

Official and Grassroot Responses to the Japanese Textbook Controversy: A Comparative Study on China and Korea

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Abstract. Japan's ongoing revision of its wartime history, particularly through its school textbooks, continues to be a major source of diplomatic friction in East Asia, intertwining issues of national identity and collective memory. The intensification of these disputes in 2002 and 2005 marked significant turning points in Sino-Japanese and Korea-Japanese relations. This paper delves into the official and grassroots responses from both China and South Korea, shedding light on the different characteristics exhibited by each country's approach to manage disputes, as well as the relationship between government-led diplomatic maneuvers and popular nationalist movements. Through a constructivist lens, the analysis reveals how these countries not only react to historical controversies but also play an active role in shaping regional narratives and international perceptions. This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the nuanced dynamics between official state responses and grassroots movements in China and South Korea as strategic efforts to shape national identity, public sentiment, and international legitimacy.

Keywords: Textbook controversy; Sino-Japanese relations; Korea-Japan relations; Historical memory; East Asian politics.

1. Introduction

Since the latter half of the 20th century, Japan's compilation and revision of its national history in textbooks have consistently sparked international controversy. These textbooks deliberately downplayed Japan's war responsibilities during WWII, denied or whitewashed the comfort women system, obscured the accountability for its invasion of Korea and China, as well as presented a one-sided view on territorial disputes such as those over the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Island and Dokdo (Takeshima) [1]. In response, the Chinese and South Korean governments have reacted strongly, frequently attempting direct intervention and correction of specific phrasings--an approach that is highly uncommon in other textbook compilation processes globally. This underscores both countries' non-tolerance to the violation of historical justice and their concerns over the resurgence of Japan's right-wing, historical revisionist narratives.

Modern scholarly research on the issues of historical memory is extensive, with numerous studies analyzing the political underpinning of textbook production and exploring how these disputes have hindered multilateral economic cooperation among CJK. However, there remain two critical gaps in current body of research. The first is the underestimation and limited application of constructivist framework. Constructivism, by focusing on the mutable and reconstructable nature of history, provides a perspective to international disputes that transcends conflicts of interest and ideologies. This essay aims to demonstrate its rising relevance in explaining East Asia, where the politics of emotion have been increasingly centralized.

The second gap is the always-simplified depiction of other nations' reactions to the controversies. Existing studies often tend to generalize these reactions: the public "expressed outrage" or "protested", while the government "took firm action". In reality, the responses at state-level and society-level actually differ significantly in terms of timing and motivation, revealing intricate layers of social psychology and political calculation. These reactions are not driven by a monolithic ideology and should not be simply embedded into a teleological narrative. By examining these responses in greater depth, this study also seeks to fill this narrative gap and offer new insights into how historical memory may shape diplomatic dynamics.

This essay would be situated closely with the context of Sino-Japan and Korea-Japan diplomatic relation changes during the past fifty years, with a particular focus on the year 2002 and 2005 as two critical junctures when the textbook controversies sharpened and escalated. The responses are analyzed along two key dimensions: the official and the grassroots, which intends to distinguish between governmental policy-making and public expressions of sentiments. Official responses refer to the governments' choices on diplomatic strategies, language and their degrees of assertiveness, while grassroots responses will heavily focus on the protest movements taken place in reality and cyberspace. After comparing the characteristics of responses exhibited by China and South Korea, constructivist approach will be employed to investigate the potential causalities and mechanism of mutual influence between these two categories of responses.

2. Official Response in China

In the past fifty years, Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations have primarily revolved around the dual themes of “economic cooperation” and “strategic reciprocity”. While the issue of historical revisionism had indeed created friction, for China whose national strength has significantly increased since the reform and opening-up period, the diplomatic strategy towards Japan has consistently been framed within the broader objective of consolidating its direct stake in establishing global order [2]. China's diplomatic stance towards Japan, therefore, should always be contextualized within such developmental consideration.

In “Descriptions and Changes in Japanese Textbooks Regarding Invasive Wars”, Zou Yi quantitatively analyzes the number of textbooks adhering to historical justice (classify the invasion of Chinese territory as “aggression”) and the proportion of such textbooks among all published textbooks in Japan during that given year. Examining the fluctuation of this proportion over time, one could find its correlation with several critical junctures in the evolution of Sino-Japanese relations.

Statistical data indicated that in the 1970s, textbooks acknowledging the aggressive nature of war constituted the lowest proportion of 12.5%. This period marked the initial stage of Sino-Japanese diplomatic thaw, during which the right-wing ideological legacies in Japanese society has not yet been suppressed. Beginning in the 1980s, this proportion gradually rose and peaked at a dramatic 91.3% in the 1990s, as the progress of reform and opening-up has caused China's increasing economic dependence on Japan's financial assistance. This period is often marked by historians and scholars as “honeymoon period” in diplomatic relations. During this time, Japanese government's stance on historical issues softened to some extent. Certain textbooks once again faced the responsibilities of war crimes, thereby reemphasizing the historiographical characteristics of the era of Tokyo Trial.

Nevertheless, since early 2000s, this proportion has consistently declined and dropped to 26.7% by 2016 [3]. This change is closely linked to its redefined perception of China from a collaborative partner to a primary counterbalancing force, and it reflects the important transformation in Japan's diplomatic strategy in the international arena and East Asia, particularly in the aftermath of the economic bubble and the Asian financial crisis.

In her research, Zou identifies 2002 as the turning point when the proportion of textbooks using the term “aggression” began to decline [3]. This year coincided with the official approval and adoption of the New Japanese History, a textbook that generated significant international controversy. In response to the 2002 textbook issue, China's official stance was relatively restrained, emphasizing that the proper handling of historical issues not only influenced bilateral relations but also deeply affected the “conscience” and “discernment” of the Japanese citizens. Additionally, it would determine whether Japan, as a member of the Asian community, could establish a legitimate image and maintain its credibility. In April 2002, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhang Qiyue further stated that China will “reserve the right to further respond” to Japan's inappropriate revisions of its history textbooks.

The year 2005 marked another critical juncture in disputes over this subject: the New History Textbook Atarashii Rekishi Kyokasho compiled by the right-wing academia Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, has passed the Ministry of Education's review and was subsequently published. This version of textbook contained several contentious and arguably unconstitutional revisions, including portraying colonial annexation to Korean Peninsula as a step to "unification", attributing the suffering of the colonized populations to land reclamation policies while avoiding any discussion of the loss of sovereignty, and replacing "Pacific War" with the rhetorics of "Greater East Asia War" to justify its imperialist actions under the ideology of "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" [4]. Most inflammatory to both Chinese and Korean audiences, however, were still the issues of territorial sovereignty along with the denial of the Nanjing Massacre and the comfort woman system. This textbook ultimately became the catalyst for the mass anti-Japanese demonstrations in China in 2005, which will be analyzed in further details later.

Notably, China's official reaction to New History Textbook was more forceful and firmer than its response to New Japanese History three years earlier. On the very afternoon the textbook passed the review, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs urgently summoned the Japanese Ambassador of China while the Chinese Ambassador in Tokyo also engaged in formal negotiations with the Japanese government immediately. This escalation provoked reflections on the shift of Chinese government's stance and approach from a more restrained one of 2002 to the more confrontational of 2005.

In addition to the rising economic tensions and concerns over Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, as well as anxieties regarding the distribution and adoption rates of the new textbook, the consciousness of domestic and international "audiences" is also an essential factor influencing Chinese official responses. In making diplomatic decisions, the Chinese government had to consider not only the broader international context but also the shaping of national identity, taking into account the real-time fluctuations in public sentiment and popular opinions. The issue will be further elaborated in the section exploring the interconnection between official and public responses. Before that, the focus will turn to the grassroots reaction to the textbook controversy in China.

3. Grassroot Response in China

The 2005 anti-Japanese protests stand out as the most prominent example of public reaction to this subject, primarily motivated by the widespread dissatisfaction towards the New History Textbook's denial of Japan's wartime responsibilities. The demonstrations swept across more than 20 cities, including Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Beijing and Chongqing, with participants ranging from university student organizations to spontaneously mobilized citizens from diverse social groups. This diversity in participants led to a lack of uniformity in protest goals and strategies. Intellectuals tended to adopt peaceful approaches, such as signing petitions addressed to international organizations; private enterprises engaged in boycotts of Japanese goods, aiming to curb Japan's economic exports in China; and certain individuals took more radical actions, such as vandalizing Japanese-made cars and electronics and desecrating the Japanese national flag. These aggressive acts compelled to government intervention, leading to a number of arrests and the imposition of formal restrictions on public gatherings.

The scale of this demonstration and the intensity of it remain ingrained in the collective memory of Chinese citizens. However, the demonstration was short lived, enduring for only one month. The violent incidents that unfolded during the protest elicited criticism from Japan, which called upon the Chinese government to take actions and offer compensation. Under international pressure, China's Ministry of Public Security issued a statement on April 21 calling for an immediate end to the protests and the dissemination of related information, a message broadcast nationwide on the evening news. The protests then swiftly subsided following this appeal. This "explosiveness"--characterized by its large-scale mobilization but short duration--marks a defining feature of the Chinese grassroots protests, forming a contrast with that of South Korean movements worthy of analysis.

Moreover, the role of cyberspace during this period warrants closer examination. Platforms such as Baidu Tieba, Tianya Forum and Weibo, alongside privately operated nationalist websites, emerged as the most significant venues for public protests. In tandem with the street demonstrations, online activism peaked in 2005, epitomizing the widespread public outrage over the Diaoyu Islands dispute and the publication of New History Textbook itself. During this time, Chinese netizens engaged in various forms of digital expression to assert historical memories. A notable example is the widely circulated poem titled “Mother, I Am Diaoyu Island”, written in a first-person narrative as a non-human and actually pluralistic subject, the Diaoyu Islands. It used mother-child relationship as an analogy to convey a profound emotional connection to territorial sovereignty.

While the formal nature of online gathering and protesting renders them less violent compared to street demonstrations, the government’s response to online public sentiment remains somewhat repressive. In April 2005, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Qin Gang publicly urged the populace to “express their perceptions rationally”, indicating the government’s ongoing vigilance regarding the potential risks associated with online protests.

It is asserted that in response to the textbook controversy, China failed to cultivate a representative movement with significant political impact in cyberspace. This can be attributed not only to governmental control but also to several other factors, including a long-standing isolation from mainstream Western social media and a lack of precedents for social protest activities within the country. These multiple factors have made the official response become the predominant message, if not the only hearable message resonating within the international community. However, this does not indicate that nationalist and anti-Japanese sentiments in China are less intense than that in South Korea; nor should it diminish the powerful role played by online public opinion in political critique and oversight.

4. Official Response in South Korea

While the recent-year interactions between South Korea and Japan have become closer than in the post-war period, the legacy of Japan’s colonization of the Korean Peninsula continues to lie beneath the surface, complicating their bilateral relations. In the year 1998, Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi expressed a public acknowledgement of historical issues for the first time, stating, “what happened in the twentieth century need to be resolved within the twentieth century”. That same year, the “Japan-South Korea Joint Declaration of 1998” was formally adopted, marking a rapid normalization of interactions between the two nations and ushering in a “honeymoon period” at the turn of the century. During this time, the South Korean government implemented a series of policies aimed at fostering amicable cooperative projects with Japan. However, the publication of the New Japanese History in 2002 was perceived as a betrayal of the previously established trust, provoking a strong wave of anti-Japanese sentiment throughout South Korea [5].

From an overarching perspective, South Korean government’s response to the textbook controversy was more consistent and assertive than that of China. In February 2002, the South Korean National Assembly passed a resolution announcing that it would reconsider the continued opening of its cultural market to Japan until the textbook issue was resolved. Members of the National Assembly also suspended their participation in the Korea-Japan Parliamentary Alliance and ceased referring to the Japanese Emperor using the term “Emperor” in official documents. In March, both the ruling party and the opposition parties in South Korea expressed deep concern regarding the textbook controversy.

In response to the New History Textbook of 2005, the South Korean government adopted a similarly resolute stance. Then-President Roh Moo-hyun publicly declared that South Korea was prepared to engage in a “diplomatic battle” with Japan. Furthermore, the South Korean government officially established the “Correct History Planning Group for Northeast Asia”, a presidential agency dedicated to analyzing and correcting Japanese textbooks. The agency’s mandate extended beyond merely proposing passive responses; it aimed to actively promote South Korea’s position

internationally, ultimately compelling Japan to recognize the legitimacy of South Korea's stance and to construct and maintain South Korea's image on the global arena.

5. Grassroot Response in South Korea

The diplomatic stance of South Korea is closely intertwined with the prevalence of historical melancholia within the society. An examination of public responses reveals a certain degree of synchrony between South Korean grassroot protests and those in China. For instance, in 2005, over three thousand South Koreans encircled the Japanese Embassy in Seoul in protest against the New History Textbook, primarily focusing on territorial disputes regarding Dokdo, burning effigies of the Japanese ambassador.

It is however essential to emphasize the level of organization and continuity of these protest. In response to the 2002 New History Textbook, more than sixty social organizations in South Korea established the "Headquarters for Correcting Japanese Textbooks" in Seoul. Since its formation, this group has continuously expanded and has actively sought cross-national cooperation by issuing initiatives to civil society organizations in North Korea and China, aimed at forming a counterforce against the right-wing historical narratives [6].

Since the emergence of the democratization movement in 1980s, there has been an increasingly intense wave of historical reflection in South Korea, accompanied by a rise in national consciousness. Historical issues have become central to social movements, with a significant increase in protests related to the comfort woman issue. Among these, the "Task Force for the Comfort Woman" and the "Wednesday Demonstrations", aimed at addressing the Japanese military's use of comfort woman, have emerged as key mobilizers, conducting over a thousand marches since their inception in 1992. Following the textbook controversy in 2005, these organizations welcomed numerous new members from various sectors of society, ultimately exerting direct influence on official responses. In the face of persistent public pressure, the Park Geun-hye administration was eventually compelled in 2013 to regard the resolution of the comfort women issue as a pivotal condition for improving diplomatic relations with Japan [7]. This process illustrates that, although the impact of grassroots activities requires time to accumulate, their substantial role in shaping foreign policy is long-term and significant.

6. The Relationship and Influential Mechanism between Official and Grassroot Responses in China and South Korea

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault argues that discourse not only describes and reflects but also actively participates in shaping it [8]. From this perspective, the responses of the Chinese and South Korean governments are not merely passive reactions to specific events, but rather proactive practices of "defining diplomatic stances" and "regulating public perceptions" through discourse. In other words, beyond examining their reactions to Japan, it is also crucial to study the governments' effort to either encourage or suppress domestic resistance, uncovering the underlying considerations and intentions. Additionally, discourse's performative nature is evident in its emotional impact. Sara Ahmed's theory of the "politics of emotion" suggests that emotions are not purely individual experiences but are generated through discourse and the network of symbols, disseminated through narratives, and ultimately create collective emotional consensus [9]. This theory helps explain the direct influence of the openness, intensity, and speed of official responses on public protests in China and South Korea, as well as sheds light on the recent trend of emotional centrality observed in East Asian politics.

From the analysis of the textbook controversies, it becomes clear that the relationship between official and civil reactions does not follow a simple casualty, nor does it always reinforce each other; rather, it often involves a complex interplay of constraints. On the surface, China's civil reactions appear to be largely under the influence and manipulation of the government, with limited reciprocal

influence on the State's diplomatic responses. However, the impact of public sentiment on official reactions still exists at a theoretical level, albeit more implicitly, as it operates as a preemptive factor. As Jessica Chan Weiss's research on propaganda and rhetoric in international disputes highlights, governments, when formulating diplomatic strategies, must not only consider international interests but also manage and guide domestic public emotional tendencies [10].

In the 2002 textbook controversy, the Chinese government's relatively restrained diplomatic approach was not a passive response, but a calculated strategy that took into account potential domestic reactions: How would this discourse/strategy affect the shaping of national identity? Would it inflame public resentment? How should the government respond in the event of a public opinion crisis? In this sense, civil reactions are in fact an integral part of the government's cohesive and long-term strategy. Therefore, the large-scale anti-Japanese protest in 2005 can be seen as a consequence of losing control over public opinion costs, forcing the Chinese government to swiftly respond and subsequently expend more diplomatic effort to maintain international balance. This demonstrates that public sentiment can, under certain conditions, serve as a preemptive factor influencing official discourse choices.

In South Korea, the interaction between official and civil responses exhibits different characteristics. Due to differing national contexts, the South Korean public generally holds higher expectations for political participation and contribution, and the government's intervention in civil activities is less overt and direct compared to China. Conversely, South Korea's grassroot protest organizations maintain a persistent attention on historical issues, possess a wealth of experience in social movements, and exhibit strong mobilization capabilities. As a post-positional force, they can exert a certain degree of influence on the government's adjustment of diplomatic rhetoric and strategies.

7. Conclusion

Through the above analysis, it becomes clear that responses are not merely passive reactions, but rather active and constructive actions. These actions together weave a narrative, helping nations to establish a just image and legitimacy on the global stage. Constructivist theory posits that diplomatic interventions and protests are often not simply targeted on particular situations or events, but rather part of a continuous process of building what Alexander Wendt called the "shared ideas" and collective understanding between states. By publicly expressing dissatisfaction with Japan's right-wing historiographies, China and South Korea have persistently constructed and reinforced negative perceptions of these narratives. At the same time, social movements and online discourse have amplified the dissemination of these emotional responses, drawing more countries into this collective understanding and thereby strengthening regional shared beliefs. Consequently, the textbook controversy not only serve as a key indicator of domestic dynamics in Japan and the Japan-China and Japan-South Korea bilateral interactions, but also reflects the reciprocal and mirroring relationship between China and South Korea regarding the historical memory of WWII. This dual interaction mechanism between official and grassroot responses in these two nations provides a valuable novel perspective for the future study of international relations.

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