

# Corporal Punishment in Japan

## One Path to Positive Anthropological Activism

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**ABSTRACT:** This article is about the controversial educational practice of corporal punishment – known as *taibatsu* in Japan – which challenged me to reflect upon my anthropological heart and find my anthropological identity. Corporal punishment is a practice around which many ideas and discourses about education, social order, human rights and even power swirl, and it is therefore an inherently sociocultural practice wherever it takes place. Like other forms of violence, it also poses a personal challenge to anthropologists who observe it in practice and have to decide whether to remain an observing bystander. At one time, I made that choice. In this article, I explain why I no longer do.

**KEYWORDS:** anthropologists, corporal punishment, education, human rights, social order, sociocultural practice, *taibatsu*

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that. (Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. 1967, p. 62)

### Introduction

What does it mean to have a heart? Does it mean having a conscience for what is right, an empathy for the plight of others or a mind that is in touch with one's emotions? What does it mean to be an anthropologist who has a heart? Does it mean having an approach to fieldwork, theory and writing that are guided by what is right rather than what is merely apparent to our eyes today? Does it mean writing with a vision of what can be rather than what is today?

Excluding 'native anthropologists', most anthropologists study 'The Other', which often assumes some sort of empathy for the plight of human beings different from one's Self, and at least denies the cultural exceptionalism that guides many scholars working in other humanities and social science disciplines in this country. Most anthropologists also make great effort to avoid 'speaking for' the people they study.

But is this empathy and this effort enough? Should they also be accompanied by an advocacy or activism of some kind, or driven by a calling to make the world a better place, however 'better place' may be defined? This calling need not be religious or political, of course, but it seems to me that it ought to be humanistic, perhaps even spiritual in the social sense of the term, and above all driven by a shared sense of understanding for what other people in other cultures go through, and by the desire to do something to lighten the weight on their shoulders. In short: a good and positive anthropological heart.

In this article, I will argue that the heart of anthropology needs to find this anthropological heart. But rather than try and do so with a thick history of anthropology's origins or its evolution, or by a deep analysis of how and why we find ourselves in our cur-



rent disciplinary predicament, I will try to do so by sharing my own experiences as a young anthropologist, and by sharing my experiences researching the controversial issue of corporal punishment in Japan. Based on these experiences, I believe that the field of anthropology will fade into the shadows of irrelevance unless we can find a way to interpret our reflexive, non-judgmental fieldwork approaches with focused and specific after-fieldwork policy recommendations, recommendations that call for enhanced physical and mental health, improved social and racial justice, and increased equality of opportunity.

I am a sociocultural anthropologist of sports and education, and to me ‘anthropology’ is ‘philosophy with the people in it’, to borrow an expression from the British anthropologist Tim Ingold (Ingold 1992). I like this definition of the field because it allows me to incorporate my studies in political theory, which was my major as an undergraduate; my experiences living in Japan, where I taught English after college; and my studies in sociocultural anthropology, the field in which I received my masters and doctoral degrees in England. In all of my research, I undertake long-term fieldwork and conduct semi-structured interviews in order to understand the behaviours of my informants, and I also read around relevant subject areas in order to contextualise these behaviours. My research thus far has primarily been about how sports have been conceptualised and used as educational tools, both in Japan and the U.S., why this has been the case and how sports can, if they are going to be used for education, be better structured to help educators inculcate the right values. Part of this research has been about corporal punishment in Japan.

## Corporal Punishment in Japan

I first encountered corporal punishment as an English teacher in rural Japan. I had been hired by the Japanese government to teach its children, and on one of my first days at my school I was appalled to see the physical education teacher slapping a thirteen-year-old boy in the face. I did not understand much Japanese at the time, so I had no idea what the boy was being physically punished for. Yet I was perhaps most surprised by the fact that I did not flinch in the face of it. Looking back, I feel ashamed that I did not speak up and make my perspective known.

The practice of corporal punishment, which is known as *taibatsu* in Japan, can loosely be defined as the striking, beating, hitting or kicking of the body to discipline or punish, by a person in a position of au-

thority relative to a person in a subordinate position. *Taibatsu* has been used in Japan for centuries, mostly by adult men to socialise growing boys into ‘proper ways’ of Japanese adult life. It was only first labelled as ‘*taibatsu*’ in the Meiji Period (1868–1912), when it was banned by Japan’s Education Minister to portray Japan as a civilized nation. However, the Japanese prohibition was from the very beginning rather vague – it entrusted teachers and principals with the ‘right to discipline’ (*chōkaiken*) but not the ‘right to use *taibatsu*’ (*taibatsuken*). This allowed teachers and principals some leeway to use the disciplinary tool if and when they saw fit. Owing to this legal ambiguity, the 1879 prohibition was vigorously debated throughout the Meiji and Taisho (1912–1926) Periods and was repealed twice and reinstated twice.

By the 1930s and 1940s, though, during the first two decades of the Showa Period (1926–1989) when Japan became increasingly militaristic, this debate went underground. That is because the practice of *taibatsu* was used as a way of socialising and disciplining Japanese soldiers and for securing their obedience to the Emperor, militarist leaders and the idea of the Japanese Empire as a whole. Young students were treated similarly in Japanese schools, because, after all, these students would someday become soldiers.

After the war ended, Japan was forced to renounce its right to a standing military and, in theory at least, the sort of militaristic discipline that had sustained it. Since that time, Japan’s official education policy has been that corporal punishment has no place in Japanese schools. Still, while postwar Japanese students were no longer explicitly trained to defend the Japanese Empire, and the postwar Japanese school was supposed to be violence-free, the perceived value of violence to solve problems remained a vestige of war that lurked in the back of the minds of many Japanese schoolteachers. This was especially the case among teachers who taught physical education or coached sports, many of whom were themselves returning soldiers.

During the high economic growth period (*kōdo keizai seichōki*, 1955–1973), in which Japan rose from the ashes of war to become a global economic power, the Japanese education system was widely trusted to produce intelligent, obedient workers. Japanese workers were expected to toil diligently in order to make their companies – and by extension, the nation of Japan itself – profitable. Discipline deepened this close connection between the education system and the economy, teachers emphasised the importance of learning by rote memorisation and *taibatsu* was occasionally employed to ensure classrooms remained orderly enough for instruction to continue, uninhibited

by unruly distraction. In Japanese schools, 'managed education' (*kanri kyōiku*), which emphasised rigid control and strict discipline of student behaviour, and did not seem grossly different from the militaristic discipline of the war, was the educational fad of the 1970s and into the 1980s. For many, *taibatsu* was seen as the means to make such 'managed education' work.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, after the high economic growth period ended in 1973 and Japan's economy began to lose steam, some began to question basic Japanese educational practice, including the use of *taibatsu*. Around the same time, as crime rates went up, Japanese began to see youth as a problematic demographic (Goodman et al. 2012), and in influential circles of Japanese society, particularly among bureaucrats and groups of intellectuals who considered the educational ways of Westerners, *taibatsu* began to be seen as an inherently 'Japanese problem' that needed fixing. Some Japanese even began to believe that too much discipline was to blame for both the wildness of youth and also the faltering Japanese economy.

Then, when a series of extreme incidents of *taibatsu* hit the national news, and in particular when the national media swarmed the court case of the so-called 'Totsuka Yacht School Incidents',<sup>2</sup> the fiery debate over *taibatsu* was formally rekindled in the public sphere. As a result of these and other high-profile incidents, in the following two decades the Japanese media and the Ministry of Education took an abiding interest in *taibatsu*, officially labelling it a 'problem' and beginning to collect statistics to measure the extent to which it was a problem. The issue continues to stoke controversy and debate.

## Theorising Corporal Punishment in Japan

As an anthropologist, I have long wondered how we should understand this complex, controversial phenomenon. First, is corporal punishment *always* an act of violence? This is a difficult question to answer, but I lean towards saying no, mostly because there are many examples of *taibatsu* that are 'mild', forewarned and undertaken systematically (in the sense that a child knows the rules and the potential punishments if those rules are broken). I also say this because surveys suggest that most Japanese who experience *taibatsu* as children come to appreciate it as adults. Moreover, it seems likely that most Japanese parents use *taibatsu* in the home, and the fact that most Japanese teachers and sports coaches are not punished when they are caught inflicting *taibatsu* also suggests

that the nation as a whole does not by and large view the act as an act of violence. However, because many other people in Japan, including many government bureaucrats and intellectuals, consider corporal punishment to be an unequivocal example of violence, this practice causes considerable cognitive dissonance for Westerners who observe it but do not intervene to stop it. Which side of the debate should we as foreign scholars living in Japan be on?

Theoretically, corporal punishment is an example of what I call a 'language of discipline' (Miller 2013). It is neither a silent (i.e. it is not banishment, confinement or ostracism) nor verbal language of discipline (i.e. it does not use words to advise or admonish, such as reprimand or ridicule). Physical languages of discipline include corporal punishment, physical abuse and torture. Among these, corporal punishment seems to be the most acceptable form of physical discipline, at least when it is 'mild'.

Why has *taibatsu* persisted despite the laws against its use? Clearly some Japanese educators have decided that it is effective and necessary enough to warrant breaking the law. When I asked my informants during my fieldwork what they thought about *taibatsu*, I was rather surprised by what I learned. Many Japanese educators told me that *taibatsu* is effective because it instils discipline, builds character, creates order and guides young people to learn proper social behaviour for adult life in Japanese society, and that the law against it in schools was simply the result of the American postwar occupation and therefore not necessary to obey. Could it be that Japan's anti-*taibatsu* laws have simply been an example of *tatemaie*, that which is said to appease onlookers, while the *honne*, or true belief, is that corporal punishment is a necessary evil of the modern industrial nation-state and its system of mass schooling (Imazu 2006)?

I also began to wonder if corporal punishment relates to the idea of being noticed, and whether its use is a sort of sign of respect or *inclusion* in one's group. This inclusion and associated sense of belonging is one of the most important things in Japanese social life, so could it be that even physical discipline is a form of inclusion into the group that is desired by many young Japanese? If so, that would explain why so many young Japanese who have experienced *taibatsu* come to approve of it, and why its existence mirrors the continued existence of bullying in Japanese schools. For years Japanese schools have been riddled with bullying incidents, many of which have led to suicides, but bullying remains a common practice nonetheless.<sup>3</sup>

As a result of these questions, I began to ask myself, how might we theorise corporal punishment anthro-

pologically? As Kondo (1990) among others has shown, the idea of a disciplined body goes hand in hand with a disciplined mind, and that both are seen as integral to the crafting of one's self. We also know from Hori that physical discipline is used in Zen monasteries to encourage enlightenment-seekers to focus their attention on meditation (Hori 1994). In my book on this subject, I applied the theory of Michel Foucault to help answer this question (Miller 2013). Foucault's ideas of power relations and bio-power were instrumental in helping me understand the mechanism by which young people in Japan come to believe in the value and effectiveness of this 'language of physical discipline'. Even though they just as easily could have invoked Japanese law to condemn the practice, instead they have become convinced that this physical language of discipline is Japan's traditional and inherently cultural language, and in that regard worth passing on to the next generation.

## Towards Positive Anthropological Activism

Yet Foucauldian theory left me feeling like there was something missing. For example, when Japanese people choose to use corporal punishment, they often justify it by emphasising the friendship or bond that exists between the teacher and the student who are involved. Some say this form of discipline represents a 'whip of love' (*ai no muchi*). Within a closed cultural context, and with a student who understands that the punishment is done from a place of love, perhaps this explanation is justifiable. But is *taibatsu* always an act of love, an act of friendship, an act driven by the heart? Who draws the line between violence and the 'whip of love'? Does the 'love' of a teacher override the pain of the punishment and thereby make the act morally acceptable?

These are all difficult questions to answer. Unfortunately, Foucauldian theory did not help me much with them. Foucauldian theory *implied* that those in power ought not to abuse their power and inflict pain upon another person's body, but I wondered if that implication was enough. In my mind, this is one problem with French social theory and much anthropological scholarship these days. Although the social sciences and humanities owe a great debt to Foucault for his commanding studies and their many lessons, rarely do social theorists make the case for any 'ought' position; describing the 'is', it seems, is enough. Description is safe; prescription is dangerous, especially so in a hyper-competitive and impoverished academic

economy. Many, perhaps even most of us, are content remaining in our own relativistic corners of scholarship, conflating the good sense of leaving our pre-conceived notions behind as we embark on fieldwork, with the absurdity of leaving out whatever wisdom we have gained from having finished the research.

In recent decades we have learned that the field of anthropology has historically produced knowledge through inherently unequal hierarchies of power, like empires or privileged positions of wealth. For some, this realisation has signalled a call for relativistic or nihilistic conclusions, so that we do not repeat the indignities of history. The assumed dichotomy is this: if all power is constructed and all knowledge production is 'situated', to use Donna Haraway's term, then anthropologists can only say one of two things: either (a) 'All truth claims are equally valid' (relativism) or (b) 'All truth claims are reducible to existing power hierarchies or to underlying power moves' (nihilism) (Hale 2006).

Moral relativism, however, is insufficient, and in the case of violence against children at least, perhaps immoral. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes wrote: 'Anthropologists may be "suspending the ethical" in our dealings with the "other". Cultural relativism, read as moral relativism, is no longer appropriate to the world in which we live, and anthropology, if it is to be worth anything at all, must be ethically grounded' (Scheper-Hughes 1995). Here Scheper-Hughes was suggesting a third possibility that transcends the aforementioned dichotomy: that of carefully choreographed 'anti-relativistic anthropology'. Scheper-Hughes herself called it 'militant anthropology', but I do not care for her term because it implies that there can be no heart in our work, and that the only way we will be heard is if we fight. I would prefer that we 'kill them with kindness', so I here propose a new term: 'positive anthropological activism'.

## What Is Positive Anthropological Activism?

What exactly do I mean when I say 'positive anthropological activism'? First, here is what I do not mean: positive anthropological activism should not supersede the need for careful empirical studies, and it should not come before the research is done. It should neither replace participant observation, the comparative method, respect and empathy for others, nor the use of critical theory. It should neither ignore nor give undue consideration to human problems above the survivability of our earth and its

ecosystem. Finally, it should not attempt to appear superior or exhaustive.

By positive anthropological activism, I mean the humble application of anthropological methods and theory for positive human purposes, and in using that definition I do admit the pluralism and subjectivity that may come from a diverse group of scholars defining 'positive human purposes' for themselves. Nonetheless, it should be our goal to produce research that challenges people to think through and deeply reflect upon the social relationships in which they are involved. We should consciously choose to refocus our attention on what works now and what might work better for human societies in the future. If anthropology is going to remain relevant, we have to give our audiences constructive guidance that they can use. In some sense, as scholars we are the only members of democratic society who truly have freedom of thought and expression, yet so few of us try to use them for positive ends.

I do not mean to suggest that we only offer a rosy portrait of things as they are, ignoring the problems of the world but rather that we maintain a responsible, 'glass-half-full' vision of how things might become, and undertaking our work with that vision always in mind. Being positive means shedding light on the best paths available for the people and institutions from whom we draw our salaries and receive our funding. Being positive requires not only a deeply reflective study of our own anthropological hearts but also a carefully and passionately considered appreciation for the value and power it holds, to touch the hearts of the people whom we study, of course, but also the hearts of the people for whom we toil. We do not live in a vacuum, and we must embrace our roles as educators and civil servants as well as researchers.

Anthropological activism came to me because I have done extensive research about sports but also about violence within sports, so I have been uniquely positioned to see the best and worst of human life every day, from the great accomplishments of our heroes to the great failures that often afflict them just the same. I realise that we humans are capable of using our bodies to dance beautifully, while also using them to inflict intense pain. I now know that as a scholar I always have a choice: either to focus on and write about the solutions we as human societies have already created, or to focus on the solutions we have not yet come up with. In either case, though, I am now choosing to focus my attention on solutions, not problems.

## Why Do We Need Positive Anthropological Activism?

As anthropologists, we occupy a privileged yet precarious position. We are rarely directly involved in the violent acts we observe. Yet we see what happens, and as observers we have the obligation to report. We also have the obligation to tell both sides of the story, since that separates us from profit-minded journalism and gives our work meaning. Telling both sides of the story, however, is not the same thing as resorting to morally relativistic conclusions. Our research and hard work has earned us the right to offer reasoned, empirically based recommendations. Certainly agenda-led research is a patent methodological mistake, and one that would surely doom any research project to failure before it even begins, but who can fault us for 'adding our two cents' after our research is complete? If we as scholars do not help the public think critically about the ethics of our adult actions, especially as they relate to our children's lives, who will?

I am not tenured, and I have been warned by senior professors to be careful about what I say, write, and publish before I achieve it. But what I wait for may never come. Tenured positions have been in deep decline for many years, and I will be lucky if I can manage to stay in academia beyond my current, limited-term contract. That is why, to me, and to my anthropological heart, simply describing the problems of the world and interpreting their context seems grossly insufficient.

The forces working against the nuanced conclusions that our long-term studies provide – the twenty-four-hour news cycle and talking-point politics to name just two – are many. It is not the time to stand on the sidelines. As a discipline, we seem keenly aware of 'the Other' we study but remarkably ignorant of where we currently stand ourselves. In the past Americans had no other news source to shape their point of view of 'the Other'. Now they have all sorts of options, and many of them carry the moral/normative message that we often shy away from sending. Just as we are often marginalised from the mainstream of the academy, and the academy itself is often marginalised from mainstream American society, we choose to write about the Other dispassionately and talk only amongst ourselves. This is a closed conversation, and so a disservice, to our informants, to our students and to ourselves.

## Conclusion

When I first embarked upon this research, I followed the training of my British social anthropology professors who insisted I remain objective and empirical; in a way, to remain 'in the right' by remaining relativistic. These professors were not wrong; but what they suggested did not work for me. Many of these professors conceptualised anthropological research as a sort of thoughtful empirical reportage on society, culture and history, but when I studied in Japanese universities during my fieldwork I realised that intellectuals could serve as important public role models as well. Professors like Kariya Takehiko, a sociologist of education who was my host supervisor while I studied at the University of Tokyo, inspired me to make scholarship a socially transformative life's work that might include governmental advising, organisational consulting or writing for popular audiences. His example, and the example of others like him, has helped me realise that a reluctance to venture outside the Ivory Tower is in many ways holding our field back.

In 1990, Myles Horton and Paolo Friere argued that scholarly activism could only be developed by those 'who make the road by walking it' (Horton and Freire 1990). Perhaps I am not unique in my struggle to reconcile my British views on the role of an empirical academic with my views of public intellectuals in Japan, all the while trying to pave an academic road for myself in my native United States. Although I certainly do not claim to have cracked the code of public intellectualism, what I have certainly learned on my path is that neither nihilism nor relativism will work for me. I am neither a machine nor can I follow anthropology's supposed orders.

My research on corporal punishment in Japan has led me to conclude positively that young students and athletes crave both attention and structure, and they want firm but fair, as well as stern but supportive, teachers and coaches. No matter where I speak about this issue, but especially in Japan, I am always asked to share my opinion, and I choose to share it in this way, regardless of whether the prevailing winds of anthropology might try to blow my opinion in another, negative direction. While I did not start this research with this positive, activist agenda, as my academic career progresses I feel it increasingly growing. I can sense my role expanding from that of a researcher to that of researcher and advocate, and in that new multi-dimensional role I charge myself with the task of limiting the amount of pain and suffering in the world in any way I can. So far, I can write about what I see, and how it made me feel. I try to remember

that what I say and write may mean a great deal to the people I study, especially its children, who, as I have learned, can most definitely learn discipline without us beating it into them.

My advice to scholars who study controversial topics and want to do more than just 'interpret the discourse'? Write for a broad audience, and try to disseminate the best of your research widely. Wherever possible, choose open-source publishing outlets. Do not put your findings behind pay walls. Speak up. Do not be afraid of what your honesty may bring. Remember that your voice carries great weight, because it is based upon your research, which is excellent if perhaps not exhaustive. Finally, try to be as positive as possible. Remember that it is a choice to limit yourself with a reluctance to judge or appear 'neo-colonial', as if your honesty as a scholar were the greatest obstacle of power relations your informants faced, or as if you were not already making judgments with your choice of research topic in the first place. There is no such thing as absolute objectivity, so you may as well make your case honestly, thoughtfully and respectfully. Just as we are taught not to underestimate the impact of our role in our research, we must be careful not to overestimate it. Our fears of 'saying too much' often relegate us to writing monographs that no one reads, policy papers that hardly influence policy, and books and articles that rarely stoke the fires of social change.

So here I propose a more positive form of anthropological activism. Our discipline – and the world around it – seems to be crying out for it.

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## Notes

1. Some teachers – especially those in charge of physical education – were even expected to play the role of so-called ‘corporal punishment teachers’ (*taibatsu kyōshi*), a role having been deemed so essential to maintain the hierarchy and order of the school that it was institutionalised and given a name, even as the law prohibiting *taibatsu* continued to be in effect (Morikawa 1990).
2. Between 1979 and 1983, several children went missing and/or died at the Totsuka Yacht School, in Aichi Prefecture, near Nagoya, during so-called ‘rehabilitation’ training, and the head of the school, Totsuka Hiroshi, was put on a very public trial that lasted twenty years. He ultimately served three years in prison.
3. In 2012, then Deputy Education Minister Tanigawa Yaichi said that the best way to combat bullying in schools would be to hire a ‘scary martial arts teacher’ to intimidate the children. Tanigawa added that bullying could only be prevented if such a strong martial arts teacher or at least a retired police officer existed in every school (Asahi Shimbun 2012).

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