

The Literacy Movement in Japan

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THE UNITED NATIONS HAS consistently tried to tackle the problem of literacy since the 1940s. Designating 1990 as "The Year of International Literacy," it called all nations to a greater commitment to literacy activities for the following ten years. Needless to say, Paulo Freire has had a great influence on the worldwide expansion of the literacy movement. It is his thesis that illiteracy is not a cause but a result of poverty and social oppression. He further suggests that a critical literacy movement will encourage illiterate people to awaken to the reality of their oppression. In this short paper, I intend to show that Freire's theory and practice are completely applicable to the literacy movement in Japan.

Japan is known as an economically developed country. Boasting a high literacy rate (99.9 percent), the Japanese government responded to a United Nations investigation in 1964 by saying that there was no literacy problem in Japan (Hirasawa 1983, 111-112). At present, there seems to be no indication of a decline in the enthusiasm for education by Japanese parents nor in the intense competition of the entrance examination system. Still, in this educationally-confused society, many people have been left out in the cold. It is possible that the literacy movement among the educationally marginalized 0.1 percent of the people will be a catalyst in putting right some of the flaws in Japanese society and its educational system.

The present literacy movement in Japan can be grouped into the four following categories:

1. the Buraku Liberation Movement
2. the junior high night schools
3. the literacy classes for Korean mothers in Japan (*Omoni Hakkyō*)
4. various other groups.

In the following sections, by making brief references to the history and current conditions of each of these four groups, I will clarify what it means to be deprived of literacy in Japan and what is required to obtain it. I will also consider what Japanese society and its schools have lost by ignoring 0.1 percent of its population.

LITERACY CLASSES IN THE BURAKU LIBERATION MOVEMENT

Japan has a serious discrimination problem that remains unsolved. I am referring to the discrimination against the approximately three million people who reside in and around six thousand *buraku* communities throughout Japan. Non-Japanese have great difficulty in understanding Buraku discrimination because it is different from the kinds of religious, ethnic, and racial discrimination that are common in other countries. The Japanese situation is unique in that *Burakumin* (Buraku people) have been deprived of their human rights for no clear reason except their place of residence and family background. The outcasts of India are perhaps the only analogous example in

the world. It has been generally asserted that this discrimination was politically and systematically instituted under the Tokugawa shogunate, but according to recent research, its origins may go back as far as the medieval period.

Since the founding of Suiheisha in 1922, the Burakumin themselves have taken the lead in the Buraku liberation movement. In 1969, the passage of a Law on Special Measures for Dōwa Projects was a positive step toward improving Buraku conditions. Nevertheless, discrimination against Burakumin is so deeply rooted in people's consciousness that it is still difficult for young Burakumin to obtain jobs and to marry non-Burakumin.

Interestingly, the first Japanese literacy classes began in the mining areas of Fukuoka between 1963 and 1966 as a project of the Buraku Liberation Movement, before Freire presented his theory. The coal industry, which greatly contributed to the development of Japanese capitalism, owes its success to the sacrifices of the Burakumin. There were formerly 720 Buraku communities with more than 250,000 residents in Fukuoka Prefecture. The population of Burakumin was the third highest in the whole country when the number of Buraku communities in Fukuoka was at a peak.

Nearly half of the Buraku communities were crowded into the Chikuho mining area. At certain times, the Buraku miners accounted for about seventy percent of all miners in the major mines and 100 percent in the medium- or small-sized ones. That was because the mining industrialists took advantage of the cheap land prices available in the Buraku communities. In addition, they found it easy to exploit the extremely poor Burakumin by providing unstable employment. Buraku miners were forced to work under harsh and dangerous circumstances. In fact, an investigation shows that the majority of the miners killed in acci-

dents were Burakumin (Buraku Liberation League 1976, 20).

A rationalization policy, established in 1958, resulted in the closing of one mine after another in the coal industry. At the same time, haphazard mining techniques led to an increase in accidents. In their struggle against unemployment and mining accidents, the Burakumin eventually organized the Buraku Liberation League in an attempt to overcome those problems.

In the course of this growing movement, some women became aware of their illiteracy. At the same time, some local school teachers began to show a real concern for the problems confronting their pupils, i.e., low academic levels, long absences from school, and juvenile delinquency. These women and teachers united to form a literacy movement, beginning with reading and writing the first five letters of the Japanese *hiragana* (script for Japanese words). Using tiny old wooden boxes for desks and local homes or temples for classrooms, the Japanese literacy movement started from nothing. The teachers remarked:

We are in no way trying to compensate or make excuses for the failures of the government. But we believe that the Dōwa projects against discrimination will never succeed as long as we teachers do not understand the realities of the Buraku communities. We must learn to trust in these children and their parents. Still, we should urge them to understand how important and necessary it is for them to get an education and to trust in their teachers.

The mothers expressed their need to learn to read and write not only in order to read the names of stations, towns, and shops but also to discover how they had been uniformly oppressed and discriminated against. One said:

When I was in despair, I resigned myself to it as my lot in life. But through learn-

ing to read and write I have realized that I have suffered simply because I am a Burakumin (Eighteenth National Meeting of Researchers on Dōwa Education, 1966).

Being able to express their history and lives in writing turned out to be the most important part of their learning, because their stories clearly revealed that the source of the discrimination was the power structure inherent in Japanese society.

The young literacy movement awakened the Burakumin and encouraged renewal and change within the Buraku Liberation Movement after its struggles with mining conditions. I think this shows that the literacy movement not only helped Burakumin learn to read and write but also led them to the realization that society had labeled them and deprived them of those abilities. Thus the movement provided an impetus for change within the Buraku communities and Japanese society as a whole.

From its humble beginnings in the mining communities of Kyushu, the literacy movement later spread to Osaka, Kyoto, and other areas as Buraku Liberation League projects. According to an investigation by the National Rinpokan (Buraku public facilities) Liaison Council in 1990, 291 or one-third of the Rinpokan in Japan conduct literacy classes (Central Executive Committee for the Year of International Literacy Promotion 1991, 16). In its early stages, the literacy movement received little support but continued with great enthusiasm. Gradually, after winning government approval, it is safe to say that the literacy movement evolved from a liberation project to a Buraku "issue" project.

Investigations show that there has been and still is a wide gap between the educational backgrounds of Burakumin and other Japanese. A recent report shows that the percentage of children in general who have not attended elementary school or have quit before graduation is 0.4 percent, while the

percentage for Buraku children is 1.5 percent. As for junior high school students, the percentage of non-attendees and dropouts for the whole country is 42.9 percent and 64.0 percent for Buraku youth (Buraku Liberation Institute 1991). Another report shows that there are approximately 220,000 illiterate Burakumin, or 18.6 percent of the total of functional illiterates—those who have some difficulty in reading and writing (Buraku Liberation Institute 1991, 79). These statistics suggest that the literacy movements, when interpreted from a liberation perspective, might offer a key to the solution of some of the educational problems that plague Japanese society.

In hopes of observing some literacy classes, which, thanks to the Buraku Liberation Movement, have such an illustrious history, I visited such a class at the Rinpokan in one of the Buraku districts of Kyoto. Such classes are mainly led by local public school teachers, with government support. Although I experienced many difficulties in obtaining permission to observe a class, I was finally able to do so at the Rinpokan between 7:30 and 9:30 on the evening of January 31, 1994.

I had heard that at best there were about twenty persons attending classes. That day there were four small groups in the largest study room. There was a man in his forties, one middle-aged woman and three middle-aged women, each with a teacher. Stopping occasionally to question the teacher, each student practiced writing by copying samples of Chinese characters. Also, there was a woman in her twenties writing sentences using a dictionary as her teacher was absent. I felt they were all rather quiet and serious.

In the next room, two women and a teacher were cheerfully studying together. A woman in her fifties was writing large Chinese characters, checking the stroke order with her teacher saying, "Sensei (teacher). Cross here. Okay? Bar here. Okay?"

Is this all right?" She went on, "Sensei. Today I was able to read the character for 'dried' in dried flatfish. Before I have only read flatfish in *katakana* (script for foreign words), but now I can even read the character." She spoke in a lively dialect, "I deal with both thick and thin soy sauce at work. Now I can distinguish the Chinese characters for thick and thin. The one for 'thin' uses the character for the sun. The one for 'thick' has many intricate cross bars."

She said to me, "I really wanted to be able to write my own name. Before I could, I always carried my seal, so whenever I had to sign something, I used my seal. Once someone actually conned me into signing something I should not have signed!"

A woman in her twenties was busy studying a junior high geography book. In another room, a man of about forty years old sat face to face with his teacher. In this way, learning experiences were provided for each student according to their needs. I felt there was an equal relationship but also a certain tension between teachers and students.

Almost all the literacy teachers are also elementary school teachers. The following is a sampling of comments they made during our visit:

I have learned many precious things from the students who come, and I really enjoy teaching here.

After teaching here, I realized that my students might have family members who did not have a chance to learn to read and write.

I wish I could communicate the joy in learning I see here to the students at my elementary school.

It is clear from these comments that the literacy class can be a valuable place where elementary school teachers find answers to the present problems confronting Japanese schools.

THE JUNIOR HIGH NIGHT SCHOOL MOVEMENT

In Japan, elementary and junior high schools became compulsory as a result of the reform of the educational system following World War II. Since the government maintains that 99.9 percent of Japanese children attend school, the need for junior high night schools has not been generally recognized. Nevertheless, in spite of strong government control, there were actually thirty-four public junior high night schools operating in Japan by 1990 (*An Overview of Today's Buraku Discrimination*, 1991, 90). Additionally, twelve private schools were being run independently without the approval of the Ministry of Education. These night school students, who are so eager to learn to read and write, must be given serious consideration.

A number of problems have arisen since the inauguration of the six-three-system of compulsory education. The system was ostensibly reformed after the Second World War to secure equal opportunities in education, but it did not necessarily work to the advantage of all. Recently, for example, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of children who do not attend school or are absent for long periods. Between 1947 and 1964, 1,138,333 Japanese children had not completed compulsory schooling (*Literacy is a Human Right*, 1990, 11). This number does not include those children who did not attend school at all.

According to the Osaka municipality records for the first half of 1951, there were 2,485 children who had been absent from school for long terms, including children who did not attend school. That number represents one percent of the total enrollment of 240,939 children for that year. Out of these 2,485 children, forty-nine percent could not attend school because of poverty. Upon closer examination, it is clear that there was a high percentage of long-term

absences in the Ikuno and Higashinari wards, which are Korean districts, and in Nishinari, a Burakumin district (Ogata and Osada 1967, 18). Expenses for textbooks, school supplies, donations for improving school facilities and for school lunches, which should be borne by the government, became the responsibility of the parents. Therefore, while equal opportunity in education remained the ideal, the compulsory school system was actually leaving many children out.

Unable to overlook the conditions of their students, the teachers at the second municipal junior high school in Osaka's Ikuno district started a night school in 1947. Since the beginning, the school has been criticized by the Ministry of Education and given administrative warnings to stop, even though it was in the forefront of the night school movement in Japan (*Monthly Bulletin of Education* 36:3). Such junior high night schools increased from 1950 and reached a peak of eighty-one schools in 1955. This number decreased rapidly after 1961 (Kinki Junior High Night School 1990, 6).

The number of children who were absent for long periods or who had not attended school at all decreased due to the economic stabilization of Japanese society. Also, since the Ministry of Education never officially recognized the existence of night schools, the major financial obligation for managing and operating the schools fell on parents. In spite of this decline, there were 38,000 elementary students and 42,400 junior high school students who had long-term absences in 1966. In fact, the number of children who had not completed compulsory education increased year by year and reached over one million in 1964 (Inatomi 1990, 134). Under these circumstances, one night school student was able to persuade the Board of Education of Osaka Prefecture and Osaka City to give official approval of the junior high night schools. Night schools were inaugurated

through the support of groups expressing such ardent enthusiasm as "Keep the lights on until night school is unnecessary for any child!" The number of night school applicants increased quickly, and the movement grew one step at a time.

At the same time, the rising interest in night schools brought some of the contradictions in Japanese society into clearer relief. For example, night schools in Osaka had to deal with the problems faced by Korean residents in Japan, mentally and physically handicapped children, and repatriated and returning children from South America and China. Also, given the reality that the nationwide statistics for children not attending school gradually reached its present level of 70,000, people have tended to think that children who did not attend night school at the right time should try to attend night school (Ministry of Education, 1967). As a result of this thinking, the age range of those who attend night school has naturally widened.

The government, which once sought a reduction in the number of classes and the speedy abolition of night schools, now at least partially recognizes their significance and has started to think seriously about the related issue of lifetime education. Though it is clear that the night schools have helped those who were unable to complete their compulsory education, the night school movement as presently conceived lacks a clear vision for lifetime education. Further, considering the present state of education, one may legitimately wonder whether a truly satisfactory education is actually being provided by Japanese schools. For those who must study while continuing to work, it is desirable that there be a special place in each district, even if it is small, for them to continue their studies. The more places that can be made available, the better. I am not completely against a movement to secure better programs for those who need night school, but I cannot help feeling that

there are serious problems related to the present lifetime education programs under the direction of the Ministry of Education.

Most lifetime education programs conducted at public halls today closely resemble already existing programs at cultural and educational centers and community colleges. But these programs in Japan are a far cry from the understanding of social education advocated by Mr. E. Jurupi, head of the lifetime education section of UNESCO, who has said that education should respond to the needs of those who are disadvantaged, oppressed, excluded or exploited. If social education is squarely based on the securing of human rights for the individual, that is where the present educational programs for reading and writing, like those of the junior high night schools, can be included. But it is hard to expect present lifetime educational programs in Japan to begin to include reading and writing education without a major shift in current policy. The total number of those who do not attend school at all and those who do not complete compulsory school education is expected to reach around 1,700,000 very shortly (Inatomi 1990, 155). If we include those without Japanese citizenship, it is clear that the movement supporting the junior high night schools will confront still more serious problems in the near future.

OMONI HAKKYŌ

Many *omoni* (Korean mothers) in Japan are learning at night schools, especially in Osaka and Kyoto. There are also six literacy classes especially for *omoni* in Osaka, Kyoto, and Kanagawa formed by private organizations based on Christian principles. Many *omoni* attend Omoni Hakkyō (Korean Mothers Class) because they can graduate from night school after only three years. In 1978, Omoni Hakkyō was launched in an area of Kyoto where many Koreans reside. When I asked the people in charge of

Omoni Hakkyō about their purpose, they explained their aims as follows: to provide a place where *omoni* can learn Japanese, since their reading and writing skills are limited because of a history of hardship; and to offer a place to promote mutual friendship between Japanese and first-, second-, and third-generation Koreans.

Omoni had a hard time historically because Japanese imperialism deprived them of their own language and names. Very few could read or write their own language when they started to attend Japanese classes. As a result of Japan's colonization of Korea in 1910, their land was taken and they were forced to come to Japan to live. They were forbidden to use Korean, forced to take Japanese names, and thereby deprived of their national and cultural identity. They had no opportunity to learn to read and write their own language either before or after the war. The rate of school attendance for Korean children in Japan was 39.8 percent in 1933 and 64.7 percent in 1942 (Motoki and Uchiyama 1989, 76). It is a sad historical fact that they have been deprived not only of their native language but of Japanese as well. Since there are no public organizations to support the teaching of Korean, many second- and third-generation Koreans born in Japan cannot use their native language.

Though Omoni Hakkyō is a place to learn Japanese and Korean, it should also be a place where Japanese can learn the history of what we did during the era of the colonial control of Korea (1910-1945). For all the heavy tasks it faces, Omoni Hakkyō owes its existence solely to private volunteers and contributors. This is further evidence of the evasive attitude of the Japanese government toward its war responsibility. The Omoni Hakkyō should continue to actively explore ways toward true multiculturalism in Japan. Also, they should continue to focus on the teaching of Japanese and the native languages of foreign laborers whose

populations will keep increasing.

OTHER LITERACY CLASSES

Apart from the classes for participants in the Buraku Liberation Movement, the night schools, and Omoni Hakkyō, there are a few other classes addressing the problem of literacy. For example, there is the Kotobuki School for illiterate people in Kotobuki-chō in Yokohama, a Japanese class for reading and writing in Hirakata City in Osaka Prefecture and home classes for illiterate people with disabilities in Takatsuki in Osaka Prefecture.

Kotobuki, one of the largest slums in Japan, is home to about six thousand day laborers. Workers and teachers opened a literacy class in 1978. Though they use public facilities provided by the government, they have rejected government aid. Representing the Kotobuki School, teacher Osawa Toshio said, "When I started the class, I'm sorry to say that I really believed that the people of Kotobuki were not interested in education. But I realized that was not true. The students are really anxious to learn. I cannot help thinking that we need an 'education' where learning is associated with living" (Ōzawa 1973, 72).

The government has also sponsored some classes to teach Japanese reading. In Hirakata there have been five such classes since 1982. Unlike other cities, Hirakata has adopted the policy of granting citizenship to people from abroad. Consequently, sixty percent of the students in their classes are foreign nationals (47 out of 77 students in 1992). The administration is actively involved in the social education of average citizens and provides people from abroad with opportunities for learning Japanese.

In an innovative program, the Takatsuki city administration has begun home classes for illiterate people with disabilities. Twice a week since 1974, teachers have gone to the homes of disabled people who had post-

poned going to school. As of 1993, four people had taken advantage of those classes. Though no public facility such as a community center has inaugurated similar classes and a real movement for disabled persons who are illiterate has not yet begun, I am hoping that these practices will spread in the future. Saitō Masako, representative for disabled people at the National Liberation Movement Liaison Conference, said, "People are under the assumption that those who are able to read are better than those who cannot read. I am afraid this might eventually lead to a meritocracy" (Motoki and Uchiyama 1989, 75). This is an important observation and a challenge to the literacy movement.

In the preceding sections I have roughly outlined the development of the literacy movement in Japan. Next, I would like to explore the part education plays in this literacy movement and how the theory and practice of this movement have worked within the Buraku Liberation Movement. By this I hope to show the differences between the educational theories of the literacy movement and general education in Japan.

Those who are illiterate surely find themselves alienated from this information-centered society. When shopping, they often pay too much or receive too little in change because they cannot read price tags. They cannot buy tickets at vending machines. For them, the newspaper is nothing more than wrapping paper. At city offices or hospitals, they must ask others to fill out their forms, offering such excuses as, "I have hurt my hand" or "I forgot to bring my glasses." Consequently, they tend to avoid going to large hospitals, which can sometimes result in serious illness. They do not know how to read notices or how to use electrical appliances, nor can they help their own children with their homework. They are embarrassed by papers that are sent home from school. They can neither

get a driver's license nor find proper jobs. To go to unfamiliar places, they usually use taxis even though they are much more expensive than buses or trains.

Illiterate people have been deprived of basic human rights. One man did not know the meaning of the word "page" until he was told to open his book to page twenty at a driver's school. Another had to hang around the hospital because he did not know the meaning of the word "urine" and was ashamed to ask anyone. In an even more serious case, a man could not clear himself of a false charge because, believing what the police said to him, he did not tell the truth to his lawyer. He did not understand the system of lawyers and prosecutors. Being illiterate can therefore lead to great danger.

The problem is that illiterate people do not understand that the social structure is to blame for their illiteracy as well as their social disadvantages. Ms. Ōkawa Emiko, once a student in a pioneer literacy class in Osaka, expresses quite uniquely the goal of literacy: "I want to recognize the word 'fool' when I see it." Similarly, Hyon Shioku, a student in the Omoni Hakkyō in Osaka says, "The first thing I learned was the Japanese phrase, 'you are a fool.'" Illiterate people do not always realize when they are being

insulted. They do not understand why they are discriminated against and despised. They must become convinced that being illiterate is not their own fault but the result of discrimination. This awareness is one of the goals of the literacy movement. Some people begin to talk about Buraku discrimination after participating in the literacy classes (Buraku Liberation 1991, 321:133). This means that, as Freire says, teaching reading and writing is a political activity (Motoki and Uchiyama 1989, 65).

Next, I want to examine how the literacy movement can empower people for change. Ōzawa Yūsaku made a comparison between school education and literacy classes. According to his report, these two types of education are opposite in both goals and methodology (Buraku Liberation 1986, 299: 98). Paulo Freire also made the same kind of comparison in his theory about education for the oppressed (Buraku Liberation 1986, 244:68-69). Their results are shown in the diagram at the bottom of this page.

Whether teaching letters is a political activity or not depends on the method of teaching and on whether both the teachers and learners belong to the establishment or not. "The [literacy] movement requires learning and learning is indispensable to

<p>SCHOOL-TYPE EDUCATION (Banking Concept of Education)</p>	<p>LITERACY CLASS-TYPE EDUCATION (Problem-Posing Education)</p>
<p>Transmission of information To form passive or adaptable persons Based on the needs of the teaching side Text based on the Education Ministry guidelines To keep students from seeing the contradictions in society To come to belong to the establishment To link isolated persons To attribute their failures to their own abilities or efforts</p>	<p>Discovery of information To form critical thinkers or revolutionists Based on the needs of the learning side Text based on the realities in daily life To encourage students to see contradictions in society To come to carry out the liberation movement To separate persons</p>

the movement" (Freire 1970, 65-88). If not connected with a liberation movement, learning will tend toward school-type education.

"When I didn't attend school, I was not discriminated against" (Omoni 1981, 204). "School used to be like a prison for us" (183). "Never again do we want the kind of school that turns out illiterate children." The school described by these students of a reading and writing class was one where students were made to stand in the classroom just because they failed to bring the required money or failed to do their homework. Real education is not taking place in such schools, which neglect what is important. We must, therefore, get beyond such superficialities and return to real education. People have been deprived of the ability to read and write not only as a result of social discrimination but by the schools themselves. The flaws in school education are exposed by the literacy movement.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

In light of the above-mentioned situations, a literacy movement as a liberating force and an embodiment of true education cannot be ignored. I am convinced that further developments in the literacy movement will be necessary as long as there are people in this information society who have difficulties with reading and writing. However, in closing, I would like to share some of my questions and concerns about this movement.

"We can push the movement forward even if we are not able to read and write." "These movements have to be directed by the people who do not know how to read or write" (169). These opinions voiced by students in reading and writing classes pose deep questions for the literacy movement. What is the purpose of learning to read and write? We should never forget that the central issue in developing literacy education dif-

fers from that of school-type education. No person should be deprived of his or her human dignity because of illiteracy. One person even pointed out that illiterate people still possess fine sensibilities and think all the more deeply because they are unable to read and write, and I'm inclined to agree with him (Motoki and Uchiyama 1989, 72). "We could borrow soybean paste or soy sauce from our next-door neighbors but not literacy" (Ōsawa 1990, 44). This remark fully illustrates the speaker's common sense and keen powers of observation.

My conviction is that we should strive to create a society in which people are respected, even if they cannot read, and where they can fully participate in society, even though they cannot write. So much emphasis can be placed on learning these skills that we fail to understand the differences in cultures that may not put the same priority on literacy skills as our own. This tendency can also be seen in China, where non-Chinese races with no reading and writing ability in their own languages are taught Chinese words and writing, and in Siberia, where the children of a race of hunters are deprived of their own language by being taught only the Russian language. Similar problems exist in Japan, where people of the Ainu race cannot speak the Ainu language and where the Ryūkyū language in Okinawa is disappearing. So our attitude toward racial and ethnic minorities is also important in the literacy movement. We should consider the culture of peoples without reading ability and try to keep the languages of minorities from disappearing.

We should also keep in mind other forms of language expressed not only by written characters but also by other means such as sound (voice), body (sign language), and Braille. Otherwise, we who are concerned with the literacy movement could be guilty of creating a society where disabled people's needs are ignored. We should emphasize the need for sign language and Braille

and work toward the inclusion of this category of language in the literacy movement in Japan. All of this presents a fundamental challenge to our ability-oriented society. In the literacy movement, we should focus our energies on the creation of a society in which the inabilities of each person are accepted.

To date, literacy activities in Japan have not been systematically organized. Although activity groups have begun to communicate with one another, isolation still exists. Many problems confront us: the illiteracy of disabled people, Japanese language education for foreign residents in Japan, and the securing of education for racial minorities, to mention only a few. Unfortunately, the Japanese educational system has given little attention to these problems. The newest authoritative dictionary does not even have a heading for *shikiji* (literacy; *Buraku Liberation*, 1989, 27). In Japanese academic and government circles, neglect of literacy issues has been the prevailing attitude to date.

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