Voluntary Associations in Japan : A Functional Factor in the System or a Changing Force?

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INTRODUCTION

It is more than thirty years since Nakane's *Japanese Society* was published[1], where she argued that Japanese group affiliation and human relations are one-to-one: a single loyalty stands uppermost and firm [NAKANE 1967]. For most urbanized Japanese men, the primary organization that requires this "body-and-soul emotional participation" may have been the company. If we suppose that such a complete devotion on the male part can only be possible under the condition of a strict sexual division of labour, we may say that, for women, this primary group has been the family (*ie*) and, by extension, many territorially based organizations. People may belong to many voluntary organizations in addition to the primary group, the view holds, but these latter groups are secondary, marginal and therefore unimportant for understanding the basic nature of social relationships in Japan.

This paper begins with the proposition that an argument such as this may have been true in the past but no longer applies to contemporary Japanese society. The paper will attempt an analysis of the factors behind this significant social and cultural change. It will be ultimately argued that by the tendency to look at "primary" organizations such as family, village or company only,—a tendency that has been dominant in many anthropological studies of Japan at least—we have been led to a rather static view of the society and to various types of cultural determinism in our understanding of Japanese patterns of human relationships. The tendency has also contributed, intentionally or unintentionally, toward fostering the 'myth of Japanese uniqueness'.

Japanese society is a complex one that is undergoing changes in line with other industrialized and post-industrialized societies in the world and, in order to grasp the nature of this change, we should now turn our eyes to many small but widespread experiments for alternative styles of human relationships. Voluntary associations seem to provide a ground for such experiments. Those who participate actively in voluntary associations, as we shall see, often make conscious efforts to diverge from the dominant pattern of social relationships governing "primary" organizations—vertical, role-bound, imposed consensus, suppression of individuality, and so forth. In the past, at least until the early 1980s, those active in

these experiments were usually marginalized and regarded as failures within the
system. Now in the late 1990s, however, the dominant discourse in the society
itself seems to have changed from "sacrifice the private to serve the public (*metshi-*
hōko)" to "revitalize the private to serve the public (*katshi-hōko*)", and various
experiments with alternative life styles seem to have been encouraged. On the
basis of a close examination of the nature of two voluntary groups observed in
Kawasaki city, south of Tokyo, and of one from a rural area in northeast Japan, this
paper will attempt to show the meaning of voluntary associations for those who
participate in them and to what extent we may interpret such participation as an
indicator of changes in the society at large.

VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION: A CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATION

The term 'voluntary association' categorically designates groups of a
secondary nature which people join by will as opposed to the primary group whose
membership is given automatically by birth. The growing importance of these
secondary associational ties in modern society has been commonly recognized as a
universal process of social development. In Japan, it is an anthropologist,
Yoneyama Toshinao, who first drew our attention to its importance by coining the
term *shaen* for modern associational ties as opposed to the traditional ties of non-
selective nature like *ketsuen* (blood ties) and *chien* (territorial ties).

As Ueno Chizuko [1987] has pointed out, however, in the modern situation,
where the importance of primary ties is rapidly diminishing, the term *shaen* has
come to designate too wide a range of relationships to be analytically useful. She
reminds us of the fact that, especially in Japan, selectiveness is extremely limited in
such modern organizations as companies or the army. In other words, while they
are secondary groups, in reality people are not so free to join or leave them at will.
She therefore suggests that we further distinguish modern associational ties into
two different classes by the degree of freedom for joining and leaving, namely,
'selectable ties' (*eraberu-en*) and 'non-selectable ties' (*erabenai-en*). Others have
attempted to divide them into purpose-oriented and value-oriented ties [INOUE
1987].

It is the selectable and value-oriented kind of associational ties that we will
focus upon here. According to Ayabe Tsuneo [1976: 14], the nature of human
relationships in such associational groups can be characterized by equality among
members, voluntariness, partiality and selectability. By the term 'selectability' he
means in particular that people do not join those groups for the purpose of
livelihood as the existence of such a purpose inevitably limits freedom for leaving
once having joined. For instance, such modern associations as companies or
bureaucratic organizations of a relatively formal and permanent nature tend to
develop internal hierarchies and rigid organizational structures, thereby losing the
spontaneity, equality and flexibility that voluntary associations demonstrate. The
associations to be analyzed later in this paper can in fact be contrasted with such

bureaucratized modern organizations in that they are partial and private organizations whose members intentionally seek free and personalized human relationships and try to avoid hierarchical constraints, strict regulations and interpersonal rigidity.

One further characteristic feature of the informal voluntary associations we are dealing with here may be the fact that membership in those groups is based on autonomous individuals rather than groups such as the *ie*, and in this particular aspect, they differ from those of a traditional type. It has been noted that Japanese society has a long tradition of voluntary associations of which the widespread religious or economic associations known as *kō* may be considered as a typical example [SAKURAI 1962; AYABE 1976]. To the extent that the membership of a *kō* was decided on an equal basis regardless of the status of *ie*, we may say that these traditional associations resemble modern voluntary associations. This aspect is no doubt quite different from the relationship that governs other traditional institutions such as *dōzoku* as the latter is governed by the vertical ties of the main/branch houses [TORIKOE 1993].

However, traditional voluntary associations such as *kō* are different from their modern counterparts in that membership was more often based on *ie* and not on individuals. This, of course, does not mean that we do not find examples of individual-based *kō*. In the late Tokugawa period, for instance, we find reports of various religious pilgrimage groups (*kō*) organized by women only [VAPORIS 1994: 243]. More often, however, membership in *kō* was by household unit and household heads participated in them, representing their respective households. Such membership was sometimes inherited, thus further depriving the character of voluntary association from them. Moreover, as their membership was often territorially bounded, it became increasingly difficult to distinguish *kō* groups of a voluntary nature from the territorial groups whose membership was *de facto* ascribed.

KAWASAKI CITY: THE RESEARCH SITE

While it is true that voluntary associations have been witnessed in traditional Japan as well as in rural areas in the contemporary period, they are more frequently observed in cities where the hold of primary ties such as that of *ie*, *dōzoku* or other territorial groups is comparatively weaker. Mostly as transplanted families, the residents of growing cities have perhaps felt a more urgent need to create 'community' and new *nakama* with whom they can socialize with trust and intimacy. If we consider these as backgrounds for relatively active voluntary association activities, our two cases observed in Kawasaki may be taken as typical examples.

Kawasaki is a city located south of Tokyo that has grown dramatically since World War Two. Its rapid growth is indicated by population statistics that show around 200,000 in 1945 and 300,000 in 1955, but 650,000 in 1965 and more than

1,200,000 in 1995. Since the 1970s, in particular, the northern part of the city has been developed as a 'dormitory town' of Tokyo, and a large number of commuters has moved in, as it takes only twenty minutes by express train from Kawasaki station to Shinagawa Station in Tokyo. The city is also known for its progressive political character, as it has one of the few progressive local governments (*kakushin jichitai*) in Japan [YAZAWA 1987]. The Socialist Party has been in power in Kawasaki ever since its first candidate, Ito Saburo, was elected mayor in 1971 on the basis of the organized labour union of city employees.

Such a political atmosphere has apparently provided for ordinary citizens and élites of Kawasaki alike a fertile ground for many social, cultural and political experiments with regard to such matters as environmental and welfare issues, citizens' participation in municipal politics, and policies concerning alien residents and so forth. These experiments of an unusually progressive nature have often presented a challenge to the existing system of the country as a whole. In 1998, for instance, Kawasaki City employed two Japanese Koreans in the city office. The act of granting alien residents the right to become city employees was a symbolically meaningful gesture toward elimination of ethnic discrimination. Although there is still a long way to go for the measure to evolve into anything like a complete elimination of discrimination even in Kawasaki, the measure is considered a progressive step which most other municipalities in the country are not yet prepared to copy.

Kawasaki city, stretching far from northeast to southwest, is now divided into two distinct parts of different outlooks and social character: the old industrial south where factory workers, traditional shop keepers, and illegal foreign migrant labourers are concentrated and the residential north, where many company employees, municipal officials, commuters, etc., live. The old town of the south that has developed around Kawasaki station and the seaside industrial area may be considered the native Kawasaki, while the middle class residential north may be considered a new town. Our case studies of voluntary associations were carried out between 1994-1996 in the new middle class residential area of northern Kawasaki [YI et al. 2001].

MRS. TAKEDA AND HER "LIFE SCHOOL GROUP"

Mrs Takeda, who was sixty-five in 1998, is a typical new middle class housewife who became a resident of northern Kawasaki in 1968 when she immigrated there with her husband who was an electrical engineer commuting to a company in Tokyo. Mrs. Takeda was born and brought up in a rural town in southern Japan and had worked as a dressmaking instructor after graduating from a two-year technical college. She had an arranged marriage with a company employee from the same town in 1956 when she was twenty-two. The neighborhood in Kawasaki she moved to was a newly developed housing area where most of the residents were immigrants like her, feeling the need to construct

a neighborhood community from scratch. Her family joined the newly organized local residents' society (*jichikai*) soon after their move and she began to actively participate in the citizens' protest movement that was launched against the government's plan to build a huge distribution center in Kawasaki.

Although membership in the residents' society was on the basis of household, as in rural areas, in the case of her neighbourhood, it was mostly housewives who participated in activities organized by the society, as most of their husbands were away from the community during the day. The protest movement that finally succeeded in the early 1970s in forcing the new socialist government to withdraw the original plan was an incident that mobilized almost all the citizens of Kawasaki. In fear of worsening pollution and deterioration of the living environment, most people participated in the protest and the mobilization of the protesters was systematically made on the basis of local residents' societies (*jichikai, chōnaikai*). Mrs. Takeda herself walked around collecting signatures from the residents and took turns with her neighbours in the sit-in protest at the city assembly meetings when the issue was on the agenda.

Apart from participation in the citizen protest movement mentioned, Mrs. Takeda, who has two daughters, was also involved with neighbourhood social activities through her participation in the P. T. A. s of her children's schools. However, she felt some frustration with activities in both the residents' society and the P. T. A. s, as they did not provide her any lasting community of her own. The citizens' protest movement in which she participated as a member of her neighbourhood residents' society no longer provided any momentum for continued gathering once the goal was achieved. Although the residents' society continued its routine activities like the Annual Party for the Aged (*keirōkai*) and the All Souls' Festival in August (*bon odori*) [YI 1993], its membership being automatically determined by residence in the same neighbourhood, Mrs. Takeda could not find in such activities a community of common interest and value. She felt a limitation of a similar kind with her P. T. A. activities. As a member of the P. T. A. of one daughter's school, she once pursued a plan to build a new playground in her neighbourhood where children might play after school hours. Mrs. Takeda soon realized, however, that she could not continue any action with the P. T. A. membership as people withdrew participation once their children left school. Social education programs provided by the city, on the other hand, provided her a good space and opportunity to establish the kind of associational ties she wanted.

Social education, or *shakai kyōiku* in Japanese, ever since the term was first adopted in the Meiji period, referred to the educational programs provided by national and local authorities with the specific purposes of transforming people into 'public beings' (*kōmin*) who could be useful for the society and nation. The tradition continued and even during the devastation of the immediate postwar ears, the government first began to establish facilities for social education such as residents' halls (*kōminkan*) throughout the country with specific purposes of "aiding people to recover from the shock of the defeat and subsequent social confusion".

The aims of social education differed by region but were generally in line with the guidelines regularly provided by the Social Education Department of the Ministry of Education [*KAWASAKI-SHI KYŌIKU IINKAI* 1993].

In the case of Kawasaki, the first major target of social education after World War Two was school leavers, who were flocking into the city in large numbers as workers. Numerous evening classes were offered to teach youths, partly as a means of helping them to complete their unfinished education. In the 1970s, the main target was switched from working youths to women, and to housewives in particular [MOON 1995]. With the growth of educated full-time housewives in the population of Kawasaki, the demand for social education grew accordingly. Many cultural courses were offered by private organizations such as department stores, but the social education provided by the municipal authorities was not only cheap but also often of a better quality. The municipal government provided spaces such as a citizens' centre (*siminkan*) and offered classes by invited lecturers for six months or so. The education authorities then encouraged people who had completed the course to organize a voluntary study group (*jishū gakushū grūpu*) by themselves. Sometimes, groups are created as voluntary study groups from the beginning at the citizens' centre, with subsidies from the municipal government.

Mrs. Takeda's Life School Group was of the latter kind. When she worked as a representative for one daughter's middle school P. T. A., she had a chance to visit one of the citizens' centers, where she learned about the Life School (*seikatsu gakko*) Program offered by the city. In 1973, Mrs. Takeda managed to gather some twenty women among her acquaintances and started a Life School with a small subsidy from the city. They have met regularly at the citizens' center building since then and studied such matters as neighbourhood problems, environmental preservation, children's education, welfare for the aged, and so on, sometimes with an invited lecturer and sometimes by themselves. In addition to study, they have also carried out various activities together such as regular investigation of air pollution, recycling, fund raising for environmental preservation, advertisements for safe food, exchanges with rural youths, and so forth. The members of Mrs. Takeda's Life School have also been running a library for children since the 1970s. They borrowed books in bulk from the city library and placed them at the Life School. Then, over weekends, they invited neighbourhood children to come and read. The Life School members sometimes offered special classes or parties for the children who visited.

One of the major achievements of Mrs. Takeda's Life School in terms of citizens' movements was the petitioning that the group made to the Mayor and the municipal government from 1975 to open a branch building (*bunkan*) of the citizen's centre in their own neighbourhood. They finally succeeded in 1988, after 13 years of continual action assisted by other citizens. The purpose of the campaign was to encourage and facilitate people's participation in social education programs and citizens' activities. Mrs. Takeda and her colleagues consider the success of the campaign as a victory of citizens' initiatives over the hitherto one-

sided, up-down style of municipal administration. Although the operation of the new citizens' building and related facilities is the responsibility of Kawasaki city, its running is now largely entrusted to the members of Mrs. Takeda's Life School Group themselves.

While the interests and nature of activities of the Life School members have changed over time and there has naturally been a little change in membership, Mrs. Takeda has been running basically the same group for more than 25 years now. Mrs Takeda considers the Life School Group an indispensible part of her life. Although Mrs. Takeda and other members of the Life School have dutifully fulfilled their domestic roles, they feel that they could not have lived without the extra-domestic activities and the companionship they have created at the Life School. It has provided them with a different world of experience and identities from those they have as wives and mothers [YOSHITAKE 1982; IMAMURA 1987]. Although they have conformed to the required pattern of human relationships at home, at the Life School, they have made conscious efforts not to have any hierarchies within the group. Although Mrs. Takeda started the group, she has never insisted on leadership and the group has always been run democratically with voluntary participation.

In addition to study sessions and citizens' activities, the Life School members started several years ago a workers' collective to produce lunch boxes (*obentō*). A workers' collective, meaning a firm that is owned, run and financed by the workers themselves: that is, a firm in which the capital, labour, and ownership are not separated, is another experiment tried by Kawasaki citizens and others to challenge the existing style of working in which there exist different classes of people and hierarchies [ISHIMI 1986; MOON 1997]. In the workers' collective style of working, everyone is equal, participates in decision making on an equal basis and shares profit on an equal basis. The members of Mrs. Takeda's Life School now finance most of their activities with the income from the *obentō* business for which they have to meet more than three times a week at the new citizens' centre building.

COMPANY MEN'S " 'HAVE YOU BEEN THERE?' GROUP"

Our second example is a men's group, also found in northern Kawasaki. The title of the group is *"itaka-no-kai"* that may be translated as "'Have you been there?' group", a title that symbolically conveys the message that Japanese fathers have been company beings (*kaisha ningen*) and have not existed at home and in the neighbourhood (*chiiki*) in which they live. Like the "Life School Group" above, this one is also an offshoot of one of Kawasaki city's social education programs called "Home Education Class for Fathers".

If the major target of social education in Japan was women in the 1970s, it switched to men in the 1980s. While women's employment increased in the 1980s, thereby reducing the demand for social education, there was a notable increase in the demand from the men's side with structural adjustment in Japanese businesses

and an increase in early retirements. A need was felt to re-socialize the retired men, who had been buried in company life and hence had lost touch with the real world of everyday life, to be useful in the neighbourhood and society at large. As in the case of women's social education, the classes offered at the first stage were mostly hobby classes or cultural courses. The "Have you been there? group", however, was not simply a leisure time class for retired grandfathers in that one finds in it a search for an alternative lifestyle [OYAJI NO KAI, ITAKA 1993].

The class was originally initiated by those women who had been active in the social education movement in Kawasaki. With the growth of social education, some women who had earlier been students started a movement to increase citizens' participation in the running of social education programmes in the city. They argued that citizens of Kawasaki should not remain as passive recipients of the programmes provided by the government authorities, or as simple objects to be taught and guided, but should be able to decide what they learn on the basis of their own interests. The movement was quite successful and citizens' participation in the making of social education in Kawasaki considerably increased. A voluntary group called "A gathering that thinks about social education in Kawasaki (*Kawasaki shakai kyōiku wo kangaeru kai*)" was formed by the movement leaders and relevant officials in the municipal government, and it was given a voice in deciding the direction and content of the programmes offered. "Home Education Class for Fathers" was one of the programmes that reflected such citizens' initiatives. From the beginning, it started with a conscious idea of transforming men from 'company beings' who had lost touch with the mundane businesses of everyday life and making them into 'social beings' again. They also aimed at changing the existing relational patterns of husbands and wives as well as those of fathers and children.

The "Have you been there? group" we are discussing here is a voluntary study group (*jishū gakushū grūpu*) formed by some 20 men who attended the first Home Education Class for Fathers opened in Kawasaki in 1982. They had attended the class for six months and started a group of their own in 1983. The members were mostly company employees in their 40s and 50s, although a few other occupations were also included. We may note that they were not the ordinary retired grandfathers who had been the usual male clients of social education programmes. They were people who already had doubts about their existence as company beings. They were also people who had been critical about the kind of relationships they had in established organizations. In the "Have you been there? group", therefore, they made conscious efforts to diverge from the dominant pattern.

The first step they took was to eliminate all the 'shoulder writing' (*katagaki*) from their name cards. It was to meet each other as human beings and not as roles and statuses, as is the conventional practice in Japan. Also, although there was more than 10 years of age difference among its members, they managed to associate with each other as equals. Participation of the members was on a strictly voluntary basis without any rules or regulations. The members said that they themselves were surprised by the fact that they had been able to keep up the associational ties for

more than 15 years now in such a fashion even though most of them were company employees, where many believe that no organization can possibly function without vertical hierarchies. Their main aim has been, it is said, "to create a world that is not manipulated or controlled, that is participated in with free will and by independent human beings" (interview with members). The activities of the "Have you been there? group" included, as did those in many other voluntary citizens' associations found in Kawasaki, community making movements, anti-pollution protests, recycling activities, and so forth. But their major stress was always on changing lifestyles and patterns of human relationships, and recovering a place in the family and neighbourhood.

In recent years, there have sprung up in Japan many voluntary groups with similar ideas and, in 1994, the members of the "Have you been there? group" established a network organization called Kawasaki Fathers' League with several other such groups appearing in the metropolitan area and started exchange programmes and joint activities [KAWASAKI OYAJIREN 1994]. When they first started the group in 1983, however, they had to face quite a negative response from society at large. When a story on the group appeared in a local newspaper, for instance, a close friend of one member's wife advised her that letting a man be publicized for such unusual activities would harm his career at the company. The general atmosphere at the time, it is said, was that having private lives itself meant incompleteness of loyalty as a company being, and most people felt ashamed of talking about family or neighbourhood matters at the workplace. Similarly, many believed that, for any man to be engaged in such activities, there must have been serious abnormalities in his life, e. g., children's delinquency, marital problems or problems with his own promotion at the workplace, and so forth.[2]

In the 1990s, on the other hand, the general atmosphere has changed considerably for the country as a whole. The fact that a corporation has among its members those who are engaged in such unusual activities as those of the "Have you been there? group" or publicization of such a fact is no longer condemned so negatively as before. Rather, one even observes the phenomenon that such a fact is publicized for the corporation's positive image, indicating that it is a flexible organization respecting individual lives and diversity. It is often claimed that Japanese companies no longer want people who completely identify with the company, but prefer a more 'complete human being' who can balance work, family life and other social activities.

'HESE VOLUNTEER ASSOCIATION' OF RURAL YOUTHS[3]

Associations observed in rural Japan have characteristically developed an ie-based membership and hierarchies linked with the local administrative structure. These features can be noted not only in traditional associations but also those that appeared after the Meiji period (1868-1912). Many village associations found fairly uniformly throughout the country today were in fact created with the

instructions and models provided by the central government at the time of the implementation of the new local government system in the early Meiji period [MOON 1989:138]. Some of these government-created associations were banned after the Second World War for their activities supporting the war, but were soon revived, in theory at least, as voluntary groups with individual membership.

In reality, however, even the newly formed village associations tend to adopt traditional *ie*-based membership. Therefore, whether it is the Housewives' Association (*fujinkai*) or the Youth Group (*seinendan*), one person representing each household in the hamlet composes the hamlet branch, and each hamlet branch has a representative to higher administrative units such as village, county, prefecture, and, finally, the national federation. They have also maintained the character of territorial organizations, and therefore it is difficult to consider them as voluntary associations. As we shall see below, however, there have appeared in rural Japan, especially since the 1980s, many citizens' groups, like the Hēsē Volunteer Association to be discussed presently, that are more like the modern voluntary associations found in cities than the 'traditionalized' village associations described above.

The Hēsē Volunteer Association is a group of some 20 young people who organized themselves in the mid-1980s with the specific purpose of revitalizing the society and culture of Hēsē village in Fukushima Prefecture [KWON 1995]. Like many other villages in Japan, Hēsē village had been losing population to the cities, resulting in an aggravation of the problem of aging and the decline of the local economy. The Hēsē Volunteer Association was a group of young people who gathered with the hope of revitalizing local society and culture as well as constructing a new identity for the villagers, a positive identity overcoming peoples' negative image of their own place as remote and backward. The first action they took toward this end was an environmental campaign against a large scale resort construction plan in the area.

The campaign was part of the wider movement for village revitalization in Japan, one strategy of which is to represent villages vis-à-vis cities as places that preserves unique cultural tradition and unpolluted nature [MOON 1991]. Instead of developing the area as a leisure resort for urbanites which may guarantee a more immediate economic return, those who adopt this strategy attempt as much as possible to protect nature from environmental destruction, and to cultivate local character as a basis for their new identity. The case of the Hēsē Volunteer Association, many of whose members are return migrants who have had experiences of living in the cities or abroad, and are thus familiar with discourses at the national and global level, is a good example of these culturally-and environmentally-oriented movement groups. For more than 10 years since the successful anti-resort campaign, therefore, the group has been at the centre of many other citizens' movements such as the preservation of regional culture, forest protection, village revitalization and so forth.

The Hēsē Volunteer Association can be understood as a typical example of

modern voluntary associations in that it is a group of people who gathered spontaneously and on an equal basis, and who share common values and orientations. While it has a regional basis, unlike the traditional village associations we discussed above, residence by no means automatically determines its membership. Only those who agree with the stated purposes and aspirations of the group join it, and individuals and not households become its members.   The membership consequently covers a much wider area than a hamlet or a village as in the case of traditional territorial organizations. Moreover, it is said that the group started with a conscientious criticism of the culture of the Japanese modern organizations that are 'stupefied' by strict hierarchies and bureaucracies. In order to avoid the bureaucratization characteristic of formal organizations, therefore, the members of the Hēsē Volunteer Association have aimed at providing only a temporary frame or place (*ba*) for activities that automatically dissolves itself when the action is completed. They have also emphasized the freedom to join and leave, and have attempted to keep a permanent organizational structure as well as the resultant enforcement of any kind to the minimum.

The members of the Hēsē Volunteer Association include employees of the village office, those of the Agricultural Cooperative, those of a private company as well as ordinary farmers. In other words, the activities of the Association is not for the purpose of livelihood.   Nevertheless, the members of the Hēsē Volunteer Association claim that it is not their home or workplace but the activities in the group that provide them with a major source of meaning in their life and identity. They also emphasize that the term 'volunteer' used in the group's title was adopted not with a simple connotation of various kinds of non-paid volunteer activities related to general social welfare of the local people but with a specific meaning of "all the spontaneous and creative activities and practices related to the construction of new culture in the area they live" [KWON 1994: 424].

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, I have attempted to demonstrate the changing nature of human relationships in Japanese society with a specific focus upon voluntary associations. While we have discussed only three cases in detail, the growing interest in voluntary association activities is by no means confined to the people of Kawasaki or some young people in Fukushima prefecture. We may observe many women's and men's groups in cities as well as rural associations in contemporary Japanese society that display similar orientations and relational patterns [TAKABATAKE 1978; FUJII 1987; SATŌ et al. 1995]. The widespread citizens' groups that have rapidly increased since the early 1970s, in particular, seem to present the same kind of challenge to the established culture of Japanese organizations.

It may nevertheless be argued, following Nakane[1970] and others, that voluntary associations found at various levels of Japanese society today are marginal, private and thus unimportant in characterizing the basic features of

relational patterns in the society compared to central organizations such as family(*ie*), village(*mura*) or company(*kaisha*). It is also possible to interpret the participation in voluntary associations such as those described in this paper as a functional factor upholding the smooth operation of the existing system: in that the relaxation, freedom and completeness in human relationship people experience in such groups helps them to endure the pressures of formal organizations in which they also participate.

In view of the fact that Japanese society itself is undergoing significant changes, however, a different assessment may also be possible. In other words, the kind of change in attitudes toward voluntary association activities we noted above itself may be taken as reflecting more fundamental changes occurring in the society's value orientation. In an urban environment and for educated housewives like Mrs. Takeda who are isolated in nuclear families, traditional blood or territorial ties can no longer provide a meaningful source of identity [YOSHITAKE 1982; UENO and DENTSŪ NETWORK KENKYŪKAI 1988; SATO 1988]. Similarly, the stabilization of the economy that can no longer guarantee a life-long employment for many and the more recent post-bubble economic depression are displaying many limitations of modern corporational ties (*shaen*). Due to a rapid increase in the number of aged and early retirements, the part that may be covered by *shaen* organizations are rapidly diminishing and there has emerged a growing need for dependence on personal human resources on welfare matters.

Even in rural areas, villages no longer remain as isolated places embedded in the traditional blood and territorial ties. Most people who live in rural Japan today are fully integrated into wider society through their living experiences in cities, through the media, through contacts with urban tourists, through computerized networking, and so forth. And, some of them, especially those in regional revitalization movements, are deeply involved in the politics of identity and culture in modern Japan. They refuse to accept the identity given to them by the existing power relations between the urban and rural areas, between the state and the region, and between the center and periphery, and attempt to create a new identity for themselves derived from discourses about environmentalism, cultural differences, regionalism, and so forth [MOON 1991, 2001]. Voluntary associations that are appearing widely in rural Japan these days provide a desirable space for this kind of citizens' movement, and we may say that the Hēsē Volunteer Association is but one example of this new development.

All these societal changes call for fundamental changes in the patterns of human relationships, and there is no doubt that the revelation of the limitations of the system itself at such incidents as the 1995 Kobe earthquake have also contributed to the deepening of the people's scepticism. As long as people have faith in that the existing system works and satisfies all kinds of relational patterns, the vertical, one-to-one, single loyalty, etc., patterns assumed in Nakane's "single society theory", may dominate without being challenged. With the growing awareness of the limitations and insufficiencies of the system, however, many seem

to have begun to seek an alternative lifestyle or at least multiple identities. It may be maintained that all those who are active in the kind of voluntary association activities we have discussed have in common is a search for multiple identities. They are the people who feel a need to have something more than, or something different from, the single identity given to them as a wife and mother in the family, as an employee of a company that requires "body-and-soul participation", or as a resident of a village locked in the tradition.

Voluntary associations and the kind of alternative relational patterns experimented in them may not altogether replace the traditional ties or formal corporate organizations that people belong to for their livelihood [Yı 1994]. But, as we have seen in our examples, there is no doubt that they provide sources for multiple identities. Moreover, changes occurring in the experimental groups seem to affect the pattern in the traditional and modern corporational organizations as well. The members of Mrs. Takeda's Life School group, for instance, have made various attempts to change relationships within their own families, firstly by changing themselves and then their children, husband, parents, and so forth. The "Have you been there? group" members have also experimented on their own in their respective organizations. How successful they will be in changing the whole society remains to be seen. We may nonetheless say that experiments of this kind tried at various levels of Japanese society are emerging as a significant force to bring about changes within the system itself.

Acknowledgments

NOTES

1) Its original Japanese version, *Tate Shakai no ningen kankei*. was published in 1967.
2) In fact, one member reports, a television company approached the members of the "Have you been there? group" to make their stories into a TV programme. But the TV station in the end decided to drop the idea when they realized, contrary to their expectation, that the members of the group did not have any scandalous abnormalities in their lives.
3) Hēsē is a pseudonym originally adopted by Kwon [1995] and so is the 'Hēsē Volunteer association'.

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