The New Image of Childhood in Japan During the Years 1945-49 and the Construction of a Japanese Collective Memory

CHRISTIAN GALAN

INTRODUCTION

No one will contest the statement that the years 1945-49 mark a turning point in the history of childhood in Japan. Whatever point of view one takes, it was during these years that one passes from a conception of the child as a subject of the Emperor, tennō no kodomo, or tennō no sekishi (the child being the property of the Emperor and the State), to a modern and democratic image of the child, as a free and self-sufficient individual who has rights and to whom parents and government have duties.

However, if one examines this period from a microhistorical rather than macrohistorical point of view (centred on ‘real’ children), the perception one may have of the whole process seems to be somewhat different – less ‘ideal’ and certainly more complex.

As the renowned English pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott has written, ‘to understand the effect of war on children it is first necessary to know what capacity children have for the understanding of war and of the causes of war, and of the reasons by which we justify our fighting’. The aim of the following diagram – which I will use as a starting point for my argument – is to summarize the elements that could possibly help the Japanese children of the years 1945-49 gain this understanding of both the preceding war and their present situation.

Relationship C, mainly distinguished by a rupture between the old and new images of childhood, has often been studied, particularly as the content of school textbooks or syllabi was revised. Relationships A and...
B, however, have been the subject of very few studies, which is why I have made them my particular focus here. In my study of relationships A and B, my aim is: 1) to understand the nature of the connection between the real life and the memory of the recent past (that of the war) of the children of 1945–49; and 2) to understand the relationship between the children’s actual experiences and the current adult discourse on childhood.

I will analyse each relationship by introducing a specific example. I will attempt to point out that, in addition to the acknowledged trauma of this time – first, indoctrination and the cruel reality of war, and later, the shock of defeat and the disastrous living conditions of the immediate post-war period-, paradoxically, the children of the years 1945-49 were also victims of the measures taken to liberate them and lead them to happiness and democracy. I will illustrate two ways in which the means of actually carrying out these measures were traumatic for the children involved. It is my hypothesis that these traumas were of major consequence in how the collective perception and memory of the war were constructed thereafter in Japan.


It is well known that one of the first measures taken by the Allied forces just after their victory over Japan was to censor the textbooks used in Japanese schools. Every single reference to the imperial system, the shintō religion, the army, the kokutai (national body, or national polity), or the Japanese conquests was erased from the textbooks. This measure principally affected language textbooks. History, ethics and geography textbooks in which the ultra-nationalistic and militaristic ideology was still apparent were first taken out of circulation, and then prohibited completely in December 1945.