

Getting Schooled: Literary References to the 1980s Japanese Educational Experience

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Background: Scholarly Assessments of the 1980s Japanese Educational System

The bubble years of the 1980s were heady times for Japan. The country seemed ready to overtake the United States as the world's foremost economic superpower, and Western and Japanese experts were at no loss to explain the phoenix-like rise of the supposedly utopian land of the rising sun.

Most scholarly, non-fiction books from this era were unanimous in their praise of the Japanese educational system as a major reason for the country's economic success. One book in particular that caught both the Western and Japanese public's attention was Ezra Vogel's *Japan as Number One*, published in 1979 and achieving bestseller status, a rarity for Japan-related tomes. This book not only credited the educational system for Japan's incredible rise, but also propounded its good features as suitable for adoption by US educators.

Vogel's views were uncritically accepted and built upon by other distinguished Japanologists, including Edwin Reischauer, who in *The Japanese* (1981) pointed to the so-called "modern meritocracy" of the educational system as the most important factor in Japan's economic success.

Western scholars indeed were enamored of Japan's educational system. Merry White, Vogel's disciple, penned *The Japanese Educational Challenge: A Commitment to Children* (1987) as a more detailed, sociological study of academic excellence. Her work stopped short of suggestions to import the features of the Japanese system to the United States, but her praise was just as high as Vogel's and Reischauer's.

Of course, the quantitative features of the Japanese educational system were quite impressive, making Western scholars' enthusiasm understandable. By looking only at the surface data, it appeared that Japan clearly had a superior educational system. According to information compiled by the Japanese scholar Ikuo Amano, it is estimated that by 1980, over 94 percent of high school-aged students were enrolled in classes, although high school education is not mandatory. A further 37 percent of the age-appropriate population was enrolled in tertiary-level higher education. Likewise, standardized international tests continually placed Japanese students at the top, compared to students in other developed nations. Even the weakest links in the educational system could be counted on to have basic mathematical ability and reading and writing skills, as over 99 percent of the Japanese people were literate (Amano, 1993, 118).

However, it is also true that, as the 1980s advanced, the dark underside of the Japanese educational system gradually came into focus. Scholars such as Ikuo Amano and James Shields began to shed light on the long-ignored negative consequences of the system, including the lack of creativity and the over-emphasis on exam results. As Shields (1993, x) writes in the preface to *Japanese Schooling*, "The focus has moved away from primarily quantitative measures related to academic achievement and economic productivity to more qualitative standards rooted in educational equality, individual freedom, and ethical and moral sensibility." Unfortunately, Japan in the 1980s rated rather poorly on these qualitative measures.

Attacking the Educational System: Japanese Fiction Writers in the 1980s

Against this background, Japanese literary figures in the 1980s, while not universal in their condemnation of the Japanese educational system, were rather focused on the negative, often-unintended effects of the typical educational experience. A sampling of 1980s short stories in English translation bears this out.

Yoshinori Shimizu's "Japanese Entrance Exams for Earnest Young Men" uses pastiche to convey the absurdity of the entrance exam system. As Shields (1993, ix) mentions, this perhaps is the best point from which to view the Japanese educational system, because "at the center of any discussion of educational issues in Japan is the examination system and the rigorous competition it generates." This is the infamous "examination hell" that many students endure to get into high school and university.

In Shimizu's story, the protagonist performs poorly in the Japanese-language section of tests, so he purchases many reference books and, when this strategy fails to improve his performance, he ends up using a tutor. The tutor, a young, gifted prep school instructor, brings results, but only by exposing the imbecility of entrance exam questions. Shimizu (1991, 246) shows that for this tutor, it is all a silly game, with test questions designed "to catch as many students as they can and trick them into giving the wrong answer."

On page 249, the protagonist learns the rules needed to get good marks, but in the process he also learns "what a horrible fraud this all was." In the end, Shimizu (258) uses the twisted results to show that "expertise at answering questions on Japanese tests had no relation whatsoever to skill at using the language. If anything, it suggested that being able to answer these questions correctly led to a degeneration" in Japanese skills.

Masato Takeno's "The Yamada Diary" similarly focuses its attention on Japanese exams, but in this case the more garden-variety school ones. In absurdist fashion reminiscent of the surrealist clique, Takeno creates a protagonist studying for exams who buys a computer game in which the gamer controls a typical student studying for exams. It is a situation akin to *Second Life*, except that the real and virtual lives are essentially one and the same. The reader, but unfortunately not the protagonist, is able to quickly see the parallels in the protagonist's real and virtual lives.

Takeno addresses the issue of Japan's consumer society as well as the whole game-junkie mentality, but he also points his finger at schools in general. Using the protagonist as narrator, Takeno (1991, 279) says the game was an impulsive purchase because "final exams were coming up and schoolwork was taking its toll on my sanity." The game thus began as an escape from the gloom of exams.

Ironically, in this form of escapism, the protagonist's real and virtual worlds are nearly identical, and the same tedious, depressing events occur in each. He is berated by his mother in both worlds for not studying. In a society so attuned to educational credentialism, this of course is an entirely common occurrence, as mothers, according to Shields (1993, xi), "spend a considerable amount of their energy and time working hard to ensure that their children succeed academically."

In general, the protagonist does not have much of a life, either when studying or whilst engaging in escapist computer games. Using terms explained in an essay by scholar Fumie Kumagai (1996, 33), he is what might be called "*komori-zoku*" because his time is spent indoors studying or playing computer games. He also could be a member of the so-called "*rozu family-zoku*" because there is no sense of the integration of the family as a whole, meaning that each member functions separately and spends little time with the other family members.

For those students able to get through high school and pass the university

exams, the world of Masahiko Shimada's "Momotaro in a Capsule" awaits. In this story, Shimada parodies the typical left-leaning university student. Shimada (1991, 118) gets his digs on the entrance exam process too by stating in the story that college freshmen are "like machines – the legacy of the examination system. After being machines all their lives, they can finally become human beings in college. But it takes them a while." University life has traditionally been seen as a four-year break from studying, a time for students to find themselves and grow as human beings. In fact, Shimada shows that the entrance exams have only prepared the protagonist for quiz shows, not for life.

The protagonist is a college freshman who had studied hard to enter university and now does want to find himself. In fact, he goes through a delayed rebellious phase, seeking revolution but finding only disillusionment. His natural development was thwarted by the Japanese educational system up through high school, as he had "been utterly fooled by smiling parents and teachers, and confined, de facto," to a cell (Shimada, 1991, 125).

However, Japanese society does not yield to good-boy rebels. The 1960s leftist movement is, by the 1980s, a charade. The police and other authorities crack down on minor infringements by college-age rebel wannabes, and the true rebels in society want no dealings with our protagonist. On page 145, Shimada writes that the protagonist "had the will to rebel, but had been turned into a dog – through surgery called 'education.'" Shimada's short story is a powerful indictment of Japan's educational system.

While the high school and university years are a common target for critics of the Japanese educational system, elementary-level education does not escape from its share of criticism in Makoto Shiina's "Swallowtails." This story propounds what might be called the "Totto-chan" style of schooling because of its gentle longing for the idealized version of school found in Tetsuko Kuronayanagi's *Totto-chan: The*

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Little Girl at the Window (1982). This reformatory movement stresses a bonding with nature, tolerance for differences, and a let-them-be philosophy that supposedly nurtures a lifetime love of learning.

In “Swallowtails,” the protagonist is a young boy in the first grade of elementary school. He is mocked at school and called a bald-headed monk because he is the only boy with a shaved head. Later, he is quite likely falsely accused of theft by a veteran teacher.

Still, he enjoys school life because he can play with his friends every day. Unlike most of the other students in class, who come from families with very strong ideas about education, our protagonist was left by his parents to grow naturally. He was not taught to read or write before entering elementary school, and he was encouraged to play outside and observe nature.

However, most of his friends start taking extracurricular classes such as piano lessons and English conversation classes, so his chances to play decrease as he progresses through the early years of elementary school in the story. Furthermore, the city turned all the open parks into croquet grounds for the elderly or organized sports fields, going as far as building tournament-level shot-put grounds, so our protagonist has no free space for play.

The saving grace is that the protagonist continues growing, learning at his own pace. He can be metaphorically compared to the larvae in the story which grow into swallowtail butterflies and then fly away freely.

Genichiro Takahashi’s “Christopher Columbus Discovers America” is another short story which views Japanese elementary schools as artificial, overly controlled, and dispiriting. The teacher in the story is a graduate of the highly regarded Tsukuba University and had even written her graduation thesis on “The Jewish Question in Kafka,” a seemingly difficult report that has little bearing to the field of education. It is clear that she has no imagination and tolerance, although she comes

from one of the finest research universities in Japan. She conducts class only as she had learned in her indoctrination at Tsukuba University, where there was only one way to teach. She has no tolerance for a little girl who wants to be either Christopher Columbus or, barring that, physically handicapped. The students in the class, however, prove quite spunky, even under an educational system which frowns upon children's natural feelings and imagination.

Nonetheless, it would not be correct to state that all fiction writers of the 1980s embarked upon criticisms of the Japanese educational system. Those writers who did mention schools in their stories tended to emphasize the negative aspects, but a minority of writers, while not embracing Japanese education, did provide a more neutral viewpoint.

Banana Yoshimoto, in "Moonlight Shadow," a short story in *Kitchen* (1993), uses high school as a setting for many of the activities in the story. Homeroom, field trips, and tennis club activities are mentioned, with nary a negative remark. In fact, there is a tone of sentimentality in mentioning school life. One of the male characters, in a tribute of sorts, even wears his deceased girlfriend's sailor-girl uniform to school every day, and the school officials and all of the students accept this. In light of how most Japanese high schools in the 1980s were criticized for their overabundance of rules and their lack of respect for individual differences, the tolerant reaction to the boy's cross-dressing seems rather implausible, but clearly it shows that Yoshimoto has no bad feelings towards high schools. Yoshimoto, however, tends to be regarded as more of a psychological rather than political writer, so her take on the school situation is not entirely surprising. Her specialty is sentimental and quirky characters, not social criticism.

Conclusion: Twenty Years Later and Still Relevant

Thus, the fiction of the 1980s, in general, viewed the Japanese educational

system negatively, with some significant exceptions. More so than with scholars, most notably of Western origin, who for much of the 1980s still praised the educational achievements evident in Japan, native fiction writers focused on the darker underside of Japanese education. Their views can be understood as accompaniment, perhaps even prescient precursor, to the emerging scholarly work which also found Japanese education lacking.

Brought to the present, over twenty years later, many of the problems indicated by these fiction writers remain today. The entrance exam system, while certainly not popular with the public as a whole, has shown lasting power. The competition at the upper levels appears unchanged. Demographics—a shrinking population—has made it easier to get into university somewhere, and now roughly 50 percent of the college-age population enrolls in higher education. The particular questions on these entrance exams are, on the whole, not much better than twenty years ago, although it is now easier to avoid these tests as universities diversify their admissions requirements, sometimes allowing candidates to skip the exams in favor of recommendations, personal interviews, essays, and/or high school results. According to many modern critics, Japanese students still excel at rote learning and answering multiple-choice questions, while failing at creativity and originality in thinking.

Universities are still places where students wake up late, skip classes, do very little homework, and spend too many hours drinking or reading comics or playing computer games. The only difference is that the country itself has started to recognize this as a problem. As any university professor knows, reforms are being attempted. However, society's chains will still likely wear heavy on the student population. Regardless, it seems fair to say that the leftist student movement, which offered a somewhat innocuous form of rebellion, has been dead for quite a while.

At the elementary school level, calls for a more natural educational style, supported by cooperation rather than competition, are still heard, but the reality is a very competitive environment that denies children their childhood. Many children still join extracurricular classes and lead a very regimented life, having little free time to play and enjoy nature.

The fiction writers' criticisms appear just as relevant today. Movements to reform the system have failed, and any changes have been either very modest or caused by external forces such as the shrinking population. However, the writers' criticisms are mostly qualitative interpretations of the Japanese educational system, and it would be wise to remember that quantitative data still points to Japan as a wonderful scholastic nation. While the country has slipped a bit in international rankings, it still is near the top. Furthermore, even the least scholastically successful groups can usually be counted on having good reading and mathematical skills. Data still can be used to indicate the splendid features of the system. However, it can also be said that the educational system mirrors the rest of Japanese society, where on the surface, in quantitative measures, the country seems fine, but in more qualitative terms seems to be hiding a long-standing malaise of the soul.

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