

Challenging the Textbook to Develop Historical Thinking

Inquiry Lessons on the Mongol Invasions and Meiji Japan

By Catherine Mein

Developing lessons and units of study in the current social studies climate requires finding an entry point with a topic that will facilitate an inquiry. One such entry point can be challenging textbook accounts. In *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, James Loewen describes many of the problems with history textbooks and indicates a need to stop using textbooks as the authoritative source.¹ Teaching students how to assess a source's reliability and usefulness, including textbooks, is a key historical thinking skill, as well as an essential twenty-first-century skill. Asking students to challenge the textbook's account allows students to examine multiple sources on a particular topic while also encouraging students to be more critical consumers of information.

Based on work for the Cultural Encounters: Japan's Diverse Past and Present NCTA online class and a Fulbright-Hays/NCTA study tour, I found a common entry point for lessons on the thirteenth-century Mongol invasions of Japan and the nineteenth-century Meiji Restoration. In both cases, the "usual story" that can be found in many world history textbooks has been challenged by more recent scholarship, and this challenge served as the starting point for building an inquiry. For both the Mongol invasions lesson and the Meiji Restoration lesson, challenging the textbook became a central feature and shaped the compelling question for the inquiry.

For the Mongol invasions lesson, I use the compelling question "Did the typhoons save Japan from the Mongols?" The inquiry requires students to examine a variety of secondary sources and a few primary sources in order to construct an argument on whether the samurai could have defeated the Mongols without the storms. The "usual story" is a tale of divine intervention, while more recent scholarship raises questions about several elements of this tale.

In 1274 and 1281, the Mongols attempted to invade and conquer Japan. In the textbooks I examined while creating this lesson, every one attributed Japan's salvation to typhoons. In the one or two paragraphs dedicated to the invasions, the outline of the story was strikingly similar. Kublai Khan ordered both invasions after Japan's government refused his demands for control of Japan. In 1274 and 1281, the Mongols' arrival on the coast of Kyushu coincided with the arrival of a typhoon. Some accounts explain how the effects of defending Japan contributed to the end of the Kamakura shogunate, while the others end with the typhoon sinking the Mongol fleet.

One key feature that is missing from almost every account is a sense of how long each invasion lasted. In one account, the Mongols are described as arriving in 1274, with the typhoon blowing in on the very same night. In analyzing these accounts for mythical components, this lack of time passing obscures the order of events as the Mongols arrived at the coast; landed their men, horses, and supplies; engaged the samurai in battle; and, finally, retreated to their ships to flee the incoming storms. If the storms were *kamikaze*, or the winds of the gods, this sequence of events is unimportant, but if the Mongol invasions are to be examined as historical events, the "usual story" will not work.

During the online class Cultural Encounters: Japan's Diverse Past and Present, I was introduced to the work of Thomas Conlan. His book *In Little Need of Divine Intervention* was published in 2001 and focuses on a close examination of Takezaki Suenaga's scrolls of both invasions. These scrolls

are available for use with students.² The website provides background on the scroll, four different versions of the scroll (the nineteenth-century version includes translations of most of the text in the scroll), and discussion of some of the issues with the different versions.

As the title of his book indicates, Conlan argues that the usual story wrongly suggests the samurai were incapable of defeating the Mongols. Conlan's starting point is the fact that no reference is made of the storms in Suenaga's scrolls. Suenaga was a samurai ordered to Kyushu to defend Japan against the Mongols. He fought against the Mongols in 1274 and in 1281. The scroll highlights Suenaga's successes but makes no mention of either storm. Conlan read this eyewitness account as suggesting the samurai may have believed they were capable of defeating the Mongols without the gods' assistance. For classroom purposes, the scroll is a wonderful tool for discussing the limitations and benefits of a primary source.

Conlan's challenge to the "usual story" continues with a discussion of the Mongol numbers. In textbook accounts, the 1274 Mongol numbers are typically stated as 25,000 or 30,000, and the 1281 numbers are usually listed as 140,000. Some of the textbooks note that the 1281 invasion force was the largest in world history until the D-Day invasions in June 1944. The number of Mongols, particularly in 1281, provides the most compelling support for the "usual story," because how could the samurai possibly defeat so many Mongols? Conlan argues, however, that these numbers are likely exaggerated by court chroniclers. Aside from the tendency of chroniclers to overestimate numbers, Conlan also questions the feasibility of a D-Day-sized fleet and invasion force being able to coordinate an invasion from two different departure points without modern communication technology or supply lines.

Conlan's argument and website provide the impetus for the inquiry lesson I developed. The central feature of the lesson is not the events of 1274 and 1281 but the opportunity to engage in historical thinking skills: close reading of a variety of sources, analysis of the reliability and usefulness of sources, corroboration of sources, resolution of opposing details, and construction of an argument. The original lesson from 2013, including readings and handouts, is available online.³

The lesson on the nineteenth-century Meiji Restoration developed from a similar contestation of another "usual story." Textbook accounts of the Meiji period in Japan invariably focus on the modernization campaigns of the government. The images included in textbooks are often woodblock prints from the 1880s, which show the progress Japan had made. Men and women are typically shown in Western dress and often shown observing modern technology like bridges, train engines, or warships. The textbooks highlight the changes that were occurring to emphasize how Meiji Japan was different from Tokugawa Japan (1600–1868), but as a result, the "usual story" becomes that Japan in the Meiji period was completely transformed.

In preparation for a visit to the Museum Meiji Mura, an open-air museum with examples of Meiji Era architecture, our study group read chapter 7 of Susan Hanley's *Everyday Things in Premodern Japan: The Hidden Legacy of Material Culture* (1997).⁴ Hanley focuses on the continuities and changes in everyday life during the Meiji period (1868–1912). She argues that while changes in clothing, housing, and food were occurring in the late nineteenth century, most of the changes represented continuities

from the Tokugawa period rather than changes due to the modernization campaigns of the Meiji period.

The compelling question for this inquiry asks whether the Meiji Era represent change or continuity. For this lesson, students are expected to learn the characteristics of the Meiji period but are also expected to be able to reach a conclusion as to whether change or continuity was more dominant. The sources for this lesson pair a text source with images to highlight the changes and the continuities. The textbook and images from *MIT Visualizing Culture's* "Throwing Off Asia I"⁵ provide evidence of the changes occurring in the Meiji period. An outline of Hanley's argument and images from *Old Photos of Japan* provide the evidence to support continuity.⁶

The question the students answer at the end of the unit is "Was modernization the dominant feature of daily life in Meiji Japan?" The students have to think about the changes in the Meiji period from the perspective of the average person's daily life, which complicates the story. This lesson is also available online.⁷ Change and continuity are major themes in history, but too often change gets preference in the history curriculum. This lesson forces students to examine both.

The entry point for both these inquiry lessons was scholarly research that challenge the "usual story" found in so many textbooks. While several of the resources I have included are available on the internet, the most important resources I had in creating these lessons were the opportunities provided by NCTA professional development programs.⁸ Through the online courses, summer institutes, and study tours, I have had access to scholars in the field and current scholarship. These programs always complicate the stories, but that is an essential aspect of the type of social studies instruction that needs to happen today. The skills students can develop in wrestling with questions like "Did the typhoons save Japan?" or "Was modernization the dominant feature of daily life in Meiji Japan?" are skills that are transferable to students' lives and learning today. ■

NOTES

1. James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: The New Press, 1995, reprint 2018).
2. Thomas D. Conlan, *In Little Need of Divine Intervention: Takezaki Suenaga's Scrolls of the Mongol Invasions of Japan* (Ithaca: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2001).
3. "Cultural Encounters: Teaching Japan in World History," *Program for Teaching East Asia Online Curriculum Projects*, University of Colorado Boulder, accessed November 2, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/yctxqtrx>.
4. Susan B. Hanley, "Stability in Transition: From the Tokugawa Period to the Meiji Period," in *Everyday Things in Premodern Japan: the Hidden Legacy of Material Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 155–175.
5. "Throwing Off Asia I," *MIT Visualizing Cultures*, accessed November 2, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/ybcmj9rn>.
6. See *Old Photos of Japan: A Photo Blog of Japan on the Meiji, Taishō, and Shōwa Periods* at www.oldphotosjapan.com/en/.
7. See "Cultural Encounters: Teaching Japan in World History."
8. See the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia's website at <http://nctasia.org/>.



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