


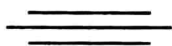
JAPAN'S HIGH SCHOOLS



Thomas P. Rohlen

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Japan's High Schools

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*For Ginger, Katie, Duke, Brooks
Alison, Michael, and Chris,
with the wish that your school years
be rich in challenge and joy*

Preface

SIMPLE CURIOSITY initially led me to the study of Japanese high schools. My own four years in a midwestern suburban high school had been a poignant and formative time, and I still recall vividly the excitement, the pain and the wonderment of beginning to shape my own destiny. Looking back as an anthropologist I also came to see that many fundamental qualities of American culture were epitomized in the high school experience, and I found myself wanting to find out what the equivalent experiences were in Japan. I had also just completed a study of a Japanese bank, and I hoped to learn about a different kind of Japanese organization, one reshaped by the American occupation and strongly influenced by a radical teachers' union.

When I went to Japan for thirteen months of fieldwork in 1974, the country was not the hotly debated topic that it is in the world today. I had no expectation that what I was about to study would prove to be of instructive interest to American educators, or that Japanese education would begin to impress me as a significant element in American understanding of Japan's economic success. Yet during the last two years, as this book has taken shape, Japan's industrial prowess and social order have captured the attention of much of the world. Japan, whether perceived as a competitive threat or as a model of efficiency, now merits careful study.

During the late 1970s, furthermore, secondary education in the United States came under fundamental review. We have witnessed an extended period of decline in the basic skills taught and a growing confusion around priorities and approaches to the universal instruction of our adolescents. Rather than just exporting our educational ideas to the rest of the world, we have come to a point where we want to learn what others are doing. Japan's educational system is indeed impressive, and knowledge of it is important to any larger understanding of that nation; but it has many faults, and a certain price is paid for its achievements. I have sought to present both the strengths and weakness of Japanese education in a balanced manner. With Japan's recent notoriety have come facile generalizations and dangerous oversimplifications. If this book serves to correct some of these, I will be amply rewarded.

My original intention was to write an ethnographic account of a particular institution, but the times called for a broader approach, one that would place high schools in the larger Japanese social, economic, and cultural context. An expanded focus has led to levels of comparison and generalization quite beyond the careful anchoring in observational data typical of the ethnographic approach. I have no regrets about working on a broader plain, but it has entailed certain problems. For example, in places I refer to "we Americans" or "the Japanese" when describing cultural inclinations as if there is unanimity of opinion in each country, and yet I am perfectly aware that variation and disagreements exist. Comparative statements involving whole nations often require such language, and a certain nimbleness of thought on the part of readers is almost a prerequisite.

I should also like to point out that my comparisons are made almost entirely between Japan and the United States. I know no other country nearly as well, and for this I apologize to readers with other backgrounds.

My research in Japan was entirely dependent on the goodwill and hospitality of teachers and administrators who gave me their trust and friendship as they patiently guided my learning. I came to admire them for their dedication and to feel deep appreciation to them for sharing their work and their lives with me. To the several hundred teachers in Kobe who cannot be listed by name, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude. I only wish that this book could repay them for their kindness.

Financial assistance was received from the Japan Foundation and from the Committee for Faculty Research at the University of California, Santa Cruz. I gratefully acknowledge this support. Professors Yoshida Teigo and Ueda Hitoshi provided me with my first introductions and were always ready to give further help. I am also indebted to many people for encouragement, and for the special insights gained in discussions of my work, including Ed Beauchamp, Harumi Befu, Keith Brown, William Cummings, Ronald Dore, Sue Hanley, Victor Kobayashi, Hugh Patrick, Dan Okimoto, Henry Rosovsky, Ezra Vogel, and Kozo Yamamura. My former students, Nancy Ukai, Sharon Traweek, Syoko Saito, and Sharon Noguchi, have provided me with valuable information over many years, always with a warm note of interest. Chiyoko Ishibashi helped me with some difficult translation work. To my friend Richard Pascale I owe a special debt for his regular support and his insistence that I continue in pursuit of the larger issues involved in Japanese education.

Marilyn Rose helped with the typing, and I received excellent editorial assistance and encouragement from Margo Paddock and Meryl Lanning. Phyllis Killen at the University of California Press was, as always, of great help.

Most of all I want to thank my wife and children for sharing with me the long months of fieldwork and the often exasperating years of analysis and writing. They patiently put up with the moods, mysteries and dislocations of this kind of work and offered the affectionate support without which I could not have proceeded.

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Introduction

Education is the cheap defense of nations.

EDMUND BURKE

THE ULTIMATE foundation of a nation is the quality of its people. Over the long haul, their diligence and thrift, their creativity and cooperation, and their skill and orderliness compound to shape a nation's level of achievement. Certainly such things as natural resources, great leaders, a talented elite, and astute policies also have a significant influence on the general performance of societies. We regularly study these more apparent considerations, but too often we fail to come to grips with the fundamental issue of the quality of average daily behavior in national populations. International differences in average behavior are indeed difficult to measure and assess. Often they are relegated to the residual category of culture and then essentially ignored. Nevertheless, how well a population performs the basic tasks of social existence when multiplied out day after day, year after year, is the underlying basis and sense of dynamic for key institutions that in turn shape a nation's place among all nations. The historical rise and fall of civilizations, in other words, rests heavily on such assumed matters as socialization, fundamental skills, and general morality. In our modern sophistication, we are prone to discount the significance of these basic issues in analyzing long-term national developments.

Japan is a case in point. A nation pitifully poor in natural resources,

Japan has the highest population density per acre of arable land in the world; nearly all her energy and raw materials must be imported. In this century, she has rarely enjoyed the leadership of strong or brilliant individuals, suffering great destruction in World War II as a result. Japan's bureaucratic elite has established highly effective industrial policies in the postwar period, and her managers have shown great skill in creating efficient economic institutions, but these would have amounted to very little without the crucial ingredient of superb human capital. Crediting Japan's bureaucrats and managers with Japan's success—a success so in fashion today—misses a crucial point. These men could not have produced what has been accomplished only by millions of Japanese working together.

This book is about how that population is being educated and developed, and the results are assessed in comparison with the United States. The quality of a citizenry is the product of a number of basic institutions, most notably the family, religion, and schools. Of these, schools are the most accessible, the most comparable across cultures, and the most responsive to public policy. High schools occupy a particular place in the socialization process. Their students stand at the threshold of adulthood, reflecting the work of parents, teachers, and schools. At the same time, the final steps in shaping a national citizenry are clearly evident in high school education. High schools illustrate the manner and the intensity of the educational effort, and the outcome of that effort is reflected in the conduct of high school students.

In studying high schools, we not only learn what socialization occurs there, but we have an opportunity to gauge its results. Further, as the end point of mass education, high schools reveal the disparity in skills and habits achieved by members of the same generation, thus allowing us to assess the matter of equality. Finally, because adolescent minds present few barriers to difficult ideas, high school is an excellent point along the educational path to take a close look at the meaning of what is taught—the cultural, political, and intellectual implications of the process.

Japan has surpassed the United States in popular education. The two nations lead the industrial world in percentage of young people entering high school (both above 95 percent), yet in Japan high school is not compulsory. Fewer than 75 percent of American youths took high school diplomas in 1980, whereas the Japanese now gradu-

Table 1

Educational Outcome, United States and Japan, for Persons Aged Seventeen in 1974 (in percentages)

	<i>Japan</i> *		<i>United States</i> [†]	
	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
Graduated from high school	90	91	73	77
Attended college or junior college	44	32	47	44
Graduated with B.A. or equivalent	39	12	25	24

SOURCES: Data from United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Education Division, *Digest of Education Statistics* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975); and Mombushō, *Waga Kuni Kyōiku Suijun: 1975* (Tokyo: Okurashō Insatsu Kyoku, 1976).

* Figures represent expected outcomes based on 1973 pattern.

† Excludes persons who may attend college or gain degrees more than one year after their age group.

ate 89 percent from high school (Table 1). And, contrary to American experience, the Japanese have not had to seriously sacrifice quality in their extension of a secondary education to nearly everyone. On international tests of both science and math, Japanese mean scores are higher than those of any other country. The degree of variation in ability among Japanese students is also shown to be very low (Tables 2 and 3), meaning that equality of achievement is notable. Such accomplishments must have something to do with the prowess of Japan's workers and the success of her economy. In fact, although the average level of Japanese intellectual skill and knowledge is high, equally noteworthy is the high level of orderliness and diligence in the general population. Education has something to do with the fact that social problems in Japan are small by Western standards. We must understand how Japanese are taught and how they are socialized if we are to gain insight into the underlying strengths of the country.

American secondary education seems to be in perpetual crisis. Test scores have declined and private school enrollments have risen. Demoralization has spread and increasing school violence seems to follow. The goals and institutional will of secondary schools have come into serious question. From decade to decade our priorities

Table 2

Achievement in Mathematics by Thirteen-Year-Olds, 1960–1964

<i>Nation</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Coefficient of Variation</i>
Japan	31.2	.542
Belgium	27.2	.542
Finland	24.1	.411
The Netherlands	23.9	.665
Australia	20.2	.693
England	19.3	.881
Scotland	19.1	.764
France	18.3	.678
United States	16.2	.821
Sweden	15.7	.689

SOURCE: Torstein Husen, ed., *International Study of Achievement in Mathematics: A Comparison of Twelve Countries*, vol. 2 (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1967), p. 22.

shift radically, and the result is a sense of profound contradiction among the many goals of our population.

Rather than making persistent efforts to raise the average level of our human resources, we seem to have resigned ourselves to compensatory technology and other techniques of "foolproofing" our basic production systems by building in the assumption of a low, even declining common denominator. We have become a society with a low expectation of the average citizen. Coping with the human factor in this way creates a vicious circle of declining standards leading to declining expectations. Now a new national administration proposes, in the name of states' rights and budgetary constraint, to relinquish responsibility for improving the situation. But this is not actually a very significant change. We have, in fact, been liquidating our human capital base for some time.

Given the erosion of the American family and the declining commitment to parenting among the young, the troubles of our schools are all the more alarming. The reader will find the contrast with Japan sobering. I say this not because I intend to hold up Japanese education as an example to be emulated, but because once we are aware of its approach and its achievements, we cannot avoid seeing

Table 3

Achievement in Science by Persons Aged About Fourteen, 1970

<i>Nation</i>	<i>Middle School Sample</i>	<i>Mean Coefficient of Variation</i>
Japan	31.2	.474
Hungary	29.1	.436
Australia	24.6	.545
New Zealand	24.2	.533
Federal Republic of Germany	23.7	.485
Sweden	21.7	.539
United States	21.6	.537
Scotland	21.4	.664
England	21.3	.662
Belgium (Flemish)	21.2	.434
Finland	20.5	.517
Italy	18.5	.551
The Netherlands	17.8	.562

SOURCE: Data from L. C. Comber and John P. Keeves, *Science Achievement in Nineteen Countries* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973), pp. 159, 108.

ourselves and our problems more clearly. Japanese high schools are a mirror for Americans, but not a model.

Ironically, what the Japanese have accomplished is not much appreciated in Japan. Perhaps public education is a universal scapegoat because expectations are unattainably high, but the fact remains that most Japanese find strong reasons to complain. A powerful left-ist teachers' union sees education as creating inequality and serving the interests of the establishment. Parents complain that their children work too hard and worry too much about passing entrance exams. Traditionalists see postwar education as undermining basic Japanese culture and values. There is ample evidence for each of these criticisms.

Foreign observers of Japanese society and education have reflected the Japanese criticisms, especially those centering on the entrance exam competition. Many have echoed the litany of complaints about how exam pressures are responsible for high youth suicide

rates, nervous disorders, and even delinquency. As a result, foreign readers have generally held the opinion that Japanese education is notable for its excesses rather than its accomplishments. Recently, however, a fresh and much more substantial perspective has been introduced by William K. Cummings, a sociologist who has examined elementary education in Kyoto in considerable detail.¹ He concludes that Japanese education is praiseworthy on many accounts, including the high standards achieved in basic education, the quality of instruction offered in the arts and music, the success in teaching orderly behavior and social sensitivity, and the broad equality of opportunity established by the compulsory school system.

I am much impressed by Cummings' arguments, and this book supports his perspective in some key respects. I seriously disagree with him about the overall character of Japanese education through twelfth grade, however. The addition of the secondary school level to the picture Cummings draws greatly alters some of the qualities he finds so appealing. This book argues against his judgments of the overall Japanese accomplishment in terms of both equality and the quality of instruction. It also evaluates the role of the teachers' union from a different perspective. I have aimed at putting the admirable and the objectionable into the same framework, in recognition that they are systematically related in Japanese education.

To capture this complexity and to portray the life within Japanese high schools, I conducted a year's fieldwork (1974-75) in five distinctly different high schools, representing a spectrum from the best to the most troubled schools, in the industrial port city of Kobe. During six to eight weeks at each school, I sat in on classes, interviewed teachers, studied records, and gave out questionnaires. Comparisons of the schools reveal much about the structure of social differences in Japan. And, in turn, the underlying categories, activities, values, and procedures common to all five schools reveal much about Japanese public and educational culture.

Seven years have passed since this period of fieldwork, and I have been back to Kobe several times to check details and follow subsequent developments. The ethnographic present remains 1974-75 so far as my observations are concerned, but I have attempted to update the national statistics to make this book as current as possible.

1. See Cummings (1980).

There have been changes in each of the five schools since 1975, but none has affected significantly the character of Japanese education as described in these pages.

No books or articles in English exist on Japanese high schools, and in Japanese nothing has been published of an observational nature. Documentation is minimal. Japanese scholars take their high schools for granted, and they have not studied the variety. My first objective in these pages must therefore be to describe in some detail what Japanese urban high schools are like. Beside being a necessary and legitimate end in itself, this is the first step in discussing the place of education in Japanese society and contemporary culture.

The plan of this book, then, is to move between the specifics of high schools and the relation of high schools to larger matters. After introducing the five particular high schools in Chapter One, the historical context (Chapter Two) and the social context (Chapters Three and Four) of high school education are considered. The goal is to identify the influences that have shaped high schools. The succeeding four chapters return to examining fundamental patterns of high schooling. Chapters Five through Eight constitute an ethnographic account of the Japanese high school organized around the standard topics of space and time, social organization, politics, and instruction. The goal is to consider general questions about the experience of high school as it shapes Japanese character. Finally, in Chapter Nine, the overall pattern of Japanese adolescence is considered as it is molded by education and as it compares with the American experience. The issues of efficiency, social structural variation, and contemporary culture begin to converge here. In the final chapter, some conclusions are drawn.

The structure of the book can be visualized as resembling two concentric wheels, one large and one small. The patterns of organization and practices that mark high schools are the inner wheel, from which a set of issues and questions is drawn out in separate directions like spokes to the larger wheel of more general sociological and cultural questions. The influence along each spoke is two-directional. Schools are shaped by their social environment and they contribute to it, both. No single thesis governs the arrangement. I view institutions as integral wholes and prefer to view them from many perspectives rather than to shine a single theoretical light on them. This is a matter of taste. My preference is to begin somewhat