

# Some Aspects of Changing Japanese Education

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Education in Japan has experienced two great changes during the last one hundred years. The first change occurred following the *Meiji* Restoration in 1868 when the westernization or modernization of Japan began. The second change was the change in 1947, immediately after the World War II, when it is said that the democratization of Japan started.

Before the *Meiji* Restoration, there were no public schools or western type modern schools, mainly because of the national isolation of Japan for about three centuries in which Japan had no contacts with other nations except Holland and China and had remained as a feudal nation under the rule of the *Tokugawa Shogunate*. This does not mean that there were no formal institutions of education in Japan before that time. There were several kinds of private schools.

Historically speaking, it can be said that formal education in Japan began in the sixth century, when Chinese characters were introduced into Japan. Even before that time, the mythological stories were taught by priests or poets informally, but there were no school systems. Between the sixth and eighth centuries, formal education was carried out eagerly and even a university was established. Chinese philosophy and literature were taught. The eagerness for education was prompted by the demands of the courtiers, because for them the ability to write Chinese and the knowledge of the Confucian classics were conceived of as indispensable in the court life. So, as a natural result of this, the education at that time was strictly restricted to the sons of the nobility or the leisure class. Until the seventeenth or eighteenth century, the common people did not have a chance to obtain a formal education. They could

learn only through the ears, not through the eyes. Children of the *Samurai*, who constituted the ruling class, had been educated for a long time in special institutions including institutions for higher learning where a solid foundation in the literary, classical and martial virtues was given, but children of common people did not have such institutions at that time.

However, as the merchants began to exercise their influence on society by this time, school for children of the merchants were founded all over Japan. As at first the teachers were mainly Buddhist priests, their schools were called, *terakoya*, that is, "temple school." There, the merchants children were taught reading, writing and arithmetic. The *terakoya* was privately operated and sometimes was a one-roomed schoolhouse presided over by a single teacher and attended by some thirty or forty children ranging in age from six to sixteen. At that time, society was divided into four classes—besides the *samurai* and the merchants, there were the artisans and the farmers. There were no schools for the artisan or for the farmer. But there did prevail in the world of the artisan the system of apprenticeship as well as of the merchant which functioned as vocational education for children of the artisans. The farmers on the other hand, remained illiterate.

However, when the feudal regime was overthrown by the great political upheaval of the *Meiji* Restoration in 1868, these four classes of society were also abolished. Therefore, new system for all peoples became an immediate necessity. Furthermore, the desire of the leaders of the new government was to make Japan equally as strong and rich as the advanced nations of the West. Therefore, during this period the westernization or modernization of Japan started under the controlling and centralized power of the government.

In 1871, the Ministry of Education was established, and in 1872, a new school system, which included every school-level—such as the elementary school, the middle school, the

high school, the college and the university—was instituted along the lines of the French centrally controlled education. At the beginning, the school system had much institutional inertia, and there were great difficulties in building many new schools and in training teachers. But with the school law which was issued in 1886, which was modeled on German examples, the school system was greatly enhanced and by about 1902, about 30,000 elementary schools had actually been built. However, the school law which was issued in 1886 was considerably nationalistic in flavor, and Japanese education after that time came to show a tendency toward nationalism.

In addition to this, there were many arguments as to the most suitable content of education. Some favored a completely Western education; others favored “combining the best of East and West.” As for scientific knowledge, there was no disagreement, but concerning moral education, there had been hot disputes since 1879. As the result of these disputes, the Imperial Rescript on Education was issued in the name of Emperor *Meiji*. Although the moral items of the Rescript were a mixture of almost all the different kinds of ethics found both in the West and the East, the emphasis was put on the nationalistic, Confucianistic ethics. The Rescript permeated overwhelmingly into the minds and hearts of the people, partly because the controlling powers were very strong and partly because the people in pre-war Japan had a kind of religious attitude or sentiment toward the Emperor.

In short, Japanese education from 1868 to 1945 proceeded on the line drawn in changes of the *Meiji* Restoration. Of course, many revisions were added one after the other. But here, instead of following up all of the revisions, I would like to consider both the merits and defects briefly.

## II

The first thing which we must consider when we would

try to evaluate the pre-war education in Japan is that there are different attitudes according to the difference in the generation. Roughly speaking, the peoples who belong to the older generation now are in their fifties or sixties of age, highly appreciate some aspects of the pre-war period or the pre-war education. Of course, for them super-nationalism or militarism in war-time are conceived to be a bad dream. For the crimes Japan committed at the World War II, they recognized that they cannot say that the crimes were irrelevant for them, but they think these were the temporally deviated phenomenon which occurred under the autocracy of the military authorities. However, in fact, there was a peaceful and liberal period during 1905 to 1930 which is called *Taisho* democracy, when they were educated. It was a time that many Japanese intellectuals could neglect nationalism, and without mediation of the nation, they could pursue the problems such as individual dignity, freedom, humanity or the universal. In the field of educational practices, the liberal and experimental educational philosophy and method of John Dewey and the Montessori method were introduced and new experimental school were developed according to these philosophy and method. For the peoples who belong to the older generation, the *Taisho* Democracy was one of the fruitful results of the modernization of Japan and the subsequent militarism was conceived to be only a deviation from the right direction of modernization.

On the contrary, for the peoples of younger generation who are now in their thirties or forties, the only pre-war period which they experienced was a dark age in war-time, and the only pre-war education they knew was militaristic education. Therefore, they conceive that almost everything in the past should be eliminated and the only value in Japan is the value in the present and in the future.

As mentioned above, the school law in 1886 and Imperial Rescript on Education in 1890 contained the nationalistic ten-

dency and the centrally controlled characteristics. However, the peoples of the older generation think that these types of nationalism had been inevitable for Japan as an under-developed nation, and therefore, do not conceive that the natural result of *Meiji* nationalism was the super-nationalism of the pre-war period. On the other hand, the younger generation think conversely.

An antagonism between these two generation appears not only about the pre-war period or pre-war education, but it appears in almost all levels concerning values. For example, this antagonism appears in the idea of democracy or democratic education in post-war Japan, which I would like to refer later. It also occurs in the debate about Japanese tradition, whether it should be esteemed or not. Recently there appears the new generation, in their twenties, whose thinking is very similar to the older generation. So the antagonism among the generations is becoming more complicated. Although with antagonism of these generations, naturally, the interpretation of pre-war education varies, nevertheless it seems to me, there are some merits and defects which everyone has to recognize.

Recently some Western scholars for Japanese studies, such as Professor Reishauer of Harvard University, are interested in why the economic growth in Japan since *Meiji* Restoration was so fast. One reason for this is the high standard of literacy. Now although it is said that the percentage is 99.9%, it is likely that it had reached almost the same percentage in the pre-war period. This high percentage we owe predominantly to the thorough prevalence of compulsory education. The development of mass communication also it seems to me, is closely related to the high rate of literacy.

However, on the other hand there was a big defect. It was a defect which came almost through the closed, double-

tracked educational system since *Meiji* period. In that system, the youngster who graduated from elementary school and at the same time finished the course of compulsory education faced three or four possibilities which were open to him. But they were selected by severe entrance examination. For those who were able to take the best possibility and were able to enter the best middle school, the path toward the universities was open. On the contrary, for those who were forced to choose the less desired possibility and entered vocational middle schools, the path toward the universities or even toward the high schools except professional high schools was closed. And for those who chose the last desired and entered the higher primary school, there were no further educational opportunities. To transfer the course from the worst to the better was very restricted and almost impossible.

At the summit of the whole school system stood the imperially established universities, and these were the goal of every ambitious young man. Actually, those who were permitted to enter them were the graduates from high schools which numbered about 30 all over the country. Further success in the government service was dependent on a young man's graduation from one of the imperial universities. The education for women was inferior to man. At that time women were educated in strictly different type of schools from man. For women, the path to enter the universities was very narrow.

In short this double-tracked system, to some extent, was successful in the education of *élite*. But for others, educational opportunities were very restricted and in this respect, this system was very undemocratic. So, it was natural that in the reforms of post-war education, this system was abolished. Then what occurred in the post-war education, and what are the problematic points of it, must now be considered.

### III

Japanese educations passed through tremendous reforms, immediatly after the World War II, from 1947 to 1952, which were carried out under the Allied Occupation. The main purpose of such reforms was the demilitarization and democratization of Japan. As to the aim of school education, the *Tenno*-centered, nationalstic aim based on partly Confucianism was replaced with the new democratic aim based on personalistic humanism. Further, the closed double-tracked educational system of the pre-war period was superseded by the new open single-tracked system based on the principle of equal educational opportunities. The length of compulsory education was extended from the sixth grade to the eighth grade and co-education was established on every school level. With respect to the content and method of teaching, the old centralized, formalized education was replaced by the new freer education which prized "learning by experience" and the self-activity of the student. The authoritarianism of the teacher was removed. And the problem-solving method or discussion method was regarded as more important than the lecture method. In addition, vocational education and adult education were encouraged very much. Although these reforms were executed on the basis of the advice and suggestions of the Educational Mission from the United States, they were heartily received by the Japanese people and came to friution in the Fundamental Law of Education and the School Education Law.

Since then, 20 years have elapsed. Some revisions were carried out concerning the curricula of schools and the systems of educational administration, but the basic principles of these reforms still continue to this day. However, the problem is in what point did and in what point did not, these reforms made in the name of democratic education, actually contribute to the promotion of democracy. There is much dispute about it.

As for the merits of these reforms, opinion is almost

uniform. There is agreement as to their contribution to the development of the so called "social democracy." Co-education established right through to the university level, played an important part in raising the status of women. Adult education as well as school education greatly contributed to elevating the political, social and cultural awareness of the people. In schools on the primary and secondary levels, pupils and students, who experienced the so-called new education were, in their character, more vivid, more cheerful, and more social than those of the pre-war period. They also acquired a way of thinking in understanding social or political affairs critically. In these respects, we can say that both school education and adult education contributed to the development of the social democracy and were successful in adopting democracy as the way of life for the Japanese people.

As to the problematic points, however, although opinion varies greatly, one of the most serious problems, it seems to me, is the problem of moral education. In the period of Imperial Japan, we had been taught the moral lessons called in Japanese *Shūshin*. These were the lessons established on the basis of the Imperial Rescript on Education promulgated in 1890. As mentioned above, since the controlling powers were very strong, and because of the special respect toward the Emperor, this ethic permeated overwhelmingly into the minds and hearts of people as the principles of moral acts.

However, this was all removed by the reforms of 1947, because of its nationalistic character, and its influence has declined rapidly. Since then there has appeared a moral vacuum and moral confusion. Democracy should have filled up the vacuum, but democracy as the principle of moral act, it seems to me, did not work as well as it did in the development of sociability.

To give a few examples : one serious problem today, is the continuous increase of juvenile delinquency; another serious



problem of the younger generation is committing of suicide. I know that juvenile delinquency is not peculiar to Japan. I also know that this phenomenon, to some extent, was caused by alienation in contemporary mass society, which deprives people of the ability of self-control. But in spite of this, the fact that, for example, in Osaka, which is the second largest city in Japan, about 90% of all junior high school have been hit by this problem, seems to me to show that there are other factors which are peculiar in Japan. Concerning the rate of suicide by the younger generation for persons in their teens and twenties, Japan unfortunately has the highest rate in the world. And further it has shown a tendency to increase, especially since 1955.

Though we cannot charge this phenomenon only against education, and though it must also be grasped as a social fact, nevertheless, we must say that the problem also lies in the character of the pupils or students, as developed to some extent, by school education and to some extent, by family education. Though this characteristic, as mentioned above, has the traits of vividness, cheerfulness and sociability, at the same time, it seems to me, it lacks the ability of self-criticism or self-reflection and it lacks also the capacity of speculation which enables inquiry concerning the realms of meaning in human life. Moreover, it loses the attitude of deep respect to others and the attitude of a positive concern to something which transcends him. In these respects, many teachers cannot guide students with appropriateness, and many parents seem to have missed out on the adequate principles of child training.

Why has this occurred? At this point, I cannot explain all of the reason, but the following three problems seem to me to be closely related to the matter. Further, these three problems also seem to me to be obstacles which prevent democracy as a moral principle from working adequately.

The first problem is that during the reforms, the only education which was introduced and accepted in the name of democratic education was pragmatic or progressive education, and its guiding philosophy, that of John Dewey. Though in the 1940's, pragmatism was no longer so dominant even in the United States as it had been in the 1920's, and though many criticisms from such viewpoints as essentialism, perennialism, and scientific realism appeared in 1930's and offered ideas and methods for other types of democratic education, these different viewpoints were neglected in post-war Japan. As the natural result of Dewey's naturalism, or to some extent, because of misunderstanding of the thought of John Dewey, pragmatic education in post-war Japan did not prepare an appropriate curriculum or guidance which could enrich the inner life of the student and which could awaken the pupils to somekind of spiritual value. Moral education in the school was considered quite sufficient, simply if the curriculum of "social studies" and guidance for self-activity was properly arranged.

Recently I have read a book by Professor Phenix of Columbia University (*Education and the Common Good*). Though he is the successor to the chair of John Dewey, his viewpoint is very much different from that of Dewey. He speaks about democracy as following:

The democracy of desire is the dominant conception of democracy today.....It is assumed that the gift of democracy is the emancipation of man from all higher powers, so that he may at last built according to his heart's desire the world of which he is now master, thanks to science and invention. This form of democracy is man-centered. Its emphasis is on acquisition, on efficient production for large-scale consumption. The good society is regarded as one of material affluence, where a wide range of desires are powerfully stimulated and abundantly satisfied.

The other type of democracy centers around devotion or loyalty to the good, the right, the true, the excellent. It is referred to as the democracy of *worth*. Devotion is different from desire. It is primarily other-regarding rather than

self-interested. It invites sacrifice and loyalty instead of conferring gratification. It is concerned with giving instead of getting. One honors and respects things of value instead of using and consuming them. (*Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.)

In short, he thinks that the ideal type of democracy should be the democracy of *worth* and in this respect, I would like to agree with him. So I think that the democratic education in Japan also should include the education of this type of democracy.

However, Professor Phenix also has an idea that some kind of religious education such as "life orientation" should be and could be taught even in the public school "without violating religious liberty, and without teaching sectarian doctrines as official public dogma (*Ibid.*, p. 246)." From this point of view, the second problem about moral education in post-war Japan arises.

In 1958, after many hot discussions, a course of moral education was set up, in the primary and secondary schools, but it hardly included any elements of religious education, even as informational knowledge. In my opinion, however, moral-education without religion cannot operate appropriately in cultivating the inner-life of the student, and it cannot build up the attitude of heartfelt respect to others, or the attitude of positive concern to something which transcends one. The problem also consists in the fact that in Japan there are many traditional religions such as Buddhism or Shintoism, whose institutions, except for the religious private school, do not fulfil the function of providing religious education open to the public school student as compared with the church school in Western society.

The last problem is that even moral education has been discussed from the political viewpoint. Unfortunately, there has occurred an ideological tension in post-war Japan especially since 1950, and this tension has been introduced

even into educational practices and policies. This is symbolized by the conflict between the Ministry of Education and the Japan's Teacher Union. In spite of the reform of the educational system, the centralized power of the Ministry of Education has continued until now, and it represents the policy of the conservative party. The Teacher Union, on the contrary, which has supported the socialist party, always rejects policies of the Ministry of Education.

Concerning moral education, since the course was set up and promoted under the initiative of the Ministry of Education in line with the conservative party, in fact, it sometimes has a tendency to bring back education to the *ancien regime*. But the Teacher Union also has a tendency to conceive such a problem as moral education too politically, and at the same time it has a tendency to deny moral education which intends to cultivate the inner world of the student as being conservative and reactionary. But in my opinion the problem of moral education should be examined more purely in the proper field of educational practice itself, apart from too much consideration of political ideology.

At the conclusion of this presentation, I must say again that democratic education in post-war Japan, which started in the reforms of 1947, under the influence of pragmatic education, were successful in respect to so called "social democracy," but was not always successful about moral education or about professor Phenix's democracy of *worth*. Therefore, for the fulfilment of democratic education or democracy, I would like to say now, that those three problems, mentioned above, should be considered more fully and that the obstacles should be eliminated.

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