

„Who am I?“ – Testimonies of silent controversies in Japanese schoolchildren’s compositions

The fish dealer<sup>17</sup>  
(Sakanaya)

By KAKOI Fumio, a boy from Nishiki Lower Middle School, 3<sup>rd</sup> year (9<sup>th</sup> school year), Nishiki-chō, Kuma-gun, Kumamoto Prefecture.

*Mother was preparing supper. She said to me, as I was sitting on a chair in the kitchen, “Fumio, we’ve got a lot to do tomorrow. If you’ve time, ‘d you come and help? There’s a large order for hachimori [sea and mountain food dishes].” “Mm. But I’m busy tomorrow.” Mother sighed, “Well, that’s too bad. Mum and Dad may not get finished alone.” Mother’s tired voice echoed in my ears, her bitter smile engraved itself in my eyes.*

*I felt ashamed, as I had lied to mother. Just like a little child, I had thought of some excuse to get away from what I didn’t like to do. Surely I was now almost fully grown-up. I decided to go along, do what was demanded and learn the hardship of work.*

*Eyes fixed on the ground, my mind worked. Half apologizing I then said to mother, “I’ll go along after all. Though I really had other things to do.” I was sounding rather self-important, but was happy I had said what I had. As I had lied to mother I decided that my effort would be that much harder next day.*

*Next morning I climbed into mother’s car. Mother was in a rush and made me hurry. I didn’t see anything of father. Asking where he was, mother told me he had left before I went on my six-o’clock newspaper delivery round. Even on Sundays father almost never gets a rest. He and mother work day after day and don’t return till late.*

*I have no brothers and only one sister, who still goes to elementary school. Therefore I have to be tenacious, work hard and do what I can to make life for my parents a little easier. I have to learn the hardship of work with my whole body. Such were my thoughts as I rode along, sitting next to mother in the car.*

<sup>17</sup> Translated from: Nihon Sakubun no Kai [Circle for [the Development and Study of] Essay Writing in Japan] ed.: *Sakubun to Kyōiku* [Essay and Education], July 1988, pp. 264-267. Tokyo (Yuri Shuppan).

*We arrived at father's working place, inside the cooperative A of Ōhatake, and I was given an apron. I had already come here to help when in lower middle school, but at that time the apron had been far too large. After I entered lower secondary school I still came from time to time, but never had done work yet for which I needed an apron. Now, however, the apron was necessary, and I had grown to a size where it just fitted me. I reflected upon the fact that I had at last reached an age where I could do the same kind of work as a grown-up.*

*As all this was going through my mind I went to mother, who was already hard at work, and asked, "Now, what do you want me to do?" I spoke in a vigorous tone, and tried to sound as cheerful as possible. "Ah, I see, well, 'do you do this?" Mother probably imagined I didn't [really] like helping, as she sounded a bit surprised. True, I didn't, but seeing mother hard at work it was impossible to say so.*

*The first thing mother told me to do was take a pair of pinchers and pull prawns off the skewers onto which they were fixed from head to tail. I watched mother first. "Ah, easy, easy! You'll just be finished," she said laughingly. I set to work without the pinchers, trying to do the job with my fingers. That didn't work at all. With the pinchers, however, I didn't succeed either. The skewer only came out after I used a lot of force, and I ended up squeezing the prawn so hard it just fell to pieces. So that prawn was for me to eat.*

*I had never yet given a thought about the fact that this job needed so much strength and dexterity. Mother showed me again how to do it. Using my strength the way she showed me I pulled the skewer slowly out. This time I managed well.*

*I began to feel content and pulled out skewer after skewer. Soon my arms started to ache. Again and again I thought about asking mother to let me do something else. However, I stuck to my strenuous job until at last it was completed.*

*I washed my hands. The water was cold and felt good. In winter, though, such cold water must be really painful. Coming to think of it, father and mother's hands are frostbitten and all red and swollen in winter. It hurts only to see those hands. And as they always wear boots, their feet are covered with blisters, besides being all frostbitten too. In winter nights they keep saying, "Oh, [my feet] itch!" and they scratch and scratch or apply some ointment. As I have never been frostbitten or had blisters yet, I cannot fathom how painful that must be. But I am, at least, aware [now] how hard [my parents' work] is.*

*"What sh'll I do next?", I asked mother, who was silently getting on. " 'd you now distribute this onto 12 dishes?" she said, bringing a packet full of vegetables that apparently had been turned in oil. I was not at all good at preparing dishes and had always evaded this task when I had to help with the school lunch. But now there was no excuse, and I did what I was told. When I had finished, the dishes appeared awfully untidy. Mother looked, and laughed. Feeling annoyed I exclaimed, "It's difficult!" and then wanted to know, "What next?"*

*Next came frying. I hated frying. The oil keeps jumping into one's face, and as that hurts I had to be terribly careful. As soon as the object to be fried was in the oil I leaped, dodged and fled from the frying pan. After much ado, [however], I got through with my task.*

*I began to feel quite exhausted, being on my legs the whole time. So I sat down on a chair nearby and took a rest. That did good. I was amazed how relaxing it could be just to sit down. Here I was, still young and already that tired, yet father and mother just kept on working.*

*With a feeling of admiration I was watching my parents at work when mother came towards me, laughing. I felt I was in for the next nasty task. And so it was. Mother asked me to do what I least of all wanted to. "If you've a moment's time", she said, "knead the wasabi [horseradish]." "Oh!" I turned my face away, took bowl and horseradish into my hands and [started to] mix the radish with the proper amount of water and flour, using chopsticks. No sooner had I set to work when mother said, "Go outside. If you do this here your eyes will soon begin to hurt."*

*I immediately went outside to knead. "I'll make you a good wasabi [paste]", I thought, putting all my energy into what I was doing, but soon my arm began to ache. So I changed hands and [went on] kneading with my left. At least twice I changed round again, but now [the wasabi] started stinging in the nose. I went on kneading with my face turned away. It didn't help, [the wasabi] kept on stinging. And yet I continued. It stung more and more. I couldn't keep my eyes open. Refusing to give up I went on kneading. Finally the tears came. As they trickled down my cheeks I held my face up towards the sky. The stinging in my nose turned to pain. And yet my hands didn't give up. I was determined to make a good wasabi [paste]. I paused for moment, and then went on again. [Finally] mother's voice came, "Fumio, fine now." "Nng", I said, quickly turned the paste another five or six times and went inside.*

*There was father talking to a customer. "We don't have very much to offer, I'm afraid," he said, "we had such a big order today, I'm really sorry. But do look in another day." Father came back swiftly and, turning the tap, he gave me a glance just as I was standing there with the bowl in my hands. "Ah, you've finished." He said, "Well then, eh, c'n we have you cut the fish into fine slices?"*

*I was startled and said loudly, "I wouldn't know how!" Father laughed, "Don't worry, 'course you're able to." With that he handed me the large knife. The fish was lying ready on the board. I watched as mother sliced it horizontally, then imitated her. Applying the knife I felt terribly tense. Yet I didn't hesitate and went ahead. [Carefully] I cut two or three slices, after that it all went easily. I felt relieved when I had finished, but then noticed that the slices I had cut all varied in thickness and were most unsightly. Though I had been made to do this job several times I was hardly familiar with it and still a long way from being able to cut [fish] nicely. I felt somehow that mother and father were [now] in a pitiable situation. But mother said with a smiling face, "That's all right. Well done. Anyway, it's lunch time, go over there and have something to eat."*

*Patting me on the back mother handed me a lunch-box. I grabbed it and ran off to the resting place. There I took out a ball of moulded rice and began to devour it. It was good. [Really] good, although nothing more than rice wrapped in nori [edible algae]. Soon mother came. Sitting down she gave a tired sigh, joined me and had a ball too.*

*That day everything had gone well, and after work we returned home. At supper father said, "We really had hard work today. But it was a great help that Fumio came." "Mm", I said and asked back, "Are you always that busy?" "Mm, sometimes." "Then, if you have to work that hard you must probably earn quite a bit?" "Ng, we do, but things just won't work out as we'd like them to." "Hm." Listening to father I didn't [at all] feel like laughing, and silently went upstairs.*

*I lay down and let today's work go through my mind. I had got to know how father and mother toiled, and my first feeling was that of surprise at how hard a life they were leading. With all their energy they work for us. My own hardships are nothing in comparison. No wonder, I thought, they came home in the evening exclaiming, "What a day! What a day!"*

*In future I shall see that I fold up the laundry and clear away after meals. I'm also going to study a bit harder, so that [my parents] have no need to worry.*

*As I was reflecting on all this I became filled with the feeling of having to cherish my parents. I ran downstairs, just said "I'll come'n help again!", and went to take my bath. "Mm, we're glad if you do," the reply could be heard right to the bathroom. With the sound of this reply [in my ears] I slowly lowered myself into the water.*

I behaving like a spoiled child<sup>18</sup>  
(*Amaete ita watashi*)

By ABE Tomomi, a girl from Noda Lower Middle School, 2<sup>nd</sup> year (8<sup>th</sup> school year), Fukushima City, Fukushima Prefecture.

*"Mother!! Sorry, but would you post this card for me?" I asked in a hurry, just as I was leaving for school. "All right. Put it on the table," answered mother, who was just doing the dishes. "Well then, don't forget! Bye bye!" I said in my usual loud voice as I opened the front door. "Uwah! It's snowing and snowing, and it's cold!"*

*There yesterday the snow had at last all melted, and now it is snowing again, densely and heavily. I walked where the snow had piled up so as not to slip and fall.*

*School finished after 5<sup>th</sup> lesson, and as I set out for home the snow was lying 5 centimetres thick. And still it was snowing. Today there were no club activities, so I was able to return earlier than usual. Since I disliked walking alone along the street I took the bus. Caught between tall children from elementary school I felt like in a gorge, and stretching my neck I still could hardly see outside. Gazing at the endless snow I thought to myself, < Ah! Mother has posted my card. Terrible if it hadn't gone off today!> <But if she hasn't?! Where I absolutely want that towel and the training suit [with the design] by Honda Keiko?> <But I told mother so distinctly this morning, so everything's all right. Yes.> I convinced myself all on my own. Meanwhile the bus had arrived at the endstop Kayaba. The snow was still two, three centimeters deeper here. My left foot hurt as my shoe rubbed, so I purposely limped a bit.*

*"I'm back!" [I called] in a deliberately loud voice, [as I entered the front door]. As mother used to work at an assembly plant for cameras she used never to be at home at such an early hour. But now she was there, and when I thought of it I sensed a feeling of joy. That is why I called so loudly. "Welcome! You're early*

<sup>18</sup> Translated from: Nihon Sakubun no Kai [Circle for [the Development and Study of] Essay Writing in Japan] ed.: *Sakubun to Kyōiku* [Essay and Education], July 1984, pp. 259-261. Tokyo (Yuri Shuppan).

today?!" "Mm, we had no club activities." I went to my room, dragging my bag behind me. There I dumped it [in the corner] and hung up my school uniform. <What was that?> The card that mother was supposed to send off was lying on the table.

"Mother!!! Did you post my card?" I asked, even though I could see that she hadn't. <I wonder what mother will say.> I waited for her answer as I hurriedly changed. [But] there was no answer.

"Mother, if I call you!" The card had not been posted. Neither did mother answer. So I began to feel furious. At last mother said in quite an ordinary tone of voice, "I haven't been to Umetsu today, so I didn't post your card." She said it without any trace of emotion. Umetsu is the name of a shop nearby, and the post office is 100 metres further on. <Mother spent the whole day at home, so she really could have found time to post my card, one would think.> Wild rage rose inside me and I thumped loudly into the kitchen. "It would have surely been nothing just to go over there and give up my card!" I said, and thumped back even more violently into my room. There I just sat down on the carpet.

<Now I'm sure it's too late, I've missed the deadline. And there I absolutely wanted that training suit!> Big tears came. Lately I begin to cry about ever so small a thing. <Surely there's no need to cry now,> I thought, but the tears rolled down, one after the other. [There I was,] in a terribly cold little room 4 ½ mats large, eyes full of tears, in a temper, and thinking.

Perhaps I shouldn't say "thinking", it was rather more like thoughts bubbling up on their own in my chest. <And there I asked mother properly this morning. "Because I haven't been to Umetsu," she says, by that she had totally forgotten! I'm sure.> As this went through my mind I grew so angry I felt I had to choke. <But perhaps, as it's mother, she really had forgotten... No! I shan't forgive her. After all, yesterday...> I [began to] recall last night. Just before going to sleep I had realized that the deadline for the contest was close and thought to myself, <Ah, good I remembered! I nearly missed the [the deadline]. Good I'm still in time.> With a feeling of relief I then stayed up late especially to write that card. So I'd had less sleep [than usual].

<Well, of course I must take some blame onto myself for having forgotten about the deadline. But if the card had gone off today it would have been in time.> I jumped up. <It may be cold here, but I don't want to go to the living-room where the kotatsu [foot-warmer table] is. To get there I'd have to pass through

*the kitchen. And then I certainly couldn't evade meeting mother. No! only not meet mother!>*

*That moment I remembered the warm air fan that I shared with my brother. <That's it, I'll turn on the fan. Oh no, is it in brother's room?! That idiot. What am I going to do now?> I sat down again. <Why should I have to hide in my room? Why?! I've done nothing wrong...> Suddenly I felt strong. I stood up quickly and went to the door. There I waited a moment. <Now!> I said to myself and rushed to the living-room without looking at mother. I got there in less than 3 seconds, yet this time seemed endless – I felt as if I had been made to stand before mother.*

*[Once in the living-room] I slid the door quickly shut and felt relieved. And a great big sigh escaped. I plugged in the electric cable, crept so far under the foot-warmer table that only my head stuck out, and [started to] play one of my favorite TV games, "Donkey Kong". If you are able to solve three situations, then the gorilla falls down and the princess can be rescued. However, I didn't enjoy the game as I usually do. So I gave up almost immediately and stared at the ceiling. The anger of before found its way back into my feelings.*

*"Yesterday I did what I could to get that card written..." I thought I had said that in my mind, yet my grumbling kept coming from my mouth. I was just talking to myself, but hearing myself I thought, "What an idiot I am getting so furious about such a trifling matter." This calmed me down a little, and I looked outside. On the concrete wall the snow had piled up to more than 10 centimetres. Heavily it lay on the branches of the trees father had planted. And still it was snowing.*

*<It has been snowing since this morning. It's time it stopped. Come to think of it, perhaps mother said to herself, "I'll go once the snow has stopped." Yet it is still snowing, and there's no sign that it will stop.> I found this line of thinking made sense. <Of course! I for my part would certainly not have ventured out in that snow just to post one single card.> <Uh! I really have been behaving like a spoilt child recently! A card like that I could have dropped in the letter box, there is one right on my way to school.>*

*All this was going through my mind, when all of a sudden I heard mother peacefully humming to herself in the kitchen. "I'm sorry," I said in a voice so small that mother could impossibly have heard me. "Tomomi!!" called mother. I was startled. <Did she hear me after all? Impossible.> My heart beat fast. "What's the time?" she asked. "Eh... ten past five." Mother showed no*

*disturbed feelings at all. <Thank goodness!> Looking outside I saw it was still snowing. <If only it stopped by tomorrow!>*

*Watching the snow as it kept coming I reflected upon my conduct. There was I, all by myself, angry and crying just because of a single card. <How stupid I am,> I thought, and I became aware of myself behaving like a spoiled child towards mother.*

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Probably not all schoolchildren throughout Japan write essays like these. However, it is noteworthy that collections of just this kind of essay are carefully edited, passed out regularly to children and parents, and obtainable in many bookstores. Obviously they are the focus of a considerable amount of attention in Japan.

To non-Japanese, schoolchildren's essays are a source of most valuable information, as they show us Japan from the angle of direct participants in society. At the same time they draw our attention to trivialities often overlooked but of vital importance to those whose daily life they shape. Through children's essays we may learn that Japanese adolescents have the same impulses as adolescents elsewhere, but that they are subject to specific patterns of reasoning and ways of perceiving reality that are certainly not the same everywhere.

The two essays "The fish dealer" and "I behaving like a spoiled child" were chosen to represent innumerable similar ones depicting the ordinary and, stylistically, interweaving 3 levels of reality. These are, a) facts exactly as they were perceived, b) communicative interaction, mainly speech, exactly as it was perceived, speech invariably being recorded in the local dialect and/or in sub-standard pronunciation, and c) the process of thought as it developed in relation to the reality perceived.

To place the two essays into context, brief mention may be made of the title and contents of a number of other typical essays in similar collections:

- 1) "When I forgot my homework"; a description of a wish to deceive the teacher and then of feelings of shame.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Akiyama Chizuru (Tokyo): "Shukudai o wasureta koto". In: *Sugikko* 1985, ed. Suginami Dai-ichi Shôgakkô, Tokyo, p. 57.



- 2) "There is no reason to be tense"; a description of a fight with the inner self to overcome nervousness.<sup>20</sup>
- 3) "My stubborn self"; a description of how a pupil comes to understand, after violent inner controversies, that being mediocre is not good enough.<sup>21</sup>
- 4) "When I was born"; a pupil's description of her parents' feelings at the time of her birth, and a reflection upon the reasons of her own existence.<sup>22</sup>
- 5) "A study of the relationship between pulse and fatigue"; this essay is a truly scholarly effort at understanding the functions of one's own body.<sup>23</sup>

The examples mentioned so far can, in a wide sense, be classified "Observations of self". Also "I behaving like a spoiled child" fits this category well.

A next type of essay would be:

- 6) "Why I can't speak openly to grandmother"; here we find self-observation combined with determination to change one's attitude towards someone else.<sup>24</sup>
- 7) "My home is a guest-house"; a description first of the various types of work in a guest-house, followed by realization that it is always necessary to cooperate.<sup>25</sup>

These two essays are examples for "Coming to understand what self ought to be in relation to others". "The fish-dealer" presented above may be placed in this category.

In many cases, however, what self ought to be is merely implied, while description concentrates on another person perceived to be dependent in some way on the writer. Thus in

<sup>20</sup> Satō Yasunari (Tokyo): "Kinchō nanka kowakunai", *Sakubun to Kyōiku*, August 1989: 123-125.

<sup>21</sup> Shibaoka Yoshiyuki (Kōchi Prefecture): "Boku no ganko na kokoro". In: *Sakubun to Kyōiku*, August 1989: 175-177.

<sup>22</sup> Kojima Asako (Hyōgo Prefecture): "Watashi no umareta koro no hanashi". In: *Sakubun to Kyōiku*, August 1989: 117-120.

<sup>23</sup> Azuma Chimi, Nomura Ayumi, Kawahara Yoshiko, Wajima Mie (Hokkaidō): "Tsukare to myaku no kenkyū". In: *Sakubun to kyōiku*, August 1989: 163-165.

<sup>24</sup> Abe Masachi (Fukushima Prefecture): "Sobo ni taishite sunao ni narenai boku". In: *Sakubun to Kyōiku*, August 1989: 222-224.

<sup>25</sup> Okada Yoshiko (Ishikawa Prefecture): "Uchi wa minshuku". In: *Kodomo Nihon Fudoki*, Vol. 17, ed. Nihon Sakubun no Kai, pp. 79-81. Tokyo (Iwasaki Shoten), 1973.

8) "Our shop", a pupil's father finds that times have changed. He feels depressed, and therefore becomes dependent on the sympathy, and by implication on the future efforts, of the essay writing self.<sup>26</sup>

A similar focus on others may be found in

9) "Towels made in Imabari", a description of the ambition of one's township and realization of the importance of everyone doing his specific job<sup>27</sup>, and

10) "A new beginning after saying good-bye", where we read how the writer's mother leaves home because father has become an alcoholic and made debts, and what hardships — mother must go through finding a new job.<sup>28</sup>

In a context less connected with work we also find essays like

11) "Poor Sugô-kun", the description of a visit to a class comrade whose father has — died.<sup>29</sup>

As a rule essays treating the topic of "Self in relation to others" emphasize the work context. Sometimes both self and others all but disappear behind vivid descriptions of work itself. An example is

12) "Helping with the silkworms", an essay dealing with the discovery of the pleasure of working.<sup>30</sup>

13) "Working with the sick" is similar in so far as it also tells of the experience of very — hard work.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, mention should also be made of the quite frequent essays dealing with political responsibility in terms of war and peace. Thus

<sup>26</sup> Imaoka Michie (Shimane Prefecture): "Watashi no mise". In: *Kodomo Nihon Fudoki*, Vol. 32, ed. Nihon Sakubun no Kai, pp. 19-21. Tokyo (Iwasaki Shoten), 1973.

<sup>27</sup> Tsubouchi Shôhei (Ehime Prefecture): "Imabari no taoru". In: *Kodomo Nihon Fudoki*, Vol. 38, ed. Nihon Sakubun no Kai, pp. 102-104. Tokyo (Iwasaki Shoten), 1973.

<sup>28</sup> Iida Kyôko (Aomori Prefecture): "Sayonara kara no shuppatsu". In: *Sakubun to Kyôiku*, July 1984: 81-83.

<sup>29</sup> Harako Sayoka (Aomori Prefecture): "Sugô-kun ga kawaiisô". In: *Sakubun to Kyôiku*, August 1989: 110-112.

<sup>30</sup> Okamura Masumi (Gumma Prefecture): "Kaiko no tetsudai o shita koto." In: *Sakubun to Kyôiku*, August 1989: 105-107.

<sup>31</sup> Matsushita Yuka (Nagasaki Prefecture): "Shokuba jishshû ni itte (Iida Byôin)". In: *Sakubun to Kyôiku*, August 1989: 242-244.

14) "Talking to grandmother" is a description of a pupil trying to grasp the implications of — war through the feelings of his grandmother who had actually suffered.<sup>32</sup>

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What, we may now wonder, are the circumstances surrounding the writing of such essays, what are the aims of the teachers in whose classes they originate?

To answer these questions it comes in handy that many of the essays are accompanied by short commentaries by a teacher. Sometimes lack of clarity is criticized, sometimes lack of sincerity. A made up story is immediately detected. In the great majority of cases, however, the pupil is merely praised for having mastered a particular passage well. It is from these praising comments that we can glean quite a clear picture of the intended function of an essay.

By the mere fact that almost all essays are measured by how intense penetrating observation has been (Jap. *mi-tsumeru*), it may be concluded that this activity is the single most important task a pupil must fulfill. And here again it is striking what great importance is placed on *jibun o mitsumeru*, penetrating observation of self, or, even more explicitly, *jibun no naimen o mitsumeru*, penetrating observation of the inside of self.

The emphasis on observing and recalling by means of the act of writing naturally leads to quite intricate texts, that, as mentioned, balance passages rendering facts, communication, and thought. A good example is "The fish dealer" presented at the beginning of this paper.

"I behaving like a spoilt child" treats the three dimensions Facts, Communication, and Thought somewhat less evenly, as outside the sphere of inner self almost nothing happens. This is particularly striking when Tomomi's mother is depicted humming away in the kitchen peacefully (at least to the outside observer) while Tomomi herself is going through the most violent emotions. Quite a similar contrast between the calmness of mother and father and the violent inner feeling of the writer himself could, it will be recalled, also be seen in "The fish dealer".

Though many essays deal to a large part with the writer's self, their general objective certainly lies in the development of awareness of "self in relation to others". Self-observation then is clearly the first step on a path towards

<sup>32</sup> Horikawa Kôta (Kumamoto Prefecture): "Sobo to kataru". In: *Sakubun to Kyôiku*, August 1989: 254-256.

understanding, then sympathizing with, and finally cooperating with others strictly within the constraints of a given reality.

As the editor's comments point out, reality must be experienced with one's own whole body. Without this experience Fumio in "The fish dealer" could never have become aware of the fact that his own emotions were immature in relation to those of his parents, who, he discovers, were more powerfully feeling the constraints of reality than he had been. Thus the second concept in children's essays, after penetrating observation, is first-hand experience (Jap. *taiken*).

It is here that a large number of essays conclude that the most normal and universal experience of reality is through work. Work, if properly understood and carefully executed, thus leads to congruence of the inner self with reality, and in turn to true contentedness. At the climax of an essay a writer may then exclaim, "To work is an enormously satisfying feeling" (*hataraku no wa totemo kimochi ga ii*).

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Along the steps of self-observation, self-challenge through first-hand experience, and finally understanding of what self has to become, the writer takes the facts along his (her) own road to maturity as they are. Reproach is limited to self-reproach. However, the outside world is not seen as perfect, and though "self" is prepared to accept reality, undercurrents of opposition are in fact sensed here and there.

A stirring example is an essay with the title "Father who works in Tokyo"<sup>33</sup>. Here a girl from Muroran in Hokkaidô tells how her father is sent from place to place, ever further away from the family. She describes father's regular phone calls, her sadness when returning from a visit to father in Tokyo, and finally how father in his solitude was rapidly becoming an alcoholic. Thereby she unmistakably signals to the world of adults that adaptation to circumstances must have its clear limits.

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To end this fragmentary introduction into the world of children's essays let me turn to the question of what underlies such widespread interest in them in Japan.

<sup>33</sup> Ishiyama Marie (Hokkaidô): "Tôkyô de hataraku o-tôsan". In: *Sakubun to Kyôiku*, August 1989: 146-149.

For one thing, as the commentaries to the essays never tire to stress, they form testimonies of growth and maturation (Jap. *seichô*). Thus they are readily collected and edited as a record and at the same time an encouragement for others to seek their own maturation through writing based on truthful observation and first-hand experience. (Incidentally, one wonders how large a segment of Japanese writing in general belongs to this category of exercise in maturation, not wanting to be more, perhaps, than a stimulus for others to do the same.)

Secondly, collecting children's essays is undoubtedly done with an eye to teacher training. Published essays therefore usually retain comments criticizing that a situation has not been accurately described, or that the text is not based on what was truly felt by the writer. Criticism here is not being leveled at a pupil learning writing as a communicative art, but at a teacher learning instruction in the art of writing as a means of maturation.

Not all teachers in Japan are equally ambitious in this type of instruction. Many an essay (which as a rule remains unpublished) is not more than quite a dull recapitulation of something seen or done. However, even unambitious teachers are tied to guidelines for the formation of their pupils' personality. Accordingly the teacher's manuals demand training in "strictly looking reality in the face" and "self-reflection", and they urge "recognition of the value of work" and "understanding of those on whom one depends"<sup>34</sup>. Elements reflected in schoolchildren's essays are thus prescribed by the Ministry of Education.

And yet, the teachers who are particularly ambitious in training their pupils in essay writing, and particularly serious in discussing these essays, may not be entirely in line with the aims of the national curriculum. For instance, the official teacher's manuals demand, besides the points mentioned above, also training in formal manners, readiness to be moved by things sublime, or duty explicitly to the national community.

In the collection of essays I have looked through, however, not a trace of these last mentioned points is found. On the other hand, time and again we come across topics hardly dealt with in an ordinary school curriculum, for instance the implication of war (especially WW II), the hardships of people near the bottom end of the social ladder, or questions pertaining to financial difficulties, debts, divorce or alcoholism.

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of Education (Monbushô): *Chûgakkô Shidô-sho <Dôtoku-hen> and <Shakai-hen>* [Teacher's Manual for Lower Middle Schools (incl. Reference to the curriculum of the elementary school): The subjects "Virtue" and "Society"]. Tokyo 1978.

No doubt there is a political dimension in the aims of those who most zealously try to lead children to maturity through writing and encourage silent controversies between self and reality. A glance at the history of these efforts during the last 60 years would prove this<sup>35</sup>.

Quite apart from any political aspect, however, the essays produced form amazing documents of disciplined observation and reflection, and display an astonishing capability to recall close interaction not only with others but also with one's own alter ego. Moreover, being based on the ideal of truthfulness as the sole way towards real maturity, these very private essays give us valuable insights into reality as it is seen by children – by persons not obsessed with explaining Japan.

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<sup>35</sup> A brief discussion in English on the history of essay writing in Japanese schools as a form of self-development may be found in the study by Kitagawa Mary and Chisato: *Making connections with writing. An expressive writing model in Japanese schools*. Portsmouth N.H. (Heinemann Educational Books), 1987.

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- 2** "Topics and Narratives"
- 3** "Who am I?"



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