

Beijing, the *Guangzhou baike quanshu* (1994) and the *Guangdong baike quanshu* (1995).

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Marie H. Roesgaard, *Moving Mountains: Japanese Education Reform*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1998. 264 pp..ISBN 87-7288-477-0

One of the most pervasive characteristics of modern Japan has been that society's eagerness to learn from the experiences of others. This tradition is deeply embedded in Japan's history, dating at least to the introduction of Buddhism from India, by way of the Korean peninsula, in the middle of the sixth century AD. At about the same time, Chinese and Korean monks, craftsmen, artists and scholars brought a superior civilization to Japan, and their lessons were quickly accepted and integrated into Japan's national fabric. Later in the seventh century Prince Shotoku not only played an important role in the promotion of Buddhism, but was also responsible for the importation of a variety of ideas and objects from China that served to strengthen and enrich Japanese life. Indeed, Edwin O. Reischauer and John King Fairbank have argued, in *East Asia: The Great Tradition* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1960: 486), that 'on the whole, the Japanese government of the eighth century presented an amazingly faithful reproduction of the T'ang system.' In addition, the Japanese writing system is heavily indebted to Chinese ideographs which, although pronounced differently by the Japanese, share the same basic meanings in both languages. In the sixteenth century, Portuguese missionaries and traders were welcomed into Japan, and to some extent, both their trade and their faith were successful in penetrating the country. Soon, however, fear of Western expansionism (including that of Christianity) threatened political stability and the relatively tolerant atmosphere changed. Native Christians were persecuted and the missionaries expelled. The former were forced by

torture to apostatize, and the latter who refused to leave or tried to return were executed.

Thus, from 1639 to 1854 Japan's policy was one of *sankoku* ('closed country') and the country remained isolated from the modern world. Even under this policy, however, the Japanese managed to maintain one small, but important, contact with Western ideas and goods. A handful of Dutch traders were permitted to maintain a small factory on the tiny islet of Deshima in Nagasaki Harbour. These 'closed' years are correctly seen as a time of xenophobia, but the so-called 'Dutch Studies' (*rangaku*) also flourished on Deshima and significantly influenced the Japanese study of languages, medicine and various scientific fields of inquiry.

During the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the Japanese enthusiastically embraced all manner of Western ideas and customs in a pell-mell race to become 'modern'. Nowhere was this orgy of borrowing more pronounced than in education, where American, French, German, English and other models competed in a marketplace of ideas and practices. This is a well-known story that requires no retelling here. Less well known, however, was the brief period of 'Taisho democracy' in the 1920s, where principles of so-called 'progressive education' (strongly influenced by the ideas of the American philosopher John Dewey) buried roots which although repressed by the subsequent military regime, lay dormant until the end of the Second World War. With the end of that destructive war in 1945, the basically American Occupation of Japan (1945-1952) swept away the pre-war educational structure in what was, arguably, the single greatest experiment in social engineering the world had ever seen.

The purpose of this rather long preface to an evaluation of Roesgaard's book is to provide an important context for a discussion of current Japanese attempts at educational reform. It is clear that the Japanese not only do not fear reform, but have a very long history of adapting educational ideas and practices from societies they judge more advanced than their own. Marie Roesgaard has given students of Japanese education a very useful survey of reform in that fascinating society. She compe-

tently provides a very good context for current reform deliberations, and many of the problems facing it today.

The core of her book, however, is her evaluation of the 1984 National Council on Educational Reform, created under Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro, to once again modernize the educational enterprise. She provides a very good description of the major actors in this reform effort – teacher organizations, the various interest groups representing teachers, industry, political entities and other elites. Her perceptive conclusion that the debate over educational reform tends ‘to concentrate on political issues rather than pedagogical issues’ (p. 145) will come as no surprise to serious students of education. Rosegaard details the various reports of the National Council on Educational Reform in five chapters focusing on curriculum, individuality, life-long learning, internationalization and the information society. Each of these deserves an in-depth discussion which is not possible in the space allotted.

I will conclude this review with my answer to a question posed by Roesgaard at the outset of her book: ‘Whether the unstable political situation will for once mean that the immobilism of the legal reform of Japanese education will evaporate and fundamental reforms will be carried out is only something the future can unmask’ (p. 27). Anyone who follows the Japanese press, it seems to me, will conclude that despite all the sound and fury of the past two decades, nothing much has changed. The real question is why, despite their long history of educational reform and innovation, the Japanese have failed. I would argue that the reason is precisely because of that history. In the past Japan has always had strong foreign models to learn from, but today almost every educational system in the world is seeking to find a better way and there is no clearly identifiable ‘better’ model available. Thus, unlike past situations, if the Japanese are going to discover a better model, it will have to be one that they invent and not adopt. That is a formidable task.

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