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Rewriting History: How South Korean Textbooks are Reframing the United States' Involvement in the Korean War

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Abstract

On January 12th, the New York Times published a substantial article comparing American history textbooks from California and Texas called “Two States, Eight Textbooks. Two American Stories.” It revealed the differences of how history is indoctrinated in said states, who have passed laws dictating how details of historic events are taught in the classroom. In my research, I focus on similar issues regarding school textbooks in South Korea. Following Japanese colonial rule in 1910, Korean people adopted a sense of defensive nationalism as their efforts for an independent Korean led to American occupation and war. The United States' involvement in the Korean War has been taught from many perspectives, but South Korean's remember the war as being fueled by a desire for a unified, democratic Korea. As the recent New York Times article highlighted, history textbooks spoke highly of the U.S. aid that allocated their stable economy and new democratic government. After the Yangju Highway Incident in 2002, South Korean textbooks started presenting U.S. involvement in their country in a different light. For my research, I created a series of six blogs, each focused on a different aspect and historical memory of the Korean War. As part of my research, I compared South Korean textbooks from 2001 and 2009 as well as U.S. and South Korean documents about education following the war to consider why the U.S. involvement during the Korean War is being rewritten in South Korean textbooks.

Keywords: South Korea, Education, History, Korean War, United States, Nationalism

Nationalism was an element prominent in almost all major countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Nationalism itself is a complicated concept, but for most Americans it becomes synonymous with patriotism and that's not necessarily the case. Patriotism, at its core, is someone sacrificing for their country out of a sense of reason and logic. Whereas nationalism is someone sacrificing for their country out of a sense of emotion (Riley 1). When someone is devoted to their country one might wave their country's flag proudly on their property, for example, but nationalism is a strong identification with one's own nation. It is unconditional support in its roots, interests, traditions, etc. Korean nationalism is heavily entrenched in emotional ties to their culture, which makes it rawer and more individually significant than a sense of patriotism.

This excessive nationalism in Korea stems from a sense of victimization and apathy experienced from other nations, particularly in the last one-hundred years. The 1910 Treaty of Japan-Korea that was proclaimed to the public on 22 August and officially started the period of Japanese rule in Korea, had a significant impact on the rise of Korean nationalism (Caprio 82). Prior to this, nationalism was at an all-time low, with regular peasantry rebellions and aristocratic corruptions. The latter played a role in the former, a common characteristic of the two was a lack of pride and respect for their country, with the "higher-ups" treating the nation as unworthy of care. At this point in Korean history, Koreans were predominantly vulnerable due to the fact that it happened at the height of western imperialism. As other nations began to gain footholds in the peninsula, many Koreans saw an opportunity to improve their lives in ways that their government could or would not. Particularly, Japan took advantage of this fact by providing

incentives to Korean's who supported pro-Japanese policies, enabling them to rob the Korean King of sovereignty piece by piece.

Nothing creates a strong desire for national identity like having one's national identity stripped away--for Koreans this is exactly what they experienced. After Japan took occupation in 1910, the Japanese government initiated numerous reforms aimed at modernizing the country to some degree, but also conforming it to its own cultural standards. Although education was more readily available, most schools prohibited the use of Korean language, while other schools relegated Korean studies as "elective" courses. Several symbols of Korean sovereignty were either destroyed, modified, or replaced outright (Caprio 82). The most notable example of this was the destruction of the Gyeongbokgung Palace (경복궁) built in 1395, which was the main royal palace of the Joseon Dynasty, located in Northern Seoul, South Korea (Royal Palace). This palace was almost entirely destroyed, only ten buildings out of one hundred were left standing.

Japanese scholars also started to rewrite history on their own, promoting this notion that the Korean and Japanese people were of the same ethnic background and that modern Koreans were merely descendants of the Japanese. The independence activists at the time, were not only concerned with regaining power, but many became increasingly worried about how much of their society would be left once Japanese imperial rule was lifted. Many started to find ways to counter this cultural genocide through the fostering of Korean culture and national pride.

The Korean War (1950 – 1953)

The United States' decision to intervene in Korea stemmed from the tense atmosphere that dominated the politics of the cold war. A multitude of events left President Harry S. Truman apprehensive in the face of the North Korean attack. In 1949, one year before the Korean war started, the Soviet Union exploded an atomic bomb, effectively ending the monopoly of the

weapon by the United States. In Europe, the Soviet Union intervened in both Greece and Turkey. In doing so, it gave rise to the Truman Doctrine which is the base principles where the United States gives support to countries (or peoples) in danger from threats by Soviet forces (Cummings 15) and the Marshall Plan which was a US program meant to provide aid to western Europe following World War II (US department of state). In the early 1950s, President Truman ordered the national security council (NSC) to perform an evaluation of the Soviet and American capabilities. 1950, the Korean war began, with Korea being at the forefront of the Cold War.

Russia and the United States worked together during World War II to free Korea from imperial rule of Japan. After the war ended, the result was a divided nation – North and South Korea – run by two powers.

25 June 1950. The beginning of the Korean war. This was the first full-scale conflict since World War II and the region around P’ohang-dong saw fierce clashes between South and North Korean forces. A company of seventy-one Korean student soldiers fought on August 11th at the P’ohang-dong Girls middle school to delay North Korean advances into the city (Sang-Soo 1). These students successfully upheld the 38th parallel – which is the line on the Korean map that marks the border between North and South Korea – that General Douglas MacArthur set while American military advised South Korean troops to demolish the bridge connecting the territories (National Archives and Records Administration). In doing this, hundreds of North Korean refugees were effectively abandoned.

The South Korean Perspective of the United States from the Korean War

South Koreans, following the Korean War, generally were very pro-United States. Because of American assistance to restore the devastated economy of South Korea after the war, and the willingness of the United States to sacrifice its own soldiers to help South Korea gain independence from the North. However, anti-Americanism in South Korea peaked between 2002 and 2005 due to several reasons.

The first noteworthy reason for this shift was the Yangji Highway Incident in 2002, where American military units carrying out an exercise accidentally killed two fourteen-year-old South Korean schoolgirls who were on their way to a birthday party (Kirk and Tribune). The American military acquitted the two soldiers responsible for the “negligent homicide” incident. This sparked a wave of anti-American protests that were unseen in the history of South Korea. Tens of thousands (an estimate of fifty thousand in Seoul alone) took to the streets to protest the presence of the United States military (Kirk and Tribune). This act alone by the South Korean citizens was impactful for the individual communities as their independence from non-Korean military rule was still fresh and the threat of the United States military, stationed in Seoul at the time, being harmful rather than helpful was too great to ignore.

The second large reason for the increased anti-Americanism for the South Korean people was the Iraq War. This war sparked outrage from all of America’s allies at the international level (except Britain and Poland). The actions of America angered South Koreans, specifically the act of ignoring the United Nations and invading Iraq based on vague evidence (Council on foreign relations). The majority of South Korean citizens turned on the United States for possibly the first time in decades, and it did not help when reports of American soldiers torturing Iraqi prisoners brought up painful memories of the incidents when Americans killed Korean civilians during the No Gun Ri Massacre. This massacre occurred on 26-29 July 1950, where 250-300

civilian refugees (mostly women and children) were killed in a US air attack. Small and heavy weapons fired near the bridge of Nogeun-ri – one hundred miles southeast of Seoul (Zinn Education Project).

The most relevant incident was from President George W. Bush and his administration. In the early 2000s, Bush effectively insulted the entire left wing of Korea by claiming North Korea to be part of the “Axis of Evil,” which was a term used throughout Bush’s presidency to describe foreign governments that sponsored terrorism and sought after weapons of mass destruction, in his State of the Union Address in 2002 (National Archives and Records Administration). Kim Dae Jung and Roo Moon Hyun, Korea’s first two liberal leaders, sought after a “sunshine policy” with North Korea. This policy, officially titled “The Reconciliation and Cooperation Policy Towards the North,” refers to the theoretical basis for South Korea’s foreign policy in regard with North Korea, hoping to ease relations and eventually promote unification (Min). While the feasibility of the plan was doubtful, Bush’s breaking the program into pieces with his labeling of North Korea led to the anti-US sentiment.

Since these early 2000s instances, the overall opinion of America from South Korean citizens has lifted. Currently the sentiment is pro-American once again. In the results from a 2015 World Service Poll “Views of the United States’ Influence by Country” had South Korea at fifty-eight percent positive and twenty-eight percent negative.

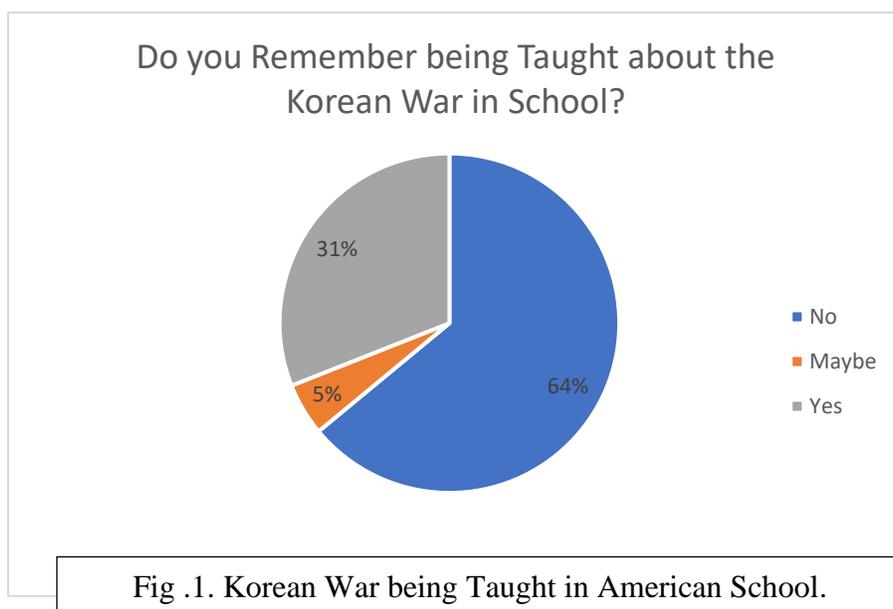
South Korean Textbook Analysis

American school’s history curriculum has often been presented chronologically with more time spent on things that have had a major impact on American society. The Korean War is usually shortened because there are two major events that have had a much greater collective impact on American citizens; the Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement. It is easy

to connect the importance of these topics to the students' contemporary lives. Whereas the Korean War doesn't have that kind of impact. While it has lasting effect on foreign affairs, the Korean War does not have as much on American students in domestic affairs--not as much as defeating the Nazi's or the end of legal segregation (An and Suh).

The average middle or high school history textbook has an entire unit for World War II, and an entire unit for the Civil Rights Movement. Whereas the Korean War is just a couple of pages in the middle of the general overview of the 1950s. A large portion of all post-World War II curriculum in American schools was focused on the spread of communism. The Korean War was a part of that curriculum, squeezed in right before the emphasis on the Vietnam War. What was taught was that North Korea attacked South Korea, then the United States – backed by the United Nations – intervened and pushed North Korean forces to the brink of total subjugation before China joined in and pushed the United States back to the 38th parallel (Lin, et al. 59).

I conducted an anonymous survey study, with participant ages ranging from eighteen to thirty-five years, to determine if the average American had a remembered knowledge of learning about the Korean War in school (outside of higher education). Sixty-four out of one hundred



participants said they did not remember (see figure 1).

In South Korea though, the general knowledge given to high school students when learning about the Korean War was that South Korea won independence from Japan at the end of World War II. Russia was supporting North Korea and the United States was supporting South Korea. The word used to describe this relationship was “jeongchi (정치)” which roughly translates to “politics.” The textbooks were pressed on the specifics of the relationship between the pairs, they described the United States as an older brother to South Korea and Russia as a father figure to North Korea. They were adamant that the United States was a “democracy” and that Russia, empathetically, was not. The North attacked and, at first, North Korea was winning until the United Nations joined South Korea and they jointly attacked the North. Then China joined forces with North Korea, advancing with strength. At this point, both North and South Korea decided to stop the war and made a truce (Cho, et al.).

Common aspects of the Korean War that are taught in South Korean textbooks that differ from American textbooks include that Koreans refer to the Korean War as “6 – 25” (the date that the war began). Although there was already frequent and unpremeditated fighting between North and South before the war, South Korean textbooks do not really cover it. Instead, alluding to placing blame for the outbreak of the war solely on Kim II Sung, as if he broke the peace randomly. Korean textbooks put emphasis on how Kim II Sung went to Joseph Stalin more than forty-five times to gain his permission to go to war. The emphasis is there to undermine Kim’s authority and autonomy. Without fail, the South Korean textbooks say how the war was an overall opportunity for Japan’s economic growth, the perfect comeback from World War II aftermath (Lin, et al.)

South Korean textbooks used to teach of the United States' involvement in detail, but overtime the textbooks changed, effectively reducing US role and credit.

Conclusion

One might ask “why would South Korea want to lessen the perceived involvement of the US during the Korean War?” And it stems from the same notion of American schools framing history to have them as the correct and righteous one the entire time. American schools actively teach that the entirety of the pseudo victory of the Korean War only happened solely because of the United States involvement. Framing the outcome to rely on the success of America as a country. This is America's own nationalism seeping through the education system. Korea has a similar approach to preserving the narrative of Korean pride, in my opinion. Korea has a rich history; most citizens take great pride in their “5,000-year history” and all the achievements throughout. But in the forty-three years that transpired from imperial rule of Japan to the end of the Korean War, Korean pride took a severe hit. The deficits of this blow are what created the intense defensive nationalism that fueled Koreans to complete the impossible – building one of the most advanced cities in the world, currently, in the aftermath of the countries war in only approximately sixty years (G20 Seoul Summit).

Koreans needed this rebuild and restricting of the nation in order to move forward from the last century of mistreatment and fear. Instead of highlighting what is arguably the weakest the country has ever been, Korea decided to shift the magnitude of the Korean War to have Korean government as the frontrunner of the success of the Korean War. Instilling in every generation that follows who will learn about the history of the Korean Nation rising above its previous victimization, creating a deep rooted and prideful respect for their country, and their countries elders.

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