

AND THE PURSUIT OF A NEW  
**AMERICAN  
IDENTITY**

Work and Education in a Multicultural Age

WALTER FEINBERG

# **JAPAN**

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<sup>1</sup>Chieko Fons, *Long Engagement: Life Stories of Japanese Teachers who Taught Before, During and After the War* Champaign, IL: Doctoral Thesis, 1990.

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# Introduction

## *I. The Evolution of the Project*

This project has evolved from a concern with the relationship between school and work to a concern about the character of a democratic identity in a multicultural world; in this Introduction I want to trace some of the different points in that evolution. I began this project in the middle of the 1980s, shortly after governmental and industrial leaders declared that a crisis existed in American education, and placed the blame for America's emerging trade gap and declining industry squarely on the public schools. To support this claim, they pointed to the high achievement of Japanese students and the great strides of Japanese industry. They argued that a steady decline in the test scores of American students was a sign of deteriorating schools, and that this was responsible for the declining competitiveness of American industry. The high scores of Japanese students and the high performance of Japanese industry was taken as proof that good schools create good workers.

The argument was influential in inspiring the educational reform movements of the 1980s. However, many questions remain. For example, Japanese students scored well on tests long before their country's steel, automobile and semiconductor industries became world leaders. Their thirteen-year-olds have often scored first in mathematics since at least the early sixties, yet only recently has Japan become an industrial superpower. Given that the thirteen-year-olds of 1960 were already in their mid-thirties when American leaders declared a crisis, why was such a long lead time required? Was it just that Japan needed all that

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time to recover from the Second World War, or that workers must be in their mid-thirties before school achievement effects increased productivity? Or is it that the skills needed to perform in the workplace have changed? Moreover, while the test scores of American students has steadily declined in absolute terms over the last two decades, American students have long been near the bottom in mathematics in comparisons with industrial nations. This was the case even during the early 1960s, when education was supposed to be fueling our nation's high productivity. If students' performance changed little over time compared to the performance of students in other countries, why should their absolute score be of such concern? And if our students consistently test poorly, why has American productivity historically been so high?

After the initial volley of concerns voiced by the business and political community, many educational changes were mandated, but they have had little effect on test performance or on productivity. For example, since the reform movement of the eighties began, test scores of American students have varied little from year to year—some years they go up a point, and the newspapers applaud, other years they go down a point and the newspapers proclaim a crisis—but during this time productivity and quality has increased significantly in the automobile and other industries. Moreover, while test scores remained relatively stable, the overall balance of payments varies considerably from year to year and even from month to month, with an overall downward trend. In Japan, too, the stock market rises and falls, and industries come and go without any apparent connection to how well students perform on standardized tests. Clearly there must be some kind of relationship between school achievement and economic fortune, but these all-too-obvious examples suggested to me that it is not a simple one, and that the link between them is mediated by many cultural factors, some of which likely have little to do with school.

To understand these cultural differences, I drew on people who are connected in one way or another with the increasing number of Japanese "transplants," as the Japanese companies with branch plants in the United States are called, and who therefore have experienced both American and Japanese society. These people represent but a slice of Japanese culture, and should not be treated as reflecting the range of differences that are to be found in Japan as a whole. However, they are familiar with life in large-scale Japanese industry, and this is the segment of Japanese society that has attracted the most attention and the most concern in this country. Moreover, the Japanese connected with these ventures are a very influential segment of Japanese



society, and they represent for many other Japanese the most important avenues of security and opportunity.

The development of one of these plants was the occasion for initiating this study. The Japanese children who came into the American community as a result of the decision to build the plant were placed in the public schools, and also attended a Japanese culture and language school on Saturdays. The Saturday school was largely financed by the state to attract the company to its borders. Almost all of the Japanese children who came with their parents would return to Japan after a few years in this country; the Saturday school was a way to ease the transition back to the Japanese classroom. The political leaders of the state felt that the school would be an important factor in the decision about the plant's location, and, given the intense competition for the plant, it may well have made a difference.

This school provided a focal point for new parents coming into the community. With the generous cooperation of the administration, I was introduced to the mothers whom I interviewed, first in the school and later in their home. With the aid of an assistant, whose flawless English was matched only by her native Japanese, I was allowed into an intimate conversation about Japanese life and education. Often, as we sat drinking tea, I would ask a lead question in English, and my assistant and the mother would follow it by a conversation in Japanese, which would then be summarized for me in English. I would follow the translation with another brief question and their conversation would continue. Later, in Japan, I continued these conversations with other mothers who had returned from the United States and whose children were readjusting to the requirements of Japanese schools.

Since some of the top Japanese executives were on the Board of the Saturday school, it also provided my first introduction to the corporate culture. The engineers, executives, and managers spoke about many of the unique features of the Japanese workplace and about their experiences with both American and Japanese workers. When they addressed issues of productivity and quality, they spoke not only about the skills required by the new technology, but also about the cultural differences that exist in the American and the Japanese enterprises. And sometimes they spoke about their own experience of learning and working in Japanese society.

When the Japanese construction company broke the ground for the factory, I began to speak to its managers and engineers about their contact with American workers; when the transplant hired a consulting firm to screen and test job applicants, I spoke to its director to find out about the kinds of skills the company needed; as other Japa-

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nese mothers came to the community, I interviewed them, and was told about the cultural interaction between family, school and work in modern Japanese society. As I spoke to American workers, teachers, political leaders, and community members who were working with the Japanese, I heard about their (culturally mediated) interpretations of Japanese life at home, school, and work.

Eventually the encounter with this community extended to Japan, where the first group of American workers from this plant was sent for training. There I learned about the character of their training experience and about the workers' impressions of Japanese society. When I was in Japan, I spoke to other Japanese mothers who, having been in the United States, had now returned and were readjusting to Japanese society. I also interviewed young women, about to graduate from college, who spoke openly to me about their hopes and expectations. I interviewed owners and executives of large and small companies about their experience with American and Japanese workers, and I spoke with many others about their encounter with these two distinct cultures. All of these people became my informants, collaborators in my own education about school, work, and culture. In reporting on these interviews I have disguised people and their affiliations as much as possible.

By this time, the central question of the study had changed. I was still interested in understanding the connection between school achievement and industrial productivity, but I was asking it in a different way. I asked: What does the achievement of Japanese students and the productivity of Japanese workers mean for Americans, and why does it carry the meaning that it does? I was led to ask this question for many reasons, but perhaps the most important was the feeling that economic issues had become secondary, and that behind all of the attention given to Japan was a concern about our own identity and moral character. My question thus became: What is it about the nature of our own self-understanding that leads us to see Japanese performance in the way that we do?

To understand the significance of this question, consider the fact that while we attribute the reliability of Japanese automobiles to something about Japanese character and personality, which we often see as threatening, we take the finely engineered German cars and the safe Swedish cars for granted without attributes of national character that carry racist or nationalist overtones. While we voice public concern about Japanese investment in American industry and real estate, little concern is raised about similar investments by the British, Germans, French, or Canadians. While the President seeks an educational

strategy that will enable our children to surpass the Japanese in mathematics and science by the year 2000, he does not consider the easier goal of surpassing the students of France, Belgium, Hungary, Scotland, or any of the dozen or so nations that stand between the scores of our children and those of the Japanese. Perhaps a more reasonable strategy, if one believes that being number one is important, would be to try to move from number twelve to number eleven, and from there to number ten or nine, seeking to overcome, say, Finland in 1993, Wales in 1995, Scotland in 1998, and so on, until some years after the turn of the century, we take on number one—Japan.<sup>1</sup> Yet we hear virtually nothing about the achievement of children in Finland, Wales, England, Scotland, Canada, France, or any of the other Western countries that rank ahead of us. We seek only to leap from number twelve to number one. The position of the Japanese is an American obsession.

Clearly there is an element of racism in this concern about Japan. However, there is racism on both sides of this issue, as demonstrated by the misguided Japanese politicians who blame America's problems on Blacks and Hispanics in the work force. Yet to dismiss the overemphasis on Japan as just a matter of racism and nothing more would be to lose the instructive moment in this encounter. Moreover, to focus just on the racism alone is to minimize the real admiration that many Americans feel for the Japanese. The mixture of our admiration and resentment projected onto the Japanese creates the opportunity to learn about the cultural source of our responses—our own identity as a people—and our emerging possibilities. It is precisely such learning that serves, in the classical sense of the term, as education. This then becomes the larger project of this book.

## *II. Images of Self and Other*

Japan stands as a symbolic complement to our own self-image, reinforcing our idea of the way we are and the way we ought to be. The recent achievement of the Japanese highlights and threatens this idea. With the exception of the period during the Second World War, the Japanese along with other Asians have been perceived by us as passive, imitative, obedient, and dependent, the seemingly perfect complement to our self-image as assertive, creative, self-reliant, and independent. Our image of the Japanese is part of our image of the "Oriental" in general, an image that is powerfully expressed by Song in the play *M. Butterfly* as he explains to the Judge how he was able

for twenty years to convince his Western male lover that he was a woman:

Rule One is: Men always believe what they want to hear. So a girl can tell the most obnoxious lies and the guys will believe them every time—"This is my first time"— "That the biggest I've ever seen"—or *both*, which if you really think about it, is not possible in a single lifetime. . . .

Rule Two: As soon as Western man comes into contact with the East—he's already confused. The West has sort of an international rape mentality towards the East. . . . Basically, "Her mouth says no, but her eyes say yes." The West thinks of itself as masculine—big guns, big industry, big money—so the East is feminine—weak, delicate, poor . . . but good at art, and full of inscrutable wisdom—the feminine mystique.

Her mouth says no, but her eyes say yes. The West believes the East, deep down, *wants* to be dominated—because a woman can't think for herself.<sup>2</sup>

As the Japanese now become associated with big money, big industry, and perhaps even big guns, our image of them as passive, dependent, and feminine becomes unsettled, as does our own self-image as independent, strong, generous, and masculine. Racism here is a desperate attempt to maintain the traditional sense of place and personhood in a world where established racial hierarchies and traditional stereotypes are destabilizing.

The admiration we have for Japan is not completely separable from such racism, but here the racism involves a mixture of fear and admiration. In the midst of this instability and the blurring of traditional boundaries, the Japanese seem to maintain a stable sense of themselves and of the various roles each is destined to play. Some Americans believe that place, personhood, and authority are signs of Japan's moral superiority serving as a spotlight to accent the real reason for our fading fortune. To seek a quick technical fix to school performance through the establishment of competitive, nationwide standardized tests or merit pay for teachers is to seek to reaffirm our own traditional identity as competitive and individualistic, and it is also to reaffirm the legitimacy of universal standards that define the educational race and allot the prizes. Yet once the legitimacy of these traditional forms have been challenged, they cannot be returned in the same way. Whereas once such tests were accepted as natural indicators of talent and merit, they are now on contested ground—legitimated but not exactly legitimate, at least not in the way they once were.<sup>3</sup> Hence

identity is an issue to be dealt with, not just a nature to be born to. The task that this book undertakes is to address the problems of education as an issue of democratic identity formation, and to do so by exploring the challenge that the Japanese present, and our response to it.

### *III. Democracy and Markets*

We the citizens of the United States see ours as first and foremost a democratic nation. We speak easily of our role as the leader of the free world. We applaud the decline of communism throughout the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Many Americans are capitalists too. They believe in the free market, and they also believe that freedom consists in people being able to buy and to sell what they wish. Most citizens do not believe that one must choose between freedom and markets, between democracy and capitalism, holding that the former is a condition of the latter. Yet if we were forced to choose, I believe that most would choose democracy.

Most people know that however unclear the ideal, democracy insists that economic freedom be tempered by political equality and they know intuitively that the two may commingle but that they are not always the same. We cannot sell our opinions to the highest bidder. Our children, our bodies, our reason, and our souls are not for sale. Markets do have limits. A choice for democracy may not be a choice for riches, but it is indeed a choice for selfhood—both our own and others. There are limits to the tie between markets and democracy, between political and economic freedom. Markets can and sometimes do exist without political freedom—without democracy. And democracies exist where market forces are constrained by politically determined needs. We are in danger of losing this distinction and of wrongly thinking that to achieve democratic freedom we need only market-oriented capitalism. Indeed, in emphasizing the importance of private consumption, capitalism may sometimes constrict the sphere of public, democratic discourse.

This is not the first time we have made such a mistake. Indeed, there is no gilded era, no moment of grace, no Garden of Eden when everyone sought democracy. Many of the Founders themselves were large property owners and merchants and they wanted to stay that way. Yet, in their drive to win popular support for their cause, they appealed to a broader popular base, and in doing so, they articulated the need for public discourse—the foundation of any democratic soci-

ety. The difficulty with maintaining democracy today is not that the mechanisms for public discourse have vanished. It is that the means for controlling such discourse have increased so greatly. A country where the top one percent of the population controls as much wealth as the bottom ninety percent would be suspect as a democracy at any time and in any place. Yet when that one percent lives at a time when powerful and costly television messages can reach hundreds of millions of people in a split second, and political imagination can be easily controlled by glib sound bites, then the inequality has serious and potentially devastating consequences unless ways can be found to increase the possibilities for more equitable control of information. Markets and democracy can likely coexist, but they are different, and the one does not necessarily entail the other.

#### *IV. The Connection between Democracy and Education*

I therefore see our highest ideal of political identity as democratic at its foundation. We know our rights, and we want to be able to express them and to have them recognized by others. We also know that, whether we like it or not, the condition for the recognition of our rights is the recognition of the rights of others. Yet where do we learn to be democracy, and what do we learn when we learn to be democratic? Do we learn democracy at home?—perhaps, if we are lucky. But democracy also rightly teaches that parents should be autonomous, whether or not they are good role models for democracy. Do we learn democracy in the neighborhood, among our peers? Certainly we may indeed learn to respect others like ourselves by playing and working with them. Yet what if our peers are not democratic? Suppose the older and stronger child bullies the younger one. Where then do we learn to be democratic, and where, even if our peers are democratic, do we learn to respect those who are different from us, as democracy is supposed to teach people to do? Our present patterns of housing, with race divided from race and rich divided from poor, make the lessons of democracy less than complete when taught only in the neighborhood. Perhaps we learn democracy in the workplace—a prospect that this book will explore in detail. Yet workplaces may be democratic, but democracy is not their main business. Their business is business, and if served by democracy then all well and good. But democracy is not a required course in the workplace. Churches are democratic—at least some of them. But then again, some are not, and democracy teaches that neither churches—those that are and those

that are not democratic—are to be interfered with. And where, if anywhere, do we learn that?

The role of public education for the development of a democratic identity has been seriously neglected in recent years; in this book I want to reconsider its importance in this regard. Yet, in speaking for the role of the public schools, it is important not to minimize their problems and their flaws. I speak of the public school as a place where we might learn to reflect upon our identity as a democratic nation and as a place where such identities could be renewed. However, the schools I speak of are not the schools that are the objects of radical disappointment and conservative scorn. Public schools often do not serve democratic ends.

Yet renewal is ultimately a public project, one that must reach toward a common good, publicly defined. If we think of such a good as the product of an elite, then the public good can be determined by graduates of wealthy private schools and a few excellent public ones. If, as I believe, such a good must be democratically defined, then it must be the focus of education in all public schools. I am not especially optimistic that this can happen, given our present economic and political structure, but if it is to happen we must at least have some idea of what it is that we presently lack. Unhappily, much recent educational discourse has lost sight of the public-forming responsibility of public education.

Certainly the public schools are flawed, but to some extent their flaws are contingent. Some teachers are narrow-minded, but this need not be the case. Many schools are concerned more with keeping order than furthering education, but it is possible to change this if we know what it means to truly educate a child, and if we can see the factors that are inhibiting such education. We are not inevitably programmed to be educational masters and educational serfs. And if schools are not equal enough, if the rich children get better teachers, smaller classes, better equipment, and a richer curriculum, as they indeed do, there is nothing that says things must inevitably stay this way.

There are three quick reasons that could be given for neglecting the public role of public education. The first is that public schools have not met their promise and have not served to promote a more egalitarian and democratic society. I believe this answer is accurate, but that there are different ways of responding to it—a progressive and a conservative way. The conservative asks us to believe that things are as they should be and that the inequalities of the schools are but a reflection of the inequality to be found in nature. The progressive says otherwise. Unequal schools squelch potential and inhibit talent from

rising to the top. I disagree with the conservative and take my stand with the progressive—but I stand only partway with the progressive. I believe that unequal schools inhibit talent, but there is more to education than enforcing the rules of the natural lottery.

The second reason for the neglect of the public schools is that a new conservative discourse has taken hold that has no real conception of a public. It understands that there are nations and markets, but nothing sandwiched in between. Political discourse is the feedback that takes place between the poll results and the sound bite. Schools serve national and market forces—not political discourse.

The third and perhaps most difficult reason to address is the tension that exists in classical democratic theory itself. Western democracy seeks the public good, but it does so through maintaining that each of us, each and every individual citizen is a separate unit—a pleasure-seeking animal—with little need or regard for each other. Some draw the implication from the tension that the “public good” is really only a label indicating the compromise each of us must make with others in order to serve our interest. Hence, the public here is ultimately reducible to an aggregate of individual interests. One of the central questions in this book is whether the Japanese present a different and perhaps more appropriate model of a public.

A lot of attention has been directed at public education even if it has not been directed at its public-forming role. We have had an “education president” and a Secretary of Education who became a czar. We have had reports and findings, studies, and investigations. We have had educational crisis and counter-crisis, and the patient continues to linger but is not well. It is not well for a very good reason: the patient, if not the sickness, has been misdiagnosed. The patient is education. It is not job training or even nation building. Its sickness is that it has lost its own sense of purpose. It has a disease of spirit, not of body. It is sick because it has come to mistake the molding of a collectivity—ready to act as one and to think as one—for the job of developing opportunities for public discourse.

Of course there are a hundred and one questions entailed in this claim. Just what is a public? Given so many different groups, traditions, races, ideas, and opinions, can there ever be a public in this country? And if there can be, then do we want it? Must we place our *many* in subordination to our *one*? These questions point not to the problem with the idea of a public as such, but rather to the question of how a public can be constituted in a multicultural age, and this is really the question about the character of intercultural understanding that this book seeks to address. It does not deny the ideal; it asks how



it is achievable in a multicultural age. To clarify the ideal is to make it more achievable in more places. We are after all more likely to hit the target if we know what the target is, but knowing what it is does not mean that we will hit it all the time.

### *V. The Limits of the Present Debate*

The ideal of the education of a public seems to be lost in the present debate about the future of American education. One view sees the state as simply a mechanism for distributing educational resources, leaving to parents alone the choice of where their students should go to school and what they should be taught. Another emphasizes the potential economic benefits of schooling, and proposes a curriculum that would improve students' ability to support themselves and to contribute to the nation's economic well-being. Those who advocate this view want to narrow the offerings of the school, eliminate the so-called frill subjects, increase the number of required subjects, and require the same subjects in every school. They want to make schools across the country increasingly similar to one another in terms of curriculum content, and they want this content to have a cash value. Those who emphasize the economic benefits of schools do not see any conflict between their view, which calls for constricting the offerings of the curriculum, and the view that advocates the widest possible choice for parents. This is because they assume that all parents and cultures hold economic success as their major educational goal, that they all share the same meaning of such success—the private accumulation of wealth.<sup>4</sup> Thus they advocate providing parents with more choice as they seek to reduce the variety of alternatives from which parents might choose. A third response is to accept the role of education as a public-forming body, but to assert that the meanings and symbols that constitute this public are already fixed, and that the role of the school is to teach students to identify them.

### *VI. A Democratic Public*

The question raised in these pages is whether there is still a possibility for a view of a public and of public education that is wider and more inclusive than those that I have sketched above, and if so, how that public can be connected to a defensible conception of democracy. The way this question is answered has inevitable implications for the