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The Japanese Employment System and Meritocracy  
in a Historical Perspective

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**Abstract**

The efficiency oriented arguments about the Japanese Employment System often neglect the social relations in the JES. In this paper, we focus on the fact that Japanese blue-collar workers have been deeply involved in the creation of the JES. They demanded the “recognition of human dignity” in companies. And, this demand included the desire that they wanted to be “treated like white-collar workers” . Although this demand acquired legitimacy in Japanese society during WW II, it was not realized easily as the employment system. After the serious and complicated conflict between managers and workers, the JES was established in the 1960s. The above facts influenced not only the institutional characteristics of the JES but the content (meaning) of “ability” in the JES.

## 1. Introduction

This paper is intended as an investigation of the historical development of the Japanese Employment System (JES) and the content (meaning) of "ability" in the JES. The term JES is defined in this paper as the employment system which was established in Japan during the 1960s. And, we will focus on the JES of blue-collar workers.

A large number of studies have been made on the JES. Since Dore's argument, the JES has been often described as a rational response to modern problems in industrial society, not as a mysterious convention.<sup>1</sup> Internal labor markets theory contributed to demystifying the JES, especially "life-time employment," and "length-of-service reward."<sup>2</sup> Koike insisted that they can be explained by the concept of "enterprise specific skill." However, these arguments are so efficiency-oriented that they often neglect institutional aspects which cannot be explained by the concept of efficiency. Most importantly, they neglect the analysis of social relations in the JES.<sup>3</sup>

First of all, we have to inquire into the three institutional characteristics of the JES which are important to this analysis.

(1) "Life-time employment" is a misleading term. In addition, labor mobility is not so low, as many researchers have already pointed out. We have to focus on the institution of entrance and exit of the JES; that is to say, the system of hiring recent graduates and the system of mandatory retirement.

(2) The wage system of the JES cannot be understood accurately by the term "length-of-service reward." First, this wage system is based on the "straight evaluation" of various attributes of workers. This characteristic leads to the complexity of wage determination. Moreover, we should pay attention to the principle of pay raise (or promotion). In short, it is a combination of stability and "proper differences" between workers.

(3) We can point out the resemblance between the employment system of white-collar workers and that of blue-collar workers in the JES. Later, we will discuss how the difference between them was a crucial problem for the creation of the JES.

As we have mentioned, this paper is interested in the social relations under the above institutions. It is fair to say that the content of "ability" is the central problem in social relations. To know how "order" in society is legitimized, it is essential to understand how "ability" is defined in the labor markets.

It is surprising that few studies examined the content of "ability" in the labor markets. Even Rosenbaum's argument, which investigated the actual mechanism of "tournament mobility" in internal labor markets (white-collar worker), did not attempt to analyze the content of "ability" itself.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Historical Development (1)

### (1) Origin

Although it is difficult to search for the origin of the JES, no scholar may disagree with the argument that the employment system of public servants is, one of the prototypes of the JES. The important feature is not only the stability of employment, but the system of hiring new college-graduates which was introduced for elite public servants in the 1880s. In order to maintain a stable supply of high-quality workers, Japanese government recruited top college graduates with no work experience.

However, the more important point to the unique development of the JES is that this hiring system was introduced to private companies in the 1890s.<sup>5</sup> Large banks and insurance companies, as well as the government, tried to recruit reliable workers. Managers thought that reliability would be largely guaranteed by the school, not by personal contact. It is not too far from the truth to say that this is the origin of short transition from school to work in the JES.

Turning to the system of mandatory retirement, employment system of public servants did not have this system officially, although the pension system acted as a virtual mandatory-retirement system. In the 1910s, as for white-collar workers, many companies began to adopt the system of mandatory retirement, instead of ad hoc treatment.<sup>6</sup> This system was introduced with the lump-sum retirement allowance in order to avoid job hopping of high-quality workers.

Again, these are stories about white-collar workers. It is true that a few excellent companies adopted the system of new school-graduates hiring and mandatory retirement for blue-collar workers in the 1920s, but they remained a small minority, as is pointed out by some researchers. For example, work experience in the external labor markets was sometimes regarded as a more important element than the length of service in wage determination by managers in this period.

It should be added that Japanese blue-collar workers began to demand recognition of their "human dignity" or "respectability" in companies. They

departed from the policy of "building-up character" in their society. "Recognition of human dignity" was the common slogan of Japanese labor movement from 1918.<sup>7</sup> Blue-collar workers wanted to be "treated like white-collar workers" with this slogan. We can find a great gap between this demand of blue-collar workers and the reality of the employment system for blue-collar workers. Although the labor movement after WWI urged managers to transform the employment system, slackness of labor markets in this period allowed them not to do so.<sup>8</sup>

## (2) The total war

The network between school and company via public employment exchange offices developed during the war, though it had already been formed in the 1920s. Needless to say, this network was made for (high-) elementary-school graduates who got employment in blue-collar jobs. Concerning this network, two points are important. First, this recruiting network was strengthened by the government during the war in order to maintain a stable and sufficient supply of blue-collar workers to produce munitions. Secondly, as a social norm, the transition from school to work of young workers had to be as quick as possible. It is not an exaggeration to say that young people who were searching for jobs without stable employment were considered to be led to misconduct (the problem of morals) easily. In other words, job searching was regarded, not as a valuable experience, but as a negative one.<sup>9</sup> The system of hiring recent graduates was introduced for blue-collar workers gradually in this context.

However, the most remarkable and influential change in the employment system during the war was the change in the ideological aspect.<sup>10</sup> In order to carry out the modern total war, the spontaneous cooperation of workers was essential. It is for this reason that the ideology which would raise the status of blue-collar workers was needed even in Japan, where labor unions were prohibited. The great difference between the employment system of white-collar workers and that of blue-collar workers had to be revised in some way or other. For example, white-collar workers and blue-collar workers were made to belong to the same labor organization, named Industrial Patriotic Associations. This labor policy was an attempt to realize the change in ideology.

The change in ideology was connected to a specific view on the wage system in labor policy. As labor was understood not only as a devotion to the state but also "a creative and spontaneous" activity, it cannot be motivated by the desire for wages. Moreover, the workers' standard of living had to be stabilized, because workers were indispensable subjects to

pursue "honor" through their labor in the new ideology of labor policy. Although high productivity of munitions was supremely important to the government, the wage system which would stimulate high productivity directly through the promise of higher wage had been regarded negatively until 1943. As a result, the "living wage" system was to be defined as the ideal wage system.

In the process of the implementation of the "living wage" policy, the government began to clarify its position of what constituted a "fair wage." For example, in 1941, the wage policy was executed, which prohibited pay raise without presenting the standard or the maximum and minimum. This was a new idea to Japanese society, because we can find the spread of favoritism on the shop floor until then. In this new policy, difference in the pay raise between workers should be small, and the number of workers who could not enjoy pay raise should be as small as possible. "Fairness" of wage system was not pursued by strict evaluation of jobs. Instead, the pay raises which would not create large differences between workers were considered to be "fair" in the labor policy.

By the way, we have to emphasize that the ideology of labor policy could be realized only partially as an employment system. For example, the "living wage" policy was realized only as the spread of a family-allowance system. However, the more important point is that this new ideology of labor policy was not simply the unrealistic plan of a few bureaucrats. It seems reasonable to suppose that there was fairly large support for the new ideology of labor policy. As evidence for this, we can point to labor disputes in which workers claimed this ideology as a basis for legitimating their demands, especially in labor disputes about wage increase or wage inequality. Truly as we have mentioned, Japanese blue-collar workers demanded the "recognition of human dignity," which included the desire that they wanted to be "treated like white-collar workers." In a sense, one may say that this demand acquired legitimacy in Japanese society because it was adopted in the ideology of labor policy.

Added to this, Japanese blue-collar workers had had the experience of having gained the status of active subjects making invaluable contribution to the state. The tension between goals in the ideology of labor policy and the real achievement formed a part of the motivating energy and the orientation for the postwar labor movement, which would urge the transformation of the employment system.

Concerning the content of "ability" in the employment system of blue-collar workers, we may say that they preferred the stability of living

standard, which had been considered to be the privilege of white-collar workers, to the competition for the higher evaluation of "ability" during the war. There had been no definite standard for the evaluation of skill before the war. Although managers tried to change this situation in some way (for example, by introducing the "scientific management methods"), they could not conquer the old custom on the shop floor or the excessive dependence on foremen. In short, managers had no clear strategy for the employment system based on the evaluation of "ability" and could not make a compromise with blue-collar workers. In addition to this, the educational system had not contributed to the formation of the employment system based on the evaluation of "ability" of blue-collar workers. Although a network between school and company via public employment exchange offices had already been formed, we can find few elements of meritocracy in this system. Freedom was strictly restricted in the choice of occupations for new (high-) elementary-school graduates during the war.

### 3. Historical Development (2)

#### (1) The fluid situation -1945 to the 1950s-

In this period, "Democratization" was the main slogan of the Japanese labor movement. Managers, who were considered to be "lame ducks" immediately after the war, could not reject this officially. Although "Democratization" was directly led by the Occupation Policy, the energy which was stored during the war contributed to the explosion of the labor movement in the latter half of the 1940s and influenced its orientation.

However, we should not overlook that the way this "Democratization" could be embodied in the new employment system or industrial relations system was not clear. In other words, there was no consensus about it in this period. To take a simple example, the legalized enterprise unions, in which both blue-collar workers and a part of white-collar workers participated, had no stable position in the industrial relations system in this period. It is for this reason that enterprise unions swung between radicalism and conservatism.<sup>11</sup>

Turning to the institutional aspect of the employment system, the network between school and company via public employment exchange offices, which was a heritage of wartime mobilization policy, had developed. This system functioned as the device to find the new middle-school graduates in a wide area and to employ them as blue-collar workers.

At the same time, we have to pay attention to the fact that the system of mandatory-retirement of blue-collar workers began to be accepted by



many companies. It may sound strange that some enterprise unions demanded this system. However, retirement-allowance system had been regarded as the privilege of white-collar workers. As blue-collar workers and white-collar workers belonged to the same unions, it was necessary to adjust the system of mandatory retirement. In addition, retirement from the company did not mean unemployment in this period because the average life span was relatively short so most Japanese blue-collar workers had no wish to find new jobs after retirement. Moreover, we may say that the workers thought that this system provided employment security for them. It may safely be assumed that they interpreted the system as the expression of the principle that "employment stability should be guaranteed until the age of retirement." At least, it was the denial of ad hoc treatment.

This is a good illustration of the strong orientation among workers to employment stability in companies where they were employed. On the other hand, managers could not allow this principle in the real world. It is for this reason that Japanese industrial relations suffered from a lot of serious labor disputes about the employment problem in this period.

The same observation applies to the conflict over the wage system in this period. Most Japanese labor unions demanded the "living wage" system. The interesting point is that this demand was legitimized by the argument that living wages were necessary for economic reconstruction instead of the devotion to the state. Although this wage system was established in many companies immediately after the war, managers began to make a counterattack. They considered that this wage system could infringe the prerogatives of management. Thus, they sought to introduce a wage system based on strict job evaluation from the United States as well as a new performance("ability")-rating system in the 1950s.<sup>12</sup>

Viewed in this light, these conflicts over employment security and the wage system are summarized as follows. In the cases of both employment security and the wage system, labor unions naively demanded stability. We can easily find the influence of the wartime experience in the workers' demands. On the other hand, managers tried to establish the prerogatives of management and to introduce the new management method, for example, wage system based on strict job evaluation. There was little room for compromise. Therefore, in most cases, substantial differences remained between the employment system of blue-collar and white-collar workers. However, Japanese blue-collar workers had become all the more sensitive to these differences in response to the wartime experience. In fact, the demand for "Democratization" in companies meant that they should be "treated like

white-collar workers."<sup>13</sup>

Regarding the content of "ability" in the employment system, two points must be noted. First, in the fluid postwar situation, Japanese workers chose to invest their money in the education of their children in order to let them climb the social ladder. Most blue-collar workers wanted their children not to be like themselves. Education was a more certain means for their children to escape from low social positions. In other words, a part of energy for "Democratization" was channeled to a massive competition for educational achievement. The result of this competition would change the relation between school and company, and the employment system itself in turn.

Secondly, managers did not have systematic ideas, which workers could agree with. On the other hand, we must not overlook the fact that there was some confusion among workers toward the employment system based on the evaluation of "ability." The "Living wage" system seemed to be incompatible with the evaluation-based employment system. In this sense, the employment system based on the evaluation of "ability" was considered by union leaders to be a symbol of capitalistic counterattack from managers. However, reality was more complicated. Even in this period, some labor unions had demanded some kind of employment system based on the evaluation of "ability," because this was the symbol of liberation from "feudalistic treatment."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, it is unrealistic to suppose that, personally, Japanese blue-collar workers rejected any kind of differences which resulted from the evaluation of "ability." They accepted personal efforts to attain relatively high status through competition in their companies.

## (2) Settlement -the 1960s-

As we have mentioned, Japanese workers were so eager to seek higher education for their children that the number of high school graduates increased rapidly. Japanese society was confronted with so called "inflation of education." It should also be added that labor market of blue-collar jobs was very tight because of the high labor demand in this period. Thus, high school graduates, who could get white-collar jobs until the 1950s, became the nucleus of the blue-collar work force in the middle of the 1960s; although the tendency to avoid manual labor had become more evident among young workers.

On the other hand, there was relatively little demand for aged workers. The development of technological innovation made their skills obsolete in many cases. In addition, the average life span became gradually longer. It meant that many workers had to continue working after mandatory retirement. It may be said that, for workers, the mandatory-retirement

system became a device for employment adjustment.

In short, Japanese companies had to create a new institution to maintain the stable supply of new high school graduates as blue-collar workers and a new employment system in which workers could be satisfied with their treatment. At the same time, Japanese companies had to transform the labor market of aged workers to make them more mobile. In addition to this, they were urged to create a more efficient employment system which could respond to continuous innovation on the shop floor, because the Japanese economy began to face greater international competition in the latter half of the 1960s.

Regarding labor relations, radical union leadership had gone away in large companies. Labor unions were defeated in a number of heated labor disputes in the 1950s. It is not to be denied that new union leaders and workers also wanted some kind of change in the employment system so that their demands could be realized.<sup>15</sup>

Viewed in this light, we may say that there was a common recognition that the current situation of the employment system had to be changed in some way or other. The government, especially the Ministry of Labor, have to be added as the actor in this situation.

We should notice that there were two options. The first option was to drastically transform the employment system and the labor market. For example, labor market with high mobility and the employment system based on clear and distinct evaluation of "ability" were the objectives of this transformation. The Ministry of Labor encouraged this option. It called this policy "establishment of the modern labor market based on trade and evaluation of ability," and tried to realize this idea in the subsidy system for job conversion or the system of public trade testing, for example. Labor unions did not officially reject this "modern labor market policy".

The second option was to partially reform the employment system and the labor market. We can describe this option as the compromise between "high mobility" and "stability," and as the diversification or dilution of the content of "ability." As we know, this option was selected as the Japanese Employment System.

Turning now to the institutional aspects of the JES, first of all, we have to focus on the system of new school-graduates hiring. The short transition system was maintained firmly in the high school graduates hiring. Moreover, the relation between school and company became more direct and close. First, companies had to maintain stable supply of new high school graduates. Secondly, they demanded personal information in detail about

new high school graduates. Thirdly, they wanted to make stable and reciprocal relations with highly ranked schools. In a sense, this system was similar to that of new college-graduates hiring. It means that the difference between recruiting system for white-collar workers and that for blue-collar workers became small.<sup>16</sup>

However, actual screening was completed by high-school teachers according to scholastic attainments. No candidates who were recommended by school would fail in the formal entrance examination. In this respect, it was different from the recruiting system for new college graduates.<sup>17</sup>

As we have mentioned, it was considered that employment stability for young workers should be secured in Japanese society. This social norm was reproduced by the creation of close relations between school and company. The treatment in employment of young workers and aged workers contrasted sharply. The instability of the latter was indispensable to the JES itself. In order to avoid unemployment, not only reassignment in the same company but also temporary transfer to subsidiary companies was introduced for blue-collar workers.

The fact that new high school graduates had become the nucleus of the blue-collar work force brought a drastic change to the relations between white-collar workers and blue-collar workers. As we mentioned, Japanese blue-collar workers had the desire to be "treated like white-collar workers," and were very sensitive to the different treatment between them. In addition, high school graduates could get employed in white-collar jobs until the 1950s. It was obvious that they would not tolerate the lower position. As for managers, they had to provide attractive employment systems for high school graduates in order to maintain stable relations with highly ranked schools because of the labor shortage.

First, both white-collar workers and blue-collar workers were placed in a common wage system by the introduction of "pay-for-job-ability" system. It means they belonged to a common status-ranking system. It is for this reason that both of them became to be called "associates" by their company. Secondly, wage differences between them were reduced. This applies to young workers especially, because it was the result of the labor shortage. Thirdly, it became more possible for blue-collar workers to be promoted to white-collar jobs (assistant manager, or rarely, section manager). The first point was an essential institutional factor to the realization of the second and third points.

As we noted, the content of "ability" was diversified or diluted in the JES. In other words, it was very ambiguous. The "pay-for-job-ability" system reflected this characteristic clearly.<sup>18</sup> Four points are important to

the content of "job ability." First, managers could find the content of "ability" which workers could consent to. Secondly, although "job ability" of workers means the ability which enabled workers to execute jobs, it was based on the "straight evaluation" of various attributes of workers. Even "potential" or "character" was regarded as "job ability." In addition, the actual wage system was a combination of various systems, including age-linked wage and length-of-service reward and job wages. Thus, the wage system in the JES has become very complex. Thirdly, both blue-collar workers and white-collar workers were evaluated by a common measure of "job ability" at least in this system. It resulted in the ambiguity of the content of "job ability," although this fact was significant for new blue-collar workers who were supposed to claim suitable treatment. Fourthly, this wage system was applied in consideration of age or length of service of workers. It is for this reason that no exact testing was introduced. This is how the demand for high evaluation of "ability" through competition was made compatible with the demand for stability of living standards. We can see the ambivalence of Japanese workers in this compromise.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

(1) We are now in the position to say that Japanese blue-collar workers have been deeply involved in the creation of the JES. The important point is that their aim was the recognition of "human dignity" or "respectability" in the company. In the historical context of social relations in Japan, this demand could be understood that they demanded to be "treated like white-collar workers." It used to be considered that blue-collar workers belonged to the lower class in society and were men of poor character in Japan. As they could not tolerate this situation, they tried to raise their status within the company. In this respect, they were not passive subjects at all. Wartime experience, which had made them believe that they attained legitimacy for their demand, created the energy of the labor movement immediately after the war. In addition, the new blue-collar workers in the 1960s were active subjects in demanding "proper treatment" in the company. This kind of activity contributed to the creation of the JES, in which the employment system of blue-collar workers resembles that of white-collar workers. In this process, blue-collar workers achieved stability in employment and in living standards. And, it became more possible for blue-collar workers to be promoted to white-collar jobs through competition.

On the other hand, as Japanese blue-collar workers did not have rosy dreams that they could completely escape their lower status in the company, they were very eager to further education of their children. The results were the "inflation of education" and the tendency to avoid manual labor. As we know, the labor shortage in this context urged the government, managers, and workers to transform the employment system in turn. It should be added that the "QC circle" movement on the shop floor was introduced under this situation.

(2) Although it is difficult to conclude what has been considered to be "ability" in the development of the JES, we may point out three characteristics. First, the evaluation of "ability" can not be accomplished without the evaluation of "character." In other words, the abstract concept of literal "ability" or "value of job" was not trusted completely in the employment system by either workers or managers. Again, we have to recall the fact that the Japanese labor movement after WWI began with the demand for "recognition of human dignity" which had originated in the policy of the blue-collar workers' "building-up character." Moreover, Japanese managers could not ignore this demand when they developed the employment system. It has been a tradition that the evaluation of "ability" cannot be separated from that of "character" in Japanese society. It may be for this reason that the JES has the tendency to avoid plain differences in pay raises or promotions between workers.

Secondly, the evaluation of "ability" is completed within the closed organization; company or school. We have no comprehensive social qualification system in Japan. The social qualification system which was encouraged by the government in the 1960s had little effect on the actual employment system. It means that managers did not trust it. It reminds us that Japanese workers tried to raise their status not in the society but in the company. In addition, Japanese workers have little experience of having their "ability" evaluated in the market, especially in their younger days. Again, a lengthy transition from school to work has been regarded to be a negative experience.

Thirdly, as the argument about "job ability" showed, the ambiguity in the content of "ability" was partly brought by the "single status" policy. This means that the desire of blue-collar workers for high status in the company was somehow related to the ambiguity in the content of "ability," although there is room for further investigation for this argument.

In this paper, we cannot discuss the relation between the evaluation of scholastic attainments in school and that of "ability" in company.<sup>19</sup> In addition, we cannot discuss the difference between the definition of

"ability" for young workers and that for aged workers in the JES. These are unsettled questions.

(3) As we know, many researchers have focused on the aspect of efficiency in the JES since the 1980s. It cannot be denied that activity among workers and Japanese "ability" which we have analysed in this paper have something to do with various participation of workers (for example, "continuous improvement" on the shop floor) and the flexibility in the JES. However, the importance of pointing out the negative aspects of the JES cannot be overemphasized. For example, the "straight evaluation" of various attributes of workers often turns out to be very tough for workers. As "various attributes of workers" include their "characters," this kind of evaluation system may interfere in their personal lives and their personalities. "Peer pressure," which is sometimes the cause of "long overtime work problems," has something to do with this kind of evaluation system.

Likewise, the evaluation of "ability" within a closed organization leads to another problem. To take a simple example, when aged workers, whose jobs were not originally protected in the JES, lose their jobs, they suffer from an identity crisis in many cases. They have no social qualifications and had little experience to show their "ability" in the market in their younger days. We should not overlook that the social network to support them has not developed. For example, although Japanese enterprise unions have demanded the employment security in companies where workers were employed, they did not care for the workers who had been forced to quit their jobs.<sup>20</sup>

Recently, we find a lot of arguments about the necessity for the transformation of the JES. However, these arguments would be superficial without investigation of how the JES developed and analysis of problems which originate in the JES. This paper is the first step toward this kind of investigation.

## Notes

1. See Dore (1973). However, we must not overlook that for some Japanese scholars, this kind of argument was not so novel.
2. See, in particular, Koike (1991).
3. Recently, we find more efficiency-oriented arguments about internal labor market theory. Jacoby (1990) criticized them properly.
4. See, for example, Rosenbaum (1984).
5. Useful information on this fact is given by Amano (1992) and Takeuchi (1995).
6. See Ogiwara (1984).
7. Sumiya (1968) is the first attempt to argue this point. Nimura (1987) refined it, and Saguchi (1991) found some evidence of this argument in the labor relations of naval yards and coal mining industry.
8. This point is argued by Gordon (1985).
9. See Saguchi (1990).
10. For further details of this argument, see Saguchi (1991), *op. cit.*
11. See, in particular, Yamamoto (1977).
12. Useful information on this subject is given by Ishida (1990) and Endo (1996).
13. See Nimura (1987). *op. cit.*
14. For example, unions of public servants and textile workers demanded this kind of employment system in this period.
15. On the attitude of the government, managers, and labor unions toward the transformation of employment system, see Saguchi (1992).
16. See Saguchi (1990), *op. cit.*
17. Kariya (1991) gives useful information on the actual screening in high schools.
18. Ishida (1990), *op.cit.* is the first attempt to analyse the content of "job ability," although I do not agree with his argument in some respects.
19. How did the evaluation of scholastic attainments in high school influence the evaluation of "ability" in companies in the 1960s? This influence might be great because stable and reciprocal relations between high school and company were created in this period.
20. See, for example, Saguchi (1995).



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