MAKING JAPAN WORK

ORIGINS, EDUCATION AND TRAINING OF THE JAPANESE SALARYMAN

J.E. THOMAS

MAKING JAPAN WORK :
THE ORIGINS, EDUCATION & TRAINING
OF THE JAPANESE SALARYMAN

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Making Japan Work

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INTRODUCTION

THE ORIGINS of the field work leading to this book lie in a study carried out of the education of adults in Japan, which was published in 1985 as *Learning Democracy in Japan: the Social Education of Japanese Adults*. The Japanese enthusiasm for schooling is well known, but what was not so well known is the scale and nature of adult, or as it is termed, social education. What was especially interesting and this was the central theme of the book, was the role which many Japanese believe such education has played in the maintenance of liberal and political values.

As an adult educator I then developed an interest in the more specific question of education and training in organisations. It seemed likely that the Japanese would place great emphasis on this, and questions arose as to what purpose it might have, and what forms it might take. I was especially interested in the education of the businessman, the 'salaryman', and how he was prepared for the transition from full-time education to work.

To try to explore this I spent several months with the training departments of six major Japanese companies, and upon return to Britain visited a Japanese company, and several British companies to enable modest comparison to be made. Of course, the time spent with companies was crucial, but increasingly a difficulty developed as I planned to try to give a coherent account of training, a difficulty which will be obvious to professional adult educators. It is that, to give a plain narrative account of what was being done in training, while of some methodological interest, does not give an intelligible picture of a complex process. By this I mean that a description of how the Japanese emphasise the importance of cooperation in their training must be supplemented by an account of the context within which this is done. Without this, the process of education and training is

isolated and insulated from the events leading to it, and the assumption surrounding it. To confine the discussion in this way makes description especially unintelligible for those who may know something of training, but little about Japan. Or, for that matter know about Japan, but little about the education of adults.

I decided therefore to broaden the picture, that is to try to explain something of the origins and background of the businessman, and the assumptions, based upon those factors, upon which trainers established their programmes. Since this account will be of interest to a variety of people, few of whom will be familiar with the diverse elements it seeks to put together, I have tried to set out, often briefly, the overall experience which the trainee has undergone and the kind of person he is likely to be.

Thus, it is necessary to know something of the Japanese education system, through which all Japanese businessmen proceed. Historical and social traditions bear heavily upon the Japanese, and these must be taken into account. The broad context within which Japanese business functions is important, and is, incidentally a source of myth and controversy. For those who are not expert in the particular problems of education in organisations, and the enormous sophistication of the process of adult education, there are sections on both. This leads naturally to a specific account of education and training in the organisations studied.

It follows that there is enormous diversity in this account, but I hope to show that it is necessary to attend to it, and try to unify it as a commonality affecting the central subject of the book - the Japanese management recruit.

J.E.T.

THE EXPERIENCE OF EDUCATION

THE JAPANESE have one of the most extensive education systems in the world. In effect, every Japanese goes through a substantial part of it, and so to be able to understand the practice of industrial education, it is necessary to know something of the educational experience and background which the Japanese bring to the workplace. This is especially the case with the group with which we are most concerned, the managers. This point is made succinctly by Prais.

> The main features of Japanese attainments in education and training need to be understood... by any country intending to retain its place amongst those that are industrially advanced.[1]

The purpose of this chapter therefore, is to describe the education system, but also to introduce some of the reservations which the Japanese themselves have about it. In this process will be mentioned the caution against accepting all the mythology about life in Japan, which will be a recurrent theme in this account.

Education has a long history in Japan, notably during the period of rule of the Togukawa shoguns from 1603 until 1868.[2] From the opening up of Japan in the latter year, there was intense interest in the establishment of an educational system which would enable the country to take advantage of the striking achievements of the nineteenth-century industrialised West, and to take its place as a nation which would contribute to those achievements. In a famous manifestation of this policy, the order was given that

> knowledge shall be sought from throughout the world so that the welfare of the Empire may be promoted.[3]

The speed with which this was achieved is now legendary, and is commonly exemplified by the victories over China in

1895, Russia in 1905, and the occupation of Korea in 1910. Unhappily, these successes were translated into a militarism, which though ultimately defeated, was responsible for a wretched period in twentieth-century history, not least for the Japanese themselves. Devastating loss of life on the battlefield and at home, culminating in the traumatic atomic bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, left Japan completely shattered. The Japanese surrender on the *USS Missouri* in September 1945 was followed immediately by a realisation, and a resolution, that a very fast programme of reconstruction had to be put in place. The educational system was one of the most important features of that process.

The Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP) was General Douglas MacArthur. Exercising power on a scale which is widely accepted as astonishing, MacArthur set out to repair and above all to reform Japan. He and his administration were convinced that the education system had been an important part of the development of the political structure which had taken Japan to war, and their approach to educational construction was dominated by that belief. The administration spent a good deal of time and energy on trying to establish an educational system which would aid the process of democracy which was the main goal of the occupation forces.

As a statement of principle, in 1947 Law Number 25 was passed. This was a milestone in Japanese educational history, and was called the Fundamental Law of Education. It is a law which is full of the kinds of good intentions with which it is difficult to disagree.

> ARTICLE 1. AIM OF EDUCATION. Education shall aim at the full development of personality, striving for the rearing of the people, sound in mind and body, who shall love truth and justice, esteem individual value, respect labour, and have a deep sense of responsibility....

The singularly political American tone of such a statement is repeated in this section, which as we shall go on to see, in important respects has been ignored, as such grandiose statements tend to be.

> ARTICLE 3. EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN EDUCATION. The people shall all be given equal opportunities of receiving education according

> to their ability, and they shall not be subject to educational discrimination on account of race, creed, sex, social status, economic position, or family origin. The state and local public bodies shall take measures to give financial assistance to those who have, with all their ability, difficulty in receiving education for economic reasons.

Predictably, the education system which was put in place was, in all important respects, based upon that of the United States. It is called, in its shorthand form, the 6-3-3 system. This means that six years are spent in the elementary school, and three in the lower and higher secondary schools respectively. But before the formal system begins, there are kindergartens which admit children who are three, four or five years old, and give them courses which last one to three years. At the age of six, compulsory schooling begins, and the compulsory element - the 6-3-3 - continues until the completion of three years in the lower secondary school, which children attend between the ages of 12 and 15 years.

To get into the upper secondary school at the age of 15, children have to graduate from their lower secondary school, which is measured by the accumulation of 80 credits. There are three kinds of upper secondary schools: full-time, part-time, and correspondence. The course at the first one of these lasts three years, and at the latter, four. These schools are divided into general and specialised, or vocational courses. Over two-thirds of the full-time upper secondary students are in general schools. About 12 per cent of the remainder are on commercial courses, 10 per cent on technical courses, 3 per cent on agricultural courses, and 3 per cent on domestic courses. In addition to this mainstream provision, there are facilities for the education of physically and mentally handicapped children, although such special provision came late, in fact not until during the 1970s.

The school system is characterised by a clearly defined, accepted, and understood hierarchy, which has led to intense competition and a level of pressure on the students which is of increasing concern to the Japanese. The time spent in the company of teachers, as a result, does not consist only of the six days in the classroom, since there is extra in the form of cramming. This is arranged by parents anxious to ensure that the child will stay in the forefront of the competition, not only

to enter a prestigious upper secondary school, but after that to enter a famous university. The passage from élite kindergarten to élite university is sometimes possible within a unified system.

> Keio, Gakushuin, Seijo Gakuen and Aoyama Gakuin are among well-known private universities at the top of escalators that start at kindergarten level.[4]

Entering such kindergartens gives Japanese toddlers their first experience of what is commonly called 'examination hell', for there are fiercely competitive tests to undergo for admission. The hierarchy of prestige in the whole system is not only rigid, but is seemingly impossible to change, as this typical case shows.

> In the Kobe district is the most famous private school in Japan (Nada), which succeeds almost every year in placing more students in Tokyo University than any other school in the nation. Competition to enter this school is most severe.[5]

However, the numbers who can succeed in getting a place at an élite establishment must be limited, and there are other avenues. In fact, after school 40 per cent of young people go on to higher education, a proportion which is exceeded only by the United States.

Within the range of provision there are, first of all, a wide variety of schools or colleges which offer training in skills of a practical nature, such as typing, automobile driving, and computer operation. Then there are Special Training Schools which were set up in 1976. These teach upper secondary courses, advanced courses for those who have passed upper secondary, and general courses. Those who complete an upper secondary course at one of these schools qualify for university entrance, a point of great importance. In addition, there are 62 technical colleges, which offer five-year programmes for technicians in, for example, engineering. These colleges recruit mainly children who have completed their lower secondary schooling. Next, there are the 548 junior colleges, which provide two- or three-year courses, mainly in humanities, teacher training, and home economics - predictably for women.

At the pinnacle of the hierarchy are the universities. In 1986 there were 465 universities in Japan, and since then several more have opened. About 268 of these have post-graduate programmes, which is an important measure of status, and not only in Japan