
Chapter 5

Spread of COVID-19 and Moral Issues in Japan

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the situation of COVID-19 infection in Japan and the moral issues that have arisen because of it. First, the author describes a case of infection at the university where he works. The spread of COVID-19 has turned in-person classes into online classes, hybrid classes, and high-flex classes, and it has been found that lessons can be conducted more effectively than expected with these alternative class structures. Second, the author addresses the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, which were actually held in 2021. Since they overlapped with the 5th wave of COVID 19, whether or not they should have been held became a major moral issue. Third, the author explains the problems with hosting the Olympics in a COVID-19 environment using the Japanese folklore terms *hare* (晴れ, celebration days) and *ke* (褻, ordinary days). Finally, the author considers the spread of COVID-19 from the perspective of moral education, concluding that given the special circumstances of the spread of COVID-19 there is a need for moral education that leads to moral action.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, moral, education, Japan, Olympics

BACKGROUND OF PROBLEMS

The 2020 conference of the Asia-Pacific Network for Moral Education (APNME) was scheduled to be held at Joetsu University of Education in Japan in June 2020. However, after accepting the application from the conference presenters, the chairperson of the APNME committee asked me to postpone the conference due to the spread of the new coronavirus (COVID-19) infection. The committee decided that the conference would be held at Joetsu in 2023.

Since the pandemic began, every country has been working on the treatment and prevention of COVID-19 infection. The response of each country has been unique, reflecting cultural differences. For example, in Wuhan, China, the functioning of the city was quickly blocked by a lockdown. In Japan, it is legally difficult to adopt such a procedure, so we Japanese were very surprised by Wuhan. But now, in many countries around the world, a lockdown is seen as one of the most effective ways to deal with a pandemic. Nevertheless, there is still no lockdown in Japan. It has been reported that the prevalence of mask wearing and social distancing also differs greatly depending on the culture (cf. Omuta et al., 2021). In Japan, there are many people who wear medical masks even when they catch a cold, so we haven't hesitated to wear masks in the case of COVID-19.

Therefore, in this chapter I decided to examine COVID-19 infection in Japan and the problems it has created that are unique to Japanese culture, focusing on moral issues. I will examine the problem from a philosophical perspective because it is difficult to confirm the facts of the pandemic response and quantitatively evaluate the effects of policies aimed at addressing the spread of COVID-19.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE FIELD OF EDUCATION IN JAPAN?

In Japan, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on January 16th, 2020 (Shirai et al., 2021). On February 3rd, it was revealed that an outbreak had occurred on the cruise ship Diamond Princess while it was anchored at Yokohama Port. This outbreak was reported worldwide by the press, partly because many foreigners were on board.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Tokyo 2020 Organizing Committee announced the one-year postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. On April 3rd, it was reported that the number of infected people in Japan had exceeded 3,000.

At Joetsu University of Education, where I work, the first COVID-19 notice was issued on January 23rd in the name of the president of the university.¹ The notice included a warning about traveling abroad. On January 28th, we received an alert from the university's Crisis Management Office, but this notice consisted only of a document received from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT). It cannot be said that the university had sufficient awareness of the magnitude of the crisis. On February 12th, faculty and staff were instructed on how to wear masks and disinfect their hands with alcohol while proctoring the entrance examination. On March 6th, we were notified that the graduation ceremony and diploma awarding ceremony would be canceled.²

On March 11th, the junior high school attached to our university put up the slogan "Don't stop learning!" To help prevent the spread of COVID-19, teachers engaged in remote learning using information and communication technology (ICT), even during the holidays.

After that, the university's 2020 entrance ceremony was canceled, and classes were canceled for the first two weeks due to health considerations. Students couldn't go anywhere, classes were online or on demand, and faculty members assigned more homework than ever before. Thus, the students were thrown into a very difficult situation.

The university was minimally aware of the crisis in its early stages, but I think it may have adopted an unnecessarily exaggerated response when the infection began to spread. This especially affected students who enrolled in 2020, as they missed the entrance ceremony, found that the lecture classes were mainly online and hurriedly prepared, and discovered that a lot of homework was being assigned. All this meant they didn't even have time to make friends on campus.

¹ The president at this time was not me.

² The Japanese academic year begins in April and ends in March. The graduation ceremony and the diploma awarding ceremony were held in March.

However, the circumstances differed between universities in the Tokyo metropolitan area and universities in rural areas, such as our university. In rural areas, the number of infected people was not as high as in the Tokyo area.

Through these experiences, we discovered that online lessons, hybrid lessons, and high-flex lessons, for which individual students get to choose the class type they want, were more effective than we had expected. Because Joetsu University of Education is a national university located in a rural area, I thought it might be less attractive to students than universities in the Tokyo metropolitan area. But if we can teach online, it doesn't really matter where students or professors are located. The question, even in normal times, is to what extent the government will accept deregulation and allow online lessons. In July 2021, there were no infected people at my university and we continued giving regular in-person lectures. However, in Tokyo, each day there were more infected people than ever before, and there were not enough hospital beds. Patients who were forced to receive treatment at home were beginning to die without adequate care and treatment.

COVID-19 was also talked about as a major problem in the elementary and junior high schools. In particular, voices from the schools expressed concern about their students being infected with COVID-19 by Joetsu students who were receiving educational training in the schools. In response, on August 11th, 2020, the MEXT issued a notice permitting alternative methods of educational training for university students. On April 13th, 2021, the MEXT issued a second notice that on the same day it would introduce a special policy granting teacher licenses to students who did not receive training in schools. However, it seems that COVID infections began to spread in the schools in early 2021, before they appeared at Joetsu. Perhaps this was due to the increasing dominance of the Delta variant of COVID-19, which is more infectious in children than the original Alpha variant.

MORAL ISSUES SURROUNDING THE OLMPICS

In Japan, the Olympic Games were originally planned to be held in 2020. However, due to COVID-19, it was decided to postpone them for one year. Thus they were held in 2021, despite strong protests from the Japanese public.

The Japanese government has never discussed the cancellation of the Olympics in 2020, and it seems that it not only decided but was quite determined to hold the Games in 2021. In late June 2021 the COVID infection rate reached a new high level. This explosive spread became known as the fifth wave, and many Japanese began to wonder if the government's decision was correct.

The Olympics were held in Tokyo after all, from July 24th to August 8th, 2021. And then, from August 24th to September 5th, the Paralympics were held. Whether we should have held the Olympics and the Paralympics during a pandemic in Tokyo will be historically evaluated in the future, but it is not easy to judge at this time.

In 2018, the formal subject of morality (commonly shortened to "moral"³) was added to the curriculum in the elementary schools, and a year later in the junior high schools. Before that, one class a week had been designated as "moral time," but it was not a formal subject in the curriculum.

A textbook on morality was written and certified by the government when morality became a formal subject. Prior to that, a policy for the content of moral textbooks was announced that required the inclusion of various stories about morality as well as those related to the Olympics. Thus, moral textbooks began to include not only stories of Olympians' great efforts to win in competition but also their demonstrations of sportsmanship. Many children presumably formed a favorable impression of the Olympics after reading these stories of the efforts of Olympic athletes in moral textbooks. But on the other hand, many children may have realized that commercial success of the Olympics had been the first priority, despite the contemporaneous presence of a medical crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even we adults noticed various contradictions such as the gap between the ideal of the Olympics per se and the quest for big sales and big profits. The commercialism of the Games, of course, became a hot political issue. However, people also talked about this contradiction between commercialism and the Olympic spirit, turning the holding of the Olympics during the COVID-19 pandemic into a big moral issue.

³ It must be kept in mind that moral education can mean, for example, that the topic of the class is morality, not that the instructor teaches the material in a moral way, which is how one would ordinarily interpret the term.

Teaching about moral values in a class on morality does not seem so difficult, but what if one must teach two conflicting values, or different ways to express a single value? And how do we solve the problem of people having different options to choose from?

I think it's the politician's job to make decisions about such matters, even in unpredictable circumstances. But if the main purpose of moral education is to improve students' moral and social abilities, is it reasonable for us to require children to do the same job as politicians? I do not think so.

When I watched the Olympics on TV, I found many moving scenes. Nonetheless, some argue that Japan should not host the Olympics in the future. I can't agree or disagree with this opinion, but I can say that there has not been enough debate in Japan about whether the 2020 Tokyo Olympics should have been held in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak. The government of Japan decided to hold the Olympic Games before there was sufficient discussion among the public. Two of the cultural characteristics of the Japanese is to take the attitude of waiting for the government's decision and to wait for the problem to be forgotten without discussing a clear solution. I think we need to change these characteristics.

JAPANESE CULTURE AND MORAL ISSUES

When COVID-19 became widespread, many countries began to take steps to control the infection. However, there was one thing that many Japanese found difficult to abide: the lockdown policy of the cities. Indeed, there is no law authorizing the government to take the mandatory measure of lockdowns. Even if lawmakers were to enact such a law, many Japanese would claim that it violated their individual rights and would not obey it.

Thus, in Japan, a state of emergency was declared instead of a lockdown. The Declaration of a State of Emergency was a request from the Prime Minister to the prefectural governors to take measures to protect the lives, health, and livelihoods of the people. Based on statutes such as the Law on Special Measures for a New Influenza, this Declaration simply asked the people to help prevent the spread of the new virus. The declaration was not enforceable and thus no one was penalized for ignoring it. On February 9th, 2021, the government replaced the Declaration of a State

of Emergency with the less effective Priority Measures to Prevent the Spread. In my opinion, the officials in charge created this new declaration just so they could say, “I declared it, but I couldn’t stop the infection because people didn’t obey it.”

The terms *hare* (晴れ) and *ke* (褻) represent concepts used in Japanese folklore and cultural anthropology.⁴ *Hare* means a day of celebration, and *ke* means an ordinary day. An example of a *hare* day is a wedding day, for which people dress up, have special meals, and offer congratulations to one another. A *hare* day suggests a day of celebration, whereas a *ke* day must really be an ordinary day.

In other words, according to this traditional Japanese cultural worldview, there is a clear distinction between *hare* days and *ke* days. The Olympics, a sports festival held once every four years, take place on *hare* days. The Tokyo 2020 Olympics were special in that the days on which they occurred were not only *hare* days, but also ordinary *ke* days, especially when a state of emergency was declared. While we were customarily allowed to dress up, eat special meals, and exchange special words for Olympics-related events, we were prohibited from doing these very things by the state of emergency; in other words, we Japanese were caught in a double bind during the Olympics.

I don’t want to denounce the politicians for creating this double-bind situation. *Hare* and *ke* are not as clearly distinguished in Japanese culture as they used to be, and in modern times we often eat special treats on ordinary days. Rather, my aim is to show that an ostensibly single truth can be interpreted in various ways. Especially in cultural matters, there really is no single truth, but only various facts that are socially constructed.⁵

The year 2021 is the 10th anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake. Therefore, Tokyo 2020 was initially called the Earthquake Reconstruction Memorial Olympics. The media guide prepared by the Tokyo Organizing Committee for the Olympic and Paralympic Games states: “We aim to disseminate the beautiful nature of the disaster area, rich and safe food, history, traditions, culture, etc., and to thank the people of the world for their support.” However, the ideal of the Tokyo 2020

⁴ The terms *hare* and *ke* are Japanese. Since they are difficult to translate into English, I write them in the paper as they are pronounced.

⁵ I want to take a social constructionist position (cf. Gergen, 2015).

Games seems to have disappeared before we knew it. It has rarely been mentioned on the television broadcasts in Japan. Instead, the Olympic vision that came to the fore consisted of diversity and harmony. Of course, this was only one of the visions of the Organizing Committee, but it was brought to the fore on various occasions during the Games by people protesting against discrimination.

This may just mean that the rationale for holding the Olympics to Tokyo changed during the Games themselves. However, it seems that the characteristics of Japanese culture can be seen here as well. It is typical in Japan that the nature of policy changes depends on the atmosphere of the social groups to which they apply.

In addition, at the time of the Great East Japan Earthquake, a photo of Japanese people waiting in line for meals was distributed as news all over the world. Even in an emergency, lining up seems like a moral act, but you can also think of it as waiting for a government to provide support to the people in such circumstances. It is very much an act of dependency. In other words, the people in line have no autonomy.

CONSIDERATIONS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MORAL EDUCATION

In Japan, moral education is thought of as a way to make children understand moral values. For that purpose, textbooks have been created to be used in teaching lessons on morality. However, moral education is considered to take place not only in classes, but in all activities of the school. Children learn morals not only from the teaching materials described in the textbooks, but also from various daily events. Thus, both the crisis of COVID-19 spread and holding the Olympics during this crisis provide a treasure trove of teaching materials through which children can learn morals. At the same time, we must not forget that many lives have been lost all over the world during the pandemic.

What moral values should be taught in these morality classes? In Japan, the government's choices are presented in a book called *the Course of Study* (MEXT, 2017).⁶ However, it is not clear why it lists only certain values. For example, self-esteem is not listed as a moral value, even though it is mentioned in many places in the government's commentary book, *Interpretation of the Course of Study*. I think that

⁶ *The Course of Study* is a kind of national curriculum established by the Japanese government and is revised about every 10 years.

self-esteem is the first block of the foundation needed to acquire morality. Unless you have a high level of self-esteem, you won't want to behave kindly toward others. The Japanese are said to have low self-esteem, and that suggests why cultivating self-esteem should be required as part of moral education in Japan.

Furthermore, in Japanese moral education, there is not enough guidance for taking concrete moral actions. The common opinion is that moral education concerns education for the inner heart, not for concrete action. However, does it deserve the name "moral education" if moral education only nurtures one's inner heart? It must lead to concrete actions. It is necessary not only to recognize and sympathize with the person seeking help, but also to actually reach out and help that person. To that end, we propose moral skills training (cf. Hayashi, 2013). This is not a common English term, so I want you to imagine social skills training applied to relevant moral situations. This training would help us act morally in an emergency. The current attitude about the goal of moral education is expected to change in Japan in the future, as evidenced by "the experiential learning about moral behaviors" being included as one of the teaching methods in the latest *Course of Study*.

It should be mentioned that "problem-solving learning" is one of the teaching methods used, as well as "experiential learning about moral behaviors." Surprisingly, it was not until recently that these teaching methods were introduced for moral education. In the past, discussions concerning moral education focused merely on the emotions and feelings of the characters in the moral narratives, and it was through these that moral values were learned. Of course, focusing on emotions and feelings is already well established as a teaching method. However, the teaching methods should also be required to have multiple characteristics.

Through the spread of COVID-19, we came to realize the powerlessness of humans. Medical experts may be able to talk about the effectiveness of vaccines and effective ways to prevent droplet infections. As I am not a medical expert, I can't do that; however, as a moral education expert, I can talk about the importance of caring for one another and working together, even in situations where I can't do anything medically. We can point out that it is possible to continue daily life without discriminating against others, even in difficult situations. We can also discuss how to improve moral education, so humans will be more willing to act kindly toward others

in the event of a similar pandemic in the future. As a result of living through the spread of COVID-19, we have become experts in it. This expertise has directed us to learn about moral education, and we can share what we have learned with many other people.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have discussed the spread of COVID-19 infection and the problems caused by it in Japan, focusing on moral education.

First of all, I described the situation at the university where I work as an example of the impact of the spread of COVID-19. Since it is a small national university located in a rural area, the situation is a little different from that in the Tokyo metropolitan area. There are not as many infected people at Joetsu as in Tokyo. In all the universities, the spread of COVID-19 has turned in-person classes into online classes, hybrid classes, and high-flex classes, but we found that these alternative teaching modalities were more successful than we had expected. In the future, we expect that the use of ICT will further improve these alternative modalities, even when the topic is morality.

Next, I discussed the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. Holding the Olympic and Paralympic Games during the COVID-19 pandemic will shed light on how considerations of moral consciousness can affect the political judgments made by Japan's government. As a matter of morality, it is not surprising that there have been criticisms about the commercialism of the Olympics and the exclusive pursuit of economic interests. In addition, it is not unreasonable to criticize the government for not even considering cancelation of the Olympics while ordering that during the Games people refrain from going out and that the restaurants be closed. However, as a matter of moral education, this is a difficult issue for people to take up and discuss, especially because everyone in Japan was invited to watch the Games, and schools were required not to penalize teachers or students who, watching the Games, failed to attend classes. From the standpoint of moral education, what was considered meaningful were the consistent effort, fairness, sportsmanship, and cultural diversity of the Olympians, and the activities of the staff who supported them behind the scenes.

Next, I tried to interpret the problems created by hosting the Olympics during the pandemic using the Japanese folklore terms “*hare*” and “*ke*,” which mean celebration days and ordinary days respectively. For us, the Olympic period were unusual days, that is, *hare* days, but it was also days when the COVID-19 pandemic continued, that is, *ke* days. The Japanese were placed in a double bind situation where these two types of days came at the same time.

Finally, I addressed the pandemic from the perspective of moral education. I explained that Japanese moral education emphasizes the teaching of moral values, and I pointed out that the special circumstances of the spread of COVID-19 infection required that moral education led people to take action to address the problem.

To summarize, in this chapter I have considered whether the moral education we have undertaken in Japan has been effective in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Olympic Games held under it. An indication that the education has not been effective are reports of discriminatory behavior in Japan against people infected with COVID-19 and the medical staff who treat them. Perhaps only a few people are guilty of this behavior, but why aren't we all moving in the direction of helping one another? The moral education we have provided in Japan seems to still be inadequate. In conclusion, I propose that Japan's moral education be revised so that it leads to moral action and behavior and social cooperation.

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