

Building a Nation through Education: The Shift from *Terakoya* to *Shōgakkō* in Meiji Japan

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of Japan's elementary education system from the decentralized, class-based *terakoya* schools of the Edo period to the modern, state-controlled *shōgakkō* system established during the Meiji era. It traces the ideological, institutional, and policy shifts that accompanied Japan's rapid modernization following the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The study explores how the Meiji leadership, driven by the need to build a strong and unified nation-state, introduced the 1872 *Gakusei* (Education Order), which laid the foundation for a centralized and universal school system modeled after Western educational frameworks. It analyzes the challenges of implementation, the influence of foreign advisors and educational philosophies, and the balance sought between Western knowledge and traditional Japanese moral values. Special attention is given to key reforms, including the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education and the role of moral instruction in shaping national identity.

After the fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate and the onset of the Meiji Restoration (1868), Japan underwent a profound transformation in its educational framework. The *terakoya* schools, originally informal institutions established for common people during the Edo period, were ubiquitous across towns and villages, numbering over 40,000. With the advent of the Meiji period, these schools underwent a systematic amalgamation, forming the basis of modern elementary schools (*shōgakkō*). This article explores the evolution of these institutions, highlighting how *terakoya* and existing warrior schools laid the groundwork for Japan's modern education system. The pivotal year of 1872 marked the introduction of a completely new, nationwide education system that enforced elementary school education for the first time in Japanese history. By examining the amalgamation process, the challenges faced, and the enduring impact of this educational reform, this paper sheds light on the historical roots of Japan's contemporary education system and its broader implications for societal modernization during the Meiji era.

The article concludes by examining the long-term impact of these developments on Japan's educational trajectory, culminating in the postwar reforms of 1947. Through this historical lens, the article reveals how education became a primary vehicle for Japan's modernization and a foundation of its contemporary society.

Introduction:

The feudal society which had existed for more than 260 years in Japan came to an end with the Meiji Restoration. The whole nation was unified and ruled by a newly formed government and the *shogunate* and clan institutions were abolished. As a result of this change, there was also a great reformation in education. The earlier educational concepts were transformed, and the school system and educational policies became radically new. In the Edo period both the *shogunate* and the several clans had established and administered their own respective schools. There was no coordination between them, because the

feudal system did not permit nation-wide educational planning. The common people provided small, private popular schools for their children to study reading, writing and the use of the abacus. While the schools for the common people were encouraged by the *shogunate* and clans, they did not try to reorganize them into an official educational system of the people. During the Meiji period, the *shogunate* collapsed and various clans were abolished as a result of the unification of the country. With these changes the warrior and popular schools were reorganized under a new educational policy.

The government held to the ideal of the equality of the four classes of society-warriors, peasants, artisans, and merchants and did not distinguish between the children of warriors or commoners. They made it their clear policy to establish an educational system in which all classes were regarded as citizens. In order to develop Japan as a modern nation, the leaders believed that they had to construct a system of national education so that individual citizens could develop their respective abilities sufficiently. Immediately after the Meiji Restoration the national leaders desired to make as rapid a transition to a modern state as possible through the education of the citizenry, and in this way establish Japan as an independent nation. In order to achieve this goal, they thought that they must establish school where the youth could learn the necessary knowledge and techniques of the new age. At that time, they observed the school systems and conditions of education in the most advanced countries of Europe and America and there acquired knowledge of the methods and organization of national education. Investigation into Western education began after 1808. In 1870 a system of schools organized into three stages, elementary, secondary or middle and university was set up. The fields of study in the university were divided into the five faculties of pedagogy, letters, law, science and medicine, following the structure of Western universities.

Proclamation of Government Order of Education:

In 1872 the *Gakusei* or Government Order of Education was proclaimed and defined in detail the school system. This proclamation made it possible to instrument a unified educational programme for the whole nation. After the division of the stages of education into elementary, secondary and university, a system of school districts or wards was adopted. According to the plan that was formulated, the whole country was divided into 53760 elementary school districts. In each district there was to be one elementary school. Likewise, there were to be 256 middle school districts with one school each and then eight university districts. In this educational proposal lay the future development of Japan schools. Various types of elementary schools were planned, and besides the usual middle schools there were plans for commercial and agricultural schools on the secondary level. In addition, night schools were proposed for these students who had to work during the day. With respect to college education, there were medical, law and arts and

crafts schools apart from the universities. These schools never existed previously in Japan. They indicate the positive intention on the part of the leaders to establish schools comparable to those of Western.

After Meiji Restoration, Education Order was put forward; the government announced its fundamental educational policy and objectives. According to this policy all citizens had to follow a way of life which would develop them educationally and thus promote industry and commerce. The acquirement of knowledge and cultivation of talent are essential to a successful life. By education men learn to acquire property, practise learned professions, perform public services, and make themselves independent of the help of their fellow men. Schools are designed to provide this essential education. In their various capacities they are intended to supply to all classes of men the knowledge necessary for a successful life. Although schools have existed for many centuries in Japan, yet those that have been provided by the government have been confined to the military retainers and to the upper classes. For the lower classes of society, and for women, learning were regarded as beyond their ken, and, if acquired at all, was of a limited character.

Even among the higher classes, the character of education was defective. Under the pretext of acquiring knowledge for the benefit of the state, much time was spent in the useless occupation of writing poetry and composing elegant maxims, instead of learning what would be for their own benefit or that of the state. Recently an improved educational system has been formed, and the methods of teaching remodelled. It is planned that henceforth education shall not be confined to a few, but shall be so diffused that there may not be a village with an ignorant family, nor a family with an ignorant member. Since the schools were to be for the whole citizenry, a liberal system was created based on the equality of the four classes of the nation.

Each person was to receive at least an elementary school education. Those with superior abilities among the graduates were permitted to proceed for further study in the middle school. Those selected from the middle school graduates could enter the universities for advanced study. The Government Order of Education of 1872 envisioned a school system with a single line of organization, replacing the double line (for the warrior and the people) which characterized education of the Edo period. This change constitutes the most important characteristic of education since Meiji. The principal of this liberated school system can be observed running through Japanese education to the present day.

Development of Modern School System:

The elementary schools were the first to be launched under the new school system. It was planned that after completing the elementary schools, the middle schools and universities could be arranged. But since

these schools were also provided for in the Government Order of Education, some middle schools, professional schools and universities were also set up. However, the actual work of establishing the schools was concentrated in the elementary schools. This was the result of the belief that without completing the elementary schools, the first stage of education, they could not complete middle schools and institutions of higher education.

This policy was not only important for the development of schools, but it had great significance for the modernization of Japanese life, culture and industry. If the policy of expanding school education through the founding of elementary schools had not been successful, the way of life and culture which can presently be seen among the Japanese people would probably not have been possible. To undertake such a school system, it was thought necessary not merely to learn from the modern schools of the West, but to invite educators from the advanced Western countries as leaders in carrying out the new educational policies and plans. In the fifty or sixty years after putting the new educational system into force, the number of foreign teachers who worked in Japan increased greatly. Most of them worked as teachers in the colleges and professional schools and guided the students. At that time students were also dispatched overseas to study modern American and European science and techniques.

Due to the expense, however, the number of overseas students was very limited. As time passed, it was generally recognized as more urgent for the sake of modernizing Japan to invite foreign teachers to Japan and to entrust the education of students to them. Therefore, the latter policy was adopted. Further, as an advisory educational administration, the Ministry of Education invited the American, David Murray, to Japan in 1873. He remained in Japan for five years giving advice on the implementation of the educational code.

Components of Educational System:

Under the new educational system, a new curriculum was adopted and the educational methods were also reformed. Subjects which had not been taught before were instituted, and materials and tools for education were modernized. The methods for constructing a modernized curriculum were modelled after European and American schools, and necessary materials and tools for teaching were introduced from those countries. Textbooks were also important. Those used in the elementary schools were mostly translations or adaptations of European and American books. Many texts using these materials were published. In the middle schools and above, foreign textbooks were at first imported, or they were published verbatim. Soon, however, in the middle schools and universities, students used translated textbooks or books written by Japanese. It is obvious that such textbooks performed a great work in publicizing Western culture and learning.

In the classroom, tables and chairs which were originally European or American came to be produced by Japanese. Black-boards and wall maps were also necessary in the classroom. These were first produced in Japan as supplies for the elementary schools. In this fashion, modern education began to function in the 1880's. The people found this new form of education attractive as a kind of cultural enlightenment, and they gradually permitted their children to enter the new schools. Thus, the schools of the Edo period had been reformed with the Western schools as the model, but over against this movement there was a demand from the time of the Meiji Restoration that education also be reorganized on the basis of the Japanese educational tradition. This was made clear in the Principles of Education of 1879 which claimed the support of the will of the Emperor. This text criticized the tendencies in education after the Restoration and stressed the importance of moral education. It states: The core of education lies in the clear teaching of benevolence, responsibility, loyalty, fidelity and in mastering knowledge and the arts so that one can serve the people. This is the basic principle given by our ancestors and national literature which is commonly accepted for the instruction of all, high or low.

There have been a great many people who value only knowledge and techniques which are simply the products of cultural enlightenment, and who do not keep their morals but destroy good manners and customs. This is the result of the fact that the first principle of the Restoration was to destroy old customs and seek for knowledge in the world. Although the advantages of Western culture were adopted and resulted in spectacular effects for the moment, once it leads to a tendency to neglect benevolence, responsibility, loyalty and fidelity and becomes merely a competition to introduce Western manners, there is fear that in the future no one will know responsibility between the Emperor and his subjects. This is not the true motive of education in our nation.

Therefore, henceforth, we shall make clear the virtues of benevolence, responsibility, loyalty and fidelity based on the precepts of our ancestors. In the teaching of morality, the Confucian morality will be primary. Men will furthermore respect faithfulness and good manners. After that, learning in each field should be promoted according to the ability of the person. Thus, both morals and knowledge will be attained. Centring on the principle of attaining righteousness, education will be provided throughout the land. In that way the independent spirit of our country shall never be disgraced in the world.

The Bureau of Education revised the educational principles according to this policy of promoting moral education in the elementary schools and the middle schools. Moral cultivation was placed at the head of the curriculum. Since the teachers fulfilled an important function in the promotion of moral education, the Bureau of Education issued the Memorandum for Elementary School Teachers. It required teachers to

make moral education primary, to this way they attempted to advance the national character of Japan by combining Western knowledge and techniques with Oriental morality.

Reforms and National Policies:

The Government Order of Education of 1872 provided the first national educational systems in Japan, but it was a theoretical scheme based on the Western European educational system. Consequently, many problems arose with the implementation of this policy. Hence, the government altered the school system to meet the real conditions in the Education Law which was published in 1879 and the earlier code was abolished. This new educational policy left control and administration of the schools to the various localities, but because of that in some places the enrolment in the elementary schools decreased. Consequently, in the next year, 1880, they changed the Education Law and adopted a centrally controlled administrative policy. Later in 1885 when the government was reorganized and a cabinet instituted, Arinari Mori (1847-89) was appointed as the first minister of education.

At that time, it was expected that the constitution would be promulgated in 1889, Diet members would be determined by election, and the Diet would be convened in 1890. The education minister Mori carried out a complete reform of the educational system in 1886, and he constructed the foundation for the Japanese school system which lasted for a comparatively long period of time thereafter. For this reform he formulated the Elementary School Act to set in order the elementary schools which were the basis of the national education system. He published the provisions concerning middle schools, the Imperial Universities and normal schools for training of teachers. Thus, the modernization of the schools after 1872 came to a conclusion with the establishment of the provisions for the four types of schools.

During this time the national policy of enriching and strengthening the country (Fukoku Kyohei) was established. The thought of elevating Japan to a first-class nation among the nations of the world was predominant, and the attempt was made to strengthen this programme by means of the newly created school system. It was thought that as the modernization of such a nation progressed, the structure of a strong national education to make the country prosper would not be complete unless there was added also a reform in the substance of education which goes along with the external form of the system. The education minister thought that together with cultivating the knowledge and skills necessary for modern life, one must make efforts also in the education of the spirit through establishing the policy of moral education.

However, there were at that time various view points on how to carry out education in morals, and there were disputes over the establishment of that policy. It was asserted that the basic moral concept in the

spiritual education of the people must be firmly determined through Imperial Rescript. The Prime Minister, Aritomo Yamagata, also, agreed with this, and the Director of the Legislative Bureau, Kowashi Inoue, was a central figure in drafting the Imperial Rescript Through the co-operation of the Confucian scholar, Nagazane Motoda, Imperial Rescript on Education was formulated and proclaimed on the September 30, 1890. This Rescript on Education was for many years thereafter respected clarifying the fundamental policy of national education.

Hundreds of exegetical texts were published concerning the Imperial Rescript. The whole text of the Rescript was included in textbooks and interpretations were added. On ceremonial days the principal would assemble the students and read the Rescript, so that the students might understand thoroughly its policy. From about the year 1894 industrial production in Japan began to be modernized. Consequently, is became a problem as to what policies should be set up for technical education. The education minister, Kowshi Inoue, at that time endeavoured to reform the educational system in view of business needs and particularly with progress in industrialization in mind. He also sought to found new schools. Later, complete reconstruction of the educational system was carried out, and within several after 1899, the modern schools of Japan were completely organized. For about forty years after this, national education progressed according to the system set up at this time.

The elementary schools were divided into "common" and "higher", each four years. Those who completed six years of primary education were permitted to enter middle school. The middle schools were designated as middle school for boys, higher girls' school, business schools, and continuation schools for workers in industry. For higher education there were colleges and the Imperial Universities. Various types of professional schools were also established. Schools for the training of teachers were divided into two groups, (1) those training teachers for elementary schools, and (2) higher normal schools, those training teachers for the middle schools. In this way the organization of schools was completed at the start of this century.

Enrolment in the elementary schools reached more than 90%. For more than forty years after this the schools gradually expanded from the highest to the lowest classes of society, and they fulfilled their functions as schools for the entire nation. Following conditions after the First World War, reforms were made in the educational systems of each nation. In Japan, after 1917, an educational conference was held in the cabinet where plans were made for educational reform. Accordingly, after 1919, the expansion of school proceeded.

The elementary schools of that time included six years of compulsory education and the enrolment reached 99%. From about this time those who advanced to higher studies increased in number. Also, the

number of those who entered into the various middle schools greatly increased, so that middle schools were expanded and supplementary education for business was built up. At this time, particularly, higher education was emphasized, and the former policy of not recognizing any university other than the Imperial Universities was changed and other public and private universities were recognized. Consequently, many private universities were established. Professional schools also increased. Thus, the problem of the expansion of the schools came to centre on middle and higher education.

After the period of the growth of schools, Japan became one of the countries with universal education. Not only school education but social education also was put in order in this period. This indicates that education expanded into spheres outside of the schools, too. After 1932 a policy of strong control over education was adopted. The school system was not particularly altered but the practice of education gradually adopted a wartime character. After 1941 it became an emergency education system. The war ended in 1945, and in 1947 education was reformed. The so-called 6-3-3-4 system was established with nine years of elementary (6 years) and lower secondary (3 years) education being made compulsory. The practice of education in those schools underwent conspicuous change and constitutes present-day education in Japan.

Conclusion:

This article explores the historical transformation of elementary education in Japan from the informal and community-based *terakoya* schools of the Edo period to the centralized, compulsory *shōgakkō* system instituted during the Meiji era. The study situates this educational evolution within the broader socio-political upheavals triggered by the Meiji Restoration of 1868, which marked the end of the Tokugawa shogunate and the beginning of Japan's rapid modernization and state-building efforts. In the Edo period, education was decentralized, with domainal and class-based institutions serving different strata of society. *Terakoya* schools, while offering basic literacy and numeracy, lacked official structure and state oversight.

The Meiji government's introduction of the 1872 *Gakusei* (Government Order of Education) represented the first national attempt to establish a unified school system aimed at producing educated, loyal, and industrious citizens. Drawing heavily on Western models—particularly those of the United States, France, and Germany—the new system included compulsory elementary education, teacher training institutes, and university-level instruction. This article examines the implementation of these reforms, highlighting the role of foreign advisors, translated textbooks, and imported educational technologies. It also explores the tension between Western influences and Japan's desire to maintain its cultural identity, especially through the promotion of Confucian moral values and the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education.

Further analysis is given to subsequent revisions of the educational system, such as the 1886 reforms under Education Minister Mori Arinori, which institutionalized the school hierarchy and promoted centralized control. The expansion of education into industrial and vocational domains in the late Meiji and Taishō periods is also discussed, as well as the rise of moral and militaristic indoctrination leading up to World War II.

Finally, the article reflects on the enduring legacy of Meiji educational reforms, culminating in the 1947 postwar reorganization of the Japanese school system under the 6-3-3-4 structure. It argues that the foundation laid during the Meiji period was instrumental in shaping Japan's national identity, social mobility, and economic development, and continues to influence the structure and values of Japanese education to this day.

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