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WORLD & I ARCHIVE

Rethinking Japan: College Students Speak Their Minds

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Revolution and reform are words bandied about freely in Japan these days, applied to nearly every corner of public and private life. If the former term can be defined as a sharp break over a short period in a group's collective voice and vision, then the younger generation of Japanese may indeed qualify as revolutionaries.

This can make it tough to be a young person in Japan. The nation was shocked in January 2001 by the behavior of some twenty-year-olds taking part in the normally staid Coming of Age Day ceremonies, held annually in cities, towns, and villages across the archipelago. Besides mildly unruly behavior like talking on cell phones during addresses by dignitaries, more blatantly disrespectful pranks included throwing mayonnaise and even firecrackers at speakers. The mayor of one midsize city gave up halfway through his speech, tossing his script aside and storming off the stage. The twenty-something crowd has been unflatteringly branded as a hedonistic "new breed" incapable of the commitment to delayed gratification that defined previous postwar generations.

Legions of college graduates are passing on joining Japan's company-based working world, opting instead to continue their loosely structured employment as "freeters" in low-paying, noncareer service jobs. Freeters frequently overlap with the swelling ranks of "parasite singles," an even less kind term referring to adults who forgo marriage indefinitely in favor of the indulgent affluence of living with mom and dad. Indeed, Masahiro Yamada, the commentator credited with coining

the term parasite singles, calls the group (up to ten million strong) a "symbol of the impasse at which contemporary Japanese society finds itself. A feeling of being at a dead end arises when people have all they want at present with few prospects for the future, an emotional state that describes these singles to a tee." [1]

In June 2001 and June 2002, however, I helped judge university English speech contests whose participants strongly belied this characterization. Sponsored by the Fukuoka Student English Association, the contests featured twenty-four original speeches by students from five universities in Fukuoka, a city of 1.4 million people on Japan's southernmost main island of Kyushu. The speakers, typically young women about twenty-one years old, unflinchingly confronted diverse themes and specific topics such as the challenges of technology and modernity (prenatal genetic screening, surrogate motherhood, stress, human isolation); social problems and responsibility (child abuse, bullying, prejudice against the physically disabled and mentally ill, mass media excesses, eating contests, health-care reform, educational reform, challenging authority); and global citizenship (land mines, nuclear disarmament, world peace). Their eagerness to air society's dirty laundry while pushing for positive change confirmed the ongoing emergence of a more open, proactive, and freethinking citizenry.

Japanese college students, in short, are sounding a lot like their American counterparts, making them stand out in sharper resolution within a culture less receptive to upsetting the status quo. During the "lost decade" of the 1990s, however, Japan came to resemble an old sofa, with broken springs poking through the cushions in several places at the same time. The silver lining was a humbling acknowledgment that change, even of the uncontrollable variety, must be actively embraced. Destabilizing forces of transition (toward, for example, individual empowerment and responsibility and greater diversity) are today manifesting themselves in most areas of Japanese life, undermining formerly effective methods of social management and producing a nation more resistant to guidance by officialdom. Globalization and technology are compounding the fluidity of this process, while compressing the time frame in which it is unfolding. (The author described the evolution of Japan's Internet culture in the June 2002 issue of *The World & I*.)

The speech contests offered a window into the world of Japanese young adults, a color snapshot of turn-of-the-century Japan in transformation. Like post-September 11 America, Japan is now redefining the relationship between individual and community interests, searching for its own recalibrated balance of rights and responsibilities. The resulting tension and displacements are uniquely Japanese, though, for Japan is approaching that elusive point of equilibrium from the opposite direction.

ROCKING THE BOAT

The first-place speech was given by Nana Iriki of Kitakyushu University. "Please imagine you are at the station," she asked her listeners. "When you use a train or a bus, don't you feel something strange sometimes? You are constantly

being told what to do, like a child. The station is filled with the words 'don't' or 'please.' Do you think this shows kindness and provides good services? Do you think this is really necessary to protect our lives? If you answered 'yes,' maybe you are used to being spoiled. If you answered 'no, it is unnecessary,' have you complained to the company?"

"Conflict or Harmony," the title of the Iriki's provocative speech, had implications far beyond the officiousness of Japan's everyday noise pollution and visual clutter of signs bearing nanny-like messages, something that foreign visitors rarely fail to notice and Japanese have also begun criticizing. In the view of ONE academic, "This relentless hounding of the public with instructions issued by the authorities strongly contrasts with the passive, noncommunicative stance adopted by most of the public, thus depriving people of the ability to express themselves freely, thereby crippling self-determination.[2] "Iriki echoed the harsh assessment. She recounted a previous summer vacation experience at an Australian train station, where the curt announcements and generally impersonal system initially struck her as cold. Upon deeper reflection, she decided, "It is we Japanese that are puzzled when we go abroad and face a world that is 'unusual' only for us." The speech continued by challenging Japanese to more vigorously exercise the virtue of civic courage, by taking risks and choosing conflict over harmony in order to reform society.

"For a long time, Japanese people have tended to avoid conflict and dispute. We think conflict is a bad thing and creating harmony with the surrounding people is a good thing. Therefore, we avoid complaining and try to be patient. Even if we are sure that something is wrong, most people ignore it. However, it is harmful for us not to complain. It means that we rely on others who undertake difficult tasks and it also means we are not independent. Moreover, don't you think we are irresponsible when we ignore these things? In such a situation, nothing will change in a positive direction. This way of thinking is called safety-first, or a negative attitude."

Indeed, "safety-first" has assumed the status of national mantra in Japan, where the words can be seen prominently displayed on signs at any construction site, especially the ubiquitous government-funded ones. Maybe only semi-apocryphal, an urban legend of the recent past described how an electronic "chains required" sign began flashing on a mountain pass one sunny summer afternoon, prompting dutiful motorists to obey. Such compliant, passive attitudes are a root cause of Japan's much maligned "spectator democracy," now being steadily superseded by a more independent, assertive approach. Some of today's younger Japanese drivers, for example, might resist chaining up even in a blizzard. Fresh, more meaningful evidence of civic sea change is visible on all fronts.

Kusai mono ni futa, translatable as "if it smells, cover it up," goes far in explaining the cover-up culture that has long pervaded Japanese society, making acknowledgment of even minor wrongdoings tantamount to shameful betrayal of one's group. In recent months, remarkably, American-style whistle-blowing has exposed an accelerating stream of both public- and private sector-crime and corruption; national legislation to protect individual whistle-blowers has even been

passed. In late 2000, a firestorm of grassroots protest accompanied the introduction of a revised resident-registration system, in which personal data for all Japanese were entered into a national computer database, along with new eleven-digit personal identification numbers.

Scores of local government assemblies passed resolutions urging Tokyo to suspend the plan over privacy concerns; several flatly refused to implement it. "The specter of a village assembly criticizing central government policy was previously unheard of," according to journalist Tomoko Otake, with one activist voicing the hope that "an ongoing wave of local resolutions will eventually topple a decision made at the highest level of the bureaucracy."^[3] A hotbed of resistance to the registration number scheme was Yokohama, a metropolis of 3.5 million people whose maverick, 38-year-old mayor was elected largely by vowing to publicly disclose the entertainment-related expense accounts of city officials. More than 800,000 Yokohama residents opted out of the national registry system under a special city provision the central government is certain to disallow, setting up an unprecedented legal test case. Also attracting increased criticism is the government's related policy of family registration, a relic of the imperial past that discriminates against non-Japanese and their children, as well as Japanese children born out of wedlock. Information is indeed power, and it has become a bitterly contested commodity.

The thunderous "fall of the bureaucrats" has helped hasten the long-awaited energizing of civil society. The reputation of nearly every government ministry has been tarnished by a staggering range of malfeasance and influence-peddling scandals, along with general ineptitude that made possible the domestic outbreak of mad cow disease and contamination of the nation's blood supply with HIV and hepatitis, not to mention economic mismanagement on a grand scale. The "Koizumi Revolution" itself, named for the tenacious current prime minister whose reforms are being resisted most strenuously by bureaucrats and their backers in his own ruling party, reflects the reformulated state-individual relationship in its rhetoric if not yet its results. "Power to the people" is essentially Koizumi's message. Government slogans and billboards frame the process as a transfer of political locus from the center to localities and from officials to citizens, adding more bluntly for good measure that "government is your job." Risk aversion and seniority, meanwhile, are being elbowed aside as societal organizing principles by activism and *jitsuryoku-shugi* ("actual ability-ism"), as citizens more fully exercise the political sovereignty with which they suddenly found themselves endowed in theory after the war.

"This society is filled with a lot of contradictions and problems we cannot understand," continued Iriki. Therefore, let's always question our surroundings. Even if your question is too small, you should say your opinion at once and be a person who creates opportunities for everyone to change our society. Do not be satisfied with your lives too much. Conflict is necessary to improve ourselves and our lives. Yes, to keep harmony with others is more comfortable than breaking harmony, but to challenge ourselves, to leave a comfortable place, is often more meaningful and beneficial. Ladies and gentlemen, next time when you use a train or bus, look around you. Then, consider your daily life again deeply. There might be strange things you haven't noticed yet."

NAGASAKI, NUKES, AND WORLD PEACE

"Do you know what happened on August sixth in Hiroshima and on August ninth in Nagasaki? On these two days, terrible atomic bombs were dropped on both places." In a compelling---and unsettling---speech, Kosuke Ogawa of Fukuoka University asserted that nowadays, due to vastly more powerful classes of nuclear weapons, "only one nuclear bomb can destroy western Japan completely. When I heard this situation, I felt fierce sorrow and worry for the future of the world as one of the people who was born in Nagasaki. So I would like to insist on my opinion about nuclear weapons and consider what we can do to abolish them."

According to Nagasaki's atomic bomb museum, Ogawa reported, 80 percent of Japanese young people aged 16-25 do not know about the atomic bombings. "All of you, do you understand what peaceful life is without understanding what war is? I think you have your ideal peaceful life in your hearts, but if you forget the tragedy of atomic bombs in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, your ideal peaceful life can't be realized and you can't create it. And we must keep it in our mind to create a warless world."

World peace is a noble and eminently desirable goal, and the topic was a timely one. Nuclear powers India and Pakistan were edging toward war over Kashmir at the time, while North Korea is currently intent on joining the nuclear club. Yet other portions of Ogawa's speech displayed the anti-American overtones indicative of the advancing "Japan as World War II victim" mindset.

"Have you ever heard of death ash?" he asked. "In 1954, March first, the United States of America tested a hydrogen bomb in Bikini of the Marshall Islands. Then, a Japanese fishing boat, *Dai-Go-Fukuryumaru*, came there to catch fish. However, the fishing boat was covered with death ash by the exploding bomb. The passengers were exposed to the bomb's radioactive rays and suffered from nuclear sickness. Despite the fact that these tragedies happened, most people try to hide it in history as only one event in the past. Everyone, please don't forget these tragedies! We must not make the same mistake!"

Few Chinese or Koreans would include the accidental irradiation of the Japanese fishermen near Bikini on a list of glaring historical omissions in Japan, a country where depictions of World War II are today more controversial than ever. On the contrary, right-wing nationalist groups such as the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform deny that anything resembling a massacre took place in Nanking in 1937, or that Japan's colonization of the Korean peninsula was brutally violent, or that "comfort women" were sexually enslaved. Such ultraconservative, revisionist efforts are bearing unfortunate fruit across Japan. Two days after Ogawa's speech, for example, prefectural officials in Kagoshima bowed to revisionist pressure by deciding that high school trips to China will no longer include visits to war-related museums in Nanking.

The Nagasaki A-bomb museum was itself harshly criticized when it opened in 1996 for including a modicum of pre-1945 contextual information. According to

journalist Nicholas Kristof, right-wingers charged that such information "could lead children to conclude that Japan did bad things and thus that the atomic bombing was morally justifiable." [4] Nagasaki's mayor, despite his own impeccable conservative credentials, was shot and very nearly assassinated by an ultranationalist in 1990 for stating his opinion that Emperor Hirohito bore responsibility for the Pacific War.

Nagasaki, at the same time, is considered the spiritual home of the Japanese peace movement, founded by the saintly Dr. Takashi Nagai in the rubble of ground zero. Sharing no common ideology with right-wing nationalism, the left-leaning peace movement has long clung to history in an abstract vacuum, eschewing concrete issues of war responsibility while focusing on victimization as represented by Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This mind-set has produced a seriously underinformed younger generation, as well as fertile ground for groups with far-right agendas. As an article in the Japan Times avers, "Even ordinary Japanese who are neither rightists nor leftists inadvertently aid the revisionist cause by seeing Japan only as the victim of a nuclear holocaust and not as an aggressor." [5]

Ogawa's well-intentioned calls for remembering the A-bombings and striving for a nuke-free world seemed based on just such a centrist yet myopic view of World War II. Foreign professor Daniel Metraux discovered with dismay that his university students "often had a 'Japan as Suffering Victim' image of the war in which the aggressive West inflicted needlessly intense bombing--including atomic bombing--on a nearly defenseless Japan," several of his students expressed visible anger over what the United States did at Hiroshima but were "stunned and puzzled when he discussed the murder of 30--50 million Asians by the Japanese army, the sex-slaves, Unit 731, and the Rape of Nanking." [6] Indeed, pointed follow-up questions from two speech contest judges attempted to nail down Ogawa's level of awareness of Japan's full wartime role, by asking what else he had learned in school.

He was able to add merely that all Nagasaki public school students must visit the A-bomb museum and that "war is cruel." Over the decades in postwar Japan, this "everyone was to blame" reasoning has degenerated into "no one was to blame," producing among many a national memory of the Pacific War minus its primary perpetrator. Neither did Ogawa's presentation suggest any tangible action for moving toward nuclear disarmament. This was due primarily to language difficulties and the nature of the speech contest, but it also reflected what James Orr has called the "paradox of antinuclear pacifism based on atomic victimhood." As he explains in *The Victim as Hero* (2001), "absolute rejection of nuclear weapons not only prevented compromise and hindered resolution of security concerns and complicated diplomatic relations with the United States; it also effectively relieved the ideologically pure activist of responsibility for solving them." [7] This helps explain Japanese pacifism's limited capacity for making constructive contributions to global security in general. Nearly all of my own university students opposed U.S. military action in both Afghanistan and Iraq, ethereally explaining that they prefer peace.

Well into 2003, Japan's parliament was locked in heated debate over

"emergency response" legislation that would modestly empower Japan's military in the event of terrorism or other national crises. Progressive, peace movement Japanese could be seen demonstrating against the bills in downtown Fukuoka on weekends, convinced that such authority could mean a return to wartime militarism. Prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, where executed war criminals are enshrined among Japan's war dead, prompt annual protests from Asians who charge that Japan seeks to erase its World War II victimizer role. Such has been the polarized outcome of sidestepping history, of speaking indistinctly of peace while ignoring specific questions of justice.

Ogawa's conclusion was nonetheless admirable for its idealism and sincerity: "Please appeal in your hearts, 'No more nuclear war! I will never make nuclear weapons!' Japan must forever remain the last place ever to have suffered nuclear attack."

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS, HUMAN ISOLATION

In her speech, Megumi Fukagawa of Fukuoka University examined the quality of life in postmodern society. "Now, our society is making remarkable progress by industrialization and our life is flooded with machines," she observed. "Life is much more convenient than when I was a child, but the opportunity for touching humans is decreasing. The most serious problem is that modern children can't get acquainted with other people."

No nation has modernized its economy more rapidly than Japan, where the social fallout continues to be far-reaching. Various postwar factors have contributed to the rapid breakdown of first the traditional extended family and now the nuclear family structure: relentless industrialization and urbanization; fast-rising divorce rates, ultralow birthrates and the graying of society; the diversification of lifestyles and soaring number of single-member households; and technology. Home video games and Internet-equipped mobile phones are just two of the machines that have curtailed face-to-face interaction and complicated the transference of values between generations.

"Who did you play with after school?" Fukagawa asked the audience. "I played with my grandmother or my sister or my friend. In particular, I played with my grandmother mostly. I learned from her how to throw *otedama* [a traditional beanbag game], how to do sewing, and how to communicate with neighborhood people. But most modern children have no brother or sister. Moreover, they don't live with their grandmother or grandfather. Instead, they have TV games, where it is possible to play alone. I want modern children to understand that TV games won't teach them how to communicate with others. We have to offer children a better environment."

That won't be easy, due to a demographic hollowing out of society. Japan's birthrate is among the world's lowest, and its population is the world's fastest aging; already, 20 percent of Japanese are age sixty-five or older. Due to this double hit, the number of Japanese is projected to peak at 128 million in 2006 and then shrink by nearly half over the next hundred years. Webs of family and community connections, once the epitome of Japanese life, are fraying fast. This

has contributed to widespread alienation among youth, record numbers of whom are withdrawing into drugs and crime, which is turning ever more callous and violent.

STRESS THERAPY

"Did you know that some dinosaurs died from stress?" asked Rie Murai of Fukuoka University. "By the way, do you feel stress now? Today, we live in a stressful society, where persons are affected by many kinds of stress from human relationships, jobs, and diseases, which may cause depression. According to the Japanese government, 55 percent of Japanese people feel stress. Only 55 percent? I doubted it. The other 45 percent of people do not notice their stress. Today, our society and environment are changing in a variety of ways as during the dinosaur period. If we live in stressful environments with no care for stress, humankind would similarly perish someday."

Calling stress the "modern disease," Murai noted that it can lead to autonomic imbalances affecting internal organs, resulting in higher blood pressure and related problems that often go undiagnosed. *Karoshi*, outright "death from overwork," has been both medically diagnosed and legally recognized in recent years. Japanese courts have ordered corporations to pay compensation to bereaved family members of *karoshi* victims, employees who worked nearly around the clock for weeks or months on end before succumbing. The age-old attitude of unquestioning endurance known as *gaman*, with its unmistakable element of psychological denial, is yielding to more therapeutic approaches, such as the aroma therapy that Murai recommended. Similarly, new age remedies as well as the ancient practice of fortune-telling are enjoying faddish runs as stress busters. "Twelve step" programs for recovery from various addictions are catching on.

Shingo Fukamachi of the Fukuoka University of Education took first place at the 2001 event with his demonstrative description of dance movement therapy, intended mainly for mentally ill patients but recommended universally for stress relief. Akane Iwanaga of Fukuoka University expressed regret for the human costs of Japan's headlong push for modernization, suggesting stargazing as a solution. "We rush through life and get stressed out," she said. "The developments of science and economy have brought about material wealth in exchange for peace of mind. Why don't you look up at the night sky tonight?"

ENABLING THE DISABLED, EMPOWERING THE WEAK

Several speakers chose themes illustrating the dramatic improvement in Japanese attitudes and laws regarding mentally and physically disabled people and other weaker members of society. Prejudice and discrimination against people with handicaps ran rampant during the last half of the twentieth century, as the nation's single-minded focus on economic growth left them excluded from public life; culturally ingrained attitudes often made them pariahs even in their own homes. "Physical and mental disabilities seem to arouse powerful feelings of shame across Japan, and these emotions offer a disconcerting glimpse of the way in which society here sometimes works," observed the New York Times in

1996. An adult man in a wheelchair recounted for the newspaper his "childhood burden more excruciating than his crippled body and deformed hands: the gradual awareness that what his father felt for him was not love but embarrassment, that even those he lived with regarded him as a monster." [8]

Today, marginalization of the disabled is still apparent. The taboo on discussing their problems has ended, however, and the once relatively compassionless Japanese are finding their collective heart. Broken people are no longer being tacitly blamed for their brokenness. Awareness and acceptance of society's wounded, walking and otherwise, are gradually increasing, facilitating their inclusion within local communities and elevating their quality of life. Dividing lines that formerly confined the vulnerable to separate compartments within society are growing fainter.

Prejudice against the mentally ill was examined by Sakiko Nakahara of the Fukuoka University of Education, who described a television news report of a crime involving a mentally ill suspect: "In this incident, the cause was not clear, but the mass media reported as if all mentally ill patients were dangerous. The mass media make people have prejudices against mental disease. It's not too much to say that the mass media reflect our opinions." Ostracism has traditionally kept Japanese mental patients physically removed from sight. "Because citizens fear to have relations with mental disease patients and object to establishing [psychiatric] hospitals in their towns, most hospitals are established in the heart of mountains and isolated from the local community," explained Nakahara. Housing discrimination results when "a landlord or landlady frowns at their request and assumes that they are dangerous."

Progress is being made. A few days before this speech, Japan's transportation ministry ordered the nation's three major airlines to allow mentally disabled people to fly on their airplanes; such people had routinely been turned away unless accompanied by medical attendants. The day after the speech, the Japanese Society of Psychiatry and Neurology adopted a new term for schizophrenia in a move to increase public understanding, replacing the term meaning "split mind disorder" with one meaning "loss of coordination disorder." Unfortunately, isolated tragedies like the fatal knifings by a 38-year-old mental patient of eight children at an elementary school in 2001 have fueled the erroneous preconception that, in the speaker's words, "mentally ill people equal potential criminals."

In a speech about hearing impairment, entitled "Throw Away Our Sympathy," Eiko Hikida of Kitakyushu University quoted a hearing-impaired person as saying, "having obstacles is surely an inconvenience but never unhappy. It may even enrich our lives. We don't need sympathy, we just need cooperation.' I heard these words said by a disabled person, and I was very surprised and shocked." Hikida learned Japanese sign language, which was popularized by a TV drama series featuring hearing impairment, as a school club activity. "To tell the truth, my motivation for learning sign language was selfish at first," she said. "I thought sign language looked cool, so I learned. That is to say, I was interested only in sign language, but not really the hearing impaired people themselves or their difficulties."

In a separate speech on the same topic, Ayami Kanegae of Fukuoka University of Education recounted a true story about a deaf child who could not speak. The young girl wanted to use sign language but was forbidden to do so by her mother. "Her mother had a big prejudice against sign language. She thought using sign language was shameful," Kanegae explained. One evening when the girl was going to bed, she used sign language to tell her mother she loved her. "But her mother didn't know what it meant. As usual, she felt it was shameful and uncomfortable. So she scolded her daughter for using sign language. The mother's concern had been toward other people's eyes rather than understanding her own daughter."

The story had a happy ending; the mother eventually learned sign language herself. Kanegae also mentioned a newspaper article about people with a wide range of disabilities now entering various professions in Japan, as employment barriers continue to fall. "People with disabilities have a big possibility in order to select their own future, just like people without it. So we should not regard them as aliens," she concluded.

"Barrier-free" has become an everyday buzzword, in fact, referring to wheelchair-accessible elevators in train stations, new laws allowing helper dogs in restaurants, and more progressive policies allowing the mildly disabled to attend public schools with other children. National efforts focused on the swelling ranks of elderly people have led to new public facilities and programs such as the Town Mobility Project, which gets seniors and disabled people out of their houses and into motorized carts.

A wider government-sanctioned movement currently gaining momentum seeks to empower disadvantaged and vulnerable people of various classes: women, foreigners, children, crime victims, the disabled, Hansen's disease patients, descendants of former social outcasts, and others. Interestingly, in Japan these general antidiscrimination efforts have come to be closely associated with human rights. During International Human Rights Week in December 2001, for instance, I received in my mailbox a ten-page illustrated booklet called "Toward Ending Discrimination," produced by the Fukuoka City Human Rights Promotion Council. The remarkable booklet advised that employment applicants should not be judged according to their birthplace, adding that it is not necessary to formally investigate the background of marriage prospects. Husbands should help out with housework, and fathers should talk to their children; foreigners, elderly people, handicapped people, and people with HIV should not be discriminated against.

This human rights publication, which might raise the eyebrows of American taxpayers, represents a novel twist in the long line of "moral suasion" campaigns directed by the Japanese state. A new era has dawned in Japan, where the traditional emphasis on collective responsibility is being complemented, both from above and below, by insistent calls for victim rights, patient rights, consumer rights, student rights, senior rights, nonsmoker rights, and animal rights. (Briefly considering the first group, there is certainly no shortage of crime victims, as Japan's crime rate has risen every year since 1996. Medical malpractice lawsuits,

meanwhile, have doubled over the past decade and set a new record in 2001, another indicator of the erosion of deference to authority and the corresponding emergence of litigious attitudes among the Japanese public.) The cumulative effect of this fresh willingness to see and start rectifying injustice is a country noticeably more resident friendly, for foreigners and Japanese alike, than when I first moved here in 1991.

The worsening problem of child abuse was confronted by Shinsuke Katsuki of Fukuoka University. Reported cases increased an extraordinary sixteen-fold over the past decade, from 1,101 in 1990 (when statistics began being compiled) to 17,275 in 2000. Part of the increase stems from newfound openness to discussing child abuse and recent laws mandating reporting; actual cases are also way up, partly due to a lack of support for isolated mothers inexperienced at child rearing. "Maybe when you go home after this contest," he ominously concluded, "you may hear a child's cry from the next house." Convicted child abusers, at least in the more horrific cases involving deaths, are beginning to receive prison terms instead of the previously customary suspended sentences.

Victims of school bullying, closely tied to the national problem of student suicides, are also receiving greater sympathy and help than in years past, when it was sometimes assumed that victims were guilty of nonconformity and thus deserved being bullied. Tomoko Okoba of Kyushu University recited the contents of a suicide note written by an eighth-grade student, who appeared to have psychologically accepted this warped view of the weak as at fault. The victim of both bullying and extortion wrote in his will, as Okoba informed the audience, "Please don't accuse the guys who demanded the money from me. I have only one person to blame. It is me, because I gave the money to them obediently. If I had had enough courage to refuse to give them money, this situation would have been different, wouldn't it? I'm so sorry." The boy's will also expressed "his gratitude to his family and apologies for taking money out in secret."

There is now greater resolve for confronting the root causes of bullying, namely what Jeffrey Kingston, author of *Japan in Transformation*, has called "the high-pressure atmosphere of a school system that produces such behavior and a society that sanctions it as a means of social control."^[9] Parents of student suicide victims are filing lawsuits against the parents of bullies and schools that fail to address the problem. Regarding the suicide epidemic as a whole, Japan remains a nation in need of healing. A record 33,048 Japanese took their own lives in 1999; the following year 28,332 Americans did likewise, in a country with more than twice Japan's population.

EDUCATION CROSSROADS

"My classmates and I belong to the Department of Education," said Ikuko Mutsuro (Fukuoka University of Education). "We really want to be English teachers. However, the more classes we take about school education, the more anxious we are about the recent trends in principles of education."

Based on the twin pillars of latitude and comprehensive learning, Japan's new national teaching standards were the source of teacher and parent anxiety

even before they took effect in April 2002. Latitude refers to an overall reduction in curriculum content of fully 30 percent, while comprehensive learning (also called integrated learning) fosters the creativity and critical thinking skills that Japanese believe their children lack. Various catchphrases used by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MECSST) to describe the revised policies can be combined and rendered in English as "relaxed, cram-free education with latitude and room to grow." Underscoring the reality of Japanese public education as an institution in radical transition, April 2002 also marked the completion of the phased-in move to a five-day school week. Public school students are now free on both Saturdays and Sundays.

The barrage of criticism greeting the nation's new guidelines notwithstanding, the policy background confirms that the education ministry is not needlessly tinkering with a perfectly running machine. "Relentless competition has stifled children," concluded a typical newspaper editorial back in 1997 "It has robbed them of time to explore their interests and enjoy life, and virtually killed their individuality."^[10] As school officials and the public alike noted with rising alarm, while placing near-total emphasis on rote memorization and academic rankings did produce world-beater standardized test scores, "primary and middle schools were plagued with ever-worsening problems such as bullying and truancy." According to Yukiko Furusawa, writing in the Daily Yomiuri, "a dominant theory emerged that these problems resulted from the distortion of students' minds by the pressures of highly competitive entrance examinations for universities and colleges."^[11]

By the late 1990s, the term "classroom collapse" had been coined. It described how entire middle school classes were becoming disrupted and unteachable due to disorderly students; in some cases, the chaos spread down to kindergartens. Investigation of long-term truancy cases shed on the so-called social withdrawal syndrome. Plummeting levels of scholastic ability known as "academic collapse" began necessitating remedial education at successive rungs of the ladder. Related to this destabilized school backdrop were spiraling rates of juvenile crime, drug abuse, and schoolgirl prostitution. While school administrators remained reluctant to use expulsions to deal with the unfamiliar problem of openly defiant students, violence including homicide and suicide involved students as well as teachers, who began burning out at unprecedented rates. Kinder, gentler schools certainly seemed called for.

The irony of Japan's preexisting educational crisis, then, is that the very features of the highly regimented system that were so recently praised for its success (such as compulsory uniforms and socialization through group activities like daily cleaning) were suddenly being blamed for its breakdown. In this context, it seems reasonable that policymakers are shifting the focus from sheer academics to character building, broadening the scope of student life to include flexible activities such as community volunteerism and promoting the ability to face challenges and solve problems individually. Grading system reforms enacted in April 2002, based on absolute rather than comparative assessment, encourage individual effort and deemphasize class rankings.

Yet Mutsuro and others opposed to the reforms are unswayed by the

ministry's good intentions. "I'm sure comprehensive learning is a very good education, if it works well," she said. "But now, nobody can correctly carry out the comprehensive learning that MECSSST has in mind." Mutsuro described hearing a lack of concrete objectives during a ministry official's presentation at an educational conference, along with open dissension in the teacher ranks. "I saw some schoolteachers who were bored with his talk. One such teacher said, 'It is troublesome. Why do we have to participate in this meeting?' I thought, comprehensive learning cannot be successful in the present situation. Comprehensive learning is too abstract and unprepared."

Regarding the latitude component of the new standards, mandating dilution of learning content by 30 percent, Mutsuro predicted it will exacerbate the problem of general scholastic decline, while creating new divisions between the educational haves and have-nots. Japan's merit-based, "test scores open doors" school system is proudly egalitarian, despite the crushing stress it often entails, making the prospect of such a two-tiered model very worrisome. Public schools are required to follow MECSSST instructions much more closely than private schools are. Indeed, since barely half of private schools initially agreed to give their students every Saturday off, many will undoubtedly resist full implementation of the thinner curriculum. "Therefore, if children want to get more academic ability, they will have to go to expensive private schools," said Mutsuro. "Moreover, in order to pass the entrance exams of higher private schools, they will have to go to cram schools from an early age. This situation is unfair for students who can't afford it."

In an acute case of unintended consequences, intensive cramming and competition are precisely what MECSSST is trying to discourage. Thus, the ministry has awkwardly requested that cram schools, businesses providing supplemental lessons to millions of Japanese students, offer outdoor recreational activities on weekends. Officials have scurried to defend their reforms with slogans such as "Let's allow families to spend more quality time together." Due to the dearth of non-school-related youth facilities, they have suggested that families should visit museums, historical spots, and even ethnic restaurants together.

"Few doubt that the scholastic abilities of young Japanese, from grade school children to university students, have declined markedly," stated Takamitsu Sawa, a professor at a leading university. "In my opinion, the problem stems from the fact that in the 1990s, traditional Japanese virtues such as perseverance, diligence and seriousness were ignored. ... Mammonism is rampant. Intelligence gets little respect." [12] In fact, a subculture of underachievement loosely analogous to the Generation X phenomenon in the United States one decade ago can be discerned among some Japanese youth. The challenges facing Japanese society thus extend well beyond the education system, where current crises are both a cause and an effect of deeper societal readjustments. It will be neither surprising nor wholly undesirable if rote test-taking prowess deteriorates further still, for MECSSST appears committed to its redirected priorities of "human formation" and "education of the heart."

Another prominent academic (and author of the Japanese best-seller *University Students Who Cannot Solve Fractions*), however, warned of dire future

consequences unless the national curriculum guidelines are rolled back to the 1980s levels. Kazuo Nishimura predicted that wealthy parents will outsource education by sending their children overseas. Within Japan, globally competitive companies will hire qualified foreigners instead of unqualified Japanese, leading to even higher unemployment and social instability. The fundamental solution, the professor argued, lies in decentralizing the education ministry's power.[13] Mutsuro's defiant speech also stressed decentralization, a theme being heard more often as the vertical structure of Japanese society continues to flatten out.

CONCLUSION

"Have the Japanese changed?" asked a special New Year's Day 2001 supplement to the Daily Yomiuri. The obvious answer is yes; people everywhere are always changing. The pace and scope of transformation in Japan, however, have been eye-catching. "The rising levels of truancy, bullying, materialism, moral laxity, and delinquency among youth have spurred a national introspection, focusing on what has gone wrong," writes Kingston.[14] Pessimism and apathy, hallmarks of the much-discussed "Japanese disease," have abounded for several years. "Japan is a relative newcomer to the club of wealthy industrial nations, yet in regard to a wide range of modern ills, it has pulled abreast of countries that have enjoyed the fruits of maturity and prosperity far longer," lamented social commentator Mariko Sugahara. "The nation itself has fallen victim to the ills of an advanced industrial society almost before it had a chance to enjoy the rewards." [15]

In an article discussing "rapid changes in the industrial and social structure [that] have given rise to social destabilization," Seiko Yamazaki considered the attitudinal effects upon Japanese youth of the collapse of the company-based lifetime employment and seniority systems, events that occurred seemingly overnight during the dramatic swing from double-digit economic growth to long-term recession. Emergency restructuring, along with general economic evolution, has entailed "the collapse of the system of transition from youth to adulthood that has functioned in Japan until now. ... Now, there is a need to rebuild a social system that supports individuals under greater burdens while also valuing their independence and responsibility." [16]

The momentous shift from a culture of excessive dependence, now well past its expiration date, to one of individual responsibility is central to this social rebuilding project. Also involved is a progression in national values and mind-set: from the vertical, centralized, and uniform way of thinking that produced the manufacturing-based "Japanese miracle" to the horizontal, decentralized, and diverse arrangements needed in the information age. Detailed prescriptions for national regeneration are the subject of intensely polarized debate, not a bad thing for any democracy, especially since all parties agree the nation has reached a decisive turning point. In this sense, Japan's glass may be considered half full.

Conservatives, as Kingston relates, "argue that stressing ethics in school, encouraging respect for national symbols, and seeking inspiration from Japan's rich traditions and culture can help alleviate the anomie and alienation that plague society." While the conservative critique of the problem has convincing elements,

most of the right's recommendations are unlikely to carry the day among average Japanese, especially youth. Progressives, on the other hand, "tend to focus on recasting society to permit more individuality and self-fulfillment as a means of encouraging people to identify with a community that currently seems unattractive, stifling, and overly demanding of self-sacrifice for reasons that appear unconvincing to increasing numbers of Japanese." [17] Japan Insight, part of the government-affiliated Japan Information Network, provides a surprisingly candid online overview of the wide-ranging social, political, and economic adjustments currently being wrought, with section headings such as "Changes in Self-Image and Individual Fulfillment."

Even more candid, and patiently hopeful in a way evocative of the older Japan still coexisting within the newer, was the January 2000 report of the prime minister's blue-ribbon Commission on Japan's Goals in the Twenty-First Century. The commission's august members called for "fostering the spirit of self-reliance and the spirit of tolerance, neither of which has been given sufficient latitude so far." They went on to issue a bold rallying call: "We are not pessimistic over Japan's future. These are vast potentials within Japan. The main actors are individuals; individuals will change society and the world. From this will emerge a new society and a new Japan. ... It is not realistic to accomplish our ambitious goals in one generation." [18] Similarly ambitious about re-creating Japan, Fukuoka's college students are in more of a hurry.

Endnotes

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