

*The last or lasting samurai?*

*The impact of secondary schools on elite formation in early development*

Comment

Miguel Urquiola  
Columbia University

# Summary

- Does education enhance intergenerational mobility?
- How does it interact with family background / “social capital” / “privilege”
- These questions are hard to answer
  - The data are hard to come by
  - Conceptually: schooling *and* outcomes are correlated with family traits

- To illustrate the difficulty, the paper notes that early in the Meiji period:
  - Former samurai were overrepresented in business, bureaucratic, and professional elites
  - “Possibly because” they were also over-represented among secondary and tertiary school graduates
- Was there a causal link between schooling and career choice/success?

- Paper seeks to establish causality using 1890s rapid educational expansion
  - Idea: adjacent cohorts—otherwise exposed to similar trends—had markedly different access to schooling
  - The focus:
    - is on *secondary schooling* (contrast to usual focus on tertiary)
    - covers *occupational mobility* (less studied in the literature)
- Finding: school access increased upward mobility, not occupational mobility:
- That is, expansion:
  - ↑ the number of elite members with non-elite fathers
  - New elites mostly chose same occupation as their father (Tokugawa persistence)

# Comments

This is a really nice, really thorough paper; I greatly enjoyed it

I only have three comments; they are all variations on a theme:

- In thinking about school systems, our analytical/modern desire is for clear structure/rules
- Yet, these systems can be informal/chaotic, particularly
  - far in the past and
  - at low income per capita levels
- This has implications for how we interpret related research

- *Age at entrance into school is a key input into the paper's regressions*
- The paper assumes the entry age to be 13
  - Statutorily, the minimum entry age was 12
  - Mitsuhashi (1898) states average age was 14.3
    - However, this was measured “several months” after entrance → authors opt for 13
- Further robustness exercises / discussion would be useful (even in a different paper?)
- Before school systems fully formalize entry ages can be slippery
  - Particularly if there are private schools, as in Tokugawa period, e.g.,
    - In the early 1800s Columbia College, students aged 13 were common
    - In 1849, Charles Eliot entered Harvard College at age 15
    - In lower-income countries today, 13 year old primary schoolers are common
- The Tokugawa period seems to have featured such “chaos”
- It is unlikely to have suddenly gone away with the Meiji restoration

- *Differentiation across secondary schools*

- As prefectures went from 1 to 2 schools, were the schools interchangeable?
- Does school identity matter?
  - E.g., one school might have a more qualified teacher
  - Peer quality might differ across the two schools (as in Figure 4)
- More information/discussion would be useful
- Even if school identity cannot be observed, this matters on mechanisms
  - E.g., the “peer effects” mechanism in the paper could really be one of signaling
  - The classic Spence (1974) model is about “whether school”
  - A different question is “which school” (MacLeod and Urquiola 2015)
  - E.g. up to ~1920s, the Ivy League was non-selective; then selectivity grew
- This matters because the Tokugawa school market seems quite varied, with many schools
  - E.g. even public schools received private support in donations including land

- *The professional/“new” occupations, e.g., lawyers, physicians*
- No official qualifications or certification exams for these during Tokugawa period
- Pre- ~1860s this was similar in the U.S.
  - e.g., medical training was informal in NYC; Columbia absorbing the College of Physicians and Surgeons was a way “professionalize” medicine
  - Legal training was done by apprenticeship; similar process with Columbia Law
- Here the nexus of secondary and tertiary (including Imperial Univ.) is interesting
  - Did secondary become more important to access these professions? Differentially?



# Comments

This is a really nice, really thorough paper; I greatly enjoyed it

I only have three comments; they are all variations on a theme:

- In thinking about school systems, our analytical/modern desire is for clear structure/rules
- Yet, these systems can be informal/chaotic, particularly
  - far in the past and
  - at low income per capita levels
- This has implications for how we interpret related research