Why Northeast Asia Feels the Need to Rewrite the Past

Disputes over differing textbook accounts of events mask a deeper problem with how history is taught in the region.

Attempts to hide Japan’s World War II atrocities pit those who want to respect history against those who don’t.

Why are apologies so hard to come by, and what if perpetrators of wrongdoing were more forthcoming in admitting mistakes?
At the heart of current tensions between Japan and its Asian neighbors are efforts by the government of Shinzo Abe to rewrite the history of Japan’s atrocities in World War II.

The fulcrum of that revisionism is school textbooks, which have now effectively erased the history of so-called “comfort women.”

Alexis Dudden unravels how the debate pits not so much Japan against its Asian neighbors as Japanese who want to acknowledge history against those who don’t.

THAT Japanese politicians want to shape national history education in Japan is not surprising. Nor are their efforts unique. American politicians regularly memorialize the use of nuclear weapons by the United States against Hiroshima and Nagasaki as “necessary” — some even ascribe to it moral virtue — despite abundant evidence to the contrary. The ramifications for generations of Americans are clear, with most initially learning about these events in school textbooks through similar self-justifying narratives, revealing the central place of these moments in this country’s most intricate “history problems.”

Noticeably, however, in Japan today some politicians and opinion leaders are demanding such unquestioning loyalty to radically extreme interpretations of modern Japanese history that blowback to their efforts has propelled people and groups better known for subtler critique to protest on center stage. Beginning with the Japanese Historical Science Society in October 2014, at press conference after press conference these voices — together with activists long leading the public charge — reveal the irony of the current state of play: the government of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s rigidly proscriptive definition of history has generated unprecedented scrutiny and condemnation of its falsehoods both within Japan and around the world. As things stand, apowerfully entrenched minority now clings to what the government defines as a “correct” understanding of the nation’s past. For many others, the time is ripe to challenge these views.

In March 2015, the Japanese government released the latest round of state-approved junior high school textbooks. A variety of intentional misrepresentations appeared, including a wildly fantastical rewriting of the dispossession of the indigenous Ainu from their land in northern Japan in the late 19th century. Instead of the forced removal that took place, the story now explains that these people benefitted from being given good farmland (never mind that the Ainu were hunter-gatherers).

Notwithstanding which fabrication or elision in the new textbooks is most egregious, the year’s hot-button political issue, the history of Japan’s state-sponsored system of military sexual slavery known commonly by its derogatory euphemism “comfort women,” drew the most focus. Unsurprisingly, the results followed a retrograde trend in motion since 1997, when six in seven of the approved textbooks included mention of this issue. By 2003, only three in eight did. Currently, none does, yet the new list adds a textbook that vaguely acknowledges
something unpleasant in the past involving women (mainly Korean) having sex with Japanese soldiers, yet its publishers have made the obscenely counterproductive decision to remove previously published testimony by victims, because the evidence counters the government’s view. Therefore, the government-approved textbook that includes mention of the larger history does greater disservice to the truth than those that do not; in its telling, the victims themselves are to blame for one of the greatest human rights violations of the 20th century.

But could we expect otherwise? In October 2014, Abe’s minister of education, Hakubun Shimomura, challenged the need for dictionaries in school classrooms, suggesting that the contents in them could lead to “misunderstandings.”

George Orwell, were he alive today, would surely feel satisfaction at seeing echoes of the Big Brother authorities he imagined. Japanese classrooms, however, remain places of open learning by world standards. The nation’s constitution guarantees academic freedom, and teachers can introduce supplementary materials on their own — at least in theory. Yet different even from Japan’s very recent past, these latest textbook distortions appear within a newly precarious social milieu. As a result, not only do the glaring absences and contortions increase the burden of teaching the truth to already over-extended faculty — and as before, no additions would appear on required exams — but challenging any of them now also carries potentially ominous risk.

In the crosshairs is the issue of “coercing” victims into the system of sexual servitude by Japanese military officers and agents and brokers working for the Japanese military. Many middle school teachers know full well that many official Japanese government documents have already demonstrated the Japanese military’s responsibility — having previously taught this evidence in once-approved textbooks — yet now this history would appear not to have happened.

Flash to a Japanese classroom today in which a teacher finds him or herself wishing to elaborate on the role of the Japanese military to a bunch of 12- and 13-year-olds (roughly the same age as many of the victims involved in the “comfort women” system).

In Japan right now, teaching already published yet recently elided materials of certain histories is not only extra work; it could also jeopardize one’s livelihood. In such an atmosphere, arrests may not be necessary because self-censorship could silence dissent instead.

It is not forbidden to do so, yet the teacher must now produce the supporting evidence on his or her own, drawing outsized attention to now-banned materials that were once approved — a highly difficult move, and especially so among adolescents given the sensitive nature of the topic involved. In the mix, the teacher additionally risks having a student take a photograph or tweet his or her action and spreading it on social media in a Japan where special secrecy laws could lead to “misunderstandings.”

Abe’s minister of education, Hakubun Shimomura, challenged the need for dictionaries in school classrooms, suggesting that the contents in them could lead to “misunderstandings.”

George Orwell, were he alive today, would surely feel satisfaction at seeing echoes of the Big Brother authorities he imagined. Japanese classrooms, however, remain places of open learning by world standards. The nation’s constitution guarantees academic freedom, and teachers can introduce supplementary materials on their own — at least in theory. Yet different even from Japan’s very recent past, these latest textbook distortions appear within a newly precarious social milieu. As a result, not only do the glaring absences and contortions increase the burden of teaching the truth to already over-extended faculty — and as before, no additions would appear on required exams — but challenging any of them now also carries potentially ominous risk.

In the crosshairs is the issue of “coercing” victims into the system of sexual servitude by Japanese military officers and agents and brokers working for the Japanese military. Many middle school teachers know full well that many official Japanese government documents have already demonstrated the Japanese military’s responsibility — having previously taught this evidence in once-approved textbooks — yet now this history would appear not to have happened.

Flash to a Japanese classroom today in which a teacher finds him or herself wishing to elaborate on the role of the Japanese military to a bunch of 12- and 13-year-olds (roughly the same age as many of the victims involved in the “comfort women” system).

In Japan right now, teaching already published yet recently elided materials of certain histories is not only extra work; it could also jeopardize one’s livelihood. In such an atmosphere, arrests may not be necessary because self-censorship could silence dissent instead.

It is not forbidden to do so, yet the teacher must now produce the supporting evidence on his or her own, drawing outsized attention to now-banned materials that were once approved — a highly difficult move, and especially so among adolescents given the sensitive nature of the topic involved. In the mix, the teacher additionally risks having a student take a photograph or tweet his or her action and spreading it on social media in a Japan where special secrecy laws could lead to “misunderstandings.”

Abe’s minister of education, Hakubun Shimomura, challenged the need for dictionaries in school classrooms, suggesting that the contents in them could lead to “misunderstandings.”

George Orwell, were he alive today, would surely feel satisfaction at seeing echoes of the Big Brother authorities he imagined. Japanese classrooms, however, remain places of open learning by world standards. The nation’s constitution guarantees academic freedom, and teachers can introduce supplementary materials on their own — at least in theory. Yet different even from Japan’s very recent past, these latest textbook distortions appear within a newly precarious social milieu. As a result, not only do the glaring absences and contortions increase the burden of teaching the truth to already over-extended faculty — and as before, no additions would appear on required exams — but challenging any of them now also carries potentially ominous risk.

In the crosshairs is the issue of “coercing” victims into the system of sexual servitude by Japanese military officers and agents and brokers working for the Japanese military. Many middle school teachers know full well that many official Japanese government documents have already demonstrated the Japanese military’s responsibility — having previously taught this evidence in once-approved textbooks — yet now this history would appear not to have happened.

Flash to a Japanese classroom today in which a teacher finds him or herself wishing to elaborate on the role of the Japanese military to a bunch of 12- and 13-year-olds (roughly the same age as many of the victims involved in the “comfort women” system).