After viewing the recently released movie *The Railway Man* (2013), I was struck by how this current film, based on a memoir by Eric Lomax, a British prisoner of war captured and tortured by the Japanese during WWII highlighted the issues discussed in *Controversial History Education in Asian Contexts* (2014). As I left the movie theater, I commented to my husband that ‘according the book I just completed, the average Japanese student learns nothing about Japanese behavior towards prisoners of war’ from their history textbooks, while they do learn that America has never been tried for the war crime of dropping the atomic bomb.

Now, this should not be too surprising. It is old news that the history taught in schools is often politically controlled by non-academics for purposes other than as a search for the “Truth.” A social studies/history professional can read the introduction to the Harvard Social Studies/Public Issues Series pamphlets (see for example, Oliver & Newmann, 1967) to find, and I am paraphrasing here, that students are normally presented with the facts and dates to memorize, believe that historical events had to happen the way they unfolded, and do not think critically or question the history they are taught. Another example, more
egregious in its political purpose during the Cold War was the “Americanism vs. Communism” curriculum required in the high school history classes in Florida, where, by state statute, Americanism was undefined, and, always good; while Communism came in red, was monolithic, and always bad (for an example see Cantera, 1971)! The professional historian’s understanding as to the tentative nature of knowledge, the construction of available facts into a narrative to support an interpretation and understanding of events is just not common in history textbooks anywhere in the world (the meaning of this sentence is unclear. It should be rewritten for clarity). You might be asking at this point, why does this really matter?

It matters for many reasons. For example, reading this book helps a reader to understand better many of the current conflicts over territory between Japan and its neighboring countries; internal conflicts in newer, modernizing countries like Singapore, which is trying to create a national identity by forging a common, if factually questionable, history; and the rise of neo-nationalist movements in India or Japan which fuel the textbook controversies on a regular basis. The fact is, children believe the history they are taught and become citizens of their respective nations internalizing a past that may have been purposely twisted or omitted facts to create patriotism and a willingness to surrender their lives for a country based on animosities that could be ameliorated if a different approach were taken to teaching history.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part sets the context for teaching controversy as part of historical thinking/reasoning. The authors in the first two chapters do a thorough job explaining the differences in context between Western democracies and Asian countries, some of which are quite authoritarian and centralized not only politically, but also religiously and culturally. The second part of the book explores the ideas of historical conflicts that have been either ignored, white-washed, or papered over in current textbooks. The third part focuses on pedagogy that might assist teachers willing to take a risk, teaching a more active, participative social science/history course at least some of the time.

To return to Part II, how could a teacher allow students to view history as contested, constructed and interpreted? This can be accomplished, in more than one way. For the social studies teacher who might be fearful of approaching a current issues conflict, a past conflict, one
that might not seem at first to be a problem, could be explored. For example, several of the chapters focus on the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asian countries during WWII. Part II, Chapter 5 is titled “How Can We Teach the Old Foe’s Wounds: Analysis of Descriptions of the Japanese Occupation and the Atomic Bombs in Vietnamese and Singaporean Textbooks; Chapter 6, Constructing the Nation: Portrayals of National Identity in Singapore’s School Textbook Narratives of the Japanese Occupation; and Chapter 7, Japanese History Textbooks and the Asia Pacific War. A common theme in these chapters has to do with what is often referred to as the “Rape of Nanjing.” It is clear when comparing these chapters, that the basic facts; the number of deaths, the treatment of the citizens, the behavior of the Japanese invaders, etc. appears as a different narrative in each nation’s history textbooks with the Japanese textbooks often not even referring to this massacre. It is important to note here that the Japanese have never apologized to the nations they invaded for their behavior during the war. Since the Japanese textbooks do not explain that this behavior occurred, Japanese citizens today still neither understand the underlying animosity of other citizens of Southeast Asia toward Japan nor believe there is anything to apologize for. Another example, not in this book is that of the Korean “Comfort Women” and the issue of apologies by Japan over this festering issue.

A different issue in this text is Chapter 4, The Other Side of Silence: Religion and Conflict in Indian Textbooks. This chapter, along with several of the chapters dealing with creating citizens in the multiethnic country of Singapore deal with glossing over historical facts to create a harmonious population. The problem is, it isn’t really working. On May 10, 2014 the NY Times published an article In Indian Candidate, Hindu Right Sees a Reawakening about Kumar, a right-wing candidate running for office. “He called for an overhaul of government textbooks, which he said included insulting language about Hindu gods and excessive praise of the Muslim emperor Akbar.” Further West, on May 11, 2014 the NY Times reported in Russia Revisits its History to Nail Down its Future that there is debate in Russia about how to “exalt the country’s history without distorting it.” This article goes to discuss critics of the current Russian government’s fixation on the defeat of fascism “distorts history, playing down the darker aspects of the Soviet Union’s role in WWII and obliterating honest discussion of foreign policy issues.” The
multitude of issues surrounding Japanese history textbooks have been reported on by a variety of sources over many years and can be accessed with a simple Google search yielding over 4.2 million results in 0.36 seconds.¹

Why should the average history teacher in a country that is not located in Southeast Asia bother to read this book? Because the issues it raises centers upon inform us that in NOT teaching controversial, contested, constructed history—in NOT allowing students to understand the tentative nature of knowledge and the selective interpretation of facts—we do a disservice to the global community by often sacrificing the concepts of peacemaking and global citizenship to the need for national unity or a national story (e.g. The Singapore Story referred to throughout the book that is not even entirely factual about the contested date of the founding of the country). There is also a disservice to the often festering internal undercurrent of unappreciated ethnic/religious groups and their issues.

Part III of this book offers some solutions in terms of pedagogy—the Structured Academic Controversy strategy (Chapter 11) as well as an Interactivity Foundation (IF) approach used by a university in Australia to increase diversity awareness and learning through facilitated discussion. There are other instructional ideas, all referenced across the chapters for pedagogy that assists teachers in teaching topics that have conflicting data. The issue is finding teachers who are themselves historians and are aware of the fact that history is not simply a memorized list of facts and dates. This is compounded by the political nature of teaching and the need for teachers to safeguard their employment. Teaching social studies/history by introducing conflicting narratives is still very risky in many places—whether or not the issues are past or current.

As a western reviewer, one who taught high school world history for 16 years, not only did I learn some factual data of which I had no prior knowledge, but also I reflected on the fact that the reality of the problem is pervasive—not only a special concern in Asia, but also a concern regarding the perversion of history for political purposes that occurs everywhere. One can only make the case that some places are marginally better than others, but no nation can escape the charges. Hopefully this book will provide information

and give courage to teachers, especially in Southeast Asia, who wish to challenge the status quo in order to create informed citizens.

References


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Barbara Slater Stern, Ed.D. is a Professor Emerita, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA. In addition to a 16 year career as a high school history/social studies teacher, she has taught “Methods of Teaching Secondary Social Studies” and curriculum as well as supervising pre-service teachers. She is now an adjunct for James Madison University teaching “Curriculum Issues and Theory” as well as the “Internship Seminar” for student teachers. She currently serves as the President of the American Association of Teaching and Curriculum (AATC).
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