

Changes in Modern Japanese Social and Cultural Currents (4)

Spiritual Climate and Juvenile Crime

By Nakano Osamu

In late January, a 13-year-old boy stabbed to death his 26-year-old female English teacher at a junior high school in Kuroiso, Tochigi Prefecture, north of Tokyo, because she reprimanded him for coming late to her class. About a month later, two boys at a junior high school in Jonesboro, Arkansas, in the United States, randomly fired rifles, killing four students and a teacher, and wounding 11 others. The latter incident was not unusual in a country where the crime rate is high and gun ownership is widespread. However, juvenile crimes are becoming a serious problem not only in the U.S. but also in industrialized European countries and Japan. Industrialized countries have implemented very severe measures to cope with the rise in juvenile crimes, contradictory to their principles of respecting freedom, democracy and human rights.

The initiatives did help to reduce the total number of juvenile crimes, but violent crimes committed by youths continued to show a rising trend in the U.S., the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Japan.

These events, which made newspaper headlines and were prominently featured on TV and in magazines, gained recognition as being social problems. Following the shootings in Jonesboro, there were reports that metal detectors were being placed at the gates of high schools in various parts of the U.S. In Japan, the reintroduction of inspections of students' belongings by teachers and stricter disciplinary rules suddenly gained public support. There have even been calls for regular patrolling of schools by the police. Opinion leaders, including the mass media, who used to be critical of strict school discipline,

are now silent on these issues, though such a sudden turnabout is not new to Japanese journalism. Several days ago, I asked a journalist why newspapers and TV stations had refrained from commenting on the proposed reintroduction of strict disciplinary rules. His response was that the mass media can no longer afford to make critical comments on the issue.

Students at my university, who claim they kept a knife in their pocket or bag during their high school days, suggest that inspections of belongings or disciplinary rules will not help eliminate or reduce criminal offenses at school. They speculate from their experience in high school that although the recent flood of newspaper articles on crimes at school give the impression that such crimes are on the rise, the yearly total of such crimes has remained virtually

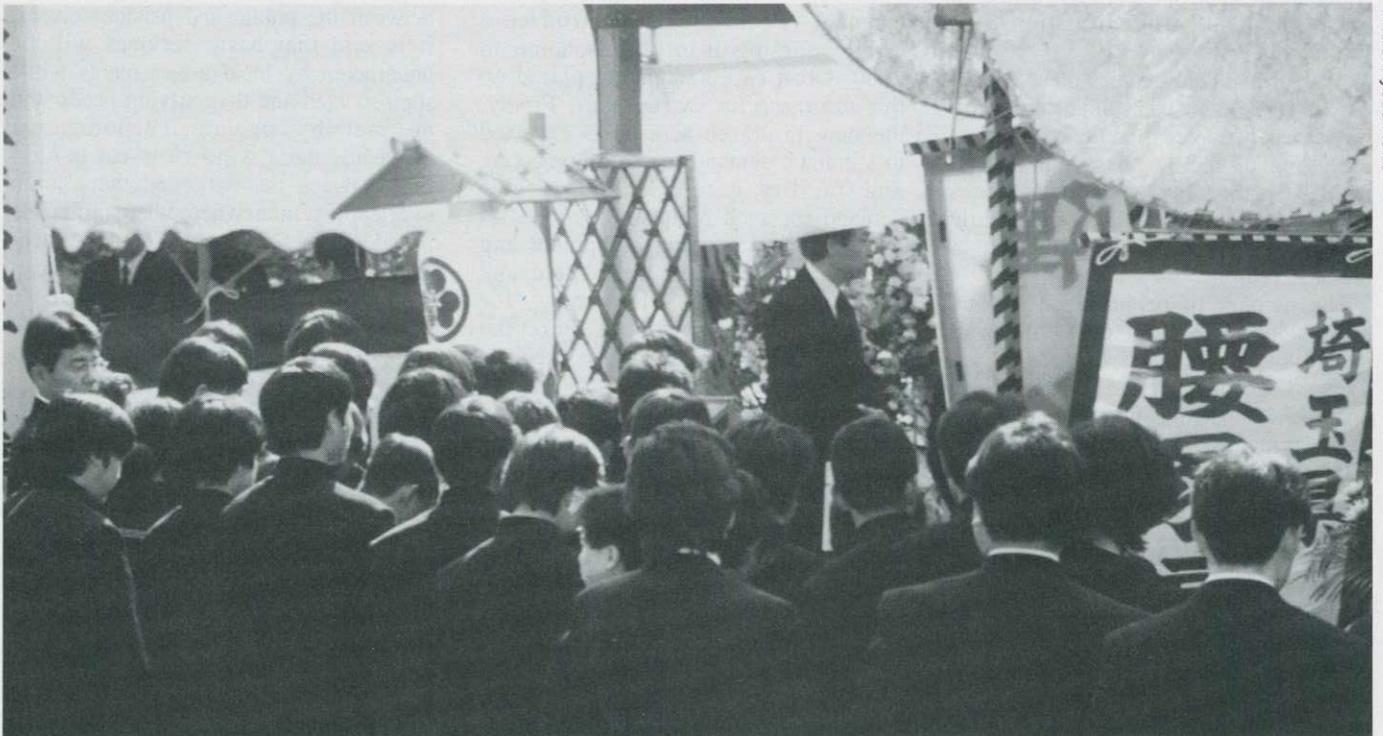


Photo: Kyodo News

One of the victims of ongoing juvenile crimes: funeral of a female teacher at Kuroiso, who was stabbed to death by one of her students

unchanged for years, and they predict that such crimes will not decrease despite the media frenzy. I think they are right. Indeed, despite newspaper reports that the suicide of a famed U.S. female celebrity triggered suicides by a number of people who admired her, the actual number of suicides that year was unchanged from the previous year. Until several years ago, the mass media played up suicides by elementary and middle school students during the entrance exam period every year. They described those who committed suicide as "victims" of the exam system. However, statistics show that the actual number of suicides by elementary and middle school students has remained unchanged for years. I wonder why the mass media have lately shied away from reporting on suicides by young students. Did they come to realize that their reports encouraged suicides, or did they realize they cannot distort the fact that the suicide rate among young students was not increasing?

My students say, and I agree, that the crux of the social problems which resulted in the stabbing of the female teacher in Tochigi Prefecture is one of the virtual reality created by the mass media. As I have mentioned, cases of violence involving students have been steadily on the rise, but did not show any sharp increase following the incident. Even if stricter disciplinary rules are imposed, such incidents will neither be eliminated nor decrease. I will elaborate on the reason for this later in this article. To put it simply, this is because such cases have nothing to do with the absence of inspection of belongings or with lax discipline.

The past 20 years have witnessed many cases of violence, including the bullying, wounding and killing (of teachers and others) by students in elementary and middle school grounds. Each time, the cause of the crime was identified and countermeasures were taken. Such crimes spread like an epidemic at one point and later disappeared. They were virtually unaffected by countermeasures. It transpired that the cause of such crimes and the effect of countermeasures had no causal rela-

tionship. To put it another way, officials did not identify the real cause, but only fabricated a cause which suited their needs or absolved them of all responsibility. Countermeasures to deal with the fabricated cause can hardly make for an effective response. This is why such crimes would increase at one time and decrease at another.

Reports about the high percentage of young boys possessing knives reminded me of my boyhood. When I was in elementary school, all students possessed a small knife in their pencil box, which they used to sharpen pencils, make model airplanes or handicrafts, and to cut or carve things. When the knives became blunt, we sharpened them. The blade of the knives was 10 centimeters long, and it could be used to kill or wound a person. Though almost everyone owned a knife, nobody used their knives to kill or wound anyone. Children held unpleasant thoughts in their hearts all the time. In my boyhood, children felt tension almost daily, but nobody dared to use knives to attack teachers or classmates.

It is often said that children feel pressure because they are crammed into overcrowded classes and are forced to study hard to prepare for examinations. But in my elementary and middle school days, I had to take tests as often as children do now, and I had to face more severe evaluations by teachers than they do now. Also, competition for entrance into higher educational institutions was just as severe as now. In my boyhood, one class comprised 60 students, many more than the 40-student classes now common. Getting tense was a daily occurrence in those days. But it never occurred to anybody to shoot classmates or stab a teacher after being scolded. This bears out the fact that severe examinations or crammed classes were not the real cause of crimes committed at school. Officials only fabricated a cause which suited their convenience.

No one in the media—TV, newspapers and magazines—nor education experts, psychiatrists, or opinion leaders have referred to what I have mentioned above. It seems to me that the

mass media have done little but provide empty talk. This focused on the pros and cons of disciplinary rules, with the pros outnumbering the cons. To make matters worse, their empty talk was interspersed with selfish, self-centered abuse of teachers and parents by children, who were brought up overprotected, with both excessive interference and a complete lack of interference, which paradoxically translated into an upbringing in which children are left alone.

Deplorably, there are not a few adults who agitate children. As I see it, the issue was intentionally distorted to make it appear a social problem. Solving the problem would be difficult under such circumstances.

About the time the venue for reports on the Tochigi stabbing case shifted to magazines from newspapers and television, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* featured the results of an opinion poll on the constitution on the front page. The poll showed for the first time that those in favor of revising the constitution outnumbered those against revision. From my personal experience of having conducted an opinion poll, I do not take these results at face value.

However, the reversal of the pros and cons this time may attest at least to a certain degree to a change in people's awareness and opinions about the constitution. Many opinion polls on the constitution have been conducted in the past with the same questions asked, and those favoring a revision of the constitution have never outnumbered those opposing it.

The *Yomiuri* poll was conducted at a time when the public, in discussing the advisability of enforcing mandatory inspection of students' belongings and the introduction of strict school disciplinary rules, became less concerned about children's freedom, human rights and privacy following the Tochigi stabbing case. Many people thought now that a teacher had actually been killed, it was no longer necessary to oppose inspections of belongings and the introduction of strict disciplinary rules on the grounds that such measures violate freedom, human rights and privacy.

As I mentioned earlier, one journalist said that the mass media could no longer afford to call for a respect of human rights for children.

It may be too shrewd to guess that the *Yomiuri* intentionally conducted the poll to synchronize with the changes in public opinion. But I cannot help thinking that the poll results had something to do with the stabbing case. In other words, drastic changes are taking place in Japanese people's opinions and consciousness and the nation's spiritual climate in regard to postwar values, which are symbolized by the constitution.

In a rather comical development following the incident, most school teachers expressed opposition to the reintroduction of inspection of students' belongings despite overwhelming public support for the proposal. Do they think it is too late to revive such rules? In a related development, a specialist (a psychiatrist, I believe) coined the word "kireru" (**) to describe the state of mind of young people who get so tense as to want to hurt someone. This expression has no academic basis or definition, but became a national catchword after it was widely used by the mass media. Still, nothing has been done to solve the problem.

I wonder what people in favor of maintaining the war-renouncing Article 9 and the provisions on human rights of the constitution would say about the inspections of students' belongings. I also wonder whether those people still insist that the boy who stabbed his teacher to death be protected under the provisions of the Juvenile Law? If they say that the possession of military power will lead to war, they must surely be in favor of inspection of belongings, which is aimed at confiscating weapons (knives). If so, do they mean to say human rights and privacy should be restricted?

A nation has the inherent right to defend itself, and so must possess a minimum of military power for



"Pressure from community life": whereas immediate action to solve the situation is needed, society places the blame on something else

self-defense. The expression of Article 9 of the constitution is very vague, and thus must be revised. This is what those in favor of revision of the constitution argue for. Meanwhile, asked why they possess knives, not a few boys reply that they do so in order to defend themselves or because other youths do so and that makes them feel uneasy. What they mean by this is that they have to defend themselves because no one else will defend them. I wonder how those in favor of revision of the constitution would regard the boys' replies. Would they recognize and accept the boys' supposed right to defend themselves?

The school teacher was killed while performing her duty of managing her class, which involved persuading, scolding and occasionally ordering the students around. Her death against her will meant absolute denial of her human rights. What would people championing the constitution and the cause of human rights say about the denial of her human rights?

As far as I know, none of those who have championed the constitution and the cause of human rights or those who have called for a revision of the constitution stated or clarified their positions on the Tochigi stabbing case. I would not blame them. What I want to emphasize is that they would be yield-

ing to self-contradiction if they were to try to uphold the consistency of their thinking or creed. This has something to do with the changes in the spiritual climate of the country which I have mentioned. It seems to me that people who have consistently asserted their thinking or creed must now shut up or declare changes in their beliefs. Some of my friends began saying things like "Freedom does not necessarily mean good," "Humans cannot stand the rigor of competition resulting from perfect individualism," or "Values transcending human nature must be created."

I would summarize the background of the Tochigi stabbing case from my own perspective.

Following its defeat in World War II, Japan made a fresh start as a nation after liquidating the ultranationalist structure and ideological mode of the Imperial System. The prewar Imperial System deeply permeated Japanese society and governed everything, starting with the theory of the origin of the country and extending even to ethics in people's daily lives. Education was no exception, with ideology, consciousness, creed and moral ethics based on the Imperial System unilaterally enforced by the government.

Said another way, in simplified terms, liquidation, abandonment and denial of the Imperial System meant

prohibition and the removal of ethics and moral education in school. Moral education was put back into the school curriculum in 1958, but strong and extremely sentimental campaigns against moral education, on the grounds that it would revive the prewar Imperial system, have prevented actual implementation of moral education in school classes. Even now, moral education is supposed to be conducted as part of total education in principle, but in practice has been virtually nonexistent in Japan since the end of World War II.

Denial of moral education is based on the theory that people were born equal and are inherently good beings. They are thus equally endowed with a conscience. If their conscience flourishes, good citizens emerge and morality and ethical consciousness can naturally come into being, so that an ideal society can be created. In other words, proponents of this theory contend that a good value system inherently exists in humans, and that the role of education is to encourage the system to flourish, not to impose values from outside. This theory is based on two tenets: 1) Humans are inherently good beings, and 2) the role of education is simply to fully encourage the human conscience to flourish, and it is not necessary for education to include any kind of moral training. I think these two tenets are dubious, and at best represent a desire, but are in fact the product of illusion.

In an educational environment where freedom, individualism, humanity, relaxation and leisure are highly valued, the product of illusion is regarded as a sound theory. Thus, all inherent human desires are affirmed as good, which means that it is good for children to do anything they want as soon as they feel like doing it, and to prevent them from doing so would be bad. According to such thinking, children are supposed to be allowed to do anything they want without restriction: chatting, drinking beverages and eating snacks during classes, cutting classes, being late for school, refusing to go to school, possessing and even using knives, striking up intimate relation-

ships with adults for money and even engaging in prostitution, vandalizing school buildings, etc. All these actions would prevent the normal management of school classes. High school education has been deteriorating, and the educational system at elementary and middle schools has been falling apart. School authorities are trying to introduce new disciplinary rules and reintroduce inspection of students' belongings as a last resort to deal with such a situation. Some schools adopted even such comical disciplinary measures as closing the school gates punctually at the time classes began, though gate-closing was terminated after a student at one school was fatally injured by a gate as it was being slammed shut. The disruption of classes has spread to elementary schools, and classes no longer function normally in a large number of schools across the country.

Children placed in disorderly and undisciplined circumstances tend to make rules effective only within the group to which they belong. This can be compared to rules practiced in prisons during the Edo period, where senior inmates controlled fresh inmates, as well as rules in the now-defunct Imperial Army, where senior non-commissioned officers bullied new recruits. Under such rules, upper-class students these days lynch lower-class students who stand out or tend to deviate from the group. Such rules are totally unjustifiable, but not unexpected. Bullying among students in the same class is patterned on the rules of the Edo prisons and the Imperial Army. It is certain that such occurrences will become commonplace if it is assumed that humans are inherently good beings, and that freedom and individuality are inviolable rights. It is thus no surprise that bullying in schools has become a serious problem in Europe, the U.S., Japan, South Korea and other developed countries. In a society where anything goes, perverse rules conceived by children reign supreme. It is not surprising in such a society that a teacher should be stabbed to death by a student.

Does the newly coined word "kireru" mean snapping because of the pressure?

Anyone could fall into such a mental state, if one lives in a group (society). This is not a new phenomenon. Some psychiatrists coined the word "kireru" as if it were a new social phenomenon, and they are now blaming society for having caused it. Thus, I wonder whether such an expression is really appropriate.

As I have pointed out, the current educational system positively evaluates everything humans are born with, and regards as bad anything that runs counter to it. The system permits neither restrictions nor changes of anything internal. Schools rarely teach children how to control desires or feelings. They have no system for doing so. In reality, it is surprising that such a stabbing did not occur earlier.

The mass media tend to play up violence by teachers against students, but refrain from reporting on student violence against teachers on the grounds that students are juveniles. In fact, there have been many cases of students resorting to violence against teachers since the 1970s. These cases were intentionally ignored by the mass media. But the mass media now find that they can no longer afford to ignore the increase in juvenile offenses.

I think the stabbing case in Tochigi was the price we have to pay for realization and enjoyment of postwar values. We now face two choices: to accept the revival of transcendental values (the prewar Imperial System, for example) to avoid a repeat of the stabbing case, or to consider such a case as inevitable in order to continue to enjoy freedom, equality, democracy and individuality as our principal values.

(**) "kireru" literally means "lines are cut" due to pressure. Just as something snaps internally, a person can no longer control his or her own feelings, and as a result goes berserk.

Nakano Osamu is a professor in the Faculty of Sociology, Hosei University. He is the author of several books specializing in media studies and critiques of contemporary culture.