

Challenges and Prospects of Textbooks in Japanese History

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Introduction: The Direction of the New Curriculum Guidelines in Textbooks

In the new curriculum guidelines of Textbooks in Japanese History, ‘active, interactive, and deep learning’ is emphasized to enhance the quality of knowledge understanding and to cultivate qualities and abilities. This is summarized in the following three points.

- 1) Knowledge and Skills
- 2) Thinking Skills, Judgment, and Expression
- 3) Ability to Engage in Learning, and Humanity

Based on the above three pillars is envisioned the learning of Japanese History for the high school students through textbooks. Based on this, six key points for improvement and enhancement in the Japanese history textbook, *Japanese History Inquiry*, used in high school education are as follows.

1. Enhancing learning activities based on historical perspectives and ways of thinking about social phenomena
2. Development of history learning structured around ‘themes’ and

‘questions’

3. Development of history learning that emphasizes the coherence of units and content
4. Placing greater emphasis on deep understanding of knowledge and concepts through ‘interpretation, explanation, and discussion of history’ and on the development of ‘thinking skills, judgment skills, and expressive skills’ through history education
5. Learning which utilizes historical sources to master the methods of studying history
6. Examination of contemporary issues in Japan based on historical context

In terms of the curriculum for history (Japanese history and world history), it would be as follows. First, it is about moving away from an overemphasis on knowledge acquisition through history learning in high school. Traditionally, the biggest issue with high school history education is its positioning as a subject focused on memorization. Now, the challenge is how to transform old method of history teaching into a subject from which students can gain meaningful learning. This does not imply a denial of the acquisition of knowledge.

Second, it involves a discussion-based learning process in which students formulate hypotheses based on acquired knowledge and verify their validity through dialogue while sharing their ideas with one another. Therefore, textbooks need to encourage the development of thinking skills to explain history based on knowledge, and the judgment skills to assess the validity of these explanations. Additionally, communication with others is essential in this process, and there is an emphasis on a sincere attitude toward learning and the respect for others’ opinions.

Third, it involves nurturing creativity by resolving the first and second challenges, where students compare textbooks, their own ideas, and others’ opinions to discover issues by themselves and derive original insights to address those historical issues. This is understood as ‘deep learning’ in historical education.

Based on the above points, I would like to introduce the current

state of Japanese history textbooks and initiatives in *Japanese History Inquiry*.

Challenges in the Textbook Curriculum Guidelines

Historiography as a Premise

After World War II, the new Japanese historiography began shortly after the war in 1949 when ‘The Historical Science Research Association’ selected ‘Basic Contradictions in Various Social Structures of Japan’ as the central theme for its conference (Presenters: Shinhachiro Matsumoto, Koyohachiro Takahashi, Shobei Shioda). The direct result of the conference was published as *The Basic Laws of World History*, marking the new beginning of the Japanese history field. The main characteristic of the Japanese historiography lies in trying to identify historical development stages as universal across the world history. In Japanese history, there has been an ambitious effort to elucidate Japan’s place within world history under the perspective of how these ‘basic laws’ manifest in Japanese history.

But it did not progress as expected by many scholars at that time. The fundamental reason for this failure can be attributed to the attempt by Japanese historians to generalize the diverse historical characteristics of regions in Japanese history under the concept of ‘basic laws.’ The problem arose from treating the historically variable ‘nation’ and its history as immutable. For example, Hokkaido became part of ‘Japan’ as a result of long-term interactions from ancient times to the early modern period, and it was incorporated into modern Japan after it was established in 1869 through Meiji restoration. In that sense, is the history of the Watarishima and Ezochi, both of which are located in modern Hokkaido, in pre-modern times considered as part of ‘Japanese history’? This raises the further question of whether history should be narrated as something that culminates in the present day, or viewed as a series of passages involving integration and separation amidst diverse regional interactions.

However, in Japanese historiography, this issue in post-war history remained as an unresolved task for the future without solving unclear

scholarly challenges (Nagahara Keiji, 2001). In place of this, Nishijima Sadao shifted Japanese historiography by proposing the ‘East Asian world system,’ which examines Japan’s relationships with the world in history, a form different from the ‘basic laws of world history.’ (Nishijima Sadao, 1962). Here, Japanese historiography established itself as a national history which positioned as a subject of the ‘basic laws,’ and from that moment it began to be criticized for its departure from that framework.

Textbook Curriculum Guidelines and the ‘World History Perspective’

On this premise, the challenge in Japanese history is how to grasp the relationship with the world organically and how to reflect this in education. The teaching guidelines for *Japanese History Inquiry* set four major categories: ‘Primitive and Ancient Japan and East Asia,’ ‘Medieval Japan and the World,’ ‘Early Modern Japan and the World,’ and ‘Modern and Contemporary Regions, Japan, and the World.’ In high school education, Japanese history is divided into four periods: ancient, medieval, early modern, and modern/contemporary. With a focus on East Asia during the ancient period, this division emphasizes the relationship with the world.

In this regard, the teaching guidelines set the goal of fostering ‘the qualities and abilities of citizens necessary to be active and effective builders of a peaceful and democratic nation and society, living autonomously in an increasingly globalized international society.’ To achieve this, the guidelines emphasize the need for a comprehensive understanding of the various phenomena related to the development of our (Japan’s) history, in relation to geographical conditions and global historical contexts. They promote learners to ‘examine comprehensively the characteristics and transitions of each era from a global historical perspective’ and ‘to grasp our country’s history broadly, considering the continuity within the timeline, the spatial awareness of regions, Japan, and the world, as well as the political, economic, social, cultural, and international environments, and the characteristics and transitions of each era from various aspects.’

However, a question arises here. What exactly does ‘global histori-

cal perspective,’ as mentioned in the teaching guidelines, mean? At first glance, keywords such as ‘spatial awareness of the world’ or ‘international environment’ seem relevant, but these are merely factors for learners to grasp Japanese history. Ultimately, if understanding each era requires understanding the global situation during a certain period, then leaving world history and Japanese history disconnected will lead to perceiving Japan within the world as meaningless in an increasingly globalized international society.

The Relationship between Traditional Japanese History Textbooks and the ‘World History Perspective’

The way textbooks describe ‘Japan’ as the subject of Japanese history and its interactions with the outside world has long history. In fact, the human inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago originally arrived from outside world. This indicates that the movements and interactions between the Japanese archipelago and the outside world are fundamentally integrated and not exceptional. However, if the textbook once viewed from the perspective of ‘Japan’ as a main criterion in explaining the history, the interaction history between Japan and outside world tends to be forgotten, and Japan’s interactions with the other states in East Asia are perceived as exceptional occurrences in history. This perception makes it difficult for learners to acquire a ‘world history perspective.’ In this context, it is problematic that while medieval, early modern, and modern-contemporary Japan are compared with the world in the aforementioned main topics, ancient Japan is categorized solely as ‘East Asia.’ This classification stems from the notion that, in ancient times, connections were limited to a narrower regional context (East Asia), with broader global connections not being recognized as established.

It should not be assumed that all periods are interconnected in the same way. However, textbooks should avoid portraying Japan as inherently closed off within East Asia from the outset. Ancient East Asia was not a closed entity. For example, a single glass vessel was discovered in the Okchŏn M1 tomb of the Okchŏn Tombs in Hapch’ŏn, South Kyongsang Province, Korea (photo on the left). In Japan too, a glass bowl was

found in Tomb No. 126 of the Niizawa Chizuka Tombs (photo on the right). While the exact correlation between these two items are unclear, both are dated to the 5th century. It has been suggested that the Japanese item is a product of the Sasanian Empire (Abe and Nakai, 2012). This suggests a structure of exchange between West Asia and East Asia, as well as circulation within East Asian World.



The so called ‘World history perspective’ entails not merely juxtaposing Japan with other regions during the same period in history, but rather considering its structural implications in this manner. Alternatively, considering the learners’ level, it should be seen as a starting point for them to imagine and hypothesize why and how connections occur. This process allows learners to develop their understanding through discussions about the validity of their hypotheses.

The Description of Japan-Korea Exchanges in the Textbook *Japanese History Inquiry*

The writing policy

I was one of the authors who are responsible for writing the textbook *Nihonshi Tanshū* (*Japanese History Inquiry* published by Daiichi Shuppan). Based on the textbook guidelines outlined in the beginning, the approach of writing was designed to present learners with main text, illustrations, and historical sources. Learners use those contents as clues to formulate basic hypotheses in response to historical questions posed in

each unit, and then verify those hypotheses through discussion. By providing many chances to explore questions such as ‘why’ and ‘how’ in history, learners are able to enhance their understanding and perception of history.

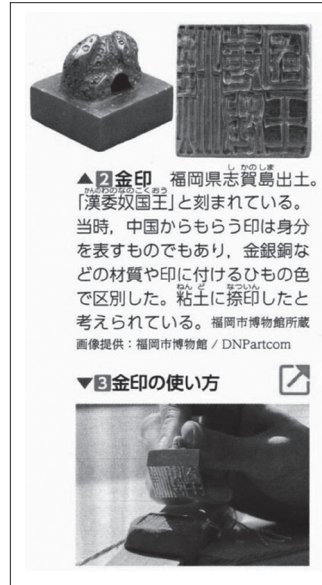
In particular, it emphasized the development of insights that allow learners to recognize the tendency to be confined by narrow perspectives influenced by existing biases, capturing the gap between traditional views and modern understanding without being bound by pre-conceptions.

One example is the use of gold seals. By examining the explanatory text and illustrations, learners who initially assumed that seals were used with vermilion ink on paper come to understand that the Golden Seal was actually employed with clay, serving a purpose distinct from its modern applications. This recognition of the divergence between traditional practices and contemporary understanding enables learners to better contextualize their own knowledge and perspectives.

The Narrative of Japan-Korea Relations

Textbook narratives are heavily constrained by space limitations. Within these constraints, the challenge lies in how to incorporate history research findings while adhering to the aforementioned principles. Below, I would like to introduce the achievements and challenges regarding the narrative of Japan-Korea relations in the ancient section of the textbook *Nihonshi Tanshū*, published by Daiichi Shuppan, in which I was involved.

First, Japan and the Korean Peninsula are the closest neighboring countries, and their interactions have been active since ancient times.



ic relations between Southern parts of the Korea and ancient Japan during this period, the introduction of the Seven-Branched Sword is also mentioned on the history materials page.

Among the history of interactions between ancient Japan and Korea, a particularly controversial issue is the Kwanggaet'o Stele (King Kwanggaeto Stele). The caption of the figure explains the position of Koguryo, which erected the stele, as follows:

Koguryo seemed to be strongly aware of Wa (Japan), emphasizing its victories in battles against Wa.

This textbook narration is based on the research of Lee Söngsi (1994). Here, by incorporating a dual perspective on the military conflicts between Wa (Japan) and Koguryo, Nihonshi Tanshu achieves a multi-faceted view that is not one-sided, enabling a comprehensive understanding of ancient Japan and its relations with Korea.

Furthermore, the history of exchanges was not limited to diplomatic relations between ancient Japan and Korea. For instance, it was described that before Japan's wars with Koguryo, horses were not originally present in ancient Japan. But, due to the wars between two states, there was





beginning of active horse breeding, and horse gear started to appear as a burial items in ancient tombs of Japan. This explanation serves to make the learners aware that the presence of horses was never a given, bridging the gap mentioned earlier.

It also aims to demonstrate that international exchanges are not merely diplomatic but also reflect on domestic political structures. Additionally, by displaying a simple illustration of horse gear, it enables learning about how horse gear consists of various components.

Regarding the fact that horses were originally absent in ancient Japan which was noted in the *Records of Wei in History of Three Kingdoms (Sanguozhi Weishu)*, but I couldn't introduce that issue in the textbook. If this issue had been included, it could have fostered the development of critical thinking skills about the unfolding of the era and awareness of new issues (such as where the horses were brought from). This is something that could be expected to be enhanced through revision opportunities.

I would like to address the so-called 'The Cession of Mimana Four Counties Incident' in the 6th century. Azuma Ushio points out the persistence of the ancient Japan's control ideology in textbooks (Azuma Ushio, 2022), highlighting this controversial historical issue between ancient Japan and Korea. Recent research has clarified that the expansion of Paekche's territory is not related to the involvement of Wa State in Mimana regions. So matters like the 'The Cession of Mimana Four Counties Incident' and 'Mimana Japan Prefectures,' which have already been refuted in academic research, should be excluded from the textbook description. Instead, the textbook shows the peninsula's developments on a

historical map and describes how such fluctuations in the Korea Peninsula's situation, for instance, are connected to the transmission of Buddhism from Paekche to Wa (Japan).

The 7th century in Nihonshi Tanshū marked the peak of international changes in East Asia. In Chapter 1, Section 2, Paragraph 4, there are many historical events: The concentration of power through internal coups in various states during the 640s, 'The Battle of Paekgang' following 'The fall of Paekche Kingdom' in 660, and 'The fall of Koguryo Kingdom' in 668. However, there is also an increasing need to cover many historical events within Wa State. Particularly, 'The Taika Reforms' are often discussed as the initiation of the Imperial government by adopting the Tang China political institution, but academic research has shown significant influences from the institutions and culture of the Korean Peninsula (such as the Sangi system and the hyang system). Incorporating those historical facts properly into textbook is a future challenge.

Furthermore, in previous textbooks, the situation on the Korean Peninsula after the Battle of Paekgang was omitted. However, by meticulously describing this part, it was deemed that one could understand East Asia more clearly in the 8th century, so I have described the Battle of Silla and Tang Dynasty as follow.

やまじろ国

倭国は唐の襲来に備えて西日本各地に山城を造営し、九州北部に

さきもり
防人を設置して防衛体制を整えた。この間に唐と新羅は668年に高
(→ p.49)

句麗を滅ぼしたが、朝鮮半島の支配をめぐる対立するようになり、
(← p.34)

672年から戦争状態になった。676年に新羅が唐を半島から追い出し、
朝鮮半島の統一に成功した。

Wa State prepared fortresses throughout western Japan in anticipation of Tang's future invasion of Japan, stationed Sakimori in northern Kyushu, and established a defensive system. Meanwhile, Tang and Silla jointly

conquered Kingdom of Koguryo in 668, but they became antagonistic over control of the Korean Peninsula and entered a state of war against each other from 672 onwards. In 676, Silla expelled the Tang armies and successfully unified the Korean Peninsula.

In Chapter 1, Section 2, Paragraph 7, which covers the 8th century, *Nihonshi Tanshu* mentions that East Asia was comprised of Japan, Silla, and Palhae, and discusses the diplomatic conflicts arising from Japan that considered Silla as a subordinate state. However, the textbook's coverage of Silla and Palhae history is restricted to their eventual downfall, as presented in Chapter 1, Section 3, Paragraph 3. This indicates that there is insufficient coverage of the international exchanges between ancient Japan and other states in East Asia. In the 9th century, ancient Japan's diplomatic relations with Silla faces significant decline in textbook description. It is generally believed there was no diplomatic relations between these states in 9th century, but there were still trade exchanges between Chang Pogo and ancient Japan. However, as mentioned earlier, there is no narrative describing these exchanges in textbook. Incorporating such exchange history between ancient Japan and Korea into future revised textbook appropriately will be a future task.

In Chapter 1, Section 3, Paragraph 3, *Nihonshi Tanshu* explains the collapse of Silla and Palhae states, and the establishment of Koryŏ Dynasty along with the arrival of Joseon merchants. However, the narrative regarding East Asia during the so-called Heian Period in Japanese history (794 to the end of the 12th century) is limited to this section only. A prevailing notion in general Japanese history is that 'after Sugawara no Michizane's abolition of the Tang envoys in 894, ancient Japan's interactions with other East Asian states became extremely limited, leading to the flourishing of kokufu bunka (national culture).' Criticism against the concept of 'kokufu bunka' in Japanese history has been advancing in recent research (Kimura Shigemitsu, 1997; Kawauchi Haruto, 2018; Yoshimura Takehiko et al., eds., 2021), but integrating this new research into history education has been a slow process for the future.

Conclusion

In the contemporary world where military conflicts are frequent in various global regions, understanding the historical causes and backgrounds of these conflicts holds significant importance. This is not an exception in East Asia. Through history education, it is crucial to acquire a global perspective that transcends national boundaries in order to deepen mutual understanding.

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