

# Seeing Without Learning, Seeing Things That Are Not There

**Earl Kinmonth**

(Emeritus Professor, Taisho University)

General as contrasted with academic interest in Japanese education in Britain is conspicuous by its absence. The most common reference to Japan and education in the British press is in the context of reporting the many countries that rank much higher than Britain in the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) league tables.<sup>1</sup> There are occasional articles that deal with some social pattern that involves schools and school age children such as bullying or suicide but overall what might be styled popular interest in Japanese education is at a low ebb.<sup>2</sup>

The current situation is quite different from the mid-80s and early 90s when there was considerable popular, academic and governmental interest in Japanese education up to and including government sponsored efforts to “learn from Japan” how to improve British education. An odd article here and there will occasionally suggest Japan as a model but in recent years the foreign model of choice has been China, so much so that UK government has sponsored a concerted effort to introduce “Asian” (Chinese) math teaching methods.<sup>3</sup>

This shift from Japan as model to China as model is clearly tied to appraisal of the Japanese and Chinese economies and not to the performance of their national education systems. In terms of the PISA rankings, the position of Japan is little changed now from what it was when Japan was the model of choice two and three decades earlier.

The current infatuation with Chinese education is just as absurd as was the earlier infatuation with Japan. There is no need for Britain to seek models from distant countries with cultures and educational systems far removed from those of Britain. There are countries close at hand even countries adjacent to Britain itself that rank much higher than Britain in the PISA standings even countries that rank higher than China but their educational systems are ignored by the press, academia and the government. Indeed there are Asian countries and territories that out perform China in the PISA standings but they are also ignored.

It is painfully obvious that what drives attention is not the performance of the national education systems but the performance and scale of the national economies. Countries such as Finland, Ireland, Canada, and Estonia are all ranked far above Britain and even above China in some categories and anyone of them should be able to serve as a model for Britain. To the extent that Ireland and

Canada are English speaking and culturally close to Britain, learning how they achieved excellent PISA scores should be far easier than learning how China did it.<sup>4</sup> But, there is to push to “learn from Canada” or “learn from Ireland” to say nothing of “learn from Estonia.”

In looking to contemporary Chinese education as a model because of the vigor of the contemporary Chinese economy, the British government and those who celebrate the “Chinese model” are engaging in the same absurd behavior that was evident when the vigor of the Japanese model drove attention to the “Japanese model” of education.<sup>5</sup>

Even if there was hard evidence to link the performance of schools education to economic performance, it is utterly absurd to look at the current education of any country because it has a high performance economy and it is doubly absurd to look as has been the case for both Japan and China at early years or even preschool education.

Children in school now are not contributing to the economy. They are not workers. They are not managers. If there is a relation between economic performance and schools education, and that relation is far from proven, it is necessary to look at schools education when current workers and current managers were receiving their education not what school children are receiving now.

At any given point in time the economically active population of a country especially those with a low fertility rate, the case for both China and Japan, will be composed largely of people educated decades earlier. Assuming a school starting age of 5 years old, a 35 year old worker would have started his or her education three decades earlier and a 55 year old manager would have started his or her education a half century earlier. Unless teaching methods, content, and participation rates have been constant for decades in each model case, looking at contemporary schools education does little or nothing to tell you how schools education has contributed to contemporary economic performance.

In the case of Japan when it became the focus of attention in the 1980s, there was still a large fraction of the workforce and managerial class who had started their schools education in the 1930s. The steep increase in the Chinese economy that began attracting foreign attention in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was based largely on workers and managers who started in their schools education in the 1940s.

Even without considering the issue of when the economically active population received its school education, British and other foreign writing on both Japan and China has been marked by other issues. The emphasis in field research has been on early years education and even preschool education.<sup>6</sup> Secondary education has been largely ignored and vocational education almost totally ignored. To the extent that tertiary education has been taken up, the emphasis has been almost entirely on the very top end of elite higher education while ignoring the much larger numbers who do not make it into elite institutions or who do not even go to college or university.

With Japan replaced by China as the foreign model for emulation, the popular press stories that appear about Japan tend to be completely or largely bogus stories that warrant the recently popular

designation “fake news” or stories that take up a social pathology that involves schools or school age children and wildly exaggerate the severity of the issue in Japan and which provide no comparative data from other countries that would allow putting the Japanese case in perspective.

Among the dubious and outright fake news stories about Japan that have originated in Britain, there is probably no story that received more attention than one in appeared in the **The Guardian**. Subsequently retracted,<sup>7</sup> the 2013 story claimed that there was an epidemic of conjunctivitis (結膜炎) among teenagers in Japan who were engaging in oculolinctus or “worming” (eyeball licking, 眼球なめ) for a sexual thrill.

Although the story should have been recognized as bogus because of references to elementary school children as “teenagers” and photographs showing children wearing black eye patches rather than the white medicinal eye patch that is standard in Japan, the story “went viral” with major news agencies world wide picking up on the report and taking it seriously.<sup>8</sup> That a prestige newspaper could originate fake news about Japan and that it would “go viral” without any news organization doing even the most minimal fact checking demonstrates that the foreign press in general and even (or particularly) news media catering to an audience with higher than average levels of education is ready to believe the most absurd stories about Japan and the Japanese.

This is a phenomenon that I believe reflects a certain type of racism on the part of editors and foreign journalists. This is not “classic” 19th century racism nor is it the racism associated with the “alt-right” in the US or the UK. Rather it is what has been called “cultural racism” by some European writers. Rather than being focused on “color” as is the case with “classic racism,” the focus is on culture and Japan is seen as having a culture like no other and as having a culture and society where things happen that would happen nowhere else. But, whether it is based on “color” or based on “culture,” this type of thinking is nonetheless “racist” because, as such writing emphasizes, Japan is a country where 98.5% of the people belong to the same ethnic group.

Unfortunately, fake news about Japan and Japanese education has not been limited to such easily debunked stories as that about worming. In 2015 there was another major fake news story about Japanese education that was heavily driven by reporting in British media beginning with the university trade publication **THE** (Times Higher Education)<sup>9</sup> and spilling over into the higher end of the British popular press, most notably **The Guardian**.<sup>10</sup> This story is one of a small number of cases involving Japan where the same story was also “fake news” in the Japanese domestic press.

In mid-September, 2015, **THE** carried a story under the headline “Social sciences and humanities faculties ‘to close’ in Japan after ministerial intervention.” Although this was not the first such story making this claim, it carried extra weight because it appeared in **THE**. In short order numerous articles appeared in English making the claim that the Japanese government had ordered “Japanese universities” to close their social science and humanities departments. Many articles failed to note that the “order” even if true applied only to national universities and not to the much larger private sector.

A British academic started a petition using change.org that called upon MEXT to rescind its order and to spare the humanities and social sciences. Although the originator of the petition did recognize that the government “order” was aimed at national universities almost everything else in the petition was factually wrong. More important, those who signed the petition indicated in their comments that they saw this “order” as part of a reactionary political agenda led by Abe Shinzo and an attempt to suppress those academic disciplines that teach “critical thinking.” Some who signed the petition went so far as to describe the “order” as “even worse than what the Nazis did.”

Although **THE** later published a rebuttal to its original article and despite subsequent events as well as MEXT statements making it clear that there was no “order” calling for the abolition of social science and humanities programs, **THE** has not retracted its original story and no follow up stories have appeared in any English language venue. Indeed, even in Japanese there has been only one follow up story showing that the alleged “order” was misread and that nothing much happened.<sup>11</sup>

Once again the fact that “reputable” and “mainstream” British publications ran with this story is evidence of what I would call “cultural racism” because accepting this story without verification shows a readiness to believe that things can happen in Japan that would happen nowhere else. Moreover, the original **THE** story illustrates what I would describe as contempt for Japan. The author of the story was a young man with no expertise on Japan to say nothing of having no Japanese language capability. His resume indicates that he was a stringer for provincial small town English newspapers.

That writing on higher education in the world’s third largest economy and a major investor in Britain would be farmed out to someone so totally lacking in subject knowledge can, I think, be described only as evidence that the **THE** does not regard Japan or its higher education as a subject worthy of serious attention.

While there are some British academic studies of Japanese education that are well grounded and worth reading, most of those studies are extremely high priced and there is little evidence that they have any influence outside of the small number of British academics who are seriously interested in Japanese education. Prices of one hundred pounds or more are not unusual. Even when I had a generous research allowance as a Japanese academic, I seldom bought books from British trade publishers because of their extremely high prices.

British (and American) academic publishing is also extremely slow compared to Japan. It is not unusual for there to be a five year or longer lag between when a foreign scholar does field work in Japan and the publication of his or her monograph based on that research. Because Japanese education is controlled and micro-managed by the central government policy shifts and their implementation can occur very rapidly making even the most careful research out of date before it is published.

Further, books based on field work are typically written as though they are describing the present

situation in Japan but they remain in use even when the present they describe is decades in the past. Thomas Rohlen's *Japan's High Schools* was an excellent piece of research in that it described both elite and non-elite institutions based on extensive participant observation.<sup>12</sup> But, when it was published in 1983, it described a reality that was already slipping into the past and when students read it today, and it does appear on contemporary course outlines, they are reading about a very different world, one decades before the Internet and smart phones that figure so prominently in the lives of Japanese high school students today.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, in some cases foreign scholars have simply been out of touch with what was going on in Japan. The 2003 symposium-based book **Can the Japanese Change Their Education System?**<sup>14</sup> asked a question that was being answered in the affirmative and repeatedly on Japanese television through the appearances of "Mr. Monbusho" Terawaki Ken. This was the introduction of the *yutori-kyoiku* policy that saw an overall reduction in the mandated elementary and middle school curriculum by roughly one-third and the introduction of topic-based study, the design of which was left up to schools and teachers. Looking at this book today produces a sense of awe that the symposium participants could have been so out of touch with what was happening in Japan.

There are a few books about Japanese education that are reasonably current and not too expensive. Peter Cave (University of Manchester) has written two that I recommend: **Primary School in Japan: Self, Individuality and Learning in Elementary Education** (2009) and **Schooling Selves: Autonomy, Interdependence, and Reform in Japanese Junior High Education** (2016). The most recent of these illustrates the difficulty staying current with Japanese education. The cover photo shows a human pyramid, something that has been a feature of sports days in Japanese middle schools for some decades. But, as schools competed with ever larger and higher pyramids, serious injuries increased, and in 2015 guidelines were issued that had the effect of leading to the disappearance of the pyramids.<sup>15</sup>

Japan in general and Japanese education in particular is a moving target. Even with the best of intentions, serious foreign scholars have difficulty staying current. And, when one turns to mass market writing about Japan, what little attention Japan and its education receives is superficial at best and bogus or racist at worst. This is not a pattern peculiar to Britain. Treatment in US media is no better. If anything it is worse because of assertions about the alleged failure of Japanese school history textbooks to treat issues such as "the Rape of Nanking" and the "comfort women" to the satisfaction of Americans who seem to think they have a right to dictate the content of school education in Japan.<sup>16</sup> Mercifully, there is much less of this in Britain.

---

1 "Pisa tests: UK lags behind in global school rankings" **BBC** (6 December 2016) : <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-38157811>

2 "Why bullying in Japanese schools is especially traumatic" **The Economist** (12 April 2017) : <https://>

[www.economist.com/asia/2017/04/12/why-bullying-in-japanese-schools-is-especially-traumatic](http://www.economist.com/asia/2017/04/12/why-bullying-in-japanese-schools-is-especially-traumatic)

- 3 “Asian maths method offered to schools” BBC (12 July 2016) : <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-36772954>
- 4 “China” in this context is something of a misnomer. The latest PISA results for “China” are actually only four cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu and Guangdong) and largely exclude the children of migrant workers in those cities.
- 5 One notable British example in this genre is John Lorriman and Takashi Kenjo *Japan’s Winning Margins* (Oxford University Press, 1994). Ironically, this book was published five years after the 1989 stock market crash and two years after the bursting of the real estate bubble, the two events that are seen as the beginning of Japan’s “lost decades.”
- 6 Julia Whitburn, *Strength in Numbers: Learning Maths in Japan and England* (NIESR, 2000) is just one of many works that focused on early year elementary school children who were many years away from entering the workforce.
- 7 “The readers’ editor on… how we fell into the trap of reporting Japan’s eyeball-licking craze as fact” *The Guardian* (25 August 2013) : <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/25/guardian-japan-eyeball-licking-craze-hoax>
- 8 The Tokyo-based journalists Mark Schreiber did a detailed investigation of how this totally bogus story originated and spread. “The envelope, please (and don’t lick it)” *Japan Times* (21 December 2013) : <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/12/21/national/media-national/the-envelope-please-and-dont-lick-it/>
- 9 “Social sciences and humanities faculties ‘to close’ in Japan after ministerial intervention” *THE* (14 September 2015) : <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/social-sciences-and-humanities-faculties-close-japan-after-ministerial-intervention>
- 10 “Japan’s humanities chop sends shivers down academic spines” *The Guardian* (26 September 2015) : <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/sep/25/japans-humanities-chop-sends-shivers-down-academic-spines>
- 11 I have authored a detailed analysis of this panic over a nonexistent policy. It will appear under the title “Much ado about very little: The [2015] Japanese government order that Japanese national universities abolish their humanities and social science programs” as chapter 7 in Dennis Ahlburg, ed. *The Changing Face of Higher Education* (Routledge, 2018).
- 12 Thomas P. Rohlen, *Japan’s High Schools* (University of California Press, 1983).
- 13 The university entrance examination that is important to high school graduates who do not go directly into work is also radically different from what is described in Rohlen’s book.
- 14 Roger Goodman, ed. *Can the Japanese Change Their Educational System?* (Oxford Symposium Books, 2003).
- 15 “Dangers of human pyramids lead to concerns over student safety” *Japan Times* (6 October 2015) : [https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/10/06/national/dangers-human-pyramids-lead-concerns-student-safety/#.W0tFrc8\\_lpg](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/10/06/national/dangers-human-pyramids-lead-concerns-student-safety/#.W0tFrc8_lpg); “New rules for human pyramids in Japanese schools” BBC (9 February 2016) : <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-35532561>.

16 The UN rapporteur David Kaye is an egregious example of this. “U.N. rights expert airs concern about Japan’s freedom of expression” *Japan Times* (30 May 2017) : [https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/05/30/national/social-issues/u-n-rights-expert-airs-concern-japans-freedom-expression/#.W0tJzs8\\_1pg](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/05/30/national/social-issues/u-n-rights-expert-airs-concern-japans-freedom-expression/#.W0tJzs8_1pg); even worse was the statement originated by Alexis Dudden and Jordan Sands and signed by more than a thousand “scholars” protesting non-existent suppression of debate on the “comfort women” issue by the Abe government. “U.S. academics condemn Japanese efforts to revise history of ‘comfort women’” *Washington Post* (9 February 2015) : [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/american-academics-condemn-japanese-efforts-to-revise-history-of-comfort-women/2015/02/09/e795fc1c-38f0-408f-954a-7f989779770a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/american-academics-condemn-japanese-efforts-to-revise-history-of-comfort-women/2015/02/09/e795fc1c-38f0-408f-954a-7f989779770a_story.html)