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A DISCUSSION ON THE CONTRADICTIONS OF JAPAN'S CULTURAL VALUES AND THE VALUES ADVOCATED IN ITS EDUCATION REFORM UPON THE SUBJECT MATTER OF LEARNING

*Fu. MEI LING.**

A country's education is intimately linked to its culture in that in nurturing the younger generations, the education system is often perceived as one efficient channel to pass on the values that the country holds dear and those that are essential in preserving its culture. In addition, the distinct style of education of different countries and the kinds of activities involved further reflect the culture's conceptions on the various key domains such as 'learning', 'teaching', 'evaluation' and 'ability'. This article analyses the contradictions of values that are in Japan's culture and those advocated in its recent education reform. By advocating self-autonomous learning, the Ministry of Education is confronting the nation's complacency upon its long-established 'soft group-orientation' national trait. The concepts of 'learning' and 'evaluation' as hitherto understood in Japan's culture are also under serious scrutiny by this challenge of values. This article argues that the values prescribed in the reform are not only transforming Japan's philosophy of education, but are also contriving the biggest social change in Japan since the end of the Second World War.

Introduction: Learning and Culture

Education, being one of the many systems established in the society, is not only inseparable from other social functions, but is also highly reflective of the country's values (White, 1987; White, 1988; Yamamura, 1993). Values are susceptible to changes. We have seen the demolition of the values on imperialism and we have seen the change of views upon the role of females in society, just to name two among the many (White, 1988). Values revealed in a culture also change though it appears to be slower than other changes. When certain values are maintained and expressed in different ways in the society for a long time, may that be through the social systems, artistic channels or others, the values are accepted as traditional values. Very often than not, these traditional values are embedded in school curriculums, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes deliberately. The United States and Japan are often depicted as two opposing poles for discussions on this matter of values as the former advocates democratic, liberal and individualistic values while the latter adheres to the values of social cohesion, group harmony and the establishment of

human relationships (Cummings, 1980; White, 1987). These two opposing sets of values inevitably reflect themselves in the different styles of education existed in the two countries.

Learning is very much a cultural activity (Cummings, 1980; White, 1987; White, 1988; Yamamura, 1993; Monbusho, 1993). The conception of this activity affects greatly the kind of education that is implemented. With the ideology of democracy and respect for individuals salient in Western Culture, it is predictable that learning activities take the forms of active-involvement self-expression, trial and error and individual-centered types of activity. Teachers also treat each student as an independent individual with different levels of ability. In the case of Japan, the principles of egalitarianism and social cohesion rule in the ideology of education (Cummings, 1980; White, 1987). Therefore, activities that are group or class-oriented, teacher-centered, consensus-building become apparent in their everyday learning. At this point, it is important to note that the different concepts formed on "learning" are not just cultural-bound, they further affect the beliefs, attitudes and strategies that are to be involved in learning, for both the teachers and the students.

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Learning and the kind of learning that occurs are also greatly influenced by social factors (Yamamura, 1993). The fact that Asia has a long history of respect for knowledge and the trust that knowledge paves the road to success in life is an undeniable driving force behind all forms of support that the Japanese children are receiving in their learning. In Japan, academic achievements are widely approved with a strong social recognition and are regarded as highly admirable traits attained by immense effort. As a consequence, "learning" which produces impressive academic results is to be encouraged by all means. Family, being the central social unit in the social systems of Japan (the notion of *ie*), one's children's academic success brings fame and pride to the family and failure brings shame instead (Yamamura, 1993; Tachikawa, 1994). It is then not difficult to understand why all Japanese mothers are enthusiastic in playing the significant role of unconditional supporter in their children's studies. One other important social factor is that it is prevalent in Japanese society that excellent academic achievements are accepted as the main indication of ability and they serve as an important yardstick in the social selection process (White, 1987; Yamamura, 1993).

The world-famous intense examination pressure in Japan known as the "examination hell" is, of course, a reflection of this pragmatic role of education within Japan's social structures. Despite various criticism upon the unnecessary strains on the young people's mental health because of this extreme examination pressure, the Japanese society seems to be at a loss as to how to deal with this problem. First of all, the egalitarian principle in Japan's educational ideology asserts that the examination system is by far the best system that provides fair chances to all young people in getting into the appropriate educational institutions of their ability (Monbusho, 1991). Secondly, the corporate sector of the society relies heavily upon this examination-oriented selection process to provide them with the suitable and able workforce. As a result, education in Japan is so deeply entwined in this pragmatic function of grading the workforce that parents send their children of all ages (from primary to senior high) to *Juku*, the preparatory

schools which specialize in cramming for examinations, at the end of each tired school day even though it is of a formidable financial and spiritual cost (White, 1987).

The affective element upon the concept of 'learning' in Japanese culture also plays an important role in arousing the enthusiasm that the Japanese society displays on 'learning'. In Japan where the philosophy of Confucius reigns, "learning" is often associated with admirable character traits like diligence and perseverance. It is also said that severe hardship in life or in learning builds a refined character. It is further believed that "learning", resulting in an increase of knowledge, will lead to higher intelligence (Rohlen, 1983; White, 1987). Teachers in Japan not only enjoy life-long employment as in other professions, but they are also given high respect and social status which ensure the dignity of the profession. The affections for 'knowledge' are the base of the country's admiration for and endorsement of a 'knowledgeable person'-teacher. These sentimental affections, together with the cognitive conception on what 'knowledge' is, and what 'knowledge' represents contribute to determine the kind of 'learning' that is to be promoted (White, 1988).

Socialization and Competition

Socialization

Socialization occupies an important place in Japan's education. As mentioned earlier, social cohesion is one of the many cultural values highly held in Japan, the cultivation of a sense of belonging and understanding of the culture is essential for the smooth transition of young Japanese students to the adult world in anticipation of becoming members of the workforce.

This process of socialization actually takes place at an early age at home before the children are enrolled into schools (Yamamura, 1993; White, 1987). The concept of '*amae*'—indulgence and unconditional love and support which closely knit the mother-and-child bond—is made famous by Doi (1973) in his book "The Anatomy of Dependence". Having this '*amae*' child rearing tradition, Japanese mothers are able to transmit to their children the concept of 'in-groups' (*uchi*) versus 'out-groups' (*soto*). The children are also taught expected social behavi-

ours as opposed to indulgent behaviours acceptable in intimate relationships. In Japanese culture, an understanding into this network of human relationships and their respective behaviours in the society is regarded as an important process in one's life because successful social integration is seen as the realization of the 'self'. White (1987) has pointed out that "there is, in Japan, no conflicts between the goals of self-fulfillment and the goals of social integration" (p. 27).

Yamamura (1993) analyses this group-orientation in Japanese culture as a 'soft' orientation for it emphasizes a voluntary integration of 'self' and 'group'. He lists four characteristics of this soft group-orientation disposition:

- i) immersion of 'self' into the 'group'.
- ii) respect of the group's will above oneself.
- iii) competitions among different groups as motivations for individual contributions.
- iv) flexibility in the hierarchical structure of various groups.

(p. 34-36)

These characteristics that define the relationship between 'self' and 'group' can be found ubiquitous in the social structures of Japanese society—at home, at school and at work. With social harmony nurtured around an understanding and the building up of a close relationship between 'self' and 'group' in Japanese culture, it becomes natural to find that most learning at school is designed around this theme.

A lot of the teachers whom I met in my school visits told me that they always thought about students in their group identities. Certainly, there are a lot of activities which emphasize cooperations, sense of responsibility and group efforts that exist in similar forms for both Japanese schools and schools in the West. For instance, extra curricular activities such as sports teams, music groups, drama productions etc.; student bodies which bear the responsibility in representing students' interests and reflecting their ideas to the school administration. However, there are also a few unique Japanese school activities that do not exist in schools of the West. One of them is the participation of all students in cleaning the entire school; another one is the organizing of lunch-serving for the whole class. Apart from these notable services,

teachers are often found to be facilitating group consensus in discussions or in reaching decisions for class affairs. Students are expected to belong to a certain social group and those without one are often bullied and/or labelled 'strange'-incidents of '*ijime*' (White, 1987; Tachikawa, 1994; Yamamura, 1993). From these examples, one can see that within the Japanese cultural context, learning in Japanese schools involves a lot of socializing, the functions of which are to mould young children into the 'soft' group-orientation nature.

The importance attached to this socialization process which is disguised as empathy-oriented, consensus-seeking education has taken away to a certain extent some aspects of cognitive learning that is, independent and evaluative learning. Besides, the principle of egalitarianism in Japanese education which dictates everyone to learn the same contents as well as learning at the same pace has called on the sacrifice of the development of individual characters (Monbusho, 1991). Inquisitive minds are not nurtured nor encouraged; self-discovery learning is not widely appreciated; inventions, funny or new ideas and exceptional imaginations are usually regarded as walking away from traditions, that is, negating long-established social consensus. 'Learning' in Japanese schools being confined by its cultural values shows a completely different dimension of the concept when compared to 'learning' in the context of western culture which of course has its own unique set of values regarding the matter of developing younger persons. Thus, learning is an activity that cannot be alienated from its cultural environment which somehow dictates the kind of activities to be involved and the type of behaviours to be found.

Education in Japan has always focused on developments of the 'whole being' rather than just cognitive skills (Cummings, 1980). Hodgins and Koesther (1993) argue that the origin of non-verbal sensitivity stems from the need for a smooth social functioning. In fact, I shall extend that this sensitivity is exactly the objective of Japanese mothers' '*amae*' spirit. Moreover, research on recent moral development in Japan shows that Japanese children conceive rules contextually and that interpersonal rela-

tionships influence their behaviour patterns (Naito, 1994). Naito (1994) concludes that cultural beliefs affect not only Japanese children's conceptions of rules but also develop "a situation-dependent ethics or moral relativism" (p. 41). Mann and others (1994) also report the relativity of Japanese children's behaviour of 'respect' towards different social groups. It is also reported that the distinct categories of interpersonal relationships in the society determine the flexibility of social rules (Mann & others, 1994). In order to enable Japanese children to internalize these social behaviours, school undoubtedly becomes the obvious agent to be given these socializing and moralizing functions to fulfill. As a result, learning in Japanese schools has a lot to deal with understanding and handling human relationships and acquiring skills in enabling the smooth functionings of these relationships in appropriate social contexts. Nevertheless, this is not to say that 'learning' in Japan has little cognitive aspect. Nor am I suggesting that education in Japan concerns little about 'knowledge'. On the contrary, the concepts of 'knowledge' and 'learning' as perceived through Japanese cultural context reveal themselves vividly in Japan's fierce competitive education system. Again, these two concepts—'knowledge' and 'learning'—are significant in determining Japanese children's attitudes towards school and learning; and consequently their learning styles are also affected.

Competition

The fierce competition in Japan's education system is best described by the catchphrase "*juken jigoku*"—"examination hell" which was coined in the early seventies. It describes the enormous pressures that Japanese students face in fighting to get into a university of their choice. Since each university is setting its own entrance examination independently, it is common for a candidate to sit for four or five examinations, each of which may cover a slightly different syllabus. In recent years, this competitive spirit has spread down to the senior high school and junior high school levels. According to the Ministry of Education (1991), this unhealthy sign stems from a psychological com-

plex rooted in Japanese culture (p. 15). The psychology of competition-avoidance in Japanese culture has brought about social harmony and cooperative spirits in the adult world. Nevertheless, the necessity of a selection process in society still exists and the inevitable outcome is the shifting forward of this process, that is, by gaining entrance into a first rank university. The ranking of universities is well-known and the obsession of the entrance examinations is well-publicized in the press every year (Rohlen, 1983). Now the competition is moving downwards with the reason and hope that entrance into a famous junior high school will ensure acceptance into a good senior high school which in turn, should provide a fair chance of assuring entrance into a famous university (Monbusho, 1991). In fact, the trust, dependence and affections of the Japanese people upon their examination system to perform its function of social selection do not end in its bureaucratic education system. Examination exists at the doorstep of nearly all kinds of professional registrations; teachers, lawyers, consultants, travelling agents, and accountants just to name a few. All examination are written paper examination and there are no interviews; not even in the case of foreign language ability tests.

To understand this absolute dependence on written examinations, one must get back to the philosophy of education in Japan. I have mentioned the principle of egalitarianism which favours a public examination system because of the fairness that the system seems to ascertain. Another principle that prevails is the belief that an improvement of ability is attainable by anyone with dedicated effort (White, 1987; Yamamura, 1993). This worship of wholehearted effort as the ultimate virtue can best be understood by the expression "*gambatte*"—"do your utmost". "*Gambatte*" is apoken frequently as signs of encouragement, compassionate understanding, exhortation, greeting and slogan etc.; it is seen written in classrooms, study rooms, headbands and posters, etc.. It is obvious that this belief of dedicated effort is closely linked to the egalitarian principle according to which everyone is capable of achievement provided that he/she puts in effort and help is given when needed (Yamamura, 1993).

In my school visits, I was told by a lot of teachers that they always focused their attention on groups, not individuals, aiming at facilitating cooperative effort which was believed to play the trick of upgrading the weaker students as well as benefiting the smarter ones as they took on the role of tutors. Regarding the effort-worshipping symptom, one teacher narrated the difficulties he once had in facing pressures from both parents and colleagues when he assessed his English tests with a greater proportion on result performance instead of efforts. He also talked of a school policy which dictated an allocation of a certain percentage of the total assessment to efforts irrespective of performance outcomes. The possible explanation for such disregard of the relationship between learning efforts and learning outcomes is that when all expendable human effort is exhausted and yet the result is still unsatisfactory, both school, teachers and parents are all spared to bear the blame of failure which, when aligned to Japanese culture, is a group responsibility.

With the examination system well in place, the admirations of complete efforts prevailed, the concepts of 'knowledge' and the 'desirable learning style' inevitably evolve themselves around the constraints of these social factors.

For the convenience of an assessment system, examination papers mostly consist of questions that require regurgitation of factual details. With the widespread use of computer programming, multiple choice questions become an indispensable section. Testings on a person's recall of knowledge also ensure objectivity in assessment (Rohlen, 1983). The controversy of subjectivity and objectivity in assessing understanding is of course a century-old issue. 'Understanding' is not only a personal possession with individual trademark but also the concept of which reveals itself in a continuum. It is indisputable that the dimension of a person's 'understanding' of a topic is pertinent to his/her summation of existing elements of knowledge on that topic (White & Gunstone, 1992). Sometimes teachers realize that 'learning' and 'understanding' vary in individuals and that understanding results mostly from interactions of each individual and his/her environments (White, 1988). Therefore, keeping in mind the

undeniable and unavoidable individual learning context, it seems rather cynical that there is no discordant argument in opting for pure objectivity when the issue of assessment which is supposed to be a measurement of 'understanding' is raised. In Japan, where personal development is not valued high in the culture and individual differences ignored, it seems almost inevitable to find that objectivity in examination assessment is regarded as the best and most reliable measurement fulfilling the function of a fair selection mechanism (Yamamura, 1993; Monbusho, 1991).

Nowadays, the goal of schooling appears to be training for survival under intense pressures since the fierce competition has invaded into the high school levels. Teaching at school thus concentrates mostly on spoon-feeding students in order to help them to pass various entrance examinations. Rote-learning becomes the commonly accepted way of learning; a good memory is the most envious possession. The school administrators and teachers may find comfort in telling themselves that they are pressing their students so as to help them survive the system. Unfortunately, training in memorizing pieces of 'knowledge' in students is destined to lead them to believe that 'acquiring knowledge' is equal to 'memorizing facts'; sometimes there may be links among the pieces of knowledge but students are convinced that it is best not to spend too much energy on finding the links, let alone thinking about the relationships and dimensions of these knowledge. 'Learning' at school means 'rote-learning' that is, one can try many different ways to improve his/her power of memory but the ultimate goal is to memorize as much as one possibly can and not to forget them until the examinations are over. Hence, these school experiences serve as the *raison d'être* of the formation of a simple, single-tracked and rigid concept of 'learning' which has nothing to offer except monotonous, boring and laborious memorizing tasks. The students' attitudes towards 'learning' and 'school'—the official place of learning—are then doomed to be unfavourable, sometimes indifferent, maybe hostile at times.

A frequent response from the students whom I talked to in my school visits was: 'because it's

going to be in our exam!'. When I was chatting to some junior year 3 students about the previous work that they had covered in Japanese and expecting answers showing some varieties in both contents and activities, in among the answers there was this—they were taught to memorize the word order that appeared in a piece of classic and also the proper order of the word/phrase movement when translating to modern Japanese as this was going to be the way the examination questions would be set. Examination strategy has become the synonym of learning strategy in this circumstance. As schools gear themselves into helping students in passing examinations, the perceptions of education, teaching and learning become all the more distorted. School drop-out rate soars high recently in Japan causing various social problems. Truancy rate was found to be at 0.2% at elementary level and 0.94% at junior high school level, that is almost one in a hundred junior high school students had been absent for more than 50 days under the category of school refusal in 1992 according to the Ministry of Education statistics (Monbusho, 1993; Yamamura, 1993). Young people complain that schools are old-fashioned and the teachings unrelated to their life which further aggravates the relationship between schools and their clients whom are never consulted about the service that they are going to receive. One can also find cases of students unable to handle the enormous pressures in competitions or bullies at school that they eventually dropped out. There are inadequate social services in dealing with this drop-out trend, nor is a comprehensive counselling system in place in Japanese schools (for details, see Monbusho, 1993; Tachikawa, 1994, and Yamamura, 1993).

As discussed before, concepts of 'knowledge', 'learning' and 'school' affect a person's attitude on how to deal with the activity and the place where it occurs. The attitude thus formed further affects a person's willingness of commitment since attitude encompasses more than interests, extending itself to curiosity and appreciation. Not only is the extent of involvement in learning dependent upon a person's attitude pertained in the related concepts, but also the types of strategies employed in gaining insights into the subject matter concerned are decisive

in the acquisition of knowledge and the consequent depth of understanding (White, 1988). The poverty in Japanese children's repertoire of learning strategies is a reflection of their apathetic attitude towards 'learning'. It also reflects a distorted concept of 'learning', lacking in diversity and vitality. To what extent the dimensions of socialization and the social pressures for its selection function exerted upon schools in Japan have contributed to these deficient concepts and the subsequent unenthusiastic attitudes somewhat resembles the hen and egg issue which will not be easily resolved. The immediate urgency though is to help enriching the repertoire of learning strategies in Japanese children; and to persuade them of the values and worth in equipping themselves with such variety so as to bring about more efficient learning. An efficacious way in getting students to enlarge their repertoire of learning strategies is to include different tasks engaged in testing the dimensions of their understanding because a wide range of assessment formats and methods of feedback is the most effective mechanism in coercing students to reflect upon their own learning (White & Gunstone, 1992). Assignments and examinations that require students to show their innate coordination and organization of their elements of knowledge are also desirable if genuine understanding and good learning strategies are the goals in school education.

The evaluation of a person's learning has been narrow and monotracked in Japan. It is not just the big enterprises, but also the government and the consciousness of the general public who have judged a person's success or failure in life by the fame of the university from which he/she graduated (Monbusho, 1991). Until there is a change from the society on this narrow concept of evaluation, Japanese children are unlikely to be persuaded of a need to change their learning style.

Self-autonomous learning

The continued existence of extreme and unnecessary pressures in Japan's education system does not imply that the government is ignoring the problems that are created. Nor is the society unsympathetic towards the plight of

the young generation. The silent tolerance of such extremity lies in Japanese people's resignation to the cruel reality that exists in the framework of the social structures in Japan. That the prospect of a stable life working with one of the giant enterprises depends on which university one gets into; that Japanese workers are expected to commit and be loyal to their employers makes the decision on their first job a critical moment in life; ... all these contribute to the chaining effect in Japan's social structures. Parents often said of finding themselves with no choice but to send their children to *Juku* (preparatory schools) and to deny them of their leisure time.

In 1989, the Ministry of Education acknowledged that various problems caused by the unnecessary pressures existed in the system and had thoroughly revised the elementary, junior high and senior high school guidance booklets in an attempt to eradicate the problems. A change of policy shifting emphasis from socialization to respect for individual development was clearly spelled out. In addition, 'international understanding' was included in the package to become part of the school curriculums (Monbusho, 1989, 1991). Individualism and internationalism thus became the two pillars in Japan's recent education reform.

Individualism

The Ministry of Education (1991) gave a detailed analysis on Japan's egalitarianism and efficiency in education which were able to produce a capable workforce for the society and thereby attained an economic miracle for the country (p. 7-16). However, one of the by-products of balancing egalitarianism and efficiency in education is the enormous pressures applied upon both teachers and students in its competition model. Furthermore, the competition has provided a breeding ground for the notorious ranking of high schools and universities which seems to be socially accepted as the quasi-official grading of the student population (p. 9-14). In an attempt to tilt the balance, the Ministry of Education urged all educators to address this new inequality created under the egalitarianism principle. Inequality is seeded because under the egalitarianism banner, each

child's individual qualities and abilities are being dismissed. Moreover, the examination system with its significant passing/failing cut off point is a too generalised measurement which is unable to evaluate the dimensions of a person's capability. With this claim, the Ministry unequivocally implies that reliance on a cut-off point to determine the admission of a student into an educational institution looks absurd and unfair.

The proposed new perspective of respecting individual development paves the way for an emphasis on promoting independent evaluative ability and the nurturing of perseverance in a student's character. This belated recognition of individual difference in students justifies the employment of different pedagogy for different students. Treating students differently is not a violation of the principle of equality. On the contrary, it confirms the realization that each individual student has different needs and a teacher should be sensitive in responding to his/her students' needs. The Ministry further elaborates that school curriculums which encourage independent thinking and expand creativity are the formulas in bringing about one of the two afore-mentioned educational objectives: individualism. An unobstructed development of individual personality is to be accompanied by the strengthening of a moral education which is designed to focus on a humane and compassionate understanding on mankind through engaging students in a variety of experiences (Monbusho, 1989).

Embarking on this vital change of philosophy of education, the Ministry of Education has endorsed the principle of self-autonomy in learning. There is no ambiguity that the value of creativity weighs higher than that of socialization now. It is also clear that independent thinking is the quality that students are asked to pursue instead of relenting to group pressures. In addition, the promotion of self-autonomous learning implies that students are to be encouraged to take control of their own learning. Determination and commitment to be responsible for one's own learning is probably what most teachers strive to persuade their students of throughout their career. However, self-autonomous learning means more than being

responsible in submitting assignments on time. It also involves more than memorizing thacher's notes and texts and regurgitating them in examinations without mistakes. The qualities that self-autonomous learning enhances include not only an expansion of knowledge base, but also a development of cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies (White, 1988; Elbaum & others, 1993).

Cognitive strategy refers to a general skill involved in controlling thinking upon a task at hand. Examples for it are perceiving alternative interpretations, determining goals, judging likelihood of success, assessing comprehension of task etc.. (White, 1988). Metacognitive strategy refers to a conscious control and an effective facilitation of cognitive strategy employment. Examples include an awareness of what one knows and what one does not know, utilizing learning strategies that vary with the nature of the material to be learned and the task demands of the learning situation, being able to predict the success of one's learning effort, monitoring the success of one's learning efforts and planning ahead and utilizing learning time in an efficient manner (Royer & others, 1993). The development of cognitive and metacognitive strategies is indispensable pertaining to self-autonomous learning (Kitao & others, 1989).

As discussed in the earlier section, the repertoire of one's learning strategies is closely linked to concepts and attitudes. In fact, the formations of concepts and attitudes on 'learning' and 'understanding' etc. are intimately woven with the social structures in a society and it is especially more so in Japan. The Japanese government in initiating such a change of philosophy of education has actually called for the biggest social change—in values, concepts and structures—since the end of the Second World War.

The values that infiltrate in the Japanese education system so far do not seem to be complementary to the values as emphasized in self-autonomous learning. For instance, independent learning (a relatively new concept) as opposed to group consensus learning; evaluating one's own performance and setting one's own goal as opposed to closely-guided learning led by teachers; pursuance of a genuine under-

standing seen in an expansion of a new horizon as in absorbing the newly learned knowledge into one's own construct of meaning as opposed to an expansion of knowledge in a data form stored in one's memory for future recall; actively involved learning as opposed to passive receptive learning.

I shall not venture into concluding that self-autonomous learning poses a complete non-complementary set of values from what is manifested in Japan's cultural concept of learning. Nevertheless, it looks as though the two sets of values are diametrically different and unpromising. Will Japan be able to resolve the difference and arrive at a compromised set of values? Or will Japan accept a mixture of the two? Hitherto, Japan's educational reform looks to be awaiting its people's verdict in either pushing the reform forward with an historical change or in protecting its traditional cultural values, thus maintaining the present structures. Will a change on the concept of 'education' and all other concepts that are central to it occur and bring about a complete change of attitude upon 'education' in Japan?

Internationalism

The purpose of the inclusion of international studies in high school curriculums is self-evident in that it is to foster a good understanding with foreign countries. The necessity in fostering an understanding with other countries urgently can be perceived as the government's anxiety in preparing its young population to envisage a global development which has already started, forming a new concept that the world is one big family. Thinking globally and acting locally is the obvious objective of this second theme in the education reform. A reconsideration of analysing Japan's position in the light of the whole region and a readjustment of Japan's relationships with its neighbour countries of course belong to the essential nature of this internationalism (Monbusho, 1989, 1993). Besides, the government is envisaging the expansion of Japan's involvement in world affairs as inevitable given the development of present circumstances in world politics. An involvement in world affairs requires a population with a vision of far-sighted

international intimacy and a willingness to share responsibilities in international management (Monbusho, 1993). Having this future vision for Japan and thereby taking the appropriate steps to prepare for it is the behaviour one would expect of a responsible government. Unfortunately, the contradiction here is no matter whether the government has expected a conflict or not, this future vision and the measures thus taken are vehemently challenging the fundamental values manifested in the culture of Japan. With the concept of a global village, the sense of homogeneity of the Japanese race which hitherto is cultivated through the strong socialization process in the school system may cease to exist. It is by the cooperation of family and school that the young Japanese children are moulded into the 'soft group orientation' tendency; it is through the '*amae*' child-rearing spirit and the emphasis on a smooth maneuvering of social relationships that have given a sense of unified identity to the Japanese race; an international outlook will require the Japanese people to look beyond their own race. The concept of a global sense of belonging will also challenge the Japanese 'in-group' and 'out-group' concept in its definition of human relationships. Given the affections of and attachments to traditions of the Japanese people, this challenge may prove to be another important historic turning point after Perry's arrival which had forced open Japan's door to the west.

Learning in Life

'Learning in life' can be understood as an extension of 'self-autonomous learning'. In promoting the concept of learning being a life-long activity; that there is no distinction, nor discrimination upon age or sex in this unique human activity, the Japanese government proposed various measures to enable people of all ages to participate in furthering their education. A few easily implementable suggestions given by the Ministry of Education (1991) are: more evening graduate and post-graduate courses from colleges and universities to allow working people to pursue a higher qualification; an easier and more flexible admission process taking into account the work experience of the applicants; the setting up of life-learning centers where

people of all ages can obtain free counselling service and information on courses and seminars available in all levels of education; a change to a more flexible credit system in colleges and universities allowing a limited time of deferment; the strengthening of television broadcasting education etc.. (p. 62). The implementation of these measures will in fact quietly facilitate a social change from enterprise-centered form of learning to self-directed, well-informed choice of learning throughout one's worklife. This education network aims to assist all people, both young and old, to return to learning if they so desire. Merriam & Clark's research (1993) on what constitute to the significance in learning for individuals reports that for learning to be significant: "1) it must personally affect the learner, either by resulting in an expansion of skills, sense of self, of life perspective, or by precipitating a transformation; and 2) it must be subjectively valued by the learner" (p. 129). Therefore, creating a network with easy mobility so that learners can control 'what to learn', 'when to learn' and 'how to learn' raises no controversy here not only because controlling 'what', 'when' and 'how' is exactly what self-autonomous learning is training for but also subjective decisions on these matters are significant to individuals in that they are valued by individual learners. An inflexible system which inhabits learners to seek further education at another point of life except the youthful years is in fact denying the chance of exiting and re-entering education at a point of time which may prove to be extremely important for some individuals who come to value their learning efforts more after gaining other experiences in life. Feeling personally affected and giving special value attachments to his/her own learning are a revelation of the learner's intrinsic motivations which should be immediately maximized for they will undoubtedly give the learner a successful headstart in his/her learning.

With the establishment of this education network intending to create a more flexible system, the next interlinked reform that the government cannot afford to overlook is to seek recognition from the society, especially the corporate business sector, to appreciate the learning that occurs outside the normal education track. In

other words, Japan must find its way to widen its present evaluation criteria. The results in written examinations and the fame of a graduate's high school or university which supposedly guarantee academic excellence are two very narrow measurements in evaluating a person's ability. The Ministry of Education proposes the consideration of interviews, practical tests, discussion paper submission, special expertise, voluntary service, club participation, setting a quota system to avoid over-concentration of graduates from one single school and others (Monbusho, 1991, p. 46). The calling for a widened concept of evaluation on ability here is again challenging the social consensus formed in earlier years. In the early section, I have discussed that social consensus, if followed by the majority of the society without being challenged for a long time has the tendency of falling into the category of tradition. To break this long-accepted consensus and reformulate ideas into a new concept requesting new consensus require wide public support as well as a very plausible and viable alternative. Will Japanese enterprises be persuaded of the alternative evaluation criteria to be a better and more sensible way of recruitment? Is the general public ready to discard its consensus of unofficial ranking of schools and universities of thirty years as the yardstick of their social selection process? Will a broader concept of evaluation take root in Japan? As evaluation of a person's ability in a social context is inseparable from the evaluative formats that schools will take, students in responding to the evaluation feedbacks are actually undergoing a socializing process that transforms them into the conformed behaviours desired by the society which subtly define the concept of 'ability' for them. Therefore, an expansion of students' conception of ability that it enwraps a whole wide range of skills instead of just academic achievement must start with a social revolution on the concepts of 'evaluation' and 'ability'.

Conclusion: Conceptions and Culture Change

I have discussed so far that the values implanted in Japan's education reform look rather antithetic to the traditional values that have been followed and unchallenged for many years

in Japan. The implication of the reform is that it attacks precisely the heart of the matter, that is, challenging the worth of the values that are held precious in many of the concepts that form the Japanese society. I have mentioned in the introduction paragraph that values are susceptible to changes. When a person is convinced of the worth of some new values and discards old ones, a conceptual change is taking place.

Pintrich, Marx and Boyle (1993) examines the paradox in conceptual change in that "current conceptions potentially constitute momentum that resists conceptual change, but they also provide frameworks that the learner can use to interpret and understand new, potentially conflicting information" (p. 170). The conceptual ecology requires four conditions for a conceptual change to take place. The first stage is **dissatisfaction** with the current understanding and ideas on the concept. Then the new conception must be **intelligible**. It must also need to be **plausible**. Lastly, the new concept must appear **fruitful**, that is, in resolving conflicts and contradictions of previous ideas and/or in suggesting new lights for investigation (p. 172). The first condition suggests that in conceptual change, a confrontation with the complacency and inadequacy of the values in the existing concept is necessary. With the provision of this situational challenge, the other three stages describe the process of interactions between the individual and the new information present in the situation.

The education reform of 1989 set down by the Ministry of Education offers this situational challenge. The policy change and the suggestions to be adopted in schools confront the complacency of the population in its belief upon Japan's 'soft group orientation' culture. Besides, the proposed values seen in self-autonomous learning, individualism and internationalism in the reform attack the inadequacy of such traditional concept in coping with circumstances of great complexity and multi-dimensions existing in the post-cold-war world.

It is no coincidence that Japan's economy is facing a restructuring period which challenges many of its enterprise practices which have been taken for granted since the end of the war. Accompanying this economic restructuring are

challenges in the political arena: the pressure from the region and also from the rest of the world upon Japan to take a more active role in leadership; the chance to vigorously participate in international affairs; the expansion and international inter-dependence of Japan's economic activities; ... all contribute in creating a dissatisfactory state towards Japan's isolationist, inward-looking culture which was formulated long time ago with the background of an island nation, thus fulfilling the first condition for conceptual change. I have argued in the previous sections that the present education reform is actually calling for a drastic change upon Japan's social structures and the cultural values thus embedded, rippling its effect on a conceptual change nation-wide. I have also argued that Japan's education system is so deeply entwined with its other social structures that it must seek support and/or complementary changes from other social sectors in order to succeed in achieving the new vision outlined in the reform. Now that Japan, in its unprecedented position and power recognised by the world, is being confronted by the inadequacy and the resistant nature of its culture must grope its way through the stages of intelligibility and plausibility of the new environment to redefine concepts concerning itself as a nation. Being one of the important social systems performing a fundamental and supportive role, Japan's education reform is facilitating changes hand in hand with other restructurings occurring in the society. Drastic changes may have confounded Japan as a nation. However, the momentum accumulated from the sweeping changes across all sectors of the society may prove to be contriving changes with the best timing and the best collaborative effort in redefining Japan's perception of its own culture and in understanding its relationship with the rest of the world.

There is no denial that education in Japan is undergoing a dramatic change. The contradictions of values in the old concept and the new vision of education if somehow are resolved in the process of change, Japan's model of education may turn out to be the well-balanced, well-blended model embracing values from cultures of both east and west, dawning a new ear in the conception of what is possible and practicable

in education.

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