To Hell with Happy Endings! An Anti-School Manifesto

Tsuneno Yujiro (Translation by Akira Kohbara) with an Introduction by Kido Rie

In an interview held in August 2017, Tsuneno Yujiro, an activist and writer who experienced *futōkō* (school non-attendance) and the author of "To Hell with Happy Endings! An Anti-School Manifesto," said:

> Now I am unemployed, and although I might work part-time at some point in the future, my mental illness is severe to the point where I receive a disability pension. This is clearly different from the "cheerful *tōkōkyohi* (school refusal) children" model that has been proposed for *futōkō* children by the alternative school Tokyo Shūre among others. In my case, I am not someone who, in spite of their *futōkō* experience, is working, married, graduated from a famous university and so on; nor am I living a fulfilling life....Even if I try, I cannot express my pain in such words....Among the people I knew, it was a shared understanding that the cheerful *tōkōkyohi* image was a lie. Despite that understanding, the way we saw it was, Why would we want to say from the get-go that some of us remain hikikomori (acute social withdrawal) into our 40's after *tōkōkyohi*, when *tōkōkyohi* itself was seen so negatively to begin with? Why don't we tell a strategic lie instead? ...What I am speaking against about this is, Who can

believe that? Does that cheer up children who actually do not go to school at present? ...I don't exactly want to speak directly to children and youth who are in severe situations, but I think the message "It could get worse" is more important (than "It will get better").

An issue raised here concerns the narrative of liberation for members of minority groups. Denying negative images attached to a marginalized group and a movement's liberation discourse often emphasizes successful models who "overcome" their predicament and live happily. Tsuneno criticizes this strategic attitude and focuses on the negative realities members of the minority group sometimes face in their lives. He argues that the liberation of oppressed people needs to start from reconsidering the value that determines what is "positive" or "negative". Thus, rather than celebrating those "positive-but-unrealistic" figures who are said to have overcome their difficulties, it is more important to recognize and focus on the unfavorable aspects of their lives.

Tsuneno Yujiro. August 2017. Photo provided by Zenkoku Futōkō Shimbun-sha.

Tsuneno's thought builds on his own experience of not going to school while he was in primary and junior high school in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. The phenomenon where children do not attend school without "reasonable reasons," such as poverty or physical illness, has been called "*futōko*" or "*tōkōkyohi*". Although *futōkō* has been used from the 1990s to the present to describe this, Tsuneno preferred the term *tōkōkyohi* to describe his personal experience. While *futōkō* only refers to a state of not going to school and has a more neutral nuance, *tōkōkyohi* is closely associated with underlying psychiatric conditions, such as "school refusal syndrome [*tōkōkyohi-sho*]" or "neurotic school refusal [*shinkeishō-teki tōkōkyohi*]". Using the term *tōkōkyohi* allows him to clarify his stance of affirming the negatively signified situation as well as to affirm his own experience in the 1980s.

The impact of Tsuneno's writings can be best understood within the history of children's school non-attendance, one of the most profiled educational problems in post-war Japan. Since

the first articulation of the problem in the late 1950s, it has attracted wide attention. Throughout the 1980s, schools supported Japan's human resource development system as a point between education and employment. Schools provided youth with standardized academic skills and job-matching opportunities through a systematically organized teaching program and a school-mediated job search. Within this context, *futōkō* was viewed as a situation which prevented children from achieving a decent career path and thus excluded them from future social participation. The dominant discourse framed by specialists such as psychiatrists as well as the Ministry of Education regarded *futōkō* as an illness and a deviance that should be cured or corrected. To resist this, a *futōkō* movement began in the mid-1980s to advocate for *futōkō* children's rights. Arguing that they are neither ill nor deviant, the movement emphasized that *futōkō* children "chose" not to go to school. In this process, "cheerful *futōkō*" images were vigorously disseminated, emphasizing those who attached positive meanings to their experiences and pursued careers after a period of *futōkō*. The cheerful *futōkō* story empowered *futōkō* children and parents who had been suffering from negative public recognition that children who did not go to school could not find a decent job, and were unable to become fully-participating members of society.

However, from around the mid-1990s, society itself began to change. Facing a long-term recession after the economic bubble burst as well as a series of neo-liberal reforms to tackle the resultant economic issues, Japan's human resource development system proved unable to adapt to the unstable new reality. The youth employment environment deteriorated precipitously and inequality in education became increasingly obvious. Under this new situation, the cheerful *futōkō* story that focuses on those who went on to a bright career after *futōkō* ceased to be effective. In the early 2000s, the Ministry of Education, Culture,

Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT] shifted the recognition of *futōkō* from the "*kokoro* (mind) problem" to the "career problem" based on a follow-up survey. This survey, targeting people who had experienced *futōkō* when they were in the third year of junior high school, reported that, at the age of twenty, those who experienced *futōkō* were less likely to go on to tertiary education and more likely to be in a state of "neither going to school nor work" (Morita 2003). Along with this, more career options became available for *futōkō* children including correspondence course high schools and private free schools. As a result, while those who have enough resources to access these options and can develop "good" careers after experiencing *futōkō* were de-problematized, those who do not/cannot do so and remained unemployed shutting themselves at home were exposed to derogatory eyes. The latter situation was difficult to explain by key concepts of the *futōkō* movement, such as "choice" or "diversity".

It was against this background that Tsuneno wrote "To Hell with Happy Endings!," which is from the book *Futōkō: It was not My Choice* (Tokyo: Rironsha)（『不登校、選んだわけじゃないんだぜ！』），together with me as his coauthor. This volume was published in 2005. Speaking of his personal history, he wrote that when he started *futōkō* in the 1980s, he blamed himself for not going to school. Through an encounter with the *futōkō* movement, he was able to accept and even celebrate his *futōkō* experience. As time went on, however, Tsuneno started to realize that a considerable number of "cheerful *futōkō* children," including himself, grew up to be unemployed and *hikikomori,* and some suffered from mental illness. In 2003, two years before the publication of the book, the number of *freeters* [people who are casually employed or are unemployed looking for casual work, in the 15-34 age group, excluding housewives and students] hit its highest level at over two million people, and a year after that, the term "NEET" [jobless people who are not looking for a job, in the 15-34 age group, excluding housewives and students] was introduced to Japan and instantly became popular. Along with the casualization of employment, the career path to independent adulthood became unclear even for those who had not experienced *futōkō*. In this social context, Tsuneno critically asked the question: "Do we value *tōkōkyohi* because it is a worthwhile choice?" He suggested that the strategy of narrating "happy endings" about marginalized people and reducing the problem to a matter of choice contained a pitfall, specifically that it can distract public attention from the failures of the social structure where unjustifiable power distribution disadvantages minorities. His point was that liberation is not in the idea that "*futōkō* is a worthwhile choice," but in imagining a society without a school system that stigmatizes *futōkō* in the first place.

Tsuneno Yujiro and Kido Rie. *Futōkō: It was not My Choice*, revised edition. （増補 『不登校、選んだわけじゃないんだぜ！』） **Tokyo: East Press, 2012. (The original edition was published by Rironsha in 2005.)**

After publication of the book, Tsuneno's criticism did not meet a positive response from his target audience, including those who were part of the *futōkō* movement. The center of the *futōkō* discussion continued to be on the dichotomy of "illness" or "choice". In this configuration, his argument "To Hell with Happy Endings!" was received either as backlash against the movement or as supporting the existing value system which denigrates the goal of affirming *futōkō*. Important reactions were from areas outside *futōkō*. For example, a respondent from an "anti-marriage" movement cited Tsuneno's discussion in a booklet and criticized the typical liberal discourse that "I can marry. But I accept your anti-marriage life. It's a matter of choice". Here, too, the critical point is not to be able to choose a life of non-marriage but to reconsider the institution of marriage itself, which imposes a limitation on human relationships. As such, although his argument was not accepted in the movement, it did speak to larger issues and reached beyond the problem of *futōkō*.

Unfortunately, Tsuneno passed away at the age of forty in March 2018 from internal organ disease. I, as a coauthor of his book, hope readers can appreciate Tsuneno's stance, consistently siding with minority populations who do not have happy endings, and thus are marginalized even within the discourses that surround minority movements. There is a radical and universal point of view about the idea of minority liberation that we need to remember, especially in the era where "choice" can be a prevailing key word.

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To Hell with Happy Endings! An Anti-

School Manifesto

Tsuneno Yujiro

Translation by Akira Kohbara

As a Former Cheerful, Unique Tōkōkyohi Child

I'm a former "cheerful *tōkōkyohi*[1] child." A "cheerful *tōkōkyohi* child" is someone who cannot fit in in school because of being "unique," but lives happily outside it.

The narratives that we "cheerful *tōkōkyohi* children" have been telling have one thing in common: they all have happy endings. A happy ending is reassuring. No matter how difficult your life may have been, a happy ending cancels it all out and makes you feel good.

But sometimes, I want to know what happens after those happy endings. When Mito Kōmon[2] and his followers reveal his signature item, an *inrō*, they then get rid of an evil lord, and restore peace to the village. Or, in the case of a romantic film, a couple goes through twists and turns to eventually unite.

I myself, as a "cheerful *tōkōkyohi* child," used to tell my story with a happy ending. Then what? I'm not very happy now. Living is hard. But then, if you ask me what's hard, I'd be a bit at a loss. Even though I could give you the usual reasons, I can't provide an answer that rings true to me.

Either way, although I can't explain it to you well enough, that's how I am now. And in that case, the kind of endings I mentioned earlier perhaps weren't real endings. And our decision to call them "happy endings" maybe has something to do with my not being able to talk very well about how I am now.

My life so far has depended on the "cheerful *tōkōkyohi*" narrative. My life without it would be unthinkable. Still, if that narrative is the source of my hardships, there is a need to think about why that is so.

My Encounter with Tokyo Shūre

It was after I got to know a place called "Tokyo Shūre" that I became a "cheerful *tōkōkyohi* child." That was around the end of the 80's. Shure at the time was a place for kids who didn't go to school to hang out. Even now, I clearly remember the day I first went there. Okuchi Keiko, who ran the place, said as soon as she met me, "Not going to school is not a bad thing. You're not breaking the law or anything."

Prior to that day, for me, not going to school was something absolutely unacceptable. That's why, when I actually found myself unable to go to school, I thought that was the end of the world. To me, school was the world, so not being able to go to school meant that I had no place in the world.

Day after day, whatever I did or wherever I was, I kept thinking, "I don't go to school." Whether playing a video game all night; watching a TV series set in a time centuries ago; at a museum in Ueno; or breaking dishes, crying and screaming–I always felt there was a big hole in my heart. I would cause trouble for my parents by grunting, "My heart is aching. It's breaking."

Given the situation, for me, getting to know Shūre was a turning point. I'd heard things like, "Not going to school is not a bad thing" before. But the power of such things paled compared with the power of Mrs. Okuchi's words. I think that is because I heard her words spoken in a place for people who, like me, didn't go to school and did not mind it one bit.

When I found myself unable to go to school, they labelled me a "*tōkōkyohi* child." It was a verdict that I was a piece of crap not worthy of existence. But my encounter with Shūre taught me that my brother, who was in the same boat as me, and I were not the only ones who had that label attached to them. I was a member of a minority group that was by no means small.

Nor was Shūre a place geared towards bringing kids back to school. That is, it was a place where, instead of trying to redeem ourselves from the "dishonor" of being *tōkōkyohi* children, those of us who shared the label came together and lived as *tōkōkyohi* children.

I regained my life at Shūre. Even now, almost every day, I recall fond memories of my fun-filled days at Shūre. It was literally the zenith of my life. Even though I've become such a dead loss now, the several years I spent at Shūre in themselves make me think that my life has been worth living.

Here at Shūre, I learned the idea that whether you go to school or not is a matter of personal choice. You go to school, that's fine; you don't go to school, that's fine too. This was also an idea held by Mrs. Okuchi and many of my friends at Shūre. This theory of "choice" pointed not just towards the option of going to school, but also towards the option of not going to school, each being of equal value.

This meant so much to those of us who could not go to school. It is common sense that we "must go to school," and everyone knows it. We know it, and yet we still find ourselves unable to go to school no matter what. If "going back to school" was the only path available despite all this, then there would be absolutely no hope for us. So, to us, being able to think, "It's ok if we are outside school" meant: "It's ok if we live."

For me, back in the day, the idea of "choice" meant something a bit different from what some parents call "choice." Those parents try to affirm not going to school as something that their kids "chose" to do. However, I've never once thought that I made that "choice," nor have I met a single person who said they made that "choice." What we wanted to say was that we "should be able to choose," as opposed to saying that we made that "choice."

However, there was no way this idea of "choice" could work very well. The thing is, in society, there were only overwhelmingly negative images about not going to school. To accept these images would probably have been–for the kids themselves not going to school, for their parents, and for everyone else in society–very difficult. Why would that possibly be an object of choice?

To get many people to think, "Not going to school is an option, too," something had to be done about those images. That's why those who believe in the idea of "choice" have been working to re-paint the "option of not going to school" not as something devoid of hope, but rather as something full of hope that can be an object of "choice."

Pressed by that urgent necessity, some of the Shūre members, including myself, became "cheerful *tōkōkyohi* children." We presented to the world our cheerful, lively selves through, among other things, media interviews and our own writings. We tried to imbue the dark, depressing term "*tōkōkyohi*" with a positive light. Mrs. Okuchi and others, who were serving as allies to those who didn't go to school, actively tried to let everyone know about us and justify their claims.

An Incredibly Fishy Narrative

What I call the "cheerful *tōkōkyohi* child narrative" refers to the stories of those who don't go to school or have had periods of non-attendance, but they are specifically of those, including myself, who came to see their experience in a positive light. These can be told by the children themselves in the form of memoir or interview, or introduced by their allies.

When you read several of these texts, it's crystal clear that these narratives follow a coherent pattern of introduction-development-plot twist-and conclusion[3]. Here is how it looks:

Introduction: Going to school is hard!

Development: I can't go to school and now my life's even harder!

Plot Twist: I'm stress-free now that I know it's okay if I don't go to school! I'm truly enjoying my life every day!

Conclusion: Now I'm a working adult contributing to society.

The "Conclusion" has been added only recently as those "cheerful *tōkōkyohi* children," who appeared around the late 80's, hit their 20's and 30's, so many stories end with a "Plot Twist." There are also stories that partially lack some of the key elements, but invariably, the narratives move chronologically from a "Twist" to a "Conclusion"–towards a happy ending.
Take, for example, a book called *What is Free School?–Children Create, We Create with Children* (Kyoikushiryo Shuppankai, 2000) that the staff at Shūre wrote. According to this book, the future for Shūre alumni apparently diverges into three paths: the "College Route"; a route where eventually children land in some kind of employment; and a route where they invest energy in their hobbies and other passions, which then provide them with a source of income. The reader of the book is introduced to Hiroki, whose single-minded devotion to anime and video games led him to his current job; Takako, who, after working part-time and going to a culinary school, is now balancing work and child-rearing; Shiho, who is enrolled in a junior college via distance learning with the goal of becoming a nursery school teacher; and Toru, who, after working at a sewing factory owned by his parents, currently works as a carpenter.

These narratives sound incredibly fishy. How many former *tōkōkyohi* children are now productive members of society? I'm sure that the number of those who are in a place far from a happy ending–be it social withdrawal (*hikikomori*), illness, or some form of violence–is not small.
Even though people often badmouth Shūre

saying, "They only recruit elite *tōkōkyohi* children," of the Shūre alumni I know, those who have landed a stable job make up only a minority. Many don't have a stable job and don't fall under any of the three categories above. Were these people forgotten by mistake? Or, were they left out because whoever was in charge thought, "We don't want the world to see them?"
If the latter was the case, then that would beg a question: Did the "cheerful *tōkōkyohi*" narrative affirm *tōkōkyohi* in actuality?
I think "cheerful *tōkōkyohi*" is akin to odorless garlic. One advertisement for odorless garlic goes:

"I know garlic is good for health, but that odor..." Here's some good news for you!

That might be true. But what I want to take issue with is whether that can be "good news" to the garlic itself. Would odorless garlic be happy being told, "You folks are garlic but you don't even have an odor! That's amazing!" And–what about the rest that haven't been deodorized and have that garlic odor?
"Cheerful *tōkōkyohi*," too, is an improved variety of *tōkōkyohi* that became everyone's favorite after what originally was unacceptable got deodorized. But then, if someone tells you, "You are a *tōkōkyohi* child but you're amazing, you're full of life, you're so active, you definitely can be a productive member of our society!"–is that supposed to be a compliment?

To be sure, images of people who are cheerful and full of life, as well as their success stories, may lead to a situation where more people are able to think, "It's okay if you don't go to school." Seeing those winners brimming with confidence may change the minds of those who now think, "*Tōkōkyohi*? It's an illness, right?"; "If you start skipping school with no good excuses, then you've set your foot on the path of juvenile delinquency"; "*Tōkōkyohi*? I mean, they don't look as if they have any future ahead of them, so..." But there are things that get left

out to create these positive images. Whatever looks dirty, stinks, or feels grim is wiped out of the picture.

Of course, "dark" pasts such as social withdrawal, violence, and illness have their own places in the "cheerful *tōkōkyohi* narrative." But in the happy-ending narrative, they are like a "shadow" that is meaningful only insofar as there is a bright present.

This creates not only inequality between someone who goes to school and someone who doesn't, but a hierarchy among people who don't go to school as well. Because, you know, if we were meant to progress from our "dark" phase towards a "bright" one, those of us who are in a "dark" phase now would be considered "lagging behind."

Years ago when I was still a "cheerful *tōkōkyohi* child," a young man who was a former *tōkōkyohi* child talked about how life had been very hard for him at a meeting. And he said, "I guess that's because I'm not over my history of *tōkōkyohi* yet." I fiercely interrogated him by saying, "I don't think my *tōkōkyohi* has negatively affected my life even in the smallest way. Why would we need to feel any less about ourselves just because we didn't go to school?" It was like saying, "You may be in pain like I used to, but don't you think you'll feel free like me once you put your inferiority complex about *tōkōkyohi* behind you?," even though I didn't say this out loud.

Looking back now, this is such an arrogant thing to say. The "cheerful *tōkōkyohi* narrative" is a collection of stories, each of which is a personal experience. But to make sure that we have a happy ending, these ended up serving as a manual that points those of us who don't go to school towards a way to go. I applied the manual to his situation and offered him unsolicited "mentoring." Maybe, if "it got better" for every single one of us; but when we know that a not-so-small number of former *tōkōkyohi* children in their 20's or 30's are still

withdrawn in their homes today, forcing that kind of manual on someone else should be unacceptable.

I wrote above about when I realized that I was a member of a group called *tōkōkyohi* children. But now, we can't just put everyone in this group into the same box. People who go to school are different from people who don't, but not only that, there are also myriad differences among people who don't go to school. Up until now, those who want to affirm school non-attendance have been using the "cheerful *tōkōkyohi* narrative" as a justification for their own claims. But the people who fit into the narrative are only a handful of those who don't go to school. At the end of the day, the happy-ending narratives told by "cheerful *tōkōkyohi* children" were only the stories of "*tōkōkyohi* elites" as opposed to "*tōkōkyohi* children."

A Trap Named Choice

However, there was also another important advantage to the theory of "choice": It was easy to accept for people who went to school as well. By using the word "choice," you could now argue for the right not to go to school without rejecting school itself. Few people would sympathize with radical ideas like, "School is wrong!"; but if you were to say, "School doesn't work for me, so let me choose another path," it would be easy to think, "Ah, okay." In fact, newspapers and TV–a.k.a. cliques of educational elites–now portray life without school attendance in a positive light. The journalist Egawa Shoko, for example, speaks highly of people with a history of *tōkōkyohi*: "They find what they want to do outside school, and live each day to the fullest working towards their goals."

"Whether you go to school or not is a matter of personal choice."
A framing like this does sound nice. It can cast both someone who goes to school and someone who doesn't in a good light. But isn't this such

a fishy story?

My question first and foremost is whether there are people who "fit in in school" for real. Is there really somebody anywhere in the world who made a "choice" to go to school saying, "Everything in school works great for me!"?

I think that, in reality, those who go to school don't go to school out of "choice." In today's society, everyone is supposed to go to school when they reach age 6. That is, school is something forced on you from above and has nothing whatsoever to do with whether you "fit in or not." Some people may be able to "adjust" to something that is forced on them, while others may strongly resist it. But such myriad responses do not change the fact that school is essentially something that has been forced on us. We end up making this fact seem unclear when we say, "Kids themselves can choose whether or not to go to school."

Another reason why I find this framing fishy is that it obscures the relationship between people who go to school and people who don't. It's not as if those who don't go to school live on an "uninhabited island" isolated from the rest of the world. Both those who go to school and those who don't live in this society. This means that neither those who go to school nor those who don't are free from the situation their counterparts find themselves in.

For example, let's consider "discrimination based on educational background." Often when we problematize this, our focus is on those who are under-educated or non-educated. Attention is paid to how they are being excluded and discriminated against. But what we cannot forget is that this is also a problem pertaining to those who are highly educated. Their myriad "privileges" do not just descend from heaven; they depend on discrimination against people who are under-educated. Highly educated people can maintain their well-paid, comfortable jobs precisely because under-educated people are made to take up jobs that are demanding and don't pay well.

This conversely means that discrimination against under-educated people is not isolated from privileges enjoyed by their highly educated counterparts. In that case, we should stop sugarcoating the problem by saying, "Go to school if you want to. You don't have to go if you don't want to." For us to be able to live secure lives without going to school–that is, for us to be free from negative experiences even when we are under-educated–people who go to school, especially those who go to "top universities," must be seen as the problem. We must rob them of their privileges. What *tōkōkyohi* children need is not "understanding" from educational elites–we need to defeat them (although, um, I'm also one of the "university-educated").

Today, I can't quite understand why or how my life is so hard. I feel like this has something to do with how I once cut the dark, negative aspect of me off within myself so that I could become a "cheerful *tōkōkyohi* child."

"Elite *tōkōkyohi* children" celebrated by the "cheerful *tōkōkyohi*" narrative–I used to be one of them. But, looking back now, this narrative was oppressive to me as well. That is because this narrative ends with a happy ending as soon as I overcome my inferiority complex about not going to school. As long as I accept this narrative, I won't be able to put into words whatever hardships I may experience after the happy ending.

To hell with all the happy endings that don't even come close to reality. I will rather say this:

Tōkōkyohi is an illness; *tōkōkyohi* leads to violence; *tōkōkyohi* leads to social withdrawal; *tōkōkyohi* isn't free at all; *tōkōkyohi* is grim, dirty, and it stinks.

And we must affirm *tōkōkyohi* as all of the above–Can we?

Related Articles:

Tsuneno Yujiro, "The 'Open Letter in Support

Tsuneno Yujiro (1977-2018) described himself as "unemployed" (as of 2015). He was known for his involvement in numerous social movements. To name just a few, he was committed to anti-racism and fighting the exclusion of homeless people. He also publicly opposed the exclusion of Korean Schools from the High School Tuition Waiver Program. In 2015 he wrote The "Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan": A Critique for the Asia-Pacific Journal-Japan Focus.

At age 10 he became, in his words, a "deserter from compulsory education." A year later he became a member of Tokyo Shure, a place for children outside school. He then sporadically attended school and eventually graduated from Lancaster University in the U.K. In Japan, he had a career teaching English and developing teaching material for standardized English tests. He contributed a chapter to �‖不登校、選んだわけじゃないんだぜ！』（*Futōkō: It was not My Choice*), Kido Rie and Tsuneno Yujiro, Tokyo, Rironsha, 2005, (reprinteded, Tokyo, East Press, 2012). His blog in Japanese can be found here. His Twitter account is @yujirotsu.

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Notes

[1] *Tōkōkyohi* literally means "refusal to go to school." See the Introduction for more on the terminology.
[2] The reference is to a long-running TV series based on the legend surrounding a 17-18th century daimyō Tokugawa Mitsukuni, who is said to have travelled incognito across Japan with two followers. In each episode, at a critical moment, he reveals his identity by showing

his *inrō*, a small lacquer case, that bears his family mark.

[3] The reference is to *Ki-Shō-Ten-Ketsu*, a common narrative structure in Japan.