

# history and myth in times of war: elementary school history textbooks in imperial Japan

Toshiko Ito

Education in times of war has to contribute to the engagement with military conflict. Historical description in history textbooks of Imperial Japan did so effectively by fostering readiness for mobilization and self-sacrifice. This article focuses on the interplay between historical description and myth, and discusses the possibility of making historical description into a tool of resistance against tendentious historical description predicated on the provision of rationales for war.

Keywords: historical description, history textbook, identity, Imperial Japan, myth

## 1 Introduction

Historical description conjoined with mythically charged narrative can provide a sense of national cohesion under a shared identity; it can also justify military conflict. Thus, historical description is often exploited to manipulate people into supporting wars.

Drawing on Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory, this study examines the mythically charged historical description provided in the elementary school history textbooks of wartime Imperial Japan. Assmann defines cultural memory as "remembered history" (1992, p. 52), which creates collective identity, mediated institutionally through commemorations and observances. Cultural memory emphasizes remembered history rather than factual history. Treating myth as a form of remembered history, Assmann regards the relationship between myth and history as interpenetrative, with history being transformed into myth through remembering. The transformation into myth provides history with a heightened sense of reality, charging it with "persistent normative and formative energy" (1992, p. 52). Thus, myth takes on the appearance of foundation history as well, which affects our view of the past from the present.

This article discusses the relevance of myth in Imperial Japan and examines the mythical transfiguration of historical description in the elementary school history textbooks of Imperial Japan in times of war. It also evaluates historical description conjoined with myth, especially as it sought to intensify pupils' conviction of their mission as imperial subjects, including their readiness for self-sacrifice and leadership in conquered territories during wartime. Consequently, it contemplates the use of historical description conjoined with myth to make education retain the potential to keep a critical distance from tendentious historical description predicated on the provision of rationales for war.

## 2 Imperial Japan and its form of governance grounded in myth

In the period between 1639 and 1853, Japan enjoyed a long spell of peace due to its chosen policy of isolation from the world at large. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, Japan plunged into a series of wars owing to its newly adopted policy of expansionism, which the country espoused as part of its rapid modernization modeled on the West. These wars continued intermittently for more than half a century, beginning with the outbreak of the First Sino-Japanese War (1894) and coming to an end only with defeat in World War II (1945).

When shedding its isolationism and redefining itself as a nation state, Japan modeled itself on the West. This period, known as the Meiji Restoration, was ushered in with the “reintroduction” of imperial rule in 1868, ending the shogunate’s long military rule. The imperial monarchy, allegedly Japan’s traditional form of governance, was in fact based on an “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 2). To ensure people’s support of imperial monarchy as Japan’s traditional form of governance, the government concocted a remembered history from myth, appropriating Japan’s oldest chronicles, “Record on Ancient Matters” (712) and “The Chronicles of Japan” (720). These two medieval texts depict the Japanese archipelago as the creation of the deities. According to this myth, upon completion of the Japanese archipelago, the sun goddess Amaterasu sent her grandson, the harvest god Ninigi, to earth with this divine injunction:

This Reed-plain-1500-autumns-fair-rice-ear Land [i.e. the Japanese archipelago] is the region which my descendants shall be lords of. Do thou, my August Grandchild, proceed thither and govern it. Go! and may prosperity attend thy dynasty, and may it, like Heaven and Earth, endure forever (Aston, 2011, p. 77).

Observing Amaterasu’s injunction, Ninigi reigned over Japan. His great-grandson acceded to the throne as the emperor Jimmu, and an unbroken imperial lineage ensued that has governed Japan ever since. Accordingly, emperors are divinities in human form, and thanks to the imperial dynasty, Japan is to prosper in perpetuity. This foundation myth was officially taught in history classes so as to hasten the rapid acceptance and popularization of the imperial monarchy.

While modernizing itself in the peacetime of the 1870s and the 1880s, Imperial Japan forged this remembered history to legitimize the emperor’s reign at the helm of a unique polity so that its subjects would be united in pride, sharing a sense of togetherness under a state-prescribed identity. The Ministry of Education used history textbooks as its preferred medium to promulgate this myth, so as to increase the readiness with which pupils adopted their assigned identity as imperial subjects. In wartime, starting in the 1890s, myth began to be exploited among pupils to strengthen their readiness for self-sacrifice and leadership in conquered territories. Military conflicts and Japan’s changing position in wartime intensified the use of myth in history textbooks.

### 3 History textbooks compiled by Imperial Japan’s Ministry of Education

The government’s view of history is evident in the use of myth throughout Imperial Japan’s elementary school history textbooks, especially those compiled by the Ministry of Education. There were three periods in textbooks according to the three screening systems that were in force consecutively: the liberal period (1872–1880) sought to found a modern nation state by emulating the Western system without a textbook screening system; the reactionary period (1881–1902) sought to suppress the Western influence, using a textbook screening system designed to strengthen

national awareness; the expansionist period (1903–1945) sought to compete with the West by means of a standardized textbook system designed to stoke nationalistic fervor.

### *3.1 History textbooks compiled by the Ministry of Education in the Liberal Period of the 1870s*

Imperial Japan came into being in 1868. In its first decade, its highest priority was to emerge from the backwardness caused by the country's long spell of isolation. To this end, Japan adopted a liberal educational policy designed to ensure quick modernization, modelling itself on the West. The Education Ordinance of 1879 relaxed the centralization of educational policy and left the implementation of educational guidelines to local discretion.

In the early 1870s, the Ministry of Education compiled two textbooks in Japanese history, which were intended for general information without being binding. The first of these, "Japanese Empire" (1872), opens with an account of the mythological age which features the divine injunction condensed to a single sentence, followed by the chronological presentation of 122 successive emperors. The second textbook, "An Epitome of Japanese History" (1875), opens with an account of the first emperor Jimmu, accompanied by a brief mention of Amaterasu as his ancestor. The divine injunction is noted in passing. The discussion of the successive emperors treats not only their great achievements, but also their shortcomings. Consequently, the second textbook places less weight on myth and fawning presentation of emperors than does the first one. These changes can be attributed to the view held at the Ministry of Education that history textbooks were to emulate the Western model.

### *3.2 History textbooks compiled by individual textbook publishers in the Reactionary Period of the 1880s and the Nationalistic Period of the 1890s*

Having compiled two textbooks in Japanese history for elementary school use in the early 1870s, the Ministry of Education refrained from compiling any further such textbooks in the following three decades, entrusting private-sector publishers with the task instead.

In the 1880s, the government began to fear that the country's rapid westernization was not conducive to the consolidation of the imperial monarchy. Above all, a surge of support for the Liberty and Civil Rights Movement was seen as a threat to imperial monarchy as Japan's allegedly traditional form of governance. As a consequence, the Ministry of Education became increasingly reactionary in its outlook. In the 1880s, it revised the Education Ordinance to strengthen the control of central government and made morality the leading curricular subject, turning away from Western codifications of ethics in favor of teaching traditional Confucian virtues. The Guidelines for the Course of Study for Elementary Schools asserted in 1881 that the subject of history was required to nourish the spirit of devotion toward the emperor and the love of the country. Consequently, the subject of world history was excluded from the elementary school curriculum, while the core subject matter of Japanese history became strictly prescribed. Under the Guidelines of 1881, Japanese history textbooks were to begin with a chapter on the foundation myth, and to contain narratives on only the successive emperors' merits, omitting any mention of their shortcomings. The Guidelines thereby caused Japanese history textbooks to depreciate factual history and give prominence to emperors' legends. The two textbooks compiled by the Ministry of Education in the 1870s went out of print, as their contents did not comply with the Guidelines of 1881. Shortly after the announcement of the Guidelines, still in 1881, the Ministry of Education introduced a registration system for textbooks, which required governors to register the books used in schools.

The registration system was replaced by an accreditation system in 1883, which prohibited books from being used in schools unless they were approved by the Ministry. Finally, the accreditation system was replaced by an authorization system in 1886, which permitted only textbooks authorized by the Ministry of Education for use in schools. On February 11, 1889, the anniversary of Japan's mythical National Foundation Day of 660 BC, the Constitution of Imperial Japan was adopted. This legal document enshrined the notion that the divine injunction was an established historical fact. Consequently, sovereignty was eternally invested in the emperor, and imperial subjects were bound to support the emperor's rule as divinely ordained. In accordance with the Constitution, educational policy was legally codified by the Imperial Rescript on Education of 1890. The Rescript mandated Confucian morals, above all loyalty and filial piety, forcing Japan's imperial subjects to self-sacrifice when it came to supporting the emperor in times of war.

In the 1890s, Japan entered wartime as a result of its expansionist foreign policy. The Outline of the Course of Study for Elementary Schools (1891) mandated that the textbook publishers were to bring textbook contents into line with the Rescript contents. The Outline declared both the foundation myth and the divine injunction as indispensable for Japanese history textbooks, requiring Japanese history textbooks to begin with the foundation myth, continue to the imperial dynasty, and foreground the everlasting nature of the imperial lineage, emphasizing the divine injunction. These requirements considerably strengthened the myth-oriented tendency.

### *3.3 History textbooks compiled by the Ministry of Education in the Ultra-Nationalistic Period between 1903 and 1945*

Around 1900, the Imperial Rescript on Education was energetically promoted through school ceremonies. At every important school event, principals were obliged to read the Rescript respectfully and to give an admonitory speech based on its contents. Pupils were asked to memorize the text of the Rescript. Meanwhile, the textbook screening system engendered a sometimes too close relationship between officials and publishers. In 1902, a bribery case involving officials and publishers occasioned the Ministry of Education to introduce a state-compiled textbook system, which led to a standardized history textbook compiled by the Ministry of Education in 1903. During the period of a state-compiled textbook system (1903-1945), Japanese history textbooks were revised five separate times, often reflecting the changing war situation, which led to six distinct phases in state-compiled textbooks.

The textbook of the first phase, "Japanese History for Elementary Schools" (1903), and the textbook of the second phase, "Japanese History for Ordinary Elementary Schools" (1909), both devote their first chapter to an account of the deities and Ninigi's descent to earth in observance of Amaterasu's injunction. However, they present the injunction only partially: in the first phase, the first two sentences are omitted, while in the second phase the eulogistic name for Japan is omitted. The chapter on the deities is followed by chapters on the successive emperors, each presenting the respective ruler's biography. Both textbooks also provide the list of 122 emperors – from Jimmu Emperor (enthroned in 711 BC) to the Meiji Emperor (enthroned in 1867) – at the back of the book, the first 25 emperors being figures of the mythological age. The textbook of the second phase was compiled after Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War, which had conferred on the country its new status of a great power. Accordingly, the textbook of the second phase emphasizes the country's responsibility as a great power, reinforcing the nation's glorification.

The textbook of the third phase, "National History for Ordinary Elementary Schools" (1920), and

the textbook of the fourth phase, “National History for Ordinary Elementary Schools” (1934), equally devote their first chapter to an account of the deities, following the pattern established by the previous two books, but enlarging it to some extent. Both textbooks relate the descent of Amaterasu’s grandson Ninigi to earth, but also include episodes about Amaterasu’s brother Susanoo and Susanoo’s descendant Okuninushi. Both books treat the divine injunction in a vein similar to the textbook of the second phase. However, the textbook of the fourth phase presents the divine injunction in a colloquial style, while the textbook of the third phase presents it, like its predecessor in the second phase, in an elevated literary style. This change may be attributable to the influence of the New Education Movement in Japan, which pursued child-centeredness as one of its core tenets.

The textbooks of the third and the fourth phase have two notable changes in common. Firstly, the place of the list of emperors is moved from the back of the book to the opening page. Secondly, the book title is altered from “Japanese history” to “national history”. These changes reflect the rise of a political desire to create a sense of cohesion under state-prescribed identity in two wars: WWI (1914–1918) and the invasion of Manchuria (1931). In the meantime, the tendency to treat the foundation myth as historical fact was further strengthened by the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), which triggered a national mobilization in 1937.

The textbook of the fifth phase, “National History for Elementary Schools” (1940), devotes its first chapter to the account of the deities, like the previous four textbooks, but on a grander scale. It relates not only the episodes involving four of the previously mentioned deities, but adds episodes involving two additional deities, Izanagi and Izanami, the progenitors of Amaterasu. It quotes the full text of the divine injunction as an epigraph on the textbook’s title page and in its first chapter as well.

In 1941, shortly before the outbreak of the Pacific War, Japan’s elementary schools were replaced by national schools, which used a curriculum streamlined toward the aim of forming imperial subjects in wartime, fostering an awareness of the nation’s imperial mission. The aim of the textbook of the sixth phase, “National History for Elementary Stage” (1943), was adoption by the new school type and therefore sought to help assist in the mental and physical formation of martially-minded imperial subjects under conditions of all-out war. The textbook devotes its first chapter to an account of the deities, like the previous five textbooks, but enlarged to the full. It relates the episodes involving eight deities, adding another two deities, Ninigi’s son Hoori and his grandson Ugayafukiaezu. Just like the textbook of the fifth phase, the book also quotes the full text of the divine injunction as an epigraph on the textbook’s title page and in its first chapter. Throughout, the narrative employs emotional and flowery language designed to appeal to the pupils’ feeling. Pupils were to understand that they had to contribute toward their nation’s grand project of establishing the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

#### 4 Changes to historical description due to war situation

The above reading of the six standardized textbooks establishes the circumstance in which historical description increased its reliance on myth as the country was descending ever more deeply into its wars. The increased prominence of the divine injunction in historical description during wartime is emblematic for this development.

Increasing reliance on myth is also evident in the changing explanations given by the textbooks for military victories of the past. The textbooks of the first and the second phase attribute Japan’s

success at repelling the Mongols' invasions of 1274 and 1281 to "strong wind", and Japan's victory in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895 to the skill of its armed forces. The Russo-Japanese War, however, brought a turning point in the explanation given for past victories. In the textbook of the third phase, Japan's victory in the First Sino-Japanese War is attributed, contrary to the previous textbooks, to the emperor's grace: accordingly, Japan owed its resounding victory to the emperor's providential "training the soldiers at the cramped and cold Imperial headquarters in Hiroshima", while 'sharing the soldiers' joys and sorrows" (p. 124), which united the soldiers' hearts for the purpose of victory. Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War is now attributed unambiguously to the emperor's glorious virtues, including "his prayer for victory at Ise Grand Shrine" (p. 136), a sacred site dedicated to the worship of Amaterasu. According to the textbook of the third phase, the spread of education raised the whole nation's patriotism and loyalty to the emperor to even greater heights. The victory in WWI as an ally of the Entente Powers is attributed to "imperial virtues and the imperial subjects' loyalty" (p. 153) as well. The textbook of the fourth phase attributes Japan's victory over the invading Mongols to "divine wind" (p. 118) for the first time. Japan's victory in the First Sino-Japanese War, the Russo-Japanese War, and WWI is attributed to the emperor's grace, the emperor's glorious virtues, and the imperial subjects' unfailing loyalty to the emperor. The textbooks of the fifth and the sixth phase keep the explanations given for victory in these four wars unchanged.

A stark contrast is found in the standardized textbooks during the period of the American-led occupation in the aftermath of WWII. After Japan's defeat, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, General Douglas MacArthur, required occupied Japan to suspend curricular courses in morals, Japanese history and geography at the end of 1945, citing concerns that these courses might continue to contribute to the indoctrination of pupils with militaristic and ultra-nationalistic ideologies. In the standardized textbook titled "The Course of our Country" (1946), compiled by the Ministry of Education, the opening chapter, named "The dawn of Japan", has the Stone Age as its subject matter. Myth, including the divine injunction, disappears completely. The account given of the first emperor Jimmu is accompanied by the phrase "according to legend" (p. 3), thereby clearly marking the passage as a deviation from factual history. The usage of the term "resounding victory" – even of the term "victory" – disappears completely. As a result, the impassioned explanations for military victories disappear as well. Historical description becomes devoted to the dispassionate description of war situations and the terms of the treaties negotiated after the wars.

## 5 Japanese history textbooks in times of war and times of peace

Imperial Japan was embroiled in a nearly continuous state of war, especially from 1894 to 1945. To meet the political exigence of the times, education had to make its contributions to the war effort. As the reliance on myth in Imperial Japan's history textbooks shifted in accordance with the country's changing position in the world as a result of the wars, myth was initially exploited to create a sense of national cohesion for the population around the state-prescribed identity as its imperial subjects. In line with the country's increasing belligerence under its expansionist policy, myth was increasingly exploited to create readiness for mobilization, including self-sacrifice.

Imperial Japan's intensified use of myth in history textbooks during wartime follows a logic of necessity in Jan Assmann's concept of history and myth, as history needs to be transformed into myth if it is tasked with generating and sustaining a collective identity. Imperial Japan attempted to exploit myth in times of war, because the purpose of Japanese history as a curricular subject was to foster an awareness of national mission derived from a collective identity as imperial subjects.

Aleida Assmann, who studies memory culture with Jan Assmann, distinguishes two dimensions of cultural memory: storage memory and functional memory. Storage memory has “no vital ties to the present and no bearing on identity formation” (2011, p. 127), whereas functional memory consists of “vital recollections that emerge from a process of selection, connection and meaningful configuration” (2011, p. 127). She regards the relation between storage memory and functional memory as dynamic and supplementary (2011, p. 397). Elements of storage memory are unrelated to the present. However, if they become regarded as relevant in keeping with the demands of the times, they attain a connection with the present, which makes them enter functional memory. This perspective suggests a way to teach history at school. History should be taught so that pupils find access to storage memory as neutral knowledge, which enables pupils to take part in the work of selecting elements and make them related to the present independently.

Historical description accompanied by myth effectively furnished pupils with a sense of togetherness under the state-prescribed identity, even as it prepared them for joining the ranks of the fighting forces. As a safeguard against historical description providing the rationale for war, two conditions must be met. Firstly, history textbooks should offer pupils historical description in which factual history and remembered history remain separate, yet they may stand in an interpenetrative relationship. Secondly, history textbooks should offer abundant references so that pupils constantly have access to stored history unconnected to the present as well. If these conditions are met, pupils retain the ability to contextualize the historical description provided, and to connect stored history to the present on their own, thereby retaining the potential to keep a critical distance from tendentious historical description predicated on the provision of rationales for war.

Historical description in history textbooks designed to forge a sense of national cohesion under a prescribed identity is not the exclusive specialty of Imperial Japan. In 2001, a revisionist work titled “New History Textbook” was approved for school use by the Japanese Ministry of Education. The textbook downplays or whitewashes established facts regarding Japan’s wars of aggression, while also giving weight to myth without distinction from factual history. The textbook purports to condemn “masochistic history” and to stress the positive aspects of Japan’s past so that pupils can take pride in their country. In so doing, it spearheaded a development over the last two decades in which right-wing revisionism of public memory has become strongly ascendant. Carol Gluck, a historian studying war memory in Asia, contends that Japan under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has turned national history into nationalistic history, “ignoring seemingly established facts in favor of narratives glorified by pride and patriotism” (p. 285). Even in the 21st century, caution, and vigilance regarding the interplay of history and myth in historical description still remain urgent requirements.

## References

Assmann, A. (2011). *Cultural memory and western civilization*. Cambridge University Press.

Assmann, J. (1992). *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*. C. H. Beck.

<https://doi.org/10.17104/9783406703409>

Aston, W. G. (2011). *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the earliest times to A.D. 697*. Routledge.

Gluck, C. (2022). National pasts as political presents. In H. L. Roediger & J. V. Wertsch (Eds.), *National Memories* (pp. 280-299). Oxford University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197568675.003.0014>

Hobsbawm, E. J. (1983). Introduction. In E. J. Hobsbawm & R. O. Ranger (Eds.), *The invention of tradition* (pp. 1-14). Cambridge University Press.

Ministry of Education. (1872). *Japanese Empire*. Ministry of Education Press.

Ministry of Education, & Normal School Tokyo. (1875). *An epitome of Japanese history*. Ministry of Education Press.

Ministry of Education. (1903). *Japanese history for elementary schools*. Kyoiku Press.

Ministry of Education. (1909). *Japanese history for ordinary elementary schools*. Nihon Press.

Ministry of Education. (1920). *National history for ordinary elementary schools*. Nihon Press.

Ministry of Education. (1934). *National history for ordinary elementary schools*. Nihon Press.

Ministry of Education. (1940). *National history for elementary schools*. Tokyo Press.

Ministry of Education. (1943). *National history for elementary stage*. Tokyo Press.

Ministry of Education. (1946). *The course of our country*. Osaka Press.

Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers. (1945). Suspension of courses in morals (Shushin), Japanese history and geography.

<https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/9885587>

### Recommended Citation

Ito, T. (2022). History and myth in times of war: Elementary school history textbooks in Imperial Japan. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 5(15).

[https://doi.org/10.17899/on\\_ed.2022.15.4](https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2022.15.4)

Do you want to comment on this article? Please send your reply to [editors@oneducation.net](mailto:editors@oneducation.net). Replies will be processed like invited contributions. This means they will be assessed according to standard criteria of quality, relevance, and civility. Please make sure to follow editorial policies and formatting [guidelines](#).

### Toshiko Ito

Toshiko Ito is a professor of education studies at Mie University, Japan. She specializes in the history of education and comparative international education. She is the author of *Die Kategorie der Anschauung in der Pädagogik Pestalozzis* (Peter Lang, 1995), and *Übergänge und Kontinuität* (Iudicium, 2007).



