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An Alternative To Japan's Examination Hell

—Hisaya Shirai

NESTLED deep in the mountains of Yamagata Prefecture in snowy northern Japan is a novel experiment in secondary education. A small Christian school offers an alternative to the usual high school: an emphasis on thinking instead of memorizing.

The Independent Christian Academy (ICA) strives for well-rounded personal development through a spartan work-study programme. The curriculum is based on Christian principles. Corporal punishment, not uncommon in high schools here, is banned, and teenage violence unknown. To assure maximum effectiveness, the academy limits enrollment to 78 pupils.

The school is located in an isolated corner of Oguni Township, a 30-minute taxi ride from the nearest train station. As the taxi turns a bend in the road, giant Japanese and Hebrew characters loom up to proclaim an Old Testament truth: "Fear of the Lord is the Beginning of Wisdom." The proverb is blazoned on the wall of the school's main building.

Pulling into the school yard, the taxi driver remarks that there isn't much snow this year—just the meter or so that has already fallen. How, I wondered, can you run a successful school in the boondocks of Yamagata.

One reason is the academy's distinguished history. Principal Sukeyoshi Suzuki, 87, founded the school at the request of Kanzo Uchimura (1861-1930), a pioneering Christian educator and philosopher. Suzuki was a member of Uchimura's Bible study group while a university student in Tokyo.

In the mid-1920s, Uchimura was looking for a rural location to base his proseletyzing activities. One day he opened a map and scanning Yamagata prefecture, placed his finger on Oguni Township.

Uchimura sent Suzuki to the region to select a school site. After his mentor's death in 1930, Suzuki resigned a teaching position at Tokyo Imperial University and moved to Oguni. In 1934, he established the Independent Christian Academy based on Uchimura's philosophy.

Suzuki recalls the early days. "Fifty years ago, children in the nearby village went to work after finishing elementary school; nobody thought of giving them more education. I began by teaching, for free, the people who worked for me. At first, there were only two or three students."

"The village had no electricity. I set up a generator at the school and started a small factory to make eating utensiles and other daily necessities. That's how our work-study programme began."

After World War II, the academy was accredited as a regular high school. The physical facilities compare poorly with those of urban private high schools, but they are adequate.

Inside the main building are the principal's office, a teacher's lounge, a business office, classrooms, and an all-weather gymnasium. A boy's dormitory is also attached. Arranged around the main structure are living quarters for the faculty and a girl's dormitory. A cafeteria, kitchen, auditorium and small library stand next door.

The curriculum conforms to Ministry of Education guidelines and also includes courses not offered in the regular school system. "We seek true knowledge, here, based on the teachings of Christ," Suzuki says. "Our aim is to promote the full personal growth of students."

Each grade, for example, spends an hour a week on Bible study, and the Japanese-language teacher devotes another hour to one of Kanzo Uchimura's biblical commentaries. Following the traditional tutoring method, the teacher writes the text on the blackboard. Students copy it faithfully by hand, just as students of another era copied sutras. The teacher then explains the passage's meaning.

Two of the three hours allotted each week to physical exercise are spent working around the school. During the remaining hour, students loosen up stiff bodies with Danish gymnastic exercises popular in Japan before 1945. One hour of English class is devoted to singing hymns in English accompanied by a pipe organ.

Students are also encouraged to discover the joy of reading. Freshmen tackle Uchimura's "The Greatest Legacy to Future Generations." The sophomore class is introduced to Swiss philosopher Carl Hilty's "Happiness." Third-year students hone their minds on Plato's "Apology of Socrates."

Many critics have noted that the average high school in Japan, public or private, overemphasizes preparing children for college-entrance exams. A school's reputation is determined by the number of its graduates admitted to prestigious universities.

These stiff tests require students to answer many questions in a short period of time. High schools teach their students to respond rapidly and mechanically to questions. Thoughtful replies or original interpretations are discouraged.

Teenagers spend what should be the most carefree years of their lives in rote learning. The pressure-cooker approach also deprives society of the creative, critical minds required to sustain a democracy.

Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone has urged the restructuring of Japanese education to provide more flexibility and meet increasingly complex social needs. But many wonder whether our school system can be saved.

"From a pedagogical point of view," Suzuki says, "high schools with the best college-admittance rates are really the worst. And the so-called top universities are the least suitable for those who really want to study."

"This kind of education destroys the desire to learn. At our school, it is taboo. We teach children to respect knowledge, and to study because they enjoy it, not order to get high marks."

The Independent Christian Academy has no official catalogue and does advertise, relying on word of mouth for students. The school has three to four times the number of applicants it can admit, ample evidence that many parents and children are determined to avoid the educational rat race.

Another independent Christian school similar to the Oguni academy is scheduled to open in Shimane Prefecture in western Japan in April 1988.

Suzuki's 78 students come from all over Japan. Only five are from the Oguni area, and the others live in dormitories together with about 20 teachers.

Families send the students a monthly allowance of $300, which they deposit in their private savings accounts. Tuition is $65 per month. Most of the rest goes for room and board; students keep $13 for spending money.

Faculty receive a monthly salary of $500. There are no bonuses, but rural Yamagata is inexpensive and they manage comfortably.

(To be continued)