

An Unwavering Enthusiasm for Education

Japanese education has been distinct in that it has for a very long time been available to the ordinary person.

At least from the beginning of the Edo period (1603–1867), not only warriors in a high social position but also the commoners down to farmers and merchants were receiving an elementary school education under a class system known as “*shi-no-ko-sho*,” which ranked warriors at the top, followed by farmers, craftsmen and merchants. The lords of feudal domains set up schools called “*hanko*” to educate the children of their retainers. These schools offered education that corresponds in level to today’s elementary school education and in some cases to a junior high or senior high school education. There were about ten *hanko* in the first half of the eighteenth century. That number grew to about 260 at the beginning of the nineteenth century. *Hanko* seem to have placed an emphasis on literature and Confucianism.



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Masakazu Yamazaki, playwright, critic and former chairman of the Central Education Council, looks at the history of education in Japan and the roles it has played in society.

In a parallel development, private schools known as *terakoya* became popular in agricultural communities and cities, where the merchant class lived. According to one theory, members of the warrior class, who had flourished during the Sengoku (“Warring States”) period (1467–1568) that preceded the Edo period, lost their jobs with the arrival of peace. A great majority of these unemployed warriors are said to have found work as teachers at *terakoya*. Naturally, reading, writing and arithmetic were taught at *terakoya*. The Japanese literacy rate in the Edo period was believed to have been very high, compared with the literacy rate in not only other countries in Asia but also in European countries. The number of *terakoya* is believed to have reached approximately 1,500 in Edo (present-day Tokyo) and approximately 15,000 nationwide by the end of the Edo period.

Incidentally, a somewhat special kind of difficulty is involved in learning the Japanese language. That is the coexistence of ideograms imported from China, which the Japanese call “*kanji*,” and original Japanese phonograms called “*kana*.” The number of letters Japanese language students needed to master was enormous, because two types of *kana*—*hiragana*

and *katakana*—were used, and each had about fifty letters. In spite of this difficulty, Japan enjoyed very high literacy rates. This can be attested to by the fact that novels called “*kibyoshi*” sold in the thousands when they were published in the Edo period.

Merchants were particularly enthusiastic about education. In addition to providing the elementary school education I described above, merchants often taught what could be called business ethics or business manners to their children and adults including warriors at private schools which they had established on their own.

Education and Employment

Then the modern age arrived. With the Meiji Restoration (1868), education became the greatest challenge for Japan as an emerging nation. Education in the Meiji period (1868–1912) became extremely centralized because Japan rapidly introduced from the West modern manufacturing industry and various legal concepts or basic social assumptions that were global standards. For example, the Ministry of Education (now the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT]) was established as an integrated central government body to oversee education in 1871, three years after the administra-

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Contemporary illustration of a classroom scene at an Edo-period (1603–1867) *terakoya*. Such private schools, established by merchants before education became compulsory in the Meiji period (1868–1912), were very well attended by children in the cities and agrarian communities, and along with the *hanko* schools for children of the feudal lords, ensured that Japan had a high level of literacy by world standards at the end of the Edo period.

tive switch from the Edo Shogunate to the Meiji government. The establishment of the ministry represented a remarkable centralization. Initially, only four years of elementary school education was compulsory. Then, the compulsory schooling period was extended to six years. Subsequently, an education system consisting of six years of elementary school education, five years of junior high school education, three years of senior high school education and three years of university education had been established in Japan by the 1920s. The first university in Japan, the University of Tokyo, was founded as a national university in 1877 out of the Shohei-zaka Gakumonsho of the Tokugawa Shogunate in an independent initiative.

Interestingly, Japanese citizens looked up to this sole university as a school that provided benefits or leadership. I believe this is a unique characteristic of Japan, compared with the frequent occurrence of “town and gown conflicts” in the course of university establishment in the United States. Of course, elementary schools were free to attend. Schools at higher levels cost money, including tuition or textbook fees. Higher education was beyond the wildest dreams of most aspirants.

The Ministry of Education committed itself to improving higher education in 1922. That is to say, the Ministry began to acknowledge private universities, which had not existed up to that point, as universities. Universities now famous, such as Keio University and Waseda Universi-

ty, were certified at this point. At the same time, national universities, then called imperial universities, began to increase in number. Ultimately, nine imperial universities were established, as were a large number of senior high schools. To state the details, only eight national senior high schools existed originally, including the *ichiko* (the first senior high school). As a result of the Ministry’s policy change, a large number of senior high schools bearing the geographic names of their regions, such as Matsumoto Senior High School and Niigata Senior High School, came into existence.

Consequently, a huge social problem emerged in Japan, albeit for a brief period. That is to say, Japan did not have sufficient employment for the intelligentsia, which expanded rapidly in number. More specifically, there were three classes of people known as the intelligentsia. The first class consisted of academics who confined themselves to imperial universities or, in other words, remained in seclusion in ivory towers. They occupied the highest rank. So-called middle intellectuals who worked at ordinary companies, centering on those in journalism, formed the second class below the top one. Graduates of military schools or specialized vocational schools, such as teachers’ training colleges and agricultural, forestry and fisheries schools, shaped a group known as grassroots intellectuals at the third rung. Unfortunately, this burgeoning group of academics in the first class became totally indifferent to

politics and tended to withdraw to the foxholes of their specialties by the time they had graduated from university. The second class of middle intellectuals centering on those involved in journalism went on to form extremely political and ideologized groups. And the third class of grassroots intellectuals created a certain social group, with a special focus on the military.

As a result, a structure of ideological confrontation between academicism and populism, or between upper and middle intellectuals, developed. The former class of intellectuals was not able to lead public opinion, while the latter became overly populist. Caught in this ideological battle and influenced by additional poverty in agricultural communities, Japan produced an ill-fated current that ultimately triggered the Second World War.

Enthusiasm for Education

However, the Japanese government’s enthusiasm for compulsory education remained constant. For example, school buildings constructed in accordance with strict criteria regarding local geographic features and architecture are the safest places during natural disasters, whether they were located in villages or cities. This unchanged government enthusiasm can be attested to by the fact that, even today, people go to school buildings to take refuge when a disaster of some kind strikes.

Following its defeat in World War II, Japan incorporated significant elements of the U.S. school system. For

example, the so-called 6-3-3-4 system, consisting of six years of elementary school education, three years of junior high school education, three years of senior high school education, and four years of university education, is adopted from the United States. The enthusiasm of Japanese citizens for education remained extremely strong in the postwar period as well. Virtually no Japanese children failed to undergo compulsory education, in other words, six years of elementary school education and three years of junior high school education. Japanese parents sent their children to school even when food was scarce. The percentage of junior high school graduates who go on to senior high schools has risen to the present level of 98% over the years. This means compulsory education has in effect been extended to twelve years. Incidentally, all expens-

continued in postwar Japan. The Ministry of Education continued to play a role. However, at the same time, Japan introduced a decentralization of power, modeling itself on the United States. Consequently, we can say that Japan today balances centralism and decentralism.

To give a specific example, the Japanese government grants basic qualifications to teachers in a centralized manner. In other words, aspirants can become teachers by earning credits prescribed by the government at universities. The subjects required for study at universities are particularly centralized for those aspiring to become elementary school teachers. However, it is the local boards of education that actually hire teachers. Decentralization of power is more or less maintained in this way. As for textbooks, the prewar government ed-

tionship between equality and freedom in learning. Needless to say, the ideal is for people to share equally substantial and advanced knowledge. However, achieving this is a difficult task for any country. It is difficult because knowledge differs from wealth. Achieving equality does not end with a division of knowledge. In other words, educational opportunities may be offered equally but learning and achievement depend on the skills and efforts of each individual.

For this reason, differences in academic standards exist among schools in present-day Japan, in the same way as they do in other countries. There is a considerable degree of competition to enter the most renowned schools. For higher education overall, all young Japanese already have the opportunity to go to a university of some kind if they wish to do so, thanks to the declining birthrate. But the competition is still severe when differences in the academic standards among schools are taken into consideration. Calls have been made for a diversification of education as a natural solution to this problem. A number of different approaches have been tested to provide knowledge that corresponds to the different capabilities of each individual in different ways. Still, an ultimate resolution has yet to be discovered. This resolution has not been discovered because differences in occupational preferences exist in Japan as they do in other countries, in addition to disparities in academic standards among schools. Competition for desirable jobs is fierce in each specific occupation for that reason. No such thing as perfect equality is sought in this competition.

Meanwhile, a strong antipathy toward elite education exists in Japan as a natural part of general society. However, scholars and researchers with high levels of achievement are being sought as the world transitions to a knowledge-based society. Japanese education is continuing to struggle with the dilemma of equalizing its broad base and maintaining its highest peaks. □

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es for elementary school and junior high school education are covered by the National Treasury. Students pay nothing, including the cost of their textbooks. Substantial reforms also took place in the postwar period at universities at the top of the ladder. As a result, national universities in rural areas were improved. Under a government policy of establishing at least one university in each prefecture, the number of universities increased. The percentage of senior high school graduates who enroll at universities has reached about 50%. This means university education in Japan has entered the so-called universal stage. Incidentally, programs for national educational unification and full state support

ited and distributed the same textbooks to all parts of the country. Today, textbooks are edited and published by private companies. MEXT screens the textbooks to ensure they conform with established criteria. Local boards of education and respective schools are entrusted with the task of selecting textbooks from the screened candidates.

Equality and Freedom in Learning

Under these arrangements, Japanese education retains the equality and universality it had in the Edo period. However, Japan shares an essential problem with other countries: the rela-