

Education and Vocational Training in Japan

by Rainer Neu

It will be our common opinion that the possibility of innovation and change is not something external or accidental to any institutional system. It is given in the very nature of the process of institutionalization and in the workings of institutional systems. But nevertheless the fundamental change in the Japanese educational system in this century must be seen - and can be compared to Germany in this way - as a consequence of external influences. In both countries it was the military defeat of the 2nd World War which forced an opening and a process of democratizing of the educational systems under the influence of the Victorious Powers. A nationalistic ideal of education tailored for states ruled by an emperor or "Führer" was superseded by guidelines which took their bearings from Western democracies. The Japanese "Basic Law of Education" of 1947¹, which was essentially due to American influence, demands in its preamble the "creation of a culture which is generally applicable and which finds its expression in individuality". This educational ideal is without any doubt determined by the spirit of a Western-democratic understanding of education. The theoretical assumptions of this demand, however, have two poles in history: On the one hand it allows a maximum of personal specialization on the basis of a formalized concept of knowledge, above all represented in Anglosaxon Pragmatism and today generally accepted in the sciences which aim at technological usability. On the other hand it refers to an "integral" understanding

¹In: Horst E. Wittig, Pädagogik und Bildungspolitik Japans. Quellentexte und Dokumente von der Tokugawa-Zeit bis zur Gegenwart, München-Basel 1976, p. 149-153

of education (Gr. Paideia) as a critical integration of one's personal development into public culture, a concept which has had its roots since the Enlightenment above all in German-speaking cultures. In this article I want to examine the position which the modern Japanese educational system holds in regard to this area of conflict of Western educational aims.

After 1945 the Japanese school system developed according to the American school system. Education begins with nursery school (one to three years), then pupils attend a primary school for six and a secondary school for three years. Up to that point going to school is compulsory for all children. In 1980 95% of the girls and 93% of the boys who had finished secondary school attended a High School, which can be compared to the American Senior High School, for three years.¹ In Japan's schools of further education there are neither Ordinary nor Advanced Levels; instead of these pupils have to pass an entrance test. In 1980 33% of the girls and 41% of the boys who had passed High School went on to a College or a University. That means: in spite of the stiff entrance tests over 30% of one age-group are university students in Japan. In the Federal Republic of Germany it is only 18%.

This high level of education, linked with a rapid progress in technology, is also being admired in Germany. With more interest than in the past, people have started to ask for the reasons for the successful development of the Japanese economy. The high level of education in Japan and her people's consciousness of the importance of information are considered to be one reason. As a consequence West Germany's Foreign Minister, Genscher, in December 1983 complained about the extent to which West Germany is behind in technology as

¹ Figures according to Noboku Takahashi, Die Frau in Japan, in: Neues aus Japan, März 1982, hg. von der Japanischen Botschaft und den Japanischen Generalkonsulaten in der BRD, p. 26-33, here: p. 28.

compared to the USA and Japan, and he advocates a more marked furtherance of the elite in West Germany. As a means of achieving this he proposed the furtherance of private schools and private universities. By demanding private universities for the elite Genscher wants to free people doing research from a flood of regulations and from the need to justify themselves.¹

Obviously Genscher wants to make the Japanese model of education seem attractive to German education politicians. But it has to be asked whether it is possible to transfer Japanese educational institutions to European conditions, and, if so, whether this is to be desired.

Taking into account that the present Japanese educational system took its bearings after 1945 from the American model and that education in the Meij Restoration period followed Western ideas one may not ignore the fact that Japanese education was completely ruled by the spirit of Confucianism up to the end of the Tokugawa era (1868). The purpose of this education was to become absorbed in the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius and to develop - by following the wise men's ways - into a morally perfect member of the community. The Education Reform of the Meij Restoration was a critical interference with this fixed and comprehensive concept of education, it was, however, revised by the Imperial Rescript on Education in 1890. Until 1945 this Imperial Rescript on Education remained the basis for the education of one's personality and the doctrine of right conduct. Two virtues were all-important: true devotion to the dynasty and reverent respect for one's parents and ancestors. This basic attitude formed the people's practical ethics: Harmony in the family, faithfulness in friendship, temperance and modesty, general benevolence, efficiency in your profession, devotion to public welfare, observance of the country's laws, sacrifice for one's native country.

¹According to the "Frankfurter Rundschau" from December 14th, 1983.

Being a relic of feudalism this scale of values was abolished after the end of the war. It was to be replaced by a new moral education which took its pattern from the concept of American public schools, in which the individual is central according to the spirit of democratic liberalism. The possibility of a clear and extensive practically-moral orientation, which - on the basis of Confucianism - had determined Japanese ideas of value up to that time, was replaced by a pluralism of possible ways of behaviour. The insecurity which followed can still be seen in an abundance of committees, reports and guidelines from the Education Minister, who is at pains to formulate generally obligatory norms of moral behaviour. Not a few utterances in this context bear clearly restorative features referring to traditional moral values rather than the creation of a new culture "generally applicable and finding its expression in individuality", as the "Basic Law of Education" demands.

Up to the present day the Japanese have indeed not succeeded in finding a system of social ethics corresponding to modern demands, which could form the moral basis for the Japanese educational system. The foreign observer rather gets the impression that - despite all outward pragmatism - Japanese society still follows a deep-rooted Confucian moral system, which in theory is regarded as a feudal relic, but which still determines the moral foundations of this people even in modern times. These Confucian ethics impart a special ethic of learning and working. The Japan expert Helmut Erlinghagen writes in this context: "Confucius made the East and thus the Japanese a part of the earth, in which effort as such is highly valued, and learning consequently considered to be of immense worth. Although the East is said to be contemplative, Confucius' desire for knowledge seems to be more directed to the outside than to the intuitive impulse

for an active thirst for knowledge, which still today distinguishes educated people in Japan from those in the West".¹

So I want to propose the following thesis: we have to distinguish between the official teaching aims of the Japanese educational system and the fundamental norms of ethical behaviour in society. In reality the Japanese educational system can build upon a foundation of social norms, which - though they are not clearly named - are strong enough still to determine today the framework of obligatory social behaviour. The indecisiveness of modern ethical teaching aims is counterbalanced by a deep-seated foundation of traditional norms, to whose maxims a high willingness to learn, which Confucius demonstrated in his own life, belongs. A comparable learning ethic in which learning is a value by itself is not known in the Occident. This is one of the basic differences between Western and Eastern attitudes to education.

In the Japanese educational system a separation between storing knowledge and moral teaching aims has been evident ever since. Where the transmission of ethical norms can be delegated to pre-scientific authorities learning can become a value in itself, which need not answer the question of its legitimation by itself. The ability to store up as much precise knowledge as possible and to have it ready on call is indeed admired in Japan. That is why pronounced specialists who acquire as much information as possible in a limited field can develop in Japan. Less trained is the ability to perceive connections between different fields of cognition or, even less, to question matters of knowledge critically. This form of learning in which stored knowledge has become substantial becomes again evident when people choose a job.

¹ Helmut Erlinghagen. Japan. Ein "deutscher Japaner" über die Japaner, Stuttgart 1974, p. 371

He who enters a Japanese firm does not choose a certain job, but he simply chooses the business and he leaves it to the management to decide which kind of job he is going to do in the following years. It is not necessarily his specific field of studies which qualifies him for this job. Above all it is the reputation of the university he graduated from which opens for him a certain professional career. Training for his job is taken over by the firm. In Japan I got to know a young man who had graduated in Catholic theology and who was now working in the electrical industry.

The management also concerns itself with the personal moulding of its future staff members. Young employees in big firms often have to undergo a group training, especially if they are graduates from High Schools or Universities. This character formation can take place during a several weeks' course in a zen monastery supervised by a master of meditation as well as during a stay in a camp in the mountains, where former military men carry out a training program. The common aim of these training courses is to teach the young employees concentration, endurance and team spirit and to check the potential beginnings of individualism. Here the division between, even the contradictory character of school training, vocational qualification and personal education becomes drastically evident. Naturally this character-training of young adults can only be successful if it can refer to norm orientations, views of life and the willingness to behave in specific ways, which - more or less distinctly - already exist in every individual. Such an educational system can function only as long as definite and generally accepted patterns of behaviour are passed on at least in the field of primary socialization, i.e. especially in the families. That is why I want to venture the prognosis that the actual crisis of the Japanese educational system is still to come. This crisis will come about when -

as a consequence of a growing secularization and a pluralization of values - the transmission of an accepted social ethic can no longer be taken for granted and when the tradition of Confucian values, which are as an undercurrent still existent today, must be replaced by patterns aimed at personal orientation. I think indications of this crisis have been observed for quite a long time in striking outbreaks of deviant behaviour in Japanese schools and universities, although I do not doubt that the traditional Japanese system of values may last for a few more generations.

Now a comparison between the Japanese and the German educational systems is of interest in that here the consequences of the secularization since the Enlightenment have already led to a specific new definition of the relation between the sciences and practical life. This came about with the help of the German idea of "Bildung", which originates in Mysticism and leads from Master Eckhart to Hegel into the centre of German Idealism. "Bildung" sees education not only as a training for reality as it is, but as it could be. This definition of "Bildung" can be justified - according to Humboldt - by the argument that neither state nor mankind are concerned about knowledge and talking, but about character and acting.¹ Humanism found the solution for a new definition of the relation between science and practice in the maxim: Education through science. This basic idea of Humboldt's notion of university states: Theory is of value for the individual only as the student - on the basis of an understanding of reality - is also shown norms for his own behaviour. With this claim humanistic education emancipated itself from norms which were only legitimized by tradition and which did not stand scientific reflection.

¹Wilhelm Humboldt, Über die innere und äußere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin, in: A. Anrich (Ed.), Die Idee der deutschen Universität, Darmstadt 1959, p.379

From then on education has to be understood as being reflexive; it aims at self-responsible thinking and acting. At the centre of the search for the true, good and just life - the leading question of every "Practical Philosophy" - now stands the subject that is able to talk and to think. So the process of education signifies - in Fichte's words - that the reflecting and feeling man is at the same time the creating and acting man.

This maxim, education through science, also determines the modern teaching aims of German schools. So you can read in the guidelines for the teaching of senior classes in North-Rhine-Westphalian grammar schools: "Teaching and educating cannot be separated from each other in school-life. Both functions penetrate each other constantly, influence each other mutually, and have their common point of reference in the pupil's knowledge, his abilities and behaviour".¹ The following statement applies to the educational task "self-realization in social responsibility": "This education takes place - first and above all - within the scope of teaching"², in other words, by transmitting knowledge.

Although the Japanese "Basic Law of Education" would not object to such an interpretation of its educational tasks, this notion of education is alien to Japanese thinking. The anti-metaphysical tendency of Confucianism and Buddhism is in this respect closer to Anglosaxon Pragmatism, although the latter concept cannot give a satisfactory answer to the problem of legitimating ethical teaching aims. Learning in Japanese schools is - till today - connected rather with the idea of imitation than with the notion of reflection. The German philosopher Eugen Herrigel wrote concerning Japanese

¹ Richtlinien für die gymnasiale Oberstufe in Nordrhein-Westfalen. Sozialwissenschaften, ed. by Kultusminister des Landes NRW, Heft 4717, p. 14

² *ibid*, p. 16

teaching: "Practising, repeating and repeating the repetition are in progressive intensification its distinguishing marks for most of the time. In the first instance the pupil is not demanded anything except imitating conscientiously what the teacher demonstrates. Averse to long-winded explanations he confines himself to brief instructions and he does not reckon with questions asked by the pupils. He calmly watches their groping efforts, without hoping for independence and maturity."¹

The process of reflection and self-responsible thinking and acting does not fit this attitude towards learning. The notion of modern subjectivity, which forms the medium for the maxim "education through science", is simply lacking in the Asian tradition. The buddhistic tradition rather tends to dismiss the idea of an "ego" as mere imagination.

So I can formulate more precisely the problem of a new definition of ethical teaching aims in Japan, which was already referred to in the "Basic Law of Education" in 1947, but which has not yet been solved till today: The Japanese are used to arriving at ethical decisions on the basis of traditional, pre-scientific norms and in the context of their social position. They lack in their own tradition a concept of education which could transmit ethical responsibility on the basis of acquiring theoretical and practical knowledge in a way they themselves have to answer for.

Three ways out of this dilemma are conceivable:

1. The deliberate resort to traditional values, as it is - here and there - louder and louder demanded. This decision, however, would have to cope with a problem that

¹Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in der Kunst des Bogenschießens*, O.W. Barth Verlag 1978, p. 51f.

seems to be unsolvable at present, i.e. to stop the process of secularization or to reverse it, and to prevent the spreading of pluralistic values.

2. The adoption of a Western model, as was propagated after 1945 but in no way realized, and which - under the influence of pragmatic ideas of a "good" life - does not seem to be a real alternative to Eastern traditions.
3. The creation of a particular "Asian" model that would mediate between science and practice and copy the achievement which Humanism acquired for the European notion of education. I - a person from the Occident - am not in a position to judge on that, but I think this would be an exciting alternative.

But for my own, German part, an assessment decidedly forces itself upon my mind: The attempt to follow Japanese educational conditions, which is expressed in Genscher's wish for the setting up of private universities in Germany for the elite and for specialists, would be wrong. In the first place we lack the specific, in Confucian tradition rooted Japanese attitude towards learning, which is the personal supposition for this kind of specialization.

And in the second place this attempt would go back on that step of development, which can plainly be considered as the cultural achievement in the German understanding of education: the mediation between scientific thinking and a responsible ethical conduct of life. Genscher's demand to largely release the researching elite in private schools and universities from the "need to justify themselves" is a downright betrayal of the German ideal of education. "Inconsiderate are those who propose a transformation and dispersion of universities into specialized schools". Perhaps

you are not longer astonished at the end of this lecture to hear that this modern sounding sentence was written by Schleiermacher over 150 years ago. The independence of the German University should - as far as possible - guarantee its freedom from commercial interests, be they immediate or directed from outside. In this context I find comfort in the thought that the private educational institutions in Japan are normally in no way elite schools, but they have rather the reputation of being second, if not even third class. At the top of the Japanese educational system we find the public universities. And this should not be any different in Germany, either.

(finished September 21st, 1984)