

Text books for schools are controversial subject in Japan



School textbooks in Japan are not written by the Ministry of Education. Instead, the textbooks for all subjects in elementary, and both lower and upper secondary schools are written and published by several major private companies. (Picture for representation only)Writer can be reached at junkonirmala@gmail.com

Japan has mastered the age of visual culture long time back in the form of their text books. Every text book in Japan has lots of images, visually appealing content with texts and pointers which makes children to engage both right and left brain in the schools.

School textbooks in Japan are not written by the ministry of education. Instead, the textbooks for all subjects in elementary, and both lower and upper secondary schools are written and published by several major private companies. This system was introduced to japan after World War II to avoid government having direct authority over the written contents. Therefore, the textbook controversies in japan refer to controversial content in government-approved textbooks used in the secondary education (Junior High Schools and high schools) of japan.

The controversies primarily concern the japanese nationalist efforts to whitewash the actions of the empire of Japan during world war ii. Japan's school education law requires schools to use textbooks that are authorised by the ministry of education (mext). However, each local education board has the final authority to select which textbooks can be used in their jurisdiction from the approved list.

In japan, a potential school textbook must pass a sequence of evaluations before receiving approval to be used in japanese schools. First, textbook companies submit a draft of their proposed textbook to the japanese ministry of education. The textbook authorization and research council , an official council of the ministry of education, composed of university professors, high-school and junior high teachers, checks the draft in accordance with the ministry's educational curriculum guidelines to ensure that the contents of the proposed textbook is "objective, impartial, and free from errors."

The ministry of education will give the company that authored the textbook the opportunity to revise the draft when it is found to contain information that is inconsistent with national guidelines. Once the textbook revisions are complete and the textbook has received the approval of the ministry of education, local boards of education select books from a list of authorized textbooks for schools under their jurisdiction. The process of textbook authorization is ongoing and conducted every four years, the results of which are presented to the public the following year.

The hullabaloo of this process includes that the government textbook authorization system has been used to reject textbooks that depict imperial Japan in a negative light. This includes a case in the 1960s where a description of the Nanking massacre and other war crimes committed by the Japanese military before and during World War II was rejected by the Ministry of Education.

The author sued the ministry, finally winning the case decades later. Recent controversy focuses on the approval of a history textbook published by the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, which placed emphasis on the achievements of pre-World War II imperial Japan, as well as a reference to the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere with fewer critical comments compared to the other Japanese history textbooks.

Reflecting Japanese tendency towards self-favoring historical revisionism.

More so, voices from academic scholars and from within the school system expressing dissatisfaction with the content being approved by the government as they claim that most of the textbooks are not balanced, focusing on the good history of Japan and leaving aside the other side. People also ask, for example, whether it is appropriate to split the history of Japan and the history of other countries into separate subjects in this age of globalization. They also question the validity of a history curriculum that does little more than make students memorize dry facts.

Defenders of the system however counter that a book which fails to mention specific negative facts regarding the aggression and atrocities committed by Japan during World War II would also fail the Ministry of Education's approval process.

During the approval process for the aforementioned history textbook by the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, the author was ordered to revise the book's content several times before receiving final approval.

Moreover, during the Cold War, the ministry rejected textbooks by left-leaning publishers which attempted to portray the Soviet Union, mainland China, North Korea and other communist countries in a positive light.

Defenders also point out that during the 1960s and 1970s, the extent of the atrocities, as well as the existence of many of the incidents, were still being debated by Japanese historians; therefore, the Ministry of Education was correct in rejecting references to specific atrocities such as the Nanking massacre during that era, but the ministry finally insisted on the inclusion of those same incidents after Japanese historians had finally reached consensus during the 1990s.

They also point out that, North and South Korea, as well as China, which happen to be the most outspoken critics of the Japanese textbook approval process, does not allow private publishing companies to write history textbooks for their schools. Instead, the governments of those countries write a single history textbook for all of their schools. In the case of South Korea, the government strictly examines textbooks from different companies before being publicized. Critics of Chinese and Korean textbooks also argue that the textbooks of those countries are far more politically censored and self-favoring than Japanese textbooks.

The general trait of Junior High School social studies textbooks for use beginning in fiscal 2016 is that government views have come to the fore on various issues, reducing the diversity in their content. Attempts to play down Japan's wartime atrocities could result in students not having accurate knowledge about the nation's militarist past. The government would do well to remember that uniform textbooks compiled by the state during and before World War II went hand in hand with Japan's militarism.

The trend that has surfaced in the latest screening appears to run counter to the Education Ministry's own effort to revise the curriculum guideline so that students will gain the ability to face and solve problems by working with others. In this age of globalization, it is all the more important for students to be aware of divergent opinions and stances on issues. This forms the foundation of being able to solve problems in mutually acceptable ways. Learning about issues in modern history can help youths gain this ability, and textbooks should be designed to help train students in this matter.

There is strong emphasis that the Education Ministry should return to the original idea of the post-war screening system to let authors and publishers give full play to their ingenuity to produce intellectually interesting and challenging learning materials. While huge debate is ongoing in Japan, Asian counterparts are observing closely on this topic.

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