

Social Issues in Japan: Shikoku, Education, Business

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INTRODUCTION

Japan has a rich cultural heritage and, like all nations, it has its fair share of social issues. Japan is also a highly educated country. However, their education system is different from what exists in the United States. While the differences can offer advantages, there are also a lot of unique social issues that come along with this different system and structure. Furthermore, Japanese business culture is different from Western business culture, as we learned in the lecture. Among other things, we learned that it is typically more hierarchical, group-oriented, and based in socialization. “Live-to-work” is a common theme and value of the business culture in Japan as well, which affects nearly all areas of Japanese life (Alston, 2005, p. 71).

This paper will discuss some social issues that affect Ehime and Kagawa prefectures, how these social issues may fit into a broader national or global context. I will also discuss the social issues, along with the positive aspects, inherent in the Japanese education system, specifically the Juken System. Leading from the education system, I will delve into the social effects of *shushoku katsudo*, the Japanese job hunting system, and how age related salary and the lifetime employment system help to shape this system. Where possible, some possible solutions to these issues will also be discussed.

SHIKOKU: EHIME AND KAGAWA

Shikoku experiences the effects of many nationwide, and sometimes even global, social issues; the issues are often magnified because it is a rural area cut off from the mainland with a heavy connection and reliance on its surrounding ocean. It is the smallest of Japan's four main islands, at 7,262 square miles (18,808 square kilometers), with a population of about 4.18 million. It consists of four prefectures: Kagawa, Tokushima, Ehime, and Kochi (Pradyumna, 2005, p. 151).

The Pearl Industry in Ehime

Miura Bay in Ehime prefecture is an important area for the Japanese pearl industry. The area produces akoya pearls, which are extremely high-quality, and in the 1990s it supplied pearls for 80 percent of the Japanese market and 65 percent of the cultured pearl market in the United States (Pradyumna, 2005, p. 153). However, in 2000, an epidemic killed 70 percent of all akoya oysters in Japan. Multitudes of bankruptcies and suicides were reported among Japanese pearl producers and no area was harder hit than Ehime prefecture. Ehime was the center of Japanese pearl oyster production; 80 percent of all Japanese pearl oyster production took place in its bays before the disease struck (Pradyumna, 2005, p. 153). As are many other industries in Japan, the pearl industry is highly regulated. Producers can cultivate pearls or raise baby oysters, not both. Since the oyster killing epidemic began 15 percent of the licensed pearl cultivators have gone out of business, along with 23 percent of the oyster breeders, a huge blow to the pearl industry in Ehime (Pradyumna, 2005, p. 154).

In an attempt to revitalize and save the Japanese pearl industry and continue to produce high quality pearls, Ehime pearl cultivators are experimenting with using new breeds of oysters, new breeding grounds, and new cultivating techniques for akoya oysters (Pradyumna, 2005, p. 154). However, many fear that this won't be enough, that a virus is not the only cause of the mass death of so many precious akoya oysters. Some believe that even before the epidemic occurred that the akoya oyster had been weakened by overbreeding. Others point to overcrowding and pollution as well. One possible pollutant of contention is the chemicals used by the fish farmers who raise *fugu*, a Japanese blowfish. The fish farmers use these chemicals to kill *fugu* parasites, but even as they help the fish farming *fugu* industry, these chemicals could be seriously harming the delicate akoya oysters the pearl industry relies on (Pradyumna, 2005, p.

154). In this case, a solution becomes difficult, as both industries support the livelihoods of Japanese people and contribute to the Japanese economy. However, it is Global Warming that is truly scaring most of the pearl industry. Ehime's waters have been 1.5 degrees warmer than average over the past 15 years, and warmer waters make the akoya and other shellfish more susceptible to disease (Pradyumna, 2005, p. 154).

It's clear that the oyster issue is likely affected by outside sources. Ehime alone cannot change global warming and ocean pollution, those are worldwide social issues. However, local people can always do their part by helping to clean their oceans and promoting environmental awareness and energy efficient activities. As a country, Japan can do this nationwide and attempt to lead the world in environment reform. Investment in clean energy, like nuclear, solar, wind, and geothermal, can help clean the environment. Also, investing in and promoting the use of electric or hybrid cars can help clear pollution. In the short term, the Japanese government can also subsidize its pearl industry, so that pearl cultivators can continue experimenting with ways to improve without fear of going bankrupt.

Declining Population in Kagawa

As a rural area, Shikoku will be particularly hard hit by Japan's aging population and the flight of the youth to more urban areas. Kagawa, in particular, will suffer. By 2040, it's expected that Kagawa's population will drop by 200,000 people, from 995,000 to 773,000. In Kagawa too, in recent local elections for prefectural assembly nearly two thirds of candidates ran uncontested (Johnston, 2015). While this may seem like just good luck for those candidates running, it reflects a broader trend in the rest of Japan as well, and is a sign of fewer voters and an aging and declining population. It's inevitable that voter district mergers will be happening in the future,

and these will raise questions about local democracy, autonomy, and tax base, and perhaps signal a restructuring of Japan itself (Johnston, 2015).

The aging population and flight of youth is not an issue that only affects Kagawa, though Kagawa is one of the prefectures that are particularly affected. Japan's population in 2014 was about 127 million, but it is expected to drop down to 107 million by 2040, and then 97 million by 2050 (Johnston, 2015). Though it's difficult to say what exactly will help, I believe that Japan should begin letting more immigrants into their country to find work. Japan needs a population of workers in order to keep up its economy, and there are plenty of foreigners who would gladly do many of the jobs Japanese people don't want to do. In order to attempt to preserve more culture and population in rural prefectures, I think attempting to make rural areas more attractive to young people could help. If Japan invested in Universities, modern and cheap housing, better public transportation, and better tourism advertisement for rural prefectures, more young people might be willing to stay.

Traffic Safety in Kagawa

Another issue Kagawa is facing is traffic safety. In Kagawa, cars have risen above railways as the main form of transportation through the region, becoming a major part of life. However, problems associated with increased automobile usage are therefore on the rise. Pollution and concerns about global warming come up, along with increased traffic congestion and traffic accidents. Unfortunately, the number of traffic accidents continues to rise in Japan, with a high percentage involving pedestrians and senior citizens. Kagawa is ranked as the worst prefecture for number of accidents per 100,000 people and per 10,000 vehicles (Ihara, 2010). I think, in order to combat this issue, traffic safety needs to be taught in all public and private schools in Kagawa. If children learn from a young age how to be safe in and around vehicles, as

well as polite road rules, accidents should go down. Free classes for the public should also be available, and those who receive traffic tickets should be required to attend.

THE JUKEN SYSTEM

In the lecture, we learned that the Juken System is an examination based system. Examinations are used to determine entrance to schools, typically for university and high school, though there are some cases of entrance exams for top tier elementary and junior high schools. In the lecture, we did learn that there are a few other methods to enter schools, passing entrance exams is by far the most common method; most students who desire to attend university, or even a prestigious high school, must pass examinations.

As we learned in the lecture, only attending school is not enough to pass entrance examinations. Students must hire a private tutor or, more commonly, go to cram school, which are privately run schools which focus mainly on helping students pass their entrance exams. Tutors and cram schools are expensive, as noted in the lecture, and if parents want their children to go to university they must pay for them. This creates a situation where only those families with enough money to fund the study for entrance exams can afford to send their children to university. Since university is required to obtain many high-paying jobs, those from poorer families have less upward mobility in society, which solidifies the gap between classes.

Furthermore, as we learned in the lecture, starting in primary school, or even before in the case of those children whose parents want them to prestigious primary schools, children spend a large amount of time outside of school studying. They don't get a break until they pass their university entrance exams, which leads to losing a lot of their childhood time to academics rather than spending it socializing, having fun, and discovering their true interests.

The Juken System can also have unfortunate effects on a student's knowledge and desire to learn. In this examination focused system, only rote memorization of facts is practiced in order to increase the chance of passing the entrance examinations, which focus highly on facts. For example, English education in Japan typically does not develop practical knowledge of the language because it focuses mainly on memorization of grammar and translation. Listening and speaking are not tested on entrance examinations, so they are not focused on, despite the fact that listening and speaking are necessary to actually use English in a practical setting (Rubrecht, 2004, p. 104). As we learned in the lecture, by the time many students reach university they are burnt out and don't care about learning because previously they were forced to intensely study material that was meaningless in the long run and had no practical value.

Examination Hell: Stress Out, Drop Out

The constant studying for these exams, which can determine the course of your life, can be hellish, as we discussed in class. Unfortunately, some perfectly intelligent people cannot handle the examination stress very well. Test anxiety can be a huge issue for some people; it may prevent them from progressing well in Japanese society. As we discussed in class, not doing well on exams and/or not being able to handle the stress of studying does not necessarily mean that these people are unintelligent. These people may even be able to handle other types of stress very well; the exams are not necessarily a good indicator of who can perform under stress at various jobs, counter to the beliefs of successful Japanese professionals we heard in the lecture. Furthermore, as we also discussed in the lecture, examinations by themselves can't reveal all human talents that a person may have. For example, the examinations do not test a person's interpersonal skills, which can be invaluable in many careers for which you need a university degree.

As we learned in the lecture, the “hensachi” examination based ranking system, which creates a clear distinction in academic level between students, can be a cause of bullying, as those with higher scores ridicule and demean those with lower scores. Bullying can have serious consequences. In 2004, 93 primary and junior high school students committed suicide, a 57% increase from the previous year. Furthermore, 225 senior high school students committed suicide, a 29.3% increase from the previous year (Shirai, 2004, p. 108). The stress from having examinations that determine the course of your whole life and from bullying due to the ranking system likely contributed to these suicide rates.

This stress and bullying can also cause hikikomori. Hikikomori is a term that means “social withdrawal,” when people stay at home without going to school or work for a period of six months or more, not due to a physical problem. When somebody is hikikomori, they also withdraw from all interpersonal relationships except family (Shirai, 2004, p. 112). The average age of onset for hikikomori is 15.5 years old and, according to a study of 80 patients, 68.8% said their first cause of withdrawal was “School Avoidance” (Shirai, 2004, p. 113). The typically young age of onset, right in the middle of high school, and the high rate of “School Avoidance” as the initial cause indicate that school related stresses, like the intense studying for examinations that can completely change your life course and bullying, are likely a large cause of the hikikomori population in Japan.

Positive Aspects in Japanese Society

There are some benefits to the Juken System. As we learned in the lecture, the entrance examinations are very fair. There is one chance per year and everybody takes the exam under the same conditions. Entrance exams also provide students with a clearly defined goal to reach with clear steps to take to get there, providing students motivation to do well in school (Rubrecht,

2004, p. 105). Also, as we discussed in class, the “hensachi” ranking system is one of the easiest ways to classify people into different academic levels. Though the system may not test all talents, and those with test anxiety have a hard time, it is a relatively okay indicator of academic level and other talents are difficult and time consuming to test for anyway. As noted in the lecture, there is also a large economic benefit from the system, as many people have jobs involving cram schools. This cram school structure also provides classes on job hunting, which provides an obvious and easy place for students to go to learn how to act in the professional world.

SHUSHOKU KATSUDO

In Western countries, people can enter and leave the job market at many various times, however, it's different in Japan. The only chance for job hunting in the business world occurs typically only once in a lifetime, during the last two years of their time in University (Mathews, 2012, p. 121). If students pass this crucial time when they are *shin-sotsu*, new graduates, they can probably never enter the business world. This one period of time determines whether or not somebody can have life-style they want or enter their dream profession (Mathews, 2012, p. 122).

During this time, as discussed in the lecture, students are subjected to an enormous amount of stress. As we discussed, companies prefer hand-written resumes, which take a lot of time to make. Any small thing can cause people to fail. This long process takes students away from their studies, and many times students pay money to learn every exact detail they need to pass interviews, as we learned in the lecture. This only helps to solidify the current social issues inherent in the education system in Japan (Mathews, 2012, p. 123).

Salary by Age and the Life-Time Employment System

The reason that *shushoku katsudo* is a once in a lifetime chance for employment is related to the salary and raise system in Japan, as we learned in the lecture. Unlike Western countries, salary is based on age, not merit. As people get older, their salary increases. As we discussed in class, this creates a situation where hiring people who are older is undesirable; hiring young new college graduates is the best option for companies. Furthermore, because Japanese companies fully train all their new employees and expect to be able to place them in any division, the companies prefer to hire generalists rather than specialists, as we learned in the lecture. This means, as discussed in class, that obtaining a graduate degree is generally a detriment in most fields, as it means that a person is older when they graduate. Only for entering academia or jobs related specifically to IT or science is obtaining a graduate degree worth it. It's an unfortunate situation that encourages students not to continue their education to gain more skills and further learning, which could make them better workers and assets to the economy in the long run.

Also, this salary by age system means that, in general, people can never change their jobs, as we learned in the lecture. If they quit, they will be too old to hire elsewhere. A few people do have a chance to get a new job mid-career, as mentioned in class, but this only applies to people with really good skills and specialties.

Salary by age used to work better in the past, because of the lifetime employment system common in Japan. Companies used to guarantee that employees would never be fired or laid-off until they retired, but since the economy started to go down-hill in the 1990s, this is no longer a guarantee (Mathews, 2012, p. 123). People can be laid-off by companies in the middle of their careers, and in this situation, it is also very difficult for these people to find new jobs because of their age salary requirements. As we learned in the lecture, unlike Western countries, Japanese

people are trained within a company and build their careers within a company; they are valuable to that specific company. Other companies may not want to spend the money training these older employees in a new company system, as discussed in class. Because of this, Japanese workers no longer have trust in their companies, expecting that they could be let go at any time, which can create a very stressful environment (Mathews, 2012, p. 123).

You're Hired! What Happens Now?

As we learned in the lecture, those who complete their job hunting successfully, even if they are hired by the company they wanted, may still not get the job they desired. This is because employees for Japanese companies typically do not have a choice of which division in the company they work for, as they must apply to companies as a whole, and not specific positions. As we learned in the lecture, even if you are assigned a job you want at first, you can be reassigned any year to a different division. This sort of environment, combined with the early age at which one must decide what kind of company they wish to work for, can contribute to very low job satisfaction rates (Mathews, 2012, p. 123). In a survey conducted in 1992, only 17% of Japanese middle-managers were "very satisfied with their work," which is very low in comparison with other countries (Alston, 2005, p. 72).

Also, work is almost a religious thing in Japan (Alston, 2005, p. 71). As we learned in the lecture, much more than just working hours are expected of Japanese employees, they must be willing to stay long hours with their bosses and socialize outside of work with coworkers and clients constantly. Socialization is key to the Japanese work place (Alston, 2005, p. 105), and as we learned in the lecture, if you do not participate in these activities, you don't have a chance for promotion. This means that Japanese employees are typically not able to spend much time with their families.

You're NOT Hired! What Happens Now?

As mentioned in the lecture, if a student fails at securing a job before graduation, they will sometimes extend their time in university for another year in an attempt to still qualify for *shin-sotsu* status. However, as we also learned in class, this doesn't always work. Many companies will look at how many years somebody has spent in university; if they do not have a good reason for an extra year of university, like studying abroad, for example, then they won't be hired. So, even with this extra effort and money, people can still easily fail at *shushoku katsudo*.

As we discussed in class, those people who fail at *shushoku katsudo*, or decide to forsake the difficult *shushoku katsudo* system, sometimes become Freeter or NEET. Freeters are people who work low-skilled part-time jobs and NEET are people "Not in Education, Employment, or Training" (Inui, 2007, p. 76). As we discussed in class, Freeters have an uncertain future regarding their income and retirement, and NEET are a drain on the economy of Japan, as they typically survive on welfare services.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, social issues aren't always confined to just one area and are intertwined with how society runs, making it difficult to fix problems. For example, problems in specific places often come from problems that are affecting the region, which may be affected by the nation, which may be affected by the world. Shikoku is a perfect example of global and national problems, such as global warming and an aging population, creating issues on a local scale.

The Juken system is an example of social issues that are intertwined with positives and negatives in Japanese society. The question is, can anything be changed and does it need to be changed? I would argue that change is necessary due to the long list of social issues tied up with the system. However, as we learned from the lecture, there is unlikely to be large change, as the

system is too embedded in the Japanese economy and social expectations. One possibility that allows for working within the system is to make the entrance exams more practical focused, which would shift how students studied for them. For example, including listening and speaking on the English portions of the exams would create greater focus on teaching and studying those aspects. In the end, despite the disadvantages, the Juken System is in Japan to stay for a long while yet because of how deeply it is embedded in Japanese society.

Yet another set of social customs that are embedded in Japanese society which create a myriad of difficult to solve issues is Japanese business culture and the system that goes with it. There are some good qualities that exist in the Japanese business culture and system. For example, as we discussed in class, people can expect to get better wages as they get older and those participating in *shushoku katsudo* only have to compete with those their own age with similar skill levels. However, the salary by age system creates many issues that shape the current *shushoku katsudo* system. This salary system must change in order to create a more competitive system for Japanese workers so they can have more than once chance to obtain a career in their lifetimes. This is especially true because lifetime employment is not guaranteed anymore (Mathews, 2012, p. 123). However, the changes will also force companies to completely restructure their hiring practices and probably their training practices as well. This would be a huge change for the Japanese education and business systems that would be very difficult to implement.

While it is easy to come up with many ideas on how to fix social issues in theory, it is much more difficult to put many of these ideas into successful practice. Politics, social nuances, culture, and economy – all of these have to be considered when implementing solutions, as situations that cause social issues have many effects beyond the obvious, including positive

effects. However, it is still worth it to try and improve situations, it is simply necessary to proceed carefully and with forethought.

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