Selection of newspaper articles from 1985-1990 by Steve McCarty (ones written in Japanese are in another file). It may be necessary to enlarge parts of this PDF file to make it easier to read.
Individualism vs. Individuality

To the Editor:

What alarms Dr. Munz in his Guest Forum article (Feb. 9) may be just one school of thought in the Japanese government. If individualism is a mere scapegoat for the side effects of authoritarianism, then that viewpoint will not stand up for long within Japan.

Here we might make a distinction between individualism and individuality. An engineer asked if my recent article on the Japanese as unique individuals was advocating their becoming more individualistic. No, that is up to them. Perhaps indirectly I encouraged them to bring out into the open what is natural and inevitable so that we may all enjoy their individuality.

If snowflakes were people, the unique crystal pattern of each would be their individuality. Individualism, as opposed to collectivism, is a sort of creed which values individual differences over group affiliation. In practice, a lot of selfishness is tolerated as a side effect of mental freedom with all its benefits for human evolution.

A collectively disciplined Japan is defended by age-old observations of rice-field slackers, the selfishness of small children, myopia and public apathy, equating them with individualism.

When individuality always faces the hammer, it manifests as rebellion or apathetic self-indulgence. Its higher manifestations can hardly emerge, while in freewheeling societies genius flowers amid the weeds of immoderation.

If Abraham Maslow’s formulation is true, the need for group affiliation and its attendant fear of ostracism cannot be exploited indefinitely, because all the fundamental needs up to and including a sense of belonging have been abundant-
Different kind of school year that makes sense

Guest Forum

By STEVEN A. McCARTY

A school year starting in September, with a five-day week, would be a profound change for Japan, but characteristics of its historical regard for international standards. The Prime Minister’s Ad Hoc Council on Education is reportedly poised to advise the government to move in this direction. Thus I would like to discuss potential reform of the school calendar, with particular reference to English education.

A school year reflecting the lunar calendar and agricultural cycles is not unreasonable. It is just inconvenient for international exchanges. The short-lived cherry blossoms, to be sure, at first appearance arouse the nostalgia for new beginnings in education and employment. Yet rather than at the busy beginning of the educational fiscal year, the trees would still bloom as beautifully toward the end of the school year when relationships are better established.

Japanese educational institutions prefer to hire fresh new graduates, even from abroad, although most of the latter graduate about 10 months before the fiscal year starts in Japan. The more qualified graduates can hardly be expected to wait that long, whereas a September starting time would allow visas and other paperwork to be processed during the summer.

Sister-school relations, as another example, are of interest on both sides for promoting international understanding. But speaking from experience in representing Kagawa Junior College, more reciprocity and therefore exchanges of faculty members. The all-English competence of their students is documented by both STEP text and university entrance exam reform.

In the circuit from community attitudes and central government policy to the individual student, teachers are on the front lines and have to be willing to carry out reforms. In-service training becomes necessary in a case such as English redirected to international communication.

As community attitudes evolve, educators and students will accordingly become receptive to wise reforms. Here the media can play an educational role, such as promoting competency in foreign languages to widen the circle of identity to the international community.

As Anshu Shimizu editorial in January challenged the Rinku-kaihatsu to make more far-reaching recommendations, and advocated a five-day school week for greater educational freedom. On June 7, the same editorial column in the vernacular supported the September to June school year for all, as well as seeking to reduce the number of hours children to spend more time with their children, and to let go of the arbitrary April starting time for the sake of internationalization.

America, England and other countries on or near the September norm with a full weekend would welcome such reforms as a sign that Japan really wishes to join the international community. A five-day school week is a bolder proposal than shifting to a September starting time, but the Rinku-kaihatsu would do well to endorse one side of the template.

While vested interests may oppose projected reforms, the trade-offs involved must also be recognized. You cannot have your cake (more Eng. lessons) and eat it too (a five-day week). In that case the concern could shift from the quality of English to their quality, including more extra-curricular exposure to English in context.

What began as a call from certain quarters may become a consensus when the time is ripe. At this stage educators can conscientiously study the Rinku-kaihatsu recommendations while considering the larger aims toward which they lead. To guide rather than cater to the community attitudes is one meaning of lifelong education, and a perennial task for us all.

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Emperors and rice inviolate

Guest Forum

By STEVEN A. MCCARTY

Rice as well as Emperors are core values of Japanese civilization. Research into ancient religion hints at their interrelation since the pivotal Yayoi Period (roughly 300 B.C. to A.D. 300). This in turn sheds light on the cultural meaning of emperors and rice to this day.

To recount ancient Japanese history may indicate just how venerable this heritage is. However, the arcane names of periods shed scant light on their cultural characteristics unless accompanied by lifestyle indicators.

Briefly, Old Stone Age culture prevailed for at least 20,000 years in a preceramic period before the first period with a proper name, the Jomon Jidai. Around 10,000 years ago the Jomon rope-design pottery appeared, yet this New Stone Age lifestyle was still basically one of hunting, gathering and fishing. These ancestors of the Japanese were religious, and their shamanistic animism may be termed proto-Shinto, for Shintoism was late to institutionalize in response to Buddhism.

What changed around 2,300 years ago was not just the style of pottery found at a place called Yayoi. Rice agriculture and metalworking from China and Korea brought a whole new livelihood and infrastructure for Japanese civilization. Rice agriculture fostered social organization as its complexity necessitated villages and government, the first steps toward a unified nation.

Archaeological evidence hints that villages were governed by divining the will of gods (kami). As the harvest of ample rice was by no means assured, the first public festivals (kami matsuri) were devoted to its success. To this day the Emperor performs rituals to the same effect.

As the Bronze and Iron Ages also arrived in the Yayoi Period, metalworking technology was pressed into the service of the festival. The mystery of dotaku bronze bells with no everyday use, for instance, is solved if they were festival ritual implements. Thus the Yayoi Period could be characterized as a theocracy of rice and metal.

During the same period the first extant Shinto shrines arose, such as Kumano and Ise. Before the Yayoi Period ended the nation-building had begun, with the emperor system premised by the Priestess Queen Himiko. The spread of rice agriculture throughout Western Japan in the Yayoi Period thus paved the way for nationhood in the subsequent Yamato Era.

Proto-Shintoism lives on in the protection of the purity of rice. Take the Bon dance, for example, which could be explained away as a Buddhist custom. The "Bon Odori" at the Takamatsuzuka Festival every August recapitulates the movements of the rice cycle from sowing to harvest, a preoccupation of Japanese religion for nearly a millennium before the advent of Buddhism.

This continuity of ancient religion serves to clarify that rice and emperors remain inviolable core values of Japanese culture. Therefore to regard rice as a mere commodity, or to equate the Emperor with the state, are both shown to be partially misconceived.

In the same spirit that the U.S. refrained from bombing Kyoto and spared the Showa Emperor war culpability, respect must also be shown for the cultural significance of rice. With rapid modernization eroding venerable traditions, to strike the core of Japanese culture can only harden its defenses.

Striking the core of Japan’s culture will only harden its defenses

What is a symbol anyway, and what does the Emperor truly symbolize?

One culprit may be merely the non-specialized use of the word "symbol." This is an important notion in the social sciences and humanities, particularly in the psychology of religion. Its technical meaning is distinguished from "sign," which represents something known. The sign for the state is the flag, while a true symbol represents something wholly ungraspable, a picture that no number of words can explain.

Normally, a symbol is an object or image pointing to a meaning beyond conceptualization. Symbolic language was there before rationality developed and remains in dreams, myths, metaphors, the arts and, indeed, all non-verbal communication.

Living symbolism can extend to a human being as in the expression “living Buddha.” Living National Treasures (ningen kokuhō) symbolize aspects of Japanese culture, while the Emperor epitomizes its totality. Internationally, children of intermarried couples are living symbols of world peace (het) achieved (sei).

As nationalism is not an arbitrary stage on the way to globalization, the state cannot be the ultimate referent of a symbol. It is rather the continuity of ancient tradition that the Emperor symbolizes. Wishes that he live 10,000 years point to the preservation of this heritage. The Emperor is thus a living symbol of Japanese culture.

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Speakers' corner

Communication a key to cultural liberation

By Steven A. McCarty

A new kind of human liberation is dawning as global travel and communication shatter the complacency of monoculturalism. This sudden communication from monoculturalism toward multiculturalism may spell the end of cultural liberation.

Monoculturalists tend to take relative customs and beliefs for granted as absolutes. Indeed, we can only become aware of possessing a culture in the first place by comparison with contrasting cultures.

Cross-cultural encounters reveal that even common sense assumptions differ radically among cultures. Foreigners in Japan face stark cultural differences reinforced by the conviction that Japanese ways are correct. To surrender one's own culture and obey local customs may be a stage beyond even mastering the language.

Relevance

Researchers with experience in Japan, such as John Condon and Doris Bartz, have pioneered studies of intercultural communication with worldwide relevance. Japan has thus contributed more than its share to this fledgling field, wielding its strength as a hedgehog in international interpersonal relations.

Monolingualism is a gatekeeper of monoculturalism. Should foreign language teaching become de rigueur, as communicative methodologies with intercultural training, perhaps language study should open the door to cosmopolitanism. However, cultural liberation can start with bilingualism, which is sufficient to foster the requisite sense of cultural relativity.

There could be monolingual exceptions who discover cultural liberation intuitively. By dint of study or introspection one might see the absurdity of his cultural assumptions. Or by living in different regimes of a diverse country, one might transcend provincialism. But acquiring foreign languages generally certifies the effort needed to meet other cultures halfway.

Language

Bilingualism and multilingualism are instrumental to cultural liberation but do not guarantee its term. The respective cultural systems behind each language need to be held in mind as standards for intercultural communication skills. Thus much purported communicative competence would need to be applied with appropriate ethical competence.

Cultures cannot meet uncompromisingly acquire the power or wealth by subduing others into one imperium. In a pluralistic world, not only will various cultures have to meet on a third, middle ground, but all cultures will have to meet in mutual respect for there to be communication.

Suppose two sides meet, one believing that we adjust ourselves to reality, the other side adamant that we create reality. If communication occurs, the former

In a pluralistic world, not only will two cultures have to meet on a middle ground, but all cultures will have to meet in mutual respect.
Biculturalism bridges oceans

Your editorial on Japan-U.S. public opinion trends (Feb. 11) suggested that internationalization is really mutual understanding. Presented in such a light, internationalization could be recognized as a need that still exists in the U.S. and elsewhere.

When enough individuals in a society gain accurate information about other cultures, and sufficient experience of cross-cultural interactions, then the perennial need for mutual understanding could influence the public agenda.

Greatly contrasting cultures like those of the U.S. and Japan can be most instructive to each other. Observing that even common-sense assumptions differ among cultures, we could realize that we ourselves possess a certain arbitrary cultural background. Learning to see other cultures in their own terms, we could understand their viewpoint on a certain issue in terms of their way of thinking.

The possibility of transcending cultural differences without relinquishing our uniqueness may also become evident. Communication based on mutual respect does not threaten the cultural heritage of either side but adds knowledge and coping skills to the cultural repertoire of those involved.

Biculturalism that bridges oceans could be the beginning of a multicultural awareness bringing about a reconciliation among cultures. Even if not seen as a "megatrend" until the 21st century, the movement from monoculturalism to multicultur- alism will be recognized someday as a sort of cultural liberation.

By the time our "half" baby reaches "majority," let Japan-U.S. relations truly benefit both sides equally and become a partnership based on mutual understanding. Friends cannot stay "mum" and lose the nerve of our vision.

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