

A Study of the Causes of Bullying in Japanese Schools from the Perspectives of History and Culture

Zihan Lin

Huaqiao University College of Foreign Languages Japanese, Quanzhou, 362021, China

Keywords: school bullying; collectivism; power culture; vertical society; shame culture

Abstract: School bullying is taking place in Japan frequently. It has been characterized by behavioral violence, young victims, and severe consequences in recent years. As a result, school bullying is attracting great concerns from the society. This paper explored the underlying connections between the occurrence of Japanese school bullying and traditional Japanese culture from the perspectives of history and culture. According to analytical findings, the collective consciousness, hegemony culture, and shame culture deep-rooted in Japanese traditional culture are all internally related to Japanese school bullying.

1. Introduction

Across the world, an endless stream of school bullying incidents has been reported. Japan is no exception. For instance, Princess Aiko, the granddaughter of the Mikado, was bullied by schoolmates at the school, which broke the record of zero bullying for members of the royal family. As a result, widespread public outcry occurred in Japan. Helplessly, Crown Princess Masako started to accompany Aiko at school and protect her. The Royal Guard even sent a large number of plain-clothes policemen to guard in and out of the school and prevent the empress-to-be and queen-to-be from being attacked again. Also, a 13-year-old boy from Shiga County eventually chose to commit suicide because he was unable to tolerate the bullying from other students. It was said that the boy was forced by his classmates to steal things and even wrangled by a turban to have “suicide practice” unwillingly. After the matter was exposed, however, it caused a national sensation. Thus, the Japanese government especially set up an investigation group. Also, the MEXT even formulated guidelines on preventing school bullying. More importantly, a 24h conversation hotline was specially opened to encourage bullied children not to suffer such pains alone. This incident also urged the Japanese government to cope with and prevent issues of school bullying from the legal perspective. In this context, the Law on Advancing Prevention Measures for School Bullying was launched in 2013. According to these incidents, school bullying has been a major issue attracting universal concern from Japanese society. Many scholars have studied the reasons for frequent school bullying in Japan from various perspectives, including the Japanese education system, prominent social issues like sub-replacement fertility, and students’ psychological characteristics. From the author’s perspective, school bullying, an unstoppable social phenomenon that takes place among teenagers in schools, is closely related to Japanese traditional cultures. The author planned to explore the causes of Japanese school bullying from the perspectives of history and culture, thereby deepening the understanding of Japanese school bullying. China and Japan are both in the Eastern Asian cultural sphere. For this reason, Chinese and Japanese cultures have much in common. Therefore, studying the causes and status quo of Japanese school bullying is of referential significance for China to cope with such incidents with forethoughts.

According to the materials collected by the author, many Chinese scholars have analyzed Japanese school bullying from diverse aspects. Regarding preventing school bullying, Liu Jin and Du Yi[1] think America and Japan both clearly defined the scope of school bullying and enacted special laws. Cai Xiaoyu[2] analyzed the nationwide help hotline, consultation websites for bullying incidents, and service windows throughout Japan. Regarding the cause of school bullying, Feng Yongjun[3] thought the sub-replacement fertility of Japanese families caused parents to spoil children endlessly. In addition, parents who are busy with work have inadequate time for discipline

children. As a result, children are likely to have a lonely personality and eventually vent their dissatisfaction to innocent people. Gao Xiaoxia[4] studied and found that Japanese teachers have inadequate personal qualifications and poor personal conducts. As a result, teachers fail to teach students through deeds and words, which is one of the main causes of school bullying. Yang Lujie and Wang Ting[5] thought such phenomenon was related to the fact that admission-centered Japanese education neglects students' physical and mental health. Thus students live under high pressure every day and eventually have psychological inversion. Li Yue and Li Gang[5] thought the main type of Japanese bullying, namely isolation, brings tremendous harm to children, which is related to the Japanese collectivism.

Most Japanese scholars researched through numerous surveys. Mitsu Masakazu[6] found through surveys that the secrecy of school bullying is the reason why school bullying can hardly be found by teachers or parents. Ghana Yukiko[7] compared different opinions of victims and witnesses of such bullying behaviors and studied the factors for suppressing bullying in the collective. Ichii Momo[8] studied the relationship between bullies' behaviors and their responses to psychological pressure.

Based on referring to previous scholars' research achievements, the paper studied from the perspectives of history and culture. Combining the social conditions of Japan and the mechanism of school bullying, the paper focused on analyzing the deep connections between Japanese school bullying, the collectivism, hegemony culture, and shame culture in Japanese traditional history and culture. Next, it briefly analyzed the reasons for Japanese school bullying from the perspective of history and culture.

2. Collectivism and School Bullying

Unlike many Western countries that uphold individuality, Japan is a country emphasizing collectivism. For Japanese, collectivist interests are placed above everything else. Therefore, it is extremely common and glorious to sacrifice individual interests for collective interests. On the one hand, such high unity is beneficial and brings great convenience for the emergence of the Japanese economy after WWII. On the other hand, it is harmful. For instance, the Japanese often sacrifice individuality and suppress their real ideas to be incorporated into society and achieve high consistency with the collective. People failing to be incorporated into the collective are often regarded as outsiders and repelled by the collective. It thus exerts tremendous mental pressure on individuals.

The strong collective consciousness of Japanese is deeply related to the geographical position and national composition of Japan. For instance, Japan is located on an island and suffers numerous natural calamities. Therefore, the Japanese have been mentally prepared for mutual assistance and joint efforts for coping with natural disasters since antiquity, such as tsunami, earthquakes, and mountain torrents. Regarding national composition, Japanese consist of only one nation, namely the Yamato people. Therefore, there is no such thing as ethnic discrimination. Regarding history and culture, the Japanese that rely on fishing, hunting, and cultivation of rice require a high level of coordination. Therefore, the Japanese could not survive or develop without collective power. That's why collectivism is supreme to Japanese.

In schools, the collective is divided into the grade, class, student club, and friends to hang out with. People are not equal in such collective groups, but divided into different levels. The seniority of the status is determined by one's grade, age, and seniority in the collective. Although such a phenomenon is not unique to Japanese schools, it is extremely prominent and strict in Japan. When Japanese students meet each other at first encounter, they unconsciously compare themselves with others to determine their status and the way of speaking and acting. For instance, people with a low status should respect people with senior status, use honorific terms in communications, and follow others' arrangements. Anyone that refuses to act accordingly may be repelled and bullied by the group led by some leaders. Such a school structure with rank norms and hierarchical differences inevitably makes students depressive and scared. Failing to be incorporated in the collective, students may stoop to compromises and do something against their subjective will. It is likely to

cause bullying incidents. For instance, senior students bully junior students, or the small groups led by “king of children” jointly bully repelled children. Although bullied students want to rebel, they are often outnumbered. Without help from teachers or parents, these bullied children will suffer profound pains. If they were driven into the corner, such children would make extreme choices. According to the analysis above, collectivism and school bullying are closely related. Therefore, the strong collective consciousness in Japan is more likely to cause school bullying incidents.

3. Power Culture and School Bully

Affected by its geographical location, Japan is an island country. Therefore, its nationals naturally long for and worship “power” in the struggles against frequent natural calamities, deficient land resources, and material resources. It can be said that Japanese people’s worshipping of power is deeply rooted in their national characteristics. This national quality is reflected in every aspect of Japanese’ real life: With longings for power, Japanese envy and worship people with qualifications, abilities, experience, and status. Also, the Japanese are willing to follow their instructions and serve them. On the other hand, the Japanese are scared of power and are afraid of fighting with more powerful people. Such a cultural characteristic is also reflected in one aspect: Japanese often cling to the powerful country yet bully weak countries in international interactions.

Nakane Chie, a reputed Japanese social anthropologist, pointed out that Japan was a typical “vertical social structure”. In other words, the Japanese society pays a bigger emphasis over vertical relationships, such as parental-child relationship, subordinate-superior relationship, and teacher-student relationship, than parallel relationships such as sibling relationship and friendship. There exists a strong sense of utility in the Japanese vertical group. Also, the sequence is profoundly meaningful. For instance, predecessors are closely related to inferiors, while inferiors should be subservient to predecessors. The collective consciousness, sense of destiny, seniority system, and system of lifelong public utility are all expression forms of the vertical society. This series of characteristics provides effective assistance[9] for the leapfrog development of the Japanese economy. On the other hand, it has disadvantages. For instance, the vertical society that emphasizes the relationship between subordinates and superiors is more likely to cause independent dictatorship and the loss of personal will in the group. To avoid standing at the opposite side to the group, many people may abandon individual will and stoop compromises to the group and people with power. Therefore, the personal will of people with power is likely to be expanded, and its trend will affect where the collective will moves.

In the studies of the behavioral mechanism of school bullying, people involved in the bullying incident are divided into four categories, including the bully, the victim, cheerers, and bystanders. Japanese parents regard patience as a virtue and teach their children to be patient since childhood: “If you are a gentleman, you should hold back your tears.” Even if Japanese children are scolded, they have to take it and cannot explain. As a result, children fail to vent their pressure accumulated from schools and at home. Once the psychological pressure reaches the limit, children are likely to release it to peers of shorter stature and feeble character-The bullying behavior takes place correspondingly. When bullying takes place, bullies are acted by powerful members in the group. As a result, cheers may think bullies are powerful and thus worship them. For this reason, these cheerers not only refuse to lend a helping hand to the bullied victims, but also change into bullies themselves. Conversely, bystanders take no direct participation in bullying and may think it is an unjust behavior. Out of the fears for power, however, they are afraid to be the next victim if they stand out to criticize the bullying behavior. Therefore, standers-by choose to neglect it. However, such connivance may make bullies more unscrupulous. To some extent, turning a blind eye to bullying is also harmful and encourages the flames of school bullying. Due to strict self-criticism consciousness, Japanese are unlikely to rebel. Generally speaking, Japanese students first doubt about themselves and reflect over their opinions. Even if they make no mistake, they may think they deserve bullying for being weak. Also, they think they will not be bullied if they are as powerful as those bullies. Due to such a cultural and psychology mechanism, a unique phenomenon can be found in Japanese school bullying, namely the shift of roles-The victim may not always be bullied,

but become a bully subsequently. Thus it can be seen the Japanese power culture and vertical social structure turn bullying the weak as a justified behavior. These two factors are the causes of frequent school bullying in Japan.

4. Shame Culture and School Bullying

Japanese uphold the shame culture, which differs from the guilty culture of Christianity that thinks people are born with sins. The so-called shame culture is a culture that takes shames as behavioral norms and particularly values others' opinions. This concept was first put forward by American cultural anthropologist Benedict in his *The Chrysanthemum and The Sword* in 1946. To Japanese, what regulates them are not rules but others' opinions. Japanese attempt to be consistent with the collective regarding words and deeds, thinking unconventional behaviors are likely to be considered as a shame. Such a deep-rooted shame culture was cultivated over a long course of time. In fact, it is closely related to the impact of Chinese traditional cultures, the local collective consciousness of Japan, and concepts about hierarchy. Shame plays a fundamental role in Chinese traditional Confucian culture. The Confucian culture emphasizes personal moral cultivation and advocates constructing a moral-based society. Also, such ethics and rule of virtues are both closely related to the personal sense of shame. After Chinese Confucian thoughts were introduced into Japan, they were absorbed into Japanese cultures. Affected by Japanese' strong collective concepts, each individual pays a high emphasis over other members' criticism. They constantly observe what surrounding people do and make a timely adjustment to avoid being a laughing stock. Besides, ancient Japan divided its nationals into four ranks, including scholars, farmers, workers, and merchants, who had different social status, rights, and duties. It was necessary for nationals to strictly abide by their duties. Conversely, any arrogation may be considered as shame. Due to such external restrictions, the shame culture was eventually cultivated in nationals' personality[10].

Unlike the school bullying of many other countries, the victims of Japanese school bullying do not tell their experience to others and even keep it secret to their families. It can be found through the past reports about Japanese school bullying that victims generally experience three psychological phases after suffering school bullying. In the first phase, victims experience pains and grievance. Instead of actively seeking help, they think it is their fault not to be incorporated into the collective. Taking it as a shame, victims also regard being bullied as their mistakes. In the second phase, victims start to avoid others' gazes. However, such avoidance sends the message to bullies that victims are insignificant, feeble, and subdued. It brings more sensation to bullies and stimulates their desires for more bullying. Thus bullies unscrupulously infuse victims with such opinions that they are useless. With time, such situations keep repeating and deteriorating. In the third phase, victims experience growing guilty and self-denials for failing to be incorporated into the collective. Eventually, victims are unable to suffer it, make extreme choices, and even commit suicide. It can be said that the shame culture is one of the important reasons for school bullying to frequently take place in Japan. Meanwhile, bullied victims' eventual committing suicidal is an extreme sign of Japanese "shame culture". Due to such a psychological behavior mechanism, school bullying is secret, which poses huge difficulties for taking effective measures to prevent and handle such problems.

5. Conclusions

Combining with the evolution situations and occurrence mechanism of Japanese school bullying in recent years, the paper studied from the perspective of history and culture. It focused on exploring the deep connections between the occurrence of Japanese school bullying and Japanese traditional cultures. According to the analysis, the strong collectivist consciousness in Japanese traditional culture is manifested in the structure of level norms and hierarchical differences. Therefore, organized collective bullying incidents are more likely to take place in Japanese schools. Besides, Japanese power culture and typically "vertical social structure" make it easy to expand the will of people with power. Also, the trend of personal will affects the future direction of the

collective will. Meanwhile, bullying has been a justified behavior. It is one of the reasons for the frequent occurrence of Japanese school bullying. Affected by the shame culture deep-rooted in their hearts, the bullied Japanese students mostly experience shame shortly after being bullied, rather than seeking help to end bullying. Then they start self-denial and self-doubts. As a result, school bullying is highly secret and can hardly be found and stopped. Eventually, school bullying leads to severe consequences.

Collective consciousness, the power culture, and the shame culture are all national characters deeply rooted in Japanese people's blood. Although none of these can be changed at present, understanding the deep internal connections between them and school bullying is an indispensable link for better understanding and preventing school bullying incidents. Therefore, the priorities of future studies lie in applying such relationship and putting forward better preventive measures and solutions to cope with school bullying.

References

- [1] Liu Jin & Du Yin, A comparative study of preventing and handling school bullying-take America and Japan as a case [J]. *Legal System and Society*, 2018 (31):156-157
- [2] Cai Xiaoyu. A study of the laws on school bullying in Japanese middle and primary schools and revelations to China [J], *Education Approach*, 2017 (06):54-59
- [3] Feng Yongjun. Causes of Japanese school bully and countermeasures, *Information Week*, 2018 (10): 0356-0357
- [4] Gao Xiaoxia. Social problems of Japanese school bullying: causes, governance, and revelations [J], *Journal of Nanjing University (Social Sciences)*, 2017 (04):100-108
- [5] Yang Lujie & Wang Ting, A study of Japanese school bullying and its causes [J], *Examination Week*, 2017 (98):185-186
- [6] Li Yue & Li Gang. Social problems of collectivism reflected by Japanese school bully. *Reading [M]*, 2016 (30):16-21
- [7] Mitsu Masakazu & Xia Yuan, Problems of Japanese school bullying-examination based on factors for bullying secrecy [J], *Journal of Youth Studies*, 2018(02):100-106 [8] [Jap] Ghana Yukiko, Restrictive factors for middle school students' collective bullying-differences between insulted bullies and non-bullied people [D], 2008
- [9] Ichii Momo Correlations between bullying incidents and pressure filtering: role differences between victims [D], 2013
- [10] Li Na. A brief analysis of the manifestation of vertical social thinking in Japanese' Life [J], *Journal of Jilin Education Academy (A)*, 2013-11-05