

The Tokorozawa High School Entrance Ceremony Incident

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Introduction

For a short time in April 1998 events at one high school in Saitama prefecture caught the attention of Japan's national media. The student council at that school had decided to boycott the official entrance ceremony organised by the school principal, and organise a ceremony of their own. Why would such an apparently minor incident attract such a lot of attention? The purpose of this paper is to explore the reasons why, not only the media, but also commentators on the Left and the Right of Japanese politics felt that events at Tokorozawa High School were so worthy of comment.

Events at Tokorozawa High School 1997-98

On April 1st 1997 a new principal, Uchida Tatsuo, arrived at Tokorozawa High School. He was determined to bring school ceremonies into line with Mombusho guidelines on the national flag and anthem. Pupils and staff, who were accustomed to omitting the flag and the anthem from ceremonies, resisted the new principal. At the entrance ceremony held on April 8th 1997, Uchida himself took a flag and a cassette tape with the anthem on it to the ceremony. However, teachers started to take their pupils out of the ceremony hall before he could play the tape. Later the teachers and pupils criticized the new principal for imposing his version of the ceremony on them without getting a consensus first. Uchida made it clear that he would not back down and so both sides began to prepare for the following year's ceremonies.

The students' council announced that it would hold a separate graduation ceremony in March as an alternative to the official ceremony which Uchida insisted must contain the flag and the anthem. Uchida responded to this by saying that the students could hold their own ceremony if they liked, but they must also attend the official ceremony

too. However when the ceremonies were held in March 1998 far more students attended the unofficial ceremony than the official one. In order to avoid the same thing happening to the entrance ceremony Uchida and the Board of Education sent out letters to the parents of the new pupils warning them that if their children did not attend the official ceremony they would not be allowed to enter the school. On the day of the entrance ceremony, April 7th 1998, Tokorozawa High School became the centre of media attention with over 100 members of the press and TV companies gathered outside the school. In spite of threats to exclude them, about 40% of new students failed to attend the official ceremony and they were all allowed to enter the school normally.

The Issue of the Flag and the Anthem

Right wing politicians, bureaucrats and educators see teaching respect for the national flag and anthem as an essential part of the kind of patriotic and moral education that children need in order to function fully in Japanese society. The Left has, since the war, opposed the re-introduction of the flag and anthem because they regard them as reminiscent of wartime militarism and imperialism. They are also opposed to Mombusho 文部省 attempt to force schools to comply with its wishes. They believe that schools have the right to organise their own ceremonies as they see fit. However, in the 1990s opposition by the Left began to weaken. In 1994 the Japan Socialist Party ended its opposition to the introduction of the flag and anthem into schools. In 1995 the Japan Teachers' Union (Nikkyoso) did the same. Then, in the summer of 1999 the Diet passed a law recognizing the Hinomaru and the Kimigayo as the official flag and anthem of Japan.

Arguments over words: Tokorozawa students and the meaning of Freedom, Democracy and Rights in the contemporary Japanese education system

The way in which the two sides at Tokorozawa conducted their battle of words over the flag and the anthem was highly significant. They helped focus attention onto one of the key ideological areas of dispute between Left and Right in the contemporary Japanese education system. This was the dispute over the meaning and practical implications of the democratic terms and conditions that had been written into the defining documents of the postwar Japanese education system by the American occupiers and their centre-left Japanese allies. Since the Occupation there has been continued disagreement over the meaning of 'freedom' and 'democracy' as well as related terms

like 'democratic education' (the achievement of which was one of the main goals of the American Occupiers). Both Right and Left have defined these terms to suit their own political agendas. Now, in the 1990s, the concept of 'children's rights' has been added to this controversial list. Japan's ratification of the UN Charter on the Rights of the Child provoked a national debate about the nature of children's rights in Japan.

New Patterns of Conflict Within the Education System

The main difference between the Tokorozawa conflict and previous types of conflict at Japanese schools is the fact that, at Tokorozawa, the challenge to the Right was led by school students whose main slogans involved the language of freedom and rights. In previous conflicts, the opposition to right-wing management had been led and organised by the teachers' unions, and the slogans they had used had invoked leftwing or trade unionist ideals. At its height, Nikkyoso had seen itself, with some justification, as the central pillar of the Left in Japan, not just in the education system, but in the country at large. However, in 1989 it split into two, and the more moderate of the two halves subsequently adopted a policy of conciliation toward the old enemies of Mombusho and the LDP. The old style of conflict was over.

In their act of defiance against the principal and the Board of Education, the students of Tokorozawa High School did not see themselves as taking part in any national campaign. Instead they regarded themselves as standing up for their own rights as individuals and members of an individual school. They received messages of support from other schools, and help and advice from outside, but their campaign to run their own school ceremonies was primarily a localised affair. If any of the students had been punished for their actions they would have defended themselves as individuals with rights rather than members of a group. It is this stress on human rights and individualism that marks the Tokorozawa dispute out as a new type of conflict within the Japanese education system.