

Abstract

Title: The “Good Child” and Nation-Building in Japan-Faith, Equality and Utilitarianism in The First Japanese Primary School Reader

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Education is said to be one of the cornerstones of bringing a people together, of building a nation. The Fundamental Code of Education in 1872 (*Gakusei*) envisioned a common school for all children in Japan. Although the implementation would take time, the feudal division of learning was now to be replaced by a national network of schools. Shortly after the *Gakusei* detailed guidelines for curriculum and textbooks in primary schools were issued. Interestingly, in a time of nation-building and construction of a shared identity, the first primary school reader published by the Ministry of Education, *Shōgaku tokuhon* (1873) was a translation of the *Willson Readers*, a series of schoolbooks widely used in the USA.

The aim of this study is to clarify the nature and significance of the discrepancies between the American original and the Japanese translation. In the framework of the nation-building process, examining what is included, excluded and added in the translation of the American reader might give us some idea of the knowledge or moral that the editor of the Japanese primer wanted to convey to the children. It can be seen as a case-study illuminating the hybridity of politics in the early Meiji period. Culture in general at the time was adapted, Westernization went hand in hand with “samuraization” and liberalism was mixed with more traditional thinking.

The construction of the “good child” in the first Japanese primary school reader highlights the general adaption of culture in the early Meiji period. The Christian moral of *Willson Reader* was “Japanized” by adding a high dosis of Confucianism, as well as the use of text strategies and illustrations. Furthermore, the two versions of the hitherto largely neglected schoolbook points at the wavering education policies moving from Shinto ideology to a more Confucian or secular standpoint.

Keywords: Japanese language, education, Meiji, nation-building, identity, discourse, dialogism.