

## BOOK REVIEW: Education and social justice in Japan

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**BOOK REVIEW:** Kaori H. Okano, *Education and social justice in Japan*, London: Routledge, 2021. ISBN 9780415832526. pp. 236

“Balance and nuance” are perhaps the main challenges and achievements of this book. Okano had to balance between the needs of undergraduate readers who likely know little about Japan’s complex schooling system and those of researchers who need to see something novel and masterful in the approach to Japanese education. She also had to balance between approaches to the subject matter of social justice and education: methodological differences (qualitative vs. quantitative approaches, macro vs. micro approaches), ideological differences (different views of social justice), differences in experiences of various relevant groups. Finally, while balancing all these issues, this book had to convey the topic of Japan, so tempting to essentialise or exoticise, with nuance—all its differing actors and their various interests and perspectives.

What does this book offer undergraduate readers? While this book does not seem to position itself as such, it could function as a good introduction to Japanese education from a social justice lens. An undergraduate with only an understanding of the barest sketches of Japan’s history and common cultural attitudes could read this book and gain a solid foundation for approaching education.

Chapter Two provides a relatively complete history of Japanese education in 22 pages—starting with the Sino-centric period and Prince Shotoku, to the rise of the samurai, the growth of education for common people (as in *terakoya* temple schools), the institutionalisation of modern education, wartime struggles, and ending with postwar reforms that continue today. *The Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (Heisig et al., 2011), begins and ends in the same places, but at 60 times the length. This chapter paints a vivid picture of a Japan deeply invested in education but constantly struggling to define the scope and direction of education. Okano’s book presents Japan not as a monolithic nation but one with internal plurality; totalitarian tendencies in various forms exist alongside forces resisting these, giving social justice discourse a long history within Japan.

Okano then slowly moves to the present, with a chapter describing recent educational reforms, highlighting how at least four players (neoliberals, neoconservatives, progressives, and social justice advocates) compete and occasionally align to shape educational policy. She then devotes two chapters to the various faces of difference and how they experience schooling—cultural and linguistic minoritised groups (indigenous peoples, ethnic Chinese, and Koreans, newcomers), poverty, gender, and regions. While showing how the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology

(MEXT) is at the center of these reforms, it is often a vacuous center, with education shaped from the ground up by decentralised forces. These combine to give an undergraduate a clear sense that Japan is not one exotic whole but something historically constructed and internally diverse. Finally, Okano details two phenomena, *shokuiku* (education about eating) and nonformal education, to illustrate how the diversity and diverse approaches to social justice function in the field of a student's direct experience.

The result for the undergraduate researcher is a solid foundation for understanding Japanese education, with a succinct picture of how it unfolds both temporally and through diverse strata of society. At around 230 pages, *Education and Social Justice in Japan* is concise enough to remember the overall picture it presents by the time one finishes reading it but with enough nuance to grasp that the overall picture is never one that can be essentialised, and that nothing is as simple as it seems. This care to convey nuance additionally functions to dispel potentially dangerous misunderstandings of Japan—that the Japanese are ethnically homogenous (I still hear this today from my Japanese students, a statement that riles many with mixed heritage or “invisible” ethnic differences), are all middle class (this too), that rural education in Japan is inferior to urban education (a misunderstanding I myself must admit to), and so forth.

While this book needs to respond to the needs of undergraduates, does it provide for the needs of Japanese specialists, postgraduates, and researchers? I think such a task is more challenging though possible, but some may feel this book sacrifices making pointed arguments in order to introduce Japanese education. However, what I find to be the most important contribution of this book is not the making of a pointed argument, but a careful use of methodology to demonstrate a nuanced, polyvocal discourse.

Reading the book, a particular pattern for how Okano weaves together different approaches becomes clear. This basso ostinato is consistent, but most explicit in the chapter on education about eating. Like all chapters, she begins with an epigraph from a broadcast during school lunch time, announcing which students grew the vegetables in the soup. These quotes serve to anchor each chapter in the *genba* (the field)—the actual here-and-now of where human life unfolds in everyday life. She then introduces the main features of *shokuiku*, its legal basis and its history. She then proceeds to place it in a global context of “food education,” and identifies the basic features of *shokuiku*—Japan is rather distinct in having a government-recognised system with compulsory lunches with aims far beyond providing awareness about nutrition to an education on manners, gratitude, self-sufficiency, local food appreciation, etc.

With this situated background, she closely describes what the compulsory school lunch program is like with a much more anthropological gaze. She describes students in a Grade 2 classroom preparing the lunches, what they wear, the kind of food they serve, the courtesy “*Itadakimasu!*” (I humbly receive [this food].) “*Gochisôsama deshita!*” (It was a treat!) She even includes a comic illustration of the school lunch (p. 137). This paints a vivid picture, grounding laws and histories into a single, living, corporeal collective act. Her masterful use of this reminds me of Okano's *Young Women in Japan* (2009; a narrative study across 12 years that goes deep into the lives of individual students).

Grounded in this situated and living experience, she then broadens sociological imagination to explore the various functions of this phenomenon—feeding hungry

children, enhancing student learning (with a good diet!), moral education in gratitude and class solidarity, economic concerns like eating local produce and rice stocks. The social phenomenon clearly functions for society, but there seem to be far more contradictory (or at least disparate) functions than a cohesive organic whole would imply.

Balancing functional and conflict theory approaches, Okano builds out from this disparity to delineate various positions that are often opposed to each other: neoliberals and the idea of food choice, neoconservatives and an essentialised view of shared Japanese food culture, progressives and social justice advocates helping marginalised people receive adequate sustenance. Here the ideological conflict comes to the fore, further highlighted by pointing out different kinds of justice: simple equality, responding to those with particular needs, and the focus on distributive justice (“Who gets to eat?”) at the expense of content (“How often do minoritised cultures get represented in school meals?”).

I read Okano’s method as a well-rounded approach that builds discursive analysis on the foundations of ethnographic observation. “Social justice” is not taken to be a given, an ideal pre-constructed exclusively by philosophers. While she engages with philosophical constructions of social justice (in particular, Michael Walzer and John Rawls), her actual use of “social justice” is heavily informed by an inductive approach. Her regular use of epigraphs, comic strips from *Tonari no Nono-chan*, and close analyses of concrete situations (from food education to Japanese as a Second Language classes in Kobe and Osaka) seem to function as an inductive grounding, to show that examinations of an abstract discourse like social justice must remain rooted in actual everyday experience. The interpretation and extension of these idiographic observations are made possible by connecting these to a historical (and often comparative) background and with the use of various nomothetic sources (like international statistics on obesity, or the number of foreign schools). From this overall picture combining idiographic and nomothetic sources, she then teases out various approaches seen in different groups—various minorities, teachers, parents, economic groups, government institutions—showing that there is a variation of approaches and interests, some of them mutually exclusive. She then shows how these different approaches construct the idea of social justice—interpreting and employing it in different ways.

In my reading, the key contribution to this book is thus methodological—how it builds on inductive observation and weaves it with broader historical and nomothetic data to show differing voices and how their speech acts construct social justice. The result of that methodology is an end view of social justice that is viscerally demonstrated to be nuanced, internally plural, and radically constructed. Instead of heeding the clarion call of some divined idea of social justice, deducing its myriad implications, and mounting a polemic on how this should resound throughout the realities of education, she turns this approach on its head. Japan, with its long history and its currently competing interest groups, possesses its own plurality of voices on social justice. Within the grime of finding ways to meet the needs of minoritised groups, of negotiating and sometimes forming unstable alliances with neoconservatives and their essentialised Japan and neoliberals and their desire for a certain image of “internalisation,” social justice emerges as a reality.

Okano's discourse of social justice is neither closed nor complete. As this construction reaches toward the future (now lensed through me, as the reader), I wonder: the present discourse of justice presented by Okano is clearly concerned with difference, and how difference is affected by distribution ("Who gets how much of schooling?" "How equitably are educational opportunities and rewards distributed?") and content ("Who gets represented in schooling?"). But from Okano's inductive observations, difference is not between closed identities, between a binary us versus them. Even with ethnic Chinese, we have those who have been in Japan before the war, those who came after, those who still speak Chinese and those who do not, those who are intermarried with ethnic Japanese. We have those who go to fulltime Chinese schools and those who go to other international schools and those who go to mainstream Japanese schools. Then we have non-ethnic Chinese who study in Chinese schools. This internal plurality upsets the "who" behind the questions of distribution and representation. If one says, "The Chinese are getting these advantages, and these representations," the question remains, "Which Chinese?"

Furthermore, Okano's history shows how different groups learned from each other to respond to the challenges of educating in Japan, with many drawing from *hisabetsu burakumin* ("discriminated people" generally referred to in English literature as "buraku people" who are descendants of outcaste population of the feudal periods) in their political organisation, or from Japan-born ethnic Koreans in their accreditation processes. Identities are both internally plural and relationally constituted. As a researcher in the field of philosophy (among others), I wonder: What might this inductive, constructed approach teach us about "educational justice" beyond the concept of closed units of identity, beyond the binary of sameness and difference? Might Okano be offering us an opportunity to reconstruct the very idea of justice, in a way that might reauthor the dialogue between social justice advocates, neoconservatives, and everything in between?

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