Breaking the Rules in Japanese Schools: 
*Kōsoku Ihan*, Academic Competition, and Moral Education

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*From the perspective of an American observer, Japanese schools emphasize rules related to general comportment and deemphasize rules related to academic honesty. I interpret this by considering the role schooling plays within the broader process of Japanese enculturation. Compared to U.S. schools, Japanese schools are allocated greater responsibility in the discipline and moral education of children, with authority extending to domains of behavior and methods of correction reserved to parents in the United States. But Japanese schools are allocated less responsibility than U.S. schools in sorting students through academic competition, despite, or because of, Japan’s scholastic entrance examinations. Viewed in the context of their enculturative role, Japanese schools are seen to be neither as uniformly harmonious nor as generally corrupt as some outsiders have concluded.*

The children stood in unison as Hirono-sensei entered. Gray at the temples, he returned their bow and told them to be seated. A low buzz of whispered conversation was restored to the classroom, but evaporated when Hirono approached the blackboard and wrote “1 km = m.” He called on a boy who sprang to his feet and stood silently. After a long moment, just as two children seated near the boy began to prompt him in whispers, Hirono told him to sit. He then called on another boy, who stood and answered, “Sen metoru” [One thousand meters].

“Do desu ka?” Hirono asked the class, to which they responded in unison, “Ii desu.” [How is that (answer)? (It) is good.] Only then did the boy sit down. Hirono erased the blackboard and wrote four arithmetic problems across its top:

\[
\begin{align*}
8 - 6 + 2 \\
5 + 2 \cdot 3 \\
10 + 4 \div 2 \\
11 - 3 \cdot 2
\end{align*}
\]

Hirono instructed four children to come to the board and complete the problems. As they began to write, the class began spontaneously to coach them. With a glance, Hirono quieted one student near the front of the room and then moved to stand immediately next to a pair of students who were among the most vocal hint-givers. When all four board workers had finished
and returned to their seats, Hirono surveyed their work with pantomimed thoughtfulness and then focused his attention on the first student's work:

\[
8 - 6 + 2
= 8 - 6 = 2
= 2 \div 2 = 1
\]

He drew a circle around the answer. "Do desu ka?" A few whispered negatives. "Ja, nani, Koyama Eriko-san?" Hirono called on a girl who stood and answered, "Five." He asked, "Why is that?" She answered, "Division comes first." Hirono erased the errant work and rewrote it, correcting algebraic grammar as well as order of operations:

\[
8 - 6 + 2
= 8 - 3
= 5
\]

Then he addressed the remaining three board workers. "Is there something you would like to correct?" All three hurried to the board to rework their problems, closely following his example. Like their classmates, they were neatly and uniformly groomed, dressed in navy-blue school uniforms. Green stripes on their regulation sneakers identified them as seventh graders.

Next, Hirono wrote down a series of binary operations, some between fractions and some between integers. He told the class to work the operations in their notebooks, and as they began he walked down the rows, checking their work closely. He paused to tutor a girl near the front, then continued, glancing at each paper as he passed. When he reversed direction to proceed up the next row, a girl in the back waved her arms to get the attention of another girl near the center of the room and proceeded to send her some answers, both by writing numbers in the air and by holding up fingers. She attempted to keep this out of the teacher's field of vision but did not seem concerned about the two adult observers seated behind her. When Hirono turned and "caught" her, she stopped immediately. But behind the teacher's turned back, a boy showed his paper to two other boys. [edited field notes, May 1, 1992]

Rules in Schools

Rule-related behavior in Japanese schools—the acts, attitudes, and emphases with which rules are established, communicated, rationalized, enforced, and broken—differs strikingly from behavior in U.S. schools. Watching this class at a rural middle school in northern Honshu, I could hardly imagine a group of American seventh graders so respectful, orderly, and attentive, yet so freely inclined to share answers illicitly. A colleague of Hirono's sat beside me at the back of the classroom but did not seem concerned by what struck me as bald-faced cheating. He did not intervene when children seated in front of him showed their papers to other children, and the culprits seemed undaunted by our presence. Making only mild attempts to conceal their activities from Hirono, they glanced at each other's work, passed their notebooks back and forth, and whispered and gestured with abandon.
The purpose of this article is to provide a cultural interpretation of rule-related behavior in Japanese schools and, in particular, to account for a perceived Japanese tendency to emphasize rules of comportment and deemphasize rules related to what Americans might call "academic honesty." By rules I mean explicit rules promulgated by school authorities in written or unwritten form, consciously communicated and mutually understood among the teachers who enforce them and the students whose behavior they regulate. Many anthropologists view culture as essentially a set of implicit rules that guide behavior (e.g., Estroff 1981:189–190; Haviland 1993:30; Holland and Quinn 1987:4). So it might be said that my goal is to find implicit rules behind explicit rules, culture revealed by the ways in which Japanese school children get in trouble with their teachers. Kosoku ihan (the breaking of school rules) encompasses different actions and reactions in Japan than it does in the United States, illuminating fundamental differences in American and Japanese enculturative process.

I have lived in Japan for four one-year periods since 1985, teaching college mathematics and anthropology courses to Japanese and American students at several U.S. military bases. During the first year I began to study the Japanese language, an ongoing source of insight and humility. During the second, I developed a friendship with a Japanese math teacher, visited his school, and interviewed several of my Japanese students regarding their school experiences. During the third, I conducted extensive fieldwork with more than 30 adult Japanese students, observing their encounter with a Japan-based American university, interviewing them formally and informally regarding their educational life histories, and in the case of teachers among them, visiting their schools (Hill 1993). The present article was drafted during my fourth year in Japan, as I extended my research while continuing to teach.

Most of my knowledge about Japanese schools and Japanese perspectives on schooling was gained in series of interviews and conversations with Japanese adults whom I related with socially and professionally over the course of several months or several years. These included college students, parents of school children, and teachers at all school levels, representing northern, southern, urban, and rural Japan. My direct observations in Japanese schools were limited in duration from three hours to two days but included visits to a public middle school, a public high school, and a private women's junior college in northern Honshu; a public elementary school and a private technical high school in Tokyo; and a public elementary school and public university in Okinawa. The data supporting this study include 21 one-hour tape recordings, and about 600 pages of field notes and related documents.

I did not set out to investigate school rules per se. Rather, having studied Japanese education, I find that some interpretive observations I would like to put forward may be organized under the topic of school rules. I would applaud the production of an ethnographic inventory of
Japanese school rules, or an intensive field study of rule-related behavior in a particular Japanese school setting, but this article is neither. Rather it is an examination of some differences between Japanese and American school rules and behavior, perceived in cross-cultural encounters. The rules on which I focus are not selected randomly, objectively, or solely by insider criteria. They are the rules that stood out to an outsider, me, in observing Japanese schooling or that stood out to Japanese informants in explaining themselves (or their observations of American-style schooling) to me. Because my focus is on a particular broad contrast between Japanese and American school cultures, identified by members of each society in interaction with the other, I will concern myself with differences to the near exclusion of similarities. I certainly do not mean to cast Japan and America as polar opposites. Indeed, it is the general similarity of schools-as-cultural-institutions in Japan and the United States that makes an interpretation of differences worthwhile. Given the variety of my sources, I will support my discussion with uncontextualized quotes and examples, identifying informants with generic descriptions like "High school teacher," or "Mother of elementary school children." (For a discussion of research methods and researcher bias and for a thorough presentation of contextualized data, see Hill 1993.)

Contrasting Japanese and American views regarding appropriate student behavior have been highly evident in my work with Japanese students in American university settings. While American teachers tend to view Japanese students as academically lax or dishonest, Japanese students tend to observe manners of respectful dress, gesture, and speech which Americans overlook or misinterpret as "sucking up." This contrast has been equally evident in my visits to Japanese classrooms, such as Hirono's, and in interviews with Japanese teachers. One high school teacher told me that he beat students for failing to remain in their beds after midnight on an overnight fieldtrip but that he would not severely sanction a student for copying another student's work or for plagiarizing from an encyclopedia. Indeed, he assured me that a student would never be expelled from his school for any amount of copying or plagiarism but that a student would typically be sent home for a violation of the dress code and could be expelled for continual violations. I asked him how he responded if a student came to school with an inappropriate hairstyle: "If she is a girl, I send her home or send her to the bathroom to put her hair in a better style. If he is a boy with long hair, maybe I cut the hair right then."

It is in the emphasis with which different types of rules are enforced, rather than in the letter of the rules, that this U.S.-Japanese contrast is most apparent. For example, it was clear from the behavior of Hirono and his students that they shared an awareness of a rule or rules against sharing answers in the context of the lesson. By asking a student to sit down rather than parrot a classmate's answer, by eye contact, positioning in the classroom, and other body language, Hirono made numerous
efforts to suppress or counteract answer sharing behavior. By whispering, pantomiming, passing notes, and so on, students implicitly acknowledged the rule by circumventing it covertly. But neither students nor teacher appeared to view the rule as a moral imperative or to view its continued transgression as a sign of disrespect or dishonesty.

Rules pertaining to dress, grooming, and mannerly comportment, so apparent in Hirono's classroom, are also common in American schools. But American students are not issued booklets listing many pages of such rules, as Japanese middle and high school students typically are, and American teachers do not enforce such rules as strictly as do Japanese teachers, or with nearly such general compliance from students.

Many outsiders have noted an emphasis on comportment or a deemphasis on "academic honesty" in Japanese schools. But their interpretations have frequently suffered for lack of cultural perspective.

The impressive manners of Japanese school children, in combination with their high academic achievement, has moved observers such as Benjamin Duke (The Japanese School: Lessons for Industrial America, 1986) and Richard Lynn (Educational Achievement in Japan: Lessons for the West, 1988) to praise Japanese schools and to tout them as models for American reform. Such accolades tend to suffer, however, from the culture-blind assumptions that behavior observed in Japanese schools carries the same meaning it would in U.S. schools and that apparent relationships among educational treatments and outcomes can be preserved in translation from Osaka to Omaha.

Other observers have denounced Japanese schools based on their perception of overstrict discipline and rampant academic dishonesty. Ken Schoolland, an American who taught English at a Japanese university, grew so disillusioned with Japanese education that he wrote a would-be exposé, Shogun's Ghost: The Dark Side of Japanese Education (1990). In my view, Shogun's Ghost succeeds as an earnest account of American and Japanese educational values in conflict but fails as an exposé for the same reason that the accolades fail. The author neglects to interpret behavior in Japanese schools as expressive of an ethos different from his own.

Although Shogun's Ghost is a general indictment of Japanese education, it is interesting that Schoolland frames most of his objections to Japanese behavior in terms of rules and their enforcement. Japanese schools, he concludes, are bad in the first place because they do not enforce rules that they ought to (such as rules against answer sharing on tests) and are bad in the second place because they do enforce rules that they ought not (such as rules against long hair) (Schoolland 1990).

Roles of Schools

Educational anthropology has perhaps no greater mission than to remind educators of the obvious yet easily overlooked fact that there is
more to schooling than book-learning and more to education than schooling. Wherever schools operate, they transmit culture far in excess of their explicit curricula. Yet schools never entirely eclipse the educational influence of families and other social institutions, or the web of social interactions, commonly called "personal experience," to which learners may attribute much of the culture they acquire.

The role that schools play in enculturation and the role that insiders expect of schools vary from group to group and society to society. To some extent this variation is determined by differences in the lessons different learners must master. For example, Kpelle bush schools supply training in Kpelle folklore, while Amish schools do not. But even where similar ideas or beliefs are transmitted in different societies, the responsibility for transmitting them may be allocated differently among schools, families, and other agents of enculturation.

In my view, differences between U.S. and Japanese school rules and rule-related behavior may be best understood in light of different roles schools play in enculturating American and Japanese children. I will compare the roles allocated to schools in each society with respect to two broad enculturative tasks: the sorting of students through academic competition, and the moral education and discipline of children.

**Academic Competition**

Compared to U.S. schools, Japanese schools are allocated less responsibility in sorting students through academic competition, despite (or perhaps because of) Japan’s infamous scholastic entrance examinations.

No aspect of Japanese education has attracted more attention, from foreign or Japanese observers, than the examinations used to regulate school entrance, especially at the high school and college levels. Although less feared than the college exams, high school entrance exams determine which students will attend the best academic high schools, where best is largely defined to mean best at preparing students for the college exams. Each Japanese university and college administers its own annual entrance examination, a rigorous, fact-oriented, objectively graded achievement test, based on the national secondary curriculum as mandated by Mombusho (the Ministry of Education). Although teacher recommendations and other factors may be considered, exam scores are by far the dominant criterion for screening applicants. Students focus their efforts toward college exam preparations in early high school, or even middle school, and secondary schools place high emphasis on exam preparations. Most students attend commercial juku and yobiko (cram schools), which offer exam-oriented instruction on weekends and after regular school hours. The students read self-help study guides and exam strategy primers. Many, boys especially, study one or more additional ronin (masterless warrior) years after high school in order to maximize their chance of success, and some may at times live up to the saying “Yon to go raku” [four hours, success; five hours,
failure], recited in reference to an examinee's sleep habits. In its extreme manifestation, this is the shiken jigoku or juken jigoku (examination hell) that American observers have criticized and that Japanese themselves are quick to condemn:

Middle school teacher: The examinations are severe and merciless.

Recent high school graduate: The examination system is a kind of torture.

Mother of two elementary school children: The more I think of education and its problems, the more I think of the entrance examinations.

As Thomas Rohlen has observed, "Hardly a soul in the entire country will say anything publicly in its favor" (1983:81). Yet the examination system endures. Why?

Anthropologist Samuel Coleman has suggested that the exams serve the interests of Japan's politically powerful industries (personal communication, 1989). Leonard Schoppa, in *Education Reform in Japan: A Case of Immobilist Politics* (1991), attributes the system's stability to bureaucratic gridlock. I have argued (Hill 1993:124-125) that the examination process is a "rite of passage" in the technical sense introduced by Arnold van Gennep in his classic *The Rites of Passage* (1960[1908]).

I also believe that the system endures because it provides a relatively fair and objective standard for allocating desirable career tracks. As John Singleton observed in reviewing a draft of this article, "Parents and the public decry the effects of exam pressure on the kids, but they can think of no other incorruptible system for allocating scarce places in the educational tracks that lead to economic and social advancement." As a result of its gate-keeping function, the exam system helps to preserve notably low levels of competition among Japanese schoolmates by maintaining the major locus of competition outside the schools themselves.

A quarter century ago Christie Kiefer noted, "By means of the entrance examination system, competition is taken out of the classroom into an impersonal setting in which contact and communication between competitors is minimized" (1970:67). But while the competition surrounding the entrance exams has received ample attention in recent scientific literature, the relative lack of competition in Japanese classrooms has not been widely noted. In fact, much less direct competition between classmates occurs in Japanese schools than occurs in U.S. schools.

American schoolchildren are commonly segregated by ability in first grade reading groups. Gifted children and children with low aptitudes or learning disabilities are identified for special treatment. Elective curricula at the secondary level tend further to segregate children by ability. Poorly performing students may be required to repeat a year or a course in order to progress through the system. Large numbers of students drop out at the secondary and postsecondary levels.
ily or permanently interrupting educational careers while their schoolmates proceed. Grades assigned differentially among classmates are significant in determining which students may enter top universities, professional programs within universities, and graduate schools.

By ability-based segregation, by differential advancement, by attrition, and by grading, U.S. schools sort schoolmates in ways that profoundly affect their future social roles and privileges. As Goldman and McDermott put it, "In a school system that has all children pitted against each other in the name of celebrating the best, we have become preoccupied with documenting and sorting out the half of our children who do not do as well as their fellow citizens" (1987:282).

To American teachers and students, competition in U.S. schools is familiar to the point of invisibility. But as Japanese students at an American university, my informants have been surprised by the competition they encounter:

Japanese student at an American university: American students in my biology class really care for their grades. Sometimes after a test, one says "What did you get?" But the other person won't show them the grade. Or they say "You're bad for getting an A. You cheated." But the person is really happy they got an A. When they get an A, they smile and show their happiness freely, even though the students with D or F are sad. I was surprised to see one student almost crying.

For the duration of Japanese compulsory education (through grade nine), students are not segregated by ability. Elementary kumi (classes) typically study as a unit for two years at a time, remaining intact under the guidance of one teacher through first and second, third and fourth, and fifth and sixth grades (Leestma et al. 1987:25). Tokuo Kataoka notes that Japanese elementary and middle school teachers sometimes select han (class subgroups) by physical height or by existing relationships among children, but not according to ability (1992:73). In fact, if ability is considered at all in the formation of kumi and han, it is to integrate more and less talented students as heterogeneously as possible. Japanese secondary schools offer few electives, which serve to segregate students by ability in U.S. schools.

Japanese students are virtually never made to repeat a year or a course due to academic failure or lack of ability. At all levels, including college, once Japanese students have been accepted to an educational institution, the overwhelming majority proceed from grade level to grade level in lockstep with classmates and graduate on schedule. Dropouts are rarer than in the United States, and most attrition occurs at transitions from one level of schooling to another.

Although grades are assigned by Japanese teachers, they are far less important in determining academic and career futures than in the United States, and parents may look to grades more as indicators of "normal" progress than as indicators of excellence. Some informants
have suggested that good grades may encourage a student to strive to pass the entrance exam of a top university and that grades may be referred to when teachers write recommendations on behalf of their former students. But “grades per se are not regarded as important or as ultimate measures of achievement by students and parents” (Mashiko 1989:61).

When asked directly, informants agree that kyōdo (competition) occurs in Japanese schools, as in other areas of Japanese society. But while informants volunteer few comments and examples about competition in classrooms, they overflow with comments on the competitiveness of entrance exam preparations, which they sometimes refer to as juken sensō (examination war).

In Japan, as in America, the enculturation process produces, reproduces, and maintains a specialized and stratified society. In both societies, formal education plays an important role in sorting students for various social roles. But in Japan the sorting is largely accomplished by the entrance examinations, first when high school entrance exams sort students across a spectrum of vocational and academic high schools, and second when university entrance exams determine which colleges students will attend and whether they will attend college at all.

In the United States, high schools and professional schools often rank their graduating students serially, or by quartiles, thus heightening competition among classmates. In Japan, the schools themselves are ranked. Universities are ranked from first to last in popular magazine articles, and in a city with ten high schools every resident knows their precise hierarchy, determined mainly by the number of graduates they place at top universities. Thus competition is heightened among schools.

Universities vie for higher prestige in order to recruit applicants. High schools vie to place graduates at the best universities. Middle schools vie to place graduates at the best high schools. Although entrance exam performance is measured individually, with deep ramifications for the individual’s future, schoolmates are encouraged to feel like members of an academic team. They prepare for “the big exam” as American students might prepare for “the big game,” an event in which they will compete with the students of rival institutions. Singleton would add that Japanese teachers, unlike their American counterparts, are free to act as team coaches without also needing to serve as referees; the exam system serves this function (personal communication, 1995).

Not only is intraschool competition minimized by approaching exams, it may also be minimized by prior ones, since the exams sort students by ability level before they enter the school. Entrance exams help to bolster a school’s commitment to its students, and to their successful advancement and graduation, because the school has prescreened and, in an important sense, “adopted” its students.

Thus Japanese academic competition may be said to be focused between schools as opposed to within them, both in the sense that schools...
compete with each other and in the sense that direct competition among students occurs mainly during transitions between schools, when students are pitted against students from many schools and not just against classmates.

**Competition and Cheating**

In the introduction to *Shogun’s Ghost: The Dark Side of Japanese Education*, Ken Schoolland recounts how he first grew disillusioned with Japanese education in reaction to students sharing answers during an exam:

> The cheating was fairly crude, and little effort was made to disguise the intent. Usually students just nudged closer to each other, straining to get a glimpse at each other’s exam. . . . Catching a few, I thought I would make an example to the other students by turning them into another regular [Japanese] teacher who was monitoring the exam with me. To my surprise, the other teacher just grinned and shrugged when I told him of the infractions. The penalty? “Tell them not to do it, and watch them more closely.” [1990:xii]

As an American educator, I sympathize with Schoolland’s reaction to such apparently dishonest behavior on the part of Japanese students and such nonchalance on the part of their teachers. But this reaction has more to do with American educational culture than with any moral lack in Japanese students and teachers.

Because U.S. schools are allocated great responsibility for sorting students academically, academic competition is ubiquitous within them. Therefore, behavior such as plagiarism or answer sharing by an American student may seriously harm other students. Such behavior subverts educators’ sorting efforts and undermines the appearance of fairness in the sorting process. No wonder we view it as dishonest and reprehensible. No wonder we establish written plagiarism policies and threaten to expel students caught copying from another student’s exam. The common American term for such behavior, *cheating*, itself conveys that we view education as a rule-governed competition.

For Japanese students, however, “cheating” during class recitations and routine school exams neither harms other students significantly nor undermines a basic function of the school. In Japan, future social roles are not determined by managed competition in schools. Therefore, Japanese do not view such academic cheating with the moral indignation that Americans do. In fact, the most negative connotations of “cheating” and “academic dishonesty”—although I have resorted to such expressions in writing to an American audience—are not present in emic views of most answer sharing and plagiarism in Japanese school settings. To be sure, *plagiarism is not tolerated during school entrance exams*, where examinees are commonly separated by empty desks, proctors monitor them closely, and the discovery of illicit answer sharing may
elicit public outrage. But for the purposes of day-to-day classroom education, cheating is not cheating.

It is true that in Japanese schools, answer sharing may interfere with a student's acquisition of subject mastery or may unfairly affect the assignment of grades (although grades are less important than in the U.S. context). For these reasons answer sharing is explicitly prohibited during tests and many other activities. Indeed, when I have observed classrooms such as Hirono's, it has seemed to me that Japanese teachers work hard at discouraging illicit answer sharing.

But the negative consequences of answer sharing are mitigated, in the Japanese context, by a positive association. While answer sharing is discouraged, teachers value the cooperative, anticompetitive, one-for-all-and-all-for-one attitude evidenced by answer sharing. Whereas American teachers encourage students to excel relative to schoolmates, Japanese teachers encourage students to "fit in" and to succeed as a team. (See Hill 1993:130-135 for a discussion of this point.) Even when against the rules, answer sharing may be viewed as overenthusiastic helpfulness.

Over sake and appetizers, two Japanese teachers who were also students at my University reversed the traditional ethnographic interview by asking about my classroom behavior. "Why do you teach wearing jeans?" "Why do you answer stupid questions?" "How can you leave the room when the class is taking a test?" One teacher had observed me leaving math exams temporarily unproctored, in order to run an errand or talk with a student. Both assured me that they would never leave students unsupervised during a test, because their students would pass answers. "Japanese teachers must not take their eyes from the students," said one with a grin. They seemed resigned to this aspect of their jobs and completely unconcerned by any moral implication that their students were dishonest. It seems that they viewed answer sharing not as a despicable form of cheating but as the natural tendency of appropriately cooperative students—a tendency to be controlled where it interfered with instruction, but not to be reformed.

Moral Education

Compared to U.S. schools, Japanese schools are allocated more responsibility in the moral education and discipline of children, with legitimate authority extending to domains of behavior and methods of correction reserved to parents in the United States.

Just as their role in academic competition may help to explain why Japanese schools de-emphasize rules related to academic honesty, their role in moral education may help to explain why Japanese schools emphasize rules related to citizenship and comportment.

By "moral education" I mean the intentional teaching of normative social values, the taboos and imperatives that in any society serve to nudge individual behavior in directions compatible with group needs.
The most apt Japanese translation is *do toku* (path of virtue), which is the name given to citizenship classes in Japanese schools. Despite the imprecision of identifying Japanese ethical concepts with "morality," "moral education" and "do toku" similarly connote authoritarian training in public comportment, with the objective of character development.

Although moral education is valued in the United States as well as in Japan, it is more central to the curriculum of Japanese schools. Throughout compulsory education (six years in elementary school and three years in middle school), *do toku* is a distinct area of instruction with articulated themes:

1. Importance of order, regularity, cooperation, thoughtfulness, participation, manners, and respect for public property;
2. Endurance, hard work, and high aspirations;
3. Freedom, justice, fairness, rights, duties, trust, and conviction;
4. The individual's place in groups such as the family, school, nation, and world;
5. Harmony with nature and its appreciation;

Moral education classes meet only one hour per week but are viewed as fundamental to the curriculum. Teachers in all subjects are expected to stress *do toku*, in part by enforcing school rules.

It is clear from the rules themselves that Japanese schools exercise broader moral authority than do American schools. The following written school code, shared by a private middle and high school, is more concise than most but otherwise typical:

I. Purpose:
   A. These regulations are based on our school's educational principles.
   B. All students must follow this code.

II. Coming to school and going home:
   A. Do not come to school by bicycle, motorbike, or automobile.
   B. Report to the teacher's room when coming to school on a holiday.
   C. Do not stop at restaurants, coffee shops, arcades, or pachinko parlors on the way to or from school.

III. School uniform:
   A. Wear the uniform when coming to school, even on holidays.
   B. Wear the summer uniform from April 1 until October 31.
   C. Get permission in order to wear a modified uniform due to sickness.
   D. Boys must wear a very short hairstyle.
   E. Girls must wear an appropriate hairstyle [less than shoulder-length, or in a bun or French braid].
   F. No bangs more than eyebrow length.
   G. No permanent, hair gel, dye, or anything else that reflects badly on our school.
   H. No pierced ears. No nail polish. No makeup.
   I. On cold summer days it is okay to wear long-sleeved shirts.
   J. In the winter it is okay to wear the school cardigan, for boys, or vest, for girls, under the uniform jacket. [Schools are unheated in Okinawa,
but students are not allowed to wear coats or sweaters.]
L. Do not modify the uniform in any way. [Four figures are attached
depicting boys and girls in summer and winter uniforms, with many
details annotated, e.g., “Skirt length is seven centimeters below the
knee,” and “White socks with no stripe.”]

IV. Tardiness, absence, and cutting class:
A. Attendance will affect the grade.
B. After 5 instances, the teacher will call the parents.
C. After 10 instances, the teacher will ask parents to come to the school.
D. After 15 instances, the student can be suspended.

V. School life:
A. Good behavior is needed, such as proper greeting, proper speech to
elders, cleaning, and tidying.
B. Do not bring anything that you don’t need for study.
C. Do not eat while you are walking.
D. Do not use equipment without permission.

VI. Afterschool life:
A. Behave well as a student of our school.
B. Do not go to any disco or nightclub.
C. Do not smoke or drink alcohol.
D. Do not dance, except for folk dancing.
E. Do not ride double on a bicycle or motorbike.
F. Do not go out after 8:00 p.m. (junior high) or 10:00 (high school)
without parents.
G. Do not acquire a driver’s license without school permission.
H. Do not travel or go camping without school permission.
I. Do not get a part-time job.

VII. Any students who does not follow these regulations will be warned,
suspended, or expelled from our school. [School Regulations, Showa
Middle School and Showa High School, Okinawa Prefecture]

Note the lack of specific prohibition against academic “cheating,” and
the detail with which dress, grooming, attendance, and logistics are
addressed. Note that the school regulates student behavior outside
school property, and after school hours, in matters typically left to the
discretion of American parents. That Japanese schools are expected to
regulate student behavior outside school is suggested by rules caution-
ing against “anything that reflects badly on our school,” and rules
regarding behavior en route to or from school (i.e., while in school
uniform and visible to community members).

A Japanese community may judge a school whose student misbe-
haves, in the same manner an American community may judge the
student’s parents. It is typical for Japanese schools to set curfews and to
prohibit camping, out of town travel, acquisition of a driver’s license,
part-time work, and so on. When students misbehave away from school,
it is common for teachers to get involved:

High school teacher: When one of my male students shoplifts hairspray at a
supermarket near our school, I try to reform him. This is a lot of extra work
for me. It is the usual procedure that I go to the store, where the student is
taken into custody, and apologize to the manager for him, giving back the hairspray. It depends on the manager's decision whether he calls the school, the police, or the student's house. He usually calls the school, because Japanese people tend to think that youngsters are students who belong to one school rather than children who belong to one family.

Bringing the student to school, I order him to write an essay on how he feels about his deed. While he is working on the essay, I report the shoplifting incident to the head teacher of the grade, who is supposed to inform the person in charge of discipline and the vice principal. The head teacher holds a meeting to discuss punishment and the way of reforming. Before attending the meeting, I have to read some documents concerning the student and his family, and understand his character, so that I will not only give the information to the attendants but also exploit it so as to reform him or discuss it with his parents. In the meantime, other teachers know the trouble and feel sorry for me, being relieved to hear that the student does not belong to their home-rooms.

After the meeting, the student's parent is usually called to the principal's office and is informed that his/her son has to be confined to his home and study or help his parents for three days. I visit the student's house twice and the head teacher does once in the evening or when we do not have class in order to talk about his act, life, and future course with the student and his parents. I sometimes give precise advice to his parents such as to remove a TV set and a telephone from his room so that he will study harder. Since it is considered ill-mannered for parents and students to criticize teachers, the student and his parents obey my suggestion, unless his parents strongly oppose it.

Even after the probation, I observe him for a while for fear that he may repeat certain troubles, and telephone his parents to exchange information on his life at home and school. His conscientious study habits or involvement in club activities several months after the incident make me feel comfortable, despite the fact that I will never forget what he did until his graduation. [Excerpted from a written account, Okuyama, 1993]

The fact that Japanese teachers routinely advise parents on specific disciplinary measures and that parents usually follow that advice is indicative of the Japanese school's moral authority. Imagine an American shopkeeper or police officer calling a juvenile shoplifter's school in preference to calling his parents. This is the typical procedure in Japan:

Middle school teacher: When one of my students gets in trouble with the police, they call me, as well as the parents. Sometimes they just call me, and I have to go get him.

According to several informants, Japanese tend to believe that parents are too easy on their children but that schools have the moral authority and resolve to properly punish a delinquent child and to take aggressive steps to reform her or him. In fact, according to Ames (1981:83), police who take pity on a contrite juvenile caught smoking will sometimes call parents instead of school officials in order to protect the child from the severity of the school's response.
Moral Education and Strict Discipline

American observers may be charmed by the comportment of Japanese school children, but they are likely to be disturbed when Japanese teachers resort to corporal punishment or other strict discipline. Although Article 11 of the School Education Law specifically prohibits the use of taibatsu (corporal punishment), defined to include hitting, kicking, and forcing a child to stand or sit in one position for an extended period of time, many Japanese teachers do, in fact, strike children as a disciplinary technique.

Interviewing Japanese teachers and nonteachers, I encountered a broad range of opinions regarding the use of physical punishment in child rearing, from forthright advocacy to vehement opposition. The variety of opinion is similar to what I would expect from Americans. But when Japanese are asked how they would react to acts of corporal punishment in schools, a distinctly Japanese pattern emerges. Whereas Americans recognize the prerogative of parents in deciding how children should be disciplined, Japanese recognize a similar prerogative of teachers and hesitate to deny a teacher's right to use taibatsu, even when personally opposed to corporal punishment. A mother of two school-aged children once told me that she disapproved of all corporal punishment. She said that she would never strike her children and hoped that their teachers would not strike them. But she went on to say that she would not forbid a teacher to strike her child and that "teachers must choose their policy."

Americans, raised to view discipline as an inalienable responsibility of parents, tend to misinterpret disciplinary behavior in Japanese schools. They may assume that because Japanese schools are strict and regimented, Japanese parents must be stricter still, and Japanese childhood an unrelenting boot camp. In fact, Japanese parents are less strict than American parents, as experts in comparative child rearing attest. In terms developed by John and Beatrice Whiting, Irvin Child, and their associates (e.g., Whiting and Child 1953:91–98), the independence training given American children is categorically harsher than the dependence training given Japanese children. According to Harumi Befu, Japanese child rearing is characterized by a quiet soothing infancy, minimal punishment, minimal separation from parents, feeding on demand, allowing children to sleep with parents, and tolerance of disobedience (1971:152–159).

In Learning to Go to School in Japan, Lois Peak describes how she was propelled into field-based research by the intriguing discontinuity between ethnographic descriptions of Japanese preschool children at home—"indulged, highly dependent on their mothers, and unaccustomed to strict enforcement of rules for proper behavior"—and Japanese children in preschool and elementary school—"obedient, mature, self-reliant, and cooperative" (1991:xi). Peak's working assumption was that "the answer must lie in the Japanese home, in something that Japanese
mothers 'did' to their children at about the time they entered preschool" (1991:xi). But in the process of fieldwork, she reluctantly abandoned that hypothesis in favor of one she found less intuitive: that the transition was managed by the preschools themselves and "that the role of Japanese teachers in inculcating proper social behavior was more important than that of Japanese mothers" (1991:xii). In the context of Japanese preschools, Peak discovered and capably documented a role that I would argue belongs to Japanese schools at all levels: that of primary enculturative agent for teaching proper public behavior.

Just as competitive entrance exams and noncompetitive classrooms may complement and perpetuate each other, a similar complementary relationship may allow Japanese homes to be places of amae (indulgence) while schools take the lead in discipline. Several Japanese teachers have complained to me that they are pressured to be kibishi (strict) by parents who are themselves indulgent. John Singleton has noted that during his own fieldwork, "Parents repeatedly encouraged teachers to be more kibishi in their relations with junior high school students but resisted any suggestion that they could be more kibishi with their own children" (1989:13).

When viewed with an appreciation for the role of Japanese schools, the use of corporal punishment by some Japanese teachers seems no more surprising than the use of corporal punishment by some American parents. Japanese people, regardless of their personal beliefs about corporal punishment, view most incidents of its use in schools as routine and unremarkable.

But incidents judged abusive (by Japanese standards) attract a great deal of public concern. In Shogun's Ghost: The Dark Side of Japanese Education (1990), Ken Schoolland recounts dozens of cases reported by Japanese media in which students were seriously injured as a result of abuse by teachers, or as a result of ijime (student bullying) encouraged or tolerated by teachers. Despite public concern, Schoolland viewed these cases as a serious indictment of Japanese moral conscience, since nothing was done in their aftermath to "reform" Japanese schools. But this indictment is similar to an indictment based on the prevalence of "cheating" in Japanese schools. Both depend on the assumption that Japanese and U.S. schools have the same enculturative functions.

Although certainly not the norm, child abuse by teachers in Japan is common enough to deserve recognition as a serious social problem. But the problem may be put into cultural perspective by analogy to the problem of child abuse by parents in America. While abusive parenting is not the American norm, it is a disturbingly common pathology in a society where parents are given great responsibility in disciplining children. As incidents are reported, Americans react with horror and concern. But we do not consider the obvious remedy of revoking parents' authority. Parental responsibility for discipline, integrated within the role of parents and in balance with the roles of other enculturative
agents, is vital to our enculturative process. The role of Japanese schools in moral education and discipline is similarly vital to Japanese enculturative process.

Conclusion

Noting that Trobriand Islander fathers exert little authority over their children, an American observer might mistakenly conclude that Trobriand children lack a male authority figure, when in fact this is the mother's brother (see Malinowski 1927:9–10). American observers of Japanese schooling risk similar confusion where the role of Japanese schools differs from the role culturally assigned to U.S. schools.

Relative to the United States, Japan is perhaps the most striking example of a society with similar present needs but a disparate cultural history. As postindustrial societies, Japan and the United States share similar problems of communication, subsistence, social control, economic and political organization, and of most immediate interest, enculturation. But in societies with disparate histories, it stands to reason that similar enculturative needs may be met differently and by different enculturative agents. It is therefore important for the educational ethnographer to ask not only what is taught and learned in Japanese schools but also how this complements or coordinates with what is taught and learned in other social settings. It is important, in other words, to consider the role of schools as well as their function.

With rule-related behavior as a focal point, I have identified two significant ways in which the enculturative roles of Japanese and American schools differ. Compared to U.S. schools, Japanese schools place less stress on rules related to academic competition and imbue them with less moral significance, because Japanese schools are less responsible for sorting their students competitively. Compared to U.S. schools, Japanese schools place greater emphasis on rules related to comportment, because Japanese schools are more responsible for the moral education and discipline of students.

By noting ways in which similar enculturative functions are allocated differently among schools and other social institutions in Japan and the United States, we may understand why behavior different from our own endures in Japanese schools while neither deprecating nor idealizing that behavior unrealistically.

Consider the much-bemoaned fact that, while Japanese elementary, middle, and high schools maintain high standards of academic achievement relative to the schools of other nations, Japanese postsecondary schools do not, and many Japanese students graduate from a university without studying or attending lectures regularly. This "paradox" has dismayed many observers and led to widespread disparagement of the quality of Japanese higher education. The situation seems less grave, however, when compared with the situation at U.S. high schools, where many students invest more energy in social events than in academics.
and where rebellious self-expression may be tolerated or even encouraged. As Thomas Rohlen has observed, "There is good reason to argue that a Japanese high school diploma is the [academic] equivalent of an average American bachelor's degree" (1983:160). Perhaps the Japanese university experience is roughly equivalent to the American high school experience, with respect to students' personal growth and exploration. Perhaps "knowledge acquisition" and "personal exploration" are enculturative needs shared by young Japanese and Americans but met differently because of differing enculturative roles of Japanese and American high schools and universities. It is a question meriting further research.

I have written this article with three loosely defined audiences in mind: academics and researchers in educational anthropology; Japan specialists or those with extensive firsthand experience in Japanese schools; and educators with an interest in Japan.

For educators, I hope my points about academic competition and moral education in Japan were somewhat surprising. Even for readers familiar with Japan's "examination hell" and high academic achievement levels—aspect of Japanese education widely reported on in the United States—it may come as a revelation that in some respects Japanese schools are less competitive and less academics-focused than U.S. schools. These are important considerations in achieving a balanced and realistic view of Japan's educational system, which has often been presented unrealistically, as a model of shining success or abject failure.

For Japan specialists, I doubt that I surprised you. It would neither astonish nor displease me if my points about academic competition and moral education seemed modest, even obvious, to many long-term observers of Japan. But I hope I have made a convincing case for why these matters deserve closer scrutiny and better reportage than they have received. In the process whereby Japanese infants become Japanese adults, it may be that noncompetitive classrooms and the teacher's strict comportment training are as fundamental as competitive entrance exams and the mother's indulgent dependence training.

For the educational anthropology community, I hope the article will serve not only as an example (specimen anyway) of ethnographic research and cultural interpretation in an international school setting but also as an invitation to pursue the foci of school rules and school roles in other contexts. To me, the question of school roles could serve as a defining touchstone for educational anthropology: What, from various cultural perspectives, are schools for?

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Notes

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1. Ruth Benedict, in her classic The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture, contrasts “morality” with a system of Japanese concepts such as giri, defined as “righteous way; the road human beings should follow; something one does unwillingly to forestall apology to the world” (1946:134). Another indication of the Japanese view lies in literal translation of kōsoku ihan, which I have glossed as “the breaking of school rules.” The expression is written as two compounds of two characters each. The first compound translates directly as “school rules.” The second compound concludes with a character denoting bending or warping but begins with a character that by itself denotes the condition of being “different” or “mistaken.” The Japanese value of conformity is embodied in this equation of difference and error. Used to denote rule breaking, the term also supports a presumption that deviants are not willfully evil (as “morality” would have it), but merely mistaken or different. When American children misbehave, they risk being judged “bad.” Japanese children risk being “mistaken” or “different”—strange from the perspective of others, thus subject to ridicule or ostracism.

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