Is It Possible to Revive World History Education?

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Is world history education in Japan “a sick man”?

The controversy that erupted in 2006, and the resultant media coverage, is still fresh in the public’s minds: schools were no longer including world history as a required subject. Starting with Takaoka Minami High School in the Toyama Prefecture, it came to light that a number of public and private high schools across the country were not requiring their students to take world history as a required subject. This was not limited to high school stakeholders, however: many university teachers had already consented to this a little while before. Why was it that the mass media took up this matter at such a time and subjected those involved to such heavy criticism?

Although the aforementioned question is an interesting one, I shall put it aside and instead attempt to clarify the reasons why world history is unpopular among high school students. Incidentally, the number of students who selected world history in the 2013 academic year from among the geography and history subjects for the national university entrance examinations was a slightly over 90,000 students, deeming it the least chosen subject followed by geography and Japanese history, which were chosen by approximately 135,000 and 160,000 students respectively, a trend that has remained constant for many years. A number of reasons have been cited for its unpopularity, but perhaps it is a mixture of systemic factors (the university entrance exam, education curriculums, textbooks, etc.) and mental factors (many things to remember, lack of familiarity to the people and place of foreign).

During the Central Council for Education that convened with the goal of revising the Guidelines for the Course of Study (March 2009), a fierce argument developed over whether geography and history should be compulsory subjects. In particular, those involved in geography education united and
appealed to other council members to recognize the importance of geography. In parallel, those involved in Japanese history education criticized the fact that world history was a required subject. This coincided with recent arguments made by local assemblies and their conservative heads, who mobilized to suggest revisions to the Fundamental Law of Education.

At that time, I was a Senior Specialist for Curriculum responsible for world history. Although I attended many meetings, I did not want to act as a lobbyist for world history. Of course, even if I wanted to my position did not give me the authority to do so. However, supposing that a council member requested my opinion, I was not inclined to argue in defense of world history. Rather, if asked, I might have answered that world history in its current form would be better as an elective. If one’s opinion is based solely on current elementary, junior, and high school social studies curriculums, then there is certainly a rational argument to include world history among other required high school level geography and history subjects. This is because there is an extremely limited amount of content concerning world history or world geography included within elementary and junior high school curriculums, which is inappropriate in an age of globalization.

Moreover, high school geography places greater emphasis on geographic skills than topographic education; this could cause individuals to think that such content is unworthy of one and only required subject in geography and history. The Central Council for Education had insufficient time to debate this issue, and subsequently settled upon the existing geography and history curriculum and requirements.

One might ask why I do not support world history as a required subject; the reason is that its teachers feel no sense of crisis about the current situation. For example, it would be preferable for world history classes to be based on the rapid informatization of Japanese society, or investigative learning and the expansion of experiential activities taking place in elementary and junior high schools. However, the current reality is that these approaches have been rejected. Let us examine the key results extracted from a questionnaire administered by the National Institute for Educational Policy Research. It was administered during the 2005 fiscal year to teachers in charge of World History B (benchmark; 4 credits) regarding educational policy and conditions.

| Classes that use computers | 3% |
| Classes that use school libraries | 5% |
| Classes that build problem-solving skills | 13% |
| Classes incorporating observation, surveys, educational visits, and experience | 4% |
Classes incorporating activities to announce results of research 5%
Classes incorporating progressive difficulty 26%

This is the reality, and perhaps even today most classes continue to be lecture-oriented, in which teachers use fill-in-the-blank handouts that summarize textbook chapters, and tests to determine whether students can memorize sets of words. In these conditions, one might assume that those responsible might feel culpable or remorseful that world history has the lowest number of applicants each year the national entrance exams are administered. The prevailing attitude among world history teachers is that they are not responsible for the subject’s unpopularity. Most simply believe that, since students take Japanese history classes in elementary and junior high school, they choose a subject that they are familiar upon entering high school; and if world geography were taught in junior high schools, students would not distance themselves from it upon entering high school. Each year I have the opportunity to speak with world history teachers at various functions, and I have heard these sentiments repeated on numerous occasions. If one cannot admit that many teachers are oblivious to this crisis then they are in denial, and this is precisely the reason I believe that world history should be omitted as a required subject.

Even the Ottoman Empire, which shook Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by twice laying siege to Vienna, saw its fortunes reversed; by the second half of the nineteenth century, it had declined to such an extent that it was ridiculed with “a sick man of Europe”, and had itself become the target of encroachment by foreign powers. Putting aside whether world history shook Japanese history and geography similarly after becoming a required subject, the subject does seem to be at least on the verge of death. The Ottoman Empire, allied with Germany in World War I, was defeated and forced to dismantle afterward. Is the future of world history doomed to the same fate? If the current situation continues, it will likely be omitted as a required subject in next revision to the Guidelines for the Course of Study. If handled unskillfully it may cease to exist all together, and be merged with the study of geography and Japanese history. This is due to the defined objectives of World History B which are 1) to consider the diversity and multiplicity of culture and characteristics of the modern world, and 2) to promote historical thinking. Both goals can be sufficiently addressed by geography and Japanese history respectively.

Regardless of the outcome, there are four possible paths that world history can take. The first entails maintaining its current state, and it can
be argued that this path will lead to its demise. The second is to create a comprehensive history curriculum by integrating it with Japanese history, while the third option is to integrate it with geography, creating a subject that encompasses the modern world and its cultures. If either of these paths are taken world history is destined to be absorbed into other subjects, and like East Germany, disappear. The fourth option entails drastic steps toward qualitative improvement, and requires those involved being aware that world history is in a state of crisis. This paper proposes the concept of “world history literacy” as a fourth path, and examines possible approaches to reviving the subject.

A prescription for reviving world history literacy

What is literacy?

Literacy was originally defined as the ability to read and write, although in recent years it has been applied in three different contexts. The first is the concept of common sense and education, which emerged with the rise of literacy theory in the United States during the 1980s. This theory criticized scientism and humanism’s influence upon education up until the 1970s, and following E.D. Hirsch Jr.’s Back to Basics movement, popularized in his book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1987). In it, Hirsch asserts that the education Americans should have received, which includes knowledge of men such as Washington and Lincoln, had been lost. In that respect, the book’s Japanese title, *Education Makes the Country: Rebuilding Education Theory in the United States* (trans. by Yasuo Nakamura) is very fitting. The controversy over declining academic abilities developed 10 years later in Japan, marking the so called “yutori (means more relaxed) education” movement's demise.

There are various problems with this theory of literacy, however. To begin with, whom and on what grounds can it be declared that all Americans or Japanese should receive a common education? Moreover, can education be discussed as a theory of knowledge separate from a theory of learning? There are also a number of problems with the notion that rote memorization of names, places, people, and ages should occupy a central role in education.

In Japan’s case, the second major development in literacy theory occurred during the mid-1990s, and has prospered to the present day. This theory emphasizes the importance of reading comprehension and operational skills, ideas that are generally expressed through the emergence of ideas such as media and computer literacy (related terms include information and Internet literacy). In other words, in an age where multi-media and computers have spread across society, students require an education that enables them to
critically read, understand, and master them.

Subsequently, the academic abilities of Japanese students according to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) who administered the OECD, a survey of students’ problem-solving abilities, reading-comprehension, and mathematical and scientific literacies, was heavily publicized. As a result, literacy became the focus of public attention, not only with regard to students’ skills but also concerning a multifaceted concept of academic ability that encompassed both skills and knowledge. From this, we can ascertain the third theory of literacy: historical literacy.

The PISA’s literacy theory stresses that students should not only maintain knowledge and skills, but also utilize them in concrete situations. Consequently, the 2008 and 2009 revisions of the Guidelines for the Course of Study promote language activities that prompt students to use their knowledge and skills. It is within the context of this theory that the author intends to apply the concept of world history literacy.

**Why world history literacy?**

Why might focusing on the concept of literacy lead to a revival of world history? Let us start by discussing what this would signify. First, it would force a change of perception among teachers of world history. If the teacher’s job were not only to teach students world history, but also to educate them to be world-history literate, then they would have no choice but to reflect this in classes that have become routinized, and in their evaluations of these classes. If world history were a required subject among geography and history subjects, it is debatable whether such a bold change of perception would be required of them.

Second, if students were taught knowledge of world history and skills that are applicable to their actual lives, they would easily find a reason to take such classes; this also applies to average students who do not need world history to pass their entrance examinations. To accomplish this, the course content would not only be composed of a historic overview, but also themes related to various modern-day problems. In particular, this would entail a critical reading and understanding of the kind of world history that students will encounter outside of school, not just examples from ancient Oriental history or European history of the Middle Ages. Instead, this content would mainly consist of meta-historical problems, such as the different perceptions of history held between Japan and China, Japan’s colonial rule of Korea, the Asia-Pacific War, and also different historical perceptions between Japan and the United States concerning the dropping of the atomic bomb. Additionally,
content would address modern issues such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Tibetan independence. Of course, the topics targeted for study would not only entail these sorts of difficult issues, but also aspects of world history that appeal to students’ daily lives, such as the cultivation of sugar, salt, coffee, and tea-in addition to the study of other regions that are familiar to them.

Third, if students’ knowledge and ability to think critically were developed in an integrated manner, there would inevitably be a shift away from teacher to student-centered classes. With the advance of informatization and spread of various types of hands-on facilities, it is no longer sufficient to continue using the classroom as a space solely for teacher-conducted question and answer type classes. Even if workshop-type classes are not immediately possible, and assuming that teachers of world history are sufficiently motivated, it should not be difficult for them to conduct classes in which students research a theme and present it, or discuss their reading and understanding of primary sources.

If the aforementioned type of class becomes mainstream, education can move beyond a mere theory of literacy to achieve and develop the key competencies addressed by the OECD. Furthermore, if the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) is serious about its goal of imparting students with “a zest for living,” then it should also advocate this position. Of course, key competencies and a zest for living are goals that students should aim for throughout their education, both in school and out. It also goes without saying that they should develop the respective literacies corresponding to each course of study and subject.

Even if we focus solely on world history literacy, however, the critical state of world history education will not instantly recover. For this to occur a number of problems should be solved, while other issues should be deferred. For example, it is first necessary to reexamine the methods of evaluation implemented by the national university entrance examination. Alternatively, it may be necessary to reconsider the university entrance system itself.

Second, there is a need to review the methods used to train geography, history, and world history teachers. For example, the system used to issue teaching licenses for specialized education subjects should not only allocate credits for courses that provide a general overview of foreign history, but also address methods of researching history and theory (the philosophy of history).

Lastly, materials must be developed for teacher training courses that are better suited to world-history content, and the number of credits that prospective teachers must obtain related to classroom research should also be increased. Of course, if we say that world-history education cannot be revived
unless these conditions are resolved, then the profession of teaching world history will not be established. Reform of world-history education is required that will boost teachers’ low opinion of their profession and themselves as teachers of world history.

Methods of developing world history literacy

Ways of composing content

How should subject content be composed that contributes to the cultivation of world history literacy among students? The first major prerequisite, as previously mentioned, is the abandonment of compositions that merely provide an overview of history, and the creation of compositions comprising primary issues or historical themes. The next step is to select a viewpoint or approach to address these primary issues and compose content from. Let us consider three methodological approaches to accomplish this.

The first approach is from the present viewpoint. The traditional world history starts with the birth and evolution of the human race, and arrives at the ancient Oriental, Greek, and Roman civilizations. In other words, this is only a perspective of nineteenth century European historians, does not deserve the learning of Japanese high school students of today. Rather, a composition reflective of the modern world is necessary, that retroactively (post facto) and historically identifies problems such the economic divide between the North and South, and reoccurring ethnic conflicts in various regions. These are issues that seem more likely to expose students to the experience and meaning of learning.

On the other hand, if composing content that retroactively accounts for world history collectively is too difficult, then it may be possible to devise a unit-based composition in which the past is linked to the present for each region of the world. This could be derived from conventional content compositions of (pre-modern) world history. Let us consider a composition that takes the history of the world into account based on regional units, while simultaneously considering present day problems. For example, when teaching South Asian history, current compositions tend to trace a line from the Indus Valley civilization, to the Aryan invasion, to the rise and fall of city states, to new religions, and then to the Maurya and Kushan dynasties. An alternative composition would focus on the caste system that remains in place in present day India, and examine its origins and existence in various contexts, such as during the establishment of Buddhism, the spread of Islam, and British colonial rule.

The second approach is from a Japanese (home country) viewpoint.
To begin with, there cannot be an objective image of world history that will satisfy everyone. This is because it is impossible to describe history without choosing a position to base one’s viewpoint on. If we accept this to be the case, then it is entirely natural that Japanese high schools teach world history from a Japanese point of view.

This is easier said than done, however, since deciding on a specific composition of content is a difficult process. Senroku Uehara, who published textbooks beginning with East Asian civilizations, and fought hard for an independent view of world history during the formation of its curriculum in Japan, proposed the following:

> What we chiefly intended was the creation of an image of the life and historical awareness of we, the Japanese people. How did the various civilizations in the world contribute to the growth of the Japanese civilization? Additionally, how were the various historical problems that presently confront Japan determined by trends in these various civilizations? Those points were independently pursued as special and concrete. (Senroku Uehara, ed. *World history of the Japanese people.* Iwanami Shoten, 1960, p iv)

Regrettfully, Uehara’s methods were not directly reflected in the Guidelines for the Course of Study, although approximately 30 years later World History A (benchmark; 2 credits) was introduced as a new subject within geography and history and its approach merits attention.

World History A addressed two aspects of pre-modern history: 1) the historical characteristics of various civilizations, and 2) the contact and exchanges between them. The content of the former was intended to structurally and historically ascertain the characteristics of various East Asian, South Asian, West Asian, and European civilizations regarding climate, language, people, and religion. This can be considered the first attempt to liberate world history from the history of “ages.”

The latter aspect attempted to understand contact and exchanges between civilizations parallel to their existences, and was a composition of world history that utilized a Japanese viewpoint. For example, it dealt with the second, eighth, thirteenth, sixteenth, and eighteenth centuries. Each of these five centuries, (long centuries that also included the former and latter centuries) were time periods when Japan was deeply involved in the world; specifically, the time of the Kinin (gold seal) in the second century, the Japanese envoy to the Tang Dynasty in China in the eighth century, the Mongol invasion of
the thirteenth century, the arrival of the gun and Christianity in the sixteenth century, and the closed-country policy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These were used as the basis of elementary and junior high school study items and the composition of this approach to world history. In two subsequent revisions, the composition of the course was changed; the present challenge is to rejuvenate the concepts expressed by these two items.

The third approach is from the perspective of one's self, and can alternatively be described as an approach that considers the classroom and the regions its students are familiar with. Rather than being limited to the frameworks and borders of Japan, it might be better to ascertain world history from the viewpoint of the learner him or herself. In this approach focus is placed on the classroom (class), the school, and regions familiar to the students. For example, if there are Brazilians and Peruvians in the class, the lesson starts from the history and culture of Latin American countries, such as Brazil and Peru, and their historical interchanges with Japan. At the same time the economic and social backgrounds that resulted in these students coming to Japan, and how these countries should deal with each other in the future is considered.

Also, clues such as regional ruins and relics, legends, and traditional performing arts can be used as aspects, which can be thought a method to bring closer the joining of Japanese history with world history. In the case of pre-modern history, the content could be centered on events involving modern relations between Japan with Korea and China. It might also be possible to find teaching materials that deal with relations on a more global level. Currently, volunteer world history teachers across the country have formed a movement to seek out information on world history from their own regional perspective, which can then be turned into teaching materials. While this movement is currently limited to just a few teachers, its spread in terms of the composition of content may open a path for students to become world history literate.

**Methods of educational guidance and evaluation**

So what methods of educational guidance and evaluation are effective in cultivating world history literacy among students? First, rather than teaching about individual historical events, a way of thinking about perceptions of history (interpretation = theoretical hypothesis) should be taught. This means that students should search for answers independently. In other words, educational content such as the achievement of targets are not set so the students come to understand individual events and people, but so they become able to interpret and develop the skills necessary to do so.
For example, when dealing with the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain, teachers have conventionally aimed for students to understand its background, development, effects, and so on by teaching them in chronological order. However, while students might come to understand the development and transformation of British industry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through this approach, it seems unlikely that will be able to consider perceptions about the Industrial Revolution itself, or acquire the skills to interpret and explain its historical significance.

Second, the search for a way of thinking about perceptions of history should be composed primarily of questions that ask “Why?” throughout the class, and used to interpret historical materials. In the case of history classes, however, these questions are rarely asked. Instead, questions of “How?” are asked since they reflect the nature of history when it is presented using chronological logic, which fails to cultivate the skill of interpreting history. For example, consider the question, “How did the British Industrial Revolution develop?” Even if we trace the trends in British industry as described above, this question will not push students to provide an interpretation or explanation of it. On the other hand, questions such as “Why did the Industrial Revolution occur in Britain, not in France?” “Why did it start with the cotton industry?” and “Why was Manchester its birthplace?” require students to speculate on causes and reasons, and exhibit a certain degree of interpretation and explanation. By searching for answers to questions that ask “why?” students will for the first time cultivate world history literacy among themselves.

Thirdly, teaching materials that ask students to search for answers to “Why?” questions should require the interpretation of historical materials to the greatest extent possible, regardless of whether the materials are primary or secondary. The current trend in Japanese textbooks is toward large sizes of format and the use of many colors and visual elements. Unfortunately, these trends have resulted in a decreased amount of space for text descriptions, and a dramatic increase in the space allocated to reprinting historical materials.

Ultimately, comprehending the text remains to be the main objective for students and teachers who utilize textbooks, and historical materials play nothing more than a supporting role. Therefore, it is possible that these historical materials are used ineffectively or even misunderstood. While textbooks that fail to include textual descriptions utilizing historical materials are to some extent problematic, blame also lies with teachers, of which only a small number teach history classes centered on students’ interpretation of historical materials before the textbook’s.

Putting aside the issue of who is responsible for cultivating a student-
based world history literacy, we must place greater focus on the reading comprehension of historical materials, and the role of teaching materials in doing so. For example, in history teacher training courses held at various locations, such as at education centers in a number of prefectures, a popular painting of the Boston Tea Party is used as historical material to communicate trends in the colonies on the eve of the American Revolution. Afterwards, in-service teachers are asked the following questions to test their reading and understanding of the picture:

1. What does this picture show?
2. Why are the Native Americans boarding and destroying the ships?
3. Why is it called a “tea party?”

Very few teachers are able to accurately read and understand this painting after viewing it. In the second question, for example, the majority answer that they are colonists disguised as native Americans, rebelling against the Tea Act imposed by the British colonial rulers, and that they are attacking the East India Company’s ships and throwing their boxes of tea into the harbor. This event was not occurred in secret however, and anyone who saw the protagonists would have instantly known that they were not Native Americans. As there were many supporters of British colonial rule in the American colonies at that time, an investigation would have quickly revealed who was actually responsible; nobody consider that the protagonists disguised themselves in order to hide their true identities.

Since teachers of world history may not have been trained to assiduously read and understand historical materials, this sort of misunderstanding occurs. In fact, the colonists’ actions are not considered anything more than an example of *charivari*, a French word denoting the noisy uproar of a community in response to a violation of standards. If we look at other incidents from the same time period from this perspective, we find paintings showing similar manifestations of anger against the Stamp Act, and we come to understand that this phenomenon occurred widely in Great Britain and other European countries from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. Solely relying on textual descriptions, however, would probably not result in the acquisition of this sort of world history literacy.

Fourth, to successfully guide students of a history class to a comprehension of historical materials, the teacher must not simply give them the correct answers to questions, but urge them to freely interpret them. Additionally, correct evaluations (in other words, the integration of instruction
and evaluation) are vital. If the instruction deviates from the evaluation, it will be difficult for the teacher to encourage students to participate independently in the class. As a method of integrating instruction with evaluation, instead of a conventional method, such as the teacher having students fill in the blanks on a handout, I recommend using worksheets in which the students can freely describe their own interpretations. Worksheets have a number of benefits, one of which is that they prompt students to write. Through writing, it becomes easier for them to arrange their ideas and explain them to others.

It is also important that students do not only interpret history individually, but also in groups and with the entire class. Through discussions, students come to realize that there are multiple interpretations of an issue, and they will consequently reflect on and closely examine their own. To effectively promote these discussions, the topic should not be discussed immediately; rather, the teacher should first have students write their interpretations on the worksheets. This prevents students who are proficient and confident speakers from dominating the discussion.

A second benefit is that worksheets can be kept in a portfolio, which makes it possible to trace the growth and changes of each individual student’s interpretations. If the prospect of having team teaching in a world history class is minimal, then it will be virtually impossible for a single teacher to evaluate a large number of students while checking each of their comments. However, if the teacher utilizes worksheets, in addition to evaluating students' thinkings, judgments, and expressions and skills to use materials, aspects exist that can be assessed from different perspectives. Furthermore, their “interests, motivations, and attitudes” can also be fairly evaluated with a reasonably high level of accuracy.

Above all, teachers should try to use their free time wisely and give themselves sufficient time to evaluate. Of course, it is assumed that teachers will not only use students’ worksheets to evaluate their world history literacy, but also their performance by having them write short essays and give presentations. Moreover, we cannot yet disregard conventional written tests in regular examinations. Therefore, it is also important for teachers to develop written-test problems that require students to utilize the knowledge that they learned in class, and that will test their powers of thinking, judgment, and expression.

Conclusion

In this paper, I identified a key concept that could lead to the revival of world history education in the form of “world history literacy,” and provided
a specific prescription for its implementation. Ultimately, this is nothing more than my personal conception. However, if teachers of world history are to perceive their own jobs as a profession, they should not preoccupy themselves with the tepid status derived from the name, “required subject.” The problems mentioned at the start of the paper regarding dissatisfaction with elementary and junior high school social studies subjects, and teachers’ passing of responsibility, have become a rod for the world history teachers own backs. If high school students do not know world place names, then when necessary they should be taught to them. At the junior high school level, however, it is not the case that the students are going to remember them all.

In short, the teacher can only instruct in a manner that reflects their students’ realities. Additionally, they should not complain that students choose to continue studying Japanese history in high school, since they studied it in elementary and junior high school. There must be students who want to learn more about the wider world because of what they learned about Japanese history in elementary and junior high school; teachers should take the blame for their own inability to make a “sale” to these “customers.”

Education is described as being a farsighted policy, so is it unreasonable to assert that teachers who frantically prepare their students for the university entrance exam are being too shortsighted? Of course, if we consider the results-driven social climate of recent years, and the existence of school administrators who are excessively sensitive to external evaluations, then we can easily imagine the sense of powerlessness felt by individual teachers. However, even supposing that they remain absolutely committed to supporting their students in preparation for the university entrance exams, there is no reason they cannot also drastically change their perceptions assuming a sincere effort is made to do so. If they teach their classes using the method I suggested, I believe that their students’ scores on the university entrance exam would surely improve. Moreover, interest in world history will increase even among students who did not choose it for the entrance exam, and as the name suggests, they will acquire a literacy that will be of use to them when they venture out into the world.

What is important is that teachers of world history develop courage; that is, the courage to take off an old but comfortable jacket and try on a new one. I think that this is where the revival of world history education should start, and in this paper I have tried to provide a design for this new jacket.
References

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