The Authors of History:

Textbooks & South Korea's National Identity Crisis

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"Who controls the past controls the future--who controls the present controls the past."

--George Orwell's *1984*

Introduction

Governments editing textbooks is nothing new. As Peter Duus, a Stanford historian, articulates, they are a way "...to nurture a sense of national identity..."(Sneider 2012). This poses the immediate question: does manipulating history beget nationalism or vice-versa? On October 30th 2008, the Ministry of Education of Science and Technology (MEST) in South Korea was scrutinized for demanding that publishers rewrite and omit parts of the country's history in high school textbooks (Choe, 2008). Whether or not this is a justifiable exercise of power is still contested by the South Korean government and its citizens. This paper takes a look at the motivations leading up to this point while analyzing the arguments coming from both sides: should the interpretation of history be left up to standardization by the government? In line with Bardach's "Eightfold Path" to policy analysis, it is worth taking the time to discuss the intended and unintended consequences of said policy. However, solutions and recommendations as to what to do in the future will be addressed in a later piece.

A Troubled Past

For the majority of its postwar history, South Korea has been subject to dictatorships where freedom of self-expression was non-existent (Borrowiec 2015). Under the 36-year Japanese occupation a harshly imposed education-system, language, and even a manipulation of history affected how Korean national identity would be later defined (Song 2012). Present-relations between both countries' are peaceful, but it can be argued that

they are not ideal. Harsh memories of occupation remain a source of emotional contention and what can be described as “bad blood” between them.

Contrary to popular belief, and despite protests from citizens of the South involving the revision of the history surrounding Japan’s actions during WWII in school textbooks, Japanese textbooks maintain a dry, muted, style while avoiding the interpretive and overly-subjective narrative that is characteristic of Korean textbooks. Conspicuous gaps, such as the absence of mentioning its colonial power over South Korea, exist in a way that suggests intentionally muddling the true motivations for once forcibly expanding its military power throughout Asia (Sneider 2012).

Glaring omissions such as these have left Korean history textbook-writers scrambling to compensate for these lacunas through borderline propagandistic “war stories” which indoctrinate national pride and identity. This is not to say that other countries throughout history have not done the same before. What makes the Korean search for national identity unique is its geographic location. Where it is at the center of conflicts between superpowers like Russia, China, the US, and Japan. There is an old Korean saying that describes the peninsula as “a shrimp among whales.” This quote illustrates that Korea was inevitably influenced by forces that have shaped modern Korean culture.

Currently, Korean schools choose books for their students from a nationally approved list of subject-specific textbooks. This system came after educators and activists argued that history-education “should be left up to experts in the field, instead of politicians” (Borrowiec 2015). The ironic part is that in both Korea and Japan, there are approved public-school history textbooks that favor their own citizens.

For example, whereas Japan portrays its role in WWII somewhat masochistically, Korea champions the part of the oppressed victim while details of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are skimmed-over. These historical oversights are allowed and in many ways controlled by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in both Japan and Korea. (Sneider 2012).

By the Book: Defining the Policy

The policy's origins can be traced back to 2013, when the South Korean Ministry of Education instructed publishers to revise their history textbooks. In 2015, the South Korean National Institute of Korean History (NIKH) came to the masses with plans to replace existing high-school history textbooks with ones authorized by the government by March of 2017. These state-issued textbooks are written by a government-appointed panel of experts. Like China and Japan, South Korea has tried to emulate the success of Germany and France in creating common textbooks (Sasaki, 2012). As it is the job of the MOE to distribute and administer textbooks, the content has already been somewhat standardized--but never entirely omitted or rewritten. Past attempts to "streamline" textbooks failed to address the diversity of individual students and communities and because of these problems a policy revision occurred in 1995 which categorized textbooks into three categories:

1. Copyright owned by the MOE
2. Authorized by the MOE
3. Approved by the MOE or Superintendents

The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, 1998 (p.34).

Developing A "Correct History" for the People

This decision sparked intense debate about academic freedom, educational diversity and national unity. In a 2015 article published by the Los Angeles Times, the NIKH had convinced the department heads of the MOE to replace textbooks with "the correct history" by March 2017 (Kirk 2015). This plan nicknamed, "The Correct History Plan" has sparked protests and created a division in South Korea.

The subject of conflict in particular is the current depiction of the Korean War. Conservatives argue that the depiction of North Korea is "too kind" while opposing-party liberals accuse conservatives of "demonizing" N. Korea (Chloe 2008). The S. Korean government maintains that "a single history textbook would bridge the ideological gap by presenting all students with the same facts and analysis." The fact that this is still a debate to be had points to the not-so-secret underbelly of a still extremely polarized Korean society (Borrowiec 2015).

"We must no longer teach our children using biased textbooks that distort historical facts."

--Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn

The daughter of what many consider a dictator, debate is fueled by current President Park Geun-hye's already controversial past. From 1961-1979 her father, military strongman Park Chung-hee, reigned in such a way that still even today resonates ideologically with many South Koreans. While the elder Park essentially drove South Korea's rapid economic rise, he suspended many key civic and political rights. Right-wing Koreans view him as a father-figure of economic growth while the young democracy's liberals consider him an iron-fisted totalitarian. The presence of ulterior motives of this national standardized

textbook policy as a way to diminish talk of her father's dictatorial history is an easy conclusion to jump to.

For many schools, the policy is feared to be the slippery slope that threatens academic freedom under the principle that diversity of views is essential to democracy. Still so, many feel that the government's real objective in pushing for a single textbook is "to whitewash the collaboration of Korean elites with Japanese colonizers and South Korea's history of dictatorship following the 1950-53 Korean War" (Borrowiec 2015).

Two Koreas. One Motivation.

Although their governments stand in stark opposition and the differences between North and South Korea seem readily apparent, despite the obvious differences, the two countries, like grudge-gripping siblings, continue to mirror each other in the dogmatic way in which they retell their own histories. During the aftermath of the Cold War, the two clashing ideologies reflected in South Korea's textbooks contained hostile narratives that conveyed anti-communistic messages (Yoo, S. and Kim, H., 2002, p.6). Even though this antagonism waned during the 90's, the shift towards increasing emphasis on the political history of the rise of the South's economy meant the gradual disappearance of history and disparaging content of the North Korean regime in textbooks (Yoo, S. and Kim, H., 2002, p.7).

Opposing-party leaders likened the idea of pushing for a government-designated history textbook to the "North Korean education method." Moon Jae-in of the New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD) criticized, "(This policy) means applying a uniform

standard and totalitarian approach, and is itself dictatorial," also saying that "a government designated textbook has no place in a liberal democracy" (Choi 2015).

A government-designated history textbook is what Nazi Germany, militarist Japan, and the Yushin dictatorship carried-out. Even South Korea's bitter brothers to the North have adopted this strategy. Those in favor of the book policy cite mistakes in the current text and particularly mention the textbooks' portrayal of N. Korean founder Kim Il Sung's Juche ideology as not appropriate for young students (Choi 2015).

A Bipartisan Analysis

The Korean public school year begins in March of each year. While the policy is set to be implemented at the start of 2017 there has been constant backlash since the decision was rendered nearly two years ago and the S. Korean government shows no signs of rescinding its mandate. Whether or not the government has purely altruistic intentions has been the subject of national debate. According to a 2015 Arirang News broadcast, South Korean President Pak Geun Hye stated, "the current history textbooks minimize North Korean provocations and blame S. Korea for the division of the peninsula."

The preparation and manpower involved in successfully implementing a sweeping, one-size-fits-all policy seems to be grossly under-estimated. Rewriting the textbooks was the easy part. Actively distributing the textbooks and then subsequently monitoring the instruction of said material is another.

Not only is the policy still clouded in controversy, another weak-spot in the policy is the fact that it has no clearly stated outcome. One is hard-pressed to find how an increase in

nationalism will be quantifiable or how this policy will help boost the country's perception of its own national identity. The power of what is taught--and what is not taught--does influence the masses. Objective analysis of the policy is difficult. This seems more like an exercise in power meant to take back ground stolen by the country's liberal Left; a policy meant to cover-up lies rather than reveal forgotten truths.

Nonetheless, the policy does open a few doors. President Pak, during a meeting with the Preparatory Committee for Reunification, championed the textbooks as opportunities to standardize Korean history before the possibility of rejoining the North. Hurt-feelings aside, objectively standardizing the teaching of the peninsula's history is said to be a crucial step towards peace (Arirang 2015).

The policy also brings with it the promise of increased nationalism and self-confidence for the students of the country. Another Arirang news broadcast captured words from the mouth of President Pak Geun Hye herself:

"Students that study with incorrect and skewed history textbooks will see the Republic of Korea as a shameful country to be born in and will inevitably lose pride in their country."

Conservatives continue to call for the "proud history" of South Korea's unprecedented fast industrialization and democratization to be taught. The Right also contends that current versions of history are too uncritical of N. Korea: using the "term 'dictatorial' only twice when writing about North Korea, but as many as 28 times about South Korea." (Evans2015)

So why not leave it as is? Why make the swing all the way to government-mandated texts? There are some potential positives of the policy but it is hard to see this reactionary policy as anything but a case of hurt feelings and perceived lack of control. A top-down effort to crack-down on history textbooks that include critical views of the government is a far-cry from the streets of the democratic protests of the 1980s.

Projected Impacts & Policy Blind-Spots

In spite of original intentions to promote pride in its citizens, going as far as to nationalize textbooks historically breeds both myopic, egocentric perspectives and misfounded hostility. Like its Northern counterparts, and as with most countries, nationalism in South Korea is ingrained in children from the start. Students as young as elementary-schoolers are encouraged to harbor hatred towards Japan for the two countries' bloody past. In a way this "group-think" is a form of control. After all, it is education--or essentially brainwashing--that sustains South Korea's northern neighbor. Is this not the tip of the iceberg for the South?

And another thing: is *more nationalism* necessarily a good thing? Are these ideas not far from the same ideas that start wars? South Korean young men who are required to serve in the military as a reluctantly forced rite of passage are taught to love one's country. Does this policy already in place promote a healthy sense of nationalism? The textbook policy has become somewhat of a scandal because of mounting fears of this being the subtle tipping point to losing the hard-won democratic rights protests of the 80s.

It could even be argued that this spike in nationalism is a direct consequence of mandated English-education programs; where social-conservatives complain of an

increasing emphasis on a language other than their own as a threat to their national identity. Education in Korea is better described as an *industry* rather than a public service-profession. Could this policy lead to less competition among textbook companies and thus have an adverse effect on the market down the line?

The rise of government-run public school English programs like TALK (Teach and Learn in Korea) and EPIK (English Program in Korea), not to mention the boom of the multi-million dollar private English industry at the turn of the century may have driven the public towards opinions of patriotism and indirectly contributed to the birth of this policy as a way to take-back parts of the curriculum.

"Is history simply a tool for establishing loyalty to the nation or is it about producing critical citizens who can draw lessons?" (Evans)

Examples of the potential unintended consequences of the unchecked nationalism that this seemingly insignificant policy about books represents are readily available both in history books and in the political landscape of today. Korean students are at risk of being left in the dark. Ignorance is real; the risk of what could be described as cultural *aphasia* is very real.

Lessons Hard-Learned or Hardly-Learned?

Take Germany for example, the pages of history warn that well-intentioned policies like this are often followed by less-benevolent ones. However, all opinions aside, real objective questions remain: what accountability systems are or will be in place to monitor whether or not the new textbooks are actually being taught? Is there any wording in the

policy as to *how* this *new* information will be taught? What do Korea's current history teachers think? There is a notable lack of measurable quantifiable policy outcomes. Whether intentionally or not, a clear outcome for this new policy has yet to be articulated. Solutions and recommendations are welcomed as the world watches to wait and see if the historical cycle of policies like this in the past will repeat itself again come March.

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