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Multicultural Education

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Introduction

This is a massive topic, particularly in the context of immigration/migration. One can see pre-war expansionist policies, into Korea and Manchuria, as well as the early ventures into Hokkaido and the other northern islands, as being somewhat multicultural if only in the form of mandatory assimilation (Kayano 1994; Kim 1998). Post-war Japan, with its reaction against the war and emphasis on rebuilding Japan can be seen as much less multicultural in its outlook. The taking away of citizenship (Kashiwazaki 2000) and ongoing discrimination of what has become a resident Korean population (Inokuchi 2000; Aoki 2000; Hester 2000) is an example. The peaking of young Japanese going overseas for tertiary education about ten years ago (Wong 2007) and the subsequent decline suggest another “retrenching” of a monocultural approach specifically to education.

Of course, various interpretations of comments from the recent Prime Minister and Minister of Education would also suggest an increased “monoculturalism.” This trend is reinforced by various ideological positions equating “patriotism” with the same view of Japan as monocultural and monolingual. This view of Japan appears to be based on a mythic idea of a highly homogeneous past stretching back into the mists of time. Speaking of the need for something called “holistic patriotic education”, one writer reinforced the idea of Japanese being “one people separate from other people”:

Thus the child makes new discoveries. Contemporary Japanese are distant relatives who share the same ancestors. In any given period of Japanese history, the child discovers that those ancestors had constructed and paved new paths to walk upon. History is a constant relay of culture and tradition, and the child finds himself at the receiving end of this continuous process. This thought take him to his network of ancestors, and to the fact that he would never have existed, if there had been a single missing ancestor. (Fujioka 2007)

Aside from suggesting that there is a predetermined path to reproduction, this quote suggests all Japanese children are directly descended only from “pure” Japanese, no other ethnicity or nationality is involved ... ever ... in Japanese history. In fact, in the whole article, there are no other peoples mentioned except Americans, and then only in a negative context of damaging Japanese education.

... at the order of the occupation forces, the Diet ... passed a resolution to annul the Imperial Rescript on Education, resulting in the hollowing out of the fundamental principles of Japanese education (Fujioka 2007)

Obviously, this writer does not represent all, or even very much, of Japanese educational thought but he does represent a very strong strain of thought that sees Japan as being somehow isolated from the rest of the world and that this is something to be celebrated and maintained.

Concepts of Multicultural: Setting the Stage

It would not be useful to get bogged down in an argument about multicultural versus homogeneous but some discussion is probably necessary, just to set the stage. A recent thread in H-Japan had a very interesting article by Chris Burgess of Tsuda University and some very pertinent commentaries by various other people. Peter Cave of the University of Hong Kong had an extremely useful question asking if there was a specific percentage of “other” cultures (other than the majority cultural group) at which point a society would be considered multicultural. He asked if it was 1 percent, 3 percent, 5 percent, 10 percent, 20 percent that constitutes a “multicultural” society. This is a critical point since everyone agrees that there is considerable cultural and social variation in Japan. The point is how much social variation, and of what, constitutes multicultural and how is this viewed.

As a cultural anthropologist, my favorite examples of social or cultural variation are the range of dialectal variation and the many, many varieties of salted pickles, *tsukemono*, that grace Japanese railroad station gift shops. I will return to the dialectal variation point later but the point here is what does one, reasonably, call this variation. Japan has always had multiple regional “cultures”, documented by scholars, tour operators, and various regional agencies for years. Further, it is likely that the past had more variation than the present, particularly in areas such as dialectal variation.

However, it somewhat depends on how one views the concept of “multicultural”. One definition of “multicultural” is simply “many cultures” or “many subcultures” however one wishes to define “culture”. Thus, immigrant societies such as the United States and Canada are “very” multicultural while non-immigrant cultures, such as Albania and South Korea are not multicultural at all (cf. Sugimoto 1997 among many others). Of course, even in “immigrant” societies, there may be considerable variation in how multicultural various parts of the societies are. New York City, San Francisco and Vancouver are all very multicultural. In fact, much of their fame as tourist destinations comes from multicultural characteristics. Other areas, where particular immigrant groups concentrated or indigenous populations were not replaced, are far, far less multicultural. Nunavut, for example, would be considered less multicultural than Vancouver.

Another view of multiculturalism sees it in terms of lack of assimilation. Locations with different cultural groups who are not assimilated and do not wish to assimilate are, in this view, considered multicultural. Assimilated or assimilating cultural groups would not be considered multicultural. The difficulty here is how one views, or defines,

assimilation. Are first-generation Mexican-Americans who have not learned English more “multicultural” than their second generation children who are bilingual.

There is, however, a necessary point that must be raised in terms of Japan. Many authors (Kobayashi 1991; Hirasawa 1991; Willis 2006) argue that Japan’s major and sometimes only response, educationally, to the challenge of people from other cultures has been some form of assimilation, either effectively because there are no other choices or forced. The US example, sometimes referred to in the past as a “melting pot” and now more often called a “tossed salad” is a good example of partial assimilation but also, at least in some cases, the maintenance of an ethnic identity.

Moving specifically to Japan, there has been a recent flurry of comments on a thread on the H-Japan net based on an article by Chris Burgess (2004). Burgess makes quite an extended and elegant argument that there are various mechanisms “that function to maintain the idea of a unique, homogeneous Japanese (national) identity” (2004: 1) hidden, in effect, in the language of internationalization and cultural borrowing. Specifically, he notes four contemporary terms—*kokusaika*, *ibunka*, *kyōsei* and *tabunka*—that form the vocabulary of the mechanism for maintaining this identity even though the English translations of these terms would suggest the opposite (they can be glossed as “international”, “cross-cultural”, “sharing culture” and “multi-cultural” respectively). The H-Japan thread is extremely interesting with many insightful comments and relatively little bickering. One lesson that can be drawn from the discussion is that the concept of “multiculturalism”, as it is applied to Japan, is an extremely complex one.

For me, one example of this is the relative absence of the term “pluralism” in the discussion. While many of the contributors talk about what is, in effect, social variation and distinctions are drawn (and re-drawn) between social variation and multiculturalism, the idea of multiple co-existing cultural identities seems to be less applicable ... or at least less applied ... to Japan. This is in spite of substantial discussion of variable subcultures in Japan itself and, following Willis’ (2006) point, gender given the differences between genders in Japan.

Global Context

All of this discussion, of course, takes place in a global context where the educational systems of various countries are increasingly in close contact, often have students going back and forth (either as exchange students or with their parents, as migrants or temporary residents), and are often in competition. This context brings differences in approaches and outcomes into a sharper focus than might have been previously the case. In the case of Japan, attention from outside, in particular, has certainly raised questions about education, and other social issues, concerning both indigenous minorities—Ainu, Zainichi Koreans, Burakumin, women—and “new minorities”—returnees (Japanese children who have lived overseas for an extended period of time), permanent “foreign” residents,

naturalized citizens and temporary foreign residents.

This analysis will make no attempt to try to cover the entire spectrum of even just educational concerns relating to multiculturalism. Rather, two very different components of the Japanese educational system will be discussed to try to describe and explain certain aspects of multicultural (or non-multicultural) education. These two components are drawn from the author's primary ethnographic research area for the past fifteen years and from his professional experience over almost three decades.

The first area to be examined is a sample of rural Tohoku, notably small townships in Akita (Mock 2006; Mock and Markova 2007). In particular, a quick look at what is now Kita Akita city gives a perspective on what education, particularly multicultural (or non-multicultural) education means outside of the great urban centers. While most of the population of Japan does live in the metropolitan centers, most of the area of Japan is "somewhere else". It is the "somewhere else" that we will be looking at first.

The second will be the rise and (mostly) fall of the American-universities-in-Japan phenomenon (Mock 2005). Starting in the 1960s and continuing to the present, there has been a movement of American university branches and centers in Japan peaking around the period of the bubble economy and tapering off to the current situation where there are very few "survivors" left. It should be noted, before moving on, that these remaining institutions form an important presence in Japanese tertiary education and are likely to continue. Temple University Japan has been rapidly expanding over the past several years and it looks like this growth will continue.

Rural Tohoku

Last year, many villages (*mura*), towns (*machi*) and cities (*shi*) were encouraged (or forced, depending on one's interpretation) to merge to form larger civic units. From the point of view of residents of rural areas, these consolidations (*gappei*) had little to do with increased convenience, representation or services. However, from the perspective of the central bureaucracies in Tokyo, the consolidations reduced the number of civic units which seems to have been the point of the exercise.

The situation that exists in Kita Akita City is certainly not unique. Kita Akita City is a geographically enormous area with a quite small population (1152.57 square kilometers, 2005 population—at time of consolidation—estimated at 40,789 people for a population density of only 35.39 people per square kilometer). It was made up out of four fairly small townships so that it could become a "city" (*shi*) which requires a population of 30,000 in order to qualify for better funding from the central government. Since local districts cannot effectively raise funds on their own, either the prefecture or the national government are really the only sources for even basic funding. The combined population in 2000 was 42,050. However, the projected population for 2020 is 30,040, barely enough for "city" status.

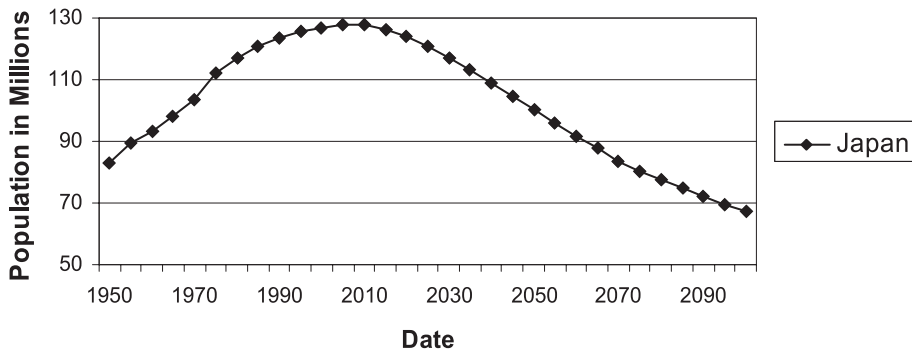


Figure 1 Population of Japan: Historic and Projected (Akita 1999; National Census 1953–2002)

This fits with many other townships in Akita and in many parts of Japan as a whole where most of the townships are losing population and the whole country will, at least by current projections, lose population dramatically by the end of this century. In addition to depopulation, there is also an increase in the upper age cohorts, an effect of a low birth rate, low infant mortality and extended life expectancy, which means the percentage of the population over 65 has been increasing, particularly in rural townships, quite rapidly. However, it is worth noting that with the overall population for Japan peaking, this process of depopulation and, perhaps even more dramatic, relative aging, may be even more dramatic in the major urban centers over the next century.

The nation has operated socially and economically on the assumption of continuing population growth. Now, Japan has reached its population maximum ... and the post-max era will be a time of unprecedented structural change. As stunningly swift as the change will seem initially, it will accelerate. The rate of population decline will increase annually. Stopgap solutions will soon prove wholly inadequate. Only systematic social and economic restructuring based on a long-term perspective can position Japan to cope with the post-max era. (Matsutani 2006: 18–19)

Basically, the rural townships started depopulation, and aging, in the middle of the 20th century after a population peak caused, in part, by repatriation of Japanese nationals who had lived in the now-defunct empire. Matsutani argues that this process is just now starting for the great urban centers and it will have a far greater impact. The various charts presented here illustrate at least some projections for the population, nationwide and locally in Akita.

Looking at education in rural townships, as represented by the towns in Akita, the curriculum is essentially the same in elementary and middle schools as it is throughout Japan. The national standards set by MEXT are followed in Ani and the other areas of Kita Akita City more or less as they are followed elsewhere in Japan. There are, however, at least two major differences between townships like Ani and major urban areas. The first is the relative absence of private “additional” educational opportunities (usu-

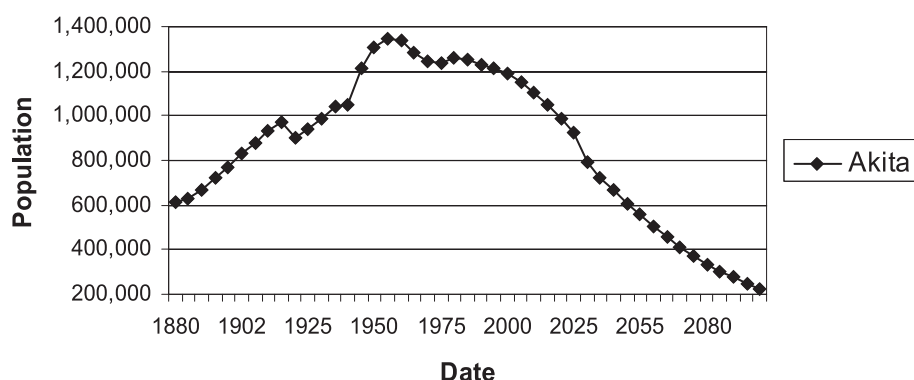


Figure 2 Population of Akita: Historic and Projected (Akita 1999, 2001)

ally *juku* “after school schools”) which allow students to expand the curriculum of the formal education system as well as “catch up” if necessary. This is an enormous difference because it could be argued that the formal Japanese education system does not allow for multicultural aspects of education and, in fact, may be said to explicitly exclude these aspects (Kobayashi 1991; Willis 2006). Further, it can be argued that *juku*, after school classes, provide much of the “meat and potatoes” of Japanese education. Formal education is so centralized, classes are so large and teachers are so overloaded with administrative and other tasks that any sort of flexibility and, indeed, good teaching, becomes very difficult.

A second major difference is the absence, in what was Ani-machi and many, even most, other low population townships in Akita and throughout Japan, of upper secondary or tertiary education (see Akita Map) facilities that not only, in and of themselves, contribute, at least in some ways, to multicultural education (e.g., English language instruction and so forth) but also informally can contribute with the presence of foreign teachers, staff and faculty. A quick look at the map indicates the correlation of secondary schools with Densely Inhabited Districts (DIDs). Virtually all of the clusters of dots are in DIDs. There are some in non-DID areas but they are scarce. In Kita Akita City, the four secondary institutions are all in or near Takanosu, none are in what was Ani or Moriyoshi towns. Tertiary institutions are even more concentrated in Akita being almost all in Akita City (the cluster of dots in the left central part of the map) with one half of a new technical prefectural university in a suburb of Akita City with the other half being located in Yurihonjo City, about 30 km from Akita City.

Specifically addressing the issue of multicultural education, then, in townships like Ani-machi is difficult. One’s first thought is to simply say that there is none and in a formal sense, this would be essentially accurate. Middle schools do offer elementary English classes but essentially these appear to be effectively translation classes with little “cultural” effect. Similarly, while there are ALT’s in Akita, quite a few actually since Akita Prefecture has always been very enthusiastic about the JET program, the

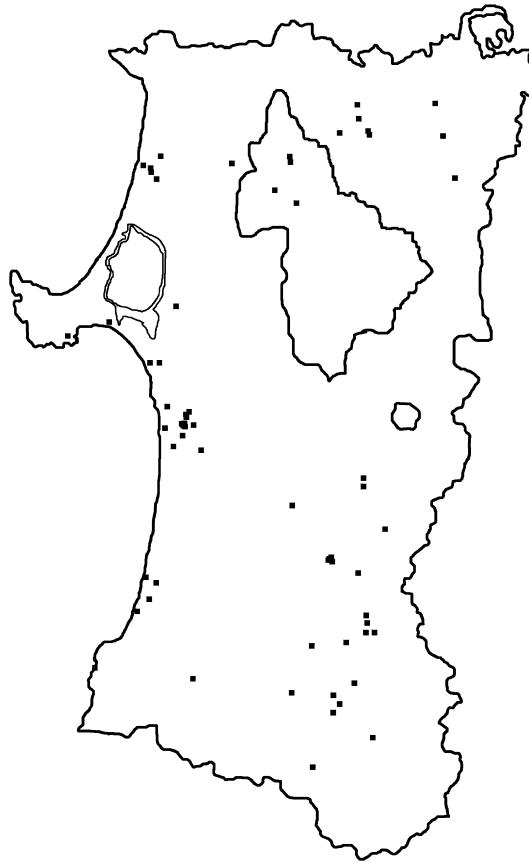


Figure 3 Akita High Schools with Kita Akita Outline

role of the ALT's is, at best, problematic.

Like most towns in Japan, there are also sometimes “international events” where “foreigners” are invited to do “foreign things” (wear traditional dress, sing a song in their language, whatever) which is also quite problematic. Discussing “international events”, one writer on the recent H-Japan thread put it this way:

The reason I feel uncomfortable is the insistence by our Japanese hosts of defining difference along national/border/flag/language/ethnic lines and thereby encouraging the assumption that people from other countries have difference cultures/languages/flag/ethnicities from Japan's and that these differences are neatly contiguous with each person's country borders. This notion is extended such that it is assumed that people from those countries have a shared and unified culture (that is neatly different from Japanese people's shared and unified culture) because of their 'nationality' and geographical origins. This then reinforces the pernicious notion among Japanese participants that they are different from people from other countries but similar to other people from Japan. In the long term, this only serves to

exacerbate cultural and ethnic tension rather than alleviate it, thereby defeating the principle aims of such events. (Matanle 2007).

On a similar note, in many parts of Akita, Southeast and East Asian women have married into particularly rural and small town families. However, there has been almost no overall impact of this immigration. There seem to be somewhat different perceptions. Some writers like Burgess (2004) have asserted that in his Yamagata sample, even the children of the immigrant women are raised as monolingual Japanese. My own observation of Akita suggests that the children (and spouses) of Filipinas are often more bilingual than other children (and spouses). Further, children of Filipina mothers appear to be far more likely to go outside Japan for education, particularly at the tertiary level.

The general point is that there has been effectively little impact of this migration in terms of making Japan, or Japanese education, more multicultural. Part of this is timing, this is still a relatively recent phenomenon. However, part of the lack of impact comes from an “expectation of assimilation” where many Filipinas and especially the Chinese marrying into rural families took Japanese names and “blended in” to the Japanese cultural milieu, a pattern of assimilation rather than maintaining cultural identity. However, this appears to be changing, at least in Akita, with Filipinas asserting some aspects of cultural identity. This may be primarily a function of younger immigrants and the achievement of something of a critical mass. The annual Sanpagita Christmas Party in Yuzawa, for example, is a Philippine cultural event that annually draws several hundred people.

Thus, it is pretty easy to conclude that while there may be some elements of “multicultural education” in rural Ani, and by extension other similar townships across Japan, it is “a thing of shreds and patches” in both formal and informal educational settings. In fact, as Matanle argues, it might even be essentially “anti-multicultural” or at least “anti-pluralist” with the “foreigner-show-and-tell” functioning to reinforce cultural stereotypes and reinforce a Japanese sense of being “uniquely unique”.

However, I would like to close this section by noting that the local dialect is extremely difficult even for “outside” native speakers to understand and, as such, constitutes a pretty major “cultural element” that is different, that separates this small rural community from “the rest of Japan”. To the extent that people, particularly young people, speak both the local dialect (a variant of the Tohoku dialect, *tohokuben*, sometimes called “Ani dialect”, *aniben*) and “standard” Japanese (*kyoutsugo*), they can be said to be bilingual. While the local dialect (and dialectal variation like it) is sometimes denigrated as being “not proper Japanese” and something which should be eradicated as quickly as possible, it is also possible to see it as a major “multicultural” element. Unfortunately, fewer and fewer young people can speak the local dialect although many still understand it. In the foreseeable future, it will probably disappear and this “multicultural” element will be gone.

American Universities in Japan

Temple University Japan, established in 1982, is usually cited as being the first American branch campus in Japan but it was preceded by a number of other ventures including the founding of Friend's World College's East Asia Center in, then, Hiroshima in the middle of the 1960's. However, TUJ was at the forefront of the wave of American branch campuses, and similar ventures such as the Japan Center for Michigan Universities (a joint venture of the 15 public universities of Michigan and Shiga Prefecture) and the Stanford Center in Tokyo. This wave peaked with the Bubble Economy, and now has waned with the economic decline over the past 15 year recession and the demographic shift which has produced fewer and fewer college-age Japanese. At one point, there were approximately 40 foreign (not just American) branches and similar ventures in Japan, now there are just a handful. Again, however, it should be re-emphasized that these few institutions are in quite a strong position and will probably remain an important part of Japanese tertiary education.

What has the impact of primarily American universities been on Japan, either at the national level or in the local communities? What part of "education" was served by the temporary peak of American universities and continues to be served by the survivors? In looking at this situation, it is first worth noting that all of the "outside" university branches were not recognized by the Ministry of Education until very recently when Temple University Japan was recognized. What is now MEXT labeled most of them as "senmon gakko", "Speciality Schools" which carry far less status and recognition than universities. In addition, while the Ministry of Education actively supported (and controlled) recognized (e.g., Japanese) universities, no such support, and very little control, was given to "foreign" universities. (Similarly, it seems that MEXT also does not recognize Japanese university branches operating outside of Japan.)

What this means is that very few American universities have been able to compete in Japan, the playing field has been anything but level. This is in addition to very different academic and cultural expectations of the "foreign" universities and, in the case of the American universities, the use of English as the primary (or exclusive) language of instruction.

Foreign universities, and Japanese versions, often called "International" universities (universities using the term "international" in their title may or may not have anything to do with anything international) clearly form an explicitly multicultural component to formal education in Japan although it should be repeated that this is not formally recognized by the Ministry of Education. While Japan has relatively few international students, the barriers including a lack of funding, the language barrier, and a number of difficulties including discrimination in housing, the movement toward international universities, including the increase in non-Japanese faculty, does seem to at least offer the possibilities for increased multicultural education.

However, it is also possible that the presence of American and (really) international universities in Japan (such as Ritsumeikan Asia-Pacific University) function to attract those students who would otherwise go overseas. According to the Director of the Fulbright Commission Japan, David Satterwhite (quote in Wong 2007), the number of Japanese students studying in the US peaked about 10 years ago at about 47,000 and has declined since. In some cases, an American university degree is seen as being disadvantageous because of employment patterns where students are hired directly upon graduation and have a network of recommending professors. Students educated outside can be seen as being disadvantaged (Wong 2007). Therefore, options like an “international” program in Japan might be better balanced. Even advanced degrees, like Ph.D.s from American Universities are seen as “less valuable” than Japanese degrees not because of any education value (or lack of value) but rather because it is “foreign” and graduates do not have the network in Japan to get business or academic positions.

Another possibility has been suggested for the rapid rise and fall of American universities in Japan. While it is obvious that many local communities and prefectures were actively, and sincerely, interested in “international” education, it is not really clear what the Ministry of Education’s goals were. One rather negative suggestion is that the Ministry of Education rather cynically saw the American universities as a way to deal with a demographic bubble of university aged students. By allowing American universities into Japan for a short period, Japanese tertiary institutions did not have to adjust to cope with the “bubble” population. After the bubble passed, the American universities were “supposed” to fail leaving Japanese tertiary education pretty much unchanged.

This idea, while it might explain some of the Ministry of Education’s inability to deal effectively or even direct negativity toward “foreign” universities in Japan, does not seem to adequately explain the presence of American and other foreign universities in Japan. The number of students enrolled, collectively, by these universities, was never very large. All of the institutions were quite small and were never allowed to expand in any meaningful way.

In a like manner, the Ministry of Education has shown a remarkable inability to cope effectively with tertiary education in almost all aspects. There is a whole literature—almost a cottage industry—of highly vocal criticism, that has itemized failure after failure of the Ministry (cf. Hall 1997 and 2002; McVeigh 2002). It seems highly unlikely that the planning and execution, irrespective of its complete lack of scruples and sincerity, would be something that the Ministry of Education would be capable of doing or in any sense would be interested in doing.

So What!

Multicultural education in Japan is complicated. If we accept a simple definition of multicultural education, that it is a form of learning (formal or otherwise) that promotes

knowledge of and respect for a variety of cultures, there seem to be several threads that promote multicultural education and several threads that operate against it. Promoting multicultural education is, of course, the Japanese economy which, as an export driven economy, requires positive relations with other societies. Japanese companies have to have employees who can work in different cultural environments.

Similarly, the ongoing improvement in communications and transportation, whether or not one conceptualizes this as globalization, simply brings Japanese more and more into contact with other cultures and, increasingly, with cultural variation within Japan. More contact does not, of course, automatically lead to increased knowledge of or appreciation for other cultures, however defined, but it does allow for the opportunity.

In conjunction with this point, the infamously low level of English language education (in terms of competency) has been slowly upgraded by a variety of factors. While the JET program is somewhat problematic (McConnell 2000), it seems to have had a positive impact in inspiring students to pursue multicultural goals in their educations as well as, possibly, improving pedagogy in the schools. Another factor is the increase in availability of non-Japanese language materials, mainly English but also with a popular culture boomlet in Korean, through music, television and other media. All of this appears to have led to the development of a fairly widespread popular interest in increased multicultural education.

However, not everyone in Japan thinks that multicultural education, or any form of multicultural activity or even thinking, is a good thing. The popular governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, has made his political career warning of “foreign crime” (which always goes up, never down, a statistical impossibility) and making what can kindly be termed insensitive comments about other cultural groups. As has already been discussed, there is also a whole right wing that sees any form of multiculturalism as being somehow anti-Japanese. In this mode of thought, any “foreign” learning or knowledge of the outside world seems to make one “less” Japanese. This group appears to include the previous Prime Minister and Minister of Education as well as the Governor of Tokyo.

The Ministry of Education effectively controls almost all of the formal curriculum of primary and secondary education. It also has a major role in tertiary education. While individual teachers can, and do, interpret and present material in the classroom in ways not “approved” by the Ministry of Education, the overall control of formal education is clearly in the hands of the Ministry.

The Ministry of Education has been widely criticized for being conservative, nationalist and, in effect, not very competent, particularly at the tertiary level. It would be interesting, for example, to contrast Japan’s economic success with its “educational” success, again particularly at the tertiary educational level. Japan has the second strongest economy in the world. Do Japanese universities constitute the second strongest tertiary educational system in the world?

The Ministry of Education appears to have an institutional image of Japanese society as being monocultural and monolingual. In terms of dealing with immigrant populations, or internal cultural groups, the Ministry appears to have been uninterested in, or maybe oblivious, to any idea of multicultural education. Assimilation is the only mode that the Ministry appears to understand.

For Japanese students, cross-cultural components are presented in ways that seem not to lead to respect or even interest in other cultures (and, of course, internal cultural differences are ignored). Therefore, it seems that perhaps the formal educational system of Japan, without major changes in the Ministry of Education that are not very easy to imagine, has almost no prospect of advancing multicultural education. Burgess is essentially correct, I think, in arguing that the four contemporary terms—*kokusaika*, *ibunka*, *kyōsei* and *tabunka*—form a vocabulary of the mechanism for maintaining a monocultural identity. For example, several universities with the term *kokusai* in their name, are neither international nor multicultural.

However, aside from formal education, there seems to be a popular movement, or rather a whole host of threads in popular culture and other forms of informal education, that are increasing various aspects of multicultural education in Japan. The increase in migration alone suggests a movement toward a more explicitly multicultural society.

Even forty years ago, it was quite difficult for Japanese citizens to go overseas for any purpose. The last half century has seen massive increases in various forms of movement, of people and information, in and out of Japan. The current political climate appears to be conservatives fighting what may be a rearguard action to “invent a traditional” past against forces that are far broader, much stronger and have a greater life expectancy.

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