

On the Education Reform of the Meiji Japan

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ABSTRACT. *The educational reform in the Meiji period was the beginning of the modernization of Japanese education. After overthrowing the shogunate, Meiji Japan began to carry out educational reform, and then issued many decrees, which referred to the education system of France, the United States and Prussia successively. This reform is carried out from the following aspects: popularizing basic education, revitalizing industrial education, developing higher education and attaching importance to developing normal education. In the reform, the relationship among politics, economy and education has been well handled, and finally an educational system with national characteristics has been formed, which conforms to the national conditions of Japan. The reform has achieved remarkable results, and these experiences and enlightenments are worth learning.*

KEYWORDS: *Meiji Japan; Education reform; Contents and enlightenments*

1. Introduction

In 1868, Japan carried out the famous "Meiji Restoration", from which it got rid of the crisis of becoming semi-colony and embarked on the road of developing capitalism. Through a series of reforms in politics, economy, culture, military affairs and education, Meiji Japan began to enter the ranks of advanced countries. In less than half a century, Japan has completed the modernization, which it took 200 years to complete in lots of western countries. The reason why Japan's economy has developed so rapidly, as its former minister Takeshi Aramu said, is that "an important reason can be attributed to the popularization and development of education"[1]. The establishment of Japan's modern education system started from the educational reform in Meiji period, and its reform experience is worth learning.

2. Background and Process of the Reform

At the beginning of its establishment, the Meiji government carried out three major policies, namely, enriching the country and strengthening the army, promoting reproduction and industry, and enlightening civilization. The basis of realizing these three policies was to popularize education and enlighten people's

wisdom. As Kido Takayoshi said, "The enlightenment of our people today is not really enlightenment. In order to prevent the shortcomings of ten years later, the only thing is to set up a real school... The foundations of an indestructible country are only human beings, while education is the only way to realize the continuous emergence of talents [2]. Then the idea of "developing a nation through education" was deeply rooted in the hearts of the people and became popular throughout the country. An educational reform to change the fate of Japan was about to come out.

2.1 School System and French Education, Education Order and American Education

In March 1868, the Five Oaths issued in the name of the Emperor put forward the basic principles of Japanese educational modernization reform, namely "breaking the old bad customs" and "seeking knowledge from the world" [3]. In 1871, the Ministry of Education was established to unify the leadership and management of science, culture and education throughout the country. In 1872, Japan promulgated the *School System*, which was the first educational administrative decree promulgated by the Meiji government. The decree was also regarded as the beginning of modern education reform in Japan. It strongly called for the abolition of the feudal education system, opposed "learning for the country", emphasized that learning was a means for individuals to live in a glorious and wealthy life; education should cover all citizens and every one should achieve equal educational opportunities; education contents should be practical, abolishing the "empty talk" of the shogunate period; The *School System* was formulated by referring to the educational models of European and American countries, and mainly by imitating France. However, due to their eagerness to succeed and lack of experience, the actual school attendance rate at that time was not high. In 1879, the government abolished *School System* and replaced it with *Education Order*.

In 1879, Japan promulgated *Education Order*, which was the second attempt to establish the national education system. Its characteristics were as follows: firstly, the central government relaxed the bureaucratic control over local education, and the local people elected the school affairs committee to manage the school; secondly, Secondly, the time for children to receive general education in primary schools is shortened to 16 months, and can be adjusted flexibly. In fact, *Education Order* has changed from centralization following the French educational system to local decentralization following the American style. *Education Order*, which was formulated mainly by Tanaka Fujino, imitated the laissez-faire American educational system, not because it was willing to emphasize the principle of freedom and democracy, but because it wanted to meet the requirements of Liberal Civil Rights and compromised to the realistic politics [4]. Therefore, instead of resolving the confusion in Japanese educational ideology and the problems in the educational system, the enrollment rate declined due to the weakening of the central control over public education. Therefore, *Education Order* was amended in 1880 to re-emphasize the government's control over education.

2.2 School Order, Education Decree and Prussian Education

In 1885, the Japanese government established the cabinet system. Mori Arinori was appointed as the first minister of the Ministry of Education to lead the comprehensive reform of the education system in the mid-Meiji period. He combined traditional culture with foreign educational reform experience, trying to explore a way that suited Japan's national conditions and prevented the full restoration of the old traditional education. Mori Arinori advocated that personal political, religious and social freedom were closely related to the independence and prosperity of the country, and the purpose of education was to make the country prosperous and strong. In 1886, Mori Arinori carried out a drastic educational reform and promulgated *School Order*. *School Order* was the general name of *Primary School Order*, *Middle School Order*, *Imperial University Order* and *Normal School Order*. A coherent school system based on primary schools was established in accordance with the *School Order*. It also established a dual-track school education system similar to Prussia, which distinguished elite education from mass education. At this time, Japan was attracted by the German model because the new cabinet headed by Ito Hirobumi realized that it would be more beneficial for Japan to develop modernization learning from a country with similar political and social conditions [5]. *School Order*, in fact, laid the foundation for Japanese nationalist education and occupied an important position in the history of modern Japanese education.

At the end of the 1980s, with the suppression of the Liberal Civil Rights, Confucianism's moral education theory and militarism conquered the western thoughts. Since then, "the national education policy has re-affirmed the traditional Confucianism, and the Western School has gradually been in line with the Nationalist ideology"[6]. Especially the *Constitution of the Great Japanese Empire* in 1889 established the state system of the modern Mikado system in Japan. In 1890, *Education Decree* issued in the name of the Emperor was promulgated, taking loyalty to the monarch and patriotism as the soul of the educational policy, and the nationalist education centered on Confucianism was established by the Supreme decree. It was a mixture of Shinto, Confucianism and modern nationalism, which set up moral standards for Japanese people in spirit. *Education Decree* finally completed the educational reform that began in the early years of Meiji and established the nationalist educational system. This educational system basically adapted to the needs of Japan's modern economic development, and met the requirements of Japan's domestic and foreign policies. Until World War II, no major changes had taken place. However, in the late Meiji period, Japan's educational reform further evolved on the basis of the nationalist educational system, accompanied by the strengthening of militarist education. This laid the groundwork for the emergence of fascist education, which was a great tragedy of modern Japanese education.

3. Contents and Characteristics of the Reform

2.1 Popularizing Basic Education and Improving National Quality

In the early years of Meiji, the government effectively promoted the popularization of primary education. In *Governance Order* promulgated in February 1869, primary schools

were required to be set up in all counties. In 1872, the Meiji government promulgated a new *School System*, whose guiding ideology was to popularize bourgeois-style national education, taking developing primary education as the primary task.

During the implementation of the new school system, the Meiji government implemented a supervisory system to improve the enrollment rate. *Primary School Order* promulgated in 1885 stipulated that parents were obliged to send school-age children for four years of education. In 1873, the first volume of primary school textbooks printed by the Ministry of Education for the first time contained the following text: "Everyone between the ages of six and seven should enter primary school to learn general knowledge. Primary schools should become places for the intellectuals, peasants, businessmen and technicians to learn and impart their skills"[4]. At the beginning, tuition was the main source of funds, but in 1899 the Meiji Government enacted *State Treasury Subsidies Act for Primary Education Funds*, and in the following year it revised *Primary School Order* to realize free education within the compulsory education years. Therefore, the primary school enrollment rate was rising. In 1873, the primary school enrollment rate was only 28.1%; in 1883 it reached 53.1%; in 1893 it reached 58.7%; in 1903 it reached 93.2%; in 1912 it reached 98.2% [4]. In less than half a century, Japan popularized national education, laying a good foundation for the rapid economic development.

2.2 Revitalizing Industrial Education and Cultivating Technical Personnel

At the beginning of the Meiji government, the basic policy of education was to advocate practical learning and establish vocational schools. As the Japanese historian Inoue Kowashi said, "Industrial education is invisible capital and the basic condition for making Japan prosperous and strong" [7]. Education must be combined with practice, and science and technology education must be consistent with the needs of industry. Since the early years of Meiji, especially since 1887, Japan's primary and secondary education and tertiary education had focused on Vocational and technical education for students, forming a huge industrial education network at the junior, middle and senior levels. Among them, secondary vocational schools were the focus of Industrial Education in Japan, which offered a variety of industrial subjects. The Meiji government is also financially supporting industrial education. "In 1894, *State Treasury Subsidy Act for Industrial Education* was promulgated. The State Treasury spent 150,000 yen annually to develop various industrial schools. In 1898, the amount increased to 250,000 yen, making industrial education more and more prosperous. From 1894 to 1898, apprenticeship schools increased from 3 to 23, industrial schools from 19 to 113, and technical schools teaching agricultural, industrial and commercial technology from 29 to 83. By 1912, there were 519 industrial schools with 748.69 million students, 7386 industrial schools and 340,000 students in Japan [4]. Japan's industrial education created a large number of secondary and primary technicians needed for industrial and agricultural production, which strongly promoted the revitalization of Japan's economy.

2.3 Developing higher education and training senior talents

In the early years of Meiji, in order to introduce advanced western science and technology

as soon as possible, the government adopted two methods: sending foreign students to study abroad and inviting foreign teachers to teach in Japan. However these two methods can only solve the urgent need. In the long run, it was necessary to develop Japan's own higher education in order to train high-level talents. In 1887, the Ministry of Education merged some schools into Tokyo University, which was the beginning of the establishment of universities in modern Japan. "In order to run Tokyo University well, the Ministry of Education allocated 40% of the total education funds to the University. And the high ratio remained until 1890 [4]. In 1886, the former Tokyo University was renamed Imperial University. By 1905, there were 48 universities and colleges in Japan, and by 1910, there were 7200 university scholars [8]. The modern higher education system was initially established.

2.4 Focusing on developing of Normal schools and Improving Welfare of Teachers

Normal education is the basis of developing national general education. Mori Arinori said the success of general education depends on teachers [4]. In April 1872, the Ministry of Education, in its *Presentation on the Establishment of Training Places for Primary School Teachers*, put forward that in order to meet the requirements of the times for education, it was imperative to establish a normal school as a matter of urgency. In June of the same year, in the *Current Plan for the Implementation of the School System*, it was clearly pointed out that the rapid construction of normal schools was second only to vigorously developing primary schools. Then, in the *School System* promulgated in September of the same year, it was clearly stipulated that besides primary schools, there should be normal schools. It was urgent to teach the principles and methods of primary school teaching. In order to further improve the normal education system and strengthen the management of normal schools, the government promulgated the *Normal School Order* in 1886, putting the training of teachers in the same important position as the training of national leaders.

In order to stabilize the teaching staff, the Meiji government took a series of positive measures to improve the social status and material treatment of teachers, especially primary school teachers. In 1890, the government stipulated that those who worked for more than fifteen years could enjoy a life-long pension, and their families could receive certain subsidies after their death. In 1896, the *State Treasury Subsidy Law on Teachers' Age Allowance in Municipal Village Primary Schools* was promulgated, which granted allowances to teachers who worked in a school for more than five consecutive years. In 1900, the Act was merged with the State Treasury Subsidy Act on Educational Expenses for Primary Schools promulgated in 1899 into the State Treasury Subsidy Act on Educational Expenses for Primary Schools in Municipal and Village Levels. In the new bill, the government spent one million dollars a year from the treasury as a teacher's age allowance and a special salary increase. These practices greatly improved the economic conditions of teachers and their political status.

3. Experience and Enlightenment of the Reform

In 1962, the Japanese government published the White Paper on Education of Japan's Growth and Education, pointing out: Since Meiji, Japan's economy and society have developed rapidly... The development of education is an important factor for this. Actually the experience of Japan's educational reform is worth learning from:

3.1 The Important Role of Government in Developing Education

The Meiji government ended the feudal separatism under the shogunate rule and adopted a centralized educational management system to ensure the implementation of various reform measures. Compared with the educational reform of the Westernization Movement in Late Qing Dynasty of China, the importance of the Meiji government in the educational reform is more obvious. The Meiji government attaches great importance to education, always adheres to the policy of "building a nation through education" and "governing education according to law". From 1868 to 1911, the Meiji government formulated more than 50 direct decrees on education reform. The great role of the government in the development of education cannot be replaced by other social groups. In a sense, there may be no development of education without the government's attention.

3.2 Giving Priority to the Development of Education

In the early years of Meiji, with limited finance, investment in education or economic construction seemed to be a dilemma. The choice of Meiji government leaders was that education should not wait for economic development; on the contrary, the training of Japanese technicians should be ahead of schedule. Japanese educator Hiroshi Hamada once summed up that in our country, we do not develop industry and factories first, then establish schools, but first establish technical schools to train graduates [9]. For the post-modernized countries, this preferential approach to education development is worth referring to.

During the Meiji period, the huge investment in education increased the financial burden of the central and local governments. In 1873, the average annual income of every household in the country was 30 to 40 yen, and the educational expenses paid were as high as 2 yen and 29 points [10]. In some areas, the compulsory education funds even accounted for 70% of the local funds. In 1900, four-year free compulsory education was implemented in Japan, and the funding for education increased sharply. In 1910, the average expenditure of local governments on primary education alone was as high as 40% of the budget [5]. It can be seen that Meiji Japan developed education under extremely tight financial conditions, but it enabled Japan to acquire abundant human resources.

3.3 Nationalization of Education

Japan is a nation that is good at drawing lessons from foreign cultures. Japan consulted

the educational system of various countries and combined with its own reality. For example, *School System* mainly imitates France; *Education Order* mainly imitates the United States; and the *School Order* mainly imitates Prussia. In the mid-19th century, in order to resist some western spiritual views and prevent the whole westernization, Meiji Japan put forward the slogan of "Absorbing Western skills and adhering to Japanese morality". In 1854, Sakuya Ikeyama put forward "the morality of the East and the skill of the West", which was later interpreted that the skill of instruments is based on the west, and the spirit of benevolence, righteousness, loyalty and filial piety are preserved in the east [11].

In the early Meiji period, the Japanese felt that they were backward and took a negative attitude towards traditional culture. The new educational system established under the influence of the Western School caused a certain degree of moral confusion due to the neglect of traditional moral education guidance [12]. This forced Japanese leaders to re-examine traditional ethics. In 1890, the Meiji Emperor issued *Education Decree*, which stipulated the educational goals and policies, as well as the moral standards of all the people, emphasizing loyalty and patriotism [4]. In short, in the early Meiji period, the government strongly advocated learning western culture, but after one or two decades of assimilation, it returned to the traditional Japanese culture. Eventually, Japan formed a modern education system with its own characteristics. As for its drawbacks, it will be elaborated in other articles.

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