

# Narratives and Contextualisation Gaps: A Preliminary Exploration of East Asian History Teaching

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## ABSTRACT

*East Asia exerts a significance influence on Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia. Despite the existence of dedicated study center, a master's program and even a compulsory course, research on the teaching of East Asian history in Indonesia high school remains limited. This has created a gap between the region's significance and the core objectives of history education. To address this gap, the study combines corpus analysis of secondary school history textbooks and interviews with of teachers. Findings indicate that Indonesian history textbooks in high schools predominantly cover China, Japan and South Korea, with instruction largely focuses on the Japanese colonial period in Indonesia. Teaching tends to emphasis political and military narratives, offering few contextualization relevant to students' everyday experiences, thereby constraining their understanding. The study highlights the need for collaboration between schools and universities to develop contextualized materials about the region and to relate international or regional issues to local realities. Such an approach would enhance both comprehensiveness and relevance of East Asia history education for students.*

**Keywords:** *East Asia, Indonesian History Textbooks, History Education, Local History*

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## INTRODUCTION

East Asia comprises the People's Republic of China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Mongolia, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau. These states hold a significant position in global economic, political, military, technology and are often regarded as centers of civilization. However, they continue to experience internal conflicts and tensions, as well as frictions with neighboring areas like Southeast Asia (Chen et al., 2024; Hansson et al., 2020; Liu & Cook, 2023; Singh, 2022; Teer, 2024).

The People's Republic of China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea have been particularly influential in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia. For instance, a 2024 visiting class program at the Museum Manusia Purba (Museum of Ancient Man) in Sangiran, Central Java, highlighted to the author the narratives of the People's Republic of China as the origin of Indonesia's ancestors. Preliminary engagement with Denys Lombard's work has corroborated this perspectives, and it has also furnished written evidence of the profound influence of his culture on various aspects of daily life in Indonesia (Lombard, 2005). Additional debates surround the People's Republic of China 's alleged involvement in the failed coup of 30 September 1965 and the China's Belt and Road program, often interpreted as a soft political imposition in Southeast Asia (Hamilton, 2021; Iksan et al., 2024; Mutia & Archellie, 2023; Yotes et al., 2024).

Japans historical and contemporary influences has likewise been widely examined. Scholarship tends to emphasize economic competition between the People's Republic of China and Japan; nuclear cooperation; Japan's influence on Indonesia's broadcasting system; Japan's involvement in mediating the Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation; and Japan's development of irrigation infrastructure in Indonesia (Inuma & Tsukahara, 2015; Masduki, 2023; Nawiyanto et al., 2024; Pressello, 2024; Yan, 2023).

The Republic of Korea, in turn, has played a pivotal role in the propagation of the Korean Wave, otherwise designated as *Hallyu*. This term encompasses a range of cultural phenomena, including entertainment consumption and emotional responses, in addition to the exercise of soft power. In addition to its cultural influence, the Republic of Korea is a major supplier of armaments (Aritenang et al., 2024; Park & Thakkar, 2024; Vial & Hanoteau, 2019). Indeed, the Korean writing system (*Hangeul*)

became the written form of Cia-Cia, an almost extinct language spoken in Buton, Southeast Sulawesi (Rinaldi, 2017).

The pivotal role of East Asia in global politics and economics has prompted Indonesia to establish a dedicated center for the study of the region, along with a master's program. For instance, the Centre for East Asian Studies at Prasetya Mulya University aspires to foster collaboration and further strengthen Indonesia's ties with East Asia. A commitment to developing knowledge and understanding of East Asia is also evident in the East Asian Studies program at the University of Indonesia, which encompasses the domains of history, literature, philosophy, cinema, and cultural studies in both modern and pre-modern periods (Universitas Indonesia, 2024; Universitas Prasetya Mulya, 2024). Meanwhile, East Asian history is also a compulsory three-credit course in both the History and History Education program (Program Studi S1-Pendidikan Sejarah Fakultas Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana, 2023).

In contrast to the aforementioned studies, research on the teaching of East Asia in Indonesian schools remains limited. Previous studies have primarily focused on political, economic, and cultural relation between this region and Indonesia, but just few attention has been given to how these dynamic are represented in school curricula and history textbooks.

This paper therefore revisits this gap by examining the representation of East Asia in Indonesia high school history textbooks and classroom teaching practices. Understanding such representations is crucial, as textbooks and classroom practices play a formative role in shaping students' perceptions of both regional neighbors and Indonesia's place in the world.

This study addresses this gap by examining how East Asia is represented in Indonesian high school history textbooks and teaching practices. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) identify the topics encompassed by the concept of East Asia in textbooks and classroom instruction; (2) analyze how Indonesia and Indonesians are portrayed in these narratives; and (3) assess whether these representations reflect the complexities and contextual realities of contemporary Indonesian society. By doing so, the paper contributes to study on history education and regional studies, while also providing insights into how Indonesian schools position East Asia in relation to national identity and global citizenship.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

History education in Indonesia is conceptualized in diverse ways, integrating both of substantive historical knowledge and A synthesis of these definitions reveals a synthesis of the substantive aspects and pedagogical competencies. Scholars emphasize that effective history teaching should foster historical analysis, interpretation skills, historical judgments, research proficiency, while also engaging with the human dimension of history, connecting past struggles to contemporary challenges (Sasi, 2024; Sasi et al., 2021). This humanistic perspective is not only about transmitting facts but also cultivating empathetic understanding and civic awareness.

In term curriculum content, senior high school history in Indonesia typically covers twelve main topics. They are: (1) introduction to history, (2) origins of ancestors and spice routes in Indonesia, (3) Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms in Indonesia, (4) Islamic kingdoms in Indonesia, (5) colonization and resistance of the Indonesian people, (6) Indonesian national movement, (7) Japanese occupation in Indonesia, (8) proclamation of Indonesian independence, (9) struggle to maintain independence, (10) Liberal Democracy and Guided Democracy governments, (11) New Order government (the authoritarian of president Soeharto, lasting from 1966-1998), and (12) Reform government or the political era after the fall of president Soeharto New Order's regime (Sasi, 2024). These topics are structured progressively across grade X-XII, each supported by designed textbook series. While this structure provides chronological and thematic coverage, it largely reflects a top down, national frameworks of historical knowledge. Again, They do not accomodate historical realities in the local context yet.

Critical studies have further highlighted significant ideological influences in textbook content. As Purwanta and his colleagues point out, Indonesian history textbooks have not functioned merely as neutral sources of knowledge, but rather as instruments through which particular world views and power relations are reproduced. Historically, they have perpetuated colonial discourses that positioned Western culture as the ideal model of modernity, while and portraying Indonesians as passive objects

in the process of social, cultural, and political transformation. Such narratives reduces local agency and reinforced hierarchies of knowledge that privilege the West over local experiences. During the New Order regime, this tendency became even more pronounced. The government strongly and tightly controlled curriculum department and used textbooks as tools of political socialization, strengthening the emphasis on national unity, order, and obedience. Within this framework, history was often narrated through the lens of state, with special attention given to military actors as the central agency of progress and stability (Purwanta, 2018; Purwanta et al., 2021).

The privileging of military and political elites, coupled with the marginalization of local communities, created a version history that was narrow in scope and ideologically charged. As a result, students were routinely exposed to representations of the past that prioritized dominant national and foreign perspectives, while silencing or relegating to the margins the diverse, community-oriented narratives that reflect the complexity of Indonesia's lived historical realities.

Suwignyo similarly critiques Indonesian history textbooks for their lack of novelty and their failure to present the everyday experiences of local communities (Suwignyo, 2014). His observation underscores a broader gap in the literature, i.e. although the curriculum covers extensive historical period and events, there is limited research how history education engages with diverse regional context, cultural identities, or transnational influences, specifically from neighboring East Asian countries. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to how Indonesian history teaching represents Indonesian's own role in regional dynamics, rather than casting them solely as passive recipient of external influences. Even less is known about how textbooks attempt to convey complex socio-cultural realities to students in way that acknowledge plurality, contestation, and lived experience. As result, historical narratives in education remain dominated by overarching national and foreign perspectives, with insufficient space for alternative voices that could enrich student's understanding of Indonesia's past and its position in regional and global histories.

Given the pivotal role of East Asia in global politics, culture, and economy, and its historical and contemporary interactions with Indonesia, there is clear need to examine how this region is represented in high school history education. This study seeks to address this gap by analysing both the substantive content and the pedagogical framing of East Asia in Indonesian history textbooks, with particular focus on how Indonesia and Indonesian are portrayed in relation to regional development. Such an inquiry is important not only for understanding the construction of historical narratives in education, but also for assessing how students are encouraged to position their own national identity within broader regional and global contexts. By adopting this focus, the study aims to provide contextualised and critical perspective on history education that moved beyond narrow colonial and state centric frameworks. Instead, it seeks to highlight transnational and regional dimensions, encouraging approaches to history teaching that acknowledge interconnectedness, plurality, and the mutual shaping of societies across Asia.

## METHOD

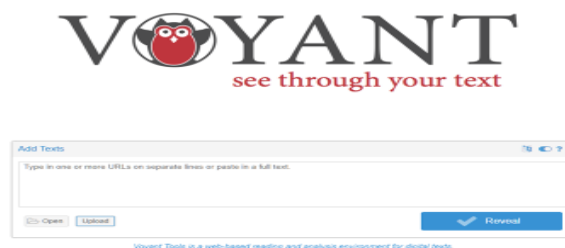
The study was conducted during the odd semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. Data were drawn from Indonesian high school history textbooks. The textbooks represented two curricula: the *Kurikulum 2013 yang Direvisi* (Revised 2013 Curriculum) and the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum).

In addition to textbooks, interviews were conducted to complement and contextualise the findings. Participants were selected purposively due to limited resources and networks. These interviews provided valuable insights into teachers's perspective on the use of textbooks, their interpretation of curricular mandates, and the challenges they face in integrating broader regional and transnational dimensions into classroom instruction.



Figure 1: The textbook that were the source of the study

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, textbooks were digitised and uploaded into *Voyant Tools* ([voyant-tools.org](http://voyant-tools.org)). This is a free web-based text analysis application developed by Stéfan Sinclair & Geoffrey Rockwell. Texts were categories by curriculum and grade level. A total five books were examined: three Indonesian history textbook for grades X, XI and XII of the Revised 2013 curriculum, and two history textbooks for grades XI and XII of the Independent Curriculum. Text book for grade X of the Merdeka Curriculum is excluded due to unavailability— exclusively for Vocational High Schools.



**Figure 2. Corpus analysis application**

Second, keyword frequency, collocation, and topic distribution analyses were conducted to identify recurring representations of East Asian countries. The analysis focused on The People's Republic of China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea, with attention to semantic patterns and discursive framing.

Third, interview transcripts were subjected to thematic coding in order to capture teachers' perspectives on teaching of East Asia history. This stage of analysis highlighted how the educator interpret curricular directives, negotiate textbook content, and adapt material for classroom practice. The interview data provided interpretive insights and pedagogical contexts that were not evident in the text books analysis, thereby offering richer understanding on how representations of East Asia are mediated in educational settings.



**Figure 3. The analysis stages**

Finally, findings from both sources were triangulated to provide a more robust understanding of the representations of East Asia Countries in Indonesian history education. Corpus based patterns from the textbook analysis were systematically compared with themes emerging from teacher interviews to identify convergence and disconvergence. This integrative approach not only strengthened the validity of the study but also produced a more comprehensive account of how East Asia countries are represented within curricular and pedagogical contexts. By linking textual patterns with teachers' interpretive perspectives, the study was able to illuminate both the formal narratives embedded in textbooks and the ways in which these narratives are mediated, adapted, or contested in classroom practice (see Figure 3).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Result

The results indicate that the People's Republic of China (China), Japan, and Korea, particularly the Republic of Korea, are consistently included in the textbooks of the Revised 2013 Curriculum, across all grade levels. In contrast, the Independent Curriculum omits any discussion of Korea in grade XII. This omission also observed in the history instruction at high schools, suggesting that the absence in the curricula directly influences teaching practices. In other words, students following the

Independent Curriculum receive a less comprehensive understanding of East Asian regional dynamics, particularly regarding Korea's historical and contemporary interactions with Indonesia (see Table 1).

**Table 1. East Asia in History Books and Teaching in Indonesian High Schools**

No	States	In the Textbooks					In the Teaching
		The Revised 2013 Curriculum			Merdeka Curriculum		
		Grade X	Grade XI	Grade XII	Grade XI	Grade XII	
1	China	V	V	V	V	V	V
2	Japan	V	V	V	V	V	V
3	Republic of Korea	V	V	V	V	X	X

## Discussion

The analysis of East Asia content in Indonesian high school history textbooks reveals clear patterns across curricula and grade levels. Across the Revised 2013 Curriculum, China receives substantial coverage in grade X text books, with 81 trends including topics such as trade networks, diplomatic relations, the power of civilization, the influence of Chinese culture in Indonesia, the name of the sea which is the source of the conflict between China and Indonesia from a Chinese perspective, Chinese influence in the countries of the Southeast Asian peninsula (Indochina), trade commodities in the form of agarwood and camphor, Chinese influence in Indonesian cuisine, and the closure of China which influenced the entry of Arab traders into the archipelago (Indonesia). Collectively, these trends illustrate a curriculum emphasis on China's historical and cultural impact, highlighting both regional connections and their intersections with Indonesia's own historical development.

In contrast, Japan and Korea receive minimally coverage in this grade level, with only one trend each. The limited material on Japan focuses on the spread of Deuteron Malay race, while the Korean material appears to offer an analogy of the influence of Hindu culture in the archipelago, such as the current Korean Halleyu the availability or accessibility of historical sources. The disparity in coverage highlights how textbook design may shape students's perceptions of regional significance, foregrounding certain historical connections while marginalizing others.

In grade XI, the Revised 2013 Curriculum continues to emphasis China (37 trends), while Japan receives moderate coverage (8 trends), and Korea remains minimally represented (1 trend). The trends on China include information on Cengho (first circumnavigated the globe), cartographers, foreign eastern groups in the Dutch East Indies, trade relations, Chinese junks, the Chinese uprising in Batavia, and Chinese banks during Dutch colonialism in Indonesia. The Japanese material includes the Japanese victory that affected the Dutch East Indies movement and Japanese fascism. The information on Korea contains irrelevant information about the author's educational background (Sardiman & Lestariningsih, 2017). The Independent Curriculum exhibits a similar pattern: 33 trends about China, containing information about the spice trade, trade relations, Chinese news, the Foreign East, the thoughts that influenced the movement (Sun Yat Sen), as well as events that had an impact on Indonesia. Meanwhile, trends about Japan dominated (492 trends) and contain information about the massacre of Japanese people in Batavia, World War II, Japanese colonization and Greater East Asia. While Korea has minimal coverage (6 trends) contained only an explanation that this country also experienced Japanese colonization (Safitry et al., 2021). This persistent underrepresentation of Korea highlights an imbalance in regional historical narratives, privileging China and, to some extent, Japan.

By grade XII, the Revised 2013 Curriculum shows a general decline in the number of trends across all East Asia countries, yet China still receives notable attention (22 trends), followed by Japan (12 trends) and Korea (7 trends). China material for includes information about Communism, particularly regarding the Indonesian Communist Party, which is a banned party in Indonesia. The material on Japan covers topics such as the occupation, resistance to British neocolonialism (the formation of Malaysia), the Intergovernmental Group on Indonesia, the negative image of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the economic power of ASEAN-Japan. The position of East Asia within the Southeast Asian region, especially concerning Indonesia, is also highlighted in the trends about Korea. In this context, the textbook discusses the Republic of Korea's contribution to the ASEAN Summit (providing support for the resolution of the Cambodia issue). Other topics include information on the shared experiences of the Asian economic crisis, tensions on the Korean Peninsula, and the Korean War (Abdurakhman et al., 2018). Meanwhile, textbooks in grade XII

of the Independent Curriculum at this level features Japan (55 trends), China (3 trends), with Korea absent. Narratives concerning Japan generally pertain to the period of Japanese colonization in Indonesia and the proclamation of the Republic of Indonesia's independence. In contrast, narratives regarding China relate to the country's support for the Republic of Indonesia during the United Nations Security Council meeting over the Dutch Military Aggression I on July 27, 1947, as well as the burning of Chinese news offices in Jakarta due to the failed coup of 1965 (Safitry et al., 2022). This distribution points out a clear curricular imbalance, with Korea persistently marginalized and the focus on Japan and China varying significantly between the two curricula.

These patterns are similarly mirrored in the teaching practices observed in Indonesian high school more broadly. Instruction overwhelmingly emphasizes the Japanese colonial period, covering topics from the era of Japanese colonization to the preparation of the news of the proclamation of the Republic of Indonesia in Rengasdengklok and the period of Indonesian independence. The material refers to teaching resources that align with the curriculum by developing a broad learning objective tool. This development is necessary to address the decline in students' literacy in Indonesia. This approach not only guides lesson planning but also supports the students' understanding of key historical events in a systematic manner. Such curricular alignment is particularly important in light of concerns about declining literacy and historical comprehension among students in Indonesia, prompting educators to adopt strategies that reinforce both content knowledge and analytical skills. By emphasizing these specific historical narratives and linking them directly to curriculum objectives, teachers shape students' engagement with history while simultaneously addressing broader educational challenges.

*I see that the material on East Asia and Greater East Asia is more focused on the Japanese occupation, which then leads to Rengasdengklok and Indonesia's independence. This material is connected to grade XI semester II. It then transitions to grade XII in the other semester, addressing the struggle to maintain independence, including how to secure international recognition beforehand. If history is comprehensive, it should be taught accordingly. When teaching, it must align with the curriculum and ATP (Learning Objectives Tool) for its broad development. If children are now provided with a book, they may struggle to engage with it (Rubi, personal communication, 11 September 2024).*

Meanwhile, the material on China primarily focuses more on the Chinese revolution that fueled the nationalist movement in the Dutch East Indies. It also highlights the transnational connections that shaped early Indonesian political activists. In contrast, narrative concerning the Republic of Korea, there is no specific discussion. Several factors contribute to the limitations of teaching East Asia, including students' literacy levels and the relatively restricted range of textbooks and reference materials available to teachers.

*For the Independent Curriculum, history focuses more on Indonesian history. The material on the history of East Asian civilizations emphasizes Japan's entry into Indonesia. The world is represented by Europe and Japan, while China pertains to the Chinese revolution. The students are disinterested in civilizations from other countries. They are indifferent to other nations. That's the challenge. The handbook is minimal, so the teacher must think creatively (Aulia, personal communication, 11 September 2024).*

The results of this research further indicate that regional narrative of the region positions its influence on the Indonesian archipelago, rather than highlighting Indonesia's own agency within regional and global networks. On the other hand, Indonesian are often portrayed as passive actors. They became objects of influence, support, or even victimization rather than as active subjects shaping historical processes. Moreover, these narratives rarely take into account the diverse contexts of school and students, including geographical location or the unique historical experiences of different communities, whether urban centers, towns, districts, villages, or rural hamlets. This lack of contextualization reinforces a narrow, top-down conception of history that marginalizes local perspectives and limits students' understanding of Indonesia's complex interactions within broader regional and global histories.

Some high schools face limitations in teaching East Asia history. Based on interview data these limitations are shaped by several interrelated factors, including the need to adapt to frequent curriculum changes, students' literacy levels, and academic abilities, limited resources for teachers, and the demand for history teachers to continue to be creative in providing contextualised and globalised history learning.

Despite these constraints, schools integrate East Asia history into their curricula within the context of Indonesia's war of independence, placing particular emphasis on political and military developments. However, instruction often does not provide locally or regionally relevant context that would illuminate the historical experiences and issues of East Asian countries themselves. This limitation should not be interpreted as a deficiency on the part of teachers. Rather, it reflects broader influence of the Indonesian historical canon and formal historiography, which tends to foreground national narratives while marginalizing regional and transnational perspectives. Consequently, the scope of teaching remains largely framed by established national priorities in history education.

From theoretical framework, Sasi emphasizes that effective history teaching should integrate substantive historical knowledge with pedagogical competencies, fostering analysis, interpretation, historical judgement, and engagement with human dimension of history. In this light, the emphasis on political-military narratives in Indonesian high school aligns with broader challenges in cultivating historical understanding that connects past struggles to contemporary matters. Moreover, Purwanta highlights that Indonesian history textbooks have historically reproduced colonial discourses, privileging Western culture and portraying the Indonesians as passive object. This aligns with observation where students predominantly engage with political-military as well as anti-Communism propaganda narratives, while local and regional experiences, such as Korean history and broader East Asia context, remain marginal. Suwignyo's critique is also relevant here, noting the failure to represent everyday experiences of local communities.

These discussions suggest that student's understanding of East Asia is shaped by structural and ideological influences embedded in the curriculum and text books. Teacher's creative adaptations mitigate some limitation, but the prevailing historical frameworks continues to privilege dominant narratives and marginalize less studied regions and locality relevant experiences. Addressing these gaps, requires both curriculum revision and pedagogical strategies that integrate local, regional, and global perspectives, ensuring a more comprehensive and balanced approach to history education.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

East Asia constitutes a region of significant historical, political, and economic importance for Indonesia. However, the teaching of history in Indonesia high schools has not been able to capture the reality of this relationship and has only presented the historical experience of being a formerly occupied country, without acknowledging the active role of Indonesia and Indonesians in this relationship, let alone the everyday reality. In other words, the teaching of Southeast Asia in Indonesia remains confined with the canon of Indonesian history and has not been able to present novelty, as argued by Sasi, Purwanta and his colleagues, as well as Suwignyo.

This lack of innovative perspectives led to conclusion that history education needs alternative discourses. One promising approach is fostering collaboration between schools and local universities in exploring the history of Indonesian-East Asian relations and their legacies in everyday life. Such partnerships can support history teachers in developing richer curricula while also helping universities, particularly history and history education programs, engage more directly with practical, classroom oriented applications of historical knowledge. This approach moves history education beyond the ivory tower, aligning classroom learning with its fundamental purpose: to foster critical, contextualized, and engaged understanding.

This study has limitations as it focuses primarily on purposively selected senior high school. Nevertheless, it opens up a discourse on the importance of teaching East Asia from an Indonesian perspective. This is primarily due to Indonesia's relationship with the region, its historical roots and border conflicts, as well as its status as a nation affected by the strong influence of the three countries in the region. Conversely, this discourse also promotes discussion about Indonesia's position in the regional crisis, highlighting the need history education to foster critical and contextualized understanding neighboring realities.

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