

# Schools and Learning in the Medieval Period

By Ohto Yasuhiro

## Universities of the Medieval Period

In the mid-16th century, Francis Xavier of the Society of Jesus visited Japan for the purpose of propagating Christianity, and in a letter of 1549 addressed to his followers in Goa, India, he wrote the following regarding the temple schools found widely throughout Japan during the medieval period. He wrote that in addition to the university in the capital city of Kyoto, there were five other significant universities — four of which were near the capital and were named Koya, Negoro, Hiei-zan and Omi — and it is also said that each of these had enrollments of over 3,500 students. Far removed from the capital in a region called Bando (Kanto) was a fifth, the most well-known and largest university in the country, the Ashikaga School in Shimotsuke province, where more students studied than at any other university. In addition to these main universities, he wrote, there were a large number of other schools throughout the country.

From the reports that they received upon landing in Kagoshima, the Xavier party was aware, however faintly, that a large number of temple schools carrying out various educational activities from primary level to higher levels were deeply rooted in the society of the medieval period. This fact became related to the establishment of the many *seminario collegio* primary schools run by the Jesuits, which were later called *kirishitan* schools. More than 200 schools, especially primary level schools, were found centered in western Japan, and the establishing of



Ashikaga School

Photo: Tochiigi Sightseeing Center

these *kirishitan* schools was undoubtedly seen as vital for the propagation of the religion in order to counter the Buddhism being taught in the temple schools. Xavier noted that there appeared to be five major universities in addition to those at the capital, but in actuality there were far more than he supposed, each energetically involved in education and research. Quite like the universities of medieval Europe, which on the whole were founded and developed in connection with churches, the influential temples in each region as temples of scholarship functioned as medieval universities. There were many prominent temples in the Kanto region, and although they varied in scale, they performed the same functions. Xavier's letter refers to the Ashikaga Gakko or Ashikaga School, as the "University of Bando," "Bando" meaning the Kanto area. The fact that its existence was well-

known, even among the numerous universities which had achieved a high level of educational activity, indicates just how representative the Ashikaga School was.

### The Ashikaga School

Although it was located in the Kanto region far from the capital, within a certain range of subjects a high level of education was carried out there, and as a consequence the Ashikaga School was widely recognized as a prominent medieval university, but exactly when and how it came into existence are not clear. There have been numerous suggestions regarding its founder, but supporting evidence is weak, and at present the name of the founder is unclear. In contrast, it is possible to estimate approximately when it was founded. This is due to the existence of a set of written regulations for inpatients at the hospital attached to the Ashikaga

School, which was founded in 1423. Obviously, the school itself had to have been founded prior to that date, but it is not clear how much further back one can trace. However, it is thought that the parent institution of the Ashikaga School was the Ashikaga family temple Bannaji. As its educational activities became more vigorous and the activities of surrounding temples formed a network centering around the nucleus of Bannaji in the latter half of the 14th century, one can assume that the date of the founding was between that time and the establishment of the regulations for hospital entrance. Judging from this, at present it seems appropriate to look at the founding as having occurred some time between the end of the 14th century and the beginning of the 15th century.

Within the history of the Ashikaga School in the medieval period, the period beginning in 1439, when the Kanto *kanrei*, shogunal deputy for the Kanto region, Uesugi Norizane, began to directly participate in school affairs and offered his patronage, through the establishment of three school regulations in 1446 was a major turning point. The reason, as explained below, was that during this period the nature of the Ashikaga School changed significantly.

In terms of the content of education, it had previously been possible to study broadly and flexibly both Buddhist and Confucianist texts. This was a reflection of the fact that there were a large number of students enrolled and they moreover had the final say in determining the content of education. In the background giving rise to such a situation one notes the existence of a highly developed student guild at the Ashikaga School. The students who formed the membership of this guild retained the right to exclude members considered not suitable as students, and in addition to the right to establish school regulations as mentioned above, they retained the right to regulate the content of education, so that they established new courses and on

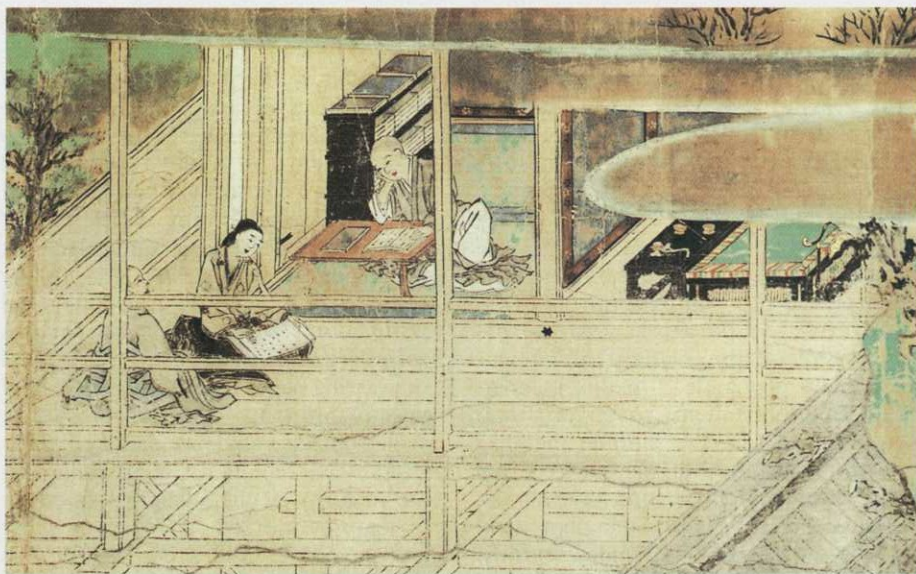
occasion even employed instructors from Kamakura. However, with his active involvement in the school and the establishment of school regulations, Uesugi Norizane significantly restricted the self-government of the students authorized by the guild. As a result, Buddhist texts were excluded from the curriculum, and the content was restricted to Confucian works. Moreover, parallel with this intervention the student guild was forced to dismantle. In this manner, the right of students to govern their own affairs and the latitude that had been left to them was quashed. From the viewpoint of quality as an educational institution, the high point of the Ashikaga School ended with the participation of Uesugi Norizane, and one can say that it then entered a period of decline.

If one were to measure the rise and fall of learning at the Ashikaga School from the numerical, external perspective of the total number of students studying there, then the Sengoku period, the period of warring states, would be its zenith. At the Ashikaga School during this period, such fields as medicine, military science and astronomy were taught, together with the long-emphasized study of divination. In a society where battles were unceasing and fierce fighting continued throughout every region, the direct applicability of the curriculum to the needs of society attracted large numbers of students. Divination, the prediction of the outcome of future events, was highly significant in the military operations of the warring feudal lords. It played a decisive role in determining the timing and direction of movements on such occasions, and it is believed that divination was ultimately what determined the actual moment of attack and how troops were deployed. As a matter of course, on the battlefield there would be large numbers of fatalities and wounded, so from the perspective of maintaining military strength the study of medicine and medical techniques

was absolutely essential. Needless to say, it was necessary to have competent military advisors who could make effective, appropriate decisions during battles on the basis of a deep understanding of military strategy and divination. Those who had studied at the Ashikaga School were widely regarded as possessing skills that met the needs of such a society. In the sense that it was closely connected with actual society, of the various schools that existed during the period of warring states, the Ashikaga School was prominent. Desiring to learn such subjects, students gathered there from every region. It is probable that the majority of the students who came to learn at the Ashikaga School were students of temple schools. Just as the students of medieval Europe roamed from place to place, it is believed that these students traveled from region to region seeking superior knowledge and skills at temple schools, and once they completed these studies, they headed for the region of the Ashikaga. Having completed their necessary studies at this school, those who had obtained the abilities required by actual society and had their abilities properly evaluated would seek a place where they were needed, setting out once again as itinerants in search of opportunity.

### *The Expansion of Temple Schools*

The Ashikaga School materialized as a network focused upon the prominent Bannaji Temple. To a greater or lesser degree, this was also true of other temple schools. And this network, as it were, extended to the temple schools in the villages, which might be called "terminals" of the networks. Within this expanded network, the temple schools took many different, undifferentiated forms, from those which centered on a single prominent temple and supported a high level of education such as the Ashikaga School to those which supported elementary and middle-level education. Originally functioning as places where priests



Taking classes in temple schools — a Japanese scroll painting

were educated, from the Kamakura period onward, they gradually began to accept the children of laymen who would not one day become priests. There began to appear temples which taught these children to read and write and instilled strict discipline, and the number of such temples grew rapidly. In this way, lay children commencing their studies at temple schools were said to be entering the temple, *terairi*, and the children who studied at these temples came to be known as children of the temple, *terako*.

Banri Shuku, who left large footprints in the history of Literature of the Five Mountains (Gozan Bungaku) from mid-15th century onwards, wrote a collection of poems titled *Baikamujinzo* and in it are a number of poems about the children who entered the temple school at Mino and were diligently studying there. From the time he left Kyoto in order to escape the Onin Wars, Banri wandered through the eastern provinces, and on his way he sojourned at a temple school in Mino, where the children of the local *bushi* were also studying. Banri's poems were about such children. With the intention of seeking honor for their families, they entered the school and

were expected to devote themselves to their studies. In the poetry of the Zen monks of the Five Mountains, the words "village school" and "provincial school" frequently appear in reference to these temple schools, and in his poems from the Mino period in *Baikamujinzo* there are similar words such as *shorin* and *dojika*, which were children's classes in the temple. What this indicates is that at the temples of Mino, educational activities for youths who came to study were considerably well organized, that is, a temple school was established. The "entrance" of the children of lay families to the temple schools began with the children of upper-rank bushi families, who under the influence of the nobility, began to aspire to culture. Gradually this extended to boys of the bushi class as a whole, and the tendency was not limited just to the children of the bushi. For example, in the *Tamon'in Nikki* of the 16th century, among the names of those who entered Shinsoan, a subtemple of the Nara Kofukuji, can be seen here and there children of the merchant class. There is no lack of such examples in similar documents. The path was clearly open to children of the

commoner class. Moreover, this was not limited to the temples of Kyoto and Nara, but appears to have been quite a matter of course in the small temples of provincial villages as well.

After leaving Mino, Banri was employed by Ota Sukenaga and so he proceeded to Kanto, where he lived and lectured on poetry for three years. He subsequently took the Tosando and continued his wanderings to Mino in Hokuriku. Along his way, however, he was thwarted by heavy snows, and he had to wait at Taiheiji Temple in Nou in Echigo province, until the spring thaw. During his stay, a Zen priest from a neighboring village visited Banri and asked his guidance regarding educational materials for children studying in the village's temple. The children

were studying Chinese-style poetry collection *Santaishi*, but their inability to correctly punctuate the poems had become an obstacle to their learning. Banri explained the correct way to mark the poems in the collection. The exchange between the two men in *Baikamujinzo* makes clear that at the small temple in the rural countryside near No in Echigo province there were children of commoners studying *Santaishi*. This meant that they were beyond the beginning level of study, and this was not a phenomenon especially restricted to the nearby village temple.

As one can see from the above, there are many cases that show the establishment of education and learning among the boys of bushi and commoners in temple schools. In recent years, it has become evident that in addition to these temple schools in villages in the medieval period, there were other educational facilities established on the independent initiative of villagers which taught village children how to read and write. For example, in Eranoura in Tsuruga in Echizen in the mid-16th century, itinerant monks stayed in the village and served as scribes in the preparation of various

documents for the village. There is a large probability that at the same time they also carried out educational activities at the village assembly hall, teaching the Japanese syllabary to the people of Eranoura. It is thought that there was a unified consolidation of villagers in Eranoura — the fundamental condition being that there was strong self-governance that extended throughout the village — and that because of this a hall had been constructed and such educational activities were carried out. When we extend our view to include commoners' autonomous facilities as educational institutions, we can see accompanying the emergence of commerce and industry and their own political development just how strong the demand for literacy and the ability to calculate figures was among the masses, and this participation by the masses shows how considerable was the extent of education and learning in the medieval period. This is evidenced by the huge numbers of extant writings by the general populace from this same period.

### *Medieval Textbooks for Writing and the Extension of Learning*

In response to increasing demands for the attainment of literacy in medieval society, *oraimono* (classical textbooks for writing) came into existence as teaching materials for the promotion of learning. The origin of these materials can be traced as far back as the latter half of the 11th century. *Oraimono* were literally compilations of sets of exchanged letters, edited in the form of a textbook. Those of ancient and medieval times are referred to specifically as *ko-orai*. The *oraimono* of the early period, including *Meigo Orai* and *Tozan Orai*, were heavily tinged with nobility and religion, but beginning in the mid-13th century when the temples' acceptance of children from lay families became more conspicuous, new types of *oraimono* appropriate for children, such as *Shosoku Kotoba*, began to appear. Rather than beginning

immediately with how to compose letters, the new type of textbook resourcefully began by teaching the words, short phrases and short sentences often used in writing letters.

The 14th century saw the appearance of *Teikin Orai*, the most significant *oraimono* in history. This particular *oraimono* remained an important textbook for about five centuries, until the latter half of the 19th century. *Teikin Orai* was compiled as an exchange of letters over a period of twelve months, and by collecting large numbers of vocabulary items and dividing them into categories, one of its important aims was to have the students practice writing. In due course, similar volumes appeared, and judging from their contents they seem to have been compiled for use in penmanship classes for children of bushi of the middle or higher ranks to promote the learning of written characters either in the temple schools or at home. The bushi, who were endeavoring to increase their political and economic strength rapidly and solidify their position as the ruling class, absorbed the traditional culture of the nobility and the temples, and they also found it necessary to deepen their knowledge of the labor and lives of the masses who were to be governed. This was probably because the amount of knowledge and information required of them increased as generations passed. Compared with earlier *oraimono*, the number of words included in the newer ones was several times larger.

From the 14th century into the 15th century, *oraimono* were unconcerned with letter-writing and were focused on a particular theme. These included such historical volumes as *Ouin no ran Shosoku* about the Onin Wars, geographical volumes dealing with the topographical features and the structure of specific regions and castle towns including *Tosa Minato Orai* and *Toyama no Ki* and such volumes as *Kissa Orai* concerning tea ceremony and tea implements. It is thought that those who studied these *oraimono* as textbooks must have included

members of the lower ranks of the bushi class, lower-ranking priests and commoners residing in a broader range of regions than before. Accompanying the expansion of literacy in the temple schools from the middle of the medieval period, the contents of the *oraimono* became richly diversified, intimately connected with the everyday lives of the people.

As described above, against a background of diffusion and amassing of learning in medieval society, the bushi drew nearer to scholarship. As an example, Kiyohara Nobukata, the foremost scholar of the Sengoku period, was employed by the feudal lords of Hokuriku and traveled from place to place giving lectures aggressively on such topics as Confucianism and Shinto. From 1529 to 1550, with notably strong ties to the Asakura regime in Echizen, he departed Kyoto for Ichijodani, political center of Echizen province on five separate occasions. He delivered influential lectures on such works as the *Chronicle of Japan*, the *Classic of Filial Piety*, the *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, and the *Book of Mencius*. The Asakura administration required an ideology to bolster its strength in maintaining control of the province, and Kiyohara Nobukata was a scholar with a sufficiently high level of scholarship to respond to that need. As scholars, literati and Zen priests from the capital repeatedly sojourned throughout the provinces, they functioned increasingly as disseminators of culture, especially from the 15th century onward. What made possible the reception and absorption of that culture, however, was the diffusion and depth of medieval period education which extended from the bushi class to the general populace, centering on the temple schools.

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*Ohto Yasuhiro is a professor at University of Tsukuba, Department of Education.*