Review Article

The Strange Child: Education and the Psychology of Patriotism in Recessionary Japan

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At a time when academics are pressured to research and publish monographs to schedules defined by tenure track or tenure review requirements, it is a pleasure to read an ethnographic study that is the outcome of an extended period of field research and writing. The Strange Child, Andrea Gevurtz Arai’s study of a pivotal transformation in Japanese national educational ideologies, spans a two-decade era bookended by the economic downturn of the 1990s and a moral panic about Japanese youth following the “Kobe Child Killings” of 1997, and the recession-era educational and employment experiences of youth coming of age in the second decade of the 21st century. This study draws on field research and interviews with a remarkably wide range of stakeholders in the Japanese education system, undertaken in two periods corresponding to these bookends – from 1999-2001 in Tokyo, Saitama, Kawasaki and Kobe, and from 2009-2014 in Yokohama, Kobe and Kochi.

The book proceeds along two overlapping tracks. The first, theoretical track covers a critical change in the educational philosophies governing Japanese schooling from the late 1990s into the first decade of the 21st century. This is a yet-to-be completed transformation from a credentialist philosophy promoting values of dependency, homogeneity, discipline and equality in conformity with the developmentalist goals of late 20th century Japan, to a neo-liberal philosophy in which the state is stepping back from its prior role of educational guidance of young citizens into scripted life roles, leaving individuals themselves to assume the risks and responsibilities of self-education and self-development in the uncertain market conditions of a 21st century globalizing society. Central to this change are contested understandings of and institutional responses to the “strange child”, the Japanese child seemingly transformed in the imaginations of parents, education officials, teachers and psychologists from the disciplined, docile, obedient inhabitant of Japan’s once celebrated school system into a disorderly, possibly even homicidal denizen of the “collapsed classrooms” and increasingly unruly schools of late 20th century Japan. In the striking words of one teacher and edu-

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cation theorist interviewed by Arai, Kawakami Ryoichi, this is a child whose very body has changed, no longer responsive to pedagogical guidance, so that even “words are no longer absorbed by the body” (Arai 2016, p.6).

Chapters One to Four cover the conflicting theorizations of the child problem in Japanese schooling during the late 1990’s to the turn of the 21st century, and the gradual articulation of a psychologized, and individualized approach to “educating the heart of the child” by Jungian psychologist Kawai, Hayao as a means for overcoming this problem. This seemingly progressive educational philosophy, with its focus upon fostering individual emotional development and life skills in a less demanding, less competitive curriculum adapted to globalization, also became, on Arai’s telling, central to government education reforms to increase individual independence and responsibility for education. This was in line with a growing neo-liberal conception of governance and educational policy which “displaces the onus of responsibility for social troubles and individual futures onto the populace, in particular the family and the home” with the aim of engineering a more individualized national character in tune with globalization and the requirements for a renewed patriotism.

Chapter Four outlines one of the main and ultimately failed challenges to these reforms, by a study group of teachers led by the aforementioned Kawakami Ryoichi, who were critical of both the latest reform efforts and of the excessively “westernized” aspects of the post-war education system. Ultimately, Arai concludes that neither Kawai and his Ministry of Education allies nor Kawakami and his study group came to grips with the effects of an ongoing recession, including financial and employment insecurity within families, upon the expectations and behavior of children. These children, she notes, are often very aware of the mismatch between their education and the rapidly changing society they will enter as adults.

The second track of the book is developed through Chapters 3-6, out of a fascinating series of ethnographic observations of schools adapting to the new educational reforms, with their emphasis on individual psychological development and relaxed curricula. There are surprises in Arai’s descriptions of the unruly and noisy atmosphere in the elementary school classes she observed, testifying to the destabilizing effects of “recessionary conditions” upon post-war national values which could no longer be dependably absorbed and reproduced by children themselves. Chapter Five details the largely successful efforts of the cram school industry to insert itself into the educational management of children’s lives as government educational policy has seemingly divested itself of this responsibility. This chapter is filled with telling observations of cram schools’ promotional strategies and classroom practices, and of the effects of long hours of cram school study on children’s family and weekday school life. It is also punctuated with interviews with anxious parents trying to procure the best educational advantages for their children in an increasingly uncertain, competitive and unequal educational environment.

Chapter Six supplies a poignant coda to the book, consisting of interviews with and observations of the lives of young people who came of age in the period covered by Arai’s research. These young people are now having to negotiate their life choices and vocations in accordance with the new emphasis upon individual responsibility and self-development. The old life scripts that guided previous generations of youth into their vocations no longer hold, as young people must second-guess an unstable job market’s demands and craft their skills and knowledge accordingly, or seek alternative, freer ways of living in a “reverse migration” from the metropole to the regions.
This is a rich and rewarding study, its theoretical insights well borne out by extensive ethnographic observation. I have just one minor quibble. It is curious that a book discussing the “retraction of state institutions from key public support” (Arai 2016, p.17) and a corresponding individualization and “liberalization of risks” (Arai 2016, p.153) has nothing to say about some of the pioneering studies of individualization, “risk society” and second or compressed modernity by German scholars such as Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and South Korean scholars such as Kyung-sup Chang (2010). Some reference to research by the latter could have provided the basis for a brief comparison with South Korea, where a parallel process of individualization appears to be underway in family and educational life.

References