

Education in the Bakumatsu Japan (1853-1912)

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During the last years of the Tokugawa *bakufu*, Japan appeared to be a country in which the feudal structure, already in agony, was no longer able to sustain the evolutionary process of the society, a process urged both from outside and from inside. The following Meiji government, under the motto of *fukoku-kyōhei* (“Enrich the country, strengthen the military”), implemented fundamental reforms of the political, economic, and social institutions of the country. The educational system played a fundamental role during the years of the Bakumatsu (the transition period between the Tokugawa and the Meiji period).

The impact of the Western educational systems on the growth of the Japanese education system together with the rapid penetration of Western thought in all areas of the Japanese society certainly influenced the new feeling of “civilization and enlightenment” that characterized the first part of the Meiji period (明治時代, 1868-1912). However, one must consider that the modern school system in Japan was not created out of thin air. The concept of formal education, if not even that of the school “system”, was already an integral part of the early modern intellectual climate of Japan.

Therefore, the development of modern educational institutions in Japan must be analyzed in light of the long historical process of the Tokugawa period. A period that generated a distinctive style of life and

thought destined to influence modern Japan. To fully understand the first Japanese developments in the field of the modern education, let us briefly examine the educational system of the Bakumatsu period (幕末, 1853-1912).

The traditional stratification of classes in the feudal society of the Edo period (江戸時代, 1603-1868) is also reflected in the school system. In fact, there were schools for all social classes, particularly the so called domain schools. Samurai attended the *hankō* 藩黌 or *hangaku* 藩学; all other social classes such as peasants, traders, and craftsmen went to the *terakoya* 寺子屋. Towards the end of the Edo period, this dualistic system began to vacillate.

Originally, for the education of the children, the samurai families relied on the teachings of the Buddhist monks. However, in the Edo period, with the culture completely absorbed in Confucian thought, the schools of their domains (藩, han) the *daimyō* 大名 employed Confucian scholars as tutors. The most important center of learning, under the direct control of the *shogunate*, was the Shōheizaka Gakumonjo 昌平坂学問所 of Edo, alternately called *Shōheikō* 昌平校.

This institution became the model for all the domain schools and was originally the study center of the Confucian sanctuary of Ueno in Edo, founded by Hayashi Razan (林羅山, 1659-1734), a scholar of the Confucian school of Chu Hsi (朱熹, 1130-1200) under the auspices of the shogunate government. Initially, the school was semi-private but, in 1797, it was placed under the supervision of the central authorities and became the most important study center of the country. Nine years earlier, in 1790, the government formally prohibited the teaching of other doctrines, so the *Shōheikō* became the supreme institution of the Confucianism of Chu Hsi, which was officially accepted as the orthodox Tokugawa 徳川 doctrine. The domain schools founded later were all modeled after the *Shōheikō*.

Young people, sent from the various feudal societies to complete their studies in this school, became tutors in the schools of their domain. Other governmental schools of the period were the *Wagaku Kōdanjo* 和学講談所, a school of national studies, and the *Igakukan* 医学官, where they taught traditional Chinese medicine. Other interesting schools were the *Meirindō* 明倫堂 of Nagasaki, where they taught foreign languages, in particular Dutch, and the *Kōbusho* 講武所, founded in 1854, which was a military school in Western style. The samurai from the various feudal societies were required to study in these schools, but towards the end of the Tokugawa period, the schools admitted members of other classes.

Until the mid-19th century, the domain schools, not less than the shogunal ones, maintained a very strict class division. A differentiated education was provided depending on the rank of the samurai: the way they dressed, the frequency, the *curricula* and the classroom were carefully distinguished. A high-ranking samurai, for example, did not study arithmetic, a subject considered suitable only for the merchant class. Instead, he learned the art of swordsmanship, horse-riding, and archery, which were all considered important doctrines for spiritual enrichment. Other military practices, such as learning how to shoot with a rifle, the *jūjitsu* 柔術, or knowing how to handle a spear, were regarded as highly “material” practices and taught only to the low-ranking samurai.

When Western disciplines were first introduced in the domain schools, they were considered suitable for low-ranking samurai. Eventually, when Western military science grew in popularity, the orthodox view established that the Western studies were appropriate for the resolution of “material” problems, but that the sphere of “wisdom and virtue” was not to be affected by the teachings of the “barbarians”.

The domain schools had not established a standard *curriculum*. Some provided only elementary level education; others dealt with the intermediate or advanced level with an emphasis in family education. The

samurai class was always concerned with the “orientation” of their children towards a “proper education” that was suitable for their social class.

Family education encouraged the development of the characteristics appropriate for a “potential ruler”. The education provided at home, by either family or tutor, was crucial to the education of the women.

During the Edo period it was not necessary for a woman, regardless of to what class she belonged, to receive an education equal to that of a man. Because her primary role was to be a wife and mother, lessons for women emphasized solving family problems and etiquette. While a very small number of women from samurai families studied classical literature and art in addition to reading and calligraphy, the main focus for female education in feudal society was on how to better fulfill their social role.

Some texts on female moral education were published during the Edo period. Evidence of this practice of separate texts for men and women can be found still during the Meiji period. During the Bakumatsu period, the number of women who attended the *terakoya* increased notably when the first private institutions were founded for the female education. In both cases, the *curricula* focused on the subtleties of the feminine virtues such as etiquette, the tea ceremony, the *ikebana* (生け花, art of flower arrangement), etc. During the early Meiji period, the traditional concept that a woman did not need an education equivalent to a man prevailed to the extent that even if the education system allowed the attendance of the elementary schools for both sexes, the female presence in the early “modern” schools was very low.

Towards the end of the Tokugawa period, the admissions of members belonging to classes different from the samurai and the *curricula* increased in the domain schools. These *curricula* were gradually extended

by adding Chinese, national studies, and Western studies. Simultaneously, a focus on military subjects increased creating a special bond between literary studies and martial arts.

After the abolition of the feudal system in 1871, the domain schools became the foundation on which the intermediate and high level schools of the modern educational reform were created. Although the domain schools and the *terakoya* were representative institutions of the Tokugawa period, other types of schools existed. These schools included the *gōgaku* (郷学, local schools) and the *shijuku* (私学, private schools).

The *gōgaku* were a branch of the domain schools, a kind of small-scale extension of the main school. Administered by feudal authorities, they were attended mainly by samurai. Some schools admitted only samurai, in others both samurai and members of the other classes and, still in others, only the “ordinary people”. The *gōgaku* can be considered the closest ancestors of the modern Japanese elementary schools.

On the other hand, the *shijuku* were private institutions in which several subjects were taught such as Chinese, calligraphy, the use of the abacus, national studies, Western studies, Dutch studies, and military subjects. Some offered *curricula* containing all these materials. Because the *shijuku* were privately managed, unlike the official schools, they had the liberty to teach unorthodox doctrines such as Western subjects or prohibited varieties of the Confucianism. For this reason, many of them became centers for the spread of ideologies against the Tokugawa government.

For example, in the domain of Chōshū (長州藩, *Chōshū Han*), known for its key role in the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate, many young “rebels” were influenced by the nationalist thought of Yoshida Shōin (吉田 松陰, 1830-1859) and his academy. These private institutions were centered on the charisma of their founders who had, in general, a very firm political, philosophical, or educational ideology they wished to propose. The individual qualities of these men attracted students from all around the country. The special relationship between student, teacher, and subject can be found in the same origin of the *shijuku*. These “secret schools” were created to transmit the confidential material of a secret society, from master to adept. Although the teachers of the *shijuku* were generally scholars of samurai origin, there were also teachers belonging to other social classes. Concerning the students, in the *shijuku* they made very few differences between students belonging to the different social classes. In these private institutions, the modern principle of merit comes into conflict with classist privileges. Even the locations of the *shijuku* were important. Some of the most famous ones were, in fact, located in metropolitan centers and domain capitals, where their political influence was very strong. Those founded in the rural areas or in small centres were no less valuable; they educated many local leaders, helped spread Western culture, and informed the community about the political events of the Bakumatsu period.

As the *gōgaku* are to modern elementary schools, the *shijuku* are the precursors of the modern private schools. The most important institution for the spread of the education among the common classes of the Edo period was the *terakoya*. Its name, evoking a school in a temple, refers to the fact that in the Muromachi period (室町時代, 1392-1573), the Buddhist monks organized, schools for the indoctrination and the education of the novices in sanctuaries. The *terakoya* converged both the children of the samurai and those of the peasants living in the vicinity of the sanctuary.

In the Edo period, they were not located only within a temple, but also in available buildings or private homes. The geographical distribution of this institution was, at least in the early stages of its development, somewhat uneven. The urban areas were richer in *terakoya* due to the strong demand from the urban populations, especially from the merchant families. In rural areas, the request came, above all, from the highest ranks of the population that felt the need to have a certain level of education for the administrative work. Very soon, the children of the lower social classes also began to attend these schools.

Usually the *terakoya* were managed by the *shōya* (荘屋, village chiefs) and by the landowners, but there were also initiatives by members of other social classes.

The teachers in *terakoya*, known as *shishō* 師匠 or *tenarai shishō* 手習い師匠 were often the same administrators. The social class of the teacher depended on the location of the school. Monks, physicians, and the non-samurai classes prevailed in the rural areas, the samurai in castle towns, and the merchants in the major cities and trading ports, where the level of instruction was more advanced. Many were volunteers led by pure passion, especially in the rural areas. Few were teachers by profession and, for this reason, there was no uniformity in the *curricula* or methods. Unlike the domain schools, teachers of the *terakoya* were neither controlled nor authorized by the shogunate, allowing anyone, if desired, to become a teacher. Nevertheless, they enjoyed a discreet authority.

Concerning the *curricula*, writing and reading were the two basic elements, to which teachers added moral or professional subjects, such as etiquette or accounting with the use of an abacus. In some, there were academic subjects such as Chinese studies, history, geography and composition, to which later they added the Western studies, such as science and military art. In many schools, the various subjects were taught from materials written by the teachers or using simple books, the *ōraimono*

往来物, written by literary men. The *ōraimono* were often closely related to the subjects concerning the everyday life and the employment prospects of the children. Those used in the rural areas had titles like “The book of the peasant”, “The book of agriculture”, “The increase of the profits for the peasant” and so on, while those for the urban areas had titles like “The book of the trade”, “Good business for the traders of textiles”, etc. In the first period that the modern education system entered into force, this quality of the *terakoya* to deal with topics related to the practical needs of the population, was abandoned to the extent that many people looked back with nostalgia to these past educational institutions. Towards the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, the interest in these schools increased notably to the point that they began to reward the most deserving teachers and to issue textbooks.

We have previously mentioned the *gōgaku* for the non-samurai classes. In fact, authorities of the domains began to encourage the emergence of schools with a higher educational level respect to the *terakoya*, emphasizing not only educative rudiments and professional education, but also the Confucian teachings. The *gōgaku* were founded not only by the authorities of the domains, who exercised a sort of moral control on the population, but also by the high-ranking vassals in collaboration with the people or by small groups of local inhabitants. Economically, the *gōgaku* were usually maintained by the population of the territory where they were created, encouraged by the authorities of the domain.

The authorities of the domain sent the teachers of the Confucian academies, three times a month, who read passages from the official documents, sometimes the Lords exempted some schools from the payment of taxes or granted special privileges to the teachers who distinguished themselves by their value.

In the last part of the Edo period, many of these institutions grew increasingly involved in political issues and, as a result, included material closely related to military subjects. In the first half of the 19th century, the number of *gōgaku* and the level of education they provided increased dramatically to the extent that they were considered a type of intermediate level educational institution between the *shijuku* and *terakoya*.

In addition to the aforementioned formal education, there were also two religious movements that impacted the moral education of the common people, especially merchants.

The first movement was created by one of the most prominent religious figures of the early 18th century, Ishida Baigan (石田梅岩, 1685-1744). Through his *Shingaku* (心学, lit. “heart learning”) doctrine, he claimed that men can improve themselves thanks to their efforts. This point of view was somewhat revolutionary in a society that believed men were at the mercy of their own destiny.

The way of *gakumon* (学門, lit. “learning”), the path to follow in order to become worthy men, encouraged followers to serve ones’ own Lord with righteousness and love, not to betray ones’ own friends, to have pity and love for the poor people, not to neglect family business, to keep the economy of the house without waste or luxury, and to obey the law of the government and family.

The aim of this movement was to raise the morale of the common people, teaching them to follow the true path of the *shingaku*, permeated by Confucian and Buddhist precepts. Orthodox Confucians attacked this movement because they considered it subversive in its implication that people had the same abilities of the samurai to learn higher precepts and become virtuous. Furthermore, it denied the Confucian principle that “the people shouldn’t be informed, but they must follow their superiors”. Some official spheres saw this doctrine as a method to “civilize” and calm down

the spirits of the lower classes and did not hinder it. Schools in which the *shingaku* doctrine was taught were founded in different parts of the country. The pedagogical approach adopted in these schools became very widely known, as it made extensive use of moral tales and images rather than incomprehensible texts.

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