

Advisory Opinion

Historical Thinking in Times of Change: Towards Multi-Faceted Understandings and Educational Openness Based on Dialogue and Diversity



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**Subcommittee on
Historical Thinking and Historical Education
Committee on History**

This advisory opinion is the result of the deliberations of the Subcommittee on Historical Thinking and Historical Education of the History Committee of the Science Council of Japan.

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Executive Summary

I Background

The world today is undergoing rapid, fundamental changes in every aspect: the transformation of socio-economic structures, developments in information technology, the climate crisis, and the pandemic. At such times, historical thinking aimed at examining the course of human development across time plays a crucial role. The relevance of the historical approach is interdisciplinary. It is applicable across the humanities and social sciences as well as the natural sciences. Especially when today's rapidly globalizing world is faced with serious issues such as deepening social divides and the intensification of regional conflicts, it goes without saying that historical thinking is indispensable towards overcoming these problems. It is fundamental to exploring the background of these crises, understanding their nature, and reflecting on possible solutions.

The Science Council of Japan (SCJ) has long deliberated the question of historical thinking and that of historical education, issuing various recommendations (such as one concerning the introduction of new historical subjects in high schools) at different committees and sub-committees. This advisory text aims to further these former deliberations, as well as to analyze the present situation surrounding historical thinking and historical education, both domestically and internationally. In pointing out the main challenges and examining prospects for the future, it is hoped our recommendations may serve as a guide toward the development of our

education policies and in awakening interest in historical thinking on the part of citizens in general.

II The current situation and its main problems

It is observed that in our rapidly globalizing, conflict-stricken world, it is all too easy for discussions of history to turn into arenas of conflict in themselves. The rapid development of information technology, in its turn, while appearing to bring about radical changes in the nature of knowledge and its place in society, contribute to the intensification of so-called “digital populism” as well. Massive amounts of information lacking any objective basis are circulated on social media and online, especially concerning history and recollections of past events. Although historical thinking and historical education (the very process through which historical thinking abilities are nurtured) play crucial roles in resolving present-day issues and in offering us precious guidance for the future, these roles have not been successfully fulfilled.

III The contents of this advisory opinion

In order to resolve this issue and ensure that historical thinking and historical education are given their due importance in society, it is necessary to pay attention to the following points.

1. The importance of diversified and multifaceted understanding

It is necessary that historical thinking in our complicated and rapidly changing world be based on diversified and multifaceted understanding and dialogue across various cultural and social divides. Of particular importance are:

i) Studying our own histories in conjunction with that of “others”, and understanding the contexts in which our own history has evolved. This will make it possible to view one’s own history in a more relative and objective manner, and thus overcome tendencies toward chauvinism and bias. Also important are approaches based on the idea of global history and that of the history of humanity as a whole, as well as the newly introduced concept of the Anthropocene, according to which the significance of human activities is located and critically examined within the context of the history of the Earth. These approaches enable us to examine our histories in a critical and self-reflective manner.

ii) The introduction of gender-based perspectives and a critical examination of the question of racism. Listening to the voices of those who have suffered marginalization and discrimination in the course of the emergence of the modern world system and have been victimized by war and colonialism.

iii) Attention to the importance of diverse historical practices in society carried out daily at the level of various communities: the preservation of historical sources, research into the history of local communities, and recording memories of war and experiences of *hibakushas* for future generations, for example.

iv) Examining and managing the effects of the development of information technology on the nature of knowledge in general, and on historical thinking in particular.

v) Examining and better responding to issues faced within the course of historical education at junior and senior high schools, and discussing possible ways to develop and enrich historical education at universities.

2. Maintaining interactive relations between historical research, historical education, and historical practice; the importance of dialogue throughout these processes

Historical consciousness is nurtured and incessantly renovated through interactive, cyclical relations between historical research, historical education, and historical practice. Of crucial importance throughout these processes is the concept of dialogue. Adherence to the principle of dialogue enables us to attain diversified and multi-faceted historical perspectives, which contribute to the resolution of conflicts, not to their escalation. This guarantees that history plays its proper role in society, offering us guidance for a better future.

In order to nurture historical consciousness based on dialogue, it is necessary to refer to past examples of international historical dialogue and international joint historical research, which reveal the importance of patient, long-standing efforts on the part of historians working across borders.

School textbooks play crucial roles in guaranteeing that the results of historical research and historical dialogue are reflected and incorporated into historical education, so that pupils can attain, by consulting different points of views, diversified and multi-faceted historical perspectives. Japan adopts a government examination system for school textbooks, according to which textbooks are screened by the government and approved for use. While opinions are divided with regards to the background, nature, and functionality of this system, issues regarding its application have recently come to light, controversial both from the viewpoint of the stability of textbook examination standards, as well as the students' right to knowledge. Openness in educational environments must be guaranteed, so that pupils and hence future citizens can develop historical thinking abilities and benefit from

different viewpoints.

A society whose citizens are capable of thinking historically based on principles of dialogue and the ability to attain diversified understandings is a society endowed with resilience and strength. The roles of historical thinking and historical education are crucial for the future of society as a whole. This advisory opinion is aimed at calling the public's attention to this important issue and activating discussion on the matter.