

Japan's Corporate Society and Democratic Education

By Kumazawa Makoto

Kumazawa Makoto is the author of several books on Japanese workers and their movements. This article is abridged from his recently-published book Hatarakimonotachi Nakiegao (Yubikaku, 1993), or "The crying and laughing faces of working people." In this article he critiques the traditional stance of the teachers' union of considering progressive education to be a desirable social policy without considering the ways in which it accords with a more conservative agenda.

In the West, declining academic standards have led many to hold up the Japanese model as an instructive example of a truly meritocratic system, but Kumazawa sees another side to this phenomenon.

The postwar educational system in Japan is often considered to be one of the primary reasons for Japan's economic and political power. Most Japanese accept without question the view that the educational system helps to select the best qualified children for jobs and prepares them to enter the workplace with skills that will make them successful workers. No doubt, children brought up in our system of management education become easily accustomed to the rules of corporate society, yet we seldom consider the nature of these rules nor whose interests they serve. As a consequence, the place of the educational system within the class structure of Japanese society is ignored.

Debates between people sympathetic to the Japanese Teachers' Union (Nikkyoso) and Japan's business and political elites have largely ignored these issues. Rather than addressing the fundamental political nature of education, our debates have centered around Japan's international reputation and self-image. This is evident when we look at the different slogans used by these groups to symbolize their concerns. For conservative elites, the aim is to "Create National Awareness on the Fact That We Are a Superpower," whereas for us, it is to "Educate Common People in a Peaceful Country." It is on the basis of these conflicting ideas that we confront them on the issue of what should be taught in modern Japanese history, or concerning issues such

as the Hinomaru flag and the anthem "Kimigayo." But regardless of this debate, the school functions as an institution for vocational distribution which reproduces the class structure, and we have rarely debated this point.

The Hierarchy of Jobs

There are no clear differences between the two sides in terms of their basic understanding and assessment of the framework of postwar democratic education, and this consensus has also been shared by the Japanese "middle class." All of these groups share the view that the life-style differences which exist in society are based upon individual merit rather than class and status distinctions. "Conservatives" and "progressives" hold virtually identical views on this point, and the idea has developed especially rapidly since 1965.

Naturally, there is a relationship between this delinking of life-style from class or status and the enlargement of consumption and service industries which formed the pillars of the rapid development of Japan's postwar economy. Since everybody came to need the same goods and services, demand grew. This is why the business and political elites accepted this type of democracy.

Let us elaborate this idea in terms of education. This ideology denies the heredity of vocation, and calls for the equalization of opportunity for those

entering school. The fundamental principle of post-war democratic education is that even the children of workers and peasants should be given the opportunity of entering high school and university. This principle opens the possibility for children to reach beyond the status or class of their parents.

For the business community, the problem is how to respond to this equalization of educational opportunities. The maintenance of high productivity, after all, still requires a division of labor at the shopfloor or factory level. And where this division of labor exists, a pyramid-like hierarchy of jobs must also exist. Whether we recognize it or not, there remain differences in job description, income, and social status. Some people argue that technological innovation will bring with it a decrease in the number of "3-D" jobs, (dirty, dangerous, and difficult), and an increase in the kind of intellectual work which requires high levels of education. But there is no necessary correlation between building an "intellectual" or "information" industry and the creation of "intellectual" jobs. Even in the age of microelectronics, the job pyramid has remained. Even when assembly lines are automated with high-tech devices in sprawling factories, the efficiency of the machines is still supported by large numbers of people en-

gaged in simple jobs both before and after the highly automated process, most of them working in subcontracting or affiliated firms.

If one accepts the conclusion that this pyramidal structure is unavoidable, and believes, furthermore, that life-styles are not based on class or social status, then the logical conclusion is that "jobs should be distributed equally." The notion of "equality" here means by a competitive process, with an even starting line. And competition here means competition by educational ability and attainment. Educational attainment comes from personal effort, so those who fail are considered less engaged or hard-working.

From Classroom to Shopfloor

One of the consequences of this ideal of democratic education was that all children from across the different classes and sectors of society were sent to compete against each other in terms of *bensachi*, or standardized examinations. In most cases, the level of the high school or university a child may enter is based on these *bensachi*. What has disappeared from the process is any choice given to the individual on what job he or she wishes to engage in. It has been replaced, in every region,

Table 1 Educational Attainment of First-Time Employees

	Total	Middle School	High School	Junior College	University
Female					
1960	601,687	327,071	253,604	10,472	10,540
1970	649,319	130,967	420,727	68,435	29,190
1980	526,617	27,373	319,108	118,578	61,558
1990	597,155	17,365	320,592	170,307	88,892
Male					
1960	772,035	356,626	318,898	7,445	89,166
1970	707,630	140,299	395,989	12,305	159,037
1980	545,776	40,014	280,585	10,578	223,571
1990	585,446	37,457	301,738	10,923	235,328

Source: Ministry of Education



Uniformed elementary school children

with orders placed by companies on what sort of scholastic attainment they can demand. Graduates who achieve high scores can work for the prominent corporations, and those with lower scores are sent to work in the small- and medium-sized ones which have less social recognition. A more serious issue is that the value of a school to students is deeply connected to the characteristics of Japanese corporate society. Most children aspire to become employees, and especially white-collar employees, of big companies, and the qualifications that managements tend to demand of their workers deal with flexibility — being able to do a wide range of work, work in a wide range of positions, and be able to work in different locations. Japanese management want corporate warriors who can adjust to a job description or workstyle in accordance with changes in the circumstances and the vigor of the company.

As a consequence of postwar democracy, competition and ability have developed as key concepts

in both the educational and job worlds. The determinants of children's future employment are essentially their achievements in school and the quality of the school they attend. Naturally, the attitudes of Japan's youth have been nurtured through this process, and it has also become the morality that governs promotion in companies. The distribution of jobs has been determined in this way, and social status has been consequently reproduced.

The idea that social status is a process of natural selection has had many effects on social consciousness. For instance, job and wage discrimination is no longer considered "discrimination without reason" now it is based upon "reasonable distinctions." Progressives in the postwar era have typically been very resistant to "discrimination without reason." One can organize a struggle, for instance, to oppose discrimination in employment against burakumin, women, or Korean residents in Japan, but this "discrimination without reason" has not been the mainstream of the strategy of Japan's rulers, at least not since the late 1960's; their main strategy has been to urge the Japanese people to accept the differences that came from job distribution, based on "equal" competition and resulting in "reasonable differences."

As a result, "school fever" accelerated in all social strata during the mature period of postwar democracy. This fever is apparent in the higher rates of higher education since the mid 1960's. (see Table 1).

I suppose that most Japanese businesses now expect middle aged people with low education, young temporary workers, and migrant laborers to engage in blue-collar jobs. They are satisfied with this distribution. It is difficult to find any differences at all between "conservatives" and "progressives" on the issue. This, in short, means that the setting of classes or strata in Japan occurs not "naturally," but "as a consequence" of something. If classes were determined naturally, human resources would be provided to various jobs of different status and income horizontally, with the main determinant being the origin of the people. In contrast to this, however, the vast majority of Japanese today fit into the bottom stratum of society, and the question of how far into the structure they can climb depends on competition and choice. In short, their position is

determined by "the consequences of their own efforts."

Management's Needs

This ideology of "consequence" spread widely through the education and business world in the period of postwar democracy, and it is the logic which allowed business and political elites to say proudly that, "Japan is not a class society." It is the basic assertion of Japan's political and business elites. It developed as a system appropriate to the notorious system of "Japanese management."

As I mentioned earlier, what Japanese management requires from their employees, and especially from white collar workers, is pliability. Employees sticking to a particular skill or job description create headaches for management. They therefore believe that people who have scored high on their *bensachi* have talents in many subjects and possess an adaptable character. This is considered the most valuable resource.

Although the schools assess their students "independently," under the logic of education, their choices overlap with the assessments and choices of Japanese management.

It is therefore within this context that I believe we should discuss the system of meritocracy in Japan. In my view, the contents of the meritocracy that our political and business elites have tried to create has changed slightly since the late 1960's. In 1963, the Council on Economy published a report entitled *The Subject and Countermeasures of the Development of Human Ability and Industrial Development*, or the so-called "White Paper on Human Development." The tone of the paper was to follow the Western style of meritocracy in calling for training for particular skills, but this is different from the current Japanese system. It is representative of the period where Japanese firms were trying to adopt the American model of rationalization of products and labor management. But what typifies Japanese companies today is the system of meritocracy which developed starting in 1965. The "meritocracy" here does not mean that workers with certain skills become available to any company, but that individual companies train workers to be flexible toward any quantity and quality of work. Business elites are confident that this system of training can absorb all variety of workers, including the many "failures" or "unmotivated" youth, the poorly-educated people who lie outside the main-

stream of society. From the point of view of labor distribution, countless simple jobs are required even in this period of "high technology." And even many of these simple jobs are no longer done by regular employees, but are contracted out. In this way the companies also make use of troubled youth as well as housewives and working students. The companies give high wages, and help satisfy the desire among these youth for consumer culture. The typical management assertion is that, "Even rough youth can work hard on the shopfloor. They need the

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money. Hourly wages free workers to become part-timers." In fact, many part-timers are working on assembly lines in companies such as Nissan and Toyota. They do not have to worry about marriage, housing, or education, they can enjoy material affluence even with part-time work. They can never advance into the ranks of the official employees, but the companies are happy to keep them on as non-official workers engaged in simple jobs. This is why the issue of "rough schools" has not been taken up as a problem by companies worried about troubles in their shopfloors. I do not plan to insist that we return to the system of "like breeds like" by denying the idea of equal opportunity which was the ideal of the postwar democratic education. It is impossible, and, moreover, should not be requested. I would, however, like to see the limitations of the idea, to see both of its sides. For example, the bright side was valuable for women. At one time there were formidable distinctions between male and female academics, especially at the university graduate level. Although these differences still exist in universities, this distinction has decreased, and this has made our society more interesting in many ways.

The dark side is that all the social distinctions have come to be regarded as "reasonable distinctions," and on the basis of this tendency, a "non-elite complex" (where people feel inferior to the elites) has become widespread. In this period junior and high school graduates have come to be looked down upon because of these expanding opportunities for education. ■