

The Basic Structure of Japanese High School World History Textbooks: Issues and Perspectives

Masashi Haneda
University of Tokyo

In today's presentation, I will elucidate two principal features of the world history textbooks used in Japanese high schools, critically assess the respective challenges, and subsequently explore the development of a new framework for world history education that could address these issues.

Features of Current World History Textbooks

Fostering National Identity: Differentiating 'Japanese History' from 'World History'

Since World War II, history education in Japan has been divided into two subjects: Japanese history and world history. This division represents a clear distinction between 'Japanese History,' which covers the national history of Japan, and 'World History,' which primarily encompasses the histories of other countries and regions. In 2018, the Japanese government announced a new course, '*Comprehensive History*,' intended for first-year high school students, and has implemented the course since April 2022. This course is groundbreaking as it is the first to integrate Japanese history and world history together. However, Japanese students are still required to choose between 'Japanese History Inquiry' and 'World History Inquiry' for further study after completing this first-year

integrated course. Given that high school history teachers often specialize exclusively in either Japanese or world history, teaching a unified ‘history’ poses significant challenges. Consequently, the traditional divide in history education between Japanese and world history is likely to persist for the foreseeable future.

Japanese high school history textbooks must be composed according to guidelines from the ‘Curriculum Guidelines,’ which is revised by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (hereafter, MEXT) around every ten years. Manuscripts prepared by publishers must undergo a review process by MEXT textbook inspectors before they can be approved for use. Revisions to the ‘Curriculum Guidelines’ reflect advancements in historical research which call for updates and refinements in the textbooks’ content. However, the fundamental objectives of history education and the overarching narrative structure of world history in high schools remain mostly unchanged.

First, let us consider the significance of history education in high schools. The 2018 ‘Curriculum Guidelines’ delineates three primary goals for ‘Exploring World History,’ one of which is as follows:

“By learning about various key events in world history, students will cultivate a willingness to independently consider issues and an attitude conducive to the realization of a better society. Through comprehensive historical analysis and in-depth understanding, they will deepen their self-awareness as Japanese citizens, foster an appreciation for their country’s history, and recognize the importance of respecting other countries and their cultures.”

As articulated in this goal, the primary mission of history education is to nurture the Japanese identity. This fact remains unchanged through the various revisions to the ‘Curriculum Guidelines.’ Given that the courses are formulated by the Japanese government and MEXT, this mission is self-explanatory and inherent. The dual structure of history education in Japan is therefore crucial. By delineating the history of Japan (Japanese history) from the histories of other countries (world history)

and then integrating their study, students develop a heightened awareness of the uniqueness of their own country and its historical identity. As a side note, the practice of dividing of history education into Japanese and foreign history has been established since the late 19th century, when history was first introduced into (modern) school education. The difference between foreign history education before and after 1945 is that, prior to 1945, foreign history was categorized into Eastern and Western history, without a unified world history curriculum. Nonetheless, the fundamental division between Japanese and foreign history has long existed.

A Collection of Vertical Histories: Assembling Diachronic Narratives of National and Regional Pasts

Next, I shall examine the contents of contemporary world history textbooks. Pre-modern history is presented as a collection of distinct and chronological narratives detailing the development of unique cultures in various regions of the world, such as East Asia and Europe. Although the extent of coverage varies, it provides a comprehensive overview of the world's past. Conversely, the post-16th-century narrative contrasts the history of European expansion with the histories of other regions, thereby showing that the latter were profoundly impacted by Europe's political, economic, social, and cultural developments. This approach highlights the interactions between an active Europe and a passive—and later 'resistant'—non-Europe. As in earlier periods, the history of non-European regions is organized according to cultural spheres.

This dual narrative underlies the textbooks' presentation of post-16th century world history. However, it must be acknowledged that, upon closer examination, both the European and non-European narratives consist of national histories, following a 'vertical' model of history. Naturally, there are constraints in detailing the histories of numerous countries within a single textbook. While the pasts of countries influential to Japanese history, such as the United Kingdom, France, and China, are explored comprehensively, the histories of countries with minimal historical contact with Japan, such as Ukraine, Argentina, and Algeria, receive less coverage. Thus, it would not be right to assert that the textbooks uni-

formly represent the world's history. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that there have been meaningful efforts to incorporate the histories of foreign countries with limited connections to Japan, for this approach differs markedly from that of European history textbooks.

Reflective Attitudes toward World History Education in Japan

Japan's past is concisely addressed within the broader context of 'East Asian cultures.' Similarly, Japan features briefly in the narrative of pre-modern world history. However, if Japan's modern history is also conflated with that of China and the Korean Peninsula, how can we discern the distinct paths that these three countries have pursued since the modern era? This issue is significant and self-evident.

In short, Japan's world history curriculum incorporates different units of narrative for premodern and modern history: premodern history is structured around cultural spheres, whereas modern history is presented through 'vertical histories' of individual countries. This fundamental style has remained unchanged since the formal establishment of world history as a subject after World War II.

Because countries and regions serve as the units of narrative, textbook authors must specialize in the histories of specific countries or regions, such as China, Britain, or the Islamic world. They are each responsible for writing their respective sections based on current trends and perspectives in historical research in their fields. These individual manuscripts are subsequently compiled by the publisher into a single textbook. Editors at the publisher oversee the coordination of these manuscripts; however, their responsibilities are largely confined to harmonizing details such as terminology, without fully aligning interpretations or explanations.

Issues with Current World History Textbooks

As summarized above, the two principal characteristics of Japanese world history textbooks are 'fostering the Japanese people' and the 'integration of vertical histories.' While I expect that this holds true for Kore-

an textbooks as well, I will reserve that inquiry for a later discussion. Considering that the ultimate purpose of elementary and secondary education, beginning in the 19th century, was to establish a sovereign nation-state and cultivate a strong national identity to support it, the current organization of world history textbooks appears to align with this objective. However, in our continually globalizing world, is cultivating a sense of national identity sufficient for a world history curriculum? It is crucial to recognize that national identity alone is inadequate for addressing contemporary global challenges such as climate change, international terrorism, big data and AI, pandemics, and more; in fact, a stubborn national identity may even pose an obstacle to their resolution.

Another more specific issue about the current world history curriculum concerns the inconsistent definitions of the fundamental geographical units of historical narrative. Because modern historiography originated primarily in Germany, France, and other Western European states, the geographical units employed in historical narrative have been shaped according to their perspectives. For instance, textbooks often frame history while defining 'Europe' as a single regional and cultural entity. However, questions arise regarding how much of Northern or Eastern European history can be sufficiently encompassed within this framework. Similarly, the applicability to Eastern Europe in the discussions and criticisms of 'Europe's' overseas expansions and imperialist policies must be questioned, considering that Eastern Europe was itself often the target of 'Europe's' expansion.

In essence, the definition of 'Europe' as one of the fundamental units of description in our world history textbooks is an ideological rather than a purely geographical idea. The same statement applies to the definition of regions like the 'Islamic World,' which is equally ideological in nature. These definitions contrast with the simple geographical categorization of other regions such as East Asia, South Asia, and the Americas. Such differences arise from the influence of Western European perspectives in defining the geographical boundaries within historical narratives.

Another practical issue is that textbooks that compile manuscripts from multiple authors inevitably bring forth inconsistencies. Moreover,

we must remain conscious of the risk that dry sentences and lists of historical terms designed for college entrance exam preparation could continually discourage students from engaging deeply with history.

History of Residents of the Earth: World History Moving Forward

Finally, I will propose strategies to address the above-identified issues with current world history textbooks.

As discussed in Part 2, an emphasis on cultivating national identity alone is insufficient for addressing the myriad challenges of the contemporary world. There must be a robust sense of belonging to this world at large, whereby individuals acknowledge and take responsibility for pressing global issues beyond their own countries. Historically, the study of national histories has been designed to foster national identities. Could not this same approach be applied to instill a sense of identity as residents of the earth? Just as the histories of individual nation-states like France, Japan, and China have profoundly influenced their respective national identities, why not develop a comprehensive global history to cultivate a sense of being a residents of the earth? This paradigm should be the new long-term goal of world history education.

I am not suggesting that a sense of being a residents of the earth should replace national identity. Individuals often have multiple layers of identity, identifying themselves as both Tokyoites and Japanese nationals, or as both Seoulites and Koreans; I argue that a concurrent sense of being a residents of the earth should be added alongside these national affiliations. Moreover, all residents of the earth need not study a single unified global history; rather, it should encompass the diverse experiences of residents of the earth living in different regions worldwide.

For instance, one could focus on the political systems and structures across the globe during the 18th century, examining their regional characteristics to identify commonalities and differences and comparing them to modern global societies. This approach diverges from ‘vertical history,’ which focuses on the history of a single nation-state, and opts

instead for a ‘transversal history’ which associates these characteristics with global movements across the globe as a whole. By repeating this method periodically, perhaps every hundred years, one may capture varying historical trends in global political systems.

Furthermore, tracing the origins and dissemination of significant concepts or institutions, such as the accommodation of the ‘state’ in modern Japan or Korea, can provide a comprehensive history of residents of the earth. This approach differs from vertical history which assumes the primacy of the nation-state.

In modern Japan, where the government dictates the ‘Curriculum Guidelines,’ making fundamental changes to the structure of world history education is challenging. For now, we must observe how the new ‘*Comprehensive History*’ course unfolds in practice and assess its impact. In light of the interconnectedness between Japan and the global community, there is a need for conversations about how to best structure world history education and for a willingness to adapt its current state. These discussions should not only take place within Japan, but must also involve candid exchanges of views between Japanese and Korean scholars. I eagerly anticipate further dialogue on these matters.