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The Abe Government and the 2014 Screening of Japanese Junior High School History Textbooks

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Introduction by the Asia-Pacific Journal

School textbooks constitute one significant arena in which dominant, oppositional, and alternative forces in society contest the past to shape the future. Textbook controversies can be a sign of democracy—or they can indicate efforts to suppress democracy. As Tawara Yoshifumi meticulously documents, recently announced results of the Japanese government's school textbook screening show clearly the Abe administration's success in imposing its views of such controversial issues as the forced prostitution of the wartime Japanese military (the ianfu or 'comfort women') and the Nanjing Massacre, as well as territorial disputes with China and Korea, nations that Japan colonized or invaded in the first half of the twentieth century.

Japan's governmental screening of school textbooks began in 1948, when the nation was still under Allied occupation. Since then, the regulations and rules of the screening system have remained for the most part "regulatory"—rather than "statutory"—in nature. This has often allowed recent Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) Prime Ministers and their administrations to be seen as acting fairly even as they accommodate demands from the rightwing nationalists who have long constituted the party's hard-core conservative constituency.

Indeed, Prime Minister Abe has been the champion of the rightwing nationalists for the last two decades. In 1993, with the LDP out of power, Hosokawa Morihiro of the Japan New Party made the first clear-cut admission of the Asia-Pacific War as a "war of aggression" by a postwar Japanese prime minister. In response, Abe, then a newly elected Diet member succeeding his late father, played a key role in establishing (and subsequently directing) an LDP committee to attack school textbook content, promote revisionist views on the war, and deny the existence of the Nanjing Massacre and jugun-ianfu ("comfort women going with the army").

Since then Abe has led the historical revisionist movements both in the Diet and in public discourse. For example, in 2001, Abe, then the Deputy Chief of Cabinet, intervened in the production of NHK's special report on wartime sexual violence, including the issues of comfort women, to eliminate some critical segments. In 2005, he abstained from voting on the Diet Resolution on the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the war, a resolution that contained the phrase "fukaku hansei" ("deep reflection"). Although his first tenure as prime minister was brief, he won the office again in 2012 on the platform that included the need to reconsider the Kono statement of 1993 and the Murayama statement of 1995, the Japanese government's two landmark statements of apology for its wartime actions including the comfort women.

To be sure, the screening regulations and rules are not written using rightwing or nationalist rhetoric. We know the ideological predisposition of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Science and Technology which conducts the screening only by what is produced—the Ministry's criticisms of texts submitted by publishers, and the resulting textbooks made available for, and used in, schools.

Here, Tawara's data and analysis are critical. Each revision made may look small, but put them together they reveal the sea change in the neo-nationalist rightwing direction. Tawara's article makes another important point: while internationally Japan's textbook controversy has centered on colonialism and war, it involves other controversies such as the massacre of ethnic Koreans in Japan at the time of the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and the oppression of the Ainu people. This suggests the need for those wishing to redress Japan's war atrocities to build closer connections with those working to redress ethnic and other social issues central to Japanese democracy. The Asia-Pacific Journal

Japan's textbook screening process

On April 6, 2015, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology ("Ministry of Education" below) announced the results of the 2014 screening of junior high school textbooks. This is the second screening of the textbooks based on the curriculum guidelines revised in March 2008 and the first based on the new Textbook Examination Standards revised (for the worse) in January 2014 and the new Textbook Screening Guidelines (internal regulations of the Textbook Authorization Research Council) revised (for the worse) in March 2014. According to these revisions, publishers had to follow the newly established rule that the government's view receives sufficient weight in textbooks.

In this screening, the publisher Manabisha applied for the first time for authorization of its textbook in the history field of social studies. Manabisha is a company set up by the Children and Textbooks Japan Network 21, organized mainly by active teachers.

As a result of the 2014 screening, the history textbooks of the publishers Jiyusha[1] and Manabisha failed the first examination, but were approved after re-submission following revision of the points indicated as deficient.

It should be noted that Jiyusha did not apply for screening of its civics textbook this time, presenting its current textbook as a sample copy for adoption. Since the textbooks were authorized on the basis of the amended screening system, as mentioned above, while Jiyusha's civics textbook was authorized under the old screening system, an objection was raised that it could not serve as a sample copy because it had not been screened under the new regulations. However, the Ministry of Education stated that this was "not a problem."

Listed below are the main problems regarding the 2014 screening of the social studies textbooks.

1. Screening based on the new standards demanding the inclusion of government views in textbooks

(1) Among the "deficient points" given as reasons for the non-authorization of Manabisha's submitted textbook were statements regarding the "comfort women" (ianfu) issue. On p. 237 the textbook stated, "Some young women in Korea and Taiwan were sent to the front as 'comfort women'. These women were forced to move together with the Japanese army and could not act according to their own will." On p. 279 the textbook stated "the Japanese government recognized that the military was involved in the setting up and operation of 'comfort stations' and has apologized and expressed its regret for this." The text

explained that the government had set up the Asian Women's Fund because it considered that "the matter of compensation has been resolved between the countries concerned" and explained that it "does not provide compensation to individuals". The text explained that this issue had been "taken up in the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) and the US Congress, and Japan's responsibility for violence towards women during the war has been called into question." These statements that were declared "deficient" are all objective facts.

Japanese high school students with textbooks

The "reason for comment" given is that these statements were "not in accord with the common view of the government." According to the Ministry of Education's explanation, the "common view of the government" is that, in documents the government had found by the time of the announcement of the Kono Statement (1993),[2] "there was no statement that directly proves forcible abduction by the military or constituted authorities." This view was advanced in the written reply (approved by the Cabinet on March 16, 2007) to a question by Lower House member Tsujimoto Kiyomi and the written reply (approved by the Cabinet on September 11, 2012) to a question by Upper House member Katayama Satsuki which states that, regarding the Coomaraswamy Report [of UNCHR),[3] the government "expresses reservations based on serious concerns."

Radhika Coomaraswamy

As a result of these indications of "deficiencies," Manabisha removed the term "comfort women" in all places except where it is used in the Kono Statement, which is included in the textbook as reference material.

However, this view of the government expressed as a "reason for comment" has been questioned by many specialist researchers and persons directly involved in the drafting of the Kono Statement. They point out that the Kono Statement recognized coercion based not only on official written documents but also on interviews with the victims themselves, and that at the time of the Kono Statement and in documents discovered thereafter there are many cases of recruitment both by physical coercion and by deceit. They state that the problem is not simply the question of coercion of "comfort women" by the Japanese military at the time of transportation, but also the issue of the sexual violence the women had to endure by being robbed of their freedom to move or escape after being confined at "comfort stations."

Completely ignoring these objections, the Ministry of Education allows only the (current) government's view to be included in textbooks. Teaching this to children as the only correct conclusion is outrageous behavior that has no place in a democratic society. Historical truth is something that should be established through research and discussion by historical researchers. Politicians conduct their activities based on political objectives, not from the standpoint of establishing historical truth. It is contrary to common sense and a major problem if those with political power decide the historical truth, for example, about the "comfort women" and have this taught to children.

If it becomes clear that Japanese politicians have imposed their own view on the textbooks and that references to "comfort women" have been deleted as a result of this screening, it is inevitable that this will be severely criticized by the international community. This kind of screening should be ended immediately.

Since this is the result of the addition in last year's amendments to the Textbook Examination Standards of a clause requiring the inclusion of statements based on the view of the government, the Textbook Examination Standards established last year should be abolished immediately.

(2) This imposition of the government's views in textbooks is also conspicuous regarding Japan's territorial conflicts. An important factor in this has been the voluntary restraint of publishers in response to the amendments to the Explanation of the Course of Study for social studies, which were implemented in January 2014 before the screening. Although only one of the current history textbooks deals with territorial issues, nearly all the publishers of history textbooks for the 2016 school year have included sections on them. Three of these publishers have featured these issues in a large 2-page column while the others have included a small section. At the same time, references to territorial issues have increased in both geography and civics textbooks. In accordance with the government's views, the Northern Territories, Takeshima,[4] and the Senkaku Islands[5] are described as "Japanese territory." All of the textbooks simply state the government's view that the Northern Territories and Takeshima have been "unlawfully occupied" by Russia and South Korea, respectively, and that no dispute exists over ownership of the Senkaku Islands. None of them makes any mention of the claims of South Korea or China.

Regarding territorial issues, the history textbook submitted by Ikuhosha[6] states, "Takeshima was completely governed by the Edo Shogunate from the middle of the 17th century at the latest." As a result of screening, this statement was revised as follows: "Japan is considered to have secured the right of possession of Takeshima from the middle of the 17th century at the latest." However, the statement in Shimizu Shoin's history textbook that "Japan secured the right of possession of Takeshima from the mid-17th century" was revised based on a screening opinion to "The existence of Takeshima was known from the Edo period." This opportunistic and arbitrary textbook screening is full of contradictions.

It is natural that the government has certain views regarding political and diplomatic issues, but the possibility exists that such government views are mistaken. In a democratic society it is required that citizens, in whom sovereign power is vested, develop the ability to make independent judgments while learning about views that differ from those of the government. In order not to violate Article 26, Paragraph 1 of the Constitution or Article 16 of the Fundamental Law of Education (prohibition of improper control[7]), it is necessary to ensure that textbooks do not include contents that obstruct children's growth as free and independent persons and that they do not enforce the teaching of one-sided ideas or views (cf. Supreme Court Grand Bench judgment in the Asahikawa Scholastic Achievement Test case, May 21, 1976[8]). There is strong concern that enforcing the one-sided inclusion of the government's views in textbooks constitutes a grave violation of children's right to learn. It can also be said to contravene the UNICEF Convention of the Rights of the Child. In this sense, the foolish attempt to have textbooks state only the government's views should be halted and, as stated in (1) above, the related Textbook Examination Standards should be abolished immediately.

Major contested territories involving Japan, China, Taiwan, Korea, Russia

2. Screening based on new Textbook Examination Standards that depend on the "commonly accepted view"

The new Textbook Examination Standards require that, when there is no commonly accepted view, textbooks should clearly indicate this. This standard was literally applied in the history textbook of the publisher Shimizu Shoin in its description of the massacre of Koreans in the aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923. In the textbook submitted by Shimizu Shoin, this description was the same as in its current textbook: "Several thousand Koreans were killed by the police, military, and vigilante groups." This time, the screening opinion pointed out that the textbook had failed to state that there is no commonly accepted view regarding this. The resulting description after revision was unnecessarily detailed: "Concerning massacres by vigilante groups, the Department of Justice at the time announced that more than 230 Korean people were killed. It is said that, with the inclusion of persons killed by the military or police, and those killed in districts not mentioned in the Department of Justice's report, the number of those killed amounted to several thousand, but there is no commonly accepted view on this." If textbook authors and publishers do not object to this kind of screening, it will inevitably result in descriptions that are so convoluted that they lack coherence. It is sufficient for statements in textbooks to state briefly the conclusions reached by historical research. The statements in textbooks must not be distorted for political purposes, under the pretext that the historical records incomplete.

3. Screening that distorts history on the pretext of emphasizing "accuracy"

The Ministry of Education explains that, in the 2014 screening, it has placed more emphasis than before on accuracy. One example of this is its screening regarding the Ainu issue. One of the textbooks submitted stated, "In 1899 the government promulgated the Hokkaido Former Natives Protection Act ("Protection Act"), took away the land of the Ainu, who were mainly a hunting-and-gathering people, and encouraged them to engage in agriculture." This statement was the same as in the current textbook, which had been authorized in the previous screening (2010). This time, however, the screeners commented, "this is a formulation that may cause misunderstanding among students." Accordingly, it was required to be revised as follows: "In 1899 the government promulgated the Hokkaido Former Natives Protection Act ("Protection Act"), gave land to the Ainu, who were mainly a hunting-and-gathering people, and encouraged them to change their livelihood to one based on agriculture."

In this case, the Ministry of Education applied the new Textbook Examination Standards to change the terms of the Former Natives Protection Act to "giving land" to the Ainu. However, it is the commonly accepted view of historical research that when the Former Natives Protection Act was promulgated, Ainu lands were taken away (other textbooks stating that they were "robbed of their land" previously passed screening). To state that the Ainu were given land is a clear distortion of history. The "Act on Promotion of Ainu Culture, and Dissemination and Enlightenment of Knowledge about Ainu Tradition,", promulgated in 1997, rejects the contents of the Former Natives Protection Act. The Protection Act also contravenes the United Nations Declaration of Rights for Indigenous People adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007 (and approved by both the Upper and Lower Houses in Japan). This is screening that distorts history on the pretext of "accuracy" and actually makes it inaccurate.

4. Textbooks cannot be allowed to be a tool of the government

As the above examples show, last year's amendment of the Textbook Examination Standards and revision of the Explanation of the Course of Study have clearly resulted in major contradictions in the way screening is conducted. We have criticized screening up to now for interfering with how textbooks are written. However, with the amendment of the Textbook Examination Standards, screening has become interference in how textbooks are written based on a new explicit requirement to state the "view of the government." Screening has reached the shocking stage of requiring that history be written based on the government's views. This shows that the right-wing Abe government is attempting to make the fullest use of education and textbooks in order to promote its agenda of creating a country able to participate in war.

5. The true nature of Ikuhosha and Jiyusha: Glorifying Japan's wars of aggression and colonial rule

It is the apparent aim of the editorial bodies of the publishers Ikuhosha and Jiyusha to glorify Japan's wars of aggression and colonial rule. In the face of critical public opinion in both Japan and overseas, they have basically maintained this framework while incorporating revisions based on screening opinions. At the same time, the true nature of Ikuhosha and Jiyusha has not changed at all with regard to their historical distortions regarding myths pertaining to the Emperor Jinmu, glorification of Japan's wars of aggression and colonial rule, idealization of the annexation of Korea, praise for the imperial system, and hostility and distortions regarding the Constitution of Japan.

The Jiyusha history textbook has removed all reference to the Nanking Massacre. In its current textbook, it mentions the Nanking Massacre only in side notes, and even this has been removed in the new version. On the other hand, it has increased its side note on the Tongzhou Massacre [of 1937] to three times its previous length. The Ministry of Education made no screening opinion on this. In 1984 all junior high school history textbooks contained references to the Nanking Massacre. Until now, even the textbooks published by Fusosha, Ikuhosha and Jiyusha included some reference to it. The deletion of references to the Nanking Massacre this year, the 70th anniversary of the end of the war, is a blatant expression of the claim of these publishers that the Nanking Massacre is a fabrication. The acceptance of this view by the Ministry of Education is a serious problem and a serious violation of the "neighboring nations clause" of the ministry's own Textbook Examination Standards.[9]

6. The Abe government's policy of changing textbooks has not been thoroughly implemented

Since the approval of Fusosha's "New History Textbook" in the screening of 2001, other textbooks have also changed their orientation towards obscuring facts related to the war. Amid this trend, we have seen unfortunate changes such as the disappearance from junior high school textbooks of terms such as "comfort women" and "forcible abduction", and the removal of statements about the number of victims of incidents such as the Nanking Massacre.

There are several cases of voluntary revision by publishers in earlier texts. For instance, in a note on the Nanking Massacre in its current textbook, Tokyo Shoseki mentions that the massacre was established as fact at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, but it has now deleted this note. Kyoiku Shuppan has added an explanation praising Admiral Togo Heihachiro and provided a photograph of him on its page on the Russo-Japanese war, introduced

the argument that Japan had to initiate hostilities in order to break the "ABCD encirclement" on its page on the outbreak of the Pacific War, deleted its mention of the killing of civilians by the Japanese military in the Battle of Okinawa, and replaced a photograph of Koreans on their "day of liberation" in 1945 with a photograph of people listening to the Emperor's radio broadcast announcing Japan's surrender.

On the other hand, there are no signs in the other textbooks of marked changes that significantly approach the contents of the textbooks of Ikuhosha and Jiyusha to the extent that we had feared. In this sense, it could be said that it has been impossible to fully realize the plan to change all the textbooks to glorify the war, which the Abe government and the right-wing factions supporting it have aimed to achieve by amending the textbook screening system for the worse. This can be attributed to increased criticism of the Abe government's runaway policies and to the efforts of textbook authors and publishers.

7. Call for efforts to prevent the adoption of the textbooks of Ikuhosha and Jiyusha

There is still a clear difference between the textbooks of Ikuhosha and Jiyusha on the one hand, and those of other publishers. The Abe government, the LDP, and organizations such as Nippon Kaigi[10] have joined forces to achieve their ultimate aim of realizing the right-wing control of education. Progressive forces in Japan have to prevent the adoption of the textbooks of Ikuhosha and Jiyusha in all regions of Japan and deal a severe blow to the movement to stem the tide of reforms that could turn Japan into a nation that again contemplates the road to war.

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This is a slightly abbreviated version of an article that circulated internally on Network 21.

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Notes

[1] Publisher of a strongly revisionist textbook edited by the neo-nationalist organization Tsukuru-kai. On Tsukurukai (Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform) see Koide Reiko, Critical New Stage in Japan's Textbook Controversy http://japanfocus.org/-Koide-Reiko/4101/article.html; Yoshiko Nozaki and Mark Selden, Japanese Textbook Controversies, Nationalism, and Historical Memory: Intra- and Inter-national Conflicts http://japanfocus.org/-Yoshiko-Nozaki/3173/article.html.

[2] In 1995, Japanese Cabinet Secretary Yōhei Kōno issued a statement regarding forced prostitution during the war (the so-called 'comfort women') acknowledging that the "Japanese military was, directly or indirectly, involved in the establishment and management of the comfort stations." The full text is accessible online at http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/women/fund/state9308.html.

[3] Radhika Coomaraswamy, a Sri Lankan legal export issued a 1996 report on the 'comfort women' as a UN special rapporteur for the United Nations Committee on Human Rights criticizing Japan's handling of the 'comfort women' issues. In October 2014, the Japanese government formally requested amendment of the report. Coomaraswamy refused the request. The Asahi Shimbun October 14, 2014. http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201410160051

[4] On the Takeshima/Dokdo islands, which are currently controlled by Korea, but claimed by Japan as national territory, see Mark Selden, Small Islets, Enduring Conflict: Dokdo, Korea-Japan Colonial Legacy and the United States, http://www.japanfocus.org/-Mark-Selden/3520/article.html.

[5] On the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, which are controlled by Japan but disputed among that country, China and Taiwan, see Reinhard Drifte, The Japan-China Confrontation Over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands – Between "shelving" and "dispute escalation," The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 12, Issue 30, No. 3, July 28, 2014, http://www.japanfocus.org/-Reinhard-Drifte/4154/article.html and Gavan McCormack, Much Ado over Small Islands: The Sino-Japanese Confrontation over Senkaku/Diaoyu, The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol 11, Issue 21, No. 3, May 27, 2013, http://www.japanfocus.org/-Gavan-McCormack/3947/article.html.

[6] Publisher of a textbook edited by the revisionist organization Committee to Improve Textbooks (Kyokasho Kaizen no Kai), an organization that split from the Tsukuru-kai in April 2012.

[7] In the 2006 revised version of the Fundamental Law of Education, Art. 16 Paragraph 1 reads as follows: "Education shall not be subject to improper control and shall be carried out in accordance with this and other acts; education administration shall be carried out in a fair and proper manner through appropriate role sharing and cooperation between the national and local governments.", see http://www.mext.go.jp/english/lawandplan/1303462.htm.

[8] Regarding the Asahikawa Scholastic Achievement Test case, see the website of the Japan Federation of Bar Associations, http://www.nichibenren.or.jp/en/document/statements/year/2006/20061220.html.

[9] The neighboring nations clause introduced in 1982 requires that textbooks give "necessary consideration, in the interest of international friendship and cooperation," to the modern and contemporary history of relations between Japan and its Asian neighbors.

[10] Ultraconservative organization founded in 1997 to advocate "patriotic education," Constitutional revision and prime ministerial visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. The organization demands the restoration of a more monarchical system and the restoration of State Shinto.

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