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**A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE
EDUCATIONAL DELIVERY IN JAPAN**

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I. Introduction

Generally speaking, Japanese education has attained one of the highest qualities, in which most children graduate high school. Over 95 percent of Japanese graduate and some Japanese education experts believe that the common Japanese high school students gain about the same level of education as second year American college students. In addition, Over 95 percent of Japanese are literate even though the Japanese language contains three types of letters, making it one of the most difficult languages in the world (Ellington, 2005).

In terms of Japanese K-12 education, the Japanese education systems utilize a 6-3-3 model, which is primary, junior high, and high schools respectively, based on the education system in Germany. Through elementary to junior high schools, education is compulsory. The government of the nation, prefecture, and locality pay most educational costs for students from 1st to 9th grades although about 30 percent of students go to private schools (Ellington, 2005). Moreover, the National Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology mainly controls curriculum at school. Based on the study guidance in Japan, the government decides on the main curriculum for each year. Also, the Japanese government carries out textbook inspection systems. When educators think the textbooks are proper for students, they have to report these books to be inspected by committee.

Japanese teachers at all levels are much more prepared in mathematics than schools in other countries. All Japanese students are required to take advanced mathematics classes. Also, Japanese students have many required Japanese language classes. Japanese students have to learn complicated written language, including Chinese

characters/expression, classic languages, and modern languages. In general, all Japanese students take English classes from 1st grade of junior high school to the end of high school (Ellington, 2005).

Based on Confucius' idea, the Japanese suppose students should learn morals while improving academic skills. In fact, many teachers have classes and activities about morals through topics of minority problems and social efforts. For instance, Japanese students and teachers clean their classrooms, stairs, and passageways from Monday to Friday. During the weekend, students participate in recycle campaigns and waste management. Japanese students greet teachers with bows to show admiration and modesty whenever they meet at school.

In Japan, most students take entrance examinations to get into high school and higher education. Even though about 80 percent of junior high and high school students attend private preparation schools, called cram schools, for the examinations, some universities offer an option of admission beside examinations, including interviews and performances. In my case, for example, when I entered college, my university allowed me to take recommended examinations. My high school selected me as a potential student at the university, so my high school teacher wrote a recommendation letter mentioning my efforts of academic grades, extracurricular activities, and events at the school. A few weeks later, I received an admission letter from the university.

Finally, decreasing birth rates have become one of the significant educational issues in Japan. The population in Japan is near 128 million; however, it is expected to decline soon. Furthermore, over half of all Japanese women with children at school work outside the home and there are numerous single mothers. These mothers often give up

sending children into higher education for a lack of finances. If there are fewer students at school, many professors have to leave their jobs. Although the Japanese graduate enrollments at high schools and universities have increased recently, there are critical issues in education in terms of decreasing children in Japan (Ellington, 2005).

In this paper, I will examine educational foundations and philosophical thoughts in Japan while exploring how the educational system has been functioning as a historical overview. Also, I will research critical pedagogy, guidelines, relationships between teachers and students. Finally, I will suggest possible modifications and effective educational approaches according to both positive and negative aspects in Japanese education.

II. Overview of the history of education in Japan

Japanese education began in the 7th century. After the Taiho of 701, the government created schools for samurai children. At the time, education mainly pursued notions of Confucianism, and students studied and memorized Chinese classics, including *Analects of Confucius* and *Art of War*.

In the middle of the 17th century when the Edo era began, other new types of schools were established. The first form was temple schools, the *terakoya*, which became the first common school in Japan. Another type of school was Dutch studies, or *rangaku* where young samurai learned about combined arms, medicine, and other European science. The school of Dutch studies only allowed students to gain outside knowledge via the Dutch trading post in Nagasaki, Japan. Although Japanese education separated

from the society and focused on ancient texts, its system became one of advanced functions in the world at the time.

Before World War II, several Japanese leaders and intelligent scholars had started to adopt Western science while considering possibilities of educational reform. The most critical figure during this movement was Yukichi Fukuzawa, who concluded after traveling the U.S.A. and Europe that the most meaningful system at that time was in Germany. His idea, “Heaven does not create one man above or below another man. Any existing distinction between the wise and the stupid, between the rich and the poor, comes down to a matter of education,” has still been common sense in the modern Japanese society (*Japanese Education: Everything 2*, 2002).

Imitating Germany’s educational systems, Japan created a 6-3-3 system: primary school, middle school, and high school respectively. The system of high schools was more comparable to the German institutions than to the high schools in the U.S.A. Only primary school was compulsory at the time. Original Japanese universities also expanded. The very first institution was the Tokyo Imperial University, now called Tokyo University. Other prestigious universities developed later on, including Fukuzawa’s Keio University, Waseda University, and Rikkyo University.

Through passing the Fundamental Law on Education in 1947, junior high school become compulsory as well as primary schools. Even though the Allied occupation was carried out when Emperor Hirohito accepted the Potsdam Declaration, much of the old system remained. For example, the Ministry of Education just put a rubber stamp on all textbooks without thoroughly checking for appropriateness. In addition, all students in

the school wore the same uniforms, and curriculum of high school was similar to a preparatory school for higher education, such as a university.

In the modern education system, there are multiple choices after high schools depending on a student's goal. These schools contain special training schools, technical colleges, junior colleges, universities and graduate schools. To prepare students for competition to enter high school and colleges, there are several cram schools where students attend for supplemental information after regular school hours (*Japanese Education: Everything 2*, 2002).

III. Philosophical foundation of educational thoughts in Japan

In this part, I will explore three decisive concepts which create Japanese culture and education. These concepts are mainly traditional education, Confucian education, and collectivism in the Japanese society.

Differences in educational systems are from the philosophical ideas of each country. According to my experience of Japanese, the philosophical idea creates unique society which is collectivist. Education in Asian countries, where the majority of people are Confucian, leads to a traditional, collectivist society.

First of all, Japanese education has mainly been influenced by traditional education. At the first part of this chapter, I will investigate how Japanese education follows rules of traditional education.

Traditional education

In terms of traditional schooling, Japanese teachers provide valuable knowledge to students in education. Students often behave and listen humbly to the teachers (Freire, 1993). The traditional education depends on standardized tests, letter grades, and short-answer tests. The authority of the teacher sets the tone of dialogue between students and teachers (Shor, 1992). Therefore, educators select the program's content and make suggestions and students adapt to make their decisions (Freire, 1993).

Indeed, Japanese students follow what teachers mention and believe what teachers say is correct most of the time. Authority of the Japanese teachers clearly indicates higher positions when one observes a conversation between students and teachers, or between teachers and parents. All students and parents use respectful words to teachers instead of using causal words in Japanese.

Also, Freire (1993) makes several points concerning the notions of traditional education. He believes that the "banking method" of education does not include students' critical thinking skills and also discourages their future goals and curiosities. Instead, this education may produce human robots that perform as they are told rather than as thinking individuals. If students were adults, they would never create strong critical thinking techniques. Finally, Freire (1993) concludes that authentic thinking and behaviors of human beings must consider processes through communication.

As Shor (1992) discusses above, Japanese education, especially junior high schools and high schools rely, on standardized tests, grades, and paper exams. Since most students take paper exams based on standardized tests to get into the next educational institution, these exams are extremely competitive. Memorizing information

for the exams does not require critical thinking at all, while these processes cost money and time and require extra schools. Some principals in public schools argue that teachers do not only check students' academic achievement, but also evaluate their extracurricular activities and efforts of school events. However, when it comes to entrance examinations, teachers are generally only interested in students' academic achievement in the school.

Confucius

Throughout Japanese history, the powerful Confucian beliefs have influenced and enhanced national life in all aspects of society and educational fields. Japanese education has become one of the most successful in the world, partially because it has been built upon the philosophical ideas of Confucius (Mungazi, 1993). In this part of this chapter, I will analyze Confucian education which always connects to Japanese education.

Confucianism was introduced from China, which has been a powerful influence on Japanese culture and education. According to Confucius, maintaining peace in family, friends, and work relationships is necessary, and admiring hierarchy in both society and in relationships is important as well (Guttek, 2006).

According to Mungazi (1993), the notion of Confucian education is to understand the stable contributions of trained educators who are capable of foreseeing Japanese education in the future. A main idea of Confucius is that educators should prepare and develop instructions or rules in society. Improving both education and individuals was important because these always relate to the relationships between a human being and society. He understood that shaping the strong relationship between group members in the society is critical in education as well. Japanese culture has adopted those ideas in

every area of life. Therefore, Confucian philosophy is necessary in terms of all aspects of Japanese educational efforts.

Group thoughts are important in the Japanese society. Everyone keeps rules and disciplines based on the notion that Japanese people have similar opinions and share common rituals that show cooperation. They avoid outstanding attitudes because these show that the person does not follow rules and know discipline. Students, for example, do not often oppose ideas of elders and professors, even if they hold different ideas. If teachers do not accept students' ideas and suggestions at the school meetings, they will often adapt the ideas to better suit their own needs.

Conversely, another scholar defines the notion of Confucianism in the unique view that people are always in a mix of human relationships. He argues that to cooperate with others is possibly their destiny. A Confucian idea is that unity is like the wings of a bird. Humans' wings have to be set, which means that if wings move horizontally, the bird can fly straight, but if the tips of wings go slightly down, the bird will immediately fall to the ground. We can state that when a majority of people do different and wrong things it is like these wings pointing slightly down. It is evidence that the whole country could decline soon. As an example, love in the Chinese character has a heart in the center of the character. It indicates not only a single organ, but also emotions, minds, and spirits. According to Confucian philosophy, the character implies that one is going to expand thoughts and perspectives while sharing his/her emotion and spirit with others. No matter what their genders and ages are, all men/ women and elders/children unite with their hearts in the center of the body. (*Confucianism: Wisdom of Faith*, 1996)

Here is a typical example of the movements of a bird's wings: when one student kills another student for fighting, the accident will be reported in the media so that most Japanese will receive the information. Afterward, the reputation of the school will be lowered in the eyes of others. Instead of the murderer receiving a negative reputation, society will blame the instruction of the school, and lower the school's reputation.

Finally, the philosophy of Confucius contains understanding of interpersonal relationships in society. Relationships are hierarchical, and social order answers to people's obedience, responsibilities, and polite manners. The concept is that a human being does not live by himself but with his/her relationship to others, such as sovereign/subject, father/son, elder brother/ younger brother, husband/wife, friend/friend (Wang, 2001).

Collectivism

According to the philosophical thoughts of Confucius, one can observe that most ideas which Confucius believes relate to notions of collectivism. In this part, I will explore the definition and concepts of collectivism belonging to Japanese society. Although some scholars argue that attitudes of the Japanese tend to be individualistic, there are decisive facts that show the collectivistic society in Japan.

Wikipedia (2006) asserts that collectivism stresses any discipline which is important to the group. In a whole society, state, nation, race, and social status, people should be subordinate to the collective group. Japanese historians believe that Japanese people have instinctive senses and understanding that they cannot live without groups.

For example, teachers would rather give lectures to primary students on how to behave well in public and how to cooperate with other people than academic lectures. They teach children that maintaining harmony is necessary within groups. Teachers often mention at school that students should keep the same pace of others' steps, *ashinami wo soroeru*. Good behavior often coincides with cooperation. In this case, good behavior is indicated by children who followed teachers' and parents' instructions, no matter if the idea is correct or incorrect.

According to Confucian concepts, collectivists base societal views on coexistence with each other. Triandis et al. (1988) consider collectivism to promote interdependence when the individual and group share clear aims. When it comes to individualism, the relationship between the person and group goals may not show agreement (Wang, 2001).

One can see a similar situation of promotive interdependence in the classroom. While American education tends to have student-centered classes, Japanese classes have teacher-centered lectures at school. The class style brings the notion of a coexistence in Japan in terms of the collectivist society. In order to smoothly cooperate with each other, somebody in the group must lead the rest of the members. In the case of schools in Japan, the leaders become teachers for the group of classroom and school. School can be peaceful and attain cooperative work because of the relationship between teachers and students.

In *Tightness Looseness Revisited: Some Preliminary Analyses in Japan and the United States*, Chan et al. (1996) discovered several aspects of manifestations of tightness and looseness: determinants of social behavior, sanctioning systems, values, cognitive styles, and language. Tightness-looseness is a crucial dimension which explains cultural

differences in several social behaviors. In terms of the social behavior of collectivist cultures, the normative pressure mainly comes from specific smaller group members, such as families and friends.

In schools which propagate collectivist ideas, the normative pressure occurs within specific smaller groups in both the classroom and house. For instance, once students find a few close friends in the classroom, they tend to be together all the time, such as going to music classes, taking physical education classes, visiting other classes to see friends and going to bathrooms during breaks. These smaller groups are microcosms of larger collective societies, having characteristics of caring, idea sharing and maintaining relationships with others. As another example, when parents expect their children to get into prestigious schools as a next educational institution, most children agree with it and go to cramming schools to follow parents' desires.

Through these results based on literature review analysis, Japanese education shows notions of traditional education, Confucian thought, and a collectivistic society. Most people believe what teachers say is always correct because traditional education. Also, the classroom tends to be a student-centered class, borrowing from the educational philosophy of Confucius. Relationship of student grouping and children/parents shows the unique concept of collectivism. In the next chapter, I am going to discuss critical educational systems according to my experiences and case studies.

IV. Analysis of strength and weakness in Japanese education

In this part, I will analyze Japanese education from philosophical viewpoints. First, and through case studies, I will explore Japanese teachers, students and class styles.

Next, I will examine Japanese education in terms of the advantages and disadvantages of the prevailing educational system in the light of my experiences. These critical examinations will assist me in discovering meaningful educational approaches for Japanese education.

To begin with, based on Confucian thoughts, I will analyze both positive and negative views of relationships between educators and students in Japan. Everyone, including parents, students, neighbors, and coworkers refers to educators, teachers and professors respectfully. Students have to change their ways of speaking from casual to respectful when addressing teachers. It is obvious that educators are highly ranked in Japanese society. That is why many people in Japan believe that what teachers say is always correct.

Therefore, an advantage of the relationship between educators and others is that most people strongly trust educators in Japan. Although students may not be able to argue with what instructors say, most Japanese students and parents still respect teachers at school. A critical disadvantage of Japanese education is signified by the fact that educators and students never have personal relationships with one another, so they cannot exchange beneficial information besides class tasks. This is because educators often intimidate students with their strong authoritative attitudes.

Indeed, these relationships between Japanese educators and students establish the teacher-centered class. Based on a Confucian idea, followers obey what the leader says in order to keep a peaceful group. In the case of Japan, educators become leaders in the institutions and the students are the followers. There are disadvantages of this belief. For example, teachers often feel that they are teaching subjects to invisible students in a quiet

place. Japanese students only listen to professors' lectures; they do not ask questions and argue critically. In addition, some professors in Japan still utter unpleasant words or make facial expressions when students give the wrong answer. Therefore, students often hesitate to share their answers and questions in class because they are afraid of making mistakes, and so they seem shy and nervous.

Educators also observe students' philosophical beliefs in Japan. In the video, *Schools of Thoughts- Teaching Children in Japan and America*, the teacher mentioned that in American schools children also have something to teach, and the process of activities guides creativity. Alternatively, in Japan, teachers teach how to study well and how to gain knowledge in proper ways for entrance examinations. Consider the following case studies of Japanese teachers:

In the video, a teacher in a cram school was interviewed. He talked about how, in Japan, there is an optional schooling that students can take to prepare for an entrance examination for high schools and universities. This school referred to as a cram school, is common in countries where non-English speakers live. The male teacher said cram schools are not the place where students develop creativity and individuality. Rather, they simply focus on memorizing information for examinations. Parents spend over 2 to 3 hundred dollars in a month for the school. Instructors and students never have critical communication, but just look for expanded solutions of how to find answers quickly to take entrance examinations.

A Japanese principle in a public school offered other insightful thoughts. He observes that teachers do evaluate not only students' grades but also their attitudes and activities in school. And even if their scores are lower than other's score, it does not

mean they cannot get into better schools. However, the reality is that they still focus on mainly students' grades rather than extracurricular activities they did in the school. Although educators may want to consider students' positive effort in schools beside grades, one can obviously see traditional outlooks in the Japanese education (John, 1995).

The video concluded that the educational system in Japan definitely discourages students from developing critical thinking skills, whereas American education seeks to apply activities which develop students' thinking skills. Because they focus so much on preparations for examinations, Japanese students do not have to develop their skills of cognitive analysis. In addition, a lack of interactive discussions and presentations in class leads to students that do not have strong public speaking skills, and many Japanese students have difficulty expressing and analyzing their opinions.

In contrast, I have discovered that the Japanese educational system builds up students' general knowledge through preparations for entrance examinations. According to research, lack of general knowledge often affects the number of students who graduate college. While about 85 percent of Japanese students graduate, nearly 50 percent of American students leave or change schools.

The possible reason for the different percentages may be students' different approaches toward academic work. Because of the pressure of entrance examinations, Japanese students develop strong basic skills, while they are less creative. So, they feel that the amount of class tasks and assignments at college are less painful than studying for examinations. Different levels of pressures in preparation for college affect the percentage of graduates.

In a nutshell, styles of competitive examinations in Japan have both advantageous and disadvantageous consequences. On the positive side, students can thoroughly develop their general knowledge through the process of preparing. This knowledge will equip them for high-level academic work at a university, a technical college, a special training school, or a junior college. Negatively, however, this educational system creates less creative and imaginative skills. The way to study for examinations in Japan is to memorize information for the test. Anyone who has large short-term memory, can pass examinations. But, this skill never requires critical thinking.

Meanwhile, according to a report from Japanese media, one private school in Japan has utilized a European style which focuses on discovery and experience. In this style, teachers teach subjects well and in enjoyable ways. When Japanese students learn English, the native speaking teachers lets the students practice new words and sentences while chanting. Also, they use computers for learning English to promote student interest. In a science class, students use authentic materials to examine chemical reactions at the laboratory, and then they discover how things change, produce, and are structured. Both students and teachers discuss reflections, suggestions, strengths and potential issues after the experiments. The reporter mentions that this would be an ideal educational style in Japan.

Indeed, some public schools in Japan have carried out creative classes even through educational experts are concerned. In a public school in Tokyo, for example, the teacher inspires students to solve problems based on a story of Sherlock Homes. The teacher creates a cooperative activity with detective stories. It is an ideal activity; however, there is a serious problem. If the system of education changes in Japan, the

society has to agree with it. In other words, social values, such as discipline, may change as the educational system transforms from traditional to democratic. Therefore, the most significant worry is that people may not follow rules like they already have been accustomed.

At this point, I have discovered important insight in the analysis of the educational system in Japan in terms of relationships between teachers and students, class styles and philosophical thoughts. Based on the philosophical thoughts of Confucius, Japanese education has followed a traditional style. Because of the traditional education and collectivist society, teacher-centered classes became the norm. Even though educational levels in Japan are higher than other countries, students do not often develop creative skills and ideas. These viewpoints create a very unique educational style in Japan. Also, I believe both positive and negative aspects of the Japanese education contribute to effective suggestions for educational approaches.

V. Conclusions & Suggestions

According to reviews, analyses, and case studies, Japanese education has pursued ideas of traditional education, collectivist society, and Confucian philosophy. I provide positive perspectives of these thoughts and other insightful views while suggesting some meaningful approaches. For Japanese students, I recommend a form of democratic education for Japanese traditional education. Then, I show how Confucianism could benefit from Dewey's philosophy. In the end, Japanese teachers should encourage students to participate in class discussions.

First, I will need to compensate for pessimistic views in Japanese education while utilizing helpful ideas of democratic education. Democracy is a situation of free communication and mutual control in a community of shared authority, where all members have opportunities to express opinions. In democratic education, communication encourages learners' language skills, ideas and critical thinking skills through cooperative activities such as projects, presentations, and individual assignments (Shor, 1993). I believe that educational systems should also inspire students to improve their thinking skills instead of only emphasizing academic scores. In Japanese education, most entrance qualifications depend solely on students' scores. I think these entrance examinations should discover students' cognitive and creative thoughts as well. Although building basic knowledge is important for students, I believe continuing higher education should not have to be that stressful and competitive. Therefore, I propose that examinations include activities to check how students cooperative with others, their positive attitudes in the activities, and their creative ideas.

Besides, Confucian philosophy highly values cooperation with others. Both Confucian and Deweyan philosophical ideas contain positive perspectives. While Confucius believed that cooperation is important no matter what types of personalities people have, Dewey valued one's unique expressions and individual contributions, regardless of age and gender. According to Confucian philosophy, thinking the same beliefs and behaving similarly with other people brings harmony. Doing so fosters peace and safety, even though it is tedious and too conventional. In Japan, students often hold in their creative or helpful thoughts in the classroom. Teachers often lead lectures and class meetings and decide on school events and new principles without any argument

from pupils. These teachers' attitudes often discourage students from studying and joining activities because they are more focused on just following school rules. That is why I suggest teachers should understand student entreaties and respect student voices more than they do now.

Finally, I believe that teachers in Japanese schools should inspire students to participate in class discussion as much as possible. Discussion in democratic education promotes students' critical thinking skills. In this case, critical thinking is a coherent and creative custom of the mind that generates meaningful context through discussion, cooperative activities and presentation. Cooperative learning in democratic education creates strong connections among educators, students and parents. Students experience education as something they do instead of something teachers do for them (Shor, 1993). This reflects Dewey's emphasis on people as having unique opinions and attitudes rather than being robot-like, as in Japanese education. In many cases, Japanese students could be robot-like because they simply follow what teachers say.

The classroom of traditional education in Japan demonstrates that students are quiet and obedient. Students carefully listen to lectures without questions and comments. Even if students have questions during class, they rarely ask. They wait for asking questions until class finishes because students are shy and do not want to interrupt lectures. Nevertheless, students have to improve their communicative and thinking skills for public use. After graduation, most students start working or studying at an institute of higher education. In these places, people definitely need to know communicative skills of negotiations, management, and discussion. Moreover, students should speak and express their creative thoughts in class so that they might overcome shyness. Also,

teachers should speak encouragement such as “That is a good idea!” and “Great job!” As a result, students feel confident and their motivation to learn is increased. Unfortunately, not many teachers use encouragement in Japanese schools. For these reasons, I suggest that Japanese education should create a classroom environment where students freely discuss with teachers and each other.

The main reason I suggest discussion-style classrooms is that they demonstrate individual thoughts while creating an enthusiastic classroom. While sharing thoughts, reflections, questions, and comments through cooperative projects, presentations and group researches, the classroom becomes energized. Energy cannot be automatically created by itself. But I believe energy is generated when learners discover clear goals and explore solutions and effective ways toward accomplishing activities, projects and discussions. “Energy is the electricity of many minds caught up in a circuit of thinking and talking and writing. Energy is an aura of creativity sparked by the interaction of students.” (Brown, 2001 p.203) I think this quote suggests that when the classroom is full of energy, it makes the students cooperate with each other and feel confidence in what they are doing in class. I am sure these positive attitudes influence learning motivation outside of the class, which is crucial for students to achieve their aims.

In conclusion, Japanese education could profit from American educational systems in terms of developing creative and unique individuals. In democratic education, not only do students learn something, but also they teach educators their thoughts and experiences while interacting with them (Shor, 1992). Human beings should learn valuable facts while being socially aware, as opposed to being automatons who only focus on the input and output of correct facts robbing students of creative learning.

Through transformation and modification of education, Japanese students will develop their critical thinking skills via listening, writing, reading and speaking activities.

Japanese classrooms will be more enthusiastic and students will show a more positive attitude towards all subjects.

Even though it needs thorough examination and efforts from experts of both fields, Confucian philosophy will help Deweyan democratic education and vice versa. While cooperating with others, which both philosophers highlight, Japanese people can recognize and respect others' opinions in spite of the generation gap. Japanese education can be more effective and of a higher quality for all citizens. Hopefully, a through combination of philosophical thought, a multicultural education will soon emerge and develop students' academic knowledge, social behaviors, and relationships with other people.

Furthermore, I have realized important facts, issues which can make education more meaningful, and perspectives which can aid Japanese education. I believe this research is just the first step; there needs to be more critical analyses, experiments, and discussions in order to build more effective schools in Japan. I strongly believe modifications in Japanese education are possible if both educators and students create enduring plans and prepare careful research and experiments. Although I realize there are other issues I should look at, such as minority, left-behind children, and suicide among school students in Japan, my long term plan for Japanese education is to generate integrative and enthusiastic classrooms. Hopefully, these energetic classrooms create students who acquire strong thinking and cooperative skills while they develop academic knowledge.

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