

# Comparative Ways Out of the Spiritual Collapse of Japan (Part 1)

日本の精神文化崩壊の分析と解決に関する二極的見地 (上)

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## 要 旨

明治維新ならびに、第二次世界大戦敗北が主な引き金となって、日本は欧米の文明に習った近代化を急速に推し進めた。その結果、民主的政治形態が確立し、科学技術や産業もめざましい発展を遂げた。経済も急速に発展し、多くの国民が物質的な豊かさを享受できるようになった。

反面、「欧米に追いつき追い越せ」のスローガンの下に始まった近代化の思想が、日本より欧米の方が優れていると考える傾向を生み、日本が自信と誇りを失ってしまったようだ。

「校内暴力」、「いじめ」、「引きこもり」、「学級崩壊」、「モンスターペアレント」などの社会問題は日本でも深刻の度を増しているが、アメリカではすでに半世紀前から問題となっていた。さらに現在急速な経済発展を遂げている国々でも同様の問題が起き始めている。

著者らはこの点に着眼し、上の社会問題と日本が大きな影響を受けたと考えられる西洋文明の物質的側面との関連を検証し、それぞれの異なった観点や分析を開示し、その解決法を模索した結果がこの論文である。今回は、アンドウが論点を解説し、宮川がその論を展開した前半部分を提示している。

宮川は日本の社会問題の解決を、欧米に見習うだけでなく、日本古来の精神文化の再評価を通して日本人であることに自信と誇りを取り戻し、現代社会に役立てる知恵を自らの文化の中に見出すことによって独自の問題解決を試みることを提案する。

これに対してアンドウは、上の現象は近代化の過程でどうしても避けられないもので、日本固有のものとは捉えがたいという観点から、次回の論集においてその論を展開する。

## Introduction

This paper is an attempt to begin a polemic on the causes and solutions to Japan's current social problems. The opposing views, presented in two parts, examine the impact of modernization as manifested by the Japanese post-war economic miracle of the 1950's to the 1980's and the "lost decade" of the 1990's when its economic expansion came to an impasse. In this paper, Miyagawa provides a cursory look at the first view. The writer's perspective of the consequence of modernization is that western ways of thinking began to influence the people's mentality resulting in the lack of confidence in being Japanese as well as the eventual decay of spiritual traditions that served to hold the society together. In other words, external forces in the form of western ideologies are seen as the main impetus of change that transpired in Japanese society. Hence, the call for revisiting and reevaluating its moral, ethical and spiritual traditions takes center stage in the possible solutions to many societal problems.

In the next writing, Ando's view will be elaborated. Ando's perspective contends that the current social problems are a natural phenomenon of change in any given society. Social problems take place as a by-product of a society in transition. They are inherent of an organic process of development brought about by both internal and external forces in the modern world. In the case of Japan, this view requires a careful examination of its people, history and the different ideologies, religions and moral code of conduct that served to strengthen and solidify the power of rulers in a particular period prior to modernization. It also demands a thorough look at the role of external forces of modernization namely western ideologies that develop into a specific kind of relationship with Japan. The realization, therefore, of workable and explicit solutions to Japan's social problems could only then be achieved.

### Miyagawa's Perspective

#### Modernization versus Spirituality

It is widely known that Japan's modernization started with Meiji Restoration in the mid 1800s but is less known that the country had to be through yet another wave of modernization, which took place right after World War II.

Both cases of modernization were triggered by Western forces which were

commanding the domineering power across the globe. At the beginning of the modernization effort of Japan, Western influence was limited to science and technology. However, in due course, Western ways of thinking began to influence the Japanese people's mentality. What happened as a result was lack of confidence in being Japanese as well as moral and spiritual decay.

### Results of the Breakdown in the Spiritual Tradition

Japan in its modern history has demonstrated rapid economic growth and remarkable technological and scientific development. As is the case with any phenomena in this world, Japan's modernization has its negative side which takes the form of social ills. Among them are school violence, *hikikomori*, and classroom anarchy, and they are increasing in both the number and seriousness.

**School violence** first attracted social attention when Japan was enjoying the economic boom from 1960 to 1980. During that time Japanese people realized that higher academic achievements would promise better salaries. As a result, people began to set a greater value on the academic career than any other abilities. This inclination of overly emphasizing educational qualifications brought about the practice of allotting students to a percentile called *hensachi*.

As people become heavily concerned about *hensachi*, they begin to regard those with high *hensachi* scores as candidates for a success in the world, while those with low scores are labeled "dumb" or "stupid." They are considered as losers, no matter how talented in non-academic fields.

Under this circumstance, frustration and stress are accumulated in students with both high and low scores. High-achievers are under pressure always urged to strive more, whereas low-achievers are under frustration being either disdained or ignored. When their frustration reaches the saturated point, they resort to either violence or truancy. Some end up in duels, violence to teachers, and destruction of classroom and teaching materials. Others start bullying. There are also some who play truant or drop out. Among these acts, the first and most conspicuous was school violence.

According to the criminal report issued by the National Police Agency from 1979 to 1981, the number of students arrested for school violence amounted to 6,000 in 1976, which increased to 9,000 in 1981. Eighty percent of these offenders are junior-high students. This problem widened its scope and in late 1990s even primary schools started to have incidents of this kind.

**Hikomori** or social withdrawal attracted public attention about a decade later. Afraid of school violence, including psychological offense or bullying, some students stop going to school. Some of those who played truant also drop out of school. If they abandon themselves and shut themselves in their rooms, they will be categorized as *hikikomori*. This phenomenon is elusive and difficult to grasp because the main symptom is withdrawal.

According to Shizuo Machizawa, psychiatrist and specialist in *hikikomori*, *hikikomori* is mainly caused by parents' excessive expectation and children's passivity or suppression of their desires and ambitions (Shiokura, 2002). Preoccupied with the social norm that values only intellectual efficiency called *hensachi*, these parents have no ears to listen to their children but single-mindedly urge them to study.

These children, on the other hand, wishing to be accepted by their parents, try to live up to their parents' expectations. When they fail in their effort, they withdraw themselves from the society and in extreme cases end up in killing themselves, killing their family members, or a parent killing his or her *hikikomori* child.

**Gakkyuhokai** or classroom anarchy started to attract public attention when NHK broadcasted a documentary under the same title in 1998. Since then the incidents have become more rampant and now can be seen even at a nursery school level.

These days, mass media often mention the current trend of nursery school education which urges its teachers to praise misbehaving pupils as unique and offensive ones as active. Although this method of education may have some positive effects, its negative effects, including prompting children's misbehavior, are prominent.

Those lacking social manners carry over their attitudes to primary school. As

a result, some walk around the classroom, others jump on desks, and yet others go in and out of classroom during a class session. When pupils see their teacher incapable of controlling the misbehavior, the whole class follow suit and the class falls into a state of anarchy.

For the issue of *gakkyuhokai*, specialists are now putting the blame on not only previously mentioned nursery school education but also the lack of family education. Since a few years ago, parents who make self-centered requests to their children's teachers have been tormenting the teachers. Those parents, despite their negligence of family education, are said to be causing teachers' psychological breakdown as well as *gakkyuhokai*.

### In Search of a Solution

The above examination reveals the lack of moral and spiritual tradition in the current Japanese society. Tracing back the recent history of Japan, we run into one of the biggest events, namely modernization.

Japan succeeded in its attempts in the field of science and technology, but was confused culturally. The confusion comes from the fact that Japan had to take in foreign ideologies, which were imposed by the West, without having enough time to digest and take root in the society. The following are some of the main examples of the difference in thoughts between Japan and the West.

One of the most significant differences of Western way of thinking from that of Japan is that the former is analytical and divisive, while the latter is enfolding and inclusive. The most typical example of the analytical, divisive Western mindset is science and technology. Western science and technology have developed through phenomenal analysis and its logical explanation. Those engaged in these fields have endeavored to explain world phenomena by means of science, which eventually inflated human desire of bringing the phenomenal world under control. This kind of Western attitude runs counter to Japanese worldview nurtured by Shintoism.

Typified by the Shintoistic notion of regarding nature as the sacred abode,

Japanese people traditionally nurture the notion of living in harmony with nature. However, in the course of modernization, this **harmony**-oriented mentality gradually gave way to **competitive** ways of thinking among Japanese people.

Ideologies imposed by the United States in the form of postwar-colonization policy also affected Japanese mentality. Having been made to demolish all the stories about Japanese historic heroes and replacing all the textbooks on traditional morals and ethics with those of democracy, liberalism and individualism, Japan has been suffering from social and cultural confusion.

Fair and equal treatment of everyone advocated by democracy was interpreted as the negation of hierarchical social system and brought the customary practice of **respecting for others** to an end. Liberalism was interpreted as freedom to do anything without **consideration** to others. Individualism was interpreted as the right to make decisions irrespective of circumstances.

Thus the traditional Confucius values of respectful to elders, considerate of others, and polite in manners gave way to non-respectful, self-centered, and willful attitudes. Buddhist teaching of non-attachment to desire, which is the source of suffering, was ignored in pursuit of **material wealth**. To sum up, Japan has lost touch with the values of consideration, benevolence, harmony, appreciation of divine protection, composure in sight of calamity, and readiness to render selfless service for something bigger than the individual self in an effort to adapt Western ideologies of autonomy, human rights, democracy, liberalism, and individualism. Worse than all, in pursuit of Western science and technology, Japan has lost pride and confidence in not being “Western.”

The above implies that Japan can win back its confidence by reevaluating its moral, ethical, and spiritual tradition. The society has changed, and people may find some of the tradition too obsolete. At the same time, there are ideas and teachings that give inspiration to solve current social ills. It is for Japan to re-examine what it gained and what it lost in the course of modernization.

The recuperation will require effort of each individual, but as the saying goes, “God helps those who help themselves.” Without excluding foreign ideas, Japan will have

to make the best use of its inclusive nature and find the balance between the East and the West to become healthy and happy.

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