

Toys in Children's Culture in the Early 20th Century Japan

—On the Theory of Heizaburo Takashima—

Masao Yamaguchi

Toys as play objects drew relatively small attention until the beginning of the 20th century. Although sophisticated dolls, which influenced the development of the *baby doll* in Europe, existed in Japan in the middle of the 19th century, interest toys in general was limited to collectors of antiques. According to P. Coleman, Edmund Litney witnessed a new type of Japanese doll in 1851, and produced a few dolls modeled after the Japanese doll upon his return to Sonnerberg.¹ It was Heizaburo Takashima, one of the first experts in child studies in modern Japan, who undertook a somewhat systematic approach to the study of toys in the late 19th century Japan.

Takashima was born in 1865, a son of a *samurai* of lower middle rank. Because of the coup d'état in 1867, which was a hard blow to his family, Takashima could not go beyond primary school. Takashima became a self-taught teacher and a scholar and was appointed the principal of a primary school of modest size and rank. In 1886 and 1887 he wrote articles on teaching method in a journal called *Kyoiku-jiron* ("Educational Times"). He put an emphasis on the importance of psychology in teaching. More and more he became interested in significance of child psychology in the practice of education.

- 1909 On Children's Tales
- 1911 Studies on Dolls
- 1913 On Dolls
- 1916 Psychological Classification of Dolls

Although, the list is highly selective, it shows the shift in Takashima's interest.

From 1909 to 1916, Takashima was actively involved in the movement of artists and scholars of diverse disciplines. A study group on children's toys took place in the department store called *Mitsukoshi*, the Japanese equivalent of Harrod's in London. Between 1910 and 1920, Mitsukoshi was managed by Ohsuke Hibi. Hibi was an intellectually sophisticated man and he asked Sazanami Iwaya, then a prominent author of children's stories to organize the Exposition of Children's Culture in 1910. Iwaya invited various scholars and artists including anthropologists, authors, a folklorist, collectors, art historians, painters, theater critics, literary critics and poets to organize the Exposition. One of the scholars was Shogoro Tsuboi, a professor of Anthropology at Tokyo University. He joined the collectors of toys.

In addition to giving advice to the Exposition, this Bloomsday group held regular meetings in the form of a salon. Apart from holding regular meetings, they gave public lectures on children's culture once a month. Tsuboi talked about children and toys in various cultures. He had a tremendous collection of toys which he gathered during his tours around the world as an ethnographer. He also invented many new toys and sold them in the children's corner of the department store. He was a genuine *homo ludens*.

Takashima gave a series of public lectures entitled "On the Principle of Hobby" at the store. Hobby in the beginning of the

20th century in Japan was a weapon to revitalize the dominating urban culture, which tended to be superficially westernized.

It was against this background that Takashima developed his idea of spontaneity and creativity in children. He published a book called "Discourses on Child Psychology" in 1909, when the first exposition of Children's Culture took place. In 1911, he published his major work on child psychology entitled "Study of Children for Application to Education." As the title shows, Takashima's concern was the context of education. He referred mainly to the kindergarten education. The following is the evaluation of Takashima's work by a psychologist:

"Until the end of last century, the educational world of Japan thought of a child as an unaccomplished adult. It was for this reason that school children who behaved like grown-ups were praised as model children. The Japanese word to be *discreet* (otona-shii) is derived from the word *grown-up* (otona). 'He is like a grown-up although he is small,' was the expression to praise well-behaved children. It was Dr. Yujiro Motoda who first proposed that the children have their own world. Takashima applied this point of view to the practical dimensions of life." He applied this idea to education.

In his work "Study of Children for Application to Education," Takashima devotes some 54 pages to the section on toys. He discusses such items as ;

- 1) Hands and mind: the two are closely related.
- 2) Necessity of toys: the act of holding is the essence of play and toys fulfill this basic necessity.
- 3) Everyday objects and natural objects: both should be used to satisfy children's needs to hold, to transform and to create.
- 4) Age in need of toys: for children between 3 and 7, toys are

indispensable.

5) Toys should be practical.

6) Importance of color, form and design of toys.

He then divides the growth of a child into stages: 1) early stage of babyhood; 2) late stage of babyhood; 3) early infancy; 4) late infancy.

The remarkable point of his work is that he applies psychological classification to toys.

Psychological Classification of Toys

senses	touching ---	licking toy, doll made of rubber
	seeing ---	balloon, pinwheel, flag
	listening ---	rattle, flute and pipe, trumpet, drum
	muscular ---	<i>kendama</i> (cup and ball), ball made of string
intelligence	curiosity ---	<i>kokeshi</i> , secret box
	memory ---	<i>hamee</i> (putting pieces into a picture), <i>kumitate-ningyo</i> (a doll that can be assembled)
	imagination ---	building block, <i>anesama</i> (dressing doll), mask, <i>mamagoto</i> (playing house)
	reasoning ---	tumbler (<i>okiagari koboshi</i>), balance toy (<i>yajirobee</i>), physical toy
affection	sympathy ---	doll, <i>anesama</i> , animals
	sense of beauty ---	<i>nishikie</i> (wooden print), <i>chiyogami</i> (color figured paper), accordion flute
	concentration ---	<i>haneko</i> (wooden racket for badminton),

darts, quoits

patience --- patience game, puzzle-ring

courage --- *kendama*, air gun

Takashima was aware of Flebel's theory on gift (*Gabe*) and was under the influence of this theory. According to Takashima, Flebel saw spontaneity in children's play. However, Flebel did not accept the *laissez faire* approach. He thought there are both favorable and negative aspects in children's play, and that the negative type of play should be taken over by a positive one. Takashima refers to the idea of "gift" (*Gabe*) by Montessori and states that this is possible by the application of toys to educational purposes.²

Although Takashima did not mention directly the "gift" of Flebel, he knew the critical view of his colleague, Sozo Kurahashi, that Flebel's idea of "gift" (*Gabe*) is too abstract and excessively logical. Flebel explains that each gift has symbolic meaning. For example, a ball represents the cosmos. Children who are playing with balls experience the correspondence with the micro-cosmos and macro-cosmos. Harmonious correspondence is the ultimate ideal of Flebel.

Kurahashi criticized that saying the excessive symbolism and logic do not apply to the experience of daily life of children. However, he acknowledged Flebel's emphasis on the importance of objects in children's play.³ Flebel's concept of "gift" was too abstract and it bears no relationship to the everyday objects or toys surrounding children. Takashima's approach escapes this shortcoming.

In spite of the general interest in children's toys, very few systematic studies have been carried out so far, with the exception of a work by Walter Benjamin on Russian toys, or Robert Jaulin, etc.

In traditional Japan, toys were scarce. Most of the objects which became toys in later years, were used for religious ceremony. Most of the toys are traced back to the world of folk belief. Since 1880, a salon of sophisticated authors and artists existed in the area called Mukojima in Tokyo. Mukojima retained some of the features of the old Edo even after Restoration. Here members brought the toys from their collections and discussed them. It was an attempt to rediscover toys in their original context. It was at the same time the start of the studies in folklore and ethnology in Japan. Shogoro Tsuboi, one of the first Japanese anthropologists, was a member of this salon. He introduced the comparative perspective in the study of toys, and prevented the group from becoming reactionary and parochial.

One can fall into two traps in taking interest in toys. One is the danger of becoming too parochial. Another is the temptation to impose on children excessive rationalism using toys as a means to tame them. Takashima avoids falling into these traps by taking two different approaches. One is to put emphasis on children's spontaneity in play in his theoretical orientation. Play theory has an important position in Takashima's approach to the psychology of children. He defines play as something spontaneous and done without objects. Thus, children play from early infancy.

He believes that play originated as an outlet for overflowing energy. The kittens and puppies flirt with each other all the time just like children. Flirting is their business.

The common misunderstanding is that children's play can be programmed and taught in school. However, a movement that is programmed is already work. The distinction between work and play is a relative and flexible one because work can become pleasure if one repeats it and acquires the skill to do it

automatically. Everything that children do is play for them. They do what interests them. It is for this reason that it is irrelevant to make them work for a certain purpose. Children can achieve something while they amuse themselves and move their hands and feet derivatively.

Children's play is essentially individualistic. It is not collective. Children play with sand in their palm or with a piece of wood in their hand. They are at ease with chaos. It is, therefore, not advisable for teachers in kindergarten or nursery school to make children to play, sing, or march collectively. Also, children are not competitive by nature. They tend to be rebuked for being mischievous at home. However, mischief is the essence in children's play. Takashima was always in favor of leaving the children in their natural state.

Thanks to his connection with the Mitsukoshi salon, Takashima had rich and concrete information on toys of the day, from Iwaya, who had stayed in Germany and was knowledgeable of Flebel's ideas on gift and kindergarten, Takashima learned what was going on in Germany. Iwaya writes about attending a reception in memory of Flebel in Berlin and a visit to a kindergarten of the Flebel Society in his travel account entitled "Souvenir of My Visit to Europe" (Tokyo, 1903). Iwaya himself was a collector of horse-related toys. He also gave a talk on *Marchen* and toys in an open lecture at Mitsukoshi in Osaka in April, 1908.

Shogoro Tsuboi took an active part in the *enquete* (questionnaire) research carried out by the Japanese Association of Education in 1891. The Exposition demonstrated various objects related to children's life such as dolls, toys, drawings, photographs, clothes and accessories, caps, sandals and shoes, toiletry goods, artificial flowers, umbrellas, sacks, baby carts and other vehicles

such as tricycles, school goods, sports goods, chairs, tables, Japanese and Western musical instruments, cakes and alimentation, specimens of nature, miniature architecture, machinery and anything and everything related to children's life. These goods were classified and displayed under the categories of life maintenance, education, costumes, and toys. This type of exposition was held until 1918 in Tokyo and Osaka. Mitsukoshi, insofar as comprehensive study of children is concerned, was ahead of contemporary universities in Japan at that time.

Masuko Honda, a professor of children's studies in Ochanomizu University draws our attention to the aspect of objects as words. Objects are charged with new meaning in the context of their engagement with man, without losing the trait of being proper goods, and manifest a special function, starting to talk in the way they are engaged with the particular person. She defines toys in this way: "When various goods are related to people in the phase of play, they are characterized as 'toys,' and they function as playmates to animate, children. Toys, small things full of vitality, are an exception and they are possessors of proper language."

Honda puts emphasis on the double existence of goods; they cease to be goods, while continuing to be goods. She talks about the semiotic aspect of goods.

"Goods are tinged with significance and emerge as 'signs' in a broad sense, ceasing to be mere 'substances.'"... Toys are precisely such goods.

If we make an attempt to listen to the 'words' of these tiny toys, which are waiting to talk, we may start to speak their words derivatively. When we succeed in decoding the message of toy exchange with children, we may start to read the image of the whole cosmos in 'tiny' and marginal things.⁴ Honda's approach, if it

is applied to the empirical study of toys, can show the way to go beyond the limit of the symbology of the *gabe* approach.

Recently, an article that leans towards this general direction has been published. It is called "The Study of Tones in the Traditional Tone Instrument in Japan." ⁵ (*Gangu Bunka* (Toy Culture), no.9, March, 1992). Professor Motegi showed that there is a correspondence between the tone traits of the children's toy musical instrument and the tone of natural sounds produced by birds, insects, and wind and wave. She made a survey of musical instruments, acoustic instruments in traditional and folk performance, toys, and the sound in nature. Although her objective in this study was to make a survey of the soundscape of natural and artificial sounds, her research shows cosmological significance.

Makoto Nakagawa, a musicologist, showed that a cosmological city like Kyoto was founded on the principle of Chinese geomancy called *fengshui* (wind and water) by which a certain tone pattern was structured by the pitch of the bells of the temples located at the four corners of the city.

It is known that *gagaku*, the ancient court music of Japan, is composed and performed in accordance with a cosmological principle in the pitch, and the sound produced was thought to remain on earth and become an element of the mosaic of the *Mandala*.

These studies demonstrate two possibilities for the further development in the study of toys in children's culture in Japan; the spontaneity and flexibility in the children's play and the cosmological dimension in which children's play with toys is latently involved.

This seems to be the way to assert the study of toys and children's play without leaning excessively in the direction of

defining it as the preparatory stage for practical and material life of the industrial and urban world where imaginative competence of children tend to be excluded in the name of rational and so-called scientific thinking. It is not the negation of rational and scientific thinking, but a matter of balancing sensitivity with rationality.

- 1) Coleman, P., *The Collectors Encyclopedia of Dolls*, Vol. 12, New York, 1986, p. 722
- 2) Takahashi, H., "Toy and Education" in *jido Kenkyu* (Child Study) vol. 17, no.12.
- 3) Kurahashi, "gift" in selected works.
- 4) Honda, Masuko, "Proposal of Toyology Reading Cosmos in Extremely 'Tiny' Goods" in *jido Bunka*, 1982 pp.1-6.
- 5) Nakagawa, Makoto, *Heiankyo Oto no Uchuu* (Royal Capital of Heian A Sound Cosmos) , Tokyo, 1992.

This is a paper presented at The International Symposium on Children's Culture at Edinborough university, Edinborough Scotiand in 1991.