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Social Issues in Japan

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**INTRODUCTION**

Japan as a country, like any other country, has social issues that it deals with. In this paper, I will discuss three areas of Japanese society that deal with social issues. In Fukuoka, Japan, there are many opportunities for tourism, both domestic and foreign. Part of the problem with increased tourism and larger cities, is that there is a slightly higher crime rate because of it. I will talk about the social issues specific to Fukuoka, as well as giving my opinion on what can be done to remedy those issues.

For Japan, education is the most important thing in your formative years. It is what young people devote themselves to and, as such, a business has been made out of it. I will talk about how the after school tutoring business in Japan works and how it goes about teaching students. There is also the factor of language learning, namely English, that Japanese students must go through. Learning English is important, but students aren’t truly being taught how to speak and use the language. I will speak about Japanese education and how students are being taught to take a test rather than taught to understand the contents.

In the world of Japanese job hunting, everything happens in a short window of time. The end of your college life is a whirlwind of job applications, interviews, and stress. Even after that, there will still be many difficulties that comes from working at a company. All of the social rules that have to be followed, never having control over what position you end up with, never mind if you are a woman and want to get married and have children. Through all of the lectures and studying that I have done, I’m going to discuss the issues in the Japanese business world.

**FUKUOKA**

Fukuoka lies in the northern shore of the Kyushu island of Japan. It is a city known for beaches, ancient temples, Fukuoka castle, and Tonkotsu ramen. A modern city that has elements of history blended into it, it is a city that people enjoy travelling to and living in. It is a port city that has been a hub for culture; culture from other countries and it’s own. Every year, Fukuoka gets more than 880,000 tourists flying in and visiting the city. It is the sixth largest city in all of Japan, but it is not without it’s own problems.

**SOCIAL ISSUES**

When there are large settlements of people, cities that grow large and prosperous, they also bring problems with them. According to a comparison of crime rates in all of Japan’s major cities, Fukuoka is the fourth on the list for highest crime rates. For a country like Japan, that prides itself on being a safe and relatively crime free country, this is a point of shame. The only cities that have a higher crime rate are are Nagoya, Osaka, and Sakai. Osaka and Sakai are a part of Osaka prefecture, which has the US Naval base that contributes towards its crime rate, making it that much worse that Fukuoka has a high crime rate. Fukuoka has “23,399 crimes reported in 2013” (City Yokohama, 2014). Most of the crimes are non-violent, according to the OSAC, “financial crimes that include the use of stolen credit cards and credit card numbers occur on a regular basis” (OSAC, Japan Crime and Safety Report, 2015) while violent crimes are “by U.S. standards, violent crime is extremely rare in Fukuoka” (OSAC, 2015). Thankfully, the issue of crime is a fairly prefecture-specific problem. Since most of Japan has such low crime rates, Fukuoka stands out, but when compared to the rest of the world, it is a fairly safe place.

Another big issue that is affecting Fukuoka is the problem of an aging population. While the city is still a hub for activity, the increasing number of elderly means that there is space and personnel need to to help take care of them, especially if their families can not. According to the textbook, “Japan’s population is aging rapidly” (Karan, Japan in the 21st Century: Environment, Economy, and Society, 2005), and Fukuoka is not exempted from this. It is not a prefecture-specific issue however. For all of Japan, “the rapid aging of the population” also “has implications for the future structure of the workforce” (Karan, 2005). With so many people aging, the younger generations are going to wind up taking care of their grandparents and parents. The aging generations are a nation-wide social issue, with people living longer they become more and more dependent as time goes by. When you compare the world “in terms of the aging of its population, Japan is now at the top of the world” (Ogawa, Aging Population in Asia: Experience of Japan, 2007). This means that, in all of the world’s populations, the “aged population is outnumbering the child population” (Ogawa, Aging Population in Asia: Experience of Japan, 2007). Japan’s low birth-rate is mostly caused by the low birth rate, so in order to try and fix the issue, the low birth rate would need to be dealt with.

**Solving the Issues**

The issue of the crime rate in Fukuoka isn’t one that can be solved very quickly or easily. Part of the problem that causes crime in a city is that fact that there is a significant amount of tourism. With Fukuoka being a hub for trade and tourism, it means that it has a lot of different people coming through the city, people who aren’t always paying attention.

Another factor that contributes to that is the night life of the city. Its really easy for someone out at a bar or club to get their credit card stolen. To tourists who are visiting Japan, they always think about how much safer it is, and can let their guard down. One way that might help people that go to bars or clubs would be to have signs up at the front, reminding people to be careful and mindful while they are at that establishment. The signs would need to be in multiple major languages, so that anyone from any country would be able to read it. Just like in any country, people need to be more careful and aware when they decide to go out drinking. People having their drinks spiked in order to be robbed is one of the most common crimes that occur in association with bars and nightclubs. A sign reminding people to not leave their drinks unattended and to also be wary of accepting drinks from others might also help improve the chances of potential victims. Sometimes, just having someone point it out to you can help you be more careful. That is one way that I think the city would benefit from, in order to lower crime rates a little. Another option that might be put in place is better cyber-security for places where tourists use their credit cards often. Another option might be that big tourist centers require payment in cash, rather than accepting card, which would make it harder for criminals to steal credit card numbers.

As for the issue of the aging-population, there aren’t many ways in which it can be dealt with. There isn’t a lot of incentive for people to have children, and a lack of funds or space for them is also part of the problem. If there were some kinds of incentives to having children, like tax breaks that parents in the US receive and ways to make it easier financially for parents to have more children would be good. Another option would be to make it easier for people to obtain larger homes when they have a child. Part of the issue if that affording a two-bedroom home might be difficult, but if there were ways to make it costs less if you had a child and that was the reason for needing more space, it would benefit families greatly. There could also be more rest homes or other facilities that assist elderly people in their everyday lives. Places that the elderly might be able to go to during the day where they can stay entertained or do things that make them feel needed and useful. Community centers that offer classes for the elderly or that could be taught by the elderly might be a good idea for helping to keep them involved in the world and the area they live in. The best way to deal with the problem of the aging population that I can think of is to get the people affected involved, to try and work together and help one another to solve the issues.

**JAPANESE EDUCATION**

In Japan, from elementary school on through high school, children’s lives are focused on school and learning. In the lecture, it said that “many students from elementary to high schools go to study at cram/preparatory school …to pass entrance exams” (Takahashi, Lecture 311, April 6). This means that children all through their youth, have to focus all of themselves into studying, doing well, and getting into a good school. One this that it seems to be lacking, however, is actually making sure that students have a working understanding of what they are being taught. Jukku are after school learning programs that focus on teaching children how to take tests and do well on them, rather than teaching to understand the materials. The Japanese people are overly concerned with test results, and the only way to do well in life is to come out of a school that has a good reputation. From elementary school age onwards, children are focused on testing well and getting into a better school, without focusing on actually learning and understanding the things that they are being taught, especially English.

**Jukku**

There is a gigantic cram school market in Japan. Children as young as 4 years old can go to a cram school, according to the video we watched in class. There is a huge emphasis on getting into a “good school” in Japan. Any school that is considered “good” will have a difficult entrance exam. This is why there is a Jukku system. For elementary schools that are considered prestigious, there is something called an Ojuken. According to the lecture from April 6th, Ojuken are interviews and tests for the parents and kids, where the child must take a test to get in and the parents must be interviewed and deemed acceptable by the school. Getting into a good school means a better future. When you get to junior high and high school level, most students are attending Jukku. According to one article that we read for class, “66% of high school students attend Jukku” (Rubrecht, Research and teaching notes, 2016), that means that the majority of students need extra and actively are seeking out extra help in order to simply pass a university entrance exam. Jukku are such a large part of schooling that there are even schools for students who were not able to pass the entrance exam of the university of their choice and must go back again in a year to try over. These schools are called yobiko, students have to there to get supplemental learning in order to pass the university entrance exams. This further shows that “passing the entrance exam to the college/university of your choice becomes the [life] purpose of all high school students” (Takahashi, April 11 lecture). These Jukku are also used for teaching English, but the testing kind of English, not the kinds that students would actually feel comfortable using in a conversation with a foreigner.

**English language learning**

LearningEnglish is taught in school from early on. However, “students are mostly engaged in grammar and translation instruction” (Rubrecht, Research and teaching notes, 2016), which means that they are not actually learning how to use English; they are simply being taught to deal with English test questions. A lot of Japanese students understanding of English is just from rote memorization, according to the same article. From my discussions with Japanese students, it truly seems that they do not feel like they actually learned English, even though they studied it for many years. It is required for Japanese students from as early as elementary school to start learning a foreign language, namely English. However, the sad fact is that “many Japanese English teachers do not have fluency in English” (Takahashi, April 6 lecture), meaning that the students are unable to fully understand the material that they are being taught, because the teachers themselves to don’t fully understand. Programs like JET work towards getting native English speakers helping to supplement the learning of students, but it is an effort that sometimes is only able to make small improvements. Without the school system being changed; the way that classes are taught and the way the tests are given, there is only so much work the programs like JET can do to further the education of school children. Unless a student wants to get a job that would require them to have an actual understanding of English, most students wont really work on learning it once they reach university. The only benefit that knowing English seems to present is the possibility of getting a better position.

**Teaching for the Test**

Teaching styles in Japan are comprised mostly of teachers “[lecturing] students without involving any interaction” (Sugihashi, Culture shock and adjustment, 2016), the students are expected to just sit quietly and listen to the teacher lecture. The article that we read talked about how teachers don’t give students questions to think about or time to discuss; they don’t actively involve them in class (Sugihashi, 2016). Some types of information simply have to be memorized, like math formulas and history dates, but things like learning another language need more than that. If students are learning English, but are not taught how to actually use it and speak it, then they only end up with a cursory ability with that language. In my experience, being pushed to use a foreign language, to speak it and listen to it, really helps to improve a student’s understanding and ability in their target language. Another issue that I find with teaching with tests specifically in mind, is that once the test is past the information is easily forgotten. According to the lecture, many students who make it into a university end up being mostly unable to speak English in their English classes. Their level of actual understanding is such that students end up feeling as though all of the time and effort that they put into studying is a waste, and they lose interest in studying anymore. When a high school student takes and entrance exam for a university, there are always English parts of the exam. However, the exams always “neglect the foreign language skill of listening” (Rubrecht, Research and teaching notes, 2016), further emphasizing that competency in communicating and comprehending the actual spoken language is not really the goal. By teaching student solely for the purpose of taking a test well, the lose the importance of the information they are trying to teach.

Overall, the style of teaching that the way that tests are taken needs to change. The society is so focused on the brand names of colleges and schools in general, with out focusing on how well they actually teach information.

**THE GREAT RACE: GETTING A JOB**

In the lecture, we learned that most of a Japanese University student’s senior life is spent on job hunting. For Japanese students, “lifetime employment” (Mathews, 2012) is the end goal of their job hunting. It’s very difficult to get a job once you are past your graduation, and some students will even delay graduating in order to gain more time to find a job. Everyone hectically struggles for a year or more to make it through the grueling and expensive process of finding a gob. There are even tutoring places to teach students the proper etiquette for interviews.

**Job Hunting in Japan**

In the lecture, we talked about how, when filling out applications for different businesses, writing them out by hand gives a better impression to employers. This sounds good in theory, but that means writing out at least 60 applications by hand, all within a few months. I also learned in the lecture that there are different levels of importance to the companies you apply for, almost like when you apply to college. They have a rank from A to D, which means that students have to have back ups in case they don't get into they company that they wanted to. Each company that you apply to requires an application and a photo of yourself. Not any kind of photo though; depending on what type of company you are applying for, you need to have a different expression on your face. The way you style your hair and the type of outfit you wear can determine if your interview goes well, so having the right interview clothing is also a major expense that students have to deal with. In interviews, some of them even go so far as to look through the contents of you bag; something that would otherwise be a huge invasion of privacy and personal space in other countries. You also have to take different kinds of tests for some companies, as well as going through multiple different kinds of interviews. Some interviews are group ones, some of them are with the people who would be your bosses should you get hired. Different types of businesses have a differing number of interviews as well. I also learned in the lecture that different companies can be giving their interviews on the same day, making the students have to choose which interview to go to and which to pass up. If a student passes up and interview, their application process with that company is terminated; there is usually no chance of changing the interview date. This sounds incredibly stressful, and the result of this stress is sometimes Hikikomori, NEET, or FREETERs. The process of getting a job is hectic and difficult, but even after they manage to pass the tests, clear the 8-10 interviews, and finally get a job offer, their struggles don't end there.

**DIFFICULTIES IN THE WORKPLACE**

Getting into a company is a trying experience, and it is usually only the start of a young worker’s difficulties. After going through months of training and learning how to do their jobs (that going to University doesn’t even cover), most newcomers are delegated to basic tasks. In the lecture we learned about how, for new workers, you have no say in what job you actually get, nor what division you are put in. They are expected to put in long hours at work, and to fail to do so is considered a “lack of will and loyalty to the group” (Alston, 2005), meaning that if someone were to arrive on time and leave on time they would be looked down on in the company. This seems incredibly nonsensical, the idea that in order to do well you must become a workaholic. The Japanese work ethic is so focused on the group, to the point that individuals can’t be praised for their work openly (Alston, 2005). There is a phrase in Japanese that translates out to “The raised nail gets hammered down” (Alston, 2005) meaning that individuality and standing out is discouraged. The Japanese view of the company is like a family almost, to the point where the continuation of the company is more important than anything else, including profit (Alston, 2005)

**Problems for Women**

Women in the workplace are never really paid attention to, they are “outside the hierarchy” (Mathews, 2012). In the lecture, I learned that it is expected for women to not be in the workplace for very long, to the point where very few women ever get into high ranking positions in the company that they work in. Most young women who enter the workforce do not see their job as what they are going to do for the rest of their life (Mathews, 2012).

I learned in the lecture that there is this expectation that, once a woman gets married, it will not be long until she starts to have children, which will lead to her leaving her job. In japan, there is about three months of paternity leave allowed to company workers, for both men and women. However, because taking time off is so frowned upon in Japanese society, most parents do not (in the case of the fathers) take time off or, in the mothers’ case, do not take he full time off. There is such a stigma on taking time off from work that even taking maternity leave is frowned upon. The expectation is that women will quit their jobs to have a baby and then simply go on to being a housewife, who maybe will do part-time work during the day once her child is older and busy with school, and be home in time to make dinner. This idea horrified me, the idea that once a woman tells her boss that she is pregnant, they ask when she will be leaving the company. Even if a woman does manage to keep her job and continue working after having a child, if she took her full maternity leave the chances of her being able to gain a better job in the future becomes almost non-existent. The idea being that she would never be able to be fully devoted to her work because of her status as a mother. If a woman wants to have a career, she is expected to choose between having a child and her job. I learned in the lecture that there are even times when the woman doesn't want to quit, but her husband insists that she do so once pregnant. This idea that women can’t work and be a mother at the same time seems ridiculous, but in Japan it is normal.

**CONCLUSION**

Japan is a developed country, but it is not without it’s overall issues and, it is important to understand these issues in order to fix them. Tourism is quickly becoming a staple to the Japanese economy and all of the issues that come with it need to be deals with. The aging population is an issue for Japan as a whole, and working to incentivize youths to have children and programs to help the elderly would go a long way towards helping to solve those issues. The Japanese educational system as well has issues, and a large overhaul would be necessary in order to change the system that is currently in place. The heavy emphasis on students to do nothing but take tests and trying to get into better schools takes its toll on actual learning. Learning English that is only useful for taking a university entrance exam is not actually being able to use of speak that language. There would need to be a shift in values, and more stress placed on actual understanding in order to change the system. From the time you are graduating from college, you need to have a job lined up that you are going to have to sign your life away to. After dealing with the grueling process of finding a job, you must then work crappy jobs while waiting till you are older and get get a better position. If you’re a woman, you are waiting until you are pregnant and then are expected to give up your job and devote yourself to child rearing. The way that Japanese company work is set up seems a painful and unfulfilling. The social issues that Japan deals with aren’t exactly country specific. But how they face and deal with those issues is solely up to them.

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