Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s “Rashōmon” and the post-World War II high school introductory kokugo curriculum: using study question analysis to determine the factors that have secured its status as primary standard text

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Abstract
In Japan, one of the primary means of exposing young people to works of Japanese literature is through the textbooks used in kokugo [Japanese language] education. Since the education reforms following World War II, primary and secondary school textbooks are produced by a number of private-sector publishers. However, these textbooks must be officially approved by the national Ministry of Education in order to be eligible for selection by school boards for classroom use. As a result, textbook editors, Ministry of Education staff, school boards, and kokugo instructors are some of the key actors that determine the literary works to which young people are exposed.

Akutagawa’s short story “Rashōmon” first appeared in a small number of high school kokugo textbooks in the late 1950s. However, since the 1970s it has attained the status of teiban kyozai [standard text] in the high school introductory kokugo curriculum because it has consistently appeared in a large percentage of textbooks. For instance, “Rashōmon” has been the most commonly included work of modern Japanese fiction in introductory kokugo textbooks for the past several revisions of the Ministry of Education’s High School Course of Study (i.e., the 1970 High School Course of Study (effective 1973-1981), the 1978 High School Course of Study (effective 1982-1993), the 1989 High School Course of Study (effective 1994-2002), and the
1999 High School Course of Study (effective 2003-2012)). Under the 1999 High School Course of Study, it has the unique distinction of being included in every textbook made for the Kokugo Sōgō [Integrated Japanese Language] course. Of the two introductory high school kokugo courses currently offered, Kokugo Sōgō is the one that the majority of students take. Consequently, it is quite likely that several generations of Japanese have read “Rashōmon” in school.

In this paper I propose that textbook editors have consistently chosen to include “Rashōmon” in more high school introductory kokugo textbooks since the 1970s because they believe that it is better suited to teach students the concepts of modern fiction as well as to satisfy the goals of successive High School Courses of Study announced by the Ministry of Education. One way to determine the aims of textbook editors is to analyze the purpose of the study questions and exercises that they create for works included in their textbooks. Therefore, I will focus my analysis on the questions and exercises for “Rashōmon” and those for rival works of modern Japanese fiction (by Akutagawa as well as by other authors) that have appeared in post-World War II introductory kokugo textbooks. Through this analysis I aim to determine what specific factors make “Rashōmon” more attractive to kokugo educators as a teaching material than other competing works of modern Japanese fiction.