

Japan: what “third” education reform

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Mark Rebick
Editor

Japan: what “third” education reform?

The various plans for reforming the education system conceived by the Japanese Ministry of Education over the past fifteen years, since the mid-1990s, have often been presented as *being part of* or *leading up to* the “third education reform”, *daisan no kyōiku kaikaku*. The expression “third reform”, by which we are to understand “third major reform” as it is sometimes spelled out, *daisan no ōkina kyōiku kaikaku*, appears in official documents from the Ministry and in the media¹. It has also been adopted in writings in English and even in French. Used very frequently in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the expression was somewhat eclipsed by the phrase “education renaissance”, *kyōiku saisei*, under the Abe government (2006-2007), although it still appears in recent works and articles (see for example Fujita 2009).

This “major” reform does indeed affect many areas of the education system, and in fact comprises a range of reforms such as the following:

- changing the status of the national universities, which went into effect in 2004,
- the plan adopted in 2003 to promote “education geared towards the 21st century”, aimed at redefining compulsory education (primary and lower secondary school) and changing the way teachers are trained,
- the application in 2002 of the 5-day week in primary schools and the dissemination of watchwords such as *yutori kyōiku* and *ikiru chikara*, measures from which the system is now moving away again, but which were both intended to create a school system which “left time” for children and gave them “energy for life”,
- and of course, the revision of the Fundamental Law on Education (*Kyōiku kihon hō*) of December 2006...

And the list goes on, with many other sometimes contradictory changes.

But the subject of this paper is not the detailed content of this very... protean reform. Rather, my focus will be its designation as the “third (major) education reform”, and consequently, the use of the concept of reform in the history of the Japanese education system. Following from this, I will discuss the generally-accepted chronological segmentation of the history of education in Japan since the start of the Meiji era (1868-1912).

¹ See for example: <http://www.crn.or.jp/LIBRARY/TODAY/9810.HTM> (available in May 2010); <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/kyouiku/dai3/3gijiroku.html> (available in May 2010).

Studying the use of the expression “third education reform” is, I find, very revealing in the attempt first to understand the true nature of the education reforms introduced in Japan in recent years, and furthermore, to determine the strategy – especially the use of words and certain discourse – implemented by those promoting these reforms.

Indeed, defining the current reform as the “third” necessarily suggests, to state the obvious, that it has been preceded by two former reforms. Moreover, it suggests that this reform is part of a continuum with the other two, or at least places them on the same level. The two reforms thus defined by default, or at times explicitly, are that of 1872 and that of 1945-1947. At first glance, or if we skim over the history, this may appear to be an obvious chronological decision. But is it really a relevant choice, and if so, on what basis? In other words, and this is the first aspect I would like to examine: why have these years been designated as years of “major reform” and/or singled out from the numerous reforms which punctuate the history of the Japanese education system since the Meiji Restoration? What makes this current reform the “third (major) reform” rather than the sixth, seventh or umpteenth?

1. The current reform with regard to the history of the education system and teaching methods in Japan

If we take the most obvious criterion for a “reform” – which is the publication of legal provisions or decrees (whether or not they contain the word *kaikaku* in their title) which replace a framework established by a former legal provision or decree by defining a new framework for the education system as a whole or in part – we arrive at a fairly large number of “reforms”. In any case, those affecting compulsory education (primary and lower secondary school) certainly number more than twenty: ...1873, 1879, 1880, 1881, 1885, 1886, 1890, 1891, 1900, 1903, 1907, 1912, 1917, 1926, 1941, 1947, 1951, 1958, 1968, 1977, 1989, 1998, etc. And the total can be higher still depending on the particular topics and levels of education or types of schooling considered.

Of course, not all of these reforms are “major”. However, even if defining what makes a reform “major” is no easy task (and by the way, this is not defined in any of the texts in which the expression appears), to anyone who knows a bit about the Japanese education system, there is *a priori* no reason that others, beyond the two implicitly targeted by the term “third reform”, could not also be qualified as such. Further on, I will discuss the two reforms in question, namely the *Gakusei* of 1872 reform and that of 1945-1947. But for now, I wish to mention several others which could just as well be called “major”:

- that of 1886, through which Mori Arinori (1847-1889) entirely reworked the education system established by the *Gakusei* fourteen years earlier, and set up the structure which would remain in place for the next half-century;
- that of 1903 which fundamentally changed the textbook system, establishing the textbook framework for the next forty some years;
- and that of 1907 which extended the duration of primary school from 4 to 6 years.

Moreover, even if it was only partially implemented and lasted only 4 years, how could one not qualify as “major” the reform of 1941, which entirely restructured the Japanese education system even to the extent of changing the names of the various schooling levels and subjects taught? Not to mention the reforms of 1955-1958...

If we add two other criteria – the status of the textbooks and the status of the official teaching directives – which, as I have attempted to demonstrate in past work (Galan 1997, 2001), are particularly relevant to the chronological segmentation of the history of education in Japan since the start of the Meiji era, it is impossible to define only two major periods since Meiji.

It is difficult to identify any fewer than six periods in the evolution of the institutional and legislative framework for the Japanese education system, which essentially alternated between periods of semi- or relative liberty (1872-1886, 1912-1923 and 1945-1958) and periods of “non-liberty” (1886-1912, 1923-1945 and 1958-2004), during which the teaching directives, which clearly have the status of imposed instructions, strictly regulated teachers’ practices in the classroom (I have studied this personally in the case of language teaching (*kokugo*), particularly reading instruction, see Galan 2001).

Changes in the status of the language textbooks are fairly consistent with this segmentation, give or take a few years. Textbooks were published freely and used freely until 1886, when a first draconian authorisation system restricted their publication, and even their use in the classroom, until the year 1903. From 1904 to 1947, textbooks were mandated nationally, with the same books being used across the nation. Then, following a short period of liberty from 1947 to 1952 (which did not however cancel the occupant’s purely ideological censorship), in the mid-1950s the trend gradually reverted to an authorisation-based system similar to that in place from 1886 to 1904, at least in terms of its impact on teaching methods.

Thus, to return to my focus here, when we examine the evolution of the directives on teaching methods and textbooks against the backdrop of the history of the education system, it is clear that the assertion that the current reform is the “third” (even major) one simply does

not hold. Nor is this assertion any more valid in regard to the general history of educational practices which, Japanese specialists generally agree, comprises at least seven distinct periods, and sometimes more (see Miyahara 1974, Ishikawa 1987, Galan 1997, 1999, 2001, Sato 2003).

Thus, from 1868 to the present, when we look at both the history of educational practices and the history of the Japanese education system in general, even if we apply the strictest possible criterion for what makes a reform “major” – i.e. that to be qualified as “major” a reform must affect the teaching methods, the legislative framework, the status of the directives and the status of the textbooks – we can identify no fewer than 4 “major” periods, and as many “major” reforms, plus the current one, bringing us to a total of five: 1872-1886, 1886-1945, 1945/1947-1955/1958 and 1955/1958-present.

2. 1872 and 1945... the first and second “major reforms”?

As we have seen, from the assertion that the current reform is the “third” or the “third major” reform, it implicitly follows that there was a first reform in 1872 and a second in 1945-1947. But by the reverse process of that we have just completed, which consisted in assessing whether any other reforms could also justifiably be considered “major”, we can also look at these two reforms (1872 and 1945-1947) and question what characterises them as “major”? So I will now focus my analysis on the term “major reform” as it has been applied to 1872 and 1945-1947.

In the French dictionary *Le Petit Robert*, the word “reform” is defined as follows for our context here: “A significant change made to the form of an institution in order to improve it, to ensure that it produces the best possible results” (1995: 1902). In *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, we find the following definition: “The removal of faults or errors, especially of a moral, political, or social kind; amendment, change for the better; etc.” and, further on “an improvement made or suggested; a change for the better” (2002: 2508). As for the *Kokugo daijiten*, it gives a similar definition for the word *kaikaku*: “*seido, sôshiki, mata wa shûkan nado o aratamekaerukoto*”, “to transform/improve a system (an institution), organisation or practices” (1993: 422), while the *Nihongo daijiten* states: “*seido ya shûkan nado o yori yoku aratameru koto*”, “to improve a system [institution] or practices” (1989: 304).

Basically, the three languages share a common definition of the term “reform” which can be summed up as follows: 1) a system exists, 2) it is changed for the better, 3) the initial system, now improved, remains in place...

2.1. *Gakusei* of 1872

If we accept the definition above, then 1872 and the *Gakusei* enacted in this year poses a bit of a problem. If we say that the use of the word “reform” implies changing or improving a system, organisation or institution, the problem here is that the *Gakusei* in fact does something totally different; it does not reform an existing system, but founds a completely new one. The *Gakusei* marks a break with the past and a new foundation, but it does not reform anything. In terms of the structure, organisation, philosophy and educational approach, it breaks with the education practices (we cannot here use the term system) of the Edo era (1603-1868). The nation shifts from an education system which could be defined as local, not-mandated, non-egalitarian and fee-based to an education system designed to be national, centralised, egalitarian, and ultimately free of charge.

Thus, the first “reform” in the strict sense of the word would be that of 1873, and not the enactment of the *Gakusei* in 1872. In fact, this reform of 1873 and those which followed until the end of the 1870s, should in my opinion be viewed as improvements on the newly-founded system created with the enactment of the *Gakusei* in 1872, and not as proper reforms in their own right. From this perspective, then the first "major reform" is that of 1879-1881, or even more probably that of 1886. Indeed, while the latter did change many aspects of the *Gakusei*, it kept the education system national, centralised and egalitarian, and aimed to make it free of charge as soon as possible.

Along the same lines, saying that the reform of 1945-1947 is the second major education reform, and that the 1872 reform is the first, would suggest that the system which remained until the defeat in 1945 was the same one set up during the very first years of Meiji. This is clearly not the case. The system which served as the education framework until 1945 – the experts all agree – was that implemented by Mori Arinori in 1886.

2.2. The reform of 1945-1947

We arrive at a similar problem, although to a lesser extent, when we try to determine what justifies qualifying the reform of 1945-1947 as “major”. Based on its symbolic aspect and what it has come to represent, and considering its most urgent objective which was to put an end to the military education system in place prior to and during the war, the reform of 1945-1947 would appear to be a “major reform”. But here again, when we take a closer look, we find that it is not that simple. The reform of 1945-1947 did change the general ideology of the education system, shifting from a subject-based militarization of minds to a pacifist and democratic education system centred on the individual. And it did reorganise the various

“stages” in the school system, adopting the 6-3-3-4 system. But aside from these aspects, it was less of a break with the past than a return (not only symbolic) to the early Meiji ideals: liberty, the child and the individual. In terms of teaching practices, it was a return to the active methods (advocated in Japan starting in the 1910s), although in this respect 1945-1947 merely opens a parenthesis which closes again in the mid-1950s.

Thus in many ways, the reform of 1945-1947 can be viewed as the extension of an initiative which, while certainly not that of the war years, was nevertheless already partly present before the war. Increasing the period of compulsory schooling to 9 years, for example, which is thought of as one the main post-war achievements, had already appeared in the decree of 1941 and had been called for before the war by a number of Japanese education experts.

Moreover, and it is the nature of the current reform which forces us to look at it this way (I will come back to this point further on), by returning to the early Meiji principles, the reform of 1945-1947 reaffirmed the equality of all in the eyes of the education system; more specifically, by requiring the State to ensure universal access to equal education, free of charge, it maintained the initial decision to have a centralised and State-controlled education system. In this regard, with the exception of the duration of compulsory education, it did not make any changes to the initial proposal of 1886, or even that of 1872.

Lastly, still according to the same reasoning we used for the reform of 1872, calling the reform of 1947 the second major education reform, and the current one the third, again suggests that the system which has remained in place until now is the same as that established immediately following the war. Again, as everyone knows, this is not true; the current system was established starting in the mid-1950s, once the Monbushô had regained all of its prerogatives of control over the education system.

3. The nature of the “third (major)” reform

So why refer to this reform as the “third major” education reform when, if we take a closer look at the history of education reforms in Japan as we have just done, this is clearly not the case?

Allow me first to say one thing: I am certainly not suggesting that all of the people in or outside of Japan who use the term “third education reform” do so in the spirit I will develop here. Many use the term unconsciously, as a matter of discursive ease – I used the expression myself in the late 1990s – and not out of support for the ideas I will now present.

So why proclaim the arrival of the “third (major)” reform when this assertion is inaccurate?

The first answer that comes to mind is to consider that this assertion is worthwhile mainly as a symbol, and is meant to make an impression in people’s minds. The intent is to make the current period into a period just as *important* as the early years of the Meiji era or the immediate post-war period, times in which, in both cases, the decisions made have subsequently been presented, or recognised, as crucial to the country, times in which the guidelines defined for education policy in Japan served for the next half-century. Here at the dawn of the 21st century, this also appears to be the goal of today’s reformers.

Suggesting that the current reform is the “third” places the current initiative in the same category as these two former initiatives, the two most “progressive” plans ever passed in the Japanese education system – overlooking the fact that in both cases, they were followed by a *gyaku kôsu*, “reverse course” or “change in direction”, to use a term from the post-war period in Japan. It would seem that 1872 and 1947 are years which resonate with people, and which make sense. They are years that bring to mind energy for change, and renaissance.

Yet, taking a different vantage point, we could also think that the coining of what to me is an inaccurate phrase, the “third reform”, is also intended to limit any subsequent upheaval by placing the current reform within the philosophy of the two previous reforms. In this sense, it could be meant to reassure the public with regard to the intentions of the governments in power since the late 1990s by attempting to create popular enthusiasm for a reform which is far from being well-accepted, whether by teachers or parents, i.e. a large percentage of the population.

This brings us to the question of the true nature of this “third” reform, a “third” reform already announced twice before, according to Amano Ikuo (1998), in 1971 and again in 1984, but which at those times did not come to fruition?

The fact that these announcements did not produce results gives us some indication of the nature of the current reform, and it is worth considering this point for a moment.

In 1971, an OECD report, while emphasizing the high performance and essential role of Japan’s education system in the country’s economic success, firmly criticised the system’s excessive centralisation and the over-uniformity of the instruction given. Other reports followed, along the same lines, calling for reform... a reform which never came to pass. Indeed, this proposed reform included provisions which would mean a loss of prerogatives and power for the Monbushô, which its high-ranking officials refused.

The effort resumed with the arrival in power of Nakasone Yasuhiro (1918-), Prime Minister from 1982 to 1987, and his creation of the National Education Reform Council, *Rinji kyōiku shingikai*. But the call for a reform which would fundamentally change the Japanese education system did not receive the support it needed from high-ranking officials of the Monbushō in the 1980s. The country was doing well, the economy was flourishing, and there was no cause, simply for ideological reasons – to adopt policy in line with that of Great Britain under Margaret Thatcher and the United States under Ronald Reagan – to change an education system which, as far as the Ministry could tell, was perfectly adequate. Especially since, once again, the type of reform under consideration would require this Ministry to forego its prerogatives of control over education, and would therefore constitute a loss of power. Everyone, including observers abroad, saw the system as extremely effective, and modifying it would have been an acknowledgment that it was not as “perfect” as the nation’s highest officials claimed. Better to blame its difficulties on parents’ lack of involvement or television, or – already – to advocate a return to moral values.

It was not until the mid-1990s, particularly with the government (1996-1998) of Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryūtarō (1937-) that, due to the financial crisis which struck when the economic bubble burst, the creed of the high officials of the Monbushō began gradually to move from centralised and omnipotent interventionism to neo- or ultra-liberalism, which translated into an overtly deregulatory policy. Or in any case, beginning at this time, these high-ranking officials were no longer willing or able to oppose this new direction in governmental policy².

Based on the definition provided in the *Kokugo daijiten* or *Le Petit Robert*, the current measures do seem, at first glance, to constitute a “reform” in the sense that they appear to modify an existing institution. But is that all? Is it really a question of changing and improving the existing system? In reading the official documents produced by the Monbushō, the answer is clearly “No” (at least for the period up until the election of Hatoyama Yukio (1947-) in September 2009, whose policy on education is still vague). Indeed, the objective stated clearly in black and white (without even having to read between the lines of certain

² Although the focus of this paper is not a detailed study of the role of the National Education Reform Council in the reform of the Fundamental Law on Education, we can notice here that even if many of the neo-liberal reforms implemented in the 2000s were first brought to light and considered by the Council (*kokusaika* and *kosei* discourses, for example, already appeared in their reports), the Council did not actually suggest changing the Fundamental Law (thanks to Takehiko Kariya for his comments on this point). One of the main reasons for this, as I see it, is that, at the time of the Council (the early and middle 1980s), it was simply too early for such a radical reform. The issue was still taboo; the Council (somewhat contradictorily) had not completely abandoned the concept of egalitarian education, and the economic bubble had not yet burst, with all of the changes this brought to the domestic situation (for development of these questions, see Galan 2006).

speeches or reports) in the official texts published by the Ministry of Education over the past ten or even fifteen years is less about making changes than breaking with the past, less about improving the current system than scrapping it and rebuilding on entirely new, radically different foundations. To employ Nakasone's expression, it is now a matter of doing away with the post-war heritage. In education too.

As I see it, in this sense, the concept of reform has once again been overshadowed by the notion of a "break with the past", *danzetsu* or *owari*. For this policy, the turning point (or "break") was clearly December 2006, with the reform of the Fundamental Law on Education. This is not so much because of what the new Fundamental Law on Education stipulates, but rather what it permits or opens the door to. I will come back to this point.

Since the end of the war, without interruption, the Fundamental Law on Education of 1947 defined the legislative and (up to a certain point) philosophical framework for the Japanese education system, and was the law with which the Monbushô operated for more than half a century. It guaranteed national, egalitarian education, free of charge (for the first stages of schooling), and mandated that children attend school, whether public or private on the condition that the latter were recognised by the Ministry of Education. In all of these regards, I repeat, this framework was essentially the same as that set up by Mori Arinori in the mid-1880s.

Yet, for ideological and economic reasons, in the mid-1990s, this framework began to be seen as problematic by the political leaders in power. Converted by the siren call of neoliberalism, *shinjiyûshugi*, these political leaders chose to abandon the model on which the "new Japan" of the post-war period had been built. The successive governments undertook a policy which would allow them to cut education spending in the future, thus triggering and promoting the implementation of an education system which was no longer equal or egalitarian, but differentiated, *kakusaka* or *kaisôka*. The declared objective was to relieve the State of all of its current (costly) obligations in terms of (mass) education, with the exception, of course, of schooling for the elite and high-level researchers whose technical and scientific abilities are directly needed by companies and industry, and thus instrumental in increasing Japan's power in the world.

One of the notions most frequently used to justify this *kakusaka*, this differentiation, is that of *kosei*, the "individual". But here, this notion is used ambiguously and has nothing in common, for example, with the concept by the same name which was advocated in the post-war period. After the war, the legislature and many educators had the idea that the individual should be fulfilled in society, and that society and school had to enable this fulfilment, for all

individuals. The point of view today is different, and with the reform of 2006, the “responsibility” for individual fulfilment has been thrown back onto the individual himself and his family. Thus, ultimately, the State will no longer play a role, nor fund the material conditions needed to make this fulfilment possible. From the neoliberal perspective, the individual is expected to obtain education and fulfilment without the supervision of the State, which only intervenes at a later stage in the process, in order to “claim” the “most promising” and or best-educated individuals it needs to form the nation’s elite and ensure the Japanese industries’ predominance in key, strategic sectors. This is how the new Fundamental Law on Education must be read; it no longer stipulates the duration of compulsory schooling, no longer mentions equality of treatment for girls and boys, places supreme responsibility for education in the hands of the parents, dissipates the national nature of the education system by allowing for possible adaptation at the local level, acknowledges the public role of private educational institutions, and so on.

In this sense, another of the current reform’s key concepts is that of *danryokuka*, the “flexibilisation” or relaxation of rules on mandatory schooling. A Ministry of Education text dated 10 July 2004 clearly spelled out the need to establish a “flexible system of compulsory education”, *gimu kyôiku no seido o danryokuka*. The Ministry’s aim was to one day need only outline the common base of knowledge which must be acquired over the course of compulsory schooling, and allow local authorities to “invent the terms for applying it” (Monkashô 2004a). Although it did assert the need for the State to implement a system of compulsory education, free of charge, for all, as guaranteed by article 26 of the Constitution, this statement contained a flagrant contradiction, which the text quickly skimmed over, as did the other documents and the new Fundamental Law of 2006.

This policy is in essence the opposite of the social program contained in the Constitution of 1946 and the Fundamental Law on Education of 1947. The Koizumi governments never hid the fact that all of these reform proposals depended on the prior, and urgent, revision of the Fundamental Law on Education. A 2004 Monkashô document closed with a statement of the need to “revise the Fundamental Law on Education”, without which it would not be possible to “establish a new vision of education” (Monkashô 2004b).

By focusing on individuals, the Law of 1947 allowed (and even demanded) that education be adapted to individuals, as the content and philosophy of the first post-war directives attest (Galan, 1997). It was not the Law of 1947, but rather the counter-reforms of 1955-1958 which threw the education system into an egalitarian frenzy. On the other hand, the Law of 1947 prohibited any differentiation in treatment and the disengagement of the

State (see Galan 2006). Thus it did not need to be revised if reformers sought only to create a more flexible and individual-based education system. However, whenever the proposed changes involved implementing a principle of unequal or discriminate access to education, and relieving the State of its financial responsibility for mass education, revising the Law was imperative.

Thus, this was not just a question of reforming the institution, but a matter of organising the destruction of this institution and replacing it with a new one. In fact, what we are looking at is a paradigm shift. In my introduction, I mentioned the *Kyōiku saisei kagi*, which translates literally as “Education Renaissance Council”. But the role and philosophy of this council is more accurately described by its official English name, i.e. the “Education Rebuilding Council”. To rebuild, there is first a demolition, and in this regard, the “third education reform” is not only not the “third”, it is not even a “reform”!

Conclusion / proposition

I would like to conclude with a few personal thoughts and suggest some possible areas for further discussion.

First, I would like comment on the use of, the term “reform”, *kaikaku*, over almost a century and a half; used indifferently to qualify the changes in education legislation in 1872, 1873, 1886, 1903, 1947... and now, it is a vague, ambiguous term, with variable meanings, and has been used to designate things which, if they have anything at all in common, certainly do not have the same significance or impact.

What I would like to submit to you for discussion, to try to get a clearer understanding of the truth behind these multiple uses of the term *kaikaku*, is a view of the history of the Japanese education system in terms of two specific years, 1872 and 2006, which each represent a break with the past and (re)founding of the system, and which both involved a paradigm shift.

In the first case, that of 1872, the shift was from a non-mandated, local or community-based, learner-paid, or in any case non-national education system, to a national, centralised and compulsory system (which as soon as possible was also free of charge). Before the Meiji Restoration, everyone sent their children to whatever school they wanted, or did not send them to school, or hired instructors of their choosing to teach them at home, and each community created its own schools for its children, however it saw fit and could afford. This was true of the *hankō*, fief schools, and *shijuku*, private schools, as well as the *terakoya*, although these different types of schools did not serve the same purpose; and the *daimyō*

provided funding for the *hankō* in order to train the elite they needed (and only this elite) taken from the *bushi* class. It was a “non system”, non-centralised and non-egalitarian, in the sense that education depended solely on families’ choice, and was based not on “national programs” but on traditions (the classical curriculum) or immediate needs (reading-writing-counting for merchants, and later, “western” knowledge which was gradually introduced). Access to education depended on the wealth of individuals or communities and/or a person’s rank within his own social class.

Between these two shifts, I suggest that we can identify four “major reforms”: 1886, 1941, 1947, 1955-1958, the main characteristic of which is that they each translated important and different choices into practices to apply the paradigm (only the first paradigm, thus far). None of these reforms question or challenge the initial choice by Meiji (my first paradigm) for a national and centralised education system, which is State-controlled, public, egalitarian and virtually free of charge for the compulsory periods.

The picture is completed by a multitude of reforms of varying degrees of relevance or notice depending on the perspective or topic in question. For example, if we look at the history of textbooks and teaching methods, 1903 appears as a key year, as does 1907 if we consider the duration of compulsory schooling, or 1918 if we look at the higher education system. The main characteristic of all of these reforms is that they always change or improve an important aspect of the practices implemented by the 4 major reforms I have cited, but without challenging the fundamental choices they involved.

The second paradigm shift is that which laid the groundwork for the reform of the Fundamental Law of 2006 and the various education laws of the 2000s, with the 2004 law on national universities at the forefront. This paradigm shift has not yet gone into effect, since the process was interrupted by Koizumi’s departure from office and the defeat of the LDP. But it does now seem “possible”, and proposes a gradual transition from a national, centralised and egalitarian education system, based on compulsory education, and which is State-controlled and -funded, to a “non-mandated”, local or community-based, thus non-national education system³; the quality of all of its various components would gradually no

³ This assertion may seem exaggerated or provocative, but what I’m saying here is not that this will happen “for sure”, but that it is now a possibility and still the goal of the neo-liberal reformers in Japan. The issue of new ways of funding public education by the State is indeed a very complex question. It is true to say, for example, that while the “State Subsidies Law for Compulsory Education” amended in 2006 allowed the State to reduce the amount of subsidies for teachers’ allowances, the central government is still paying for it today. But, regardless of what measures are taken by present and/or future Japanese governments, what the new Fundamental Law on Education seeks to do is not so much to impose change as to make change possible, and unless the law is repealed or rewritten, its potentialities will remain a subject relevant to our times. Furthermore, there is no doubt that with the new law, the funding system for education became much more flexible. How flexible it will prove

longer be guaranteed by the State and receive less and less government funding. Essentially, it is a non-system which, in the vast majority of cases, places the burden of paying for education entirely on the families, who are thus free to send their children to whichever school they choose, as they see fit (including perhaps to the *juku* alone). Thus, in many ways, it appears that the education system will resemble that of the Edo era.

The last point I would like to address is the common feature shared by the three periods of reform of 1872, 1947 and 2006. One could assert, in agreement with Amano Ikuo (1998), that these reforms were all brought about in response to outside, foreign constraints. Yet, here again, if we analyse how the reforms were carried out, and particularly if we look at who supported them, the 1947 reform clearly stands out from the other two. To me, this only reinforces the paradigmatic nature of 1872 and 2006.

Indeed, in 1872 and 2006, education reforms were created against a backdrop of outside pressures and “foreign” models: the model of national, compulsory education as in the West and foreign pressure to open the country in 1872, and today, the liberal Anglo-Saxon model and the pressure of globalisation. Yet the choices made both in 1872 and in recent years were made by sovereign Japanese governments who were entirely free to carry out the reforms they wanted. Another common aspect to these choices is that they were imposed from higher-up, almost without the population’s knowledge, if not against its wishes, and in any case, without asking its opinion. Different choices could have been made; the outside pressure in 1872 and 2006 was ideological (geopolitical) or economic, or perhaps strategic, but it was not aimed at the education system, strictly speaking. But education was a preferred arena for implementing or accomplishing the ideological or political choices made. In 1945-1947, on the other hand, the Americans did mandate the reform of the education system, and no latitude was left to the Japanese themselves, although many were in support of the reform.

Thus, in this sense, the current reform cannot, in my opinion, be considered the “third major” reform, but must instead be viewed as the second “extremely major” reform, the beginning of a new paradigm, and that which will bring the system inaugurated in 1872 to an end.

to be in the near or more distant future is another question. I do not have the room here to discuss the financial aspect of the reform, but it is a key subject. See Kariya Takehiko’s seminal article: “The End of Egalitarian Education in Japan”, published recently (Kariya 2010), in which the Japanese sociologist shows how the transfer of education funding from the State to local governments contributes to the impoverishment of schools, and ultimately, the disappearance of the egalitarian nature of the Japanese school system.

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