

## The Japanese Society in the 1990s\*

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### Introduction

Today, at the end of 1997 in Japan, it is not difficult to see many new trends of individual as well as collective and institutional behaviors in various spheres of social life, which cannot be detected even in the nearest past. At the same time, we also see some 'accustomed' behaviors, which are aberrant and abnormal when looked at through the eyes of 'common sense.' Let me explain. When social changes occur, they take two different forms. The first are gradual changes in individual and institutional behaviors, which eventually end up with the structural changes of the existing institutions. For example, it was said that the Japanese companies have a unique way of recruiting and training their employees, which were effective in nurturing the loyalty of employees to the company and in attaining high efficiency and productivity; such as seniority based wage system, life-time employment, and generalist training, to mention a few. These traditional ways, however, are giving way to mid-career recruitment, merit pay, and specialist training as more competitive economic and financial situations flourish world-wide, and Japan was forced to open its domestic market which was once heavily protected by the 'paternalistic' government. On the other hand, although the established system remains intact, alternative behaviors are prevailing so that the substantial functions are already diverging from the existing structures. One typical example are the prosperous 'cram school' businesses which elementary school children attend after coming home from their regular school, often without anytime to indulge in play. These children can be seen coming home from these cram schools by train at eight or nine o'clock in the evening, after the adult-commuters' rush hour. The children's (and parents') greatest hope is that the cram schools will increase their chances of being accepted into a prestigious J. H. S. The cram schools serve to supplement the children's education since many parents are not satisfied with the nature and level of education in public schools. This is a familiar phenomenon in Japan, but in actuality it is something anomalous and it signals the problems in today's educational system.

The 1990s is witnessing abnormalities and new changes in social life with an economy in extremely poor shape, which warrants no optimistic view of recovery. Economists offer some reasons for it; domestically the 2-percentage-point increase of consumption tax to 5% and the discontinuance of special tax breaks, and internationally financial unease of Southeast Asian nations who purchase some 40% of Japan's exports. I think, however, the current economic difficulty is only one part of the overall social problem confronting this nation. Political instability, increase of minors' crime, moral decline of corporate executives and high ranking bureaucrats, the record low birth rate and increasing ratio of the aged population, all these factors combined together serve to enhance the pressure to change the social system, and through the media and everyday experiences, we know that it is beginning to change. In what direction and with what philosophy to control these changes, this is the question and how to solve it depends on the decision we are to make.

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