

Narrative Review Article

Teaching Silence: Textbooks, Nationalism and the Construction of Wartime Memory in late 1980s and early 1990s Japan

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how Japan's Ministry of Education and the Liberal Democratic Party shaped public memory of wartime atrocities, specifically the Nanking Massacre (also known as the Nanjing Massacre or the Rape of Nanking), through the censorship and revision of history textbooks in the late 1980s to early 1990s. Drawing on theories of public and cultural memory, as well as Pierre Nora's concept of sites of memory, it situates the textbook controversies within a broader historiographical landscape. The study employs qualitative textual analysis of Ministry of Education-approved high school textbooks, ministry revision comments, and court documents from Saburo Ienaga's lawsuits to trace how language was softened, omitted, and used to support an ideological narrative. By examining rhetoric shifts (for example, replacing "invasion" with "advance") alongside scholarly interpretations by Laura Hein, Mark Selden, and Yoshiko Nozaki, the research demonstrates how state institutions perpetuated denialist narratives that prioritized national pride over historical accountability. It further argues that while Ienaga's litigation briefly amplified liberal and anti-denialist perspectives, court rulings upheld the screening system, reinforcing governmental control over historical education. The paper concludes that Japan's post-war education system functioned as a tool of memory politics: it cultivated a dominant narrative that minimized the Rape of Nanking, influenced intergenerational perceptions of moral responsibility, and strained relations with neighboring victim countries of China and South Korea. These findings underscore the broader implications of state-controlled educational narratives for reconciliation efforts and international diplomacy.

Keywords: Public Memory; Nanking Massacre; Rape of Nanking; Educational Policy; Textbook Controversies; Historical Revisionism; Japanese Nationalism; Japan

INTRODUCTION

Japan's lack of acknowledgement and representation of past wartime atrocities, especially the 1937 Rape of Nanking, is a long-contested issue. While historical narratives outside of Japan consistently emphasize the

scale and brutality of the Nanking Massacre, many post-World War II Japanese authorities, organizations, and public figures espoused a denialist viewpoint. They contributed to the suppression or distortion of public memory regarding Japan's wartime atrocities. This ideological influence was particularly evident in Ministry of Education (MOE)-approved textbooks during the 1980s, and the politicians who controlled it. The politicians held a denialist viewpoint, which led to the approval of widespread textbooks that taught the same views. As a result, the 1980s to 1990s marked a critical turning point in the shaping of Japan's historical

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and public memory.

Focusing on the textbook controversies and the voices that shaped them provides a new way to examine how post-World War II Japan's public memory of the Rape of Nanking, or the Nanking Massacre, was shaped by the heightened conservative nationalist sentiment due to the Liberal Democratic Party's single-party rule (1). Unlike museum exhibitions or public media, school textbooks carried the authority of the state and reached virtually all students (2). This gave textbooks a greater influence on the dominant memory of wartime history within Japan (3). In addition, the textbooks' deliberate changing and omissions of certain words demonstrated silenced memory in the context of public memory. The term "silenced memory", also known as "historical silences," is defined by Michel-Rolph Trouillot to be how unequal power structures work to create and reinforce historical narratives that shape how societies remember the past, tell stories, and establish historical significance.

While this paper does focus primarily on nationalist denialism, it is important to briefly situate these perspectives against the broader historiographical landscape. Liberal Japanese historians such as Yoshida Yutaka and international scholars like Iris Chang and Joshua Fogel have consistently documented the scale and brutality of the Nanking Massacre and the Rape of Nanking, which directly contradicts the denialist narratives that downplay casualties or dispute the event's criminality. Iris Chang, in her book *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, wrote: "Not only did live burials, castration, the carving of organs, and the roasting of people become routine, but more diabolical tortures were practiced, such as hanging people by their tongues on iron hooks and burying people to their waists and watching them get torn apart by German shepherds." (4) That snippet is only a few examples of the horrors that Iris Chang highlighted and brought to light through her book. Her use of direct testimonies and documents directly contradicts the denialist rhetoric in Japan, which seeks to minimize or sanitize the violence. However, some historians have criticized Chang's methodology and factual accuracy. For example, Masahiro Yamamoto characterized her as a non-academic expressing "extreme and egregiously mistaken opinions," and Minoru Kitamura labeled her book a political tool rather than rigorous scholarship. Acknowledging these critiques underscores the need to corroborate popular accounts with scholarly research (5).

At the same time, some scholars of memory politics argue that Japan's textbook debates cannot be simply

seen as a binary struggle between denialism and truth, with the term "truth" being used lightly in this case due to existing debates between scholars regarding whether or not historical "truth" actually exists. Yoshiko Nozaki and Mark Selden (6), for instance, suggest that the conflict also reflects institutional complexity rather than just purely nationalist ideology. After approval by the Ministry, multiple textbooks compete in a marketplace, and "regional selection boards" and ultimately the "local education committees" decide which to adopt, meaning that nationalist texts may be approved but also not used in the mainstream educational system (7). By acknowledging these alternative perspectives, this study situates itself within a more balanced historiographical context, demonstrating that denialism is only one part of a more complicated negotiation over Japan's wartime past.

Throughout this paper the terms "revisionism" and "denialism" are used. "Revisionism" refers to the legitimate scholarly practice of revising historical narratives when new evidence emerges and requires consensus among historians (8). Denialism is defined to be the deliberate dismissive or distortion of established facts to serve prejudiced interpretations (8). Alternative interpretations, such as those of the more moderate and politically neutral school of Nanking studies, may dispute casualty figures but still acknowledge that mass killings occurred (9). This distinction clarifies why some Japanese authors are characterized as denialists rather than revisionists.

This paper aims to explore and provide answers to the following questions. How did Japanese nationalist ideology in the 1980s and 1990s shape textbook portrayals of the Rape of Nanking through state censorship, rhetorical strategies, and language manipulation by the Ministry of Education and the Liberal Democratic Party? What does this reveal about the role of education in constructing public memory, and how does public memory affect international relations and reconciliation efforts? To do so, this paper analyzes how the junior and senior high school textbooks approved by the MOE in the 1980s depicted the Rape of Nanking, and what that revealed about the influence of nationalist ideology on public historical memory. This paper will also utilize concepts and theories from memory studies, such as "public memory", "dominant memory," and "silent memory," to examine the effect these public textbooks and works had on postwar Japan. By focusing on this pivotal decade in Japan's history, this study contributes to broader discussions of how nations remember and forget atrocities in their histories, as well as the effect of

such actions on international relations and reconciliation efforts. It will also highlight the power of education in shaping collective public memory, and emphasize the importance of political viewpoints in shaping the narrative for generations to come. This paper argues that Japanese nationalist ideology, which was shaped and enforced by the Ministry of Education and the Liberal Democratic Party's manipulation of textbook language, directly led to a dominant memory that minimized the atrocities committed during the Rape of Nanking.

This paper is structured into, and unfolds in five distinct sections. First, this study will discuss the theoretical framework it will utilize to analyze primary and secondary sources related to Japanese nationalism and textbook controversies. A timeline of the development of the field of memory studies, as it relates to this paper, and a brief history of the field will be featured. Additionally, various concepts will be applied to the Japanese government's policies in the 1980s and 1990s. In this section, the definitions of certain memory studies terminology will also be given, as well as the thinkers to whom they are attributed. Next, this paper will provide an in-depth examination of the political and historical context of Japan in the 1960s, extending through to the 1990s. This will set the foundation for the development of public memory and also highlight the factors that influenced its development. It will also mention the different types of textbook controversies that were present in Japan at the time, as well as a philosophical framework in which many researchers and publishers were categorized to be in. This leads to the following section, which is the case study on specific instances of denialism in the narrative of the Rape of Nanking in Japan, which will be analyzed through the viewpoint of memory studies in this paper. This case study section will feature specific rhetorical examples, a lawsuit, and government feedback that affects public memory. Finally, this paper will conclude with a section on the consequences and legacies of the textbook controversies in Japan during the 1980s and 1990s, and will offer lessons for future governments to consider when developing policies that may impact public memory and international relations as a conclusion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY: MEMORY, NATIONALISM, AND EDUCATION

This section introduces key concepts from the field of memory studies to examine how national education

policies shaped dominant historical narratives. It focuses in particular on how collective memory was constructed and transmitted through school curricula in postwar Japan. Research after World War II has highlighted Japanese textbook controversies, the issue of the state having power over education, and the effect representation of wartime atrocities had on the dominant narrative, and by extension, the public's memory as well. Although widely used, the concept of a "dominant memory" is not attributed to any specific theorist, but developed to be accepted as "memories [moving] beyond the remembering individual and become shared, passed on, and in this way, [forms] a broader network through which people gather a sense of collectivity" (10). It could be seen, however, as related to Michel Foucault's theories of power and knowledge, wherein he argued that knowledge and power could not be separated. Consequently, according to Foucault's theory, "societal norms and institutions shape individual identities and truths, rather than the other way around" (11). Therefore, public memory and dominant discourse are widely understood as being shaped by the institutions controlled by those in power, which, in the case of the Japanese textbook controversy, was that of the Liberal Democratic Party's government (see section 3 on historical and political context). Through their control of the MOE and textbooks, they controlled the public's memory and what was taught to the people, shaping their thoughts in the way they wanted. As a result, the development of public memory was not passive, and instead was managed by these institutions of authority. The term "public memory" is attributed to Pierre Nora and is defined as "the circulation of recollections among members of a given community" (10). This study will utilize the field of memory studies to examine the effect Japan's textbook controversies had on shaping the dominant narrative of Japan's World War II atrocities, or, in the eyes of the Liberal Democratic Party members in the 1980s and 1990s, the lack thereof. The field of memory studies sought to examine the way individuals and society as a collective remembered the past, and how such memory was transmitted, as well as constructed, through the identity, power, and culture of the ruling class, oftentimes.

It is widely thought that the field of memory studies was founded by Maurice Halbwachs through his *book Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, published in 1925. Halbwachs, one of the founding figures of this field, believed that "individual memory develops in interaction with that of social networks and the larger community"

(12). Interaction with social networks and the “larger community” could take many different forms, such as engaging with the media, reading books and other textual works, and being influenced by those around. Most importantly, however, was the interaction by which people gained education through state-sponsored schooling. This concept, started by Halbwachs, used the term “collective memory”, but some modern philosophers and theorists preferred the term “cultural memory” instead, and historians and social scientists utilized the term “social memory”. However, all three versions were inherently the same, the only difference being the approach to interpreting it. Originally Halbwachs founded his term on the sociological categories of family, class, and religion, but modern theorists within the field of memory studies focused more on “the social environment of memory” due to viewing the sociological basis as “not very appropriate in an early modern environment”, and how “the past interact[s] with existing narratives and other forms of commemoration” (12). For these reasons, Halbwachs’s definition of “collective memory” was still very much relevant to this day due to the changes in the lens through which information was analyzed and could be applied to the context of education’s role in shaping public memory.

Building off of Halbwachs’s work, Jan Assmann distinguished between what was known as “communicative memory” and “cultural memory”. Assmann defined communicative memory as “the memory that one shares with one’s contemporaries and which can be subject of living discourse and oral history”, while establishing cultural memory as “the past ‘as it is remembered and inhabited,’ which is what a society or group still considers relevant to the present” (13). His definition of communicative memory was essentially what Halbwachs argued when he established his term “collective memory” 80 years earlier. His definition of cultural memory, however, was particularly relevant to this study as it underscored the construction of memory through the dominant class’s control. Cultural memory was also relevant to textbooks, as textbooks created culture. When states, especially in this case with Japan, decided to approve certain textbooks for their schools, they were often looking for ones that promoted the state’s ideology, nationalistic culture, and emphasized a shared identity between all citizens of that state. The textbooks also did not often provide a comprehensive overview of all events that occurred in a country’s history, instead focusing on select topics. In this way, they were essentially controlling the dominant narrative taught to

students by shaping their perspective and choosing what was important or what should matter to the students. Textbooks often reflected the cultural ideologies, priorities, and traditions of a society that the government wished to maintain and preserve through education. Louis Althusser established this phenomenon in his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, wherein he stated that schools were used by governments and the dominating class to subject lower classes to their ideology, thereby making it the “ruling ideology” (14). For this reason, education and schools were a key part in establishing a cultural memory and national identity that the government or dominant class desired.

This study employs a qualitative research and textual analysis approach to analyzing primary sources. Textual analysis was a method that allowed for the uncovering of meanings, identification of themes, and underscoring of patterns to be made within texts, which in this case were approved and not approved textbooks, lawsuits, and books. It examined the language, framing, and narratives used in middle and high school textbooks and public statements, as well as analyzed them in the context in which they were produced. The middle and high school textbooks’ sources used included direct quotations from the textbooks that were approved in the late 1980s and early 1990s, versus the textbooks that were denied. This highlighted the clear difference and the preference of the Japanese MOE towards the textbooks distributed to the students. Statements made by editors working to approve textbooks for the Japanese government during that time were also used, specifically statements requiring word changes and the neutralization of tone when discussing wartime atrocities committed by Japan. This paper also utilized textual analysis as a tool to connect back to the theories of memory discussed above.

The two primary criteria utilized in this study for the analytical approach are as follows. First, it identified language shifts, including how specific terms such as “massacre,” “killings,” or “military operations” were replaced, softened, or removed entirely across textbook editions. These word-level changes were compared against earlier drafts, rejected textbooks, and MOE revision requests to determine how state representatives and branches shaped narrative tone. Second, the analysis evaluated narrative framing, including the placement, length, and contextualization of the Rape of Nanking within broader chapters on World War II. This involved assessing whether events were described as isolated incidents, mutual combat, or systemic atrocities, and determining how such framing aligned with or diverted

from nationalist or international historiographies. Together, these criteria allowed the study to examine, determine, and analyze how the government's institutional educational power influenced both the content and the resonance of the Rape of Nanking within Japan's public memory.

This study primarily focuses on three categories of MOE-approved textbooks. First, it examines the 1987 senior-high textbook *Shinpen Nihonshi*, produced by the right-wing organization Nihon o Mamoru Kokumin Kaigi. The Ministry required more than 500 revisions of this book before approving it (7). Second, it analyzes the high-school textbook titled *Nihonshi*, which was altered after MOE request as well (15). For instance, changing a section title from "Japan's Invasion of China" to "The Manchurian and Shanghai Incidents" and replacing "Japan's invasion" with "Japan's encroachment/advance." (15) Third, it contrasts these nationalist texts with widely used junior-high textbooks from publishers such as Tokyo Shoseki and Nihon Shoseki, which by the mid- and late-1990s explicitly discussed contested issues such as "the Nanking Massacre, anti-Japanese resistance movements in Korea, forced suicide in Okinawa, comfort women, and Unit 731." (16) These texts were accessed through English translations and summaries by scholars. While the selection does not represent all authorized textbooks, it highlights contested cases, mainstream counter examples, and illustrates a multitude of historical narratives within Japan at the time.

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Immediately after World War II ended in Japan, Japan's defeat led to United States troops occupying and conducting a top-down dismantling of military institutions, conducting of war-time trials, and rewriting the Japanese constitution in regard to the then-in-use Meiji one. During this time of solely focusing on economic growth, many conservative parties decided to merge in order to form the Liberal Democratic Party, also known as the LDP. They then dominated Japanese politics for almost half a century, starting in 1955, which many historians called the "1955 system". Gerald L. Curtis stated in his book *The Logic of Japanese Politics* that there were four essential "pillars" holding up the "1955 system", which were: i) one-party dominance, as the LDP ruled undefeated until 2009 when the Democratic Party of Japan won a landslide victory, ii) "the public consensus in support of politics to achieve a catch-up-with-the-West goal", since Japan

at the time wanted to industrialize quickly and continue participating on a global level in economics, iii) large linkage institutions present in Japan during that era, specifically interest groups that had links to political parties, iv) the Japanese bureaucracy that had a lot of prestige and power at the time, leading to unprecedented single-party rule in Japan under a parliamentary system (17). Due to one-party dominance, there were little to no ideological changes or shifts in the government, leading to a stability that allowed the LDP to consistently influence educational policies for decades. The presence of strong linkage institutions also influenced educational policies because many interest groups, such as the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, which pushed for textbooks that downplayed or reframed Japanese wartime aggression, had close ties to the LDP party. In fact, their mission was "to give a 'healthy,' nationalistic account to schoolchildren while building their sense of dignity in Japanese history, which 'plays an important role in the construction of contemporary Japanese national identity'" (15). They conducted lobbying, and also used their networks to influence which textbooks were adopted, oftentimes favoring their own textbooks over others. The power of the Japanese bureaucracy also allowed members of the LDP party to directly approve textbooks through the MOE without much pushback, allowing them to decide how Japanese history, and history in general, was framed. Collectively, these four pillars played a significant role in enabling the LDP to shape Japan's public memory.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the LDP's consolidation of power coincided with a renewed emphasis on historical revisionism and nationalist identity. They were supported by the masses, including farmers, merchants, and small business owners. However, by the end of the 1970s, they had already "successfully transformed itself from a traditional conservative party into a modern catchall party" (18). Consequently, by the 1980s, the LDP began to draw support from people of all walks of life, not only the lower classes, leading to more power consolidation in their hands. As a result, nationalistic sentiments regarding wartime memory began to slowly rise and take over following this uprise in conservatism during this time. The "romanticization" and glorification of Japan during the war in textbooks given to middle and high school students also confirmed that the Japanese government, under the LDP's sole control in the 1980s, still wanted to push or reinforce a militaristic goal. Despite educational reform being completed by the United States during its occupation of Japan, the nationalistic ideals of the

government were so deeply instilled that they were still exhibited after (19).

Even when the LDP temporarily lost power in 1993 to an eight-party coalition, the nationalist ideals instilled within people were not dispelled. Instead, the LDP actually returned to power just a year later through a coalition with the Japanese Socialist Party, further strengthening their conservative position. Curtis stated that this event marked a “definitive end to an era in which political competition pitted conservatives against progressives” (17). Thus, when faced with a financial crisis in 1995, Japan reverted to its nationalistic roots even more and developed a “neo-nationalistic” historical view. Textbooks like the *Atarashi Rekishi Kyokasho* (New History textbook) for middle schools and *Atarashi Goumin Kyokasho* (New Ethics textbook) for high schools, which glorified the war and framed the Japanese soldiers who invaded China as heroes who devoted their lives to their country, thrived at this time (20). Textbooks were approved using a different system in the 1980s and 1990s, where the state published and distributed outlines of what they wanted the textbooks to contain, and commercial publishers then created the textbooks. Before complete adoption, however, the state needed to approve those textbooks so that they could be authorized as “school textbooks” to be used by both public and private schools alike. In order to have a textbook approved, the publishing company had to submit it to the MOE, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (6). This process enabled the MOE and the LDP-controlled government to have complete authority over the textbooks given to the students at this time, and they could also request any changes as they saw fit.

The textbook edits at this time were only one part of a broader trend in denialist narratives and the revisionist school of thought prevalent in Japan at the time. There had also long been contested issues regarding Japan’s denial of the use of “comfort women” in Korea due to “rightist narratives” in all spheres of life (21). Far-right politicians such as Ishihara Shintaro and Fujioka Nobukatsu emphasized it as “anti-Japan propaganda by Korean society or a fabricated ploy by liberal domestic media and academics” (21). This dominant viewpoint on the issue led to a prevention of any efforts towards reconciliation or rapprochement with Korea on this issue, also affecting the public’s ability to “remember the past” (21). In addition to this, some right-wing authors and publishers, such as Fujioka—who was the founder of the Liberal View of History Group that emphasized pushback on what he called Japan’s masochistic view

of history—went so far as to even claim that the Rape of Nanking was exaggerated or fabricated, another example of denialist and revisionist rhetoric present at the time. Further studies on the representations of the Rape of Nanking in 1980s Japan often cited the author Suzuki Akira. Suzuki published a book titled “*Nankin daigyakusatsu*” no maboroshi, or the Illusion of the “Nanking Massacre”, and how this book was awarded the Bungei Shunjusha’s Oya Sochi Nonfiction Award in 1973 (22). This book aimed to cast doubt on the truth of the Nanking Massacre.

Many government officials and the Japanese imperial army also systematically burned primary documents that were needed to verify the scope and the truth of the wartime atrocities committed by them (14), showing how determined the leaders of Japan were to cover up their wrongdoings. Following Japan’s surrender in August 1945, Japanese military and civil authorities issued orders across the Pacific commanding units to burn incriminating evidence of war crimes. The director of the Military History Archives later estimated that as much as seventy percent of the army’s wartime records were destroyed (23). Many records were hidden in private homes and caves (23). Such systematic destruction of evidence has made reconstructing Japan’s wartime history and conduct difficult, fueling denialist narratives.

In a broad sense, these thinkers and proponents were classified into the “Illusion School”, a school of thought dealing with the Nanking Massacre that downplayed the death toll and scale of the atrocity (5). Out of all the researchers working in Japan in the 1980s on the Nanking Massacre, a clear majority of them were classified to be a part of the Illusion School. However, this group primarily consisted of conservative and neo-nationalist writers who were not professional historians. It had a large number of lay members, and no academic supporters in English or Chinese language discourse (9). Their influence derived from right-wing magazines such as *Seiron* and *Sapio* rather than from scholarly acceptance. Researchers that were classified to be a part of this school included Suzuki Akira, Ara Ken’ichi, Oi Mitsuru, and Tanaka Masaaki, to name a few (11).

This postwar political context, characterized by the LDP’s dominance for decades starting in the 1960s and ending in the 2010s, as well as their bureaucratic control of education, was key to understanding how official historical narratives in the 1980s sought to downplay or erase Japan’s role in the Rape of Nanking. Their consolidation of political power allowed for their denialist viewpoints to shape how wartime memory was taught

to students, thereby affecting Japan's public memory as well. Recognizing the full extent to which the LDP party had control over Japan was crucial in analyzing the official narratives that systemically downplayed, denied, or erased Japan's involvement in atrocities such as the Rape of Nanking.

CASE STUDY: THE REPRESENTATION OF THE RAPE OF NANKING IN 1980S AND 1990S JAPANESE JUNIOR AND SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS

This section examines how Japanese junior and senior high school history textbooks in the late 1980s and early 1990s reflected a denialist memory of wartime atrocities, focusing in particular on portrayals of the Rape of Nanking. Descriptions of the massacre were softened with more neutral words, and numerous details were omitted entirely. Instead, the government approved textbooks that highlighted Japan's strong suits and its efforts of modernization then. This revisionist approach distorted Japanese students' understanding of history, and reinforced a denialist public memory that prioritized national pride over historical accountability. Through the analysis of specific examples from textbook texts, lawsuits, and government statements, the impact of denialist narratives on public memory emerged, highlighting the consequences of prioritizing nationalism over historical accountability.

Japanese High School History Textbook Analysis

Many textbooks underwent edits by the MOE to reflect the ideology that it promoted as the dominant narrative and public memory. For example, the MOE sent messages to individuals working on the textbooks to "water down" their descriptions regarding Japan's "aggressive" wartime behavior, portray Meiji Japan as a constitutional and democratic system, and change various words (24). These words included altering terminology like "invade" to become "attack/advance", "tyranny" to become "oppression", "rob" to become "transfer", and "oppression" to become "suppression". These word changes affected students' memory and interpretation of the event by institutionalizing a dominant memory that prioritized national pride over historical accountability (25). Consequently, it led to a loss in understanding regarding the true gravity of the situation by the Japanese students. Changing language, such as "invading", which denotes a perpetrator and a victim, to "attack" or "advance", which connotes more of a mutual fighting

interpretation, reduced the apparent severity of Japan's actions. Changing "tyranny" to "oppression" also had a significant effect because tyranny is often perceived as a very negative and cruel term, especially when used in the context of governance or international relations, so changing it to "oppression" again lessened the severity. This selective editing of language functioned as a form of state-sanctioned silenced memory, shaping public memory to omit Japan's wartime atrocities and instead highlight only the good that the government wanted remembered.

These examples also aligned with Pierre Nora's concept of lieux de memoire, or sites of memory, as textbooks acted as physical objects that embodied collective memory and anchored a nation's history. Textbooks also served as authorized memory sites sponsored by the national government, further expanding their reach and influence over the Japanese public. Michel-Rolph Trouillot's concept in his book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995) illustrated how power shaped historical narratives further reinforces the idea that the MOE's revisions and screenings of the textbooks in the 1980s and 1990s determined what counted as "official history" (26). As a result, they also affected the widely accepted historical narrative of the time period and created silenced memories by excluding certain historical facts or perspectives.

Another example is the specific textbook titled *Nihonshi*, which translates to *Japanese History*, wherein four sections were reportedly revised by the MOE. These places included:

1. A title, Japan's Invasion of China, was changed to The Manchurian and Shanghai Incidents.
2. The phrase 'The fifteen-year war that started with the invasion of Manchuria' became simply 'The war...'
3. A caption under a map, 'Japan's invasion of China', became 'Japan's encroachment into/invasion of China'.
4. 'Mao Zedong... fought against Japan's invasion' was changed to 'Mao Zedong...fought against Japan's attack/advance' (24).

The MOE faced criticism for doing so because left-wing figures believed that they were trying to set a political agenda that prevented any criticism of the Japanese Imperial Army's actions in China by omitting them or softening their impact (24). Changing words like "Japan invasion" to "Japan's attack/advance" altered the meaning of the sentence, making Japan seem as if

it engaged in normal wartime activities rather than committing atrocities. The original sentence focused on the wrongdoing of Japan for invading, and clearly established Japan as the perpetrator and China as the victim. However, changing to “attack/advance” made it seem that Japan was simply just engaging in normal wartime activities and did not carry the same emotional connotation or weight as the word “invasion” did. The change in diction also raised doubts “concerning the circumstances of this incident” and gave “legitimacy to those who believe that the Nanking Massacre was either greatly exaggerated or altogether false” (24). Thus, even if the truth emerged later, the MOE and LDP had already established a foundation for denialist viewpoints, making it difficult to change public memory. With these revisions, the Japanese students learned only denialist or revisionist history, and public memory shifted away from historical accountability towards national pride.

To broaden analysis beyond one textbook, two contrasting examples are included here. First, the senior-high textbook titled *Shinpen Nihonshi*, produced by the right-wing organization Nihon o Mamoru Kokumin Kaigi and authorized in 1987, also exemplifies this manipulation of history through language. The textbook required more than 500 revisions, and those revisions were all portraying Japan’s overseas expansion as a positive contribution, highlighting the heroism of soldiers and downplaying atrocities (7). However, this textbook was rarely adopted because each senior high school selects its own textbook (7). Second, mainstream junior-high textbooks widely used in the mid and late 1990s published by Tokyo Shoseki, Nihon Shoseki, Shimizu Shoten, and others, explicitly mentioned the Nanking Massacre and other contested issues (16). Including these examples demonstrates the diversity of textbook narratives: while nationalist textbooks did exist and sought to minimize Japan’s aggression, many widely adopted textbooks did acknowledge wartime atrocities to a capacity.

The MOE justified its corrections by emphasizing objectivity and fairness. According to the Ministry’s screening criteria, textbooks must be “objective, impartial, and free from errors. (27)” During the 1982 controversy, the government explained that revisions would be guided by a “Neighboring Country Clause,” promoting understanding and international harmony with Asian neighbors (27). In Saburo Ienaga’s 1993 lawsuit, ministry officials argued that a footnote stating many Japanese soldiers raped Chinese women should be deleted because sexual violence occurs in all wars

and singling out Japan was unfair (28). Presenting these rationales shows that the MOE framed revisions in terms of fairness and diplomacy rather than openly denying atrocities. Nonetheless, the intended effect and their ultimate goal was to soften narratives and marginalize victims.

Ienaga’s Lawsuits Against the Ministry of Education

Both the MOE’s textbook authorization system and the Liberal Democratic Party had a tremendous influence on approving denialist narratives regarding wartime atrocities, such as the Rape of Nanking, in schools. From a memory studies perspective, these institutions functioned as mechanisms that controlled public memory by enforcing not only what citizens learned, but also by deliberately sending out messages that reflected their narrative, influencing more authors and publishers to buy into their ideology. Their control over the education system was most famously challenged by Japanese historian Saburo Ienaga’s series of lawsuits, filed between 1965 and 1997, which fought against textbook censorship on the grounds of unconstitutionality. His lawsuits provided foundational evidence on the tensions between historically accurate memory and state-approved nationalistic denialist memory.

Ienaga’s history textbook was first rejected by the MOE in 1955, and then again in 1963, on the grounds that it had contained “too many illustrations of the ‘dark side’ of the war, and they ordered him to remove and replace critical language in his textbook, like writing how the Japanese army “advanced into” China instead of its “aggression in China” (2). In 1965, Ienaga filed his first lawsuit against the MOE in the Tokyo District Court, claiming that the textbook authorization system had violated Article 21 of the Japanese Constitution, which guaranteed freedom of expression as well as academic freedom. When the Tokyo District Court dismissed the case in 1970, Ienaga appealed the decision, causing the case to be transferred to the Tokyo High Court. In their 1974 decision, the Court judges decided that some of the Ministry’s censorship was excessive but still upheld the system as constitutional.

Ienaga filed a second lawsuit in 1984, where he argued again that the screening system enabled political interference in education. That cause then led to a 1993 Supreme Court decision, which upheld parts of the screening process but also acknowledged that certain MOE directives violated his freedom of expression. Finally, in his third and final lawsuit in 1989, the Tokyo District Court ruled that the government had unlawfully

censored his textbook, giving Ienaga a partial victory after more than three decades of litigation.

The government's repeated requirements that he change his wording into a more neutral and soft rhetoric essentially also softened the moral impact of Japan's wartime atrocities, and influenced students in that they would not know about the true historical crime committed by the Japanese. These required textbook changes then showed that the MOE and the government as a whole wanted to control what was officially remembered and transmitted to the citizens of Japan, even if it may not be what "officially" happened. Ienaga also mentioned in his legal argument against the MOE a section regarding the issues of the textbook examination system, wherein "it has often been used, in fact, for the very dangerous purpose of controlling the content of education with power" (13).

Ienaga also outlined a very detailed history of the textbook examination system's correlation to controlling the people's ideology. He states that during the Meiji period, the government encouraged people to absorb new knowledge, allowing textbooks to be issued freely. However, after the Meiji period ended in Japan, the government began to ban textbooks in elementary school by citing that they were "not appropriate as elementary school textbooks", and after a while began to revive old Confucian thought when a new absolute imperial governing system arose.

The fact that Ienaga did not fare well in the courts for such a long period also supports his point that the government was utilizing the educational system to further its agenda, as even the courts upheld the dominant narrative that the government wanted. However, the publicity that was generated from his efforts led to a widespread public awareness regarding the textbook censorship issue (29). Pressure applied by China and Korea on the MOE led to them backing down and resulted in the addition of a new authorization criterion, which was that textbooks must show understanding and international harmony in their treatment of modern and contemporary historical events involving neighboring Asian countries (2).

Building off of his work, Yoshiko Nozaki has also traced how the dominant right-wing nationalist elements and figures of postwar Japan exploited textbooks with the aim of reinforcing their own political and cultural power (29). She highlighted how acknowledgement of the fact that the history textbooks "lacked balance" and how efforts to address that issue only arose after 1993, when the almost 40-year single-party rule of the LDP ended.

Nozaki's perspective supports the idea that the LDP-dominated narrative affected public memory and directly caused the erasure of the Rape of Nanking, among other historically Japanese-caused atrocities, from the public memory of Japan. Education in Japan at the time was not politically neutral as well. Instead, education was an institution that the dominant LDP was able to apply its politics and ideology to, thereby shaping national identity and maintaining the nationalist cultural viewpoint.

CONSEQUENCES AND LEGACIES

This paper sought to illustrate how Japanese nationalist ideology in the 1980s and 1990s shaped textbook portrayals of the Rape of Nanking through state censorship, rhetorical strategies, and language manipulation by the MOE and the LDP. Using textual analysis of censored textbooks, court cases, and scholarship in memory studies, it was demonstrated that education in this period was utilized by the LDP as a tool to manufacture a national identity and create a denialist public memory. This matters because it reveals how state power can influence or create selective public memory, turning education into a weaponized site of memory that prioritizes nationalism over historical accountability.

The LDP's censorship of textbooks during the 1980s and 1990s left a lasting impact on Japan's public memory. Even after its temporary loss of power in 1993, the nationalist and revisionist narrative it institutionalized persisted through the educational system, exemplifying Jan Assmann's concept of "cultural memory" (30), or the way in which the transmission of the past is institutionalized in text and causes the same narrative to continue across generations. Even when Ienaga's lawsuits regarding the matter brought national media attention, there was still minimal change in the dominant memory. Instead, there seemed to be a rise in denialist movements, such as Fujioka's popular movement, that promoted a nationalist viewpoint of Japanese history. Due to the LDP's goal of controlling the national narrative, they have influenced the public memory to become one that is absent from the historically accountable history of Japan's actions during World War II.

More importantly, however, the collective sense of moral responsibility that the Japanese youth population feels towards past atrocities in the present day post-2000s, is little. A survey sent out by Kazuya Fukuoka in the years 2001 and 2017/2018 indicated a steady decline in young Japanese people's sense of moral responsibility for the Rape of Nanking. The percentage of respondents who

“strongly disagree” that they bear moral responsibility rose from 12.7% in 2001 to 21.3% in 2018, while those who “strongly agree” dropped from 8.1% to 3.4% (31). This decline connects directly to the concept of state-sanctioned memory. When the state causes education to replace historical accountability with nationalist pride, cultural memory succeeds in preserving that narrative and fails to transmit moral responsibility because people were not taught the full extent of history.

One explanation for this decline in moral responsibility among the Japanese youth lies in their limited exposure to historically accountable narratives, which is a direct result of the MOE’s censorship and revision of Japan’s wartime atrocities. Fukuoka’s interviews shed further light on how this revisionist narrative set by the LDP illustrates communicative memory, or the everyday transmission of the past through dialogue and socialization (12). One interview with a female college student named Aki underscored the fact that “she cannot feel morally responsible for what she does not know well” (31). She indicates that she may feel more responsible for past atrocities if she knew more about them, but because she does not, she feels as if her sense of responsibility is not high. This demonstrates the concept of how a lack of education on certain historical issues can prevent feelings of accountability. Her restatement illustrates Assmann’s concept of communicative memory, which depends on lived or directly transmitted experiences within a society. When the state institutions suppress those narratives, younger generations lose access to those conversations about the past.

It is also important to recognize that textbooks, while the main focus of this paper, are not the only influencers of young people’s ideologies. Youth understanding of historical events and feelings of moral responsibility are also shaped by factors such as media consumption, political rhetoric, parental discourse, peer networks, and broader societal narratives. For instance, another interview with a male college student named Kenta revealed that although he does believe Japan had done some “bad things” in Asia, he is still skeptical regarding the truths of some events, such as the use of comfort women (31). This skepticism came from the right-wing media in which he consumes, which again shows the lasting effect of institutionalized memory sites on influencing the public memory. His perspective illustrates the long-term impact of silencing, where institutionalized denial not only erases history from textbooks but also influences public discourse in the media, reinforcing nationalism over historical accountability.

As Fukuoka’s study shows, younger Japanese generations wrestle with the tensions between accepting responsibility for wartime atrocities committed by Japan in the past and not knowing enough about those events to properly develop a sense of responsibility. Discussions on intergenerational responsibility, especially the responsibilities present-day people owe to past people, advocate that the current generation should hold collective responsibility to preserve their ancestors’ memories, atone for their crimes, and ensure that they do not commit the same mistakes (20). At the same time, obligations across generations do not automatically happen, and individual awareness, social institutions, and collective memory must all mediate the sense of responsibility current and future generations feel towards past generations (32). In this case, textbook rhetoric plays a significant role in shaping the intergenerational responsibility between current and past generations, and in bridging the gap that fosters growth and learning. In addition to textbooks, the media, political rhetoric, and parental discourse are also important cultural transmission mechanisms that, again, influence how young people come to understand, internalize, and act on their intergenerational obligations.

As a consequence of the LDP’s control over textbook content, Japan’s international relations with China and South Korea have been affected. Because official Japanese textbooks softened or omitted acknowledgements of Japan’s wartime crimes, the governments of the victim countries view Japan as unwilling to take full responsibility (33). This stalls reconciliation efforts. For example, after the MOE authorized the ultra-conservative *Atarashii Rekishi Kyokasho*, or the *New History Textbook*, in April 2001, South Korea temporarily recalled its ambassador to Tokyo, canceled a joint search-and-rescue drill, and postponed school exchanges and coast-guard visits (24). China cancelled a planned visit by the chairman of its National People’s Congress and demanded revisions (24). South Korean demonstrators even burned effigies and called for boycotts of the co-hosted 2002 World Cup (34). Additionally, the 1982 textbook controversy likewise led to protests and prompted Japan to adopt the Neighboring Country Clause for its textbook guidelines. The very need for this clause underscores how textbook censorship had become a diplomatic liability (27). These educational choices did not just reflect LDP and Japanese nationalism internally, but also had international geopolitical consequences for Japan’s credibility in East Asia, slowing down or complicating diplomacy with victim states.

CONCLUSION

Moving forward, Japan and other countries with contested histories should recognize the consequences of state-controlled nationalist and revisionist public memory. Japan's efforts to hide its wartime crimes from the public and shape younger generations toward nationalism have caused tensions in international relations with neighboring countries such as China and South Korea, who are the victims of these atrocities. Reconciliation efforts have stalled, as continued right-wing revisionist narratives continue to solidify tensions and reinforce negative perceptions amongst Japanese youth of China and South Korea's governments. Prioritizing historically accountable narratives over national reputation would make reconciliation more realistic and achievable, as well as improve international relations.

However, the implications of this study on top-down textbook manipulation and its influences on public memory extends well beyond Japan. Similar textbook disputes have emerged across Asia. In India, the National Council of Educational Research and Training has removed references to Muslim rulers and deleted chapters on the Mughal Empire, Mahatma Gandhi's opposition to Hindu nationalism, and the 2002 Gujarat riots from history and political sciences textbooks, prompting allegations that the Bharatiya Janata Party is rewriting history to serve a Hindu nationalist agenda (35). New editions emphasize Hindu nationalist ideologues such as Vinayak Damodar Savarkar while deleting material about communal violence (35). In China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, authorities have banned a multi-volume history of the Mongolian ethnic group and other Mongolian-language books, ordered their removal from libraries and schools, and mandated that Mandarin become the sole language of instruction for all subjects (36). Advocates say that this policy erases Mongolian culture and forms part of an assimilation campaign aimed at forging a unified national identity (36). A third example is how Tajikistan's history textbooks still closely resemble Soviet-era narratives. They emphasize the evils of the Russian Empire's expansion while portraying the Soviet period positively and highlighting the Tajik SSR's contribution to the Soviet state (37). These pro-Soviet narratives have persisted since independence and have recently provoked criticism from Russian politicians (37). Together, these examples show that the politics of memory is a recurring challenge wherever states control education. Textbooks can be deployed to legitimize nationalist agendas, erase uncomfortable histories, and

shape collective identity. Japan's experience thus serves as a cautionary example for countries on how to navigate their own educational systems and textbook approval institutions.

To address these issues, Japan—as well as other states, nations, and countries facing similar controversies—should consider concrete educational reforms. These include implementing independent textbook review committees composed of historians rather than politicians, publishing parallel historical accounts in textbooks to allow students to learn about more than just one perspective, strengthening civic educational curricula that emphasize critical thinking and media literacy, and institutionalizing regional historical dialogue panels with China and South Korea to promote shared understanding of controversial historical events. Expanding access to survivor testimonies, museum archives, and primary documents would also help ensure that the youth encounter and learn about historically accountable narratives beyond the nation's preferred narrative.

Ultimately, confronting difficult pasts openly is essential not only for national self-reflection but also for international relations and reputation. Ensuring that younger generations understand past atrocities allows them to critically reflect on moral responsibility, recognize the human consequences of violence and crimes against humanity, and consciously avoid repeating historical crimes. The broader lesson from Japan's textbook controversies is clear: when a nation manipulates historical memory to favor nationalism instead of historical accountability, the consequences ripple far beyond the classroom. This manipulation shapes identity, diplomacy, and the ethical foundations of future generations.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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