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A Historical Analysis of Student Pressure in Japanese Education

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In order to thrive in a more global setting, Japan's leaders have historically turned to education as a means of advancing Japanese society and economy. Each period of Japan's history has marked a shift in educational policy that has been initiated due to some form of actual or perceived pressure placed on the nation, and this has in turn placed pressure on Japanese citizens to succeed in a highly pressurized educational environment. The present paper examines the trajectory of Japanese education with particular reference to the role pressure has placed on shaping the approach taken to education from the Tokugawa Period until the present day. By examining the influence of historical factors on the development of the education system, the paper aims to draw connections between the deficiencies of the present day Japanese education system and the past.

A high degree of pressure has been placed on Japanese students to succeed in their educational careers, leading one scholar to label the education system here as a "pressure cooker" (Dawson, 2010, p. 16). This has in turn led to the Ministry of Education initiating several waves of reforms to the public education system. The pressure and intense competition prevalent in Japanese education though has lived on and necessitated the emergence of a shadow private (cram school) system (Dawson, 2010; Mori & Baker, 2010). This intense educational pressure is rooted in a number of historical factors. To this day, many scholars within the Japanese education system question its efficacy at various levels (Ito, 2014; Ito & Kawazoe, 2015; Nishimuro & Borg, 2013; Nishino, 2011; Sanders, 2018) and this continues to act as an impetus for the Ministry of Education to constantly push change.

In the context of Japanese education, students are put under considerable pressure as a means of pushing them to succeed in their studies. Besides the direct and clearly measurable sources of pressure, the pressure placed on the system and its students evolved over time due to a change of agents throughout various periods of Japanese history—with the Tokugawa Bakufu (Shogunate) aiming to create stability and the Meiji regime aiming to catch-up to Western innovation. In effect, these pressures on the education system were often subtle and indirect. Nevertheless, the need for one to conform to society due to pressure, be it direct or indirect, is evident in modern Japanese society, as well as the Japanese society of the past. By examining the historical progression of education within Japan throughout the Tokugawa, Meiji and Showa Periods respectively, the present paper aims to address the development of the system and the associated sources of pressure during each period, and how it affects education in Japan today.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Tokugawa Period (1603-1867)

The reconstruction of the Japanese education system began during the Tokugawa period with the first ruling *Shogun*, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) (Dore, 1965). As Ieyasu came to power, his primary goal was to create lasting peace among his people and to create a stable, long-lasting regime. The means he chose to accomplish this goal was education.

The Way of *Bun (civil studies)* and *Bu (military arts)*, referred to collectively as *bunbu*, formed the basis of the educational system under which Ieyasu studied (Dore, 1965). In order to create a stable regime, Ieyasu needed the enhanced sense and reinforcement of moral obligation in his retainers. With this information, Ieyasu drew on the knowledge of historical specialists, both Buddhist and Confucian, to help him create a stable society (Dore, 1965). Associated with *Bun* and *Bu* was the assumption that they were “linked to the dichotomy of ‘Fi and Ran’ or ‘Peace and War’ (Dore, 1965, p. 16). Since *Bun* and *Bu* were ways of learning, and were also related to the dichotomy of war and peace, the implementation of all four concepts could be interpreted as a way to ensure the permanence of peace, which would also cultivate an environment in which learning could occur. Ieyasu used the way of *Bun* and *Bu* to both advocate for and implement peace, using education as a way to attain it, beginning with his retainers.

Over time, education continued beyond Ieyasu’s retainers to certain spectrums of the general population. At the same time, many witnessed the shift

from contemporary Buddhism to Confucian studies in schools. Ieyasu moved away from contemporary Buddhist teachings to Confucian studies because he felt it fit with the way of Bun and Bu. This was due to the similarities Sung Confucianists held with the Bun and Bu teachings in terms of an enhanced sense of moral obligations; thus Ieyasu saw the moral emphasis of Sung Confucianists as suitable for his purposes.

Hayashi Razan (1583-1657), advisor to Ieyasu, continued this trend of incorporating Confucian studies into his new school in Edo in 1630 with the help of the Bakufu (Dore, 1965). Belief in Confucianism was seen as the way toward peace. This marked the beginning of a divergence from Buddhist teachings administered through temples, towards secular Confucianism which Japan's leaders felt promoted stronger moral stringency. The Hayshi Razan school triggered the beginning of formal schooling and the introduction of a "regular system of specialized classes, each with a defined curriculum and with a strict method of ranking the students according to their accomplishments" (Dore, 1965, p. 20). The pressure imposed here was for students to succeed on the basis of their ranking. By ranking students according to their accomplishments, they were encouraged to do well. Without directly feeling or noticing the pressure, students were learning in a system that was structured to pressure them to aspire towards upward mobility.

Many other schools were created, such as fief-based schools, following the model set by Hayashi. The first was created in 1636 in Morioka and another in 1637 by Matsunaga Sekigo in Kyoto (Dore, 1965). By 1690, the reigning Shogun, Tsunayoshi, rebuilt Hayashi's school, recognizing the importance of the separation of Confucian scholarship from Buddhism. Though schools were already being constructed separately depending on the school of thought on which they were based, Buddhist and Confucian scholarship were not distinctively separate or acknowledged until this time. These increasingly fief-supported schools were established to perform the important function of educating the young samurai. Most of the hired teachers were graduates of the Hayashi school, which had become the foundation and model educational institution during the time (Dore, 1965).

Besides fief schools, the education system included many other types of schools, such as, the *shoheiko*, *shijuku*, *terakoya*, and *hanko*. These were a part of the fief schools that spread throughout the country. The hanko schools focused on educating the children of the shogun's samurai on Confucianism. These schools used the way of *Bun* and *Bu* to "combine the literary and military arts into the samurai tradition that was transmitted to each successive generation

of leaders" (Duke, 2009, p. 11). In contrast, the terakoya schools were created for children of townspeople and merchants and were usually established in Buddhist temples. These schools focused on topics such as reading, arithmetic, and penmanship. The shijuku schools, which formed the basis for today's juku (cram schools), enforced a system wherein students would go to the teacher's house and be taught on the subject that the teacher was proficient in. Lastly was the Shoheiko, also known as the official school of the shogunate. This school was meant to educate the nation's future leaders under Confucian scholars. Students received a "balanced curriculum of Confucian philosophy (*bun)* and martial arts (*bu*)" (Roden, 1980, p. 16). A typical school day consisted of "an agonizing routine of rote memorization and forced habituation backed up by the threat of punishment" (Roden, 1980, p. 16). It was not until later that each division implemented lessons for a wider range of classes of people and a more in-depth curriculum that focused on the previously noted subjects in addition to medicine, Japanese and Western studies, and Western science.

Education during this period consisted of a stratified system wherein a structured hierarchy was adhered to. In doing this, a higher degree of pressure was placed on students at the upper end of the strata to succeed by gaining knowledge based in Confucian thought. Nevertheless, with this type of schooling, samurai youth were rarely able to think for themselves as noted by Roden (1980), who stated "traditional education, conducted in an atmosphere of rigid discipline and forced recitations of nonvernacular literature, hinders the development of an autonomous youth culture" (p. 17).

By 1716, the world of scholarship was well-developed and wide-spread, and saw a focus on Western education emerge (Dore, 1965). This shift in focus was triggered by interaction between Japanese and foreign populations. It was in 1640 when a policy of firm exclusion of foreigners, except the Dutch and Chinese, was implemented. With the Dutch still living within the borders of Japan, many Japanese took interest and began learning about the West (Dore, 1965). In 1774, the first translation of a Dutch book was printed in Japanese; in 1843 teachers of Dutch medicine were appointed in two Japanese schools; in 1853, American Commodore Perry arrived demanding Japan open her borders; and then in 1856 the Bakufu (Shogunate) established schools of Western study as a way to put more focus on learning about the West.

The Tokugawa regime took an active role in establishing an education system for the wider Japanese populace. During this time, the number of reading and writing schools for commoners increased and the literacy rate began to increase as well, prompting other substantial changes to the education system.

By the end of the Tokugawa period 40 percent of boys and 10 percent of girls were educated (Taira, 1971). As education was highly coveted among the upper-class, wealthy citizens placed great pressure on their sons to succeed, while among the lower class, education was not as readily available, resulting in less pressure from parents of lower-class children to succeed in education. The structure of society paved the way for a pyramid of pressure, wherein those at the top were pushed to succeed and carry on the will and duties of their successful parents, while those at the bottom were just encouraged to make do with what they had. The Meiji Period ushered in a new era of industrial growth and Westernization, which in turn required innovation in the education sector. The following section explores salient points which emerged during this time.

Meiji Period (1868-1912)

From its initiation, the Meiji period imposed a program of fast-paced modernization. The first step was the dissolution of the Shogunate-*han* system (Baku-han Taisei), which had allocated land to the warrior class, in order "to build up a unified state" (Seiya, 1965, p. 544). This task was accomplished by unifying the state around the Imperial Family and increasing its authority. Next, came its decree ordering the establishment of a universal system of elementary schooling, which already had a substantial base due to the progress made in education during the Tokugawa period. Despite all the positive advancements made during the Tokugawa Period, the Meiji regime was faced with a few significant problems, one of which was caused by the choice of who was perceived to be privileged enough to be educated.

Entering the Meiji period, higher-ranking samurai were fewer in number than low-ranking samurai "by a margin of 44 to 56 percent" (Duke, 2009, p. 11). This phenomenon seemed to speak to educators as they realized fifty percent of the current Meiji leaders who emerged from the low-ranking samurai class had some form of Western education during the Tokugawa reign, whereas only twenty percent of the higher-ranking samurai did (Duke, 2009). This is significant for education because Japan was increasingly becoming interconnected with other countries; therefore, those with knowledge of the West became better-suited to hold positions within the government, and were thought to have the capabilities required to lead Japan forward.

The first step towards a more developed education system came in the Charter Oath of March 14, 1868. The fifth declaration of intent, the *Kaikoku*—or the opening of the country—became the most important, and symbolically marked, "knowledge shall be sought throughout the world, so as to strengthen the foundation of imperial rule" (Duke, 2009, p. 47). After the Meiji

government broke Japan’s three-hundred-year seclusion, and opened commercial and diplomatic relations with Western countries, Japan was “forced to adopt measures of ‘enriching the country and strengthening its arms’” (Seiya, 1965, p. 545) as a means to counter the external pressure created by Western aggression in Asia. Education operated as an important part of this policy. This entailed a move away from educational practices considered elitist—rote memorization, rituals, and shrine visits—towards more practical education approaches that could benefit the masses (Roden, 1980).

Three years passed before the Meiji government changed the previous culture under which “education for the ruling samurai [and noble] class took preference over education for the masses” (Duke, 2009, p. 47). In order to satisfy both objectives—opening schools for the nobility and following the fifth charter oath—the highest government figure, the *Dajoukan*, called for the nation’s leadership positions to be filled by members of the noble families. Nobles were then highly encouraged to go to the new administrative capital, Tokyo, and to learn about Western societies by studying abroad. This education was meant to equip them for future leadership roles. Three people who helped foster this interest were Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901), a highly respected intellectual who travelled to the West and wrote books like *Seiyou Jijou*, a veritable encyclopaedia on Western topics; Nakamura Masanao (1832-1891), who translated a book that included the line which became the rallying theme for the reform of a feudalistic society: "Heaven helps them who help themselves”; and Uchida Masao, an author who introduced a previously unknown topic to Japanese readers: geography (Duke, 2009).

In addition, the first year of the Meiji regime was also a time in which the re-opening of Tokugawa period institutions took place. Two of the most important openings took place in 1868: *Shouhei Gakkou* and the *Kaiseijo* *Shouhei Gakkou* were re-opened with the purpose of producing a "corps of government officers for the feudal government" (Duke, 2009, p. 49). The school incorporated a traditional curriculum in which Confucian classes and *kokugaku* or Japanese cultural studies, subjects embedded in Shintoism, were taught. Due to this loyalty to imperial tradition, the *Shouhei Gakkou* was marked as the academic mainstay of the Restoration. Keeping to the fifth charter oath, on September 12, the *Kaiseijo* became operational. This institution introduced Western languages and studies; it offered French, German, and English. This school gained prominence among samurai youth who were interested in Western thought.

A few other schools relevant of mention opened in September of the same year: the *Kougakusho*, the School for Imperial Studies, and the *Kangakusho*, the School of Oriental Studies. With the addition of these two schools, the system made for a grand assortment of schools re-opened in the first year of the Meiji regime. In establishing these specific schools, the Meiji regime aimed to cater to the educated classes of society, which were overflowing with samurai youth and a smaller population of nobility. These schools, in effect, represented the three basic schools of thought that were competing for influence in the final years of the Tokugawa period: "the Kokugaku school of national studies (Shinto), the Kangaku school of Chinese Studies (Confucius), and the Yougaku school of Western studies (science)" (Duke, 2009, p. 49). This small group of educated elite students “were inherently obligated to give moral guidance to an illiterate populace” (Roden, 1980, p. 16).

To enforce this new system, the Education Code included plans for the creation of a national school system, which was to be controlled by the Ministry of Education. The Education Code called for a pyramid-style structure wherein all school-aged children attended primary school, middle school, and finally, university. Each successive stage was expected to accommodate fewer students. This incremental decrease in student numbers would be ensured via mandatory entrance exams. This marked the appearance of the entrance exam; a tradition that continues in present day Japanese education.

This change was not without its challenges. Greater access to education acted as a catalyst for more and more rural Japanese to move towards urban centers, where there was greater access to education and jobs (Sugimoto, 2010). This sudden influx of students caused both a shortage of quality teachers (particularly in the field of foreign languages) and considerable strain on school infrastructure (Roden, 1980). In order to promote cohesion within the school system, the *senpai-kouhai* (roughly translated as “senior-junior”) dyadic emerged, whereby older students were given a degree of power over their younger classmates.

Following the 1872 chartering of “The Gakusei” (Duke, 2009) which forced parents to send their children to school by implementing punishments if they refused to do so, secondary schools were designated as “government foreign language schools” (*kanritsu gaikokugou gakkou*) by the Ministry of Education (Seiya, 1965). Over time, teacher numbers fell short and funding began to decrease. Ultimately, there were only seven government funded secondary schools, two of which became the primary focus of government

funding: one in Tokyo and the other in Osaka. Other secondary schools were forced to run on their own resources with no help from the government. These reforms pushed the demand for educational success on to the students and useful knowledge became a priority.

Nevertheless, citizens found fault in these schools due to their lack of stability, a dearth of character development, and an intense focus on drilling for language training. In 1881, these complaints were addressed by the Ministry of Education with the announcement of “a new set of regulations for secondary education (*chuugakkou kyousoku taikou*)” (Roden, 1980, p. 34). All government language schools were to be designated as middle schools with a curriculum split between lower- and higher-level courses. Both levels saw a shift from a mechanical approach to foreign language learning towards a curriculum that was more general (*futsuu kyouka*), which covered literature and ethics, and was supplemented with English studies (Roden, 1980). Additionally, the Ministry of Education signalled a move toward the reinstatement of character building as part of the curriculum. Changes to the education system themselves were a result of indirect pressure placed on Japan to compete with her Western counterparts, which then parlayed this pressure on to the general population. As Japan moved into the Showa period, the realities of the impending World Wars would drastically alter the government’s approach to education. Emergent characteristics of the education system in the Showa period are discussed next.

Showa Period (1926-1989)

The Showa Period saw exceptional change in the Japanese education sector. This period ushered in a militaristic education system, entrenching nationalism in the Japanese psyche as imposed by the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education (*kyouiku chokugo*) (Beauchamp & Vardaman, 1994), which belittled individuality and promoted the pursuit of education for the sake of the emperor. As a way to both honor the emperor and to promote nationalism, the Rescript on Education “came strongly to restrict the thought of the people, and exerted a decisive influence on their consciousness as a people” (Seiya, 1965 p. 551). Due to this, Japan was successfully transformed into a fascist state, wherein the leaders dissolved independent social organizations within the nation in order to create a better controlled society by way of tactfully manipulating the populace.

With the onset of war, schools changed to support the war spirit and persuade “imperial subjects” (*koukokumin*) “to dedicate their lives to the cause of an ideology that would propel their nation into total war” (Khan, 2000, p. 213). It became an education system under a military government, which promoted an ultra-nationalistic and militaristic spirit. At this time, there were

50,000 schools with about 400,000 teachers, and about 16,000,000 students that were affected by this change (Beauchamp and Vardaman, 1994). They were instructed to "create a general high level of educational attainment so that the supply of well-trained instruments will be available for national service" (Beauchamp and Vardaman, 1994, p. 39).

Along with the spread of fascism into education, the status of teachers elevated to suit their critical position in indoctrinating the wider Japanese populace into accepting fascist ideology. War called for national support and as such, war propaganda and the presence of teachers in classrooms that were supportive of the fascist movement ensured an environment that would heavily influence a future generation to be supportive as well; hence the justification felt universally in schools for the war between Japan and China due to the Manchurian Incident in 1931 (Khan, 2000).

In the following four years, the fascist education movement began to rapidly gain traction with several new treaties. Teacher conferences were held on the topic of advancing national spirit and the ideology of imperialism. The Ministry of Education increased the amount of ultra-nationalistic activities, and in 1934 a document called the *Essence of Defense and a Proposal for Its Intensification* (*kokubou no hongi to sono kyouka no teishou*) was published by the Ministry of War (or *Rikugunshou*)—which promoted fascist education. It emphasized the importance of education for both national defense and the role of ideological warfare (Khan, 2000).

In 1935, the government intensified fascist ideology and control over writing and speech, and in 1937 the Ministry of Education published *The Principles of National Polity* (*Kokutai no hongi*), followed by *The Way of the Subjects* (*Shimmin no michi*) in 1941 (Khan, 2000). Both publications promoted stronger nationalism, unity, a spiritual binding to the idea of offering oneself for one's country, educational measures to further strengthen the idea of unity, and the duty of the Japanese people "to guard and maintain the Imperial Throne" (Khan, 2000, p. 220).

The newly created National Schools Ordinance (*kokumin gakkourei*) acted as a catalyst to one of the largest changes to the education system during this period. This new ordinance changed the curriculum, the treatment of teachers, and the organization. Its first article stated that, "*kokumin gakkou* [national school] has the purpose of conducting elementary and general education in accordance with the way of the Imperial National and the basic (physical and spiritual) training of its people" (Khan, 2000, p. 221). With this, the national school system's central curricula became the *kokuminka* (National

Studies) and the value of any curriculum was weighed by its usefulness in successfully contributing to the objectives of the Imperial State. Thus, it served as yet another instrument to inculcate citizens into the nationalist doctrine and enforce a sense of solidarity with the fascist regime. In 1941, the rate of school attendance in compulsory education was 99.7% and compulsory education was still at 6 years (Seiya, 1965).

Despite considerable efforts towards the strengthening of the fascist state, the conclusion of World War II and the defeat of Japan saw education placed under the direction of the Supreme Commander Allied Powers (SCAP). This change saw a movement away from elitist education towards a more just system that benefited wider Japanese society (Seiya, 1965). Another step away from Japan's collective normality was the 1947 Fundamental Law of Education, which officially stipulated the support of individuality for the first time. The first article of this new law, in part, dictated that: "education shall aim at the full development of personality, striving for the rearing of the people, sound in mind and body, who shall move truth and justice, esteem individual value" (Seiya, 1965, p. 543). This edict emphasized the individual instead of the collective, creating a path diverging from collective attainment for the sake of the emperor.

The Americans' efforts were fruitful, but they were met with some resistance. Many changes impacted on, and remained in Japanese society in a permanent way: the constitution, legal equality among men and women, political parties, interest groups, and educational reform. However, many other changes did not take root, such as the disassembling of the zaibatsu (large, conglomerate businesses), and the aim of eliminating homogeneity in Japanese society. The strength of the nationalism that was preached and taught throughout the years was still very much reflected in the cognition of the Japanese. Many students began to soak up the content of the books, their surroundings, and the words of the emperor and their superiors. In doing this, students were manipulated by the state and media—a subtle pressure—not necessarily to succeed, but to be great so that they could be used as instruments for the prosperity and good of the state. The result was ultimately a step backwards in the progress of Japanese education toward becoming a more liberal system. The ramifications of this step backwards are still visible in modern Japanese education, which is examined in the final section.

PRESSURE IN MODERN JAPANESE EDUCATION

Homogeneity in Japan

A homogeneous society creates pressurized education because there is pressure from society to conform to the norms of the group. If one does not fit in, they are looked upon as outcasts of society, and are generally not accepted until they conform to societal norms. The continued presence of this pressure to conform throughout Japanese society is encapsulated in the Japanese proverbs *deru kugi wa utareru*—the nail that sticks up gets hammered down—and *chinmoku wa kin*—silence is gold. This problem is compounded by a desire to maintain 'face protection'—that is to not place oneself in a position to receive negative evaluation in front of one's peers (Kitano, 2001) or to *keep face* as is said in the West. The drive to succeed is large in Japan as well as the notion that everyone should be alike. These two interrelated factors, in effect, cause stress among students in their academic careers as pressure to conform correlates with one's success in education.

This problem is exacerbated by the lingering influence of Confucianism on Japanese education, which as previously noted, was emphasized during the Tokugawa Period and has been said to be one of the largest influencers on the education system here (Stapleton, 1995). The introduction of Confucianism dates back as far as the year 285 (Littrell, 2006), and dictates strict roles and obligations for members of society in a hierarchical structure in order to maintain social order (Hofstede, 2003). This in turn, entails an adherence to an individual's own role in the Confucian hierarchy, and further pressures students to conform and thus not be assertive in their approach to learning. This has encouraged a teacher-student dichotomy that views the role of the teacher as one which demands strict obedience from students (Okano, 2009). Unfortunately, despite efforts to reform the education system (as discussed below), the past continues to negatively impact the modern education system in Japan.

Higher Education Reform

Over the last several decades, Japan has attempted to make its education system more competitive and thus attractive, particularly in the burgeoning international higher education (HE) sector. A rapidly diminishing domestic student pool in Japan (Goodman, 2010) and neoliberal policies which have opened the HE market to increasing competition (Yonezawa, Neubauer, & Meerman, 2012) make this issue particularly relevant. However, systemic problems that emerged in the past continue to permeate the Japanese system. The entrance exams that first emerged in the Meiji Era continue to so dominate the Japanese education system, that a much greater emphasis is put on entrance

into top-tier universities than actual teaching quality (Pokarier, 2010). This is compounded by the fact that institutions in Japan have “a limited capacity to attract and accommodate international students” (Pokarier, 2010, p. 257). If Japan is to shake the rote-learning practices that first emerged in the Tokugawa Period, the country will have to make a serious commitment to meaningful educational reform, and move beyond the bare minimum, protectionist approach it has taken thus far (Sanders, 2018) which suggests a continued resistance to opening up to a globalized world.

CONCLUSION

The present paper has attempted to explain the existence and development of student pressure by analysing the historical trajectory of Japanese educational reform. The Tokugawa Period was the first in which the leadership in Japan recognized the importance of education and moves were made to foster a Western-style, open education system. This was followed by the Meiji Period in which education was viewed as an essential component in combating Western influence across the greater East Asian stage. The Showa Period first saw a nationalistic education system meant to indoctrinate Japanese students into supporting a fascist regime, give way to an American-style system at the behest of SCAP. As is demonstrated though, even in modern Japan, many of the deficiencies of the system which place great pressure on students remain. As indicated by Sanders (2018), the government will need to make a true commitment to real reform if it is to make the necessary changes needed for Japan to become a global education leader. This will require greater acceptance of diversity, in terms of both people and ideas, if Japanese education is to build the capacity necessary to create a more engaged student populace, and a diverse, heterogeneous society able to cope with new challenges presented by a globalized economy.

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