

# Philosophy for Children in Japan: History and Prospects

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(Received 2015.1.5)

The beginning of the interest in philosophy for children in Japan seemed to be in 1983, when Gareth B Matthews' *Philosophy and the Young Child* (1980) was translated into Japanese. His *Dialogues with Children* (1984) was also translated into Japanese in 1987, and it was followed by the Japanese translation of Matthews' *The Philosophy of Childhood* (1994) in 1997. It seems to be able to say that philosophy for children spread out in Japan with the name of Matthews. Since the end of 1990s, the researchers in educational studies and in the academic discipline of philosophy in Japan have published articles regarding philosophy for children. This paper tries to grasp the outline of the situation of philosophy for children in Japan and describe its prospects. The possibility of the development of philosophy for children in Japan would be; firstly, raising the problem of the transformation of the academic philosophy, secondly, applying philosophy for children to moral education at school, and thirdly, contributing to nurturing the children's abilities of logical thinking, critical judgment and expression of their own.

**Key words:** philosophy for children, Japan

## Introduction

The beginning of the interest in philosophy for children in Japan can be seen at the translation of Gareth Matthews' *Philosophy and the Young Child* (1980) into Japanese in 1983. Four years later in 1987, Matthews' *Dialogue with Children* (1984) was also translated into Japanese. Further, the Japanese translation of *The Philosophy of Childhood* (1994) appeared in 1997. It seems to be able to say that philosophy for children spread out in Japan with the name of Matthews. Since the end of 1990s, on the other, the researchers in educational studies and in the academic discipline of philosophy in Japan have published articles regarding philosophy for children. This paper tries to grasp the outline of the situation of philosophy for children in Japan and describe its prospects. This paper was originally orally presented at the International Conference on Philosophy for Children held at the University of Graz, Austria, on October 14-18, 2013.

## 1. Outline

The translator of Matthews' *Philosophy and the Young Child* (1980) is Sho Suzuki. He is not philosopher, nor educationist, but researcher of Russian and French literature. He took part in the translation of Hemleben and Belyi's *Rudolf Steiner*, which shows his interest in philosophy and thoughts. Suzuki regards Matthews' *Philosophy and the Young Child* as an accusation against the general tendency of underestimation of children's intelligence and an introduction to an "intelligent" attendance to children. He sympathizes with Matthews' warm attitude to children.

Suzuki, next, translated *Dialogues with Children* (1984) in 1987. He says, Matthews insists that an "intelligent" and "philosophical" dialogue with children is quite interesting. Suzuki understands that Matthews' work objects to the common sense so far in which the philosophy belongs to "adult man" and children are excluded as immature. He observes the problems of education in Japan behind the translation. That is the problems of the

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educational climate at school in Japan in which so-called *gakuryoku* or scholastic achievement by the marks in the test is stressed, and the importance of the education of artistic sentiment, on the contrary, is insisted. The translator Suzuki is attending to the “intelligent education,” which is different from knowledge education or sentiment education, namely, the education for the reflection and discussion on the fundamental issues of human being found in Matthews’ books.

Matthews’ *The Philosophy of Childhood* (1994) was translated into Japanese by clinical psychologist Osamu Kuramitsu and writer of children’s stories Kaho Nashiki in 1997. Kuramitsu finds in this Matthews’ book the topics related to the clinical psychology in modern times, for example, the indication of inadequacy of Piaget’s theory of personality development. He is discovering in Matthews’ writings that children’s mind is full of intelligent activities. And Nashiki notes that the richness of children’s world Matthews shows is common to children’s literature Nashiki concerns herself with.

Shogo Asami translated *Das Café der toten Philosophen: ein philosophischer Briefwechsel für Kinder und Erwachsene* (1996) by Milanese-born German philosopher Vittorio Hösle and twelve-year-old girl Nora into Japanese in 1999. Asami is philosopher and he regards this book as a brilliant guide to philosophy. The supposed readers of this book are not children, but adults. The translators express great admiration for Nora’s integrity and high ability of thinking, and Hösle’s extensive knowledge and cleverness to respond to Nora’s questions.

Another translation we take up here is the one of Ekkehard Martens’ *Philosophieren mit Kindern: Eine Einführung in die Philosophie* (1999) translated by educationist Mineko Arifuku and philosopher Kogaku Arifuku in 2003. This book claims that the prototype of philosophy for children already existed in 1920s in Germany prior to Lipman and Matthews. Arifukus agree with Martens’ statements that philosophizing is a “skill of culture” which has the same importance as the three R’s for children nowadays, and take as this book’s characteristic the German-type scholarliness and the philosophical argument for the foundations of philosophy for

children. It is the first aim of philosophizing with children that children should acquire the ability to think as a “skill of culture,” and at the same time this book is a reentry into philosophy for adults, according to translators.

Other than these translations, scientific articles regarding philosophy for children were written. Mayumi Nishino’s “The Philosophy for Children in Australia: A Consideration on Moral Education for Developing the Ability to Think” (1997) tries to get suggestions for the moral education curriculum development in Japan by analyzing the educational practices guided by Philip Cam in Australia. Nishino considers two bases of learning philosophy at school: one is philosophy for children arose from Lipman, the other is “philosophy and democracy in the world” project for UNESCO (1995). We cannot find the evidence of Nishino’s reference to Matthews’ books already translated in 1983, 1987, and 1997, when this article was written in 1997.

At this time of the middle 1990s, Tatsuo Watanabe’s *Moral Education Class with Philosophy for Children* was published in 1995, which was a completely independent project. Watanabe was a teacher at the elementary school attached to the University of Tsukuba. Watanabe insists that a philosophical question “What is human being?” is quite important in order to regain our humanity in our mechanizing modern society, and the children who shoulder the future society have a right to enhance their humanity and teachers have an obligation to support them. If we try to make time for that at school, Watanabe says, there is no possibility except the class of “morals.” And he attempted to teach the class of morals with including the ways of living he learned from Kant, Hegel and other philosophers in history. This book *Moral Education Class with Philosophy for Children* is a report of his teaching practices, which contains seven practices. In every practice, there is a description of “How children philosophize in the class?” under the title of “philosophy of children.” We cannot recognize from his book the author, an elementary school teacher Watanabe’s background and the reason why he took his way to “philosophy of children.” He studied philosopher’s works and challenged to improve the class of morals by himself using guidebooks

to philosophy. This book is an outcome of his endeavors. There are no reference to Lipman and Matthews.

Apart from these educational inquiries, several books regarding philosophy for children were written by some Japanese philosophers. Hitoshi Nagai's *Philosophy for <Children>* was published in 1996, and the same author's *Philosophic Dialogue for Children* was published in 2009. The former is a philosophy guidebook for <children>. As the word children is enclosed in angle brackets < >, it has a special meaning. The <children> does not mean so-called children of particular ages, but people like children who definitely keep the questions they hold when they were children until they were really satisfied with the answers. Nagai says, "It seems that most people call the persons in the history of Western philosophy such as Socrates, Plato, Descartes, Kant, then further Heidegger, Wittgenstein, when they say philosophy. And many people believe that learning philosophy is reading and understanding the literature of those persons. However, you can never touch the essence of philosophy through such way. (Nagai, 1996, p.12)" Then, how can we study philosophy? Nagai's answer is to think by yourself. If you are interested in somebody's philosophy, Nagai says, you just find out the similar person to yourself by chance. And the significant characteristic of Nagai's philosophy of <children> is to be purely "intelligent." Namely, you only answer the "intelligent" question why I exist. Therefore, Nagai absolutely disagrees with the ordinary opinion to use philosophy for children for moral education.

Nagai's latter book is an introductory book to philosophy, in his sense, for elementary school children. A question such as what man lives for is taken up through the dialogue between a cat named "pénétré" and I. Elementary school children can follow the discussion with illustrations and *manga*.

The similar trial is Yoshimichi Nakajima's *Good-bye Doraemon: Philosophy Class for Children* published in 2011. Nakajima is an expert on Kantian philosophy. It was the philosophy for children that the academic philosopher challenged when he became sixty-five years old. It is a book children shall read in the same way as Nagai's *Philosophic Dialogue for Children*. The supposed readers are

fifteen-year-old children—junior high school's third-year students in Japan. Nakajima's major premise in philosophy is an inquiry into the "truth" for living, where the value of philosophy for children should be grounded. Since the inquiry into the truth is not necessarily comfortable, people leave philosophy when they become adults according to Nakajima's idea. Thus, Nakajima says, children could be the suitable agent of philosophy.

A series of *Philosophy even for Children* appeared in 2007. The supposed readers are around twelve-year-old children, and the authors are not only philosophers, but also writer, poet, actor, counselor and others. The books talk about life, self, family, love, work etc. The attention-grabbing copy of this series is "philosophy books in everyday life." This seems to show the situation in which academic philosophy should be related to everyday life, and it may be regarded as an affinity with children's way of thinking.

Scientific papers referred to Lipman and Matthews are written in 2000s. A philosopher Mitsuki Asanuma's paper "The Humbleness of Philosophy: G.B. Matthews' Philosophy for Children" (2002) made a crossover between philosophy's coming into the public and philosophy for children. Educationist Hideki Mori's papers (2009-2012) concerning citizenship education and philosophy for children attempted to link the two. A Mitsuyo Toyoda's paper "A Study on the Ideas and Methods of Philosophy for Children and Its Practices in Hawai'i" (2012) considered the practices of philosophy for children at schools in Hawaii.

Nobuko Morita, philosopher of education, published *Philosophy with Children: From Question to Hope* in 2011. This book basically asks what philosophy is and tries to suggest a prototype of philosophy exists in the dialogue with children. Morita assumes that this work belongs to "philosophy of education," as children come to the fore in the discussion. She refers to Lipman and Matthews, however this book does not take its way to the practices of philosophy for children, but heads for an inquiry into a new form of philosophy of education.

Younger scholars and teachers came together and carried a project for philosophy for children, and its report *Research on Philosophy Education*

*for Children* was published in 2013. They ask the fundamental questions such as “What is philosophy?” “What is child?” “What is education?” On the other, they try to investigate the practical possibilities, that is, the place and the method of the philosophy for children at school.

## 2. The message from Hiroshima University

Our Department of Learning Science at the Graduate School of Education, Hiroshima University in Japan actually had a relation to philosophy for children. The fact was unfortunately not paid attention at all in the trend of gaining in popularity of philosophy for children mentioned in the above section 1. This department invited Karel van der Leeuw from the University of Amsterdam as visiting professor at Hiroshima University for six months in 2006. He was a leading expert on philosophy for children in Holland. We conducted joint research and Higuchi translated his two papers into Japanese which were published in our *Journal of Learning Science* in 2007. Higuchi wrote as follows in the translator’s introduction to his paper “Some Issues in Philosophy for Children.”

There is an institute for the research on philosophy for children at the University of Graz in Austria, where Daniela Cahmy is the key person for the activities. Hiroshima University has a partnership with the University of Graz. I [Higuchi] attended the international conference on philosophy for children held at the University of Graz in October in 2005, when I met professor van der Leeuw, and that led to inviting him as visiting professor to Hiroshima University. (Higuchi, S.trans. 2007a, p.27)

“Philosophy for Children” is a practice of education which would give a clue to consider a new way of moral education. Main activity of the practice is “dialogue” through the stories in a broad sense. For example, in Japan, every child knows the old story “Urashima Taro” and children’s growing is inseparably bound up with those stories. However, I have never heard that the “Urashima Taro” was used

as a material for dialogue for children’s learning. In this story, a boy Urashima Taro saved a turtle’s life and he was invited to the paradise in the sea. He enjoyed very much in the place, but he became old in a moment when he returned to the ordinary world. This popular old tale would contain a philosophical question on “time” beyond the teachings like you receive the reward if you are kind to somebody. “What is time?” An unrestricted dialogue with children concerning that kind of topic is “philosophy for children.” How can we, however, connect it with Japanese moral education? That is a subject that all the people who are interested in this van der Leeuw’s paper should start thinking about realistically.

Furthermore, we want to point out that “philosophy for children” has a large scientific significance which is beyond the issues of educational practices and van der Leeuw’s proposals in this paper as well. It provides us with a new style of criticism of philosophy. If we suddenly said “we will teach philosophy to elementary school students,” people would be puzzled, because “philosophy” generally meant so-called academic philosophy. “Philosophy for children” requires us to question the presupposition that philosophy is taught at a special place like the philosophy department at university. Philosophy used to be an endeavor to think about human life and happiness, and what realizes the happiness. The original idea has been lost in a long history of philosophy and philosophy for children encourages us to return to its origin. In the case of van der Leeuw, this issue was only suggested in his inclination toward the ancient Chinese philosophy and thereby a criticism of the Western philosophy. We have to take on a task left by van der Leeuw and take a step forward to an innovative criticism of philosophy.

The possibility of the philosophy for children for moral education and a critical viewpoint to the conventional academic philosophy were already presented in our *Journal of Learning Science* in 2007.

## 3. Trials of practices

Accepting the tendency of philosophy for children in the world, practices of philosophy for children are set about in Japan as well. As the space

is limited, we take up only one example. That is the practice designed by professor emeritus of Hiroshima University, Takara Dobashi. He conducted joint research projects with Pädagogische Hochschule Karlsruhe in Germany. Our colleague Chie Ashida gives a short presentation about it in German. We appreciate the conference organizing committee's permission of this unusual style of presentation; the mixture of two different languages. Chie Ashida studied German language here at the University of Graz, and she has been involved in the cross cultural research on early childhood education between Austria, Germany and Japan. She talked about the old Japanese tale Urashima Taro as a material for philosophy for children in the presentation, and she wanted to share the story description with German speaking colleagues through German language. We cannot say how the idea was suitable and successful. However we believe the sense of language would be significant for the dialogue in philosophy for children. In the conference, as we had simultaneous interpretation between German and English, the participants could understand the content of our presentation without problems.

In diesem Teil möchten wir ein Unterrichtsbeispiel der Kinderphilosophie aus Japan vorstellen.

Als Unterrichtspraxis mit dem Bilderbuch für Kinderphilosophie hat Prof. Dobashi vorgeschlagen, das japanische klassische Bilderbuch zu verwenden. Das Bilderbuch "bietet eine gute Gesprächsgrundlage zum philosophieren mit Kindern (Dobashi, S. 15)" und der Entwicklung ihres Denkens. Prof. Dobashi hat eine unterrichtseinheit "Was ist Zeit, Herr Taro URASHIMA?" mit dem japanischen alten Märchen "Urashima Taro" vorgeschlagen. "Urashima Taro" ist ein sehr berühmtes Buch und alle Kinder lesen es, wenn sie im Kindergarten sind. Die Geschichte behandelt das Verständnis von "Zeit".

#### **Lernziel:**

"Durch das japanische Bilderbuch Tarô Urashima reflektieren die Kinder über die Zeit (Dobashi, S. 15)", als bedeutsame Grundfrage des menschlichen Lebens. "Dabei setzen sie sich mit dem Unterschied zwischen subjektiven und objektiven Zeitabläufen

auseinander und verstehen die Bedeutung der Zeit und des Zeitmanagements. (Dobashi, S. 15)"

#### **Der Lernstoff:**

"Das Märchen vom Fischer Tarô Urashima ist von Alters her in Japan in vielen Varianten erzählt worden oder auch als Bilderbuch tradiert worden. Tarô Urashima rettete eine Schildkröte (Dobashi, S. 15)", wird deshalb in das magische Drachenschloss am Grunde des Meeres eingeladen und verbringt dort 3 Jahre, die aber in der menschlichen Zeit 300 Jahre sind. "Da diese Geschichte ein japanisches Kulturgut ist, wandte sich auch die wissenschaftliche Forschung diesem Stoff zu und analysierte das Werk (Dobashi, S. 15)" aus verschiedene Perspektiven.

Wir möchten die Geschichte von Urashima Taro erzählen.

Urashima Taro war ein Fischer. Eines Tages rettete er eine Schildkröte, die von Kindern gequält wurde. Taro lies sie im Meer frei. Am nächsten Tag hat Taro wieder geangelt aber konnte nichts fangen. Als er aufhören wollte zu angeln, kam die Königin Otohime mit einer grossen Schildkröte aus dem Meer. Die Königin Otohime sagte, ich war die Schildkröte, mir wurde von dir geholfen. Ich möchte dich belohnen. Bitte komm zu unserem Palast. Er war überrascht, aber kam auf der grossen Schildkröte zum Palast ins Meer mit. Er hat drei Jahre im Palast verbracht.

An einem Tag hat Königin Otohime ihm ein Zimmer gezeigt. Von hier kann man nämlich gleichzeitig in den vier Himmelsrichtungen die unterschiedlichen Landschaften aller vier Jahreszeiten sehen. Aus dem Ostfenster erstreckt sich ein frühlingshafter Blumengarten, in dem die Kirschen blühen und Grasmücken singen. Aus dem Südfenster sieht man eine Aussicht vom Sommer. Sommerblumen blühen und die Zikaden zirpen. Sieht man aus dem Westfenster, betrachtet man eine herbstliche Szenerie.

Das deutet darauf hin, dass es im Palast keine fließende Zeit gibt. Die jeweilige Zeit bleibt stehen und ist somit ewig. Als er aus dem Nordfenster schaute, sah er das winterlichen Meer. Da erinnerte er sich plötzlich an seine Eltern.

Taro sagte der Königin Otohime, dass er

nach Hause zurück gehen will. Königin Otohime wollte ihm im Palast behalten, aber verstand, dass es sein Wille war. Sie schenkte ihm ein Kästchen "Tamatebako" und sagte ihm, wenn du es hast, können wir uns irgendwann wiedersehen, aber du darfst es auf keinen Fall öffnen.

Nachdem er in seinem Heimatdorf angekommen war, sahen Leute und Häuser ganz anders aus. Taro fragte einen alten Mann, ob er Urashima Taro kennt. Der alte Mann sagte, vor drei hundert Jahren gab es einen Jungen Urashima Taro, er ist aber ins Meer gegangen und niemals zurückgekommen. Taro war überrascht und ging nach Hause. Es gab aber sein Haus nicht mehr nur noch eine Wiese. Es überkam ihn Traurigkeit und er öffnete das geschenkte Kästchen, vergaß dabei aber die Worte von Königin Otohime. Deswegen war er plötzlich ein alter Mann mit weißem Haar.

"Die 'Zeitlosigkeit', die Tarô Urashima als Geschenk erhalten hatte, wird aufgehoben, als die Differenz zwischen der 'stehenden Zeit' des Meeresschlusses und der fließenden Zeit der irdischen Welt durch das Öffnen des 'Tamatebako' eliminiert wird. (Dobashi, S. 16)"

#### **Unterrichtseinheit:**

In der ersten Unterrichtsstunde erzählt der Lehrer die Geschichte im Sitzkreis und "bespricht sie mit den Schülerinnen und Schülern. (Dobashi, S. 17)" In der zweiten Unterrichtsstunde befragt der Lehrer die Schülerinnen und Schülern über die Zeit.

#### **"Die Hauptfragen sind:**

- Wie ist die Zeitlichkeit im Palast?
- Welche Zeit herrscht in der Menschenwelt?
- Welche Zeit ist für euch die glücklichere, die Zeitlosigkeit der Königin Otohime im Palast oder die endliche Zeit im Dorfleben?
- Welche Lebenshaltung gegenüber der Zeit sollte man einnehmen? (Dobashi, S. 17)"

#### **Schülerinnen und Schülern denken über Zeit nach:**

"Macht es wirklich glücklich, in einer zeitlosen Welt ewig jung zu leben oder ist das Leben in einer vergänglichen Zeit, die auch den Aspekt der Entwicklung impliziert, glücklicher?" 'Welche Haltung gegenüber der Zeit ist human?' Diese

Reflexionen über die Zeit lassen sich mit Hilfe des klassischen Bilderbuches Tarô Urashima anregen. (Dobashi, S. 18)"

## **4. Concluding remarks**

How can we say, what is the situation of philosophy for children in Japan? Philosophy for Children in the line of Lipman – Matthews was firstly introduced as translation in the 1980s, then papers on this topic were written in the late 1990s, where its application to the practice at school was attempted as well as the significance of philosophy for children was considered. Although the possibilities of the practice of philosophy for children at school can be found in the classes of "morals", the integrated learning and the school subjects such as social studies and Japanese language, they are not commonly realized yet. It is just a trial period, we have to say, by inspiring teachers and researchers. An interesting characteristic of philosophy for children in Japan is that the educational practices on their own are conducted and individual books of philosophy for children are written without the reference to the line of Lipman – Matthews.

Now, what can be said as prospects of philosophy for children in Japan hereafter? We want to indicate three points.

Firstly, philosophy for children will be further taken up as raising questions to academic philosophy. When you say simply "philosophy" or "*tetsugaku*" in Japan so far, it means the Western philosophy. The word "*tetsugaku*" itself is the translation of "philosophy" which basically signifies the Western philosophy originated from the ancient Greek, even though it has meanings of an outlook on life or a view of the world coming from experiences in life in the same way as the English word philosophy has. In order to reform this lopsidedness, challenges to a new philosophy with the perspectives of the ancient Chinese philosophy and Japanese thoughts are actualized now. One of the examples is R. Shusterman's "practicing philosophy." (Shusterman, 1997) In this trend, philosophy for children in which the dialogue with children is the main issue, and "philosophy of children" which considers the existence of child anew would be possibly an

innovated style of academic philosophy.

Secondly, the application of philosophy for children to moral education would be accelerated. The notion of moral education here includes all the aspects of school education such as the integrated class and school subjects as well as the “morals” class. Its important value is to reflect one’s life, uncover one’s self to others and the world, and to acquire the art of continuing the dialogue with others and the world. Philosophy for children in this case neither restricts itself to the famous philosophers like Plato or Aristotle, nor forwards itself to simply didactic stories. The image of the practice is a philosophical communication in the continuity of dialogue through *logos* in a broad sense or words. However, this style of philosophy for children would not be suitable for the present school education in Japan, because there is a tendency to demand instant performances in the cost consciousness and the spread of sentimental moral education regarding a naïve problem of mind without *logos*. There is an argument to make the “morals” class the “subjects” like mathematics or English. If the “morals” class became an ordinary school subject, teachers must assess students with the grades of A, B, C etc. That is the Japanese system. If the important competence students acquired in the practice of philosophy for children was graded in A, B, C, we have to say that it would be an obvious deviation from philosophy.

Thirdly, the idea of philosophy for children would contribute to cultivating new *gakuryoku* or scholastic achievement, that is, the abilities of thinking, judgment, and expression. A Japanese word *gakuryoku* is ambiguous. It does not signify only the ability which can be assessed by the score of the examination. Japanese *gakuryoku* contains *dynamis* or potentiality as well as *energeia* or actuality (Higuchi & Yamauchi, 2012). The aims of current conception of *gakuryoku* consists of the abilities of thinking, judgment, and expression according to the Ministry of Education in Japan, however they remain unclear for the moment. What are the abilities of thinking, judgment, and expression? It should be discussed hereafter. I [Higuchi] am teaching my class at university, where I encourage the students to practice philosophy. What can be presumed from the result of my teaching and

research is that the abilities of thinking, judgment, and expression are “force” which is related to the problem of *kansei* or sensibility. The *kansei* could connect the logical thinking in philosophy for children with the sensitivity to the environment and the power of taking action. If we seriously consider bringing up the abilities of thinking, judgment, and expression, its success or failure would be dependent upon the result of philosophy for children from now on particularly at elementary schools and junior high schools. We believe that philosophy for children has such importance and significance in the near future in Japan.

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