



## Discourses of discipline. An anthropology of corporal punishment in Japan's schools and sports

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**To cite this article:** Franziska Fay (2016): Discourses of discipline. An anthropology of corporal punishment in Japan's schools and sports, *Children's Geographies*, DOI: [10.1080/14733285.2016.1189236](https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2016.1189236)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2016.1189236>



Published online: 24 May 2016.



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## BOOK REVIEW

**Discourses of discipline. An anthropology of corporal punishment in Japan's schools and sports**, by Aaron L. Miller, Berkeley, CA, Institute of East Asian Studies, 2013, 245 pp., \$25.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-1557291059

Can we rely on the idea of 'culture' to explain the continuing use of corporal punishment (*taibatsu*) in Japanese classroom and sports education despite its illegality since 1941? How will paying attention to other discourses surrounding the practice make the debate about it more meaningful? Aaron L. Miller explores these questions in his nuanced study of past and present notions of physical discipline in Japan with particular reference to the 'definitions, histories, contexts, ethics, causes, and theories' (26) of the practice and the changes that have occurred therein. Opposing the idea of a 'homogenous "Japanese" ideology regarding the use of physical discipline' (41) and thereby aiming to go beyond generalisations of social phenomena, the author works with a symbolic interpretative approach and engages with the many existing perceptions of *taibatsu* through a compelling combination of historical analysis, Japanese and non-Japanese scholarship, and some first-hand ethnographic data, framed in a Foucauldian power-analysis. Miller's analysis sheds light on the complexity of the various understandings that play into conceptualisations of corporal punishment between discipline/education and abuse/violence and therewith aims and succeeds to produce a deeper understanding of the practice, rather than simply condemning it. Central to his argument is the recognition that there is no singular definition or interpretation of 'corporal punishment' – neither in Japan nor in the 'west', but that the practice and its use can only be understood through historical, sociocultural and discourse analysis. Corporal punishment is rather understood as a 'multivocal symbol' with both proponents and opponents. The few ethnographies that have at least partially explored physical discipline tend to focus on the practice in isolation and without pointing to the similarities of it with its application in other places. Miller successfully goes beyond this with continuous reference to corporal punishment in the US and thereby offers a more complex and innovative account that reconsiders physical discipline not in an exclusive and condemning human/child rights framework but in the web of meanings in which it is actually embedded.

To approach *taibatsu* in an 'anthropological' way, Miller starts out by discussing what is to gain from such a perspective and then proceeds to consider the changing meanings and perceptions of it for various people and institutions throughout modern Japanese history. This is followed by a somewhat less detailed discussion of the contexts, forms, genders, spaces and agents of corporal punishment and concludes in the idea of 'three languages of discipline' – silent, verbal and physical (96). Chapters 4 and 5 offer the insights that make this work original by reconstructing ethical discussions around chastisement with the supporting and opposing arguments and concepts these build on, as well as the various perceived 'causes' and symbolic meanings of the practice that leave 'culture' behind as a 'flawed explanatory tool' (125). In the final chapter Miller applies Foucault's theory of power, violence and the body to the historicisation of the phenomena that he has laid out throughout the previous chapters, arguing that 'the point at which *taibatsu* stops being "discipline" and becomes "abuse" is subjective' (157). He concludes that the existence of various discourses around *taibatsu* has 'blurred rather than clarified the proper limits of discipline' and have 'opened space for the acts to continue' (162f). It is in

the Epilogue that Miller considers in more detail the use of physical punishment in Japanese religious practice – a connection that would have been sensitive to explore in the main body of his work, and most suitably in connection with the last Appendix in which he points to the roots of corporal punishment in the US within Christian values and beliefs.

Despite the books convincing approach that is supported by its structure there are several things left to desire – particularly in regard to its self-description as an ‘Anthropology’. Even though the author refers to children being seen as ‘things’ by Japanese adults (15), and youth ‘as subjects that must be moulded into disciplined Japanese adults’ (20), he refrains entirely from engaging with classical anthropological scholarship on concepts of ‘childhood’ and ‘physical discipline’, such as Morton’s (1996) *Becoming Tongan* or Montgomery’s (2009) *An Introduction to Childhood*, to name only two. The former thinking through children’s socialisation processes paying close attention to meanings of chastisement, and the latter sketching out in fascinating detail the fine ‘line between acceptable and unacceptable treatment of children’ (156), between discipline, punishment and abuse. This feeds into an overall weakness of a general rather limited engagement with anthropological scholarship especially concerning current debates, such as on the ‘body’, ‘violence’, ‘emotion’ or ‘childhood’, which Miller acknowledges as key to framing the matter, but ignores relevant references throughout his discussion.

Further, and what is probably this work’s most striking shortcoming is the lack of ethnographic narrative and depth. The fine historical account that Miller presents to us, is only very rarely supported with actually ethnographic data – possibly because he ‘did not observe *taibatsu* first-hand during this long-term observational fieldwork’ (43) – and relies too strongly on Japanese scholar’s writings about the practice as ‘data’ and framing them as ‘informants’. Despite the important and interesting insights from these scholars’ writings, one is left to wonder whether the key anthropological aim of deriving theory from fieldwork data is thereby defeated. This study would have benefitted greatly from including young Japanese people’s perceptions of *taibatsu* which – again acknowledged but not tackled by Miller – have widely remained ignored in research on corporal punishment (110). Nevertheless, the critical and important insights this book provides are numerous. Miller identifies government responsibility and failure in regard to sufficiently defining *taibatsu* and punishing teachers for continuing to use it despite its illegality and goes as far as interpreting the practice as a state-legitimated form of violence, stressing the need to consider structural and institutional factors, as well as legal and linguistic ambiguity, that encourage *taibatsu*’s persistence.

Within his Foucauldian power-analysis approach he restrains from portraying young people as purely passive ‘victims’ of corporal punishment but acknowledges their own agency in this un-equal power relationship inflictor and recipient, which allows for more productive ways of thinking about compliance and resistance in systems that might emphasise passivity and inaction. It is precisely here where more research needs to dig deep into young people’s ways of coping with and resisting everyday punishment to find new actor-based ways of not only responding to but more importantly prevent violent forms of discipline. His analysis extends as far as to the nature of educational spaces in regard to producing opportunities for ‘violence’, which he concludes to be more likely in the realm of sports than for classroom education, for a different dependence on verbal communication and differing degrees of intimacy. This book adds nuance to corporal punishment research that has been long overdue and is a crucial addition to the Anthropologies of Young People, Education and Violence and should become essential reading for anyone – theorist or practitioner – working on questions concerning matters of discipline and punishment.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2016.1189236>