

Birth and evolution of “social studies” in Myanmar: dramatic changes in contents and approaches

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Abstract

Purpose – This research clarifies the birth and evolution of “Social Study” in Myanmar through analyzing the differences of contents and approaches between “Social Studies” under the military administration and that under the recent democratic administration.

Design/methodology/approach – The author obtained “Social Studies” textbooks that were used both in the past as well as in present day and translated them into English. The textbooks’ contents were analyzed in detail while referring Japanese and American “Social Studies” textbooks. Specifically, the author focused on the content structure of the textbooks and the learning objectives and approaches used. Each textbook was analyzed in accordance with the era in which they were used considering the social and political conditions at those times. In addition, the author clarified the necessary competencies for the people of Myanmar during the new era through discussions with many Myanmar educators. Based on this research, the author advised the Ministry of Education on the content of new “Social Studies” textbooks and supported their development.

Findings – The idea of child-centered education introduced under the military administration was further strengthened in the recent new “Social Studies” textbooks allowing students to learn by tapping into their interests and also encouraging deep thinking and creativity. This approach changed their learning from memorization without deep thinking in the past to contemplating things and creating new ideas.

Originality/value – The findings can provide curriculum developers and educators in other countries with a broad direction on how to reform “Social Studies” and related subjects curricula and textbooks in their own countries in the future.

Keywords Social studies, Environmental studies, Child-centered education, Expanding environments approach, Social function approach

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The subject “Social Studies” is currently very common. Most people know this subject and its contents because many have studied this subject from primary education to secondary education. Looking back on the history of education however, it is clear that “Social Studies” is quite a new subject. The subject of “Social Studies” first appeared in the United States in 1916. At that time, many immigrants came from European countries to the United States and as a result, the United States was about to transform into a mixed race and ethnic society. At the same time, the rapid progress of industrialization and the penetration of capitalist ideas were about to completely change the society of the United States. Under this situation, the practice of traditional religious education was becoming difficult to conduct in schools. There



were also strong demands for non-religious educational practices from teachers and parents. Instead of the religious education, the enhancement of history education and the establishment of civic education were strongly demanded through social movements. Thus, "Social Studies" was born.

In Japan, the subject of "Social Studies" was introduced in 1947 after Second World War, due to the influence of the United States. Since then, "Social Studies" has become an important subject in Japan's school education just like in the United States. However, the basic concept of "Social Studies" in both countries has been progressing dramatically in accordance with the changes of the times and social conditions.

The major questions about "Social Studies" in Myanmar are: "When was 'Social Studies' established in Myanmar?" and "What kinds of changes have been made in Myanmar's 'Social Studies'?" In general, "Social Studies" is a subject that is closely related to the culture, history and thought of a country. As a result, it is rare for outsiders to get close to "Social Studies" education in other countries. It is therefore usually almost impossible to give some opinions about its content. However, the author has had the opportunity to be involved in Myanmar's "Social Studies" education and also has experience in supporting the development of Myanmar's new "Social Studies" textbooks as an expert for more than 10 years (from 2001 to 2004 and from 2013 to 2021). Based on the knowledge gained from these experiences, the establishment of Myanmar's "Social Studies", the evolution of its concept in Myanmar's educational history and the dramatic changes in Myanmar's "Social Studies" are thoroughly discussed and examined in this paper.

In Myanmar, "Social Studies" is currently taught in primary and lower secondary education, but this paper focuses only on "Social Studies" in primary education as the author has directly been involved with primary education level Social Studies for 10 years. Now, let's discuss and analyze Myanmar's "Social Studies" in detail.

2. History of the establishment and evolution of "social studies" in Myanmar

In Myanmar, the subject of "Social Studies" first appeared in 1952 when the "Education Plan for Welfare State", called "Pyi Daw Tha", was conducted right after independence from Britain. The subject "Social Studies" at that time was named "Social Studies - Geography and History" and the contents were simply "Geography" and "History". This was because "Geography" and "History" both which were taught during the British colonial era, were basically taken over and only the subject name was changed to "Social Studies" in order to make it look different from the previous subjects.

In 1962 when general Ne Win took office and started the military administration under the Revolutionary Council of the Union Burma (RCUB), "Social Studies" was removed from the curriculum and replaced by a new subject named "Environmental Studies". This new subject integrated "Geography", "History" and even "Science" and adopted the philosophy of the child-centered education based on the empiricism that was sweeping the world's educational sector at that time. "Environmental Studies" continued for almost 20 years.

After Myanmar (Burma at that time) officially claimed to be a socialist nation, Ne Win conducted another education reform under the "New Education Program (NEP)" in 1982. In this reform, "Environmental Studies" was abolished and instead of that, two traditional subjects "Geography" and "History" were revived. In addition, the subject equivalent to "Science" disappeared from the curriculum. These separated subjects were implemented in the traditional way such as lectures and memorization.

When various social problems in Ne Win's government became apparent, general Than Shwe took office and launched the "State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)" to renew national affairs. He also set up the "Education Promotion Program (EPP)" and carried out a major curriculum reform. In this reform, the subject "Social Studies" was revived for the first time in 30 years. "Social Studies" combined "Geography", "History", "Moral & Civics" and "Life Skills" and it was practiced only for the upper graders of primary school.

This “Social Studies” was implemented again using the philosophy of the child-centered education and continued for nearly 20 years.

When the Thein Sein administration was inaugurated in 2011 to replace the long-standing military administration in Myanmar, it undertook a large-scale democratization policy and made major reforms in education. This educational reform measure was taken over by the Aung San Suu Kyi administration which was born in 2016 and advocated democracy. Under this new democratic government, a new “Social Studies” was born with completely different contents and learning approaches, which further strengthened the child-centered educational approach by cultivating necessary learning competencies such as thinking ability and creativity. “Social Studies” courses ran throughout all of primary school from grades 1 to 5.

Table 1 shows the historical changes in Myanmar’s “Social Studies”.

3. Concepts of “social studies” in each era

A subject named “Social Studies” was first born right after the independence of Myanmar (Burma at that time). But in fact, two subjects “Geography” and “History” were separately

Age	Subjects set in the curriculum and position of “social studies”
1905-1951 (British colonial era)	<Core Subjects/Compulsory Subjects> English, A Recognized Vernacular*, Mathematics, <u>Geography</u> <Additional Subjects/Compulsory Subjects> Physical Training, Hygiene, <u>History</u> , Needlework (G)**
1952-1965 (Pyi daw tha: education Plan for Welfare State)	<Compulsory Subjects> Burmese, Basic Mathematics, Social Studies (<u>Geography and History</u>), Basic General Science <Additional Subjects> Religious Instruction, Physical Education, Domestic Science (G)**, Agriculture, Handicraft, Art (Drawing and Painting)
1966-1984 (Education reform under the military administration)	Burmese, Basic Mathematics, <u>Environmental Studies</u> , Physical Education and Health, Educational Tasks***
1985-1997 New education programme: NEP)	Ethnic Language Burmese (Myanmar), English, Mathematics, <u>Geography</u> , <u>History</u> Practical Education Development Tasks***
1998-2015 (Education promotion programme: EPP)	<Core Curriculum> Myanmar, English, Mathematics, Natural Science in General Studies (G1-G3), Geography & History in Social Studies (G4-5) <Co-Curriculum> Moral & Civics and Lifeskills in Social Studies (G4-5), Aesthetic Education (Music and Drawing), Physical Education, School Activities, Agriculture
2016-Present education reform under the democratic administration)	Myanmar, English, Mathematics, Science, <u>Social Studies</u> , Morality & Civics, Physical Education, Life Skills, Arts (Visual Art and Performing Art) Local Curriculum****

Note(s): * “A Recognized Vernacular” included Burmese, Tamil, Gujarati, Urdu, Bengali, Hindi, Telugu and Karenic

** (G) means “only for girl students”

*** “Educational Tasks” and “Practical Education Development Tasks” mean a practical training including agricultural work and vocational skills development

**** “Local Curriculum” means subjects developed by local government including ethnic languages, local cultures, local environmentsetc

Source(s): Created by the author with reference to [Office of the Education Commissioner \(1955\)](#), *Creation of New Life Education: Curriculum and Syllabus for primary, middle and high schools*, [U Tan Oo \(1999\)](#), *History of Myanmar Education (Curriculum Sector) 1948-1998*, Myanmar Education Research Bureau

Table 1.
Historical evolution of setting “social studies” in Myanmar’s primary curriculum

taught under the name of “Social Studies”. The name of “Social Studies” is thought to have come from foreign countries, especially with the great influence of the United States. However, it can be said that the background to the birth of “Social Studies” in the United States was not well known among Myanmar’s (Burmese) educators. At that time, the new government of Myanmar (Burma at that time) was trying to incorporate new trends from overseas towards the formation of a new nation after independence. There was no doubt that the subject name of “Social Studies” was reflected upon and found suitable for creating a new civil society. Therefore, it is clear that the contents were conventional “Geography” and “History” and that the objective of “Social Studies” at that time was to merely acquire knowledge through lectures and rote-memorization only.

In Myanmar, university professors commissioned by the Ministry of Education have traditionally had the responsibility to write school textbooks. They usually started by writing high school textbooks, then wrote junior high school textbooks with simplified contents. Finally they produced primary school textbooks by reducing contents to the simplest form. Therefore, it can be said that the concept of those school textbooks from high school to primary school were almost the same with academic and theoretical content.

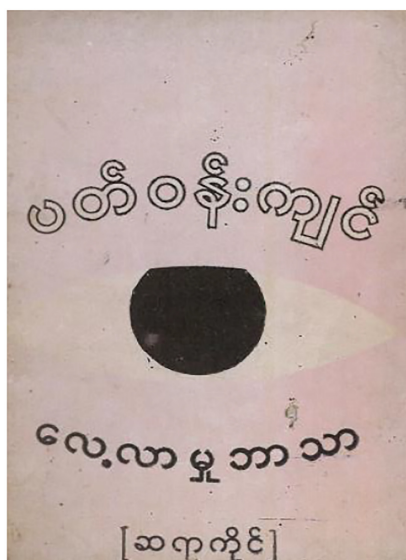
As a result, it is safe to say that Myanmar’s “Social Studies” is one of the most frequently changed subjects, whose contents and learning approaches have been evolved dynamically along with the subject name, according to each era. At one time, it existed as a combined subject of “Geography” and “History”, at another time as two separate subjects of “Geography” and “History” and at other time as an integrated subject of various other subjects. In this section, two different “Social Studies”, which have typical characteristics in the history of Myanmar’s education, are chosen and discussed specifically. The first “Social Studies” is a subject, named “Environmental Studies” that was implemented under general Ne Win’s military administration between 1966 and 1984. The second “Social Studies” is a subject that was practiced under Than Shwe’s SPDC administration between 1998 and 2015.

(1) “Environmental Studies” as an Integrated Subject under the Military Administration (1966-84)

As a part of the educational reform under Ne Win’s administration, a new subject was set up that integrated “Geography”, “History” and “Science”. This was called “Environmental Studies” and it was implemented in primary schools nationwide. The author interviewed several officials of the Ministry of Education of Myanmar about how and why this new subject was created. According to these interviews, the Ne Win’s government decided to integrate “Geography”, “History” and “Science” subjects into one new subject. At that time, combining “Geography”, “History” and “Science” together was popular in western countries. Ne Win, wanting to appeal to the people of Myanmar that his administration was an advanced and forward thinking, adapted this concept, something that had never happened before in Myanmar’s educational history. The contents were then simplified as the contents of all subjects had a strongly academic and theoretical tendency which was quite difficult for students at the primary education level. Let’s take a concrete look at the content of “Environmental Studies”.

What can be seen from the grade-3 textbook of “Environmental Studies” (Figure 1) is that all contents (School map, school environment, buildings and environment, plants, animals and products, etc.) were mainly composed of issues that were in line with student’s daily lives and experiences so that students could proceed with their learning actively based on the knowledge they already had. In addition, it is also clearly shown in the teacher’s manuals that the teaching approaches and instruction methods emphasized dialogue between the teacher and students. Therefore, students could express their own opinions and thoughts in a fun and positive manner during lessons. Such child-centered educational content and approach were

Figure 1.
Cover of the
“environmental studies
grade 3” textbook



Source(s): Revolutionary Government of the Union of Burma Textbook Committee (1966), Environmental Studies Grade 3

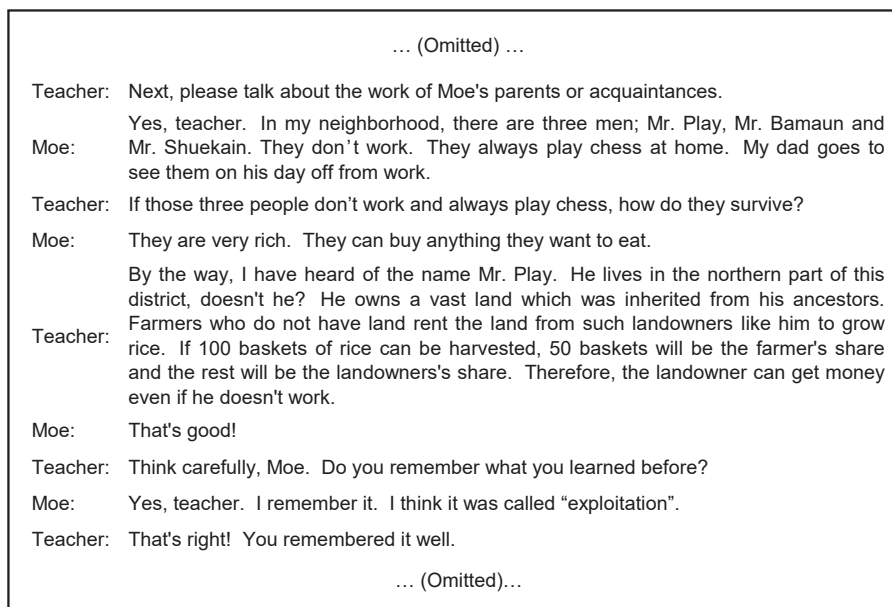
entirely new in Myanmar’s (Burmese) education at that time. This “Environmental Studies” provided students with geographical, historical and scientific knowledge in an easy-to-understand manner by connecting the content being taught to the student’s own everyday life experiences while also providing them with opportunities to discuss with the teachers. This is a radically different approach compared to the past that focused solely upon teachers giving lectures on academic and theoretical contents which students memorized by reading these contents out loud over and over again without thinking about the ideas and concepts deeply.

In order to promote such new teaching and instruction approaches nationwide and to introduce them to teachers who were not accustomed to such methods, the teacher’s manual describes a model example of a dialogue between the teacher and students as shown in [Figure 2](#).

This is very similar to the situation in Japan’s first “Social Studies” textbook published in 1947 after Second World War. At that time, the Japanese government first created “Social Studies” based on the United States’ advice and the guideline for teachers described specific examples of how to teach students, which were quoted from the teaching manuals issued by the state of California, called the “California Plan”. Similarly, “Environmental Studies” started in 1966 and was a new concept that had never been seen before in Myanmar (Burma). The government made its best effort to spread this nationwide by showing specific model examples in the teacher’s manuals.

(2) “Social Studies” under the SPDC Administration (1998-2015)

After abolishing “Environmental Studies” in 1985, the traditional subjects of “Geography” and “History” appeared again in the curriculum and continued to be practiced for 13 years. However, during the 1990s, various educational problems became apparent, such as extremely low enrollment rates, especially in primary education, significant shortage of



Source(s): Revolutionary Government of the Union of Burma Textbook Committee (1966), Environmental Studies Grade 3

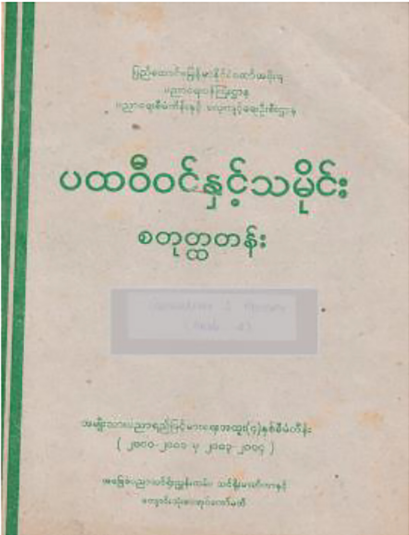
Figure 2.
Example of
"environmental studies
teacher's manual"

school facilities and teachers, repeated civil war near the borders, etc. To solve such problems, general Than Shwe's administration conducted the EPP which focused on improving primary education curriculum, teaching and learning approaches and evaluation of students' academic ability. In this curriculum reform, the subject of "Social Studies" was revived and was implemented for grades 4 and 5 of primary schools.

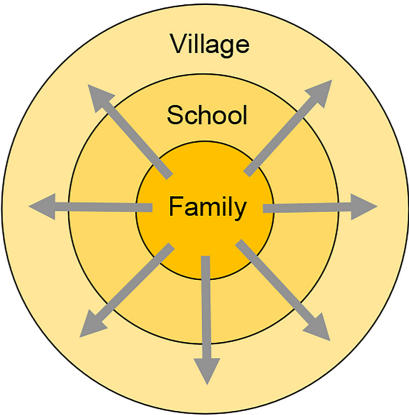
It is said that the creation of this "Social Studies" was greatly influenced by a Japanese curriculum expert (who is not the author) who was dispatched by the Japanese government. For the newly established government led by general Than Shwe, adopting new ideas coming from a foreign curriculum (in this case, the Japanese curriculum), was thought to be a good way to raise public support for Than Shwe's regime. One of the ideas was an attempt to integrate not only traditional subjects such as "Geography" and "History", but also subjects such as "Moral & Civics" and "Life Skills" into one subject called "Social Studies". The second idea was an attempt to integrate the contents of "Geography" and "History" as much as possible. The first attempt was only half successful. This is because each subject was conducted separately under the name of "Social Studies" just as it was in 1952 shortly after independence. On the other hand, the second attempt was successful to some extent and it was quite novel for that time, leaving its mark in the history of "Social Studies" in Myanmar.

So, let's look closely at "Social Studies" implemented under the SPDC administration. The "Geography & History" textbook for grade 4 (Figure 3) was composed of two sections: "Geography" section from chapters 1 to 11 and "History" section from chapters 12 to 19. In the "Geography" section, so-called "Expanding Environments Approach" was adopted, in which the areas covered by learning gradually become wider, to include such topics as "family", "school" and "village" as shown in Figure 4. In the "History" section, famous kings of each dynasty were studied in chronological order, such as "Anawrahta (1044-1077, the first king of the Bagan Dynasty)", "Kyansittha (1084-1113, the third king of

Figure 3.
Cover of “geography
and history grade 4”
textbook



Source(s): Ministry of Education (2000),
Geography & History Grade 4



Source(s): Created by the author

Figure 4.
Expanding
environments
approach

the Bagan Dynasty)”, “Bayint Nuung (1550-1581, the third king of Hantharwaddy Dynasty)”, “Alaungmintaya (1752-1760, the first king of the Konbaung Dynasty)”, “Mindon (1853-1878, the tenth king of the Konbaung Dynasty)”.

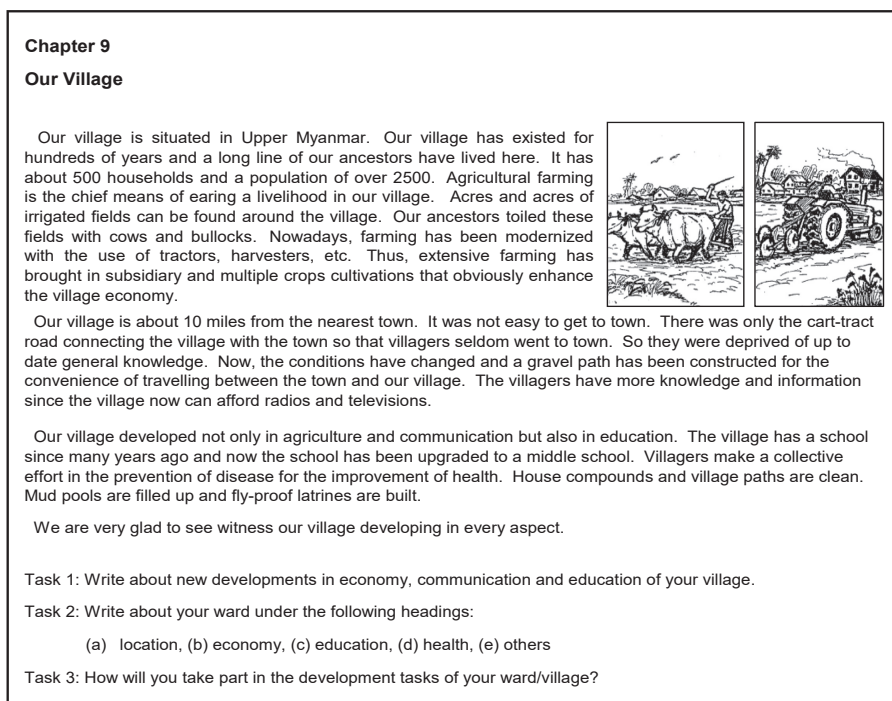
On the other hand, “Geography & History” textbook for grade 5 had a completely different structure of contents compared to the grade-4 textbook. The chapters of geographical content and historical content appeared alternately. For example, chapter 5 was geographical content about Kachin State and chapter 6 was a Kachin hero during the British colonialism. Chapter 7 was geographical content about Kayah State and chapter 8 was a story about a patriotic Kayah leader. The two chapters form one set, first one about the geographical issue of a

“Division/State” in Myanmar’s administrative divisions, and then another to learn about a historical figure who is considered a hero in that area.

Since the structure of the contents of “Social Studies” experienced changes at that time, teaching and learning approaches were also improved from one-sided lectures on the contents of textbooks and learning centered on memorizing and verbally repeating descriptions of the textbooks over and over to collaborative learning based on the child-centered education that incorporates group learning. This is because the Japanese government, including the author, introduced the philosophy of child-centered education to Myanmar’s education sector by holding seminars and training for educators and teachers intensively nationwide.

In a grade-4 geography lesson of “Social Studies” as shown in [Figure 5](#), the teacher first read the textbook from the beginning to the end and then he/she asked several students to read it sentence by sentence. After reading, the teacher asked several questions such as “Where is our village situated?”, “How many years did our village exist?”, “How many households and people are there in our village?”, etc. Most students answered by reading the relevant part of the textbook aloud. Such questions and answers were usually repeated and after this activity, when students have memorized most of the contents of the textbook, the teacher finally moved on to the tasks. The teacher usually used the groupwork technique to discuss each task in groups. From time to time, the teacher went around each group to give advice.

In a grade-5 history lesson of “Social Studies” as shown in [Figure 6](#), the teacher read the textbook from the beginning to the end thoroughly. Then he/she asked several students to



Source(s): Ministry of Education (2000), Geography & History Grade 4, pp.15-16 (translated by the author)

Figure 5.
Example of geography
contents

Figure 6.
Example of history
content

Chapter 8

Saw La Paw, the Patriotic Leader

Myanmar's patriotic leaders gathered arms and men as much as possible and fought against the British from the moment they heard the country had been invaded by the British colonists. Anti-colonist national movements occurred in the countryside. Saw La Paw, the Kayah Sawbwa was one of the patriotic leaders who fought against the British.



Saw La Paw made Saw Lon his headquarters. The Kayah patriots who admired Saw La Paw joined him. Saw La Paw was against anyone who sided with the British. He attacked the Mauk Mei region and banished the Mauk Mei Sawbawa for siding with the British. The British then sent forces to attack Mauk Mei. They claimed compensation from Saw La Paw for the damages caused in Mauk Mei. Saw La Paw refused to comply and went on fighting.

In 1888, the British sent two great army troops and attacked Saw La Paw's Kayah patriotic forces. Saw La Paw resisted the British over and over. However, the British with their greater arms power succeeded and Saw La Paw's headquarters in Saw Lon fell into their hands.

Despite this, the fact that the Kayah patriots led by Saw La Paw fought bravely against a British army that was far more powerful than theirs is something to be proud of.

Task 1: Why did Saw La Paw and the Kayah patriots fight the British colonists?

Task 2: Describe how Saw La Paw fought against the British.

Source(s): Ministry of Education (2000), Geography & History Grade 5, pp. 18-19.
(translated by the author).

read the passage sentence by sentence. After reading the passage two or three times, the teachers wrote important words such as “patriotic leader”, “Kayah patriots”, “patriotic forces” and “patriotic inhabitants” on the blackboard and asked students what these words mean. After confirming the meaning of those words, the teacher asked students some questions such as “Who did the Myanmar patriotic leaders fight against?”, “Why did they fight against the British?”, “Who was the Kayah patriotic leader?”, etc. Most students easily answered these questions without any difficulties because all the answers were in the textbook. Then, the teacher asked students to read the textbook together again. After this, the teacher finally moved to tasks provided in the textbook. The teacher usually used groupwork to discuss those tasks. Since similar questions had already been asked by the teacher, the students were able to express their opinions well in their groups.

The “Social Studies” textbooks used in these lessons were significantly different from those used before. Especially in the grade-5 textbook, it was emphasized that geographical and historical issues are not separate, but rather closely related to each other. In addition, adapting the “Expanding Environments Approach” was new and teaching and learning approaches were greatly changed moving away from the traditional “Geography” and “History” teaching method where the teacher gave a one-sided lecture and forced students to copy the content of the textbook into a notebook. However, these approaches have not yet reached a sufficient level of child-centered education because students do not use deep thinking during their learning. Actually, there have been major obstacles obstructing the spread of child-centered education and leaning that enhances students’ thinking and creativity. The biggest obstacle was the content of the textbooks. In the “Geography” section,

descriptions in the textbook were still so abstract and general that students had nothing to contemplate about. In the “History” section, on the other hand, the heroic stories about kings and soldiers contained very strong values such as “patriotism” and “loyalty”. Therefore, there was no room for students to form opinions about these figures. In fact, students were forbidden to give negative opinions about these figures. In the end, there was no other way but to give a routine opinion, such as “they are exemplary figures”.

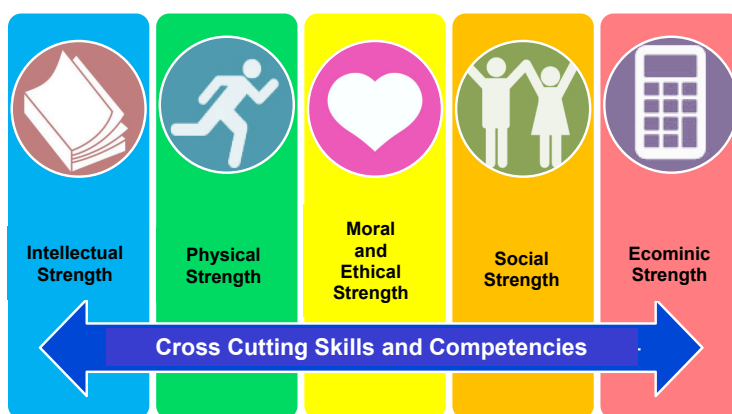
4. “Social Studies” that Meets the Demands of the New Democratic Era (2017-Present)

It was necessary to completely revise the textbooks using a holistic perspective such as qualifications and capacity development required, in order to remove such obstacles and spread child-centered education in Myanmar. Although the content of the textbooks had been revised every time educational reform took place, these reforms were still highly academic, abstract and general as the traditional textbook development system in which university professors mainly wrote the textbooks was not changed.

The new attempt to reform Myanmar’s education started in 2011 under Thein Sein’s administration. This education reform encompassed not only the curriculum from primary to secondary education, but also the educational system. Up to now (2022), curriculum reform was almost completed, but the reform of the educational system is still only halfway finished (It will be completed in 2028).

In this reform, the “Curriculum Framework”, or the grand design of the curriculum, was created. This happened for the first time in Myanmar’s educational history. This is because, in the past, textbooks and teacher’s manuals had all played a role in the curriculum. In this “Curriculum Framework”, the “Five Major Ability Model for Learning in the 21st Century” was clarified as shown in Figure 7. This model emphasizes (1) Intellectual Strength, (2) Physical Strength, (3) Moral and Ethical Strength, (4) Social Strength and (5) Economic Strength. Each strength includes knowledge and competencies as shown in the table below (see Table 2).

Based on this framework, the newest “Social Studies” textbooks as shown in Figure 8 were developed by collaborative work of various people with diverse perspectives, including university professors, staff of the Ministry of Education, educators from teacher training colleges and teachers from schools as well as Japanese experts.



Source(s): Ministry of Education (2013), National Curriculum Framework

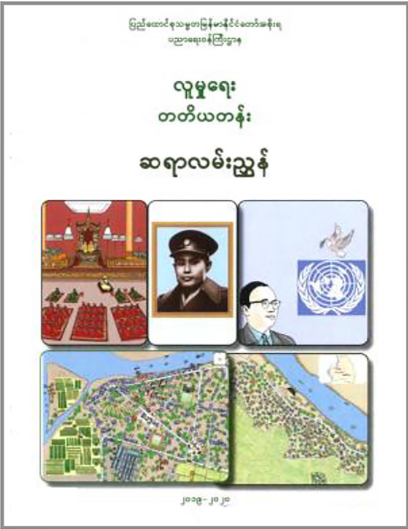
Figure 7.
Five major ability
model for learning in
the 21st century

Table 2.
The detailed
knowledge and
competencies included
in the model

The Detailed Knowledge and Competencies Included in the Model		
Strengths	Knowledge	Competencies
(1) Intellectual Strength	• Academic Literacy (Language, Mathematics, and Science) • Environmental Literacy	• Language / Literacy Skills • Mathematical Skills • Scientific Skills • ICT Skills • Creative and Innovation Skills
(2) Physical Strength	• Health Literacy	• Health-related Lifeskills • Healthy and Sustainable Environment
(3) Moral and Ethical Strength	• Global Awareness and Civic Literacy • Moral, Ethical and Aesthetic Literacy	
(4) Social Strength		• Interpersonal Skills (Social Skills, Peace Building Skills, Communication Skills) • Intrapersonal Skills (Self-Motivated Learning and Life-Long Learning)
(5) Economic Strength	• Financial Literacy • Economic Literacy • Business Literacy • Entrepreneurial Literacy	• Vocationally Relevant Skills • Employability Skills
Cross Cutting Skills and Competencies	• Higher Order Thinking Skills • Cognitive Skills, Creative Thinking Skills, Problem Solving Skills • Leadership Skills	

Source(s): Ministry of Education (2013), *National Curriculum Framework*, Myanmar

Figure 8.
Cover of new “social
studies grade 5”
textbook



Source(s): Ministry of Education (2021),
Social Studies Grade 5

The new “Social Studies” textbook (grades 1 to 5) has major characteristics that have never been seen in the previous textbooks. The first characteristic is that it aims to cultivate good

civil qualities that can support a democratic society in the 21st century. These qualities include the five major abilities mentioned above, awareness as a democratic and peaceful society, respect for one's and other's personalities, multifaced thinking and fair judgment, etc. The second characteristic is that the content was constructed by using the "Expanding Self-Environments Approach" which is an extension of the conventional "Expanding Environments Approach". This is because the "Expanding Environments Approach" takes into account the criticism that the society to be leaned has been separated from the students themselves and that the content has been set with spatial expansion based on its own logic. The new "Expanding Self-Environments Approach" positions students themselves at each stage of the society which they are learning about so that they can think deeply about what they should think and how they should act in that society. The third characteristic is that the idea of "Social Function Approach" which is used as a framework for content structure and thinking. The "Social Function Approach" was originally known as a framework for determining the "Core Curriculum" and the scope of "Social Studies" and was used in the Virginia Plan, which is an early "Social Studies" curriculum in the United States. The "Social Function Approach" is a universal analytical framework that seeks to understand the current situation of social life, its history and its future prospects by understanding the fundamental social functions and their interrelationships. The fourth characteristic is to adopt the active deep learning method as a students' learning method. For example, the contents of "history" sections focus on famous figures such as kings and cultural events at that time. Students are encouraged to imagine what kind of situation society was at that time by using provided information from the textbook. Let's take a look at some specific contents of the new "Social Studies".

(1) Chapter 1. Our Town (Grade 3)

This chapter is composed of two sections, "The town where Maung Maung lives" and "Home industry of the town where Maung Maung lives". This chapter focuses on Maung Maung, a fictional character who lives in a small town in the Ayeyarwady region called Nyaung Don which is located 50 km northwest of Yangon. Students learn about topography, land use, people, main industries, road conditions and traffic. In the latter part of the chapter, banana chip production is introduced as a local industry which is the source of livelihood for local people. Students then learn how to make delicious banana chips.

STEP 1: Learn about the town of Nyaung Don

In order for students to learn about the town of Nyaung Don, an illustration of a map (Figure 9) is shown in the textbook. Students learn about the characteristics of the town. While looking at the map, students learn about the shape of roads, how houses are arranged and how land is used. While reading the explanation of the town by a local officer as shown in Figure 9, students can understand the town very well.

STEP 2: Learn about people's lives and local industries

No matter what kind of land there is, people live there and various production activities are carried out there. Students have learned that the town of Nyaung Don has many rivers and lakes so many locals are engaged in the fishery and fish processing industries. Also, they learned that there are many banana trees in the surrounding area and that banana chip production is a popular industry. Therefore, this chapter focuses on the production of banana chips. Students learn about how people engage in this industry, what the manufacturing process is and learn how to make delicious banana chips (Figure 10).

STEP 3: Students present what they have learned and summarize the characteristics of the area



Nyaung Don is a delta town situated in the Ayeyarwaddy region. The Ayeyarwaddy and Panhlaing rivers are situated near Nyaung Don. Floods usually happen because there is a lot of rainfall. So, flood walls are built at the waterfront. In summer and winter when water levels in the river drop, silt is deposited, and sandbanks and an alluvial island appear. These places are very fertile for agriculture. Local people use these rivers for daily use and transportation. Moreover, they are used for trading local products.

Nyaung Don has a population of over 20,000 with over 5,000 households. Burmese, Kayin and other national races are living in Nyaung Don. Due to convenient transportation, people settle along the Panhlaing river more than other places. There are many pagodas and other religious buildings. Many people are Buddhists and the rest are other religions.

Since there are many rivers and lakes near Nyaung Don, people work in industries such as fishery and making fish paste and dry fish. Banana plants are found near lakes, and the banana chip industry is famous in Nyaung Don. In addition, there are other industries such as fried peas, rope twisting, construction of buildings, wood and bamboo shops, rice mills, wood factories and a broker sale center. Rice is primarily grown in fields around the town. In the plantations, seasonal fruits and vegetables are grown and exported to Yangon everyday. As the Yangon-Pathein highway is located near Nyaung Don, people can go to towns in the Ayeyarwaddy and Yangon regions.

Yankintha (Naung Chaungtha) bathing beach where people from different places come and visit is situated near Nyaung Don. Because of this bathing beach, local people and people living near Nyaung Don have job opportunities.

Figure 9.
Map of Nyaung don
and explanation by
local officer

Source(s): Ministry of Education (2019), Social Studies Grade 3, pp.2-3, p.8

In this chapter, various information about the town of Nyaung Don and its local industry is provided in the textbook. But it is not important to memorize all of them. If students memorize the description in the textbook as it is, it is no different from the educational method that Myanmar has traditionally used. What is important in the new “Social Studies” is to understand the situation of Nyaung Don and the local industry there by having each student discuss what they learned from the information and summarize their findings comprehensively.

In the textbook, an illustration (Figure 11) is shown in order for teachers to understand and practice a new form of learning in which students exchange and present their opinions in small groups. Through such learning activities, perspectives and ways of thinking about social events are cultivated which leads to the development of civil qualities.

At the end of this chapter, there is an exercise that is not dependent upon only memorizing terms and phrases. The activity is making a poster depicting the manufacturing process of banana chips by using the information from the textbook. In doing such an activity, it is

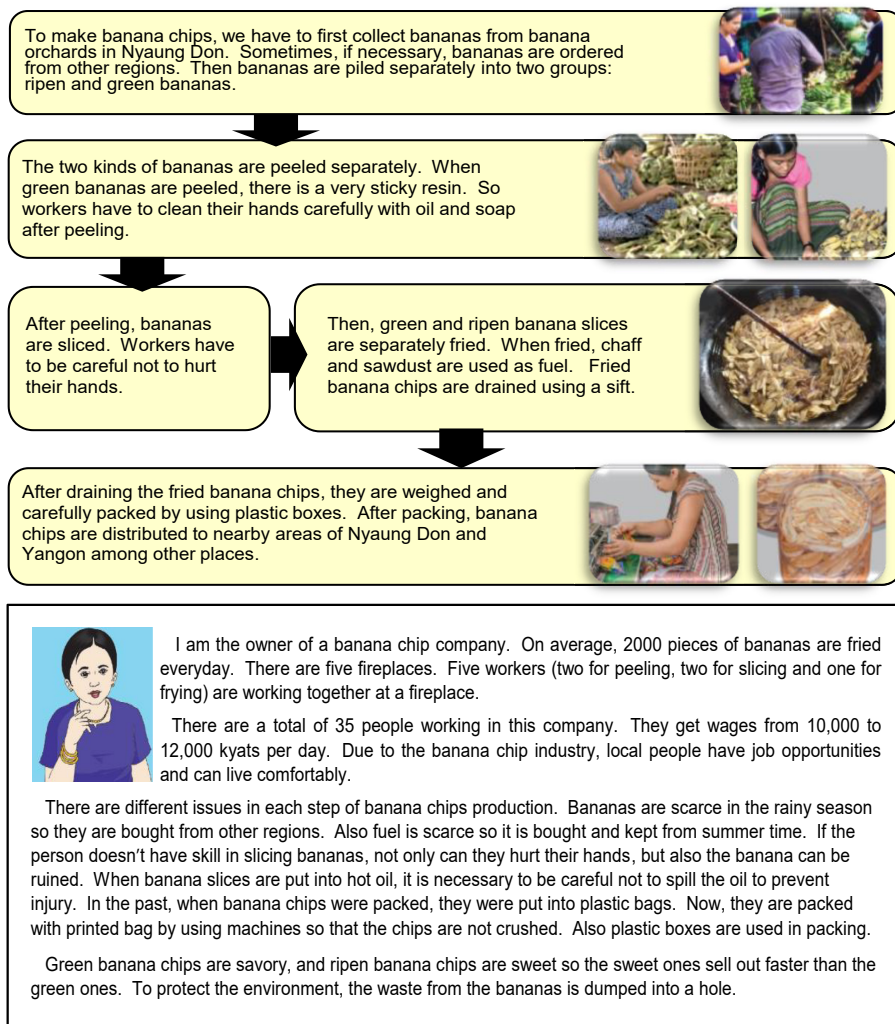


Figure 10.
Process of making
banana chips and story
by the owner

Source(s): Ministry of Education (2019), Social Studies Grade 3, pp.11-14

necessary for students to have the ability to digest and understand the obtained information in their own way and to recreate it according to their own understanding.

STEP 4: Think about the situation in the area where students actually live.

This chapter deals with one town called Nyaung Don because it is the area where Maung Maung lives, but it can be said that any town in the country can be the focus of a lesson. The most important point is to get to know the area in which the students live, not necessarily to know the unknown town of Nyaung Don. However, the reason for the dealing with the town of Nyaung Don in the textbook is to learn how to know what the town is like. From the map of Nyaung Don shown in this chapter, students can learn that a map is necessary for town research and from the story told by the local officer, they can realize that it is important to talk



Figure 11.
Image of group
discussion

Source(s): Ministry of Education (2019),
Social Studies Grade 3, p.13

to and interview people who are familiar with the town. In addition, from the banana chip manufacturing process, students can understand that it is also important to visit the factory and listen to the stories from those who work there.

In fact, the real objective of this chapter is to learn how to learn the new “Social Studies”. This is also a way of learning to cultivate civil qualities.

However, criticism from educators and schools may emerge such “This new activity is not possible to conduct!”, since such an activity includes social tours and interviews with people. Such a lesson has not been carried out in Myanmar for a long time. With this in mind, the survey of the town in which students actually live in is stated as “it is desirable to have such lessons for advanced learning but only in schools where it is possible”.

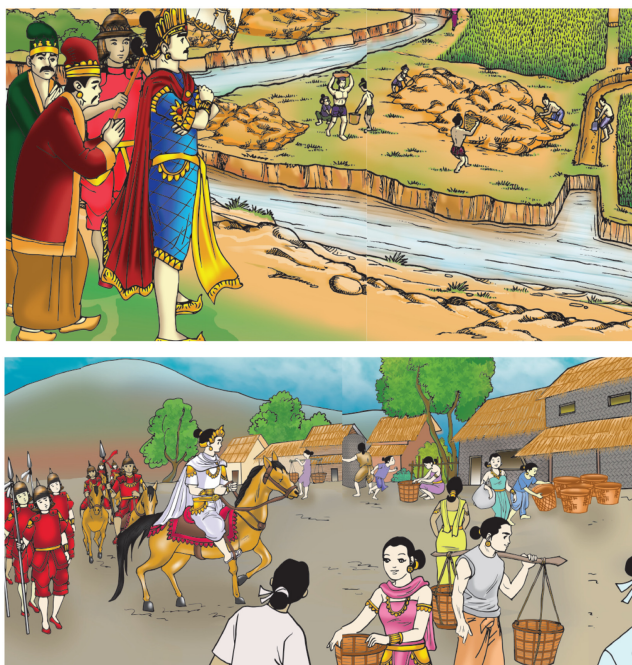
(2) Chapter 4. Bagan Era (Grade 4)

In grade 4, systematic history learning begins and learning starts with the Bagan Dynasty, the first unified dynasty in Myanmar. In the first half of this chapter, students learn about the formation of the Bagan Dynasty and the reasons for its prosperity by using a map and illustrations as shown in [Figure 12](#). In the second half, students focus on the culture of the Dynasty and move on to learning about the social situation and the characteristics of the Bagan Dynasty. In particular, the study of the Myazedi inscription preserved at the Myazedi pagoda in Bagan is one typical example of the new “Social Studies”. Let’s take a closer look at what students are learning in this chapter.

STEP 1: Learn about the importance of Myazedi inscription

The Myazedi inscription means “Stupa (zedi)” in “Emerald (mya)” and was named after it was found near the Myazedi Temple in the village of Minkabar, south of Bagan. This inscription is famous as the oldest inscription in Myanmar and was registered as a UNESCO’s Memory of the World (MOW). In the textbook, there is the following picture and explanation.

By looking at the above explanation and picture ([Figure 13](#)), students can understand that the Myazedi inscription, which is often seen in newspapers, magazines and various photo books, is very important in the history of Myanmar.



Source(s): Ministry of Education (2020), Social Studies Grade 4, pp.42-43, 46-47

Figure 12.
Illustrations of the
bagan dynasty

In the Bagan Era, Pyu, Mon, Pali and Myanmar writings were found. Myanmar literature developed in the 11th century A.D. during the early period of the Bagan Era. The Myazedi stone inscription was the most well-known stone inscription among the inscriptions of the Bagan Era. Prince Raja Kumar, a son of King Kyansittha, wrote this inscription in four languages; Pyu, Mon, Pali and Myanmar.



Figure 13.
Picture of the Myazedi
inscription and its
explanation

Source(s): Ministry of Education (2020), Social Studies Grade 4, p.50

STEP 2: Think about four languages

The Myazedi inscription is a four-sided stone pillar, each of side has the same description of the situation at the time and the achievements of King Kyansittha written in Pyu, Mon, Pali and Burmese (or Myanmar) languages as shown in [Figure 14](#). The question for students to think about here is why the same content is written in four different languages. Thinking

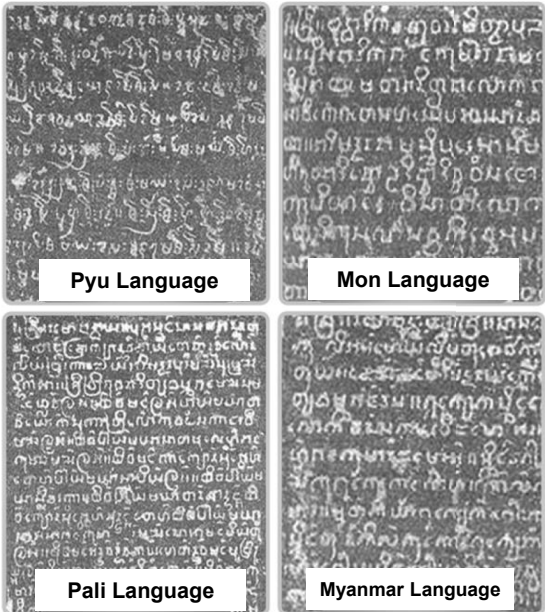


Figure 14.
Inscriptions written in
four languages

Source(s): Ministry of Education (2020), Social Studies
Grade 4, p. 51

about this is the most important learning activity here and it leads to a better understanding of the social situation at the time.

Let me explain briefly about each language. First of all, Pyu was the language used by the Pyu people who lived in the Ayeyarwady River basin from the 2nd century BC to 9th centuries AD. However, from the latter half of the 9th century AD when the Burmese oppressed the Pyu, its frequency of use gradually decreased and it almost disappeared in the 13th century.

Secondly, Mon is the language used by the Mon tribe who lived in the southeastern part of Myanmar today. It is said that the Myanmar people learned various things from the Mons because the Mons at that time formed a developed kingdom and had a high cultural standard. Theravada Buddhism is a typical example. Also, King Kyansittha, who quickly realized that the power of the Mon tribe and their kingdom could not be ignored, married Princess Khin Oo of the Mons to establish a close relationship with the Mons.

Thirdly, Burmese (or Myanmar) is generally classified into three categories, “Old Burmese”, “Medium Burmese” and “Modern Burmese”, but the one used in the Myazedi inscription is “Old Burmese”. This is a Burmese version of the characters used by the Mon tribes since the mid-11th century.

Finally, Pali was a language used in ancient mid-western India, and its origins can be traced back to around the 3rd century BC. The scriptures of Theravada Buddhism from India and Sri Lanka are written in Pali language. It is often confused with Sanskrit, but while Sanskrit is a literary and elegant language, Pali is a kind of slang.

STEP 3: Imagine the social situation of the Bagan Dynasty

Based on each of these linguistic backgrounds, when considering why the Myazedi inscription is written in four languages, the following four points can be inferred. The first is

that there were still quite a few ancient Pyu people in the Bagan Dynasty at that time. Since the Bagan Dynasty was established in the middle of the 9th century and the reign of King Kyansittha ran from the end of the 11th century to the beginning of the 12th century, there was more than half a century before the Pyu people almost disappeared.

The second is that King Kyansittha had a relationship with the Mon tribe and a considerable number of Mons came to live in the Bagan Dynasty. It is also believed that the various cultural activities and languages of the Mon tribe were respected to a large extent.

The third is that Theravada Buddhism was very important in the Bagan Dynasty and reading the Buddhist scriptures written in Pali was one of the highest social statuses. The fact that the monk named Shin Araham of the Mon tribe was invited to introduce Theravada Buddhism during the time of King Anawrahta is evidence that had to be handed down during the time of King Kyansittha.

The final point is that the unique character of the Myanmar people who built the Bagan Dynasty was finally created. It is believed that having a unique character and language raised the cultural standard and made it possible to maintain the dynasty for a long period of time.

In this way, the goal of the new "Social Studies" is to decipher the social situation at that time from the fact that there are descriptions in four different languages on the Myazedi inscription. In other words, learning can be achieved in the new "Social Studies" by students trying to understand the social situation at that time through analyzing historical materials and data. Thus, the civil qualities necessary to live in an information-based society which is becoming increasingly more complicated in the modern times, can be cultivated.

In summary, the characteristics of the new "Social Studies" are as follows. The objectives of this newest "Social Studies" are to cultivate good civil qualities including the five major abilities of intellectual, physical, moral and ethical, social and economic strengths. The structure of the content is based on the "Expanding Self-Environmental Approach" and the "Social Function Approach". With such new objectives and structures, an active deep learning approach can be used to promote students' learning in which they are able to digest various information and reconfigure this information with deep thought through the child-centered education.

5. Conclusion

Myanmar's "Social Studies" has gone through various changes since it first appeared in 1952, when Myanmar first became independent. The first "Social Studies" was merely nominal and in reality it dealt with fairly academic contents such as "Geography" and "History". However, it seems that the child-centered education based on empiricism has been practiced for some time since the introduction of "Environmental Studies". And from 1998, "Social Studies" that strengthened the idea of child-centered education began to be conducted, but the content was still academic and it contained some kinds of strong values. Therefore, there was a huge obstacle limiting students' ability to use their thinking skills in order to learn. That is where the new "Social Studies" came into being. Under the ambitious goal of cultivating the five abilities and competencies required by society in the 21st century, the content has been greatly changed to be able to actively engage in learning by exercising deep thinking skills. This content change was made using principles and approaches such as the "Expanding Self-Environments Approach" and the "Social Function Approach".

With the introduction of new "Social Studies", many changes were reported by school teachers, such as "Students are interested and actively participated in classes" and "Students ask many questions to the teacher", etc. There is also a report from home that "When a child goes to school happily and comes back, he/she talks about what he/she learned that day".

However, just as these reports began to appear, the unexpected situation of the COVID-19 epidemic and military coup occurred and schools were closed for a while. Educational

activities were not smoothly carried out. As a result, “Social Studies” as well as Myanmar’s education should be monitored for a while.

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