



Exploring Contemporary Japanese Society

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Teaching about contemporary Japan remains a challenge. It is difficult to decide which topics or issues might be most meaningful and useful in precollegiate Japan studies. This *Japan Digest* explores changes in lifestyle, economic restructuring, and technological advancements. Many of these aspects of contemporary society can easily be integrated into a variety of curricular explorations.

Lifestyle Changes

The 90s brought a steady stream of articles in the Japanese press expressing concern over the declining fertility rate. Indeed, announcements were often accompanied by the term *shokku*, or “child shock.” The 1999 birthrate of 1.34 renewed discussion on this issue. Maintenance of current population levels requires a birthrate of 2.08. Since Japan has one of the world’s fastest aging societies, this low birthrate signals a special urgency. Currently the Japanese government is utilizing increased child subsidies and tax incentives to encourage childbearing.

Although the reasons behind the birthrate dip are varied and include the economic slump, one contributing factor appears to be the phenomenon of “parasite singles.” These singles, between the ages of 20 and 34, remain dependents in their parents’ home, even though they are employed. Typically, these singles pay little or no rent, largely avoid cooking and cleaning, and routinely postpone marriage. It is estimated that 10 million Japanese fall into this category. Interestingly, about 40 percent of both male and female singles in the 20 to 34 age category are included in this figure.

Most media coverage of “parasite singles” has focused on women, detailing a lifestyle of expensive clothing, accessories and jewelry, and overseas shopping trips and vacations. It is thought that men tend to save money toward their future independence, and so receive less critical media attention. In addition to travel and shopping, these singles often take classes, especially in conversational English and other special skills.

This “parasite singles” phenomenon is particularly apparent in Tokyo and other large Japanese cities where the high cost of living can make an independent life difficult. Japan is not alone in experiencing this phenomenon; Italy, France, South Korea, and Spain are also familiar with the “parasite singles.” However, Japan has captured media attention with chronicles of salaries spent self-indulgently.

A recent best seller, *The Age of Parasite Singles (Parasaito shinguru no jidai)*, suggests that this trend is not a positive one for Japanese society. The author Masahiro Yamada cautions that these young people are often avoiding the typical daily concerns they would have if they lived alone, with a roommate, or a spouse. Thus, the question of personal growth is an important aspect of this problem.

Additionally, Yamada suggests that there are larger economic implications. For example, the most recent slump in the sales of appliances, might be a repercussion of the “parasite singles” phenomenon. On the other hand, some point out that while singles do not often purchase appliances or homes, they do consume a

wide range of items and services. Many of these singles tend to treat their paychecks as disposable income. As for the future, Yamada argues that this phenomenon is at its peak and will lessen over the next 20 years.

Appetite Issues

Japan continues to be one of the world’s largest consumers of foreign agricultural products. Recently, the Japanese government has expressed concern over increasing food imports and raised the issue of food self-sufficiency, the percentage of food consumed daily that is supplied by domestic production. The most typical way of measuring the food self-sufficiency rate is to base calculations on calories. Various foods are allotted a common caloric measure and the domestic supply ratio is calculated. According to this system, Japan has one of the lowest levels of self-sufficiency, at 41 percent, compared to nations such as the U.S. at 132 percent (with a surplus of food) and Germany at 97 percent.

The Japanese government, hoping to limit Japan’s dependence on food imports, has set a food self-sufficiency goal of 45 percent by the year 2010. The concept of food security, which has given rise to this goal, has both practical and psychological implications in a country like Japan. Underlying the government’s concern over food dependency is the realization that Japan’s food supply can be substantially impacted by unpredictable circumstances such as poor harvests at home and abroad or international political events.

The increasing shift to Western-style eating habits over the past several decades contributes to the decline in self-sufficiency. For example, consumption of meat (primarily imported) has risen while rice consumption continues to decrease. Changes in food consumption are affecting Japanese people in numerous ways. According to Japanese government surveys, Japanese children today are both taller and heavier than their 1950s counterparts. Indeed, they weigh as much as adults from that period. Changing lifestyles and a better diet have, no doubt, had an impact. There is concern, however, about another diet-related development, an increased number of overweight children.

Many Japanese people are choosing Western-style fast food, often high in fat, over more traditional, low-fat choices such as *onigiri* (rice balls). Western-style fast food is often cheaper than traditional foods, and Western food is usually easier to prepare at home than time-consuming Japanese dishes. Rising fat consumption in the Japanese diet and the attendant high rate of chronic diseases, especially cancer, continue to fuel concern.

Japanese dietician Asako Aramaki is concerned that Japan will no longer enjoy the world’s longest life expectancy due to the increasing consumption of Western-style foods. He calls those who rarely use chopsticks and eat foods such as pizza, hamburgers, and fried chicken with their hands “*hashi-nashi zoku*,” or the chopstick-less tribe. He claims that studies show that this group suffers from low blood-sugar and other health

problems, whereas those who use chopsticks tend to be healthier due to a more nutritious diet.

It is important to note that Western-style fast food in Japan is often adapted to suit Japanese tastes. For example, McDonald's menus in Japan boast the Teriyaki Burger and Chicken Tatsuta. Similarly, Domino's reports that a popular pizza topping in Japan is the tuna, scallop, and squid combo. Under the heading of portion control, newly successful Cinnabon offers a mini version of the classic.

Economic Restructuring

For the decade following the collapse of the late 80s bubble economy, Japan has been in an economic slump. As a result, restructuring (*ristora*), continues to take place. Restructuring changes have included job cuts, hiring freezes, mergers, deregulation, and increased foreign investment. In the workplace, wages are no longer based on seniority, but instead on performance.

These changes have impacted the ways in which some Japanese view work, especially youth. For example, *furii-taa* (literally, free person) a term for "slackers," is increasingly used to describe youth who hop from part-time job to part-time job, unwilling to assume the *sarariiman* (salaryman) role. With the erosion of lifetime employment, job-hopping and part-time positions are becoming more popular.

Another economic issue that has become a topic of discussion is the growing gap between rich and poor. Japan has proudly seen itself as an egalitarian country where the vast majority consider themselves to be middle class. However, a Ministry of Labor survey has recently confirmed that the incomes of college graduates aged 40-54 varied more widely in 1998 than in 1993. Many say that the growing gap reflects the new preference for performance-based pay. Some feel that increasing income stratification will disrupt Japan's social harmony and lead to a rise in crime and other social problems.

Buying patterns also appear to be changing as more and more Japanese consumers demand value pricing. Accordingly, some companies are offering high quality at low cost, with some even touting used goods. Discount labels and high quality house brands are now more prevalent in some major department stores. Japan's mom-and-pop stores increasingly seem to be a victim of consumer preference for supermarkets and mega-outlets. Recent statistics reveal that 80 percent of small shops report declining sales. The average shopping arcade housing these small enterprises has lost 44 percent of its customers in the last three years. The Tokyo government is attempting to aid these *shitamachi* or downtown neighborhood shops. Interestingly, one strategy focuses on developing Internet-based businesses for small shops. In a modern-day irony, technology might save traditional shops once disdained as retailing dinosaurs.

Technological Enhancements

In the late 90s, Japan's leadership role in the digital age was being questioned. According to some, Japan's hierarchical business culture ran counter to the more egalitarian, horizontal hi-tech style. The long-standing issue of what would happen to the middle layer of distributors in the face of technological advancements remained a concern. Discussion over whether or not Japan's culture typically fosters the creativity and risk-taking associated with technology entrepreneurship was common. Additionally, there was the Internet usage conundrum. Despite Japanese consumers' fascination with gadgets, PC ownership and

Internet usage was relatively low. Explanations ranged from space problems in homes and difficulties with the English-dominated Internet to the comparatively high cost of Internet access and its attendant telephone call charges.

Until recently, a home phone line could cost as much as \$800.00 just to connect. The cost of owning and using a cell phone, by comparison, was relatively inexpensive. Against this backdrop, Japanese technology once again displayed leadership in miniaturization as it facilitated Internet access through cell phones. Receiving the most attention is NTT DoCoMo's i-mode service, featuring a vast array of mini-Web sites for cell phones. Web site subscriptions, when they are charged, are reasonable. Users are able to access train and airline schedules, weather conditions, recipes, stock prices, e-mail and even a different animated Hello Kitty character daily. This development has leapfrogged standard PC Internet access and propelled consumer appetites for the Internet. The impetus for the enormous popularity of this Internet and cell phone union is often summed up in one word—simplicity.

Convenience stores (*konbiniensu stoa* or *konbini*), are also facilitating Internet access and e-commerce in Japan. In an effort to surmount Japan's continuing reticence to use credit cards, the *konbini* has become the place to pick up and pay for goods ordered online. The ubiquitous nature of *konbini* (it is estimated that their number is growing by 1,000 per year) promotes this unique approach to e-commerce. Additionally, kiosks inside many *konbini* allow customers to shop electronically.

Also of note, Japanese car manufacturers such as Toyota Motor Corporation, Honda Motor Corporation, and Nissan Motor Company are facilitating Internet access through dashboard screens. This access is linked through the cars' satellite navigation systems.

Conclusion

The information in this Japan Digest invites comparison to contemporary developments in the U.S., Europe, and elsewhere. The proliferation of foreign food items in the U.S. has resulted in many changes. For example, some grocery store deli counters now serve sushi. Similarly, technological enhancements in Japan are influencing lifestyle as NTT DoCoMo's i-mode is marketed in Europe and the United States. Numerous other topics can serve as springboards for further investigation and research; the Clearinghouse Web site is a useful starting point, www.indiana.edu/~japan.

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