhood or victimization. The article seeks new ways of interpreting motivations behind textbook content writing styles in Japan, and in this way departs from an automatic assumption of bias. Victimhood narratives refer to events like the "Bombing of Tokyo" and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, while victimization narratives refer to atrocities committed by the Japanese such as the "Nanking Massacre" and the "comfort women" issue. Bukh introduces the concept of "healthy nationalism," as one which rationalizes the victimhood narratives that have often received criticism from the international community. Rather than simply interpreting these narratives as the whitewashing of Japan's war crimes, Bukh argues that narratives and statements reflecting national victimhood enable the Japanese to take a stance against militarism. He also notes that many authors adopted a factual historiographic writing style preferring rational description and avoiding appeals to emotion.

By re-reading victimhood narratives in history textbooks as Japan's way of rejecting militarism while still maintaining a nationalist position, Bukh invites readers to view textbook writing from the perspective of Japanese identity formation. Bukh foresees changes in future textbook writing styles and predicts that they will likely emerge as a result of generational change. The author stresses, however, that his study does not engage a deeper analysis of the effects of international and domestic "textbook watching," nor of academic activism since the analysis focuses generally on wartime historical narratives in Japanese textbooks.

Cave, Peter. "Japanese colonialism and the Asia-Pacific War in Japan's history textbooks: changing representations and their causes." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2013, pp. 542-580.

This article addresses the limitations of current studies on Japan history textbook issue. The author argues that there are other contributing factors (besides government pressure), that can explain the reduction in coverage of Japanese wartime atrocities in junior high-school history textbooks. For his study, Cave interviewed different stakeholders of the controversy to gather firsthand information. His respondents included textbook publishers, authors, MEXT officials, representatives of civil society groups. Cave also examined the content of textbooks that had gained a significant market share and compared different editions to see if there were any notable changes from 1992 to 2005. In addition, Cave analysed the relationship between market share and textbook content.

The author outlines an alternative explanation to the changes in textbook content, and discusses these changes in relation to the 2002 curriculum reform promoting independent learning and thinking. Noting that these changes can also be read in the light of a marketing strategy, Cave stresses that the increased influence of the local textbook adoption process means that the struggle is no longer a matter between liberals on one hand, and the state (which wishes to control textbook content) on the other. It also involves other forces like the market. Cave challenges common theories, which automatically equate the reduction in narratives on Japan atrocities to the practice of self-censorship. As Cave mentions, while some publishers may have cut narratives regarding Japanese atrocities, they actually adopted innovative approaches such as the incorporation of textbook content from other countries (Indonesia for example), in order to encourage critical thinking. Overall, Cave's conclusion, drawn from interviews, textbook content analysis and market share study provides a compelling argument about the complexity of factors around textbook revisions in Japan. Cave's contribution is notable and his key insight of resisting oversimplification in making sense of what factors into textbook revision provides important lessons for future researchers as well.

lenaga, Saburo. "The glorification of war in Japanese education." *International Security*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1993, pp. 113-133.

lenaga Saburo challenged the MEXT from 1960s to 1990s before Japanese courts. The article draws lessons from lenaga's direct dealings with MEXT officials, and his actual experience of the screening process. lenaga describes what he and other textbook authors saw as the state's attempt (acting through the MEXT), to glorify war and to censor authors through the textbook screening process. lenaga outlines the significant changes that took place in Japanese politics and society just before the outbreak of WWII, and how Japan's turn to militarism can also be traced historically to the education system when the state dictated the content of school textbooks and influenced the curriculum. lenaga links the government's retention of the prerogative to scrutinize textbooks after the occupation period directly to the intensification of state-control over textbook content that started in the mid-1950s. The attempt to draw a direct line from the pre-war militarist influence of the government to contemporary times is rather problematic. Changes in international relationships and politics are mentioned as contributing factors to the history textbook controversy as well. For example, the outbreak of Cold War brought about a shift in global alliances. The United States supported and integrated Japan into an anti-communist military bloc. In fact, rearming Japan in 1950 was directed by the United States with the formation of the National Police Reserve, which eventually developed into the Self Defense Force in 1954.

Saburo's contribution is significant and draws insights from his direct involvement in a lawsuit against the MEXT – one in which, ultimately the court ruled that the MEXT's act of limiting the mention of Japan's war atrocities as illegal. In this way, the article provides readers with a compelling account of resistance against what textbook authors saw as an attempt by MEXT officials to glorify war. Because the article mainly includes events up to the 1990s, it does not discuss how progressive textbooks became more influential from 1993 onwards, especially following the end of the Liberal Democratic Party single party rule over the government. For example, the Murayama statement encouraged authors and publishers to include narratives on the comfort women issue during the next 10 years.

Jeans, Roger B. "Victims or victimizers? Museums, textbooks, and the war debate in contemporary Japan." *The Journal of Military History*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2005, pp. 149-195.

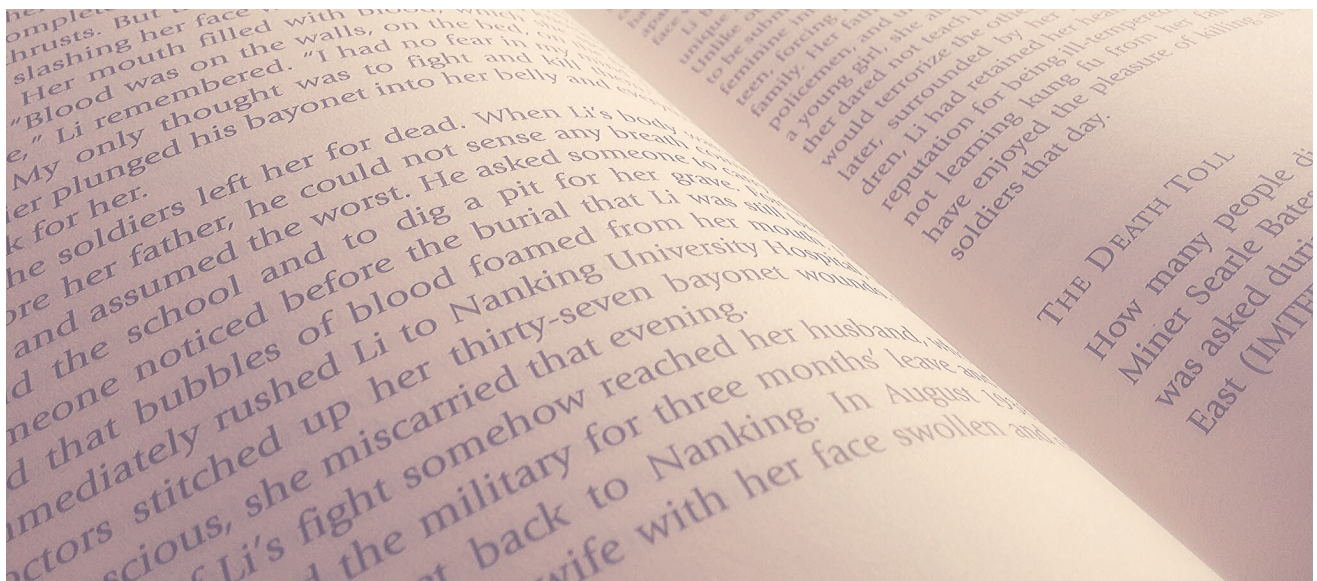
This article illustrates the complexity of the history textbook controversy in Japan and helps to clarify why there is no single template or master narrative that dominates textbooks in Japan, as far as World War II events are concerned. According to Jeans, the situation may be better understood as a continuous struggle between opposing views. Jeans analyzed changes in the views reflected in textbooks alongside of changing policies towards history textbooks from the 1950s and onwards. One of Jean's interesting observations is that nationalist ideas entered the mainstream in 1998, with the publication of nationalistic manga (Japanese comics). At the same time, the author notes that countervailing views from the other side, like the campaign in 2001 organized by the "Textbook Network" against the adoption of a nationalist textbook by holding lectures, distributing leaflets and introducing resolution and appeals to local assemblies, are noteworthy. Diplomatic contributing factors to the controversy, like the protest by Chinese and Koreans in 1982 which led to the formation of the "Neighbouring Countries Clause", are also mentioned to support his analysis.

Because it steers clear of an oversimplification of the stakes and the sides involved in the textbook controversy, Jean's approach facilitates a critical approach to the issue. As the author mentioned, revisionists are still a minority in Japan albeit, they are trying to gain the majority support. In this way, the article introduces an important perspective about the textbook controversy in Japan – one that is not as pessimistic as those which ascribe complete control by a monolithic government. The article's comprehensive and thoughtful consideration of changes and continuity in Japanese views provides readers a better understanding of the controversy.

Koide, Reiko. "Critical New Stage in Japan's Textbook Controversy." *The Asia-Pacific Journal Japan Focus*, vol. 12, no. 13, 2014, pp. 1-21.

This article assesses the influence of both the Japanese civic right-wing nationalists and the Japanese government on the adoption of history textbooks and their content in Japan. It discusses the activities of Japanese revisionists since the late 1950s in great detail. Despite the low adoption rate of nationalist texts, the author argues that the promotion of ideas which perpetuate a masochistic historical view into popular discourse is significant. The article also highlights government actions that are closely related to the nationalist campaigns of right-wing forces. The decline in market share of several progressive publishers, including the Jikkyo Shuppan and Nihon Shoseki, are also mentioned as factors which explain the growing influence of the right-wing nationalists.

This article provides useful insights about the role that Japanese right-wing nationalists have played in shaping the history textbook issue, as well as assesses their impact on textbook adoption. It does this by providing a detailed account of the movement's actions and its influence over the past few decades. In this way, the article outlines the connections between civic nationalist agendas and government decisions. Because the article mainly emphasizes the domestic context in Japan, it lacks a perspective on the roles that other countries (like United States, China and Korea) play in this debate.



Detail from Iris Chang's book, *The Rape of Nanking*

Nelson, John K. "Tempest in a textbook: a report on the new middle-school history textbook in Japan." *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2002, pp. 129-148.

This article focuses on the controversial revisionist textbook "New History Textbook, published by the nationalist group "Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (Tsukuru Kai)." It provides a close analysis of how the revisionists portray Japanese history. The textbook is not only controversial because of the portion on wartime atrocities, but also because its nationalistic viewpoint reflects an outright rejection of historical facts. Baseless assertions are pervasive in the text.

This review provides readers key information and excerpts from the textbook, to illustrate the tenets of the nationalistic point of view that local activists seek to popularize in Japanese society. This article helps readers to understand the motivation of the civic right-wingers and revisionists in Japan through its analysis of what the movement considers the "correct" textbook. Using theoretical relativism to argue for a position of moral relativism, nationalists confuse the audience and also distort the value of empiricism. They argue that no one can ever know the entire truth about the past and therefore every history is judged subjectively. They then conclude that there is no one true account. The article discusses the disastrous impacts that this textbook can have on students. In spite of the possible serious consequences of adoption, it is worth noting that the adoption rate among schools and educators of this text in Japan remains low.

Schneider, Claudia. "The Japanese history textbook controversy in East Asian perspective." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 617, no. 1, 2008, pp. 107-122.

This article discusses the history textbook controversy in Japan by reflecting on changes in East Asia over the past two decades. The author outlines the textbook controversy in the context of developments within both the international and domestic political contexts of China, South Korea and Japan. The author also assesses the unique influences that shape history textbooks, as well as their political and ideological influence on the country's values. The article hones in on the influential role of mass media and considers it as one of the triggers of the controversy. Noting how media coverage of the issue links countries together, with reports often drawing attention to the others' reaction, Schneider points out how such coverage shapes the issue in different ways. For example, media reporting about how the MEXT allegedly demanded the substitution of the term "invasion" with the more neutral term "advance" to describe the Japanese occupation sparked large scale protests in both China and South Korea in 1982. This turned out to be a case of misreporting, as there turned out to be no such demands from the MEXT. However, this misreporting was widely believed by the public, especially in the countries involved, as well as some scholars. The arising controversy became the major foundation for the MEXT's adoption of the "Neighbouring Countries Clause," a proviso in the textbook authorisation process that requires textbooks to now demonstrate an understanding of historical events involving neighbouring Asian countries.

The author introduces a different political perspective of the history of the textbook issue by considering international relations, and also takes local conditions in neighbouring countries into account. This article takes a broad view of the textbook controversy, and tries to see things in a global context. Schneider's take on the history textbook controversy goes beyond the domestic situation in Japan, and this is reflected in her arguments about the different political meanings that history textbooks can have on different scales and contexts. It provides a complex picture of the controversy by considering factors leading to sociopolitical constellations and changes that go beyond debates about historical facts, and in this way provides a compelling analysis of the topic.



Myitkyina, Burma (Myanmar), on Aug. 14, 1944, Signal Corps Photo by Frank Shearer

Sekiguchi, Rylan. "School textbooks and East Asia's history wars: A comparative approach to teaching about perspective, bias, and historical memory." *Education About Asia*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2016, pp. 54-56.

This article reviews the "Divided Memories and Reconciliation" research project and provides teachers with some insight on how history education can adopt similar comparative approaches to teach their students. The author takes excerpts from the textbooks of different countries that mention the same historical events in order to draw comparisons on the significance of the event from the varying perspectives of particular countries. This way, the author believes that students can hone their critical thinking skills as well as their analysis of primary source documents by studying different historical views.

Rather than taking a position in the textbook debates, the article uses different sources as teaching resources to facilitate teaching and learning about perspectives in history education. The author demonstrates how the application of textbook materials enhances students' learning of theory of knowledge. Examples of classroom activities are also provided for a better understanding of the strategy. The article also presents how history education should be able to teach students to think, instead of delivering them bland facts. Encouraging students to think, and eventually leading them to realize that history unavoidably reflects a bias because historical text is culturally embedded is important in any study of the textbook controversy.

Selden, Mark, and Nozaki, Yoshiko. "Japanese textbook controversies, nationalism, and historical memory: Intra-and inter-national conflicts." *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, vol. 7, no. 24, 2009, pp. 1-24.

This article provides detailed account of the role of the MEXT screening process in the controversy, and argues that the Japanese government exercises control on textbook content through it. The authors begin with a discussion of the shifting of political and ideological battleground – from the 1946 Constitution, textbook content adoption from 1955 onwards. Selden focuses on three major attacks launched by Japan's neo-nationalists on school textbooks in 1955, the late 1970s and the mid-1990s. This discussion helps to illustrate the influence of the MEXT in the screening process for textbooks through the decades. The article provides key examples of how MEXT screening (as reflected in MEXT original comments) historically demonstrated a tendency to excuse or whitewash Japan's wartime atrocities.

Because the article covers important political developments in Japan, including key policy decisions since the American occupation, it is very useful for gaining an understanding of the links between political change in Japan and textbook controversy. However, the article focuses mainly on influence of Japanese politics and includes very little about international geopolitics. In this way, the article tends to over represent the MEXT screening process and its influence in the controversy.

Sneider, Daniel. "Divided Memories: History Textbooks and the Wars in Asia." Nippon.com, <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/a00703/>. Accessed 10 July 2018.

This article begins by noting the difficulty of reaching a consensus regarding wartime history among the different countries that were involved in the conflict. It then argues that textbooks used in Japan are actually less patriotic in comparison to the textbooks in other countries. The author and his colleagues led the “Divided Memories and Reconciliation” research project to see how wartime history is portrayed across different countries: China, Taiwan, South Korea, United States and Japan. The authors compared and contrasted passages of the same historical events drawing on the most widely used high school history textbooks in the above mentioned countries. Textbooks used by elite schools and college-preparatory level courses were also analysed.

The study provides a clear and straightforward comparison between textbooks to illustrate how the history of war is shaped differently across different contexts. Although the article states that Japanese textbooks appear relatively neutral when compared with other textbooks, it also stresses that Japan’s position as the losing party in the war contributes to this. However, because the study mainly focused on high school textbooks and did not include junior high school textbooks, there is some question on the representativeness of Japanese textbooks examined. Compared to high school textbooks, there is less freedom in the process of selecting or adopting junior high school text books in Japan. Schneider describes the low-key treatment of the war by Japanese textbooks as pacifism, but the question is whether such a “neutral” outlook or perspective is one that best facilitates historical consciousness.

Trial of Captain Sonai, Japanese war criminal, Batavia, NIOD (Dutch Archives)



Guide Questions:

These guide questions can be useful discussion and/or research questions for an essay assignment or article/book review. We highly recommend Inega Saburo's "The glorification of war in Japanese education." *International Security*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1993, pp. 113-133, paired with this resource.

1. What is the key issue surrounding the "Japanese Textbook Controversy?"
2. How did the JTC become an international issue? In which countries has the controversy had the most impact and why?
3. What are some of the factors that shape or frame the Japanese peoples' way of remembering World War II? *Can you identify predominant themes or frames in the way your own textbook teaches Canadian history?*
4. How has the media shaped the JTC issue? Has it been constructive?
5. What do you think about the textbook review process by the Japanese Ministry of Education? Is it reasonable for the MEXT to require such a review process? Why or why not? Is there a textbook review process for the books you use in your school?

Teaching Concepts

- Historical text/Cultural Context
- State Narratives of History/Identity
- Multiple Historical perspectives/Complexity
- Cross-cultural dialogues / Critical Media Literacy