Contested Memories of the Past: The History Textbook Controversy in Taiwan

Lei Duan, Ph.D.
Lieberthal-Rogel Center for Chinese Studies
University of Michigan
Taiwanese students stormed the Education Ministry in a textbook protest in July 23, 2015
Turn and Talk

• What do you think is happening here?

• Why might history textbooks, or textbook changes, make people angry?
A Brief History of Taiwan

- Immigration from mainland China for centuries
- Governed by the Dutch East India Company from 1624
- Koxinga (1368-1644) drove the Dutch out of Taiwan in 1662
- Taiwan was incorporated into the Qing administrative structure in 1683
- Under Japanese colonial rule, 1895-1945
- Returned to Republic of China, 1945-
- The island has been separated from mainland China again, 1949-
February 28 Incident (1947)
Taiwan’s Road to Democracy

Transition from Authoritarianism to Democracy

Chiang Kai Shek Memorial Square… or Liberty Square?
The Formation of Taiwanese Identity
Telling histories of an island nation

"Getting to know Taiwan"

New geography and history for Taiwan's students
Taipei, 24 August 1997

On 14 August 1997, the Far Eastern Economic Review published an excellent article, titled "Schools of Thought" by its Taiwan reporter Julian Baum about the issue of textbooks in Taiwan secondary schools. The report focused on the fact that under the Kuomintang government, Taiwan's students have had to memorize quaint facts about China's geography and history, while they learned very little about Taiwan itself.

Finally, the Ministry of Education in Taipei decided to correct the situation, and had a series of textbooks written, titled "Getting to Know Taiwan", which is being introduced in Taiwan's junior highschool classrooms in September 1997.

The new texts cover many sensitive and once-forbidden topics, such as an account of early aboriginal settlement of the island, the killing of tens of thousands of Taiwanese by Chiang Kai-shek's troops in 1947, the "white terror" -- the Kuomintang's repressive intimidation campaign in the 1950s and '60s, and the "Kaohsiung Incident" of 1979, a turning point in Taiwan's modern history. The text also refers to the people on the island as Taiwan ren or "Taiwanese" rather than Zhongguo ren or "Chinese" -- a major step forward.

Some examples of what Taiwanese students until now did and didn't know:

- Students taking high school entrance exams must know ancient capitals of imperial China, but not the capitals of Taiwan's counties.
- They have to learn the reign titles of the emperors of old Chinese dynasties, but are not taught the names of Taiwan's aboriginal tribes.
- Geography tests require students to identify China's rivers and major mountain ranges, but not those of Taiwan. Maps on the school walls show an anachronistic "Republic of China" which -- among other anomalies -- embraces all of Mongolia, a chunk of modern-day Burma, Tibet, and numerous Chinese provinces which no longer exist.
- History lessons cover extensively the atrocities committed by Japan during World War II in China, but give scant attention to the massacre by mainland Chinese of 20-28,000 Taiwanese in 1947, and totally ignore the political repression that followed.
- Students must study quaint intellectual movements preceding the Nationalist overthrow of the Chinese imperial dynasty in 1911, but not the Taiwanese self-rule movement under the Japanese colonial period (1895-1945).
## The Battle over History Textbook in 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Version</th>
<th>New Version</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Mainland China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governed by Dutch</td>
<td>Invaded by Dutch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governed by Koxinga</td>
<td>Governed by Kosinga of Ming Dynasty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qing Dynasty</td>
<td>Qing Court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governed by Japan</td>
<td>Colonized by Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received Taiwan from Japan after the WWII</td>
<td>Glorious Retrocession of Taiwan after the WWII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort women</td>
<td>Women were forced to become comfort women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Diversity</td>
<td>Diversity of Chinese Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>Taiwan’s resistance against Japanese colonial rule</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The History Curriculum Controversy
AUSTIN, Tex. — After three days of turbulent meetings, the Texas Board of Education on Friday approved a social studies curriculum that will put a conservative stamp on history and economics textbooks, stressing the superiority of American capitalism, questioning the Founding Fathers’ commitment to a purely secular government and presenting Republican political philosophies in a more positive light.

The vote was 10 to 5 along party lines, with all the Republicans on the board voting for it.

The board, whose members are elected, has influence beyond Texas because the state is one of the largest buyers of textbooks. In the digital age, however, that influence has diminished as technological advances have made it possible for publishers to tailor books to individual states.