The Recent Popularity of *Okeiko* Culture in Japan

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Japan is a country where people are forever on the move and always making efforts to learn about other cultures, develop their personality and pick up new skills. This in itself is not something unique but a perennial quest for self-development is something generally characteristic of Japan. This practice of seeking and striving to know is what is called in Japanese *okeiko* and *naraigoto*. Though the implications of these two words have changed over decades they nonetheless remain quite popular today. The popularization of *okeiko* and *naraigoto* (both mean "lessons") culture is a byproduct of the twin concepts of *doryoku* (effort) and *kinben* (diligence) developed in the meritocracy-based education society of postwar Japan. The notion of self-improvement is highly appreciated by the Japanese public today, as it was in the past. Japanese families involve themselves in the project of self-improvement by learning new skills and seeking new hobbies. While children are sent for swimming and eurhythmics lessons, grown-ups enjoy learning foreign languages, PC skills, photography, musical instruments, cooking, dancing, or sports. The *okeiko* business is booming in Japan and the *naraigoto* market is fairly large and is estimated at around 1.99 billion yen annually (Yano Research Institute, 2012).

Evolving Meanings of *Okeiko* & *Naraigoto*

Today many people involve themselves in learning lessons on different topics but the focus seems to have shifted from following an established method for improving oneself to social success. This shift is clearly reflected in the kinds of activities people choose for self-improvement, activities that would help advance their career or social position. Activities such as foreign language learning, computer-based education, business understanding or designing craft products are more sought after than learning about Japanese culture or history. But in the Meiji period (1868-1912) it was more a desire to understand and improve one's habits, social maladjustment and personal failure. The notion of relentless progress has entered the desire for self-improvement and changed the focus of the skills sought through *okeiko*.

From the early Meiji era, doing *okeiko* was relatively popular amongst men and until around the 1960s doing several *okeiko* projects was common practice for company executives. Perhaps it may be difficult to find a single reason for people's motivation to participate in *okeiko* ventures but a desire to become spiritually and physically strong could be one of them. For some it meant to train their mind and body and for others it was more a matter of enjoyment. Tatsuru Uchida, one of the renowned social scholars today and someone who is also an enthusiastic martial arts expert, explains that one significant reason why people embark on *okeiko* projects is to understand the pattern of their failures and overcome their shortcomings by imitating a strict pattern of Japanese learning. However, most people may not be aware of their reason for doing so. Though there might be no clear and observable explanation for people pursuing the *okeiko* culture, it was often limited to the elite classes as they had the money and leisure to pursue such projects.

But over a period of time, as the middle class emerged, a transformation took place in the *okeiko* culture, expanding its influence to include all social classes. As *okeiko* pervaded the larger strata of society, the content, style and purpose became more innovative and diverse. *Okeiko*, which was initially meant for the higher social strata, expanded in modern times to include the middle classes, and their desire to acquire self-improving skills and knowledge is referred to as *naraigoto*. This led to an increase in the variety and style of *naraigoto*. Now there was a booming business in both *okeiko* and *naraigoto*.

To cater to the expanded *okeiko* market new syllabi were created. The variety of lessons Japan has in big cities today is phenomenal and the nature of lessons seems to have increasing emphasis on people gaining "merit"-based practical skills. Many advertisements in daily newspapers, online websites and inside public transport frequently remind us of the easy access to health and beauty lessons (nail art, aromatherapy, manners and walking to lose weight, to name a few), language learning, PC skills, cooking lessons, flower arrangement, dancing and sports tutorials, if we wish to learn something new.

Though both *okeiko* and *naraigoto* mean lessons, their meanings are slightly different. *Okeiko* usually denotes traditional Japanese training-style lessons in the framework of a mentor-disciple relationship such as *chado* (tea ceremony), *kado* (flower arrangement), *shodo* (calligraphy), *judo*, *aikido*, *utai* (chanting of *Noh* texts) and *nihon-buyo* (traditional Japanese dance). The word is also used for the practice of piano and ballet lessons as it connotes training with a teacher. *Naraigoto*, on the other hand, means developing a hobby through taking classes and gaining practical skills. One of the meanings of *naraigoto* is "something one is learning" in one's free time. But in recent years there has been a shift from *okeiko* to *naraigoto*. This change can be attributed to educational and social change. In postwar Japan, as more and more people acquired higher education and found well-paid jobs the desire to use their leisure profitably increased. There arose a new need for short-term programs to learn new skills and improve one's social status.

The Culture of Effort & Diligence

The culture of *doryoku* and *kinben* emerged through the postwar education system. In the pre-war period, compulsory education was only up to elementary-school level. Secondary school education varied from vocational to general, sometimes

gender specific. Only small numbers of people could proceed to the secondary level and very few pursued higher education. In the process of rebuilding social institutions after World War I, the Japanese government intended to provide access to education for all. With this intent, a new compulsory education system called *roku-san sei* (six-three system) was implemented.

CHART 1

Participation rate in learning, self-education & training (over 10 years old)

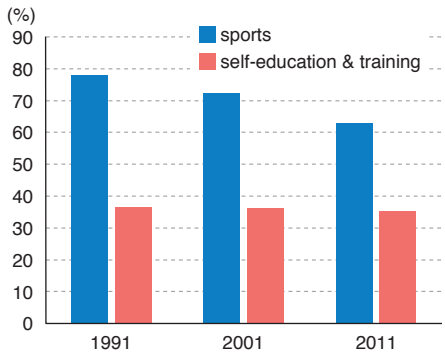
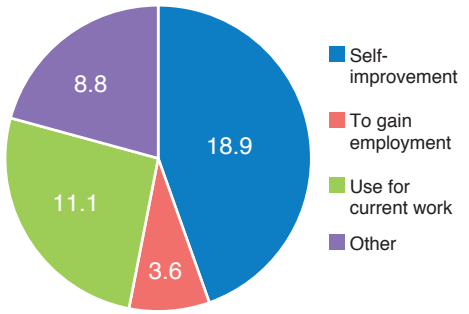


CHART 2

Purpose of participation in learning, self-education & training (2011)



Source: Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs & Communication

The new system unified different kinds of secondary schools into those called junior high schools (three years, former half of secondary education) and was made compulsory together with the elementary education system (six years). In addition, high schools (three years, latter half of secondary education) were also reorganized so that students from different strata of society could have equal access to them.

Thus, the pre-war education system that separated elites and the general public during the early stages was replaced in the late 1940s by a standardized education system open to all. This shift was undoubtedly "democratic" and egalitarian. It was innovative at that time when compared to other countries. Unlike Europe where the focus was on reducing the class divide or the United States where the emphasis was on reducing ethnic divisions, it is possible to say that the Japanese education system consistently aimed at providing equal opportunity to all. Behind this implementation lay a strong belief that education could help people to succeed regardless of their social status, since everyone was believed to possess the ability to work hard equally. The ideology of *doryoku* and *kinben* was thus widely disseminated in Japanese society and perhaps today works as the unquestioned motivation to actively participate in self-improvement lessons. The concept of self-improvement is clearly visible in modern Japanese, though criticism of the system remains.

Growth of a Meritocracy-based Society

The mass education provided by this new system has radically transformed Japanese society by creating a uniform middle class with shared social and personal values. Since the 1990s both educators and sociologists have questioned the outcome of the egalitarianism of the new education system, but the fact remains that the system itself has introduced a decisive change in the consciousness of the middle class, unifying them into a class-conscious group.

In all probability these are the people who either have elitist upper-class backgrounds or share the aspirations of elitist groups. It is possible to see such a tendency in elitist clubs, university groups, academic circles or arts forums. Middle-class and working-class groups also aspire to do well in society. Within society there is an aspiration to rise up the social hierarchy and improving through lessons (*naraigoto*) is one of the ways to realize this goal. Therefore the constant process of self-improvement implies perennial efforts to succeed.

Today the values of self-improvement through lessons of different kinds are enshrined in the social value structure of Japanese society. By and large a majority of the Japanese population appreciates the concept of continuous self-improvement but the participation ratio is around 30% *(Chart 1)*.

The effects of self-improvement were reflected in the report of 2012 published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication ("Participation Rate in Learning, Self-Education, and Training by Sex, Usual Economic Activity and Age") which states that in 2012 around 35.2% of the population spent their leisure time participating in some kind of learning and training for self-education.

According to similar ministry statistics for 2011, the reasons for participating in *okeiko* and *naraigoto* were "self-improvement (18.9%)", "to gain employment (3.6%)", "use for current work (11.1%)" and "other (8.8%)" *(Chart 2)*.

In recent years, lessons that combine different areas (learning both language and cooking, for example) and online lessons with PCs or/and smartphones are the new trend. Furthermore, research by the Yano Research Institute in 2013 revealed that 57.2% of men and women between 20 and 69 living in Tokyo and its environs or ordinance-designated cities and using information terminals such as smartphones, showed a favorable disposition towards lessons provided via the information terminal.

In the last half a century the culture of *okeiko* and *naraigoto* have taken deep root in Japanese society and become a part of the Japanese consciousness, desire for self-improvement and method of climbing the social ladder. The percentage of people who seek self-improvement will be further fueled by digital technology, online courses and diplomas. Digital technology and computer-based courses will make the acquisition of knowledge easier than before. As Japan becomes more globalized and the world more digital, the *okeiko* and *naraigoto* culture will hopefully spread to other parts of the world. The globalization of the Japanese culture of *okeiko* through digital technology would take it in a new direction. JS

Ui Teramoto studied at SOAS, University of London, and is now pursuing her doctorate on the Indian Diaspora in Japan at the Graduate School of Media and Governance, Keio University-SFC.