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**Think Again: Japanese Textbooks**

By Jennifer Lind

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Sixty years ago after atomic bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan's surrender ended World War II. Since then Japanese history textbooks have been embroiled in controversy. Critics say they too often whitewash Japan's wartime aggression. But Japan has actually come a long way in dealing with its 20th century legacy.

**“Japanese Textbooks Whitewash the Country’s History”**

**Be fair.** Most textbooks in Japanese schools condemn the country’s militarism and portray the period of Japanese aggression as a terrible error. Furthermore, the rose-tinted patriotism of the Japanese textbook that sparked large-scale Chinese protests last April—called the “Fusosha” text after its publisher—is rare among Japanese textbooks. The book was adopted by only 18 of more than 11,000 Japanese junior high schools, and it has been denounced by Japanese liberals and the country’s leading teachers union.

Nevertheless, Japan’s critics have a point. Although most Japanese textbooks are not as egregious as the Fusosha text, they generally do gloss over or give short shrift to historic atrocities such as the use of sex slaves by the



**The end of war:** A Japanese soldier surveys the

Japanese Imperial Army (the so-called comfort women) during World War II, the Rape of Nanking in 1937, and the most brutal aspects of Japan's colonization of Korea.

atomic bomb devastation 60 years ago.

U.S. Naval Photographic Center

### “Japan Distorts Its History More than Most Countries”

**False.** Most countries present their own history in a flattering light. Democracies are generally the most candid countries, but even their textbooks often put a positive spin on the past. The British, for example, are rightfully proud of their perseverance in the face of Nazism, but their textbooks emphasize Britain's “finest hour” at the expense of covering the tragedies of British colonialism and their legacies today. Italian textbooks exaggerate the anti-fascist resistance within Italy during World War II, and portray Italy as a victor rather than as a defeated Nazi ally. Even in the United States—a country more self-critical than most—many textbooks highlight the country's more uplifting moments and downplay American atrocities (e.g., the genocide of Native Americans, the horrors of slavery, the brutality of wartime strategic bombing campaigns, and the atrocities of the Vietnam War).

In autocracies, whitewashing and mythmaking are the norm. Japan's most vocal critic is no exception: Chinese pupils are taught to revere Mao Zedong. But they still do not learn that his economic policies during the Great Leap Forward led to a famine that killed 30 million people. Nor do they learn about the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown on student protestors. The one country that extensively covers its past aggression and atrocities is Germany, the international gold standard for contrition, with which Japan is often unfavorably compared. (French journalist Daniel Vernet once wryly quipped, Germany is “unsurpassed both in the crime and at repenting it.”) Japan, and the rest of the world for that matter, lags in comparison.

### “The Japanese Government Manipulates Textbook Content to Boost Nationalism”

**Not Anymore.** The Japanese government once played a major role in shaping textbook content, but it stopped doing so in response to criticism at home and abroad. For many years, liberal Japanese authors protested that conservative bureaucrats were censoring their descriptions of war and atrocities. In the late 1990s, after a series of lawsuits, as well as disputes with South Korea and China during the 1980s, Tokyo decided to stop interfering with textbook content. Education ministry officials now check books only for accuracy, and they allow factually correct books to compete for selection by school districts. Japanese government officials defend this policy as the best solution. They say that rather than have Tokyo decide which events should be included in textbooks, the government will encourage the free dissemination and debate of ideas—and let the market decide which ones are sound.

Feel-good Japanese textbooks are not part of a government effort to promote nationalism. There is a more mundane explanation. Like people around the world, the Japanese people prefer to teach their youth an uplifting version of their history. But, as the limited distribution of the Fusosha textbook illustrates, the Japanese people typically reject the most nationalist portrayals of their past.

### “Recently Published Japanese Textbooks Reflect a Growing Militarism”

**No.** Supporters of patriotic textbooks in Japan are typically portrayed as militarists by their detractors. But in other countries, the view that national history should be given a positive spin is a mainstream conservative position—not a sign of extreme militarism. For example, Lynne Cheney, the wife of the U.S. vice president, has long advocated teaching a patriotic version of U.S. history, and she has authored the children's book, *America: a Patriotic Primer*. (F is for “Freedom and the Flag that we fly”; G is for “God in whom we trust”). Similar sentiments in Japan are thus neither unique nor the musings of a crazy “militaristic” fringe.

Those who argue that Japan's textbooks are sending dangerous signals about its intentions are missing the bigger picture. For the past half century, Japan has been a model world citizen. It has a thriving democracy, is

a leader in the global economy, generously donates foreign aid, pursues a defensive foreign policy, and has forsworn the use of force as a tool of statecraft.

### **“If Japan Would Just Apologize, the Issue Would Go Away”**

**If only.** Japan has apologized numerous times, to China and others. Although some of these apologies were tepid and vague, others were frank and contrite. In 1993, Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa described in detail Japan’s brutal colonial policies in Korea, and issued his “genuine contrition” and “deepest apologies.” Two years later, Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama conveyed his “feelings of deep remorse” and “heartfelt apology” for Japan’s colonial aggression. The problem is that each Japanese apology triggers a domestic backlash by conservative politicians, who make incendiary statements denying or justifying Japan’s past violence. This cycle of apology and backlash has embittered Japan’s neighbors. Another Japanese apology will not likely help matters.

### **“The World Should Pressure Japan to Change Its Textbooks”**

**Bad idea.** In Japan, even homegrown movements to expand textbook coverage of atrocities often trigger a conservative backlash. Foreign pressure on Tokyo to rewrite its history would be even more inflammatory. A better approach is to influence more subtly Japanese education policy through international institutions. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has provided a forum for European countries to discuss historical disputes and to coauthor textbooks, and Japan and its neighbors should be encouraged to engage in similar cooperative efforts. A recent textbook called *The Contemporary and Modern History of Three East Asian Countries* was the product of years of collaboration between Japanese, Chinese, and Korean researchers determined to reach a consensus on the countries’ shared history. Such efforts will be more palatable to Japan, as they are designed to improve the history texts of all participants rather than singling out countries for criticism.

World pressure should actually be applied on China to mitigate the violent anti-Japanese sentiment that surfaces time and again. Many China analysts argue that Beijing does not instigate anti-Japanese riots when they erupt, and perhaps has difficulty controlling them. This assessment, if correct, is even more worrisome than the reports that the Chinese government fuels and encourages protests. If anti-Japanese sentiment is so pervasive that even China’s authoritarian rulers cannot contain popular outbursts, the implications for East Asian stability are immense.

It is entirely understandable that the people of China feel the pain of the terrible crimes Japan committed six decades ago. But they should also recognize Japan’s peaceful behavior over the past 60 years, and recall that, as major trading partners, Japan and China today strengthen each other economically. Mitigating xenophobic attitudes is an important task for both governments. But Japanese textbooks should no longer be used as an excuse to keep Asia’s two greatest powers locked in the past.

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