

School Textbooks and East Asia's "History Wars"

A Comparative Approach to Teaching About Perspective, Bias, and Historical Memory

By Rylan Sekiguchi

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

—William Faulkner

As EAA readers are well-aware, the question of historical memory is considerably salient in the context of East Asia. History—especially twentieth-century history—remains a recurring source of debate and contention in the region. At times, such disagreements have escalated into rancorous national and international disputes, even sparking violence and disrupting normal international relations, economic activity, and individuals' daily lives.



News headlines from recent years. Historical memory—especially of the World War II period—remains an extremely contentious topic in East Asia. Image created in PowerPoint by author from various news sources including *The Economist* and *The New York Times*.

Many of these disputes have typically focused on Japanese textbooks' portrayal of the World War II era. Critics see certain Japanese textbooks as evidence of growing Japanese nationalism and a failure to assume responsibility for wartime deeds. Defenders respond that these most controversial textbooks represent just a tiny fraction of those in use, and that the vast majority adequately address Japan's role in the war.

But it is not just a Japanese issue. Textbooks elsewhere in East Asia have attracted heated opposition, too. In the past few years alone, domestic textbook issues have ignited massive protests in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea, some of which lasted weeks and drew tens of thousands of demonstrators into the streets. The ardor of these disputes over historical memory suggests that the past is, indeed, far from dead.

These so-called "history wars" are an area ripe for exploration in the classroom. Not only can they serve as a rich source of alternative perspectives and narratives of the past with which students may be unfamiliar, but the fundamental issues they raise—for example, about the reliability of history textbooks, the intended goals of formal history education, and the question of "how we know what we know"—can make these controversies a powerful teaching tool, particularly for instructors of history and theory

of knowledge courses. Analyzing these disagreements over history allows students an ideal opportunity to consider the nature of historical knowledge, practice their document analysis and historical thinking skills, and reexamine their own understanding of the past.

The "Divided Memories and Reconciliation" Research Project

The "Divided Memories and Reconciliation" research project began at Stanford University's Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center (APARC) in 2007 to compare the most prevalently used history textbooks from five Pacific Rim societies: China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the United States. How do these textbooks treat sensitive episodes in twentieth-century history? Do they present similar or dissimilar interpretations of history? Is there wide agreement on historical facts, or are there many contradictory claims? Scholars from the five target societies examined nineteen textbooks to explore these questions. Their goal was to better understand how wartime historical memory is being shaped today—not only in Japan (the most frequent subject of East Asia's textbook controversies), but in the other four societies as well.



Five of the nineteen history textbooks analyzed in the "Divided Memories and Reconciliation" research project. Photo courtesy of author.

The research project's findings—along with translated and reprinted excerpts from the nineteen textbooks—are published in the scholarly work *History Textbooks and the Wars in Asia*, edited by Gi-Wook Shin and Daniel C. Snider. The Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE) collaborated closely with APARC to develop a companion curriculum unit, *Divided Memories: Comparing History Textbooks*, for classroom use.

Perhaps surprisingly, the researchers generally did not find disagreement among the textbooks on historical facts (with some notable exceptions). However, they did find sharp contrasts in which facts were selected, emphasized, and omitted, and how those facts were incorporated into an overarching historical narrative.

For example, compare the three passages on Nanjing below, each excerpted from a different textbook—American, Japanese, or Chinese. Can you guess the country of origin for each textbook excerpt?

Textbook A:

The crimes committed by Japanese troops in the areas they occupied were so many that they could never be recorded completely. Japanese troops carried out barbarian slaughters in occupied areas. In December 1937, after the invading Japanese troops occupied the Chinese capital of Nanjing, they carried out a well organized and planned six-week-long slaughter of innocent residents and Chinese troops who had already put aside their weapons. The victims numbered more than 300,000.

Textbook B:

The Japanese Army continued to fight fierce battles with the Chinese Army, and in December they had occupied the Chinese Nationalist capital of Nanjing, where a reported 200,000 people, including soldiers, prisoners, and noncombatants, were killed, and incited numerous instances of looting, arson, and rape (Nanjing Massacre).

Textbook C:

Japanese troops in China had killed hosts of civilians, often after torturing them, when they captured cities that had tried to hold out. In Nanking, for example, as many as 300,000 were killed after the city had fallen.

Aside from the obvious disagreement in death count (ranging from “a reported 200,000” to “more than 300,000”), these passages do not actually contradict each other. Nevertheless, their differing tones and narratives convey starkly divergent impressions of the events in Nanjing. In this respect, these passages are fairly representative of the more than 100 excerpts analyzed; even when they agree on facts, they tell different stories.¹ (Answers: Textbook A: China. Textbook B: Japan. Textbook C: United States.)

As a second example, compare the three passages on the atomic bombings of Japan below, each excerpted from a different textbook—Taiwanese, South Korean, or Chinese. Can you guess the country of origin for each textbook excerpt?

Textbook D:

Early in the thirty-fourth year [1945], the Nationalists, armed with US-made equipment, waged war in Xiangxi in April and May, dealing a heavy blow against Japan. From then onwards, the Nationalist army began to shift from a defending to attacking stance and launched offensives in targeted areas. With the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the US, Japan approached a dead end and announced its unconditional surrender on August 14.

Textbook E:

On August 6 and 9, 1945, the US respectively attacked Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atomic bombs, which caused the deaths of 300,000 people. On August 8, the USSR declared war against Japan and surrounded and annihilated the Japanese troops in northeastern China. At the same time, anti-Japanese military forces and people in China launched a general counterattack on Japanese troops. With nowhere to go, on September 2 Japan formally signed the instrument of unconditional surrender. The Anti-Fascist World War II concluded with success.

Textbook F:

[No mention of the atomic bombings]

Again, these passages do not directly contradict each other, yet they tell quite different stories. Of particular interest to American educators is probably Textbook F, since it tells no story at all about the atomic bombings—an event that, in the American mind, is among the most significant of the twentieth century.² How can a history textbook possibly leave it out? Such omissions, in and of themselves, teach us about how historical memory is being shaped in these societies.³ (Answers: Textbook D: Taiwan. Textbook E: China. Textbook F: South Korea.)

As a final example, compare the three passages below regarding comfort women, each excerpted from a Chinese, Japanese, or South Korean textbook. Textbook G:

The reality of comfort women:

Imperial Japan, as it extended its wars of aggression since around 1932, took Korean, Chinese, and Taiwanese women to its military bases under the slogan of “preventing rapes committed by soldiers, checking for venereal infections, and stopping a leakage of military secrets.” Deprived of their human rights, the comfort women were forced to provide sexual work throughout imperial Japan’s occupied territories including Manchuria, China, Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, and various islands in the Pacific, Japan, and Korea.

Those who did not return to their native countries after the war were deserted in the fields, forced to commit suicide, or were slaughtered. The comfort women who were lucky enough to come back to their hometowns also had to suffer from social alienation, a sense of shame, and weakened physical conditions throughout the rest of their lives.

Textbook H:

Many women from Korea were sent to Japanese factories as volunteer corps or the battlefield as comfort women.

Textbook I:

[No mention of comfort women]

These passages do not conflict with each other factually, yet their inclusion and omission of information leave the reader with very different impressions. Of the three textbooks, only Textbook G devotes any real attention to the topic, explicitly naming and describing the conscription, work, and ultimate fates of the comfort women. By contrast, Textbook H mentions comfort women only in passing, and Textbook I makes no mention of them at all. Even ignoring the excerpts’ tone, diction, and narrative, just a simple comparison of word count can suggest the relative importance of this issue in each society. Can you guess the country of origin for each passage? (Answers: Textbook G: South Korea. Textbook H: Japan. Textbook I: China).⁴

Classroom Connections

The multinational comparative nature of the “Divided Memories” project provides a golden opportunity to help students recognize history textbooks—and history itself—as things that are constructed. By leveraging passages like those above, we can inspire and empower students to identify bias in the world around them, participate in critical historical inquiry, and develop a better understanding of the processes of interpreting, constructing, and transmitting history.

Such an exploration of East Asia’s “history wars” can fit especially well into courses like AP World History and AP US History that specifically aim to sharpen students’ document analysis and historical thinking skills.⁵ For example, the nine essential historical thinking skills enumerated in the AP curriculum frameworks—ranging from comparison and contextualization to argumentation—align nicely with the learning objectives of the “Divided Memories” project. The AP’s “historical interpretation” skill in particular echoes a core objective of the project, affirming that students should consider how the “contexts in which individual historians work...

shape their interpretations of past events.” By extension, students can also reflect on how their own interpretations of the past are shaped by context and by their consumption of these constructed histories.

A similar case can be made in the IB context for incorporating textbook comparisons into IB’s history courses. Other IB subjects in group three of the Diploma Programme (individuals and societies), like global politics or psychology, may likewise benefit from this kind of exercise. Outside of a history course, however, this material can be especially effective in teaching theory of knowledge (TOK), a course that at its heart asks students to “reflect on the nature of knowledge, and on how we know what we claim to know.”⁶ TOK’s principal concern with epistemology dovetails well with the historiographical concerns that naturally arise in exploring East Asia’s history disputes (e.g., perspective, reliability, and truth). Particularly when studying history as a specific “area of knowledge” in the TOK classroom, these epistemological and historiographical concerns overlap and link together strongly. For example, students grapple with knowledge questions like “What is a fact in history?” and “Is it possible for historical writing to be free from perspective?”—questions that are as central to TOK as they are to the academic discipline of history.⁷

When all is said and done, we eventually want to lead students to a fundamental and challenging insight: the existence of inevitable culturally based perspectives that affect their own historical knowledge. This can be an especially difficult truth for students to confront, but it is also an intellectually invaluable one. We can try to encourage this insight through exercises that lay bare the subjective nature of students’ historical memory.

As a quick example, we can engage students in a brief game of “Name That War.” Can your students identify the wars listed below?

1. The North American Intervention
2. The Victorious Fatherland Liberation War
3. The War of Northern Aggression
4. The American War

Students should consider how these war names illustrate the different perspectives and biases of different groups of people—and of us. How might these terms (and the terms by which we know these wars) influence the perceptions of someone who is learning about these events for the first time? (*Answers: 1: Mexican–American War, as known in Mexico. 2: Korean War, as known in North Korea. 3: American Civil War, as known historically in the South. 4: Việt Nam War, as known in Việt Nam.*)

As another example, we can show students the fictitious textbook excerpt below.

Surprise Attack



Early in the morning, a large force of fighter and bomber aircraft was launched from the carriers of the imperial Japanese Navy. The surprise attack that followed was devastating, destroying many of the harbor’s ships and aircraft, and much of its infrastructure.

A fictitious history textbook passage. Image created in PowerPoint by author using “Neptuna Explosion February 19, 1942” on *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/h8ddorn>.

After reading the text aloud, we can ask students to identify the historical event that is depicted. American students, given their familiarity with US history, will almost always recognize the event as the Japanese attack of Pearl Harbor, Hawai’i, on December 7, 1941. But that is not the correct answer.

The depicted event is actually the Japanese air raid of Darwin, Australia, on February 19, 1942—a similar but completely separate World War II battle.

We can then ask students to reflect on their mistake. Why did they reflexively think of Pearl Harbor and not Darwin? What does their mistake reveal about their perspective of history? How objective is their historical knowledge? By forcing students to face these questions head on, we prompt them to contemplate and acknowledge their own biases, and reflect upon their extant assumptions. Ultimately, by creating a sense of disequilibrium for students and exposing them to multiple perspectives, we hope to lead them to a place of greater self-awareness and open-mindedness for the perspectives of others. ■

FURTHER READING

Chirot, Daniel, Gi-Wook Shin, and Daniel Sneider, eds. *Confronting Memories of World War II: European and Asian Legacies*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014.

College Board. “AP United States History: Course and Exam Description Updated Fall 2015.” *Collegeboard.org*. 2015.

College Board. “AP World History: Curriculum Framework 2016–2017.” *Collegeboard.org*. 2015.

International Baccalaureate. “Theory of Knowledge Guide: Areas of Knowledge.” *IBO.org*. <http://tinyurl.com/na55qp8>.

Shin, Gi-Wook, and Daniel C. Sneider, eds. *History Textbooks and the Wars in Asia: Divided Memories*. New York: Routledge, 2011.

Sneider, Daniel. “Divided Memories: History Textbooks and the Wars in Asia.” *Nippon.com*, May 29, 2012.

—. “Textbooks and Patriotic Education: Wartime Memory Formation in China and Japan.” *Asia-Pacific Review* 20, no.1 (2013): 35–54.

NOTES

1. An interesting side note: The Japanese textbooks were found to be “muted, neutral, and almost bland”—a far cry from the common perception of Japanese textbooks as nationalist propaganda. For further explanation and other findings from the research, see the Further Reading section.
2. The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were named the top news event of the century in a poll by *Newseum* of prominent American journalists and scholars. See “Top News of 20th Century,” *CBSNews.com*, February 24, 1999, <http://tinyurl.com/zvem4tn>.
3. Of all the South Korean textbooks involved in the study (of which Textbook F was one), none mentioned the atomic bombings. This contrasts starkly with the Japanese and US textbooks, all of which included extensive sections on the atomic bombings.
4. None of the Chinese textbooks involved in the study mentioned comfort women. This may surprise readers, given the fact that many comfort women came from China. This example points to a broader truth about the study’s findings: the inclusion and omission of information in textbooks does not always follow conventional wisdom or common assumption.
5. AP European History is not as good a fit for the “Divided Memories” curricular materials, given the materials’ specific focus on American and Asian textbooks. However, this issue of wartime memory is explored in the European context (and compared to the Asian context) in *Confronting Memories of World War II: European and Asian Legacies*, eds. Daniel Chirot, Gi-Wook Shin, and Daniel Sneider (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), a scholarly work born out of the Divided Memories and Reconciliation research project.
6. “What is TOK?” at the International Baccalaureate’s website at <http://tinyurl.com/p2sk5tc>.
7. Other relevant knowledge questions appear on the *International Baccalaureate* website page “Theory of Knowledge Guide: Areas of Knowledge” under “History” at <http://tinyurl.com/na55qp8>.

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