

Reticence towards Moral Lessons in Japanese Schools

－Moral education at a crossroad－

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I. Japanese education at a crossroad

On 24th October 2007 the Curriculum Committee of Central Council for Education in Japan, which is an advisory council of the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports and Technology, completed its discussion on whether moral education should be treated as a subject in the Japanese school curriculum. The Curriculum Committee agreed in the end that "the subject needs further discussion". There was no objection to the agreed statement in this Committee on that day. The statement means as a matter of fact, that moral education is not treated as a subject in a Course of Study (National Curriculum Standards of Japan).

The agreed plan about moral education highlighted the following 3 points:

1. Moral education needs to be developed further on the basis of the present curriculum.
2. Teachers are now using various kinds of teaching materials, so it is difficult to bring them together into one textbook.
3. There are difficulties in treating moral education as a special subject and in writing a textbook.

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One day before, on 23th October, the Education Rebuilding Council, which is organized under the Prime Minister, agreed once more to strive towards treating moral education as a subject in the school curriculum. The former Prime Minister, who organized the conference, was in favor of making moral education into a fully-fledged subject.

The agreed statement of the Curriculum Committee is considered at a meeting of the Central Council for Education, and reported to the Minister in charge of MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Technology). MEXT will write the new Course of Study based on the report of the Central Council for Education. There could be further political struggle, but presumably the agreed statement of the Curriculum Committee on 24th October will be acknowledged.

Japanese education is now changing after the modification of the Fundamental Law of Education in December 2006 (see Figure 1). According to the plan of the Curriculum Committee on 30th October 2007 the school time table of subjects like science and foreign language (English) will increase by 33 percent, and mathematics by 22 percent increase under the new Course of Study for the year 2011. New textbooks for subjects will be written according to the new Course of Study from 2011 in elementary school and from 2012 in lower secondary school.

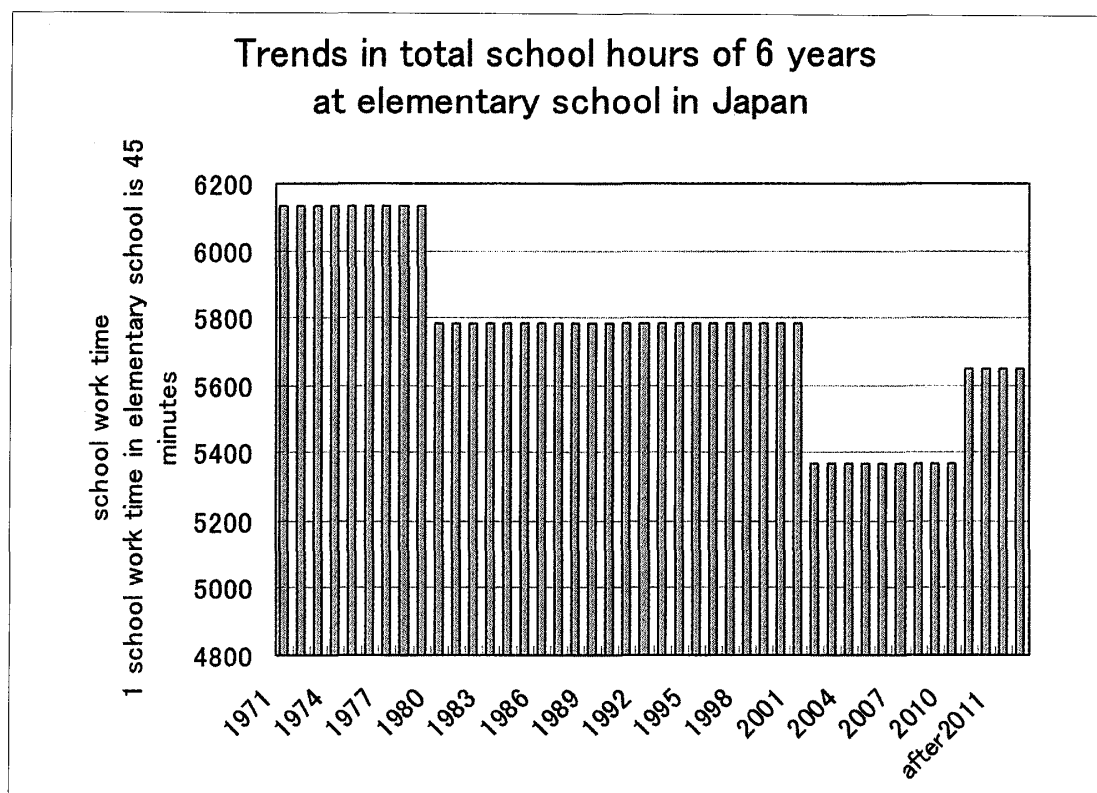


Figure 1. Trends in total school hours in elementary school in Japan

However, many schools will try to increase their own timetable according to the new Course of Study from next year. This will put Japanese schools in competition with each other.

I - 2. Moral education in Japan seems unchanging

After the discussion to raise the level of Japanese education, school hours for so-called main subjects like science, English and mathematics will increase. However, despite the voices for better moral education, it seems that little change will be carried out in the case of moral education. That means the fundamental attitude of reticence towards Japanese moral education will continue.

The above mentioned two different conclusions about moral education in the Japanese government itself represent two political tendencies: a realistic tendency towards moral education and a nationalistic tendency. Outside of the government there is a critical tendency against moral education in schools. These three tendencies make up the political movement of Japanese moral education after the Second World War. The critical tendency, which the Japan Teachers Union mainly represents, had a wide influence after the Second World War, but they have been losing their political power since the end of 20th century.

II. The Japanese school system

Before the explanation about the character of Japanese moral education, it will be useful to comment generally about Japanese education.

The Japanese educational system is called a 6.3.3.4 one-ladder system. The only exception is the case of combined high school and technical college, which provide 4 years education in total after the junior high school study (see Figure 2).

The Japanese school system is simply divided into 6.3.3.4 and has one ladder up to higher education.

The system is now beginning to change. There is an increasing number of schools offering unified 6 years secondary education, (197 schools in the year 2006, a 267 percent increase from 2001), and some schools have a system from kindergarten to university.

In Japanese education, MEXT controls the Course of Study, approves text books and ensures the quality of teachers. The centralized control of MEXT is also a characteristic of Japanese education. MEXT had a role in developing people into one nation and has assured the equally high quality of education all over Japan until now. School text books are free of charge for every pupil in compulsory education.

However, the system and centralized control bear the brunt of the criticism: what is now needed is a citizenship education, but not a nationalistic state-

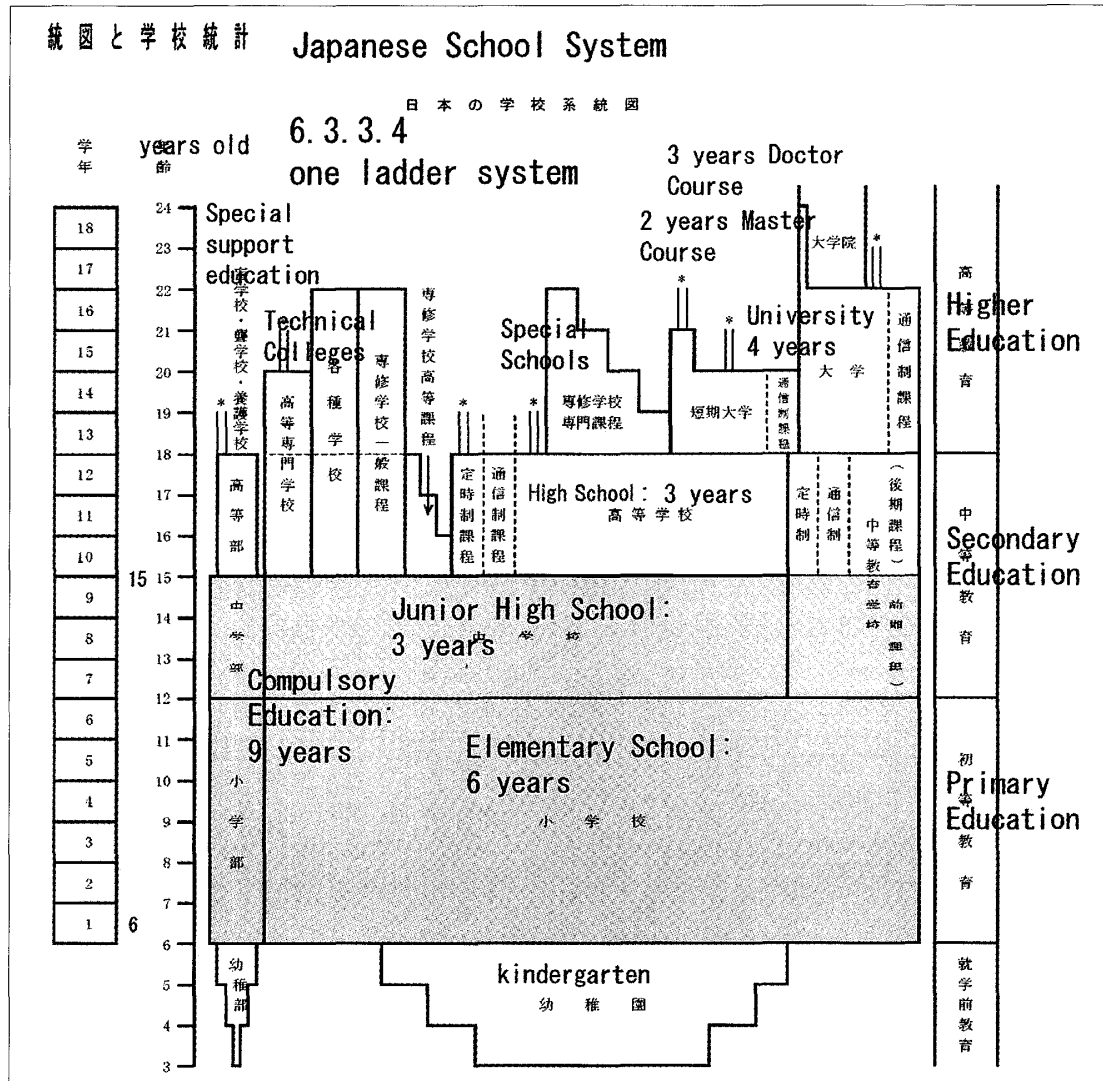


Figure 2. Japanese school system
(original figure by MEXT, translated by Kamizono)

controlled education, as in the Meiji era. Furthermore, it is attacked for being no longer adequate for the age of diversity of citizenship. It is criticized nowadays because of the increase of students who refuse to attend school, and because of the increase in bullying and suicide of students since 1985. To be educated in one ladder assures equality of education for all children, but to climb up one ladder children are forced into constant stressful competition among themselves. The one ladder system leads to a lack of alternatives.

III. Trends in Japanese education

The basic trend in Japanese education is the decrease in the number of children.

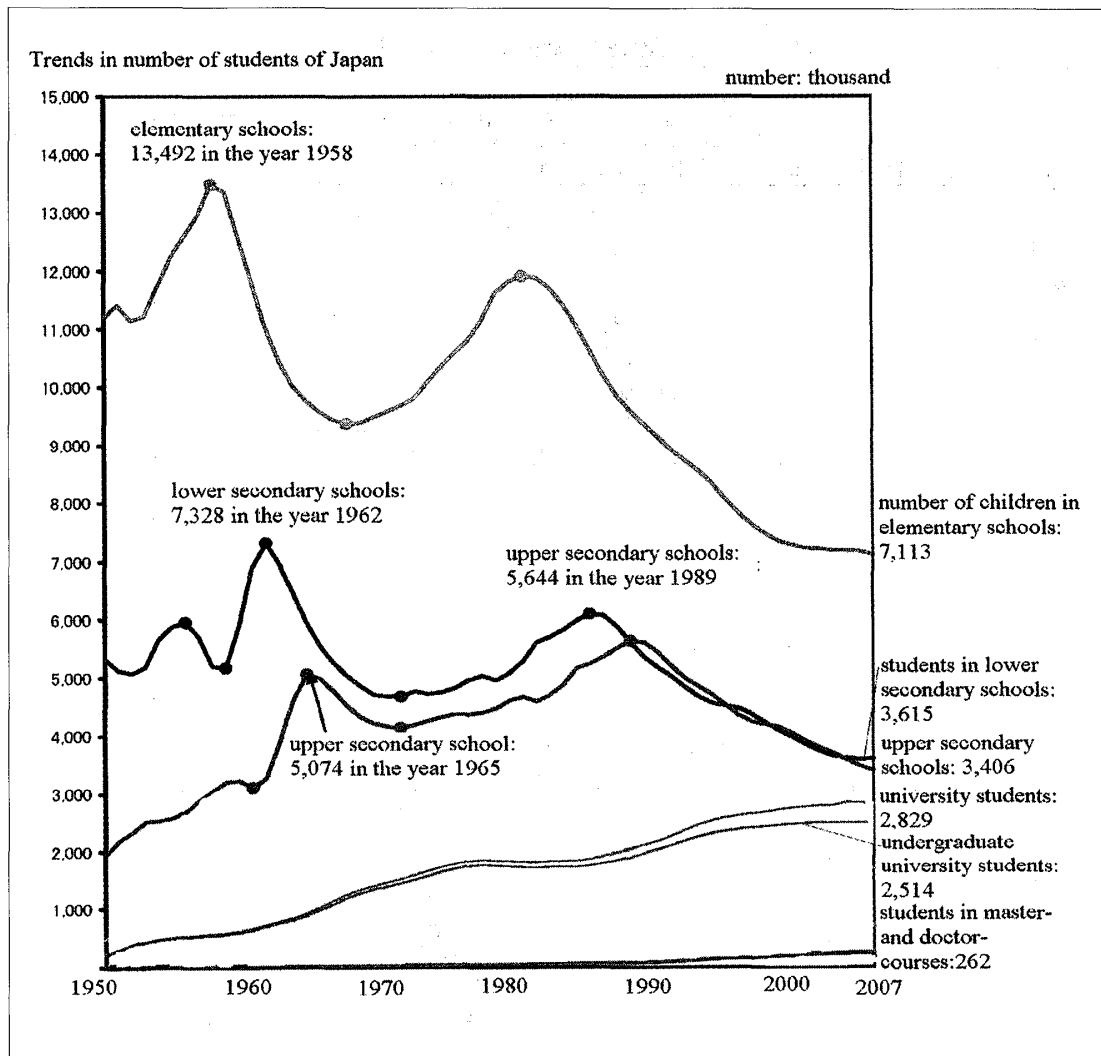


Figure 3. Trends in number of students in Japan
(original figures from MEXT, *gakkou kihon chousa*, amended by Kamizono)

The number of children in Japan is decreasing as is shown in Figure 3 in elementary and secondary schools, but the number of students in universities and postgraduate courses is increasing. That means the rate of advancement into higher education is increasing, the advancement rate in elementary and secondary education is already almost 100 percent.

The advancement rate of high school (Figure 4) became about 95 percent in the latter half of 1970's. (The advancement rate in England to upper secondary education of full-time students in 2003 was 72.3 percent (or 86.6 percent including part-time students). In Korea the advancement rate to upper secondary education of full-time students was 99.3 percent in 2004. In Japan the rate of full-time students in 2005 was 94.4 percent.)

The rapid rise in the volume of advancement ended in the second half of the 1970's in Japan. As the rapid economic development of Japan came to an end in

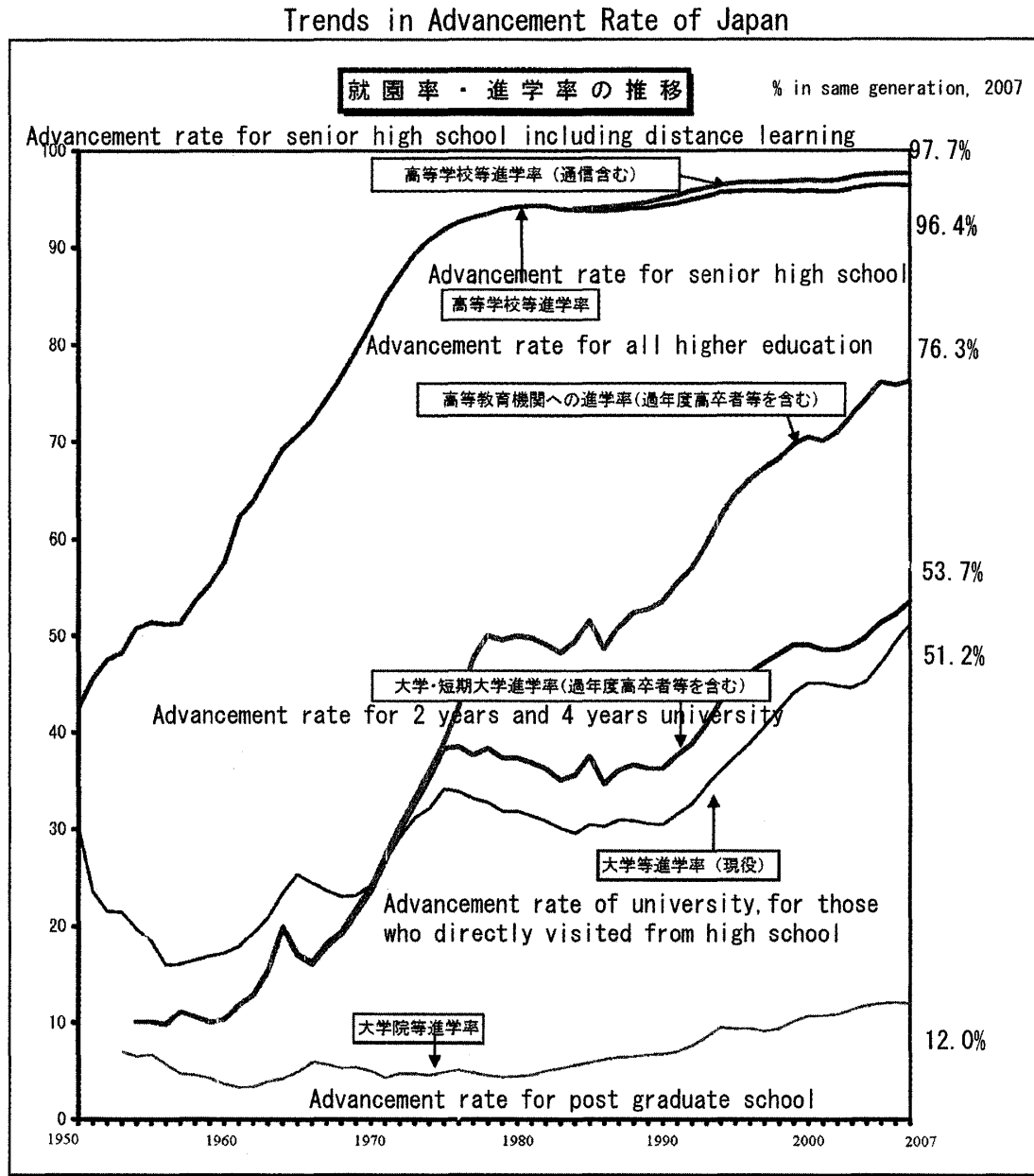


Figure 4. Trends in Advancement Rate of Japan
(original figures from MEXT, *gakkou kihon chousa*, amended by Kamizono)

the late-1970s, so the rapid development of trends in advancement came to an end at the same time. The late-1970s was a turning point for Japanese society as a whole. However the educational system did not - or could not - change. Education after the compulsory period no longer brings hope for advancement in social status by means of education, because graduation from high school has become standard. Many of the educational problems in Japan like violence in schools, bullying, suicide and refusal to attend school have increased in a kind of wave

mainly since the 1980s.

The dream for education seems to have shifted towards higher and more diverse education since the end of the 1990s. Advancement rates for university and other various higher institutions are increasing rapidly. From Figure 4 it could be said that there is a need for diverse higher education in Japan.

(The advancement rate of full-time students in Japan was 52.3 percent in 2005. The rate in England was 63.1 percent in 2002. The rate in Korea was 98.8 percent in 2004.)

IV. MEXT controls Japanese Education

By the explanation of MEXT, 9 years long Compulsory Education in Japan carries out general education according to the curriculum with national consensus. MEXT explains (<http://www.mext.go.jp/english/org/formal/16.htm>, October 2007): Elementary school aims to provide children aged between 6 and 12 with six years of general elementary education suited to the relevant stage of their physical and mental development. Lower secondary school aims to provide children between aged 12 and 15 with three years of general secondary education suited to the relevant stage of their physical and mental development, based on the education they have received in elementary school.

In upper secondary school vocational education is introduced. MEXT explains: Upper secondary school subjects include general education courses (ordinary courses, 72.9 percent of students attended this course in May 2002) and specialized subject courses (specialized courses) such as agriculture, industry, business, fisheries, home economics, nursing, information, welfare, science-mathematics and English language.

MEXT determines fundamental standards for schools from kindergarten to upper secondary schools to formulate their educational curricula so that a standardized education is available anywhere in Japan. Specifically, the objectives, goals, curricula, number of educational weeks and course subjects at each different stage of school are specified under the School Educational Law. Furthermore, the objective and contents of each course are stipulated under the Courses of Study. In accordance with this, each school has been organizing and implementing its own distinctive curricula, taking into consideration the conditions of the local community and the school itself.

MEXT especially controls the stage of compulsory education. In the year 2005, 99.0 percent of elementary schools and 93.3 percent of lower secondary schools were state, prefectural or municipal. Only 1.0 percent of elementary schools and 6.7 percent of junior high schools were private. At the stage of upper secondary education 70.1 percent of high schools were prefectural or municipal. However, 79.6 percent of kindergartens, 92.7 percent of 2-years long colleges and 73.7 percent of 4-years long universities were private.

The task of schools and local boards of education nowadays is to improve "academic ability" in subjects and promote "moral education". The importance of moral education is emphasized by MEXT as one of the main goals of education. Psychological bullying, suicide and aggressiveness of children are problems awaiting a solution in schools.

V. Moral education in Japan

Japanese moral education is based on the Fundamental Law of Education, the School Educational Law and the Course of Study in its aim and teaching items of contents. Moral education is obligatory in Japan for public schools for 9 years of compulsory education once a week. In high school there is an optional subject of "ethics and society".

For moral lessons one school hour (45 minutes in elementary school and 50 minutes in secondary school) per week is assigned and 35 school hours per year. Because almost all pupils study in a public (state, prefectural or municipal) school, moral education is carried out for almost all pupils.

The Course of Study of Japan explain that moral education must be carried out throughout the whole of education, and the school hour for moral lesson stands at the center of moral education. The Course of Study shows the moral values, which ought to be taught in moral lessons, and classifies them into four areas:

1. Matters relating to oneself,
2. The relationship of oneself to others,
3. Matters related chiefly to nature and sublime things,
4. Matters concerning the group and society.

For example the first item about moral education in the Course of Study for junior high school in classification of matters relating to oneself is "to acquire a preferable life style, improve mental and physical health, maintain a moderate and temperate mind, and live a harmonious life". The Course of Study gives a great amount of freedom to the teacher on how to organize the subject matter of each item of moral value.

VI. Control of moral education by MEXT is restricted

MEXT controls moral education by means of the Course of Study and by guidance through local (prefectural and municipal) boards of education. Control of MEXT is restricted in comparison with other subjects. However, MEXT is active in the area of moral education. The direct activity of MEXT is summed up by the following 3 points:

1. Making booklets for pupils in compulsory education entitled "Kokoro no Noto" (Notebook of the Mind) and distributed to all children.
2. Supporting a school to teach morals together with local citizens with rich life

experiences or experts in various fields.

3. Implementation of a project to promote rich experimental activities of pupils at school.

Moral education in Japan has, unlike other subjects, no textbook officially approved by the Ministry of Education. What the Ministry of Education provides are supplementary teaching materials.

To establish moral education as a subject needs 3 factors newly in the Japanese school curriculum:

1. To write textbooks
2. To supply teaching staffs
3. To evaluate pupils

The School Education Law stipulates that pupils at all elementary, lower and upper secondary schools are required to use textbooks. The textbooks to be used must be either authorized by MEXT or those whose copyright MEXT owns. Textbooks are written and edited by private sector publishers, and the Minister approves them in accordance with the Course of Study and the Standard for Textbook Authorization through deliberations by the Textbook Authorization and Research Council. During the process inspections are made to ascertain whether the description is objective and impartial, whether the description is free from error, and whether proper educational considerations have been made.

When it comes to the evaluation of moral education, MEXT says that the morality of children should not be ranked numerically, based on a moral lesson. The results of moral lessons have no bearing on further exams, e.g. entrance examination. This reticence regarding Japanese moral education may seem strange in the light of voices stressing the importance of moral education. This reticence came from reflections about education during the Second World War.

VII. Moral education in other East Asian countries

Other East Asian countries like Korea and China also set aside school hours for moral lessons.

In Korea and China an authorized moral textbook is used, a teacher for moral education teaches, evaluation is carried out, and there is an examination for moral education.

In Korea moral education appeared in 1962 as an area of study and became an official subject in 1973. Moral education in Korea continues for 12 years. There is a teacher for moral education, there is a national textbook for moral education, and there is an examination and evaluation of moral education. In 1st and 2nd school year moral education is done as an integrated subject under the name "just life". From 3rd to 6th and from 9th to 10th school year 34 school hours are allocated

for moral education. In 7th and 8th school year 68 hours are allotted for moral education, and after that in 11th and 12th school year students can choose "ethics of citizen", "ethics and thought" or "traditional ethics". In Korean moral education character education, democratic citizenship education, preparing unity education, and national safety education are important themes. Moral education in Korea seems now on the point of accepting diversity, and 5 to 7 moral textbooks will appear in the coming several years.

In China moral education is a primary subject. Moral education in elementary school is based on promoting the "5 loves" (love for home country, for people, for labor, for science, and for public property). Moral education in China is combined with political education, especially in the junior high school stage. The area of moral education is combined with public morals, law education, political education and education of thought. China seems also to be moving towards acceptance of variety within the limits of the political system. Already there are plural textbooks for moral education and moral education is divided sometimes into psychological areas and daily life.

When I gave a lecture about a Japanese moral education in China in 2004 a question was raised: "In Japanese moral education is a child not evaluated by what he/she did? Are actions not important in Japanese moral education?" Naturally, the deeds of a pupil are important as well in Japanese moral education. However moral lessons in a classroom are aimed at building up a motivation and an attitude for praxis, and not at demanding a specific action. In Japanese moral lessons a great deal of importance is attached to building up judgment, reasoning and feelings of morality in pupils.

VIII. Historical background of Reticence in Japanese moral education

Until the time of the Second World War, moral education in Japan played a dominant role to integrate nation and emperor. Moral education was combined with ceremonies to worship the emperor and with Shintoism, at the top of which stands the emperor of Japan. Moral education was once a primary subject in Japan at that time. There was an authorized textbook of moral education, evaluation about morality, and a teacher for moral education, who sometimes had a position in the army. Pupils were told to bow down deeply to a photograph of the emperor in a stone box by the main gate of a school. A novelist (Shimomura Kojin) told a story about a young man (Story of Jiro), who collided with a moral teacher and got a bad grade in moral education, so he could not proceed to higher education, because the evaluation of moral education was a primary requirement. In a museum of a small town (Kuchinotsu) of Nagasaki prefecture there is a moral textbook, which was given to a winner as a prize in a sports competition. To possess personally a moral textbook was an honor.

Immediately after the occupation by GHQ (General Headquarters) in 1945, GHQ banned the teaching of moral education, geography and history, and the textbooks of those subjects were abandoned.

From 1945 to 1957 there was no title of moral education in Japanese schools. There was a description about qualities and moralities as a citizen in a textbook of social studies. Moral education was established as a special school hour in the curriculum of Japan officially in September 1958.

When moral education began and proclaimed in 1958 there were strong objections against the restoration of moral lessons. The Japan Teachers Union strongly opposed moral education under the slogan "do not send our pupils to the battlefield once more". The Japanese Educational Research Association was also critical about setting a special school hour in the curriculum. For example, Hiroshima University's Osada Arata, one of the most influential philosophers of education, recognized a need for moral education but opposed a special hour for moral education in the curriculum. Hiroshima Prefecture had one of the lowest uptake levels of moral lessons until the end of the 20th century. Many teachers in Japan avoided moral lesson even after 1958. Pupils read books in the library, played sports or did work for a main subject in the hour for the moral lesson. Therefore, the main concern of MEXT at that time was to raise the rate of enforcement of moral lessons in each school.

IX. Reticence in moral education

As a result of discussion and political balance in the late 1950's moral education in Japan is enforced but not controlled by government. Furthermore, this reticence looks set to continue in the light of recent discussion about moral education. The following 4 points are fundamental in Japanese moral education.

1. Education in public (state, prefectural and municipal) schools must be secular and education for a particular religion is prohibited. Moral education and religion are not combined in Japan.
2. No authorized textbook of moral education is prepared by government, in order to avoid a national control of moral education.
3. Teachers must have prudence in evaluating children in the area of moral education. Moral education and evaluation of individual pupils are not combined.
4. There is no special moral teacher in Japan. All the classroom teachers carry out moral education. In the process of teacher training it is obligatory to learn about moral education, but there are no specially-trained teachers for moral education.

This reticence about moral education is a characteristic of moral education in Japan. The background of this reticence is a reflection of the experience of war.

As a consequence of this reticence teachers can choose or make up their own

teaching material in moral lessons. A teacher can choose and use a book, published by private sector publishers for moral education, use a TV programme broadcast for a moral lesson by NHK (the national broadcasting corporation), choose a social topic in a newspaper, design his/her own teaching material, use material supplied by the local school board, make use of a folk story, use an invited speaker from the community, carry out an organized experience of pupils as a teaching material for moral education, and so on. As a result of reticence teachers have found diverse possibilities of moral education, and there are many kinds of moral education taking place in schools today.

Reticence about moral education in Japan not only derives from the past, but will also bring a positive meaning for future.

1. Teachers need to judge or make up teaching material for moral education. That means moral education requires a high quality of teacher, who is conscious of what to teach. In the area of moral education teachers cannot be merely transmitters of knowledge. Teachers are required to organize learning as a whole personal involvement process of children. Without a high quality of a teacher no moral education will be effective.
2. Teachers must think about how to cope with tasks according to the needs of children, because suitable tasks for children's needs could differ according to geographical area, chronological period, each community, and the children themselves. Without reference to needs and suitable construction of tasks, moral lessons will be neither useful nor interesting for pupils. To cope with the consciousness of children and find an appropriate task for them can combine the moral learning and life of pupils.
3. As a consequence of these moral education coped to tasks of children, diversity of moral education will be realized. Teacher will be able to tune in to the diversity of pupils by various teaching materials, methods and themes. Common moral tasks carried out in a group and respecting differences of each other support developing moralities of pupils through communications between them.

What is required for moral education today is not control. What are required are clinical abilities of teachers to cope with tasks and needs of children. With cooperation of various staff members from many areas, clinical moral tasks of pupils in this and the coming age will find their way to a solution. There is a need for full support for teachers by researchers and a government. Theory of moral education is also required to support the clinical field of moral education. Reticence in the educational system could be a realistic and effective approach to managing a solution to tasks in moral education.

(This paper is based on the presentation at the Seminar of Comparative Moral Education in the Institute of Education, London University, on 7th November 2007)