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Document 21: "The distinction between wise and stupid comes down to education."

Introduction to *An Encouragement of Learning* (Gakumon no susume), Fukuzawa Yukichi, 1872-1876.

It is said that heaven does not create one man above or below another man. This means that when men are born from heaven they all are equal. There is no innate distinction between high and low. It means that men can freely and independently use the myriad things of the world to satisfy their daily needs through the labors of their own bodies and minds, and that, as long as they do not infringe upon the rights of others, may pass their days in happiness. Nevertheless, as we broadly survey the human scene, there are the wise and the stupid, the rich and poor, the noble and lowly, whose conditions seem to differ as greatly as the clouds and the mud. The reason for this is clear. In the *Jitsugokyō* we read that if a man does not learn he will be ignorant, and that a man who is ignorant is stupid. Therefore the distinction between wise and stupid comes down to the matter of education.

Moreover, there are difficult and easy professions in society. The person who performs difficult work is regarded as a man of high station. One who performs easy work is called a person of low station. For work involving intellectual effort is considered more difficult than work done through one's own physical strength. Consequently, such persons as doctors, scholars, government officials, merchants who manage large businesses, farmers who employ many hands, are considered noble and of high station. Being such, their households are naturally wealthy, and they seem to tower above and out of reach of the lower levels of society. But when we inquire into the reason for this, we find that these differences are entirely the result of

whether they have or do not have the power which learning brings. It is not because of some decree of heaven. As the proverb says: heaven does not give riches and dignity to man himself, but to his labors. Therefore, as I have said above, there are no innate status distinctions separating the noble and base, the rich and the poor. It is only the person who has studied diligently, so that he has a mastery over things and events, who becomes noble and rich, while his opposite becomes base and poor.

Learning does not essentially consist in such impractical pursuits as study of obscure Chinese characters, reading ancient texts which are difficult to make out, or enjoying and writing poetry. These kinds of interests may be useful diversions, but they should not be esteemed as highly as the Confucian and Japanese Learning scholars have esteemed them since ancient times. Among the Chinese Learning scholars, those who have been skilled in practical matters have been few indeed. Rare also has been the *chōnin* who, if he was well versed in poetry, was also successful in business. Consequently we observe thoughtful *chōnin* and peasants, when they see their own children concentrating on books, fear as good parents that they will eventually bring the family fortune to ruin. This is not without reason. And it proves that such forms of learning are ultimately without practical value and will not serve daily needs.

Such impractical studies should thus be relegated to a secondary position. The object of one's primary efforts should be practical learning that is closer to ordinary human needs. For example, a person should learn the 47-letter *kana* syllabary, methods of letter writing and of accounting, the practice of the abacus, the way to handle weights and measures, and the like. And there are many additional things to be learned. Geography is the guide to the climates not only of Japan, but of the many countries of the world. Physics is the science which investigates the properties and functions of the myriad things of the universe. Histories are books which study

the condition of the countries of the past and present by detailed chronicling of the historical ages. Economics explains the financial management of self, family, and the state. Ethics expounds the natural principles of personal moral cultivation and of social intercourse. . . .

A Western proverb says that there must be a harsh government over stupid people. It is not that the government is harsh; the stupid people have invited this misfortune upon themselves. Conversely, it is reasonable that there should be good government over good people. Therefore in Japan, too, we have this kind of government because the people are this way.

But if the morality of the people sinks below its present level and ignorance and illiteracy increase, then the laws of the government must also become harsher. Conversely, if the people pursue learning, understand the principles of things, and follow the way of modern civilization, then the laws of the government will also become more generous and compassionate. The severity or leniency of the law will naturally be in proportion to the virtue of the people. Who would cherish a harsh government and dislike a good one? Who would not pray for the wealth and prestige of his own nation? Who would tolerate the contempt of foreign nations? . . . Both government and people should have the common purpose that each function in its proper capacity, so that the peace of the country be maintained, the government smoothly administer the affairs of the state, and the people not suffer under its rule. The learning which I am now exhorting has this sole end in view.

Source: Fukuzawa Yukichi, *An Encouragement of Learning*. Trans. by David A. Dilworth, Umeyo Hirano. Tokyo: Sophia University, 1969, 1-6.

Context.

Education had been important to the Japanese for centuries; indeed, in the late Tokugawa years Japan already had one of the world's highest literacy rates. That helps explain why the 17 pamphlets that were compiled to make Fukuzawa Yukichi's *Encouragement of Learning* (*Gakumon no susume*) sold nearly a million copies between the 1870s and 1890. The other factor was his widely popular philosophy of education, which denigrated the elitism of the Chinese model that had dominated Japanese education for centuries and heralded practical education that used Western ideas and approaches. On careful reading, however, it is clear that he was quite conservative, advocating neither social equality nor popular sovereignty.

Questions.

1. Fukuzawa accepts the idea of social inequality. What, in his view, is—and it not—the basis of inequality?

2. What, for Fukuzawa, is the purpose of education? And what kind of education serves people best?

3. How does Fukuzawa feel about the time-honored Chinese approach to education? Why doe she feel that way?

Terms.

Jitsugokyō (True Words). Written by an unknown late-Heian author (c. twelfth century), this work was used as a primer in Japanese schools for centuries. It focused on the moral nature of education and the need to pursue wisdom.

Confucian, Chinese, and Japanese Learning. He refers to two of the major schools of thought in the early 19th century: Confucian (or Chinese) scholarship, which emphasized the memorization and interpretation of ancient Chinese texts, and *kokugaku* (national learning, or Japanese studies) that concentrated on the nature of Japan's past and what made it unique.

Chōnin. "Townsmen." The *chōnin* class encompassed the merchants and artisans that gave the 19th century cities most of their energy and wealth, even though Confucianism denigrated merchants as the lowest social class, as parasites who lived off the labors of others.

Kana syllabary. While rooted in the ideographic and pictographic Chinese characters (*kanji*), the Japanese written language also uses two sets of phonetic characters, which are called *kana*. Fukuzawa saw *kana* as easier to learn and thus more practical than the thousands of *kanji*.