

Book Review: *Geography Education in Japan*

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Geography Education in Japan

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Presently, Japanese geography education is at a major turning point. This is because the course of study⁽¹⁾ has recently been revised in 2017 (elementary and junior high) and 2018 (senior high school), and especially because the status of high school geography has changed from being an elective to a compulsory subject. At the same time, a new high school subject, “Comprehensive Geography,” has been introduced into the new national curriculum. This subject focuses on some contemporary themes such as competence acquisition, use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and formulation of a sustainable society on a local to global scale (Education for Sustainable Development).

Since its emergence as a school subject, geography education in Japan has undergone various changes and been faced with diverse educational issues. However, despite its long history of changes, only few books describing the status of geography education in Japan have been written in English.

Geography Education in Japan was published in 2015 as the third book of the Association of Japanese Geographers (AJG) series, “International Perspective in Geography.” This book, which is written in English, provides a comprehensive description of geography education in Japan from various viewpoints (p. v). It consists of 5 parts and 21 chapters written by 25 geography education researchers and teachers. Its content is shown as follows.

Preface

Part One: Overview of Geography Education in Japan

- 1 Outline of Geography Education in Japan
- 2 Problems and Perspectives of Geography Education in Japanese Elementary Schools
- 3 Current Status and Issues in Junior High School Geography Education
- 4 Current Status and Issues in Senior High School Geography Education
- 5 Textbook Approval System and Geography Textbooks in Japan

Part Two: Matters of Concern for Geography Education in Japan

- 6 Reconsidering Regional Geography Education in Japan
- 7 The Current State and Issues of Field Research in Japanese Geographic Education
- 8 Maps, Globes, Cognitive Space and Geography Education in Japan

- 9 Social Participation in the Community and Geography Education
 - 10 Geography Education as Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Japan
 - 11 Institutional Issues in Disaster Prevention and Geography Education in Elementary and Secondary Education in Japan
- Part Three: Challenges to Teacher Training and Geography Education
- 12 University Geography Departments and the Teaching License in Japanese Geography Education
 - 13 The Association of Japanese Geographers' Social Action Program and Geography Education
 - 14 GIS and Geography Education in Japan
 - 15 GIS Specialists' Support for Geography Education
- Part Four: Research on Geography Education in Japan and Other Countries
- 16 Trends in Japanese Geography Education Research in Recent Years
 - 17 Trends of School Geography in Asia
- Part Five: Geography Education in the Future
- 18 Geography Education as Part of Social Studies Education in Japan
 - 19 The Current State and Prospects of Senior High School Geography Curriculum
 - 20 The Great East Japanese Disaster and Geography Education
 - 21 Basic Geography and the Future Geography Education in Japan
- Conclusion

Part I, "Overview of Geography Education in Japan," explains the current status of geography education in primary and secondary education (p. xix). Chapter 1 describes the educational system, social studies curriculum, and teaching license in relation to geography. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 focus on problems and perspectives in primary and secondary schools and describe the structures of the social studies and geography-history curricula based on geography content. Chapter 5 explains the textbook approval system and the characteristics of social studies/geography textbooks for elementary, junior, and senior high school.

Part II, "Matters of Concern for Geography Education in Japan," focuses on the learning content and tries to elucidate the characteristics of geography education in Japan (p. xix). Contemporary geography education has many themes, such as Regional Geography, Field Research/Work, Maps and Globes, Social Participation, ESD, and Disaster Prevention, that should be tackled. Chapter 6 clarifies regional geography education programs by analyzing the course of study and introduces its trends in Europe and the U.S. In Chapter 7, the author reports on the current landscape of outdoor field research in schools and makes suggestions for revitalizing field research. In Chapter 8, the author makes some proposals for improving use of maps, globes, and cognitive space. Chapter 9 proposes a Geography curriculum in which four spatial scales are included for fostering children's identity. Chapter 10 clarifies the characteristics of the course of study in 2009 in relation to ESD, the "Lucerne Declaration on Geographical Education for Sustainable Development" (published in 2007 by the International Geographical Union Commission on Geographical Education), and UNESCO education in Japan. Chapter 11 focuses on disaster prevention and describes how it is treated in primary and secondary (geography) education.

In Part III, "Challenges to Teacher Training and Geography Education," the authors discuss geography teacher training and licensure procedures required to teach geography (p. xix). Teacher training is the hottest topic and one of the most important themes in educational research. The current status of geography in

universities and the licensing system for primary, junior, and senior high school teachers are shown in Chapter 12. Chapter 13 describes activities for the public and students such as the Geography Olympiad, and the teacher training programs for in-service teachers supported by AJG, its Commission on Geographical Education (AJG-CGE) and other geography associations. Chapter 14 clarifies the position of GIS in senior high school geography education and suggests a textbook-based lesson on GIS. In Chapter 15, the author reviews the role of GIS specialists and their effort in supporting the spread of GIS use in schools.

Part IV, “Research on Geography Education in Japan and Other Countries,” focuses on geography education research that provides theoretical support for practical implementations (p. xix). Chapter 16 describes the research trends in geography education from the 1980s to the present. Geography education researchers in Japan have always studied foreign curricula, textbooks, and educational trends. Chapter 17 focuses on and compares geography curricula in Asia, especially Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan, and the author concludes that geography curriculum in Asia is designed by combining several teaching approach and promotes inquiry-based learning, and geography is suitable for ESD.

Part V, “Geography Education in the Future,” considers the future of geography education in Japan based on the contents of Part I through IV (p. xix). As I noted earlier, geography education in Japan is now at a major turning point and faces various challenges. After WWII geography has been taught as a part of social studies education. Chapter 18 describes the prospects of geography education in relation to social studies education. Chapter 19 discusses geography education by analyzing the current course of study in high school, which was revised in 2009. Chapter 20 focuses on “the Great East Japan Disaster in 2011” and addresses its impacts on several damaged schools in Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima prefecture. Further, the authors report on current and post-disaster Japanese education policy and research trends. In Chapter 21, the authors point out problems with high school geography education and then describe the background to the emergence, concept, and structure of the new subject in high school, “Basic Geography ⁽²⁾.”

This book provides a short description of the characteristics and issues of contemporary geography education in Japan from a broad perspective. Especially for foreign readers, curriculum revision, geography educational research, and disaster prevention in geography education may be interesting themes. In addition, geography in Asian countries has slowly been replaced by integrated courses such as social studies and combined humanities (Lam, Lin, Lee, Yee, & Yang, 2006). Geography in Japan has been taught as a part of social studies since the second world war and has a long history. The issues, challenges and findings/outcomes shown in this book may be valuable examples for Asian geography education researchers facing the change described above to consider their country’s future geography education.

However, in my personal opinion, a chapter on the following theme should have been written in this book. Geography education in Japan has a long history of research as well as of geography lesson plans and practices. A nation’s history of educational practice is an important topic for one to learn about. Therefore, a chapter on the history of geography education practices may have enhanced this book. In addition, the relationship between geography education and social studies education is an area of interest for geography education researchers in Japan and worldwide. The eighteenth chapter illustrates this; however, this theme should not have been treated as a chapter. Some chapters on the relationship between geography and social studies discussed from various viewpoints (curriculum study, educational history, teacher education) are necessary for this book.

As the editors noted, because of the language barrier, foreign researchers have few opportunities to learn about the situation regarding geography education in Japan. This is the first book written in English that provides a detailed explanation of contemporary geography education in Japan. This book helps foreign researchers and students understand the current status of it. This book is recommended for researchers, teachers, and students interested in Japanese geography education.

Notes

- (1) Geography (geographical content) belongs to the subject “Social Studies” in primary and junior high school, and “Geography-History” in high school.
- (2) Before the new subject, “Comprehensive Geography,” was officially introduced into the new national curriculum, it was called “Basic Geography.”

Reference

Lam, C., Lin, P., Lee, C., Yee, S. O., & Yang, G. (2006). Geographical education in East Asia. In J. Lidstone & M. Williams (Eds.), *Geographical education in a changing world: Past experience, current trends and future challenges* (pp.139-154). Dordrecht: Springer.