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Between Aspiration and Application

Identifying the Challenges of Teaching Japan's Colonial Past in the Republic of the Marshall Islands

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要約

太平洋島嶼国における歴史教育に関する多くの文献は、これ
でま、同地域における日本統治時代の歴史にかんする教科書の
内容を概観することにとどまり、実際の教育現場でどのように
教えられているのか明らかにできていない。そこで本稿では、
2023年のマーシャル諸島共和国における現地調査を踏まえ、
歴史教育に関する教科書の内容と実際の教育現場の状況を明ら
かにする。マーシャル諸島の事例では、同国教育省のカリキュ
ラムにおいては、積極的に日本統治時代の歴史を教育する姿勢
が窺われたものの、慢性的な教員不足や教員の言語的障壁など
によって、教育現場では、具体的施策が乏しい状況が明らかと
なった。

Introduction: The Gap

In recent years, there has been an increasing scholarly interest in the analysis of social studies textbooks in Japan's former colonies prior to and during the Second World War (Nakamura 2004; Kikuchi 2013; Morris *et al* 2013; Juwitasari 2019; Sato & Okabe 2020). A significant portion of the literature on history education of Japan in the Pacific Islands countries seeks to understand the types of textbooks employed to teach Japan's colonial past and the depth to which it is taught (Watanabe 2005; Tamai 2020; Kawasaki 2021; Watanabe, Okuda & Aizawa 2022; Okuda 2023; Tamai & Aizawa 2023). For instance, Tamai's study on the Republic of Palau's social studies textbooks reveals a dual approach. The primary focus is directed towards a US-centric historical narrative, sometimes at the expense of certain locally significant events and issues. To bridge this gap, Palau employs a more creative approach to teaching about own history via the *Student Resource Book* (SRB), which embodies Palauan interpretations and historical narratives, notably offering more extensive insight into Japan's colonial period in Palau than US-centric textbooks. Tamai regards the SRB as a critical educational resource for Palauan society to teach and learn in detail its history from local perspectives (Tamai 2020; Tamai and Aizawa 2023). Yet, the practical extent of the SRB's use in teaching this colonial period still remains unaddressed (Tamai 2020: 98).

Similarly, Rie Okuda's detailed study on textbooks used in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) unearths the portrayal of Japan's colonial history in history education. Her findings underscore the pivotal role these textbooks play. However, she also postulates that further investigation is required to ascertain the depth of textbook application within high school pedagogical settings in FSM (Okuda 2023: 74).

In the case of the Marshall Islands, Noriko Kawasaki's work (2021) echoes the findings of recent literature on Palau and FSM above. Kawasaki (2021: 34) notes that while a reliance on US-published textbooks, a more localized alternative textbook, *A Marshall Islands History* (MIH), is believed to enrich history education in the Marshall Islands. Kawasaki argues that the MIH is posited to enhance understanding of the Marshall Islands among local citizens from historical, political, economic, cultural and geographical dimensions. It also provides them with an opportunity to learn about Japan's colonial era which had an impact on the everyday life in the country.

The recent studies exemplified above underscore the vital role textbooks in Micronesian nations play in retracing their historical roots, fostering and fortifying identities (Tamai 2020: 98; Kawasaki 2021: 41; Okuda 2023: 77). A critical gap, however, remains: the extent to which these resources are harnessed to elucidate Japan's colonial history within real educational contexts remains inadequately researched.

Against this backdrop, this article addresses this gap by undertaking an

analysis of the MIH's tangible impact and application within the educational environments in the country. It aims at uncovering how and how much the MIH is substantively used to learn more about the historical account of Japan's colonial past in the Marshall Islands.

The main findings in this article are twofold. First, the core curriculum guidelines designed by the Public School System (PSS) - the central educational institution that autonomously oversees the quality of education in the Marshall Islands - demonstrate a strong aspiration to incorporate the colonial history of Japan into teaching in the country. The curriculum guidelines and the textbook aligned with them offer local students the opportunity to learn about Japan's colonial past in the Marshall Islands.

However, local schools, which are the implementers of the curriculum guidelines, face challenges in putting the guidelines into practice. Three possible reasons for the limited application of the PSS's curriculum guidelines: the level of English language proficiency among Marshallese teachers, a chronic shortage of the Marshallese teachers, and the perception of the teaching profession as a long-term path for career development. Importantly, this article aims to uncover this less-explored dimension of history education.

Primary findings in this article derive from fieldwork conducted by the author along with Noriko Kawasaki from 28 August to 1 September 2023 in Majuro, the Marshall Islands. We engaged with five high schools¹, conducting in-person interviews with educators and administrators. Alongside classroom observations, we liaised with the PSS for insights into the curriculum and pedagogical settings.

However, our research is indicative rather than definitive, as we concede certain limitations, primarily stemming from time constraints and available funding. Our findings represent a brief snapshot rather than an enduring observation. A longitudinal study might yield more conclusive results. Additionally, due to logistical constraints, our scope was restricted to the primary atoll of the Marshall Islands (Majuro Atoll), leaving other significant regions and atolls unexplored.² Neither Kwajalein, Arno nor Ailinglaplap were part of our fieldwork.

In addition, this article neither intends to critique the roles of the PSS or other ministerial offices in education nor does it advocate their major reforms in response to the aforementioned challenges. Rather, its central objective is to identify the discrepancy between the PSS's aspirations and the realities faced by local schools in Majuro. By highlighting this mismatch, this article encourages decision-makers and pedagogical practitioners (including teachers in social studies) in the Marshall Islands to identify, collaborate and implement *together* for future institutional and operational developments. This article then explores the potential role of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), another important stakeholder, in supporting the other stakeholders and addressing the current challenges.

►1 Five high schools include Marshall Islands High School (MIHS, public school), Laura High School (LHS, public school), Life Skills Academy (LSA, public school), Assumption Catholic School (ACS, private school), and Majuro Cooperative School (MCS, private school).

►2 The unexplored atolls include Jaluit Atoll, located approximately 225km southwest, where the Imperial Japanese Navy set up its defense base, Mili Atoll, where military impressment of food and supplies took place, and Wotje Atoll, one of the major airfields for Japanese Army.

Aspiration: PSS's curriculum guidelines

The Public School System (PSS) is the critical institution for education in the Marshall Islands. The PSS was established in 2013 through the enactment of the Public Law 2013-2023 in November 2013. The primary purpose of the PSS lies in its mandate to autonomously oversee the quality of education in public schools, spanning from Grade 1 (for six-years-old students) to Grade 12 (for 17-year-old students). Also, the PSS ensures the equitable distribution of teachers across schools and collaborates with the Marshallese Ministry of Education to ensure appropriate fiscal allocation (Public School System 2022a; 2022b). The PSS has played positive and constructive roles in leveraging the quality of education in the Marshall Islands since its establishment (Kawasaki 2021).

As for the curriculum guidelines known as *Content Standards and Performance Indicators* released by the PSS (Public School System 2022c), social studies teachers are instructed to cover topics associated with Japan's colonial past in the Marshall Islands. The intended learning outcomes for students in this subject area are to:

- Identify periods of foreign administrations of Micronesia and significant developments and changes to lives during each period, focusing on the Japanese period.
- Explain impact of foreign powers on culture, politics, economy and lives in Micronesia.
- Explain positive and negative contributions of German and Japanese period of administration to Marshallese life today (Public School System 2022c).

Teachers are required to guide them to 'create a timeline of significant development and great changes that influenced the lives of Micronesian people' during the Japanese colonization and highlight key events that exerted significant impacts (Public School System 2022c: 35).

Also, the teachers in social studies are required to facilitate discussions on the enduring influences of Japan's colonial era on everyday life in the Marshall Islands from various aspects including social, economic, political, historical and technological perspectives. Storytelling sessions detailing both the positive and negative effects of Japan's colonization are considered useful pedagogical means to further enrich the curriculum (Public School System 2022c: 35).

In order to facilitate student learning on Japan's colonial history in the Marshall Islands as outlined in the aforementioned objectives, the PSS identifies *A Marshall Islands History* (MIH) (Walsh *et al* 2012) as the primary textbook at the high school level (Grades 9-12). For instance, Chapter Eight of the textbook, "Japanese Mandate Era" (2012: 223-246), covers the contact between the Marshall Islands and Japan. It details events from the first encounter in 1885, through the process of Japanization during its mandate during the 1910s and 1920s, to the militarization period between 1930s-1945. The chapter summarizes the following regarding the

transformation of the relationship between the Marshall Islands and Japan:

As the civilian administration transitioned to military rule, relationships between Majeļ [Marshallese] and Japanese also shifted. The days of friendships and regular shipping schedules, bartering with copra, and access to high-status employment ceased. The days of hard labor and hard times had begun (Walsh *et al* 2012: 243).

Furthermore, the importance of students grasping Japan's colonial history is emphasized by the PSS. For instance, a senior staff in the PSS stresses such importance advocating for its thorough teaching and learning in curricula. They posited that Grade 9 is the most suitable stage for this instructional focus.³ Additionally, the PSS official responsible for quality assurance through the 'Marshall Islands Standard Assessment Test (MIST)' indicated the necessity of having a thorough understanding of Japan's colonization. This is evident in the frequent inclusion of related questions on the MIST, touching upon topics like the health impact of foreign powers, including Japan, on the Marshallese people, the tenure of the Japanese administration, and the political institutions of Japan's modern history.⁴

In light of the PSS curriculum guidelines, Kawasaki's assertion (2021) seems valid: the PSS indeed values social studies as a pivotal avenue for students to learn and understand Japan's colonial imprint on the Marshall Islands. From this perspective, social studies remains an instrumental resource in deepening their comprehension of Marshallese history. The query then remains: how is this curriculum actualized in classrooms?

Application: The limited inclusion of Japan's colonial era in social studies

While the PSS has delineated clear curriculum guidelines, the extent to which Japan's colonial past is incorporated and *Marshall Islands History* (MIH), a primary textbook, is used, remains somewhat limited in most schools within Majuro. For instance, during a visit to a Grade 12 social studies class at the Marshall Islands High School (MIHS) – Majuro's largest high school with over 1150 students –, a Grade 12 social studies class utilized the MIH textbook. However, under the guidance of a Fijian teacher, the lesson's focal point was the development and proclamation of the country's constitution, with no mention of Japan's colonial era.⁵ In a subsequent observation of a Grade 9 class at MIHS, the MIH was once again the standard textbook. An interview with the class instructor revealed that a chapter on Japan's colonial past in the MIH was occasionally used. Key points from the chapter were written on a blackboard, however, providing no supplementary worksheets to aid teaching. The depth of instruction often depended on students' ability to comprehend the text, leading to variations in coverage.⁶

The case of Laura High School (LHS), located in the most western part of

►3 An interview undertaken in the afternoon of 28 August 2023.

►4 An interview undertaken in the afternoon of 31 August 2023.

►5 An observation undertaken in the morning of 29 August 2023.

►6 An observation and interview undertaken in the morning of 30 August 2023.

the Majuro Atoll, mirrored those from MIHS. During our visit, the MIH was confirmed as the official textbook. In an interview, a high school teacher indicated that the ways in which she teaches social studies are grounded on the curriculum guidelines provided by the PSS. Yet, the depth of study on Japan's colonial era is often tailored to students' comprehension levels, suggesting that the exact content taught can be subjective to the instructor.⁷

While public schools such as those aforementioned above are regularly monitored by the PSS for educational quality assurance, private high schools such as Assumption Catholic School (ACS), and Majuro Cooperative School (MCS) maintain a higher level of autonomy over the curriculum designs. At ACS, while the MIH was used in line with PSS guidelines, its introduction was a recent decision by a social studies teacher two years prior.⁸ With the anticipated hiring of a new instructor from the Philippines, the future use of the MIH remained uncertain, according to our interviewee. During the interview, it was also suggested by its vice-principal that it would indeed be at the discretion of the incoming teacher as to whether the MIH continues to be used as the main textbook in social studies class.⁹

MCS, in contrast, tailored its curriculum to align with the US Common Core Standard, aiming to facilitate seamless credit transfer to US colleges and universities. During an interview, teachers told us that while the broader context of World War II history was taught, Japan's colonization was briefly introduced, aligning with MCS's goal of meeting US standard exam benchmarks. Notably, the MIH was not identified as a resource during our field observations at MCS.

Two clear observations can be drawn: the MIH is widely acknowledged as a crucial resource for understanding historical contexts, including Japan's colonial history, in public schools, and to a lesser extent, in private schools. Access to the textbook provides students with an *opportunity* to develop and nurture identities of the Marshall Islands – a similar finding to case studies conducted in other Micronesian states (Tamai 2020: 98; Kawasaki 2021: 41; Okuda 2023: 77).

Nonetheless, there exists a noticeable gap between the PSS's curriculum guidelines and the on-ground realities of social studies teaching in Majuro high schools. Those high schools struggle to put the PSS's guidelines and inspiration into practice. The pertinent question then arises: What underpins this discrepancy? Why do high schools find it challenging to thoroughly integrate Japan's colonial past in their teachings on the Marshall Islands? The subsequent section delves into potential reasons for this divergence.

Possible reasons for the underutilization of the MIH

Identifying the exact reasons why high schools may underutilize the MIH is challenging. However, based on our fieldwork and interviews conducted in the Marshall Islands, we discerned several potential contributing factors.

First, language proficiency among the Marshallese teachers is a major challenge. The MIH is written in English and proficiency in this language is a notable

►7 An observation and interview undertaken in the afternoon of 29 August 2023.

►8 An observation and interview undertaken in the morning of 30 August 2023.

►9 An observation and interview undertaken in the morning of 30 August 2023

► 10 An interview undertaken in the afternoon of 30 August 2023

► 11 An interview undertaken in the morning of 30 August 2023.

► 12 An interview undertaken between 28 August and 1 September 2023.

barrier for many Marshallese teachers tasked with teaching social studies at the high school level. High school teachers are, on most occasions, required to have at least a Bachelor's degree from tertiary institutions, where the medium of instruction is predominantly English.

However, many face challenges in fully leveraging this education. To leverage overall pedagogical competencies, institutions such as the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI) and the University of South Pacific (USP) – Majuro Campus, both situated in Majuro Atoll, offer professional development opportunities for Marshallese teachers. According to an interview conducted at CMI, about a third of its students are enrolled in the School of Education, with over 90% being Marshallese in-service teachers.¹⁰ Both CMI and USP provide English proficiency courses and similar pedagogical support, yet our observations indicate that language remains a major impediment for Marshallese teachers to be able to teach social studies at high schools, and for many high schools to employ qualified Marshallese teachers to teach that subject.¹¹

Second, A chronic shortage of Marshallese teachers in social studies is another challenge. A scarcity of available Marshallese teachers in social studies has necessitated the hiring of qualified teachers from abroad. This trend was evident during our field visits. For instance, none of the social studies teachers at the public and private high schools we inspected were Marshallese; instead, they were predominantly Fijian and Filipino. At MIHS, although the MIH was utilized at Grade 9, it was taught by a Fijian teacher with an 18-year-long teaching career. In Grade 12, subjects on Government and the constitution were instructed by another Fijian teacher with over 7 years of teaching experience. At LHS, the social studies teacher was also a Fijian. Meanwhile, at LSA, ACS, and MCS, social studies classes are conducted by Filipino teachers. There is a noticeable chronic shortage of Marshallese teachers across various subjects in high schools. In addition to the aforementioned, MIHS employs teachers from Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, and the Solomon Islands, while at LHS, the teaching staff come from Fiji, Kiribati, and the Philippines. The PSS recognizes this reliance on overseas educators as an ongoing issue.¹²

To be sure, it is important to emphasize that the reliance on qualified foreign teachers remains pragmatically essential in the Marshall Islands, given the chronic shortage of Marshallese teachers in social studies or any subjects. If the PSS considers historical narratives valuable pedagogical means to forge Marshallese identities, then it may be ideal and beneficial to narrate colonial experiences from their own perspective. By adopting this approach, the PSS and schools collaboratively facilitate student learning on both positive and negative impacts of the Japanese colonization on the Marshall Islands today. It is also vital for the Marshall Islands to provide students with quality education regardless of where teachers come from. The PSS needs to maintain this delicate balance.

Third, a perception of the teaching profession might be another hurdle. The

teaching profession in the Marshall Islands does not appear to command the same appeal as other professions. A relatively lower salary scale may influence this perception. Some foreign teachers we interviewed expressed intentions of short tenures in the Marshall Islands, viewing their roles as stepping stones to opportunities elsewhere. To be fair, The PSS has outlined a clear salary progression based on qualifications, with non-qualified teachers starting at USD 6,000 and those with a Bachelor's degree earning USD 21,000, with potential for growth.¹³ However, these monetary incentives seem less appealing to many, including the Marshallese community.

► 13 An interview undertaken in the afternoon of 30 August 2023.

A concluding remark

The article has explored and analyzed the curriculum guidelines designed by the PSS and their implementation in the educational environments in the Marshall Islands. It has specifically examined how educational resources, including textbooks, are used to elucidate Japan's colonial history within real educational contexts at the local level. Fieldwork conducted by the author has led to a preliminary conclusion: Incorporating the history of Japanese colonization into the curriculum allows the PSS to offer local students insights into Japan's colonial past in the Marshall Islands. However, observations during fieldwork reveal the curriculum's limited application in social studies classes.

Furthermore, this article also has identified challenges faced by local schools including linguistic barriers, a chronic shortage of teaching staff leading to heavy reliance on qualified foreign teachers, and a general lack of incentive for career development in education in the Marshall Islands.

Addressing these challenges will require time and resources, yet the curriculum guidelines set by the PSS remain vital for fostering the identities of the Marshall Islands. There is a pressing need for the PSS to engage more closely with local schools and teachers to ensure that the guidelines are implemented in a substantive manner. It is also essential for schools, teachers and the community to collaborate closely with the PSS, striving to provide high-quality education tailored to local needs. Thus, mutual collaboration between decision-makers and pedagogical practitioners is key for future institutional and operational developments.

In this context, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and by extension the Japanese government, can play a supportive role. The provision of material development assistance, such as school buses, has been well-received. This support should continue, and be complemented by efforts to develop human resources through a bottom-up approach. An example of such an effort is a Japanese JICA volunteer who has significantly contributed to educational development in mathematics by training teachers at the PSS. This “train the trainer” approach exemplifies how Japan can further enhance the quality of education in the Marshall Islands.

Also, JICA volunteers as school teachers are well-respected yet are highly sought-after in the Marshall Islands. By sending volunteers to both the PSS, and

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schools, JICA can then bridge the gap between PSS's aspirations and the realities faced by teachers. JICA volunteers as educational facilitators could lay the groundwork for positive and systemic improvements within the educational sector in the country. Much like JICA's effort in constructing the Nakasone Bridge in 1984, which physically connected the western and the eastern parts of the Majuro Atoll, this initiative will create a lasting bridge for educational development in the Marshall Islands.¹⁴

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