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Textbooks and their Portrayal of Japan in World War II

Harry Lah

Research Seminar

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“Good morning everyone, now if you’ll turn in your books with me to page...” drones the voice of the teacher, it can be any teacher, teaching history in a typical high school. Those words dreaded by students of all ages and from all generations that attended schools within the public school system of their respective states. Many students dreaded these classes, but they were no doubt influenced by them. By sitting in them they were presented with information both new and old about their state and country from their teacher, and perhaps more significantly, whatever textbook they had in school.¹ While they are perhaps not the most exciting places for many students, history classes, as well as the teachers and books within them, help shape how students view their country in relation to themselves and the world.

One would think that what students learn in school from year to year does not change, but it can and often will change. History itself may not change but the actual writing of it does. The American textbook industry generates many millions of dollars in revenue through the publication and sale of books throughout the entire United States. These books are constantly being revised to include new historical events and edited to keep them marketable to schools and universities throughout the United States. By examining successive editions of history books and seeing what and how things change in them, greater trends in historiography can be seen.

Through textbooks, students are given a specific narrative of history, in this paper’s case, U.S. history. Depending on the writer(s) of the specific textbook in question and even when the textbook was written, it will convey a different idea or version of U.S. History. One book, *The American Pageant*, has a very nationalistic tone in its writing style, as shall be seen later. Another text, *American History: A Survey*, is much more “objective” or distanced in tone. The

¹ Richard Paxton, "A Deafening Silence: History Textbooks and the Students Who Read Them." *Review of Educational Research* 69, no. 3 (1999): 316.

third textbook examined, *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People*, is in an amorphous middle-ground. It is neither too nationalistic nor distant. While the last looked at, Eric Foner's *Give Me Liberty!: An American History*, examines the history of the United States through the lens of different minority groups and how events in America have affected and shaped them.

Each text covers the same major points of U.S. History, but each goes about them in a different way. Each, by extension, gives a different view of U.S. History and thus each affects the public remembrance of these historical events in a different way. That there can be significant differences between textbooks is a notion that appears obvious, but the fact that "differences exist" belies a topic of discussion that shows much potential for further research: How history "changes over time," that is, the historiography of history, and how said historiography is affected by various trends and events in the world. In this case, textbooks are the vehicle being examined for this historiography or "popular remembrance."

Books are a major avenue by which students receive information. This information then proceeds to both influence and further cement the views that students have picked up earlier in life through both parents (who also received certain historical narratives from schools in their youth), and more significantly, schools. This information is, more often the case than not, colored and shaped by politics, which is itself shaped by larger trends and events on both the national, and world stage.² With regards to the Cold War, for example, Americans and historians alike considered it a product of Soviet belligerence in the immediate post-WWII period. Once the 1970s arrived, a new school of thought arose among historians which aimed to emphasize the

² Pingel, F. "Can Truth Be Negotiated? History Textbook Revision As A Means To Reconciliation." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 6, no. 17 (2008): 183.

economic expansion of the American economy as the main cause for the Cold War.³ In the end, the result of this historiographical feud was a “centrist postrevisionist position [sic]” within U.S. history textbooks which was a synthesis of the two differing schools of historiographical thought.⁴ Both visions of the Cold War, the “centrist postrevisionist” one, and the former more “orthodox” one, were both *products and causes of popular thought* in their own times, and of consensus among historians. Textbooks are, by extension, both a cause and result of the way that a population remembers both the history of their country, and the way that other countries have interacted with the populations’ home country, again, in this case, the United States.

In the United States, the way people think about other ethnicities is one example of such a change in popular thought and remembrance. Take those Americans of Irish descent for instance; through the 1800s and into the 1900s they faced immense discrimination at the hands of other Americans, from jeers by people around them to stereotyped portrayals in news media of the day.⁵

Looking at both world wars, one can easily see how race was used as a means to incite support for the U.S.’s involvement in the war and opposition to the enemy countries. One famous propaganda poster from the First World War portrays a vile simian figure walking onto the shores of America from war-torn Europe. It is portrayed wearing the distinctive Prussian Pickelhaube which sits on the head of said angry “mad brute.” In one of its arms it clutches a club that has on it the word “Kultur,” and in the other it clutches a disheveled woman who is

³ Walker, J. "The Origins of the Cold War in United States History Textbooks." *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 4 (1995): 1653.

⁴ Ibid, 1655.

⁵ "Race, Violence, and Anti-Irish Sentiment in the Nineteenth Century." In *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States*, edited by J.J. Lee and Marion Casey, 365.

trying to shield her eyes from the ape.⁶ Such racist imagery remains quite alive in the Second World War, particularly with regards to the portrayal of Japan, both the state and its people.

Posters abound referring to Japanese as “Japs,” who are portrayed as rats on some occasions⁷, and on others as dark skinned with squinted eyes and oversized teeth. Any time “the Jap,” in these portrayals speaks it is always with broken English. As in the following poster: One poster⁸ made by the Douglas Aircraft Company portrays such a figure, with the words:

Tokio Kid say

Much Waste of Material Make so-o-o-o Happy!

- Thank you

Amusingly enough, over seventy three years later, such sentiment is by and large gone from the popular consciousness. In a 2013 study conducted by the German Embassy to the United States, it was found that 20% of Americans viewed Japan as the U.S.’s most important international partner. 23% of Americans considered Germany the most important partner.⁹ Quite a difference from being considered sub-human.

Between the endless instances of racism both before and during WWII, and today, between the aisles of superhero comics and Japanese “graphic novels,” between the KFC Restaurants and numerous Japanese restaurants with their Sushi bars and hibachi grills, between

⁶ H.R. Hopps, *Destroy This Mad Brute*. 1917. lithograph ; 106 x 71 cm. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

⁷ United States Information Service. “*Jap Trap*.” 1941-1945.

⁸ "Art: The Tokio Kid." *Time Magazine*, June 15, 1942. Accessed November 29, 2014.
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,795843,00.html>.

⁹ Hare, Andrew, Alexander Hoyle, and Nathalie Krup. "Perceptions Of Germany And The Germans Among The U.S. Population."

the cartoons of Disney or Nickelodeon and whatever new thing from Japan is airing on United States television networks or websites this year, it is impossible to not notice that somewhere between 1945 and the present *something* happened to cause such a drastic shift in perception of Japan and Japanese culture.¹⁰

To bring this back in to the initial topic of historiography, the way the Second World War is portrayed with regards to Japan, its people, and those American citizens of Japanese descent, is a product of both popular perception (from the bottom-up), and government opinion (from the top-down) with such things as foreign and economic policy.

The portrayal of Japan in textbooks, which shall for sake of this paper be assumed to come from the top-down due to the position of education within the U.S. governmental structure, is thus symptomatic of larger shifts in government opinion of Japan, and to a lesser extent the general public due to the need that publishers have for textbooks to be adopted by as large an amount of schools as possible.

The shifts of portrayal of Japan then, can be traced over time by looking at different editions of textbooks through the decades between 1945 and the present. For the sake of this paper, it was hypothesized that any shifts in Japan's portrayal with regard to primarily the Second World War occurred in tandem with both Japan's growing economic power *and* its growing importance as an ally and power base in East-Asia.

¹⁰ Restaurant chains like KFC are immensely popular in Japan, with many Japanese families enjoying fine Southern dining enough to go to franchises for a special Christmas dinner with their loved ones. The two countries engage in plenty of cultural exchange, with food considered unique or native to one country being consumed in the other. There is also an active exchange of mass media as well, with books, film, television and music shared between the two countries in the present day.

Through the 19th century and briefly into the 20th, Japan was a country that was little known, but one looked to with a fond eye. The United States had little contact with Japan, save for Commodore Perry's expedition to Japan in the 1850s to open it to U.S. trade and for centuries prior it had been an unknown land accessible only to the Dutch. After the country was opened up, Americans were eager for any information they could receive about this new land of mystery and economic opportunity. An article from a Philadelphia newspaper reporting on Japanese exhibits at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia noted that "The Japanese have already adopted the American costume in dress, and the progressive spirit pervading the Old World is inclining her people to adopt American ideas and American machinery."¹¹ This was racially-tinged sentiment, but none the less positive given the general sentiment of the time. Such positivity on the part of Americans even led the Japanese people to being called, if but for a time, the "Yankees of the East,"¹² in an 1896 book of the same name. This book, which was written by a William Eleroy Curtis on behalf of the Chicago Record, was a collection of letters he sent off to be printed by the newspaper while he was in Japan. In it the people of Japan were given praise upon praise for being an industrious¹³ people whose economic condition at the time was so good for foreign investors as to cause any investment made in Japanese businesses to turn a decent profit.¹⁴

Such economic profiteering on the part of the United States and U.S. capitalists¹⁵ combined with anti-Japanese sentiment on the part of Americans in California¹⁶ helped to sour relations between the two countries in the 1900s. Further fracturing of U.S.-Japan foreign

¹¹ LaFeber, Walter. *The Clash: U.S.-Japanese Relations Throughout History*, 42.

¹² *Ibid*, 52

¹³ Curtis, William E. *The Yankees of the East: Sketches of Modern Japan*, 120.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 293-294.

¹⁵ LaFeber, Walter. *The Clash: U.S.-Japanese Relations Throughout History*, xviii.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 88-90.

relations in the 1930s, then, led to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the entrance of the U.S. into WWII at the end of 1941, which ended in the U.S. and other Allied powers attaining victory in the Pacific with the dropping of the atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of August, and signing of the Japanese Instrument of Surrender on September 2, 1945. These three individual actions officially ended a war that saw the lives and livelihood of millions upon millions of people around the world.

Once the war ended, historians started to go over what information there was and come up with a way to record what exactly happened, no simple task by any means, but one that historians did carry out as best they could. Eleven years after the war ended, the first in a still-continuing line of U.S. History textbooks was released, *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic*. Written by Stanford University professor Thomas A. Bailey and published in 1956, it sought to “unfold a narrative which [would] stimulate interest in what must be recognized as a truly magnificent achievement by the American people.”¹⁷ In doing so, his was a narrative that attempted to show the underlying trends of the different events that happened in the U.S.’s history, with a focus on the political of the events thereof. His too, was a narrative whose readability was a major selling point with both students, and fellow scholars.¹⁸ But, while it does excel in readability, it shows that it is a product of the post-war, early Cold War climate. On the issue of involvement in the war, Bailey’s text had this to say:

“Clearheaded Americans had come to the conclusion that no nation was safe unless all were safe. Appeasement [...] had been tried, but it had merely whetted dictatorial appetites.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Bailey, Thomas A. *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic*, 1ed, vii.

¹⁸ Thomas A. Bailey: Teacher, Scholar, Popularizer, 161.

¹⁹ Bailey, Thomas A. *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic*, 1ed, 879.

On the description of Pearl Harbor, Bailey called it “the most stupefying and humiliating defeat in its history. In the dismal months that ensued, the democratic world teetered on the raw edge of disaster.”²⁰ But, luckily, “[t]he Japanese fanatics forgot that when one stabs a king, one must stab to kill.” Such was the description of America at the outset of its involvement in WWII. Further mentions of Japan or its people from pages 881-900 were often just as energetic, with Japan’s sea-based expansion in 1942 carried out by “the aggressive little men of Nippon.”²¹ Other terms such as “Nipponese,” to refer to the Japanese people, or “the Mikado,” to refer to the government were also used as descriptors; the same general tone persists through the rest of the book. Interestingly enough, “the Soviets” were portrayed only marginally better, being called suspicious on at least one occasion, and on another where Bailey was covering the North African front, he mentions that the Soviet leaders

had never ceased to clamor for an Anglo-American second front – a demand stridently supported by the American Communists [...] The Russian officials did not regard the American operations in the Pacific as helpful to them, nor did they look upon the aerial assault launched by the Allies against Germany as a second front at all.²²

Also interesting was that there was no mention of Japanese-American citizens being interred in the war. As for the atomic bombs, his take on its use had his characteristic energy, but lacked the jingoistic verbiage of the other sections of the book, going as far as to use the heading of “Atomic Awfulness”²³ when he went into detail on the dropping of the atomic bombs.

Looking at the book as a product of its time, the narrative fits within both the governmental and popular perceptions of Japan in the mid-1950s. The book is steeped in the

²⁰ Ibid. 880.

²¹ Ibid. 887.

²² Ibid. 890-891.

²³ Ibid. 899.

Cold War rhetoric that was characteristic of much history at the time and thus shows antagonism towards anything communist, as well as exaltation of America and its ways.

Thanks in large part to the writing style of the book, it continued to be published throughout the late 1900s; by 1991 *The American Pageant* had since seen its 9th edition. Thomas A. Bailey had by that time been dead for eight years but his text was still being widely used, it even had a co-author, David M. Kennedy, who was also a professor of Stanford University. In Kennedy's revision of the book, he had attempted to both include "the histories of many people who [...] were only dimly visible to historians, [...] native (sic) Americans, African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and certain religious communities" as well as the belief that the "urgent interest of American history" was in the public sphere where these different groups cooperated and fought one another.²⁴ While attempting to carry out these two different goals, he also sought to preserve as much of the character of Bailey's writing style as possible, maintaining the readability that made the book so widely used in the first place.

In this edition, some of the rampant nationalism present in the original 1956 edition was long gone, but some still remained. In the 1991 edition's description of the battle of Midway, the phrase "aggressive little men of Nippon" which was in the 1956 edition was replaced by "The aggressive warriors from Japan."²⁵ In the 1991, several sentences later they were still referred to as "Nipponese," however; much of the wording from the 1956 edition was still kept, with more "racist" phrasing edited as seen in the Midway sentence. Other things the 1991 edition did that the original did not was include half a page on the internment of Japanese Americans.²⁶ Also

²⁴ Bailey, Thomas A., and David M. Kennedy. *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic*, 9ed, vi-vii.

²⁵ Ibid. 849.

²⁶ Ibid. 839.

absent was any undue mention of communism, Communist-Americans, and other wording that was in the 1956 edition.

This appears to fit the changing historiography on the academic side of history as well as shifts in foreign policy, as by this time the U.S. had focused on building up a good relationship with Japan through both foreign-policy and economic development, in light of the rise of a communist China several decades prior.²⁷

This change can be seen in other books as well, the eighth edition of *American History: A Survey*, is free of any tone similar to that present in the former. Its writing style is characteristic of the “textbookese” that Richard Paxton writes about, with an overall distance from the reader and the material, and a stylistic flatness throughout the text.²⁸ This is in line with the overall goals of the authors, however. U.S. historian Alan Brinkley wanted to produce a text that was “a thorough, balanced, and versatile account of America's past[.]”²⁹ What it lacks in readability however, it makes up for with a wider coverage of different U.S. minorities in the war (spending half pages each on Native Americans, women, blacks, and Mexican Americans)³⁰ and spends a greater amount of time talking about the controversy over the dropping of the atomic bombs rather than just the act of the dropping.³¹ It does however, unlike Bailey’s text, fail to give specific estimates on casualties and damage, choosing instead to focus on the debate behind its use and its implications for the post-WWII world. These inclusions of different ethnic groups’

²⁷ LaFeber, Walter. *The Clash: U.S.-Japanese Relations Throughout History*, 328-329.

²⁸ Paxton, Richard. "A Deafening Silence: History Textbooks and the Students Who Read Them." *Review of Educational Research* 69, no. 3 (1999):319.

²⁹ Brinkley, Alan, Richard N. Current, Frank Friedel, and T. Harry Williams. *American History: A Survey*, 8ed, xxii.

³⁰ Ibid.803-808.

³¹ Ibid.813-815.

experiences in the war as well as the changing portrayal of the atomic bombings reflect observed changes in historiography that shall be discussed in more detail later.

The fourth edition of *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People*, was the next most recent of the four textbooks used, being published in 2005. The purpose of this text, as lined out by the authors, was to “integrate social and cultural history into a political story”³² that was centered on the titular themes of the book, with the end goal of creating a “balanced, lively, and accessible” narrative. In practice, this placed the text in the middle ground between Bailey’s text, and *American History*. The book focused on the multivariable nature of the start of the conflict, emphasizing the role China’s importance to U.S. policy had at the time³³. To give another example, the text made note of controversy over fire-bombing as a whole (noting its destructiveness in the Pacific)³⁴ as well as that of the atomic bombs (while stressing that at the time it was viewed like other conventional weaponry).³⁵ Unlike earlier editions of texts, this one goes at length into the morally grey nature of the conflict. The ambiguity of the war was not mentioned at all in *The American Pageant*, and is glossed over in other texts that came out before *Liberty, Equality, Power*. The book also spent ¼ to ½ a page each discussing the issues in California over Japanese-American land ownership, and internment of Japanese-Americans in the war.³⁶ It as well as *American History*, seem to be influenced by a greater historiographical trend in U.S. historical discourse, that of increased scholarship pertaining to different minority groups, from women to, in the case of this paper, those of Asian descent.

³² Murrin, John M., et al. *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People*, 4ed, xxvi.

³³ Ibid 808.

³⁴ Ibid 816.

³⁵ Ibid. 819.

³⁶ Ibid, 625, 830.

The noticeable influence of historiographical changes is also observed in the third edition of Eric Foner's text *Give Me Liberty!: An American History*. With this book he wanted to place the history of the U.S. in the context of world history³⁷ and help show how events and trends without have shaped the fabric of the United States' culture and history within while also including the different groups that make up the U.S and how they have effected and been effected by the United States. This inclusiveness runs throughout the whole book and can be seen especially in chapter 22 which deals with the Second World War. In this chapter it seems more pages are spent talking about the different minority groups' experiences in the war as opposed to the actual waging of it. The portrayal of Asian-Americans and Japanese citizens itself is interesting in comparison to the other texts examined.

Foner notes the paradoxical treatment of Chinese Americans in comparison to Japanese Americans, and also goes into some detail on how long-standing prejudice towards Japanese combined with war against Japan led to the devolution of the Pacific Theater into a "race war."³⁸ None of the other texts examined delve into the racial aspects of the Pacific theater of the war, instead focusing on the fighting as well as the significance of the atomic bombings. With regards to the internment of Japanese Americans, a full page is spent discussing the interment as well as how it did not apply to those Japanese-Americans living in Hawaii, as well as the legally murky nature of the internment.

Unlike the other books published after the 1980s, this text also mentions the long "campaign for acknowledgment of the injustice done to Japanese Americans" and how this campaign was concluded with a formal apology by President Reagan and \$20,000 in

³⁷ Foner, Eric. *Give Me Liberty!: An American History*, 3ed, xliii.

³⁸ Ibid 929.

compensation to each surviving victim of the interment.³⁹ Rather than avoiding the racial aspect of the Pacific Theater or downplaying the actions of the United States, Foner expounds on both and in so doing colors the portrayal of Japan in WWII in a way that is not seen in the other texts, showing how the U.S also engaged in morally questionable actions whereas in other texts this dark side of U.S. action in the war was downplayed or glossed over in favor of other material. However this is probably as much due to the changes in United States historiography (specifically that pertaining to Asian-Americans) as it is the provocative nature of Eric Foner himself.

Work relating to Asian-Americans had been made since the 1800s when Chinese immigrants first started to enter the U.S., but it was not until the 1980s when “professional historians” (as opposed to the missionaries, expatriates, and other people who had written histories on this topic) began to produce material⁴⁰ that attempted to write on Asian-Americans and their parent countries without any major biases. Before this point, the majority of content from the 1870s into the 1960s was framed with Asian-Americans as a whole being a problem for U.S. society.⁴¹ As four of the five textbooks analyzed for this paper were published after the 1980s, it is held that this change in discourse in academic circles has greatly affected the content and style of the work with regards to Japan and the Second World War.

This also ties into the idea of *cultural pluralism*, which in this context is essentially identifying oneself as *American*, while still keeping one’s cultural heritage.⁴² This idea had taken

³⁹ Ibid 932.

⁴⁰ Chan, Sucheng. "Asian American Historiography." *Pacific Historical Review* 65, no. 3 (1996): 363.

⁴¹ Ibid 369.

⁴² Vega, J. E. "Cultural Pluralism and American Identity: A Response to Foner's Freedom and Hakim's Heroes." *OAH Magazine of History* 20, no. 4 (2006): 20.

root among U.S. historians and teachers and could be another possible cause in this softening of the portrayal of Japan or those of Japanese descent in the U.S.

There are certainly changes in the portrayal of Japan with regard to the Cold War and its events, but those portrayals are arguably due more to changes in Cold War historiography in ensuing decades rather than actual events in the world. This does not discount the effect of geopolitics, foreign-relations, or other such weighty matters on how Japan is portrayed, but it does show how difficult it is to determine whether history or the writing thereof had more effect. The task of finding reasons for the change in Japan's portrayal in textbooks was doable for this study, but more work remains to be done to make the work carried out so far even more conclusive. Most of the books acquired for this research were published no later than 1980, with several being written after the new millennium. This was due to the difficulty of receiving old textbooks, they were either unavailable or acquiring them was cost prohibitive. Some older texts were used but a range of books published in the past seven decades was unable to be acquired.

Despite this, two overall trends can be observed based on the text examined here. The first is that the wording of book has changed. Terms that would have been commonplace in the past have been edited out as they started to gain negative connotations to them, as far as the tone of books goes, they have also grown more evenhanded in their accounts of historical events, leading to the second observed trend, change of content. Textbooks have begun to include more material pertaining to the Pacific theater of the war, from new portrayals of the dropping of the atomic bombs to the Japanese-American experience in the war, which has occurred in tandem with a greater focus on the experiences of different minority groups in the Second World War. Over the decades more and more time has been spent showing all sides and groups in the conflict

to the point that several pages in more modern texts is spent talking about minority experiences in the war alone, this would be unheard of in earlier books.

It is all too clear that Japan's portrayal has changed over the last seventy years, and this is in no small part due to the shift in Asian historiography, which is itself part of the larger movement of cultural pluralism and inclusiveness in the present day.

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