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Where ' s Mao? Chinese Revise History Books

By [JOSEPH KAHN](#)

BEIJING, Aug. 31 — When high school students in Shanghai crack their history textbooks this fall they may be in for a surprise. The new standard world history text drops wars, dynasties and Communist revolutions in favor of colorful tutorials on economics, technology, social customs and globalization.

Socialism has been reduced to a single, short chapter in the senior high school history course. Chinese Communism before the economic reform that began in 1979 is covered in a sentence. The text mentions Mao only once — in a chapter on etiquette.

Nearly overnight the country ' s most prosperous schools have shelved the Marxist template that had dominated standard history texts since the 1950 ' s. The changes passed high-level scrutiny, the authors say, and are part of a broader effort to promote a more stable, less violent view of Chinese history that serves today ' s economic and political goals.

Supporters say the overhaul enlivens mandatory history courses for junior and senior high school students and better prepares them for life in the real world. The old textbooks, not unlike the ruling Communist Party, changed relatively little in the last quarter-century of market-oriented economic reforms. They were glaringly out of sync with realities students face outside the classroom. But critics say the textbooks trade one political agenda for another.

They do not so much rewrite history as diminish it. The one-party state, having largely abandoned its official ideology, prefers people to think more about the future than the past.

The new text focuses on ideas and buzzwords that dominate the state-run media and official discourse: economic growth, innovation, foreign trade, political stability, respect for diverse cultures and social harmony.

J. P. Morgan, [Bill Gates](#), the [New York Stock Exchange](#), the space shuttle and Japan ' s bullet train are all highlighted. There is a lesson on how neckties became fashionable.

The French and Bolshevik Revolutions, once seen as turning points in world history, now get far less attention. Mao, the Long March, colonial oppression of [China](#) and the Rape of

Nanjing are taught only in a compressed history curriculum in junior high.

“ Our traditional version of history was focused on ideology and national identity, ” said Zhu Xueqin, a historian at Shanghai University. “ The new history is less ideological, and that suits the political goals of today. ”

The changes are at least initially limited to Shanghai. That elite urban region has leeway to alter its curriculum and textbooks, and in the past it has introduced advances that the central government has instructed the rest of the country to follow.

But the textbooks have provoked a lively debate among historians ahead of their full-scale introduction in Shanghai in the fall term. Several Shanghai schools began using the texts experimentally in the last school year.

Many scholars said they did not regret leaving behind the Marxist perspective in history courses. It is still taught in required classes on politics. But some criticized what they saw as an effort to minimize history altogether. Chinese and world history in junior high have been compressed into two years from three, while the single year in senior high devoted to history now focuses on cultures, ideas and civilizations.

“ The junior high textbook castrates history, while the senior high school textbook eliminates it entirely, ” one Shanghai history teacher wrote in an online discussion. The teacher asked to remain anonymous because he was criticizing the education authorities.

Zhou Chunsheng, a professor at Shanghai Normal University and one of the lead authors of the new textbook series, said his purpose was to rescue history from its traditional emphasis on leaders and wars and to make people and societies the central theme.

“ History does not belong to emperors or generals, ” Mr. Zhou said in an interview. “ It belongs to the people. It may take some time for others to accept this, naturally, but a similar process has long been under way in Europe and the United States. ”

Mr. Zhou said the new textbooks followed the ideas of the French historian Fernand Braudel. Mr. Braudel advocated including culture, religion, social customs, economics and ideology into a new “ total history. ” That approach has been popular in many Western countries for more than half a century.

Mr. Braudel elevated history above the ideology of any nation. China has steadily moved away from its ruling ideology of Communism, but the Shanghai textbooks are the first to try examining it as a phenomenon rather than preaching it as the truth.

Socialism is still referred to as having a “ glorious future. ” But the concept is reduced to one of 52 chapters in the senior high school text. Revolutionary socialism gets less emphasis than the Industrial Revolution and the information revolution.

Students now study Mao — still officially revered as the founding father of modern China but no longer regularly promoted as an influence on policy — only in junior high. In the senior high school text, he is mentioned fleetingly as part of a lesson on the custom of lowering flags to half-staff at state funerals, like Mao 's in 1976.

[Deng Xiaoping](#), who began China 's market-oriented reforms, appears in the junior and senior high school versions, with emphasis on his economic vision.

Gerald A. Postiglione, an associate professor of education at the University of Hong Kong, said mainland Chinese education authorities had searched for ways to make the school curriculum more relevant.

“ The emphasis is on producing innovative thinking and preparing students for a global discourse, ” he said. “ It is natural that they would ask whether a history textbook that talks so much about Chinese suffering during the colonial era is really creating the kind of sophisticated talent they want for today 's Shanghai. ”

That does not mean history and politics have been disentangled. Early this year a prominent Chinese historian, Yuan Weishi, wrote an essay that criticized Chinese textbooks for whitewashing the savagery of the Boxer Rebellion, the violent movement against foreigners in China at the beginning of the 20th century. He called for a more balanced analysis of what provoked foreign interventions at the time.

In response, the popular newspaper supplement Freezing Point, which carried his essay, was temporarily shut down and its editors were fired. When it reopened, Freezing Point ran an essay that rebuked Mr. Yuan, a warning that many historical topics remained too delicate to discuss in the popular media.

The Shanghai textbook revisions do not address many domestic and foreign concerns about the biased way Chinese schools teach recent history. Like the old textbooks, for example, the new ones play down historic errors or atrocities like the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution and the army crackdown on peaceful pro-democracy demonstrators in 1989.

The junior high school textbook still uses boilerplate idioms to condemn Japan 's invasion of China in the 1930 's and includes little about Tokyo 's peaceful, democratic postwar development. It will do little to assuage Japanese concerns that Chinese imbibe hatred of Japan from a young age.

Yet over all, the reduction in time spent studying history and the inclusion of new topics, like culture and technology, mean that the content of the core Chinese history course has contracted sharply.

The new textbook leaves out some milestones of ancient history. Shanghai students will no longer learn that Qin Shihuang, who unified the country and became China 's first

emperor, ordered a campaign to burn books and kill scholars, to wipe out intellectual resistance to his rule. The text bypasses well-known rebellions and coups that shook or toppled the Zhou, Sui, Tang and Ming dynasties.

It does not mention the resistance by Han Chinese, the country 's dominant ethnic group, to Kublai Khan 's invasion and the founding of the Mongol-controlled Yuan dynasty. Wen Tianxiang, a Han Chinese prime minister who became the country 's most transcendent symbol of loyalty and patriotism when he refused to serve the Mongol invaders, is also left out.

Some of those historic facts and personalities have been replaced with references to old customs and fashions, prompting some critics to say that history teaching has lost focus.

“ Would you rather students remember the design of ancient robes, or that the Qin dynasty unified China in 221 B.C.? ” one high school teacher quipped in an online forum for history experts.

Others speculated that the Shanghai textbooks reflected the political viewpoints of China 's top leaders, including [Jiang Zemin](#), the former president and Communist Party chief, and his successor, [Hu Jintao](#).

Mr. Jiang 's “ Three Represents ” slogan aimed to broaden the Communist Party 's mandate and dilute its traditional emphasis on class struggle. Mr. Hu coined the phrase “ harmonious society, ” which analysts say aims to persuade people to build a stable, prosperous, unified China under one-party rule.

The new textbooks de-emphasize dynastic change, peasant struggle, ethnic rivalry and war, some critics say, because the leadership does not want people thinking that such things matter a great deal. Officials prefer to create the impression that Chinese through the ages cared more about innovation, technology and trade relationships with the outside world.

Mr. Zhou, the Shanghai scholar who helped write the textbooks, says the new history does present a more harmonious image of China 's past. But he says the alterations “ do not come from someone 's political slogan, ” but rather reflect a sea change in thinking about what students need to know.

“ The government has a big role in approving textbooks, ” he said. “ But the goal of our work is not politics. It is to make the study of history more mainstream and prepare our students for a new era. ”

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Chinese Revise History Books. Advertisement. Continue reading the main story. The text mentions Mao only once in a chapter on etiquette. Nearly overnight the country's most prosperous schools have shelved the Marxist template that had dominated standard history texts since the 1950s. The changes passed high-level scrutiny, the authors say, and are part of a broader effort to promote a more stable, less violent view of Chinese history that serves today's economic and political goals. Supporters say the overhaul enlivens mandatory history courses for junior and senior high school students and better prepares them for life in the real world.

Chronology: Key Events in Mao's China, 1949-76. Year. Month. Event. 1949. Communists establish the People's Republic of China: Mao begins governing China. 1950-53. Korean War. 1950. February. Mao visits Moscow, Sino-Soviet agreement signed. October. China enters the Korean War. Communist campaign against religion starts. Marriage law passed. 1951. Mao launches the anti-movements. 1952. Abolition of rival political parties: China becomes a one-party state. Mao ruled China from 1949 until his death in 1976. His rule saw the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. His rise began in the early 1920s as a founder member of the Chinese Communist Party. The CCP engaged in a long Civil War against the Nationalists. On the verge of defeat, Mao led the CCP on the Long March to the North of China.