

WHAT DO WE WANT STUDENTS TO REMEMBER ABOUT THE “FORGOTTEN WAR”? A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE KOREAN WAR AS DEPICTED IN KOREAN, JAPANESE, AND U.S. SECONDARY SCHOOL HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

YONGHEE SUH, MAKITO YURITA, AND SCOTT ALAN METZGER

Abstract

Secondary school history textbooks in South Korea, Japan, and the United States have long struggled to give meaning and significance to the war waged on the Korean Peninsula between 1950 and 1953. Comparing commonly-used, contemporary history textbooks from each of these three nations, this analysis suggests that students on both sides of the Pacific are more likely exposed to text reflective of their society’s dominant orientations toward modern-day, post-Cold War, geopolitical anxieties and arrangements than to any clear narrative of historical significance that explores the varied causes or impact of the war. Such cross-national comparisons can be especially useful for educators interested in helping students construct useful historical narratives or develop more sophisticated causal reasoning about a historically significant conflict that has sometimes been thought of as a “forgotten war.”

The Korean War (1950-53) destroyed millions of lives—both military and civilian. The war also was a defining moment of the post-WWII political climate in the world. The Second World War, followed by a quickly emerging Cold War, precipitated significant geopolitical repositioning in East Asia. In the U.S. the war spurred military spending and paved the way for the nation’s future interests in Asia – most notably Vietnam. The war also provided an impulse to China and the Soviet Union to expand their influence over governments in North Korean and other Third World nations. By serving as a military supply base for the U.N., Japan strengthened its alliance with the U.S. and regained its economic standing and influence in East Asia.¹

Despite the ongoing significance of a divided North and South Korea in global geopolitics, what has been called the “Forgotten War” is sometimes misunderstood and even ignored by curriculum writers, textbook publishers, teachers, and policymakers. For classroom teachers, because of the pressure of coverage, the Korean War is often taught in a cursory manner between World War II and the Vietnam War.² Even for historians, much of the war is still open to debate. According to Allan R. Millett, it was only recently that the

Soviet Union, China and the U.S. publicly released key collections of military records related to the war, so a considerable part of the Korean War – the decision-making process of each nation’s leader, for example – has remained a mystery.³

Given the complicated, international nature of the Korean War, we believe that a comparative analysis of textbook accounts of the Korean War from nations involved, such as South Korea, Japan, and the U.S., will serve to better inform about it in social studies curriculums and classrooms for two reasons. First, considering the school textbooks may represent “official history” that a nation teaches its young generation to develop national identity and patriotism, an analysis of each of these nations’ textbook accounts will help us understand what these nations officially remember about the Korean War.⁴ Second and more important, current scholarship on teaching the Korean War approaches the war in a humanitarian way, focusing on the human suffering caused by the war.⁵ Instead of highlighting just the humanitarian dimension, we aim to illuminate the complicated nature of how the Korean War happened, progressed, and ended by engaging multiple perspectives represented in South Korean, Japanese, and U.S. history textbook accounts. In doing so, we offer some tentative explanations for why textbooks in these three nations differ substantially and argue that perhaps the textbooks read back onto the Korean conflict ways of seeing that are consonant with the geopolitical alignment of their nations in recent decades. We conclude with a brief discussion of the need to go beyond limited textbook accounts to help students better understand the meanings of the Korean War as well as the constructed nature and political purposes of historical textbook accounts.

Literature Review

Our analysis is informed by research in South Korean, Japanese, and American history, historiography, history education, and educational policy. Our specific unit of inquiry, and the intellectual questions that informed our collaboration, centers on the

instructional role of secondary history textbooks.

U.S. history textbook research

In using school textbooks to understand broader forces impacting teaching and learning, we have tapped into a long research tradition. American historians, for example, have found the textbook as a useful tool for tracing historiography over the past century.⁶ These scholars have illustrated ways in which school curriculum is situated in both time and place and affected by factors outside of school. Textbooks, for instance, have been used to critique broader societal values and assumptions—especially in relation to race, gender, and political ideology.⁷ In her analysis of U.S. history textbooks from the early twentieth centuries to 1970s, Frances Fitzgerald claimed that U.S. history textbooks have changed over time mainly due to market and political pressures.⁸ Jean Anyon also examined seventeen secondary U.S. history textbooks and analyzed how economic and labor history has been covered from the Civil War to World War I.⁹ She found that U.S. history textbooks represent certain groups' ideology and interest. More recently, Jonathan Zimmerman has argued that “conflict over patriotism and nationalism in the schools is a fairly straight line, reflecting constant theme: the progressive inclusion of more and more Americans in the grand national story.”¹⁰

While previous U.S. scholarship on history textbooks focuses on the domestic forces that impact history textbook accounts, the past decade witnessed new emerging scholarship that claims the importance of international perspectives in textbook research. In *History Lessons*, Dana Lindaman and Kyle Ward contend that U.S. history textbooks tell an isolated national story, employing an international comparative perspective to look at textbook accounts of the past.

Textbooks are a quasi-official story, a sort of state-sanctioned version of history. In nearly all countries, the government takes some role in setting the standards for an acceptable cultural, political and social history – i.e., what the authorities want the next generation to learn about its own national heritage –

enfolding them, as it were, into a collective national identity.¹¹

By contrasting U.S. textbooks with different historical accounts from textbooks from other nations, Lindaman and Ward see an overall political purpose in American history textbooks to relate the past as one grand narrative emphasizing patriotism. Along a similar line, other scholars argue that students in other countries, unlike those in the U.S., do not always study their *own* history through history textbooks. In his comparative study of history teaching in the U.S. and Northern Ireland, Keith Barton found that U.S. curriculum focuses on the origin and development of the nation, and tends to explain historical change as due to individual actors rather than larger political and social forces.¹² In contrast, history curriculum in Northern Ireland does not present any historical narrative related to the development of Northern Ireland as a modern nation. Instead, the curriculum presents the nature of human societies at different times and places.

U.S. history textbook research on the Korean War

There is not much research conducted about the way U.S. history textbooks cover the Korean War. Our ERIC search using the key words “textbook” and “Korean War” found twenty-nine journal entries, only three of which were research articles that report findings from the empirical data. Most were recommendations for teaching strategies or learning packages made for teachers to teach about the Korean War.

Dan Fleming wrote two articles about U.S. history textbook coverage on the Korean War. He examined eight World History textbooks and found that the Korean War received no more than one page of coverage in them.¹³ Even when textbooks cover the Korean War, they rarely discuss its significance or how it began. His analysis of twelve high school U.S. history textbooks suggests similar findings: the Korean War generally gets limited coverage and key issues such as who initiated the war, what was the role of the Soviet Union, why the war ended and who suffered remained unanswered.¹⁴

Although Fleming's studies focus on U.S. textbook descriptions about the Korean War, similar to new scholarship in textbook research in general, recent emerging U.S. studies on teaching the Korean War compare how the U.S. and other nations depict the Korean War in different ways. Dana Lindaman and Kyle Ward translate accounts on the Korean War in North Korean, South Korean, Great Britain, Soviet Union, and Japanese textbooks in terms of causes of the war, fighting, and the end of the war.¹⁵ They observe that the Korean War has been called the "Forgotten War" and is usually discussed in U.S. history textbooks in the context of Cold War policy and the U.N. Lin Lin, Yali Zhao, Masato Ogawa, John Hoge, and Bok Young Kim add findings from Chinese perspective: U.S., Japanese, and South Korean textbooks depict the causes of the war as North Korea invading South Korea, whereas Chinese textbooks as South Korean troops invading North Korea. Chinese textbooks describe Chinese involvement as defending its national borders from U.N troops.¹⁶

The major limitation of current scholarship on teaching the Korean War is its rare attention to the geopolitical context where these textbooks are created. Textbooks do not raise key questions like *why* they depict the Korean War in such ways and how each nation's "official history" of the Korean War reflects its current political and ideological stance. For instance, as Lin et al., point out, to better comprehend the Korean War, it will be important to understand the role played by Japan, which occupied Korean peninsula as a colony for thirty-five years until the end of World War II and had viewed it as a target for armed excursions in earlier centuries.¹⁷ What were the consequences of the Korean War to Japan as a nation and how is the Korean War officially remembered in Japan's textbooks? As a key ally of South Korea, how is the war officially remembered in the U.S. textbooks and why it is remembered in such a way? Most of all, what "official history" is represented in South Korean history textbooks about the Korean War? How does this reflect current geopolitics in the Korean peninsula? This study responds to these questions through a content analysis of the high

school history textbooks from the three nations – South Korea, Japan and the U.S.

Methodology

Sampling logic and data collection.

We selected eight widely adopted high school history textbooks: three from South Korea, three from Japan, and two from the U.S. In South Korea's case, three widely used modern history textbooks covering the 1600s to the present were chosen. In Japan's case, three popular high school textbooks were selected for the main analysis while referencing the middle school textbooks to identify the ways Japanese textbooks describe the Korean War. In both South Korea and Japan, nationally certified textbooks are used to teach modern Korean and Japanese history.¹⁸ Private publishing companies hire professors, teachers, and researchers to develop textbooks, which are authorized by the Ministry of Education. In the U.S. case, where textbooks are adopted at the state and local level, two representative textbooks were chosen from those listed as the most commonly used by the Fordham Institute's *A Consumer's Guide to High School History Textbooks*.¹⁹ Our analysis would not be significantly improved by adding a third text published in the U.S., since the two selected are among the most widely used in American classrooms and list leading U.S. historians as contributing authors.

Given the unique contexts, levels, and uses of these texts, no uniform expectations are possible for how textbooks are used in each nation. Teachers in both South Korea and Japan, for example, follow a more centralized national curriculum compared to the U.S. In the U.S. a strong tradition of local control contributes to a greater variety of textbook options for each individual secondary school. Nonetheless, the fact that a few large publishers tend to dominate the history textbook market in the U.S. ensures some national congruence.

Data analysis.

The first and second authors of this manuscript are native Korean and Japanese.

They are fluent in both Korean/Japanese and English. The three authors conducted two consecutive approaches to our data analysis. First, we read each textbook account of the Korean War drawing on Walt Werner's content analysis framework.²⁰ This approach included an examination of *what*, *where*, and *how* the Korean War is presented in each textbook (*representation*), what are the textbook authors' attitudes on the Korean War (*gaze*), whose perspective is dominant (*voice*), how various sub-texts such as pictures, labels, questions, or charts are presented (*inter-textuality*), and what is missing (*absence*). Second, we compared and contrasted each other's analysis to identify emerging themes addressing the following question: what similarities or differences emerged from these textbook accounts on the causes and consequences of the Korean War?

The three authors employed quantitative analysis to investigate selected areas such as the number of visual images to depict roles of nations, including North and South Korea, China, Japan, Soviet Union, and the U.S., as well as civilians and soldiers in each nation. We were careful not to directly compare the number of pages each nation's textbooks devoted to the Korean War and visual images on the war because each nation has different cultural practices and economic constraints when creating and circulating the textbooks. For instance, South Korean and Japanese textbooks typically do not carry as many visual images as U.S. textbooks. In contrast to the U.S., where schools purchase textbooks and students borrow them so that the textbooks are relatively expensive, in South Korean and Japanese textbooks are relatively inexpensive since individual students purchase them. Consequently, textbook companies include fewer visual images to lower the cost. Given the different contexts, instead of the direct numeric comparison as a measure of substance we conducted qualitative analysis of the images by comparing and contrasting how the images represent the Korean War.

Korean, Japanese, and U.S. Textbook Accounts on the Korean War

In the following section, we report our analysis of the textbooks by first situating the Korean War in each nation's own context: what were the consequences of the Korean War in each nation? What was the role of each nation during the War? What is the significance of the Korean War today in each nation? We then discuss how the Korean War is represented in the textbooks in both text and sub-text, such as visual images, captions, and questions, focusing on what is selected for inclusion and what is missing in that representation.

Analysis of the Korean history textbooks.

The use of the term the "Korean War" is relatively new in South Korea. For decades the war has been described simply by the starting date—the "6-25 War." In *The Korean War: the Outbreak and Its Origins*, Myunglim Park explains that this nomenclature reflects not only how South Koreans remember the Korean War but, more importantly, how they want to remember it.²¹ By remembering when it started, South Koreans tacitly assign responsibility for the war to North Korean aggression.

Questions of the war's origins have dominated Korean War historiography as well.²² During the 1960s and 1970s, mainstream arguments from Korean War historians emphasized that the North Korean government carefully planned and triggered the war. During the 1980s, scholars such as Bruce Cummings argued that the Korean War was a civil war between South and North Korea, while U.S. and South Korean governments placed the war in the broader context of the Cold War.²³ Only after the Soviet Union released war-related documents in the 1990s did these interpretations expand beyond concerns of blame. New scholarship has looked more carefully at the influence of China and Soviet Union on North Korean decision-making and argued with considerable evidence from Soviet archives that Kim Il-Sung launched the invasion with some support from Joseph Stalin. This scholarship points to Kim's belief that he could conquer South Korea quickly before the U.S. could build

up South Korea as a strong client state.²⁴

Similar to this historiography, Korean history textbooks illustrate varying viewpoints on the war.²⁵ The three most popular Korean modern history textbooks – *Kumsung*, *Jungang*, and *Doosan* – situate the war right after chapters on Korean liberation from Japanese colonization (1910-1945), followed by chapters that illustrate political and economic development of both South and North Korea after the war.²⁶ These textbooks commonly note that the Korean War allowed Rhee Syngman, the first South Korean president, to sustain a government for over a decade despite failed economic policies. In North Korea, the war cemented a succession of totalitarian dictatorships and established the principles of *Juche* – the Korean word for “self-reliance” – under Kim Il-Sung.

The three textbooks, however, present the beginning of the war slightly differently. *Kumsung*, the most widely used modern history textbook in South Korea, explains that both North and South Korean leaders initially intended to unify the Korean peninsula by military force, and there already had been quite a few skirmishes before the war between South and North Korean soldiers around the 38th parallel. *Kumsung* carries conference addresses in 1947 by Rhee Syngman and Kim Il-Sung that emphasized the importance of unification of the Korean peninsula.

In contrast to *Kumsung*, the other two textbooks, *Jungang* and *Doosan*, explicitly discuss the North Korean government as the responsible agent for the war. In the beginning of their chapters on the Korean War, these two textbooks state that supporters of the North Korean government stayed in South Korea even after the division of the peninsula and fought a guerrilla war against the South Korean government. They also spend half of their chapters explaining how Kim Il-Sung and his party established their political leadership in North Korea to prepare for war with South Korea.

Images in the three textbooks implicitly carry the same message as the text. *Kumsung*

contains one photo of Kim Il-Sung meeting with Peng Dehuai, the supreme commander of People's Volunteer Army. However, it contains a photo of the South Korean army marching in Seoul as well, which indicates that, like the North Korean government, the South Korean government built up military power before the war. While *Kumsung* weighs both South and North Korean governments' intention of unification potentially by military force, the other two textbooks, *Jungang* and *Doosan*, emphasize the role of Kim Il-Sung in initiating the war, specifically by establishing leadership in North Korea and getting military support from the Soviet Union and China. Photos in the textbooks support this point. *Jungang* features a photo of Kim Il-Sung's visit to Moscow in 1949. *Doosan* contains two photos of Kim Il-Sung, one a portrait and the other clapping with his supporters on the day his North Korean Labor Party gained power.

Another distinct feature of the three Korean textbooks is their emphasis on the roles of allies. *Kumsung* puts equal emphasis on three nations – China, the Soviet Union, and the U.S. – as agents involved in the outbreak of the Korean War. This emphasis on the role of three nations reveals important editorial choices and arrangements. For example, one activity asks students to use primary sources to empathize with multiple perspectives and viewpoints. Students first read press conference addresses from Rhee Syngman and Kim Il-Sung. They explore a timeline of the support the Soviet Union and China gave the North, and they investigate maps illustrating the advances and retreats of U.S. forces. Both *Kumsung* and *Doosan* contain a photo of John Foster Dulles, an adviser to the U.S. Secretary of State, inspecting the 38th parallel. A caption explains that the U.S. decided to exclude the Korean peninsula from the Acheson Line, the U.S. first-defense line in East Asia.

While Korean secondary textbooks emphasize international alliances and shared responsibility, they do not follow the same pattern when describing the consequences of the war. No explanation is offered to show how the Korean War affected participants and allies

in the three textbooks. Any strengthened relationship between the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea, Japan's partial rearmament and economic development, or U.S. interest in Vietnam, are rarely mentioned as results. Except for one chart that shows the military and civilian casualties from North and South Korea, the UN, and China, no sentence refers to soldiers from the U.S, the Soviet Union, and China.²⁷ The focus is on domestic affairs and, in our reading, emphasizes the lone suffering of the Korean people.

The three textbooks use photographs and first-hand eyewitness accounts of the war to vividly discuss the consequences of the war. *Kumsung* and *Doosan* carry the same two photographs: ruins in Seoul and Pyeong-yang after the war. *Doosan* and *Jungang* show Koreans who fled south to escape from the battlefields as well as the destroyed city of Seoul. First-hand accounts such as excerpts from personal memoirs are used as supplementary readings in the text. Compared to the rest of the textbook, all the three textbooks also seem to use emotionally charged language to describe the scenes after the war, such as "tragic" or "trauma."

Conspicuously missing in *Kumsung* as well as the other two textbooks is the agency of the Korean people. All the three textbooks mention leaders such as Kim Il-Sung, Rhee Syngman, and John Foster Dulles, or nations such as the U.S., the Soviet Union, and China, when they discuss the causes and consequences of the war. Individual experiences are mentioned at the end of the Korean War chapter to note that individuals in both the North and South Korea suffered because of ideologically motivated atrocities committed during the war. *Kumsung* and *Doosan* present excerpts from memoirs by South Koreans who suffered atrocities due to the political and ideological differences among their neighbors.

Korean modern history textbook accounts (and Koreans' responses about those textbook accounts) provide insight into how Korean high school students are taught about the Korean War. Not only is it recent history, but 80 percent of Koreans had family members

who were killed or wounded or experienced family separation because of the war. Koreans are keenly sensitive to how historians discuss the war and how it is taught in schools. It is not surprising that *Kumsung*, the most popular modern history book in South Korean high schools, encountered harsh criticism by some politicians and raised a public debate because it describes both the North and South Korean governments as culpable in causing the war.²⁸

While acknowledging that the North Korean government triggered the war, the textbook points out that both governments had intentions to pursue unification by military force.

Analysis of Japanese history textbooks.

Recent debates about the ways in which Japanese textbooks attempt to grapple with the nation's role in WWII have been well documented. Indeed, this issue has prompted commentary and even outrage from other nations. Most prominently, politicians and citizens in South Korea and China have used legislation, press conferences, and street protests to highlight textbook representations perceived as minimizing Japanese atrocities. Yet little is known or debated when it comes to understanding what Japanese students read about the Korean War.

Issues around the Korean War are particularly important to understanding Japan's international role in contemporary political and historical disputes with South and North Korea. Moreover, textbook representations serve an important role domestically as Japan continues to reconcile the constitutional dilemma surrounding the role of its Self-Defense Force in modern global politics. The most widely adapted high school history textbooks in Japan, each initially certified in 1997 and re-certified in 2002, are *Sanseido*, *Yamakawa*, and *Tokyo Shoseki*.²⁹

The chronology in Japanese textbooks reflects a national identity built around post-WWII modernity and helps ensure a particularly abbreviated account of the Korean War. Japan's surrender to the Allied Powers in 1945 marks the beginning of a new chapter in

Japan's history—both literally and figuratively. The earlier chapter ends with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Soviet Invasion of Japan, and the surrender. As a result, the chapters dealing with the Korean War begin by introducing war damages and the Allied occupation. A destroyed nation seems to symbolize the end of old Japan, now replaced by a new, contemporary (and democratic) Japan. With a gaze that clearly bridges the past to a positive present-day Japan, chapter titles reinforce this important national symbolism: "The Departure of Postwar Japan" and "The Beginning of Postwar Reform and the Cold War." For Japanese textbooks 1945 serves as a turning point, not because of what ended but because of what is viewed as beginning.

Japanese textbooks acknowledge the importance of the Korean War and effectively situate the conflict within a Cold War context. However, none of the textbooks makes any substantial reference to how the partition of Korean Peninsula came about in the first place. For example, *Sanseido* presents the division of Korean Peninsula in the same sentence that introduces Cold War divisions in Europe: "In 1948, as conflicts between the Soviet Union and the United States intensified, Germany and the Korean Peninsula were partitioned along lines of Communism and Capitalism."³⁰ *Tokyo Shoseki* and *Yamakawa* explain this partition of Korea as the product of segmented occupational administrations enforced by the United States and the Soviet Union. Absent in all textbooks is any suggestion that the Korean Peninsula was controlled by Japan prior to 1945. Indeed, the positioning of book chapters with a symbolic break at the end of WWII facilitates a shortened view of Japan's involvement in the Korean conflict. The Korean War is depicted as an event occurring well after Japan's "new departure"—and hence, history textbooks downplay the importance of Japan's past colonization of the peninsula. Instead, the Korean War is framed solely as a Cold War phenomenon.

However, this limited representation of Japan's past involvement in the Korean

Peninsula is not necessarily the product of Japan's unwillingness to recognize its past. In fact, post-war chapters are profoundly contextualized by the ways WWII created the conditions from which Japan's modernity emerges. But the manner in which these texts remain silent about the agency of the Japanese people during this period is significant. The dominant actor, when analyzing voice in these chapters, is no longer Japan but rather the United States occupation force. Hence, throughout the postwar chapter, there is an overwhelming use of passive voice in all the history textbooks. When active voice is used, the United States or General Headquarters of the Allied Forces (GHQ) stand as the proactive agent behind a given event or development. In other words, Japanese history textbooks frame the Korean War as an event that happened outside of Japan's capacity to intervene. The absence of an active voice in textbooks reveals a Japanese perspective that the nation no longer served as the dominant power in the region. As a result, the textbooks are able to focus on the ways the Korean War mainly changed Japan domestically during a dynamic Cold War period of occupation and rebuilding.

Thus the Korean War, according to the history textbooks, was domestically significant because it spurred Japan's economic development and hastened the nation's rearmament and independence from U.S. occupation. Japan became the strategic supply base for the U.S.-led United Nation force during the Korean War. This role helped Japan reconstruct a war-ravaged industrial sector. Furthermore, Cold War belligerents recognized the strategic value in Japan, not only as a supply base but also as a critical bulwark against the spread of communism in East Asia. Japan became indispensable as a strategic partner in East Asia for Western Bloc nations.

The textbooks reinforce the point of emphasis the effect of the Korean War on Japan's economic development. Two textbooks use bar graphs to visually represent this impact. However, in only one case is a photographic image employed to show the possible hardships

faced by the Korean people. This image stands in critical contrast to the positive representation of the war on Japan's economic and industrial boom. Yet even this photograph appears on a different page than the discussion of Japan's economic growth. As such, the text disconnects the war's positive impact on the national economy of Japan from the war's dire consequences for the Korean Peninsula. The textbook accounts clearly emphasize the benefits of the Korean War for Japan and its people rather than broad and extended political context and chronology.

All three history textbooks also situate the Korean War as a cause of Japan's partial rearmament. The Korean War, these texts suggest, required a redeployment of U.S. occupation forces to the Korean Peninsula. Each text argues that the General Headquarters of Allied Forces, Allied Commander Douglas MacArthur, or the United States government ordered Japanese rearmament to fill the vacuum created by Allied withdrawal. Paragraphs presenting Japan's rearmament give Americans agency while making Japan a passive recipient. Textbooks seem to suggest that U.S. policy concerns forced Japan's rearmament largely independent of Japanese public opinion or involvement. All textbooks present photographic images of military activity in reflecting Japan's rearmament; one includes a caption about Japanese citizens trained at U.S. military bases. Furthermore, two textbooks depict a photograph of factories manufacturing bullets to be used by the U.S. military in the Korean War. This photograph is positioned directly next to a photograph of military rearmament exercises [see Figure 1]. Such connections between re-militarization and industry may possibly be viewed as a contemporary criticism of rearmament. Moreover, given the use of voice in these texts, the responsibility for rearmament falls on the shoulders of U.S. actors.

In sum, Japanese history textbooks represent the Korean War as an event largely disconnected from Japan's imperial past and any significant Cold War responsibilities.

Instead, the Korean War serves mainly to illustrate American coercion and hegemony in the post-war period. This does not necessarily suggest that Japanese history textbooks dismiss all of Japan's militaristic past, as this past still serves as a critical context for understanding the war-related industry and rearmament that occurred in the early 1950s. But Japanese textbooks do not extend this same chronological context to understanding the state of the Korean peninsula before its partition. Moreover, these texts help ensure that any ownership of post-war decision-making fall on U.S. or Allied forces. Through chronological structure and passive language, Japanese texts depict the Korean War as largely disconnected from any active role Japan or its people played in the region before, during, and after the war.



Figure 1: Images from *Tokyo Shoseki* (Tokyo, Japan: Tokyo Shoseski, 1998/2003), 324.

Analysis of U.S. textbooks.

Contemporary representations of most twentieth century wars and international conflicts in American secondary school history texts are still shaped by a larger Cold War foreign policy narrative. The Korean War, however, is unique. Two commonly used texts, *The Americans*, from McDougal Littell, and *The American Republic since 1877* from Glencoe, offer students no dominant central explanatory narrative beyond the strategic movements of U.S. forces during the course of the war.³¹ Unlike their characterizations of the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, or even the Vietnam War, these

texts struggle to tell any generative story of a conflict driven by clear motivations, framed by a distinct conclusion, and constructed to help readers contemplate likely winners and losers.

Like Japanese textbooks, the war is contextualized almost solely within American domestic Cold War politics. In both *The Americans* and *The American Republic*, events are fitted as one section in a broader chapter on the Cold War. Given the human cost of the war in U.S. lives alone—indeed, the only lives counted in the textbook account—it is especially significant that such little attention is given to the Korean War. Moreover, neither text weighs the domestic impact of these casualties. Instead, as *The American Republic* concludes, the war itself had little broader meaning beyond the contingent events of the American Cold War experience:

More than 33,600 American soldiers died in action in the Korean War, more than 20,600 died from accidents or from disease. The Korean War marked an important turning point in the Cold War. Until 1950 the United States had preferred to use political pressure and economic aid to contain communism. After the Korean War began, the United States embarked on a major military buildup.³²

Avoiding the difficult work of meaning-making, U.S. textbook accounts privilege a story of military strategy rather than suggesting that the war produced a broader geopolitical realignment. In *American Republic*, students read of the “daring invasion” led by General MacArthur at Inchon after his “troops stubbornly resisted the North Korean onslaught” at Pusan. The MacArthur-Truman debate over control of U.S. strategy in Korea does little to situate the Korean War in international terms.³³ Much is made in both texts about the respective armies moving back and forth across the 38th parallel. Each textbook contains large maps showing the chronological progress of the war to attract students’ interest to visually comprehend the war’s progress.

A substantial amount of space is given to the “crisis” averted when General MacArthur challenged President Harry Truman to expand the war into China. In addition to recounting the clash, *American Republic* gives readers a colorful half-page sidebar called

“Different Viewpoints: Should the War in Korea be Expanded?” Excerpts of MacArthur’s congressional address complaining of “appeasement” are juxtaposed with Truman’s defense of a “limited war” strategy. In the excerpt Truman expresses the dangers of “going it alone” against acts of aggression.³⁴ This debate is typically classroom fodder for discussions around executive power and civilian control of the military. As such, text given to competing interpretations of constitutionally mandated authority on the battlefield may be included for pedagogical reasons that go beyond historical significance.

Unlike WWII, where U.S. texts reveal a triumphant American contribution to victory and rebuilding, or the Vietnam War, where narratives of human tragedy and democratic activism prevail, there is no clear storyline for the Korean conflict. *The Americans* offers readers four pages and *The American Revolution since 1877* six pages on the topic, whereas *The Americans* devotes 41 pages to World War II and 27 pages to the Vietnam War, and *The American Republic* 39 pages to World War II and 37 pages to the Vietnam War. Neither text offers much to address the human and psychological impact of the Korean War on U.S. soldiers or on the American people. This stands in stark contrast to other conflicts. Even space given to descriptions of life in WWI trenches, the home front experiences of Americans during the Second World War, or jungle warfare in Vietnam have no corollary in the Korean War narrative.

In the same vein, there is no textbook discussion about the role of public opinion or the agency of individual citizens. In weighing the human costs of the war, the texts do even less in considering the impact on other nations. No figures are given for the number of Korean or Chinese casualties. In *American Republic*, readers are not introduced to a single Korean leader. Thus, the Korean War is constructed as an exclusively U.S.-oriented event. Finally, the U.S. textbooks do not offer any conclusive interpretation of the war. Why did the U.S. fight in this particular war? What impact did it have? What was lost and what was

gained? Neither text offers much. *The Americans* states that the war ended in a truce:

Finally, in July 1953, the two sides signed an armistice ending the war. At best, the agreement was a stalemate. On the one hand, the North Korean invaders had been pushed back and communism had been contained without atomic weapons. On the other hand, Korea was still two nations rather than one.³⁵

Such conclusions fail to address the questions most American historians have been asking about the Cold War. Was Korea a central front in the Cold War? What was really accomplished in Korea? Were these accomplishments worth the costs? What impact did the war have on the ways Americans conceptualized their own foreign policy? To what degree should Americans contemplate the human, emotional, and psychological impact of their military engagements? These two textbooks never take the narrative about the war beyond a descriptive level to consider any interpretive historical thinking.

These textbook characteristics reflect a limiting inward focus. Despite contextualizing the Korean War in the broad international alliances of the Cold War, these textbook accounts tend to ignore the impact U.S. decision-making has on other nations. In one way this viewpoint is not surprising. In the early twenty-first century, with the Cold War over, textbook editors seem to be less sure about what to do with the Korean War. Americans no longer assess this war as a need for self-protection from an ongoing communist threat. As such, powerful new questions could emerge about the costs, failures, and consequences of American foreign policy during the Cold War. Yet, on the whole, contemporary textbooks lack narrative purpose in dealing with the Korean War, focus on a limited number of national leaders as agents of policy and strategy, employ passive authoritative language, and de-emphasize multi-dimensional human costs of the war.³⁶

Discussion

Transnational comparisons of history textbooks are frequently used to study the disparities in each nation with respect to the extent and depth they cover particular events in history. Such comparative inquiry of national textbooks often encourages recommendations

emphasizing the importance of multidimensional perspectives when representing past events in history textbooks. This is not surprising, since most comparative studies of history textbooks are driven by historical controversies and contemporary ideological struggles between nations.³⁷

Yet unlike textbook descriptions of WWII, the Korean War has not generated heated debates among stake-holding nations. This should not minimize the importance of textbook comparisons about the Korean War. Previous research suggests that textbook accounts are also influenced by contemporary political formation.³⁸ In other words, officially approved textbooks in a nation may reflect that nation's current orientation toward globalization and global governance. A nation like South Korea, which depends heavily on globalization for its wealth and security, may have different stances than a nation like the U.S (which still benefits from its traditional nation-state sovereignty) or a nation like Japan (which must carefully balance both traditional nationalistic aspirations and governing structures with necessary involvement in and dependence on global institutions and system).

It may be possible to explain, at least partly, differences in how textbooks cover the Korean War in light of these tensions. The U.S. is an active superpower that at times relies on national sovereignty to justify its freedom of political, economic, and military action within the world system; U.S. textbooks tend to position the Korean War as a venue for American military heroism, constitutionalism, and purposeful leadership. South Korea is a globalized economic entity that hopes to transcend limitations as a small nation-state and eventually peacefully reunite the peninsula; South Korean textbooks consequently tend to position the war as a civil tragedy in transcendent humanitarian terms. Japan is an economically powerful nation-state that is nonetheless dependent on alliances and global governance for its geopolitical influence and security; Japanese textbooks thus tend to position the war as a phase in the construction of a new democratic, capitalist Japan allied

and aligned with the Western Bloc that would become the world system. In all cases, at least in part, the Korean War is interpreted in light of what the world has become since the conflict.

Our analysis supports these claims. Korean textbooks, for example, have the most substantial representation of civilian casualties and the suffering the war caused, carrying first-hand accounts and photos of Korean civilians. Furthermore, the Korean textbooks pay much greater attention on how the war had began so that they can assign responsibility for the war and destruction it caused. History textbooks in Korea place minimal emphasis on the government of South Korea and its role in materializing the war, while representing North Korea and other global powers (China, the Soviet Union, and the United States) as the major forces behind the war's outbreak.

In contrast to the Korean textbooks, Japanese history textbooks pay very little attention to the war's origin or human impact. Instead, Japanese textbooks represent the Korean War as part of a larger Cold War climate and discuss it mostly within the Japanese context. These texts suggest that Japan was profoundly limited by the devastation wrought by WWII and limited by Allied occupation powers. The Korean War, in this context, serves as one in a series of events that helped Japan re-establish itself as a part of the Western Bloc of nations. These texts also avoid tough questions about the pre-WWII origins of instability on the Korean peninsula and the role of Japanese decision-makers on rearmament. Similarly, U.S. textbooks place a greater emphasis on the war's conduct and its impact on American politics. As South Korean textbooks heavily focus on the Korean experience and Japanese textbooks on Japanese experiences, these U.S. texts display a narrow parochialism that contextualizes the Korean War amidst a series of seemingly equal events in a domestic Cold War environment. The Korean War offers opportunities to describe an inspiring story of military courage, illustrate American leadership in containing communism, and highlight a

significant constitutional crisis over how authority over U.S. military forces should be managed.

Still, it would be superficial to simply conclude that Japanese and American history textbooks are purposely inconsiderate of Korean victims and their suffering in the war while Korean history textbooks pay much greater attention to the human costs of the war. The textbooks in the three nations discuss the war primarily within a particular domestic framework. What is missing in these textbooks are the experience and agency of individual citizens in civic dissent, popular movements, and public opinion and the discussion of the broader issues in relation to the Korean War, such as the impact of the Korean War on the international politics of the Cold War.

Recent scholarship on the Korean War suggests that although the war occurred in the Korean peninsula, the war made a significant impact on the international community during and after the Cold War.³⁹ Others suggest that, along with superpowers such as the U.S., Soviet Union, and China, the United Nations and India's foreign minister V.K. Krishan Menon played a key role in ending the war.⁴⁰ Most of all, historians consistently point out that because of the limited access to the archives in the Soviet Union and China, some issues, such as how much Stalin and Mao Zedong were involved in the war and what and how they made decisions, still need more exploration.

None of the textbooks in the three nations seems to reflect such globally-oriented scholarly questions in presenting the Korean War. Lacking in discussion of the human experience and agency of the war and its international impact on the politics of the Cold War, these textbooks choose not to provide an internationally comprehensive account of the war. These narratives also present the past as finite, determined, and inevitable—and marching progressively toward the more perfect present. They do not offer a space in which students are encouraged to pause, ask questions, and shape their own understanding of a war that still

puzzles historians. All of the textbooks embrace a unitary tone that is fundamentally consonant with their societies' dominant geopolitical attitudes. Thus Japanese textbook narratives create a space in which Japanese militarism is consigned to a distant past; Korean textbooks create a space to memorialize past suffering in contrast to contemporary comfort and prosperity; U.S. textbooks create a space in which American military power and foreign policy had a clear global function. National narratives represented in history textbooks are not open-ended but instead close off the very kinds of inquiry that are at the heart of historical thinking.⁴¹

This is unfortunate. The Korean War offers considerable opportunities for engaging with multiple perspectives, multiple causation, differing historical interpretations, and generalizations about historical significance. For teachers, curriculum writers, textbook writers, and educational policymakers, the Korean War could be a vehicle for opening up critical thinking and exploring ongoing current debates over international issues that transcend exclusively national narratives, such as the UN peacekeeping interventions, diplomacy on nuclear proliferation, and the political and military legacies of the Cold War that persist in geopolitical tensions today. Investigating multiple perspectives on how the historical past relates to the world today may be politically and ideologically challenging, but identifying and testing such historical generalizations are essential to powerful history learning. Many history textbooks in use today have yet to explicitly support this kind of higher-order thinking, at least when it comes to teaching the Korean War.

Appendix

Research Questions:

- Why did the Korean War happen?
- How did it happen?
- What were the consequences of the Korean War?

- What meanings the Korean War created in both each nation — Korea, Japan, and the U.S. -- and the international communities?

How to Answer These Questions:

Analytical framework drawn from Werner's (2002) guidelines:

1. Representation (what is said from where, and how is it said?)
2. Gaze (What gaze is implicit within this text?)
3. Voice (Whose voice is dominant?)
4. Intertextuality (How are various sub-texts such as pictures, labels, questions or charts brought together to construct a complex representational system?)
 - the # of pages assigned to Korean War
 - Make-up of chapters (e.g., layout of titles and headings)
 - # of items and features related to the Korean War in unit goals, section reviews, highlights and end-unit tests
 - # and features of primary sources related to the Korean War
 - a. Photos and picture
 - b. First-hand accounts
 - c. Others
5. Absence (What is absent from a text? Who interests or what purposes may be served by this absence or exclusion?)

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge with thanks Stephen Mucher who contributed the U.S. textbook analysis to the earlier version of this manuscript.

NOTES

1. William Stueck, *The Korean War in World History*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004).
2. Marjori M. Krebs, "The Korean War: A Role-Play to Remember," *Social Studies* 100 (2009), 273-78.
3. Allan Reed Millett, "The Korean War: A 50-Year Critical Historiography," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 24 (2001), 188-224.
4. See Keith C. Barton, "A Sociocultural Perspective on Children's Understanding of Historical Change: Comparative Findings from Northern Ireland and the United States," *American Educational Research Journal* 38 (2001), 881-913; Terrie Epstein, "Perspective Matters: the Teaching and Learning National History," *Social Education* 69 (2005), 201-4; James V. Wertsch, J. V. "Is it Possible to Teach Beliefs, as well as Knowledge about History?" in *Knowing, Teaching, Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, eds. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000), 38-50.
5. Lin Lin, Yali Zhao, Masato Ogawa, John Hoge, and Bok Young Kim, "Whose

History? An Analysis of the Korean War in History Textbooks from the United States, South Korea, Japan, and China,” *Social Studies* 100 (2009), 222-32.

6. See Hillel Black, *The American Schoolbook* (New York: William Morrow, 1967); Charles H. Carpenter, *History of American Schoolbooks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963); Clifton Johnson, *Old-time Schools and Schoolbooks* (New York: Macmillan, 1904); John. A. Nietz, *The Evolution of American Secondary School Textbooks* (Rutland, VT: C.E. Tuttle Co., 1966); Kyle Roy Ward, *History in the Making: An Absorbing Look at How American History has Changed in the Telling Over the Past 100 Years* (New York: New Press, 2006).

7. See Michael Apple and Linda K. Christian-Smith, *The Politics of the Textbook* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Michael Apple, *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age* (New York: Routledge, 1993/2000); Michael B. Kane, *Minorities in Textbooks: A Study of their Treatment in Social Studies Texts* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1970); Becky Ropers-Huilman, *Feminist Teaching in Theory and Practice: Situating Power and Knowledge in Poststructural Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998).

8. Frances Fitzgerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979).

9. Jean Anyon, “Ideology and United States History Textbooks,” *Harvard Education Review* 49 (1979), 361-86.

10. Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002), 3.

11. Dana Lindaman and Kyle Ward, *History Lesson* (New York: New Press, 2004), xviii.

12. Keith C. Barton, “History Education and National Identity in Northern Ireland and the United States: Differing priorities,” *Theory into Practice* 40 (Winter 2001), 48-54,

13. Dan B. Fleming and Burton I. Kaufman, “The Forgotten War: Korea,” *Social Education* 54 (January 1990), 35-8.

14. Dan Fleming, “The High School History Textbook: Dreaming the Impossible Dream?” *International Journal of Social Education* 4 (Winter 1989-1990), 63-7.

15. Lindaman and Kyle, 265-177.

16. Lin, Zhao, Ogawa, J. and Kim, 222-32.

17. *Ibid.*, 228.

18. To see how textbooks are selected and nationally certified in South Korea and Japan, see Hy Kim, “A Comparative Study of an American and the Republic of Korean Textbook Series’ Coverage of Measurement Geometry in the First Grade through the Eighth Grades,” *School Science and Mathematics* 93 (1993), 123-26; Masaru Tani, Masami Hasuko, and Donald Lankiewicz, “Textbook Development and Selection in Japan and the United States,” *Social Education* 57 (1993), 71-75.

19. Diane Ravitch, *A Consumer’s Guide of High School History Textbooks*. Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2004. http://www.edexcellence.net/detail/news.cfm?news_id=329&id= (accessed June 18, 2008).

20. Walt Werner, “Reading Authorship into Texts,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 28 (2000), 193-219.

21. Myunglim Park, *The Korean War: The Outbreak and its Origins* (Seoul, Korea: Nanam. 1996).

22. For a comprehensive discussion of the Korean War historiography, see Millet, “The Korean War: A 50-Year Critical Historiography.”

23. Bruce Cummings, *The Origins of the Korean War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); Burton I. Kaufman, *The Korean War: Challenges in Crisis,*

Credibility and Command (New York : McGraw-Hill, 1986, 1997).

24. Park, *The Korean War*; William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

25. Korean history textbooks for the analysis include: Jino Joo, Youngbum Shin, Jinkyu Kim, Byungkwan Min, and Dongkun Cho, *Korean Modern History for High School* (Seoul, Korea: Jungang Textbook Co, 2002); Kwangnam Kim, Youngryul Lew, Jaehong Shin, Dongeun Kim, and Byungdo Choi, *Korean Modern History for High School* (Seoul, Korea: Doosan Textbook Co., 2002); Hanjong Kim, Sunkweon Hong, Taeung Kim, Yinsuk Lee, Won Namkung, and Jungran Nam, *Korean Modern History for High School* (Seoul, Korea: Kumsung Textbook Co., 2002).

26. In both South Korea and Japan, textbooks use the same titles such as modern Korean history or Japanese history while in the U.S. each textbook has its own title. To differentiate textbooks from each other, in South Korean and Japan's cases, we will use the publishers' names to indicate the textbooks. For the U.S. case, we will use the title of the textbooks.

27. *Kumsung*, 273.

28. For the detailed criticism about the textbook published by *Kumsung*, see Jin-oh Joo, "The Standards and Censorship in Writing Korean Modern History Textbooks," paper presented at the symposium by History Education, Korean History, and Korean History Associations, Seoul, Korea, October, 2004.

29. Japanese history textbooks for the analysis include: Sanseido, *Meikai Nihonshi A* (Tokyo, Japan: Sanseido, 1997, 2001); Tokyo Shoseki, *Nihonshi B.* (Tokyo, Japan: Tokyo Shoseki, 1998, 2003); Yamakawa Shuppan, *Shousetsu Nihonshi* (Tokyo, Japan: Yamakawa Shuppan, 1997/2000).

30. *Senseido*, 162.

31. Joyce Appleby, Alan Brinkley, Albert S. Broussard, James McPherson, and Donald A. Ritchie. *The American Republic since 1877.* (Glencoe: McGraw-Hill, 2003, 2008); G. Danzer, *The Americans* (New York; McDougal Littell, 2003).

32. *The American Republic*, 665.

33. *Ibid*, 664.

34. *Ibid*, 664.

35. *The Americans*, 615.

36. Robert B. Bain, "Rounding Up Unusual Suspects: Facing Authority Hidden the History Classroom," *Teachers College Record* 108 (October 2006), 2080-2114.

37. Dan Porat, "A Contemporary Past: History Textbooks as Sites of National Memory," in *International Review of History Education: Raising Standards in History Education*, eds. Alaric Dickinson, Peter Gordon, and Peter Lee, (London, and Portland, OR: Woburn Press, 2001), 36-55; Pilvi Torsi, "How to Deal with a Difficult Past? History Textbooks Supporting Enemy Images in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 39 (2007), 77-96; Laura Hein and Mark Selden, eds., *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany and the United States.* (New York & London: M.E. Sharpe, 2000); Stewart J. Foster and Keith A. Crawford, eds., *What Shall We Tell the Children? International Perspectives on School History Textbooks.* (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2006); Hanna Schissler Yasemin and Nuhoglu Soyal, eds., *The Nation Europe and the World: Textbooks and Curricula in Transition* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005); Ya-Chen Su. "Ideological Representations of Taiwanese History: An Analysis of Elementary Social Studies Textbooks 1978-1995," *Curriculum Inquiry* 37 (2007), 205-37.

38. See notes 6-10.

39. Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History*.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).
