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Japanese and American Education: Attitudes and Practices

Reviewed by Lucien Ellington

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BOOK REVIEWS

Harry Wray. *Japanese and American Education: Attitudes and Practices*
Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999, pp. 322.

Reviewed by Lucien Ellington

Even though a steady stream of books on Japanese schools have appeared in the US since the 1980's, only a very few scholars have done as thorough a job as Harry Wray in comparing Japanese and American education. These comparative components, and the attention Wray gives to attitudes about schooling in each nation, are the two strongest features of this generally well done work. A third strong feature of the book is Wray's contention that good national tendencies, e.g. the Japanese focus upon order and the American obsession with individuality have been carried to extremes in both nations' schools. Wray is uniquely qualified to intelligently compare American and Japanese schools since he has, in addition to doing scholarly on Japanese education, taught in American public schools and universities.

The book, because of its balance and lack of polemics, will receive short shrift from those in Japan or the US who wish to use "comparative education" to either exclusively attack or defend the educational status quo. Balance notwithstanding, Wray is convinced that while both national systems need substantial reform, the US has more serious problems than does Japan. Wray's first chapter is titled "Japanese Schools' Higher Achievement, Literacy, Efficiency, Discipline, Classroom Management, and Strengths of Centralization," in it he paints a grim picture of a US public school system plagued by low academic standards, an archaic nineteenth century schedule, too many bureaucrats, and serious discipline problems.

Chapter Two, "Factors Shaping Current Japanese Education," discusses the historical and contemporary influence of Japanese culture on present-day Japanese schools. Wray describes a wide range of Japanese cultural practices affecting education including Confucianism, sexism and expectations that women should be "education mamas."

Chapters Three and Four, "Japanese Educational Weaknesses and American Strengths," and "The Distorting Influence of School Ranking, Entrance Examinations, and Supplementary Institutional Educational

Systems on Individuals and Schools,” show Wray’s critical gaze on Japan. He is condemnatory of Mombusho’s stifling power, the Japanese textbooks screening process, extensive school rules, the confidential student reports, the failure of the Japanese system to foster creativity, and a great deal more. However, Wray is most critical of the distorting influence of the examination system and private “cram schools” on virtually every aspect of the lives of Japanese youth. He makes a fascinating though not ironclad case that private “cram schools” threaten the very future viability of Japan’s public schools. Given the recent mixed to positive accounts of Japanese “cram schools” by many American scholars of Japanese education, Chapter Four should be highly informative reading to those interested in *juku* and *yobiko*.

In Chapter Five, Wray examines social attitudes that weaken American education and he makes a strong case for serious K-12 US educational reform. He addresses among other topics, the catastrophic effect of the rise of one-parent families on school discipline, and the systematic US problem of poor teachers teaching poor kids and talented teachers working in rich, suburban districts.

In the final chapters, Wray provides excellent discussions of each nation’s teaching force and curriculum. He reiterates his major criticisms of each nation’s educational system and offers suggested policy changes in his conclusion. *Japanese and American Education: Attitudes and Practices*, should be an ideal textbook for undergraduate and graduate courses on comparative education, foundations of education and sociology of education.

Peter B. Clarke, (ed.). *A Bibliography of Japanese New Religious Movements: With Annotations and an Introduction to Japanese New Religions at Home and Abroad*. Japan Library: Richmond, Surrey, 1999. 276 pp. ISBN: 1-873410-80-8.

Reviewed by Daniel A. Metraux

The academic study of Japan’s New Religions has flourished in the 1980s and 1990s with the publication of several thousand books and journal articles both in Japan and the US. H. Byron Earhart’s 1983 compendium, “The New Religions of Japan” is now very outdated. Scholars in the field

will thus rejoice at the publication of Peter B. Clarke's recently edited "A Bibliography of Japanese New Religious Movements."

Clarke's "Bibliography" contains over one thousand five hundred entries including European, American and Japanese entries covering books, journals, unpublished papers and theses, and a selection of in-house publications. The second half of the book provides brief profiles of each of the main New Religious Movements covering the founding and subsequent history of each group, a summary of main beliefs and practices and a listing of main publications by and about the religion. There is a brief introductory chapter, "Japanese New Religions Abroad—The Way of the Kami in Foreign Lands" and a concluding chapter, "Aum Shinrikyo: Brief History and Select Bibliography."

Only scholars studying each of the religions can really judge the quality of the overall listings for that religious movement. The sections on the Soka Gakkai and Aum Shinrikyo, for example, provide a broad and contemporary listing of works in English and other Western languages as well as a useful sampling of publications in Japanese. There are careful and extremely useful annotations accompanying several entries that summarize the major themes and subjects covered in each work. No bibliography, especially in a rapidly growing and broad field such as the "New Religions" in Japan, can be complete and there are some omissions of major works that should have been included. Nevertheless, one must commend Clarke, Research Assistant Sonia Crivello, and a long list of contributors at the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at King's College, University of London for their copious and diligent work. On the other hand, many of the brief summary histories and overviews of the religions themselves are poorly developed. Thus, while Masaki Fukui provides a superb chapter on the history and theology of Kofuku-no-Kagaku, the section on the Soka Gakkai is very sketchy and weakly conceived.

Clarke has provided a brief introduction to Japanese "New Religions" in Japan and abroad as well as a brief appendix that features an overview of the history and theology of Aum Shinrikyo. He notes, for example, that "New Religions need not...be considered new in the sense of providing entirely new beliefs and rituals but in the way they have restructured aspects of Japanese cosmology with a long history and interpreted long-standing ritual practices to serve different ends than once was the case." (p. 7) He concludes, "More generally, the New and New, New religions of Japan have made a difference to the religious life of Japan by their new emphasis in their teaching on pacifism, the energy they put into recruitment and

expansion overseas among non-Japanese, in the stress they place on lay spirituality, in the provision of techniques to enable devotees to reach the summit of the spiritual mountain, and in the significance they give to the laity as primary evangelists.” (p. 11) Clarke includes a discussion of the successes and failures of New Religions abroad, but provides surprisingly little analysis of the reasons why some of these New Religions, Soka Gakkai in particular, have found so many non-Japanese adherents throughout the world.

Clarke writes with some concern that the phenomenon of New religions in Japan is on the decline. A primary reason is “a lack of fit between the models of society the new religions are providing and the changing outlook of the Japanese population, particularly those under thirty years of age. The New Religions require tremendous amounts of time and exclusive commitment, which fails to correspond to the more diverse and eclectic views of younger Japanese today. Other factors inhibiting growth is a lack of motivation and energy among second and third generation members and the more establishment-oriented demeanor of some of the New Religions that have long since lost much of their “evangelical, sectarian fire.” (p. 16)

Clarke’s brief history of Aum Shinrikyo is one of the best-written analyses of this controversial sect. Clarke commences the chapter with a concise discussion of Aum’s use of mystical power:

Aum illustrates more clearly than any other religion in the contemporary Japanese context the lethal potential of mystical power. Mysticism is a difficult word to define and often refers to an inward; spiritual religion based on the experience of direct immediate awareness of the divine. It emphasizes experience rather than theological reasoning. While these features are not being overlooked here the stress is on mysticism as a form of spiritual power that is activated by a relationship between a leader who claims supernatural powers and who regards her/himself as divinely chosen and the unswerving belief of disciples in those claims. It is a power that can be manipulated to justify the use of the most immoral and unlawful means, such as the use of sarin gas in an attack on the Tokyo underground by members of Aum Shinrikyo on 20 March 1995 demonstrated, to further what are interpreted as spiritual ends. (p. 267)

Clarke provides a most useful overview of Aum’s transition in emphasis from a “this-worldly” to an “other-worldly” orientation, correctly noting that this shift was not always even and unilinear, but which

ultimately brought Asahara and many of his followers a very alienated view of society.

Despite its many small weaknesses, every library with a serious Japan studies collections should purchase Clarke's "Bibliography of Japanese New Religious Movements". It will serve as a useful guide to scholars in the field as well as students seeking an overview of Japan's New Religious Movements.

Phillip Hammond and David Machacek, *Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. 224 pp. ISBN 0-19-829389-5.

Reviewed by Daniel A. Metraux

The Soka Gakkai is the largest and most enduring of the many Asian-based religions that has found a haven in the United States since the 1960s. Although the American branch of Soka Gakkai (SGI-USA) has experienced some decline in numbers since the 1970s, it has found a niche within American society and is likely to endure for many years to come.

Philip Hammond and David Machacek provide a superb analysis of the history and theology of the US-branch of the Soka Gakkai in, "The Soka Gakkai in America." Hammond and Machacek assert that SGI-USA has been successful because it has made the transition from being an immigrant religion in the 1950s and 1960s, to being a competitor in the American religious market. While several other new religions of Eastern origin experienced sudden popularity in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s and then a decline almost as rapidly as they had grown, SGI-USA achieved stability, growing into a religious alternative for thousands of Americans. American society experienced a wide variety of changes in the 1960s, which made the social environment far more receptive to religions of Eastern origin precisely at a time when changing immigration statutes opened the country's doors to a flood of immigrants from Asia. There followed not only a rise in the number of immigrants from Asian countries, but also an increase in the number of Asian religions in America.

The authors assert that these religions arrived at a time of fundamental change in America's religious landscape. Americans were becoming increasingly mobile, not only geographically, but also socially. America

saw the rise of a “meritocracy” where one’s position in the social order depends on what choices one makes in life. There was also an awakening to religious pluralism: “While some traditionalists held fast to Protestantism as the ‘true’ religion, others, perhaps the majority, came to see that religion could take many forms, each entitled to exist in America.” (p. 174) Religion became less a community defined by shared history, doctrine, code and rituals, and more as an individual way of being in the world. Moreover, pluralism led to the emergence and spread of what the authors label “transmodernism, a desire for religion oriented to healing—the self certainly..., but also human relationships with the environment, and relationships with the divine.” (p. 175) The ascetic impulse in transmodern culture is played out in the mundane world, but it relocates the rewards for hard work and ethical behavior to the mundane world of the “here and now.”

The authors introduce us in depth to the many Americans who joined SGI-USA: Young and socially mobile, they have typically experienced a time in their lives when they had the freedom to explore the new variety of religious alternatives available in the United States. Well-educated participants in the new class of information and service occupations, they accepted an ethic of success and actively sought upward mobility. Soka Gakkai’s emphasis on taking responsibility for one’s own life and taking action to achieve personal goals no doubt spoke to the experience of young professionals in the new meritocracy. At the same time, they were socially progressive—world travelers, interested in and exposed to foreign cultures, their inward, self-orientation balanced by a global consciousness. Religiously, as well, they turned inward, focusing on the inner spiritual realm. In these many ways, converts to Soka Gakkai in America have been pioneers in an era of dramatic cultural change. (pp. 176-177)

My own research of Soka Gakkai chapters in Southeast Asia and Canada indicates that many of its recent members are upwardly-mobile well-educated young professionals. They find that the Soka Gakkai’s believes that one is responsible for one’s fate and that through hard work, one can change one’s destiny to be very appealing. The Soka Gakkai empowers the individual to “make the impossible possible.” This is in marked contrast to more traditional religions that pin one’s fate in the hands of a transcendent deity or outside religious figures. The idea that one is the master of one’s destiny and that one can overcome any set of problems appeals to the young professional not only in Singapore, but in Montreal

and San Francisco as well. Thus, the findings of authors Hammond and Machacek are remarkably similar to what I have found in my own research.

I have concluded that another key reason for Soka Gakkai's successes in Southeast Asia and elsewhere is the independent, indigenous nature of each chapter. National and regional chapters of SGI are lead and staffed by local leaders who work hard to adapt SGI to the customs and traditions of their native culture. Each chapter is quite independent of all others and there is very little control from Tokyo. Hammond and Machacek support these findings by showing that SGI-USA is quite American in its structure, leadership and actual practice of religion.

Hammond and Machacek have based their conclusions on the results of an exhaustive survey that they sent to hundreds of SGI-USA members. Their reliance on the survey is thus the basis for both the book's strengths and weaknesses. Their data and interpretations allow for an excellent analysis of who SGI members are and the nature of their collective social worldviews.

Unfortunately, the authors often tend to get lost in their sea of data. The reader is flooded with so much minute information and sociological jargon that it is hard for him/her to get a broader picture of Soka Gakkai as a whole. Another problem is that the information is too statistical. SGI-USA is made up of many individuals, but in no way do we get to know them as real people. Perhaps some personality profiles or extensive interviews would have given us a more human look at SGI-USA and we would have had a clearer, longer-lasting impression of who joins and why.

Despite these apparent flaws, "Soka Gakkai in America" represents the best modern study of SGI-USA. The research is based on a very broad spectrum of members and is carried out in considerable depth. The authors base their conclusions on their data rather than on any preconceptions. They also provide a superb portrait of the history and theology of both Nichiren and the Soka Gakkai in Japan. "Soka Gakkai in America" comes highly recommended.

Nakao Shigeo. *Doru Shihai ha Tsuzuku ka* [Will the Dollar Dominance Continue?] Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 1998. 222 pp.

Reviewed by Yochiro Sato

The official launch of the Euro in January 1999 has called into question the continuing dominance of the US dollar as the base currency into the twenty-first century. This book questions the legitimacy of the US dollar to remain the dominant base currency for the United States' foreign debt superpower status. The question of why the US dollar remains dominant is tested in light of two conflicting hypotheses: does truly free-market lead to the dominance of the US dollar, or is there a political conspiracy that sustains the dollar dominance. This book views the international finance market in a "humanistic drama which involves people, ethnic groups and political power," and gives actual pictures of individuals, corporations, cities, and communities. (pp. 7-8) From a viewpoint sympathetic to neo-Marxism and *realpolitik*, the author Nakao Shigeo describes the unfair systemic advantages the US enjoys with the hegemony of its currency. Nakao also sees an Anglo-American elitist conspiracy that globally spreads the *laissez-faire* capitalist ideology in order to sustain the hegemonic advantages. (pp. 86-87, 89)

Nakao traces back power politics in international finance to the designing stage of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The US preferred a limited loan capacity for the IMF based on a foundation style, and from direct loans by the US government and private financial institutions for the purpose of Europe's post-World War II recoveries. On the other hand, the British preferred a bank-like IMF with a larger loan capacity to reduce dependence on the US. (pp. 42-43) The US plan emerged as the international finance regime known as the Bretton Woods system, in which the US alone enjoyed freedom from the risk of exchange rate instability. (p. 45)

Although the gold standard (fixed linkage of the dollar with the value of gold) collapsed in 1971, and the US fell into a debtor status, the dollar continues to be the dominant international currency due to the size of its trade and the increases in derivative trade. (pp. 51-52) Without the obligation to exchange dollar with gold, the US could enjoy an economic boom sustained by lower interest rates, and did not suffer from the negative balance of payments since it could simply issue more dollars. (pp. 62-63)

Meanwhile, Japan's creditor status was achieved by the suppressed demands and the high domestic saving rate. (p. 53) Whereas in the 1980's Japan's rising competitiveness and America's declining competitiveness explained the bilateral financial status, the same pattern in the 1990's was explained in terms of lack of investment opportunities in Japan and plenty of them in America. (p. 51) However, Nakao sees a major change in inter-bank finance between the two periods. In 1997, the flow of inter-bank finance turned negative for the Japanese, due to a decline in Japanese purchases of US bonds (that reduced demands for the dollar), loan collection by the US banks due to fear of financial instability in Japan, loans by Japanese banks to their overseas subsidiaries that suffered from the Japan premium (higher inter-bank loan rates American banks charged). (pp. 64-65) Nakao argues that special loans by the Bank of Japan (BOJ) and injection of public funds into the troubled domestic financial institutions are ineffective because a large part of the money made available through these measures simply fled to the US. Deregulation of foreign exchange control in April 1998 further accelerated this outflow. (pp. 66-67) Observing practices of some major corporations, Nakao sees further increase of dollar-based trade, rather than an internationalization of the Japanese yen as a result of the foreign exchange deregulation. (pp. 56-59)

However, Nakao's interpretation of the Asian economic crises is less convincing. Although the negative implication of the Asian crises on Japan's financial institutions and the advantages of increasing the proportion of yen-based transactions are clearly demonstrated (pp. 137-142, 209-210), Nakao's comparison of the Thai, Indonesian and Korean crises and their recoveries (or lack of it), is superficially based on their levels of assimilation to the "IMF/Chicago school" *laissez-faire* ideology. (pp. 150-168)

The more meaningful comparison can be found between the European currency integration and a similar possibility in Asia. Nakao sees European preference for a fixed or controlled float system within the regional currencies that eventually led to the creation of the Euro. (pp. 180-181) From a realist perspective, The Euro can also be viewed as the European challenge against the dominance of the US dollar. (pp. 187-188) Although Japan and other Asian countries with a float system can learn this European way of reducing the risk of exchange instability, Nagao points out that rivalry between China and Japan and the Chinese fixed exchange system inhibit collective bargaining by Asian countries against the US. (pp. 211-212)

Overall, the book provides a very useful and critical insight into the hegemony of the US dollar. Nagao's description of Japan's current financial trouble and the dollar-based system's negative contributions to this problem are convincingly demonstrated. Also, Nakao's account of the development of the Euro is well integrated into the discussion of the dollar hegemony and the Asian economic crises. Nakao's arguments, sometimes hidden behind the citations of other commentators, of Anglo-Saxon cultural dominance in the sphere of economic ideology (pp. 86-87), the human network that connects Wall Street and the Treasury Department (pp. 130-132), and China's ability to fend-off speculative attacks of the American hedge funds against the Hong Kong dollar through political bargaining (pp. 125-126) are overly simplistic, ignoring diversity within the American elite. This type of neo-Marxist bias, combined with the expression of frustration against the alleged American double standard in dealing with Asians and Europeans (pp. 144-145), impaired the book's credibility. The book would have achieved its aim more effectively without these assertions.

Haru Yamada. *Different Games, Different Rules: Why Americans and Japanese Misunderstand Each Other* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. xviii, 166.

Reviewed by Don R. McCreary

This very readable and worthwhile text for both Americans and Japanese explains how and why both groups tend to communicate with each other in a mutually frustrating manner. It contains insider information from case studies done in business settings on how conversations are constructed by Japanese and Americans, and how the two styles of communication can contrast sharply at times and cause misunderstandings.

Chapter One, "Two Stories, Two Games," (pp. 3-21) introduces two divergent models of communication, the "Equal Opportunity Independence" model for Americans, which is based on individualism, and the "Sweet Interdependence" model for Japanese, which is based on mutual dependence.

Chapter Two, "Communication Equipment," (pp. 23-35) examines the linguistic features of American English and Japanese that sometimes accounts for confusion, such as contrasting uses of aspect, double negation,

honorifics, and pronouns. This chapter also has a serious printing error, the reversal of pages thirty-two and thirty-three, which created much confusion at first sight.

Chapter Three, "Speak for Yourself, Listen to Others" (pp. 37-51) connects the two models of communication above to "Speaker Talk," the preferred mode of conversation for Americans, and "Listener Talk" for Japanese, which is other-directed and non-confrontational and is based on the need for mutual dependence. Haru Yamada provides the reader with many concrete examples of misinterpretation, such as the impression that Japanese are extremely polite, and explains them accordingly to this preferred mode of conversation.

Chapter Four, "Taking Care of Business," (pp. 53-69) describes the cultural considerations that Japanese should understand related to individualism and the notion of equality in America.

Chapter Five, "Open for Business," (pp. 71-81) examines American and Japanese topic-opening and conversation-closing strategies, concentrating on specific patterns that American businessmen tend to use and specific uses of silence that Japanese businessmen tend to use.

Chapter Six, "Scoring Points," (pp. 83-94) addresses the Japanese strategy of "talk-distancing," which separates the speaker from his message by the use of hedging and exemplifying with conditional phrases. Haru also explains the employment of "barbarian handlers," who smooth negotiations with foreign businessmen in Japan.

Chapter Seven, "Support Network," (pp. 95-104) delineates the use of back channels, which are an integral part of conversations between Japanese. American listeners, however, tend to employ back channels only when the speaker opens a topic or is at a topic margin.

Chapter Eight, "The Truth About Teasing, Praising, and Repeating," (pp. 105-119) offers information and advice about teasing and joking in both cultures that have been sorely lacking in the past. Haru also warns about the pitfalls of praising any Japanese and the potential American misinterpretation of the notion of individual honesty when it is tied to the Japanese reluctance to praise himself.

Chapter Nine, "Role Models: Working Man, Nurturing Mother," (pp. 121-137) examines the roles that men and women play in Japan and in the US and how these roles can have an impact on conversational style in and out of business settings.

Chapter Ten, "You Are What You Speak," (pp. 139-148) explains the role of language in the conversation of national identity, emphasizing the

role that the Japanese language plays in the notion of what it means to be Japanese. This chapter appears at first to be off-topic, but the notion of identity is connected to xenophobia, which can adversely impact cross-cultural negotiations between Japanese and Americans. The back matter of the book contains worthwhile notes (pp. 149-155), over eighty references (pp. 157-161) and a useful index (pp. 163-166).

This admirable book illuminates many of the details of both Japanese and American conversational styles and provides useful advice for businessmen from both countries. With Haru's book in hand, the American can learn to refrain from labeling Japanese as self-effacing and inscrutable, while the Japanese can learn to refrain from labeling Americans as selfish and overly assertive.