The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
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Not Aesopian Enough: A Chinese Publishing Fable

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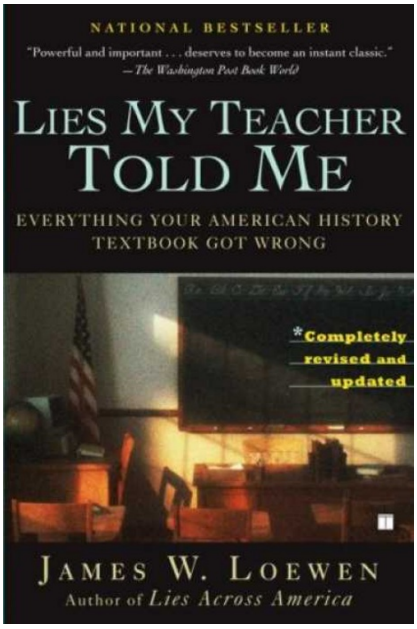

In April 2008, Ma Wanli, a professor of American history at Nanchang Hangkong University in Nanchang, China, emailed me to introduce himself as the translator of the Chinese version of my U.S. best seller, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. He also invited me to write a preface for this new edition. I agreed.

Lies exposes seamy aspects of the U.S. past. The preface I wrote for the Chinese edition suggests that a similar exposé might be useful in China. As I wrote, I realized that saying this in China might be problematic, but on behalf of the publisher, Central Chinese Compilation & Translation Press, one of the largest publishers in China, Ma Wanli assured me that my preface would not be censored. I finished the preface in late fall, and the Chinese translation reached me in December of 2008. My U.S. publisher had it translated back into English and assured me that my meaning had not been changed. All seemed well.

In late spring 2009, however, the translator emailed to request that I use "more Aesopian language," particularly in making points about the individual's relationship to the society. I had written:

> What is the reason for schooling in China? Surely it is to prepare students to take their place in society. To prepare them for a job, perhaps. To prepare them to be good citizens of China, surely.
>
> But what is their job as good citizens of China? Surely it is: to bring into being the China of the future.
>
> That job requires their best thinking, their best research, their best judgment. What should China do next — regarding Tibet, for example? Or about the one-party state? ....

Aesop as depicted in the Nuremberg Chronicle by Hartmann Schedel in 1493.

As well, I had quoted a twelfth-grade history teacher at a secondary school in Shanghai, "The closer history gets to the present, the more political it becomes. So for things after the founding of the People's Republic, we only require students to know the basic facts, like what happened in what year, and we don't study why." This quotation had already appeared in the international edition of the *New York Times*, where I had found it, but it posed a problem in my preface.

I responded by revising. I removed the word "party" and all references to Tibet, on which I am far from expert, and made other changes, some quite subtle. As I wrote the translator, "I have made those changes of my own free will and am still happy with the resulting essay. I hope you are too." I did not remove the *Times* material, pointing out that it was already "out," so banishing it from my preface made little sense. Ma Wanli called my revisions "magnanimous." Nevertheless, at the end of the process, my book came out in China in November, 2009, without the preface, but with an afterword in which Ma Wanli spoke of his "sympathy" for the book and looked forward to its "translation spurring much self-criticism among Chinese academic and education circles."

I offer the forbidden preface to you, below. You are the first to see what could not be published in China.

For two reasons, I am excited that my book is coming out in China. First, China is the most populous nation in the world, with a dynamic economy and growing political influence. As citizens of the world, Chinese people need both to know United States history and to learn what Americans get wrong when they learn their own history. Second, I hope that the example of *Lies My Teacher Told Me* will motivate Chinese scholars to write a similar book about China's own history textbooks. The rest of this introduction develops these two points.

My experience of discussing United States history with Chinese people is limited to a handful of graduate students in sociology. They impressed me. They knew far more about United States history than American students know of Chinese history. Moreover, their understanding of U.S. history was not the sanitized nationalist version that we Americans get in most high school history classes. It was critical, stressing the inequalities in our social class system and our sometimes imperial foreign policies.

Of course, these were students in sociology who had chosen to come to the U.S. for graduate study. Probably the typical high school graduate in China who does not go on to college knows far less about U.S. history — although I suspect s/he still knows more than the average American high school graduate does about China.

> Some readers of *Lies My Teacher Told Me* might ask, is it not important to persuade foreign readers that the U.S. has had a great past? Should not U.S. writers claim that their nation has always done the right thing, or at least, when it has erred, it did so with the best of intentions? No, I would reply, Americans must face their history as it actually occurred, and that is also how we must present it to others.
>
> The example of Nazi Germany helped to sharpen my thinking on this matter. Would we want Germany today to skim over that part of its past? To claim that the Holocaust — the intentional deaths of 6,000,000 Jews and 600,000 Rom people — never happened, or was an accident of war? Far better for Germany to face its past openly and to present it to other people honestly. What is appropriate for Germany has to be good for other nations.

I would caution Chinese readers that *Lies My Teacher Told Me* is not a complete history. Its subtitle, "Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong," is inaccurate. *Lies* hardly treats everything. Moreover, Lies emphasizes those topics left out or distorted in ordinary high school textbooks — books that emphasize those accomplishments of which the U.S. can justly be proud. I am proud that *Lies My Teacher Told Me* has sold more than a million copies, making it the best-selling book by a living sociologist — proud that my country has embraced such searing criticism. Can China do that?

Inaccurate nationalist history is hardly limited to the United States, after all. While I was researching *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, I had an experience that deepened my understanding of nationalist history in other nations. I read a history of the modern world, focused on the "Western world" — Europe and the Americas — published in Moscow in about 1970. Most of what it said about the U.S. was accurate. It did a particularly good job on our Civil War. Its account of 1938-40, however — of the Hitler-Stalin pact and the relationship between Germany and the U.S.S.R. that led to World War II — was completely opaque.

Perhaps every nation should outsource its history! Scholars in the U.S. could write a fine history of the U.S.S.R., for example, just as Russians could do a good job on our past. But about their own past, especially when writing for school children, authors tend to be ethnocentric, nationalist, and sometimes just plain wrong.

Treatment of recent events is particularly likely to be superficial. By definition, recent history is controversial. Many Americans are still alive who tried to end our war in Vietnam. Many others served in our armed forces and certainly do not want to consider that their service may have been in a misguided cause. But authors must address such controversies. While it is easier to give offense when writing about the recent past, it is also easier to do good research, precisely because so many sources exist, including living people to be interviewed.

Not only in the U.S. do textbooks treat recent history particularly badly. Some Japanese history textbooks give biased and inaccurate accounts of the years between 1905 and 1945, as historians in China and Korea have pointed out. Textbooks in Iran deny the Holocaust. Surely textbooks in China suffer from similar difficulties, especially about the twentieth century. According to a twelfth-grade history teacher at a secondary school in Shanghai, "The closer history gets to the present, the more political it becomes. So for things after the founding of the People's Republic, we only require students to know the basic facts, like what happened in what year, and we don't study why." As a result, according to a report in the *New York Times*, "Most Chinese students finish high school convinced that their country has fought wars only in self defense, never aggressively or in conquest..." Similarly, many Chinese students believe that Japan lost World War II largely as a result of Chinese resistance rather than the military defeats inflicted by the United States on the Japanese fleet and on Japanese forces on various islands of the Pacific.[1]

What steps might Chinese scholars and teachers take to address this problem? Textbook revision would be one answer. However, I suspect it may be no easier to get Chinese state bureaucrats to put out more accurate textbooks than to move private American publishing companies to do so. In 2004, Ge Jianxiong, director of the Institute of Chinese Historical Geography at Fudan University in Shanghai and a veteran member of official history textbook advisory committees, said, "Quite frankly, in China there are some areas, very sensitive subjects, where it is impossible to tell people the truth."[2] In 2006, Yuan Weishi, a prominent Chinese historian, inadvertently proved Ge's point. Yuan wrote an essay criticizing Chinese textbooks "for whitewashing the savagery of the Boxer Rebellion," according to another *New York Times* story, and calling for a "more balanced" treatment. The Boxer Rebellion took place more than a hundred years ago. Nevertheless, the government shut down *Freezing Point*, the newspaper supplement that carried Yuan's essay, and fired its editors. When it reopened, *Freezing Point* ran an essay rebuking Yuan.[3]

Incidents like these prompt Americans to conclude that China does not allow much self-criticism. If the bureaucrats who put out textbooks do not write what really happened, then China needs its own edition of *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your Chinese History Textbook Got Wrong*. If Chinese textbooks do not supply an accurate treatment of China's 1979 war with Vietnam, for example, or if they do not describe accurately the human suffering and social disorganization that accompanied Mao's "Great Leap Forward" — as well as China's great achievements since the end of World War II — then an independent scholar must do so, or perhaps a group of scholars. Feel free to use my book title, if you wish.

Such a solution — an independent book that contradicts, corrects, and amplifies what the textbooks say — may actually provide a better solution than revising the textbooks themselves. Consider a young student confronted by two different accounts of, for example, the role of China, the United States, and the U.S.S.R. in defeating Japan in World War II. Should she believe her textbook? It is the "official" book, after all. Or should she believe *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your Chinese History Textbook Got Wrong*? It comes with an array of footnotes, which the textbook lacks. Suddenly she has to think. Which account seems more plausible?

Maybe her teacher will give the class some guidance.[4] Maybe the student will do some research on her own. Maybe a member of the community who lived through the era can be persuaded to speak to the class. The point is: now she has to *do history*. That is a much better outcome than simply memorizing an improved textbook. As she thinks through things for herself, she develops her ability to read critically. This ability will help her after she graduates, perhaps more than the specific knowledge she learns in her history class.

What is the reason for schooling in China? Surely it is to prepare students to take their place in society. To prepare them for a job, perhaps. To prepare them to be good citizens of China, surely.

But what is their job as good citizens of China? Surely it is: to bring into being the China of the future.

That job requires their best thinking, their best research, their best judgment. What should China do next — about corruption, for example? About the fact that the planet is running out of oil, just as China has grown rich enough to demand its share? Or about the key social issue of next year — whatever that issue may be?

To think about what China should do next requires Chinese citizens to understand what causes what. It requires citizens to read critically, winnowing fact from opinion, and coming to conclusions based on evidence. In short, this task requires precisely the same skills involved in doing history.

Governments always think *they* know best what to do next. Therefore they emphasize education as socialization. In particular, governments think history should promote allegiance among students. They are wrong.

To see their error, we must make a fundamental distinction between patriotism and nationalism. Frederick Douglass, the great black leader in the U.S. in the nineteenth century, defined a nation's "true patriot" as one "who rebukes and does not excuse its sins." A nationalist, in contrast, is one who defends the nation as right, regardless of its actions. Surely China, like America, needs patriots, not nationalists.

Getting students to challenge the dogma taught by textbooks about the past is the best way to produce such patriots. That is why I wrote *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. I hope you will read it, not only to learn what we Americans get wrong, but also as an example of critical historical writing that other countries might usefully imitate.

James W. Loewen is a sociologist who spent two years at the Smithsonian surveying twelve leading high school textbooks of American history only to find an embarrassing blend of bland optimism, blind nationalism, and plain misinformation, weighing in at an average of 888 pages and almost five pounds. A best-selling author who wrote *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your High School History Textbook Got Wrong* and *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong*. An educator who attended Carleton College, holds the Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard University, and taught race relations for twenty years at the University of Vermont. jloewen@uvm.edu

He wrote this article for The Asia-Pacific Journal and for China Beat: Blogging How the East is Read.

Recommended citation: James W. Loewen, "Not Aesopian Enough: A Chinese Publishing Fable," The Asia-Pacific Journal, *23-3-10, June 7th, 2010.*

Notes

[1] Howard W. French, "China's Textbooks Twist and Omit History," *New York Times* (12/6/2004), found here.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Joseph Kahn, "Where's Mao? Chinese Revise History Books," *New York Times*, 9/1/2006, found here.

[4] However, to expect Chinese teachers to teach against their textbooks is asking a lot of them. Teachers know that during the Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976, gangs of students beat teachers in the name of political correctness.

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