

**The Child in Japanese Christian Context:
Christian Influence during the Meiji Era**

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Introduction

The 1906 painting “Attending School,” by Japanese impressionist painter Kojima Torajiro (1881-1929), uniquely captures a moment of Meiji era childhood. In it, two sisters are painted in the Western style on their way

1 Figure 1: 「登校」 “Attending School” by Kojima Torajiro



to school, which itself had only started becoming compulsory for all children during the young painter's own childhood. Despite their traditional dress, the younger sister is wearing a Western hat and the older sister has a Western umbrella and carries a bolt of cloth with which to practice sewing.¹

In their small way, these represent the revolutionary changes that were happening in society then affecting the lives of children. Fashion and equipment that once would have been rare and strange were now commonplace enough for use by children. Girls who would have previously been expected to stay home and tend to household chores were being equipped to take up roles in newly formed industries of the nation.

The Meiji Era saw Japan rush headlong to adopt Western technology, ideas, and institutions in an attempt to create a strong nation able to avoid colonization after centuries of isolation. The reentry of Christianity to Japan during this period was also due to this embrace of all things Western, and Christian influence on society was greatly disproportionate to the number of Christians. Yet, after the initial rush to modernize, Japan struggled to reconcile the new with the old, with reactionaries seeking a return to older traditions and Christians trying to discover how to be both followers of God and patriotic citizens of the empire. This paper will look first at the Christian bands that studied with the foreigners and received the gospel from them. The second part will consider the influence of Christians on the education system of Japan. The final section will consider the Christian model of practical works of compassion for children.

Christian Thought in Meiji Japan

The periods of time when Japan opened to the West, modernized, and restored Imperial rule after 250 years of the Tokugawa Shogunate is together called the "Bakumatsu" (End of Shogunate) and "Meiji Restoration." It began with the arrival of U.S. naval warships forcing Japan to open its ports in 1853 and lasted through the first decade of the 20th century until the

¹ Kojima, Torajiro. 登校. Oil. Takahashi: Nariwa Art Museum, 1906.

beginning of the reign of the Taisho emperor in 1912. With strict regulations still in place at the beginning of the period against contact with foreigners or travel overseas, most of the illicit activity of meeting with foreigners happened in places that were far removed from the center of the shogun's power in Edo. In the opposing domains excluded from normal participation in Tokugawa politics, there was an eagerness to learn from the foreigners and bring change to Japan.

Christian Bands

The first generation of converts to Protestant Christianity were largely from these domains with the strongest "bands" emerging from Kumamoto and Sapporo, where schools were opened for "foreign learning" and teachers hired from overseas who influenced the young scholars profoundly for Jesus Christ. "Captain Janes, an American teacher and an earnest Christian with puritanical ideals" converted many of his students in Kumamoto, with many of them making commitments to become Christian ministers.² Dr. William Clark, who experienced a similar outcome at the Sapporo Agricultural College, is still remembered in Japan for his farewell message, "Boys, be ambitious." Out of these bands arose a core group of Christians who spread the gospel they received from the foreigners but also sought to reconcile their new faith with Japanese thought and the samurai code.

Studies Overseas

At the same time, the shogunate itself was scrambling to deal with the problems of the forced opening and unequal treaties with Western powers and was seeking to learn how to modernize. As part of this effort, it sent its first mission to the West in 1860. However, there were similar missions sent out by the opposing domains as well as those who set out independently to travel to the West on their own. Many of these young men became Christians during their travels and became convinced that faith in Jesus Christ was the common foundation for the strength of modern societies.³ After the

² Hiromichi Kozaki, "Christianity in Japan: I," *International Review of Mission* 27, no. 3 (1938): 356.

³ Aizan Yamaji and A. Hamish Ion, *Essays on the Modern Japanese Church: Christianity in Meiji Japan*, trans. Graham Squires (Ann Arbor, Mich: Center for Japanese

Meiji Restoration in 1868, these Christians came back to Japan to play roles in the new government or to propagate their new-found faith.

Influence and Reaction

These early Christians, who largely laid the foundation for Protestant Christianity in Japan, had much in common. Their background was universally from the privileged warrior samurai class who both enjoyed a higher degree of education and were instilled with a sense of honor and obligation toward society.⁴ They were serious-minded young men who lived in a revolutionary time. The great project of their era was to build a strong nation that would not come under the domination of foreigners. But the only way to achieve this was for themselves be influenced by the foreigners from whom they needed to learn. Many of them initially headed overseas with the strategy of mastering Western knowledge for the purpose of expelling the barbarians from Japan.⁵

During the Meiji era and beyond, public opinion would swing violently between headlong embrace of all things Western and reaction against rapid change. The early Japanese Christian leaders were largely concerned with reconciling Christianity with Japanese thought and being an authentic part of the emerging nation of Japan. Unfortunately, most of them were far too serious to touch on Christian views of children or childhood.

Studies, University of Michigan, 1999), 71. One of the men sent by the Shogunate to England was Confucian scholar Nakamura Masanao who saw Christianity as the root of English culture. Nakamura would be baptized as Christian in 1874 as the first prominent public figure. See also Y.-p. Kuo, "'Christian Civilization' and the Confucian Church: The Origin of Secularist Politics in Modern China," *Past & Present* 218, no. 1 (2012): 245. "Mori Arinori circulated an enquiry to the United States' most prominent educators and asked for their honest opinion on education. In response, William A. Stearns, the president of Amherst College, opened his letter by claiming that 'the very foundation . . . of all Western civilization and substantial improvement of nations . . . is the Christian religion.'"

⁴ Kozaki, "Characteristics," 355.

⁵ Fernanda Perrone, "Invisible Network: Japanese Students at Rutgers during the Early Meiji Period," *Bulletin of Modern Japanese Studies* 34 (2017): 460.

Christians and Education

An arena where Christians were to have a much more far-reaching impact on Japanese children was that of education. Whereas education before the Meiji era was largely limited to the samurai class and the emerging well-off merchant class in the cities, one of the first proclamations in the charter oath of the Meiji Restoration was primary education for all men regardless of class. After a world tour by the Iwakura Mission, the Fundamental Code of Education in 1872 changed this to education for all, both males and females. The following year, the removal of edicts against Christianity allowed Christian missionaries to start many of the first modern schools.

Mori Arinori

One of the young men from the opposition domains that went abroad to study was Mori Arinori, a nobleman who was sent by Satsuma domain to London to study mathematics, physics, and naval surveying. While abroad, he spent a couple of years at a utopian Christian community in America but returned once the Meiji emperor was restored so he could help in the government that was largely being led by samurai from Satsuma. The young men who went abroad were ostensibly sent to learn how to make “big guns and big ships” to expel the barbarians from Japan.⁶ But exposure to Christian ideals in the West convinced them that Japanese society needed more than just technology.

As the Minister of Education under first Prime Minister Ito Hirobumi, Mori is considered the father of the Japanese Education system. But much like the early Christian ministers, Mori’s views did not simply parrot Western ideals. Mori was committed to the task of creating a strong nation, but not by simply equipping the samurai with more powerful ships or guns but by mobilizing the entire nation to be loyal citizens through education.⁷ In

⁶ Perrone, “Invisible Network.” John Mason Ferris, secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Dutch Reformed Church in New York, tells of the first Japanese to come to study: “They wished they said, to study navigation, to learn how to build “big ships” and make “big guns” to prevent European powers from taking possession of their country.”

⁷ Takeshi Soyama, “School Excursions and Militarism,” *Japan Review* 33 (2019):

1886, as the new Minister of Education, Mori issued a series of new regulations for universities, teacher training colleges, secondary education, and elementary education, creating a unified system of education for the entire nation.

In Mori's thinking, the goals of education were to produce citizens who would support the constitution and peace and order. The keys to achieving these goals were replacing education based on religious instruction (Confucianism and Shinto) that largely consisted of memorizing ancient texts with giving students opportunities to develop their own ways of thinking. His contribution was to emphasize religious freedom to instill morality while relying on instruction in patriotism and military discipline instead of Confucian ethics and Shinto national history. Mori considered the apex of Imperial ethics to be not the emperor himself but the unbroken imperial system.⁸ Mori sought to guide Japanese education away from indoctrination in the national cult of emperor worship while yet strengthening nationalism. It was these views that led to his assassination by a reactionary samurai in 1889 just as the Meiji Constitution was being ratified.

Uchimura Kanzo

With the assassination of Mori Arinori, reactionary forces within the Meiji government gained the upper hand and barely a year later issued the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education. This document made a hard right turn back towards Confucian and Shinto foundations of education and combined with the modern system of universal education put in place by Mori Arinori. It systematically indoctrinated children in absolute loyalty to the emperor as divine. The Rescript was read with formal solemnity at school assemblies before a portrait of the emperor where all teachers and students were required to bow in allegiance.⁹ This new development caught a young Christian teacher, who had come to faith amongst the Sapporo band, by surprise. Uchimura Kanzo refused to bow when the Rescript was read and not only

⁸ Terumichi Morikawa, "Mori Arinori," in *Ten Great Educators of Modern Japan: a Japanese Perspective*, ed. Benjamin C. Duke (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1989), 39.

⁹ William H. H. Norman, "Kanzō Uchimura: Founder of the Non-Church Movement." *Contemporary Religions in Japan* 4, no. 4 (1963): 338.

lost his job, but the incident also became a cause célèbre inciting further reactionary attacks against Christians.¹⁰

The Imperial Rescript on Education was a crucial turning point on the road to the establishment of national Shinto and totalitarianism. While the Meiji constitution included a clause for the freedom of religion, it held to the view that Shinto was not in fact a religion at all but simply the ceremonial functions of the state.¹¹ However, since most people considered Shinto to be a religion, the result was an extreme prejudice against all religions except Shinto.

Since the adoption of the post-war Constitution imposed on Japan by the U.S., there has been constant conservative pressure to reestablish the Imperial Rescript on Education to strengthen morality in the schools. While this has not been achieved, a similar threat has manifested in mandatory school singing of the national anthem “Kimi ga yo” and the raising of the Japanese national flag. Uchimura Kanzo had this to say about “Kimi ga yo”: “Its purpose is to praise the emperor. A national anthem ought to express the feelings of the people.”¹² In 1999, a law was passed stating explicitly that “Kimi ga yo” is the national anthem, and a number of cases have been brought to court by teachers who have suffered discrimination for refusing to stand and sing the song because of their religious beliefs.¹³

Despite the extraordinary influence of many Christians besides Mori Arinori and Uchimura Kanzo on education, most of their thinking is not about the needs of the children themselves but rather the needs of the fledgling nation. They, like their contemporaries, considered children to be empty vessels who could be filled up with whatever would be best for the state.

¹⁰ Yamaji, *Essays*, 161.

¹¹ Chido Takeda, “School Education and Religion in Japan.” *Contemporary Religions in Japan* 9, no. 3 (1968): 215.

¹² Yamazumi Masami, “Educational democracy versus state control,” in *Democracy in Contemporary Japan*. Ed. Gavan McCormack (Sugimoto Yoshio, 1986), 98.

¹³ Hotaka Tsukada, “Society and ‘Religion’: Finale and Promise,” *Bulletin of Nanzan Institute for Religion & Culture* 36 (2012): 61.

Christian Works of Compassion

While Christian theologians and politicians concerned themselves with great matters, Christianity continued to have an influence on many from the upper class samurai families. As they studied in the newly opened schools and learned from the Christians and missionaries, some were inspired to put into action the radical love they had seen modeled in Jesus Christ.

While the new plan of education included universal primary education for both men and women, the reality was that girls lagged far behind boys. Mori Arinori believed that the education of women was “important for the strength and the safety of Japan.”¹⁴ Christians were instrumental in starting private institutions for women and led the way in the first government schools for women as well. The first public secondary school for women was the Tokyo Women’s Normal School (later Ochanomizu University), a training school for teachers. Japan’s first kindergarten, based on the methods of Friedrich Froebel, was attached to this school with the support of its founding director, the Confucian scholar turned Christian, Nakamura Masanao.¹⁵

Futaba Kindergarten

Two graduates of the Tokyo Women’s Normal School were Christians Noguchi Yuka and Morishima Mine, who started Futaba Yochien (kindergarten) in one of the poor sections of the city of Tokyo.¹⁶ They first worked as teachers at the Peerage School, which was exclusive to the children of nobility. In rapidly industrializing Japan, poverty, child labor, the absence of caretakers as both parents worked in factories, and the need for older girls

¹⁴ Ann M Harrington, “Women and Higher Education in the Japanese Empire (1895-1945),” *Journal of Asian History* 21, no. 2 (1987): 171.

¹⁵ Yoko Yamasaki, “New Education and Taisho Democracy: 1900 to 1930’s,” in *The History of Education in Japan (1600-2000)*, ed. Masashi Tsujimoto and Yoko Yamasaki (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 64. Nakamura’s translation of Samuel Smile’s “Self Help” became hugely influential in Meiji era Japan.

¹⁶ Kathleen Uno, “Civil Society, State, and Institutions for Young Children in Modern Japan: The Initial Years,” *History of Education Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (May 2009): 177.

to babysit younger siblings all were factors that kept the urban poor out of the schools. The connections of Noguchi and Morishima with the elite and foreign missions supported these charity works, which eventually became supported by the Meiji government and served as models for kindergarten and daycares across the country.

Okayama Orphanage

During the Meiji era, much of the work being done to solve the social problems of industrialization was being pioneered by Christians. When asked for leading examples of social work in Japan by the French, all four examples given by the Meiji government were Christians, including Tomeoka Kosuke, who was working with delinquent children and pioneered the first reformatories, and Ishii Juji, who started Japan's first orphanage in Okayama.¹⁷ In these Christians applying the love of Christ to practical situations we begin to see compassion for children as individuals and not just as a way to influence society. Ishii Juji, in particular, allowed Christianity to redirect the radical loyalist influences of his youth in the opposition domains where, although samurai were elite and educated, they were as impoverished as other classes. He vowed to treat the lower orders with only "love without discrimination."¹⁸ At the core of his thinking was compassion: seeing the suffering of others and being moved to do something to relieve it. Poverty was not a result of individual failings but of social conditions beyond their control. Children were the target of his social action because they were the most vulnerable to these social conditions with their potential being destroyed by poverty before it had a chance to take flight.

Conclusion

Theologians in Japan continue to struggle with finding an authentic Japa-

¹⁷ Masao Takenaka, "Called To Service," *The Ecumenical Review* 14, no. 2 (January 1962): 170.

¹⁸ Tanya Maus, "Rising Up and Saving the World: Ishii Juji and the Ethics of Social Relief during the Mid-Meiji Period (1880-1887)," *Japan Review: Journal of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies* 25 (January 1, 2013): 74.

nese expression of faith that is not simply a reflection of Western Christianity. Japanese education also continues to be influenced by reactionary forces that see it as a tool for indoctrination. Perhaps the deepest and most lasting influence Christians have had in Japan for children has been through faithful acts of compassionate service that see the potential in every child.

Another 1907 painting by Kojima Torajiro, “Garden of Mercy,” depicts the work of Suzuki Yo caring for children in the Okayama orphanage.¹⁹ Suzuki was the daughter of a samurai family and went to Tokyo to study at the Tokyo Women’s Normal School to be a teacher. When the Tohoku famine struck, Suzuki left her job as a teacher to care for the orphans in Okayama.²⁰ She later would marry a Christian pastor and serve the church in Kyoto for many years. The painting won first prize that year in an art exhibition in Tokyo and was recognized by the Empress Meiji and purchased for the Imperial collection.

The painter Kojima Torajiro was himself a Christian who, with his benefactor Ohara Magosaburo, was baptized through the influence of Ishii Juji in Okayama. Ohara was an industrialist and heir to a spinning company and saw as his duty to use his fortune both to relieve the sufferings of those in need and make the world a better place. He not only supported the art work of Kojima but also the Okayama orphanage, and then went on to found schools, hospitals and institutes for higher education.²¹

¹⁹ Kojima, Torajiro. なさけの庭. Oil. Tokyo: Museum of the Imperial Collections, 1907.

²⁰ M. William Steele M. William Steele. “The Great Northern Famine of 1905-1906: Two Sides of International Aid.” Asian Studies Conference Japan 16th Annual Conference 2012. “The Great Famine of North Japan of 1905–1906, however, was the first major example of joint domestic and international disaster relief, involving extensive media coverage in the Japanese and world press, government and non-government aid projects, the delegation of groups of volunteer workers, and fundraising campaigns throughout the world.” *The Christian Herald* reported in 1906 that their final fundraising effort was divided between among the “Tohoku Orphan Asylum and the Okayama Orphanage, which are specially caring for the orphans from the famine districts.”

²¹ Masaatsu Takehara and Naoya Hasegawa, “Magosaburo Ohara: The Pioneer of CSR Who Challenged the Realization of Labor Idealism,” *Journal of Human Environmental*

Figure 2: 「なさけの庭」 "Garden of Mercy" by Kojima Torajiro 10



Japan's Meiji Christians were largely products of their times. Many were samurai who felt an obligation to the betterment of the nation of Japan. Much of their thought was concerned more with the needs of the rapidly modernizing society than individual children. It is arguable that it was those who followed the example of the compassion of Christ who ultimately made the most difference for the lives of children. Through these Christians, orphans were cared for, schools were provided for the poor, and girls were included in education along with boys. Numerous other Christians worked to eliminate child labor, combat the trafficking of poor children, and better the lives of juvenile delinquents. These works, though done by believers of a religious minority that frequently still suffered persecution, led to changes across society for children.

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