

The Japanese 'miracle':

Two views

Nobuo K. Shimahara.

ADAPTATION AND EDUCATION IN JAPAN.

New York, N.Y.: Praeger Publishers, 1979.

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William K. Cummings.

EDUCATION AND EQUALITY IN JAPAN.

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In the West, there has been widespread faith in the relationship between education and national development. Educated manpower serves industrial development with necessary skills and ingenuity (even though educators often grow restive over "vocationalism"). Surpluses in a secondary, or industrial, phase in turn can serve to enrich educational resources (but paradoxically there is some disillusion with education in all advanced societies). "This beautiful romance between education and development" has, however, thrived only in conditions unique to the now advanced societies (Kong, 1979, p.7).

Nonetheless, the model has had a persistent life. The Korean Comparative Education Society, for example, sponsored a pre-Congress conference, just prior to the Fourth World Congress of Comparative Education Societies, in Seoul, July 3-5, 1980. The Korean theme was "Education for Developing Nations." (Korean CES, 1981). It was significant, of course, that the World Congress was then convened in Saitama, Japan, July 7-10, 1980 (WCCES, 1980).

Japan has received considerable attention for the qualities of its modern educational system. The first member of the Confucian family of nations to confront the West on its own terms, the island-nation has also been the first in East Asia to

experience the promises and perils of modernization (*kindaika*, in Japanese). Again, however, the preconditions for development were unique. The British sociologist Dore concluded that on the eve of modernization, the level of literacy among all classes was higher in Japan than in the countries of Europe at the time (1965, p.294). Passin pointed out that high percentages of the Samurai class (100% for men, 50% for women) attended formal schooling; commoner attendance (male, 40%) was also surprisingly high. Contemporary views have singled out Japan as in the class of developed nations, perhaps "the only non-Western specimen in her class." (1965, pp.x-xi)

Japan's modern educational system and its relationship to advanced industrial status have begun to attract attention abroad. Japanese agencies seized the occasion of the World Congress to respond to the demand for data (Gaimusho, 1972; Mombusho, 1979). The Japanese hosts, staff of the National Institute for Educational Research, provided the delegates with an up-to-date outline of the educational system (Kokuritsu Koyiku Kenhyusho, 1978). Since the tumultuous 1960's, education as a national policy issue has ranked with other problems embedded in the advanced industrial society. Scholars who are not specialists on education have noted patterns of Japanese policymaking with case studies drawn from the national debate on higher education (Pempel, 1978).

These two studies, which should be of interest to educators and social scientists alike, have attempted to assay the role of education in the advanced industrial society of Japan. Both rest on solid foundations grounded in contemporary analyses of education (both Western and Japanese sources), including the literature on enculturation and education. Both build up a superstructure from primary materials collected during intensive field observation (Nagoya, 1976-77 and Kyoto, 1975-76, respectively). It is doubtful that anyone will soon so thoroughly mine such rich veins of data. What is of greatest interest is the fact that, partly because of variant assumptions and slightly different focus on what are essentially the same data, the authors arrive at quite different conclusions.

The author of the later study (Cummings, 1980) points out that "conventional literature" emphasizes the role of Japanese schools in teaching "values and orientations" that facilitate adjustment to the demands of the adult society. (Although Cummings does not cite the Shimahara study, it may be assumed that he would recognize its central "adaptation" thesis.) In this sense, the schools would be conservative, conserving "traditional" Japanese values.

Cummings argues, however, that schools also teach youth

lessons that conflict with adult ("traditional") behaviour: the egalitarian orientation toward work, the individuated disposition, and the orientation that is critical of authority (pp.261-2). Presumably these are "modern" values. And in this sense the schools apply a transformationist - as contrasted with the conventional meritocratic - approach. "Postwar Japan," the author maintains, "constitutes an example of a society that has been transformed by education."(p.5)

An advantage (which turns out to be also a disadvantage) of the approach lies in its lovingly intensive description of training at the primary school level. There is probably no better summary of factors in Japan's miraculous accomplishments: **concern** (on the part of wider-ranging interests, from the "Establishment" promotion of education for further development, over to the Japan Teachers Union, Nikkyoso, and its emphasis on "humanistic, self-actualizing goals"); emphasis on **"whole-person"** education, including moral development; **equality** in public education and its relatively low cost; a **demanding** curriculum; the **equitable** nature of teaching; and teacher **security**. "Progressive" forces in Japan, which include the teachers union, have urged that the proper role of education is to develop "whole people" (*zenjin kyoiku*) and not merely to create workers useful to the economy (*hito tsukuri*) (p.60).

The most fascinating section is the description day-to-day, almost hour-to-hour, of the primary school regime. The opening day ceremony, the process for establishing order in the classroom, the subtle introduction (both by the "Establishment" and by the "progressive" teachers) of moral education, the demanding curriculum, the nature of textbooks, conventional and unconventional modes of instruction - all of these are covered with uncommon insight (Chapter 5). The specialist in learning psychology will be intrigued by the author's application of the theory of "mastery learning" (Bloom, 1976) to Japanese practices. The data on cognitive equality is equally fascinating (Chapter 6 and appendix).

Somewhat less space is devoted to the middle school, as marking a transition - the learning process is more difficult and more explicitly cognitive - and to the public high school, where evaluation is tied more explicitly to achievement (pp.132-145). Moreover, at this level two tracks - one academic, leading to university education; one vocational, often leading to higher education but to earlier employment - make their appearance. Now the great socializing influence is the college entrance examination system.

Indeed, this study contains a whole chapter on examination competition (Chapter 8). There is also a selection on the

preparatory schools (**yobiko**), the exam-oriented private academies, and the extra-study schools (**juku**), in short, on the "juku boom." The author points out that there are sectors relatively insulated against examination pressure, for example, second class private universities, the vocational higher school, and technical institutes. Surely, however, it is apparent that both by inclusion and by exclusion the exam system sets the tone.

In any case, the author's argument is that the schools, in conjunction with other socialization agents, are creating a "new youth." (p.235) And it is here that the analysis is weakest. On occasion he dallies with wishful thinking, emphasizing the desires of the teachers union: "...it is possible that some of the egalitarian lessons today's young people have learned will remain with them as they move through their careers." (p.191) Elsewhere doubt is expressed: "...one cannot say whether the availability of realistic information subsequently neutralizes the primary schools's levelling effect or not." (p.193) Finally, in one place the author flatly admits: "The students' expectations are, of course, unrealistic." (p.191)

In at least one area, the author simply misread the data or, to put it more kindly, unfortunately did not have access to later data. In a subtle yet unmistakable kind of ethnocentrism, he goes on a pilgrimage looking for the grail of individualism. "The group is viewed as a collection of individuals, each of whom is seeking self-fulfillment. A group is appreciated so long as it is responsible to individual needs." (p.197)

Later evidence from the Japanese national character surveys (1978), not then available to the author, demonstrates the danger of prediction. "A continuing value consensus," as Ezra Vogel of Harvard University puts it, points to persistent attachment to the group. Cummings' statement must therefore be inverted: the individual in Japan seeks self-fulfillment in the group; individual needs are still satisfied within groups. The immediately postwar, nominal respect for individual freedom (found in 40-50 percent of replies from younger respondents) reached a peak of 60 percent in 1973, and then plummeted to 45 percent over the next five years, according to the sixth survey (1978). What **does** remain is an egalitarian spirit favouring social mobility (merit and achievement as measures of status).

One must add that the author is probably correct in stating that the "Establishment" (called the "corporate class") is doomed and that its "meritocratic ideology" is dated. But then so is the "progressive camp", especially the teachers union, which often (as pointed out) misuses the schoolroom for a personal soapbox to parrot obsolete dogma about inevitable class "struggle." Finally, it is doubtful that even in the ideologically tense 1950's and

1960's, Japanese society presented a simple "confrontation", namely "a clean split in the Japanese polity between the progressive forces for democracy and equality and the conservative forces of reaction." (p.149) Certainly by the 1970's, even the **kakushin** (reform) coalitions transcended traditional class and party lines. And by the 1980's, when Japan had clearly entered the postindustrial era, the postures and slogans of conservatives and progressives alike appeared to be obsolete. The admixture of white-, grey-, and blue-collar classes defied generalization. It is at least doubtful that the author's culturally-derived, "individualistic" values can be the universal answer to the dilemmas generated in very complex, advanced industrial democracies.

The other study (Shimahara, 1979) is equally well-grounded in materials and intensive field work. With a quite different emphasis (on higher levels of education where the college entrance examinations reign supreme) and different assumptions (about the persistence of group orientation), this author understandably arrives at different conclusions.

Shimahara's study clearly illuminates the key propositions: not only can the traditional and the modern coexist, but also the former can play a central role in the transition into modernity. In observing Japanese education, therefore, one should not await the elimination of what some Japanese call "feudal residues" or "traditional" norms. The system is already unmistakably "modern." The author writes:

The development of Japanese group orientation is a cultural consequence of social strategies adopted to cope with social and natural conditions of the environment. Once it was developed as a prominent mode of responding to environmental pressures, it constituted a vital basis of the Japanese pattern of adaptation. Today it continues to be a dominant mode of orientation guiding Japanese behavior and attitudes. (p.165)

Shimahara thoroughly documents the fact that the college entrance examination is a kind of **rite de passage** through which a youth (most often a male) proves that he has the ability and stamina to become a **sarai man** ("salary man"). The exam is used, as Cummings also pointed out, as the major instrument in the recruitment of the elite. It plays, however, an even wider role which has not been so clearly recognized. The impact of the entrance tests is felt on **all** Japanese trained in schools **all** geared to exams. The system not only identifies early on (by inclusion) future white-collar leadership for the organization sector. It also sorts out (by exclusion) the unskilled help, the blue-collar workers,

and the foremen for the secondary (industrial) sector and, less efficiently, the lab technicians, accountants, key-punch operators, information retrievers, and the grey-collar workers for the tertiary (service) sector.

Back on the elite level, a kind of "degreeocracy" (as the author calls it) produces numerous drifting, displaced students called **ronin** (named after masterless samurai). They now constitute some 40 percent of all college applicants. Among those who are accepted, trained, and graduated even from the prestige universities, there is a new downward mobility into the grey-collar service sector (p.8).

One must agree with the doubts expressed either explicitly or implicitly by both Cummings and Shimahara concerning one current sociological theory. It goes to the effect that egalitarian sentiment is not unique to Japanese youth, but rather is shared by young people in all postindustrial societies (a proposition that is probably true); and that this sentiment is a product of common structural changes in such societies - the shift to a technetronic economy, occupational upgrading, maturation of a baby-boom "youth generation", and mass affluence (p.262). There is here a kind of technological determinism, which makes norms, values, and ideology derivative. Both Cummings and Shimahara would agree, on the other hand, that it is schooling that is central to the process of political socialization.

In summary, Cummings believes that educational systems in all advanced societies do have something in common: they teach values that are inconsistent with the demands of the adult world (Cummings, p.263). Shimahara believes with equal firmness that in Japan prolonged socialization and schooling - and especially the entrance examination system - contribute to the development of cognitive orientations functional to the perpetuation of the adult political and economic systems (Shimahara, p.5).

Although the issue was not directly within the scope of either study, it may well be that these two excellent monographs document a cultural lag. **Neither** the "traditional", meritocratic training favoured by the "Establishment", **nor** the "progressive", transformational schooling favoured by the teachers union, is fully prepared for Japan's plunge into a brand new epoch, the postindustrial era.

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