

Kikoku Shijo (Japanese Returnees): Trends and Awarenesses

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Abstract

The increase in numbers of 'kikoku shijo' (returnees) in Japan has been significant within the last two decades, as witnessed by their numbers and by the response to them by government, business and educational institutions. This paper reports on two sets of interviews: one with 14 professionals who work with this group and another of young adults who have recently re-entered Japan after living for approximately two years outside Japan. This report is an attempt to understand kikoku shijo, a phenomenon unique to Japan and to identify trends which impact on the Japanese society.

Introduction

From the mid 1970s and throughout the 1980s, a significant number of Japanese nationals have been going abroad for work, research or educational purposes. This trend corresponds roughly with the general business and economic conditions of that period when investment on the international front was at an all-time high and when many Japanese companies sent their employees abroad for longer periods of time. The numbers have leveled off in the early 1990s, but they are still a significant enough number to demand attention on various fronts.

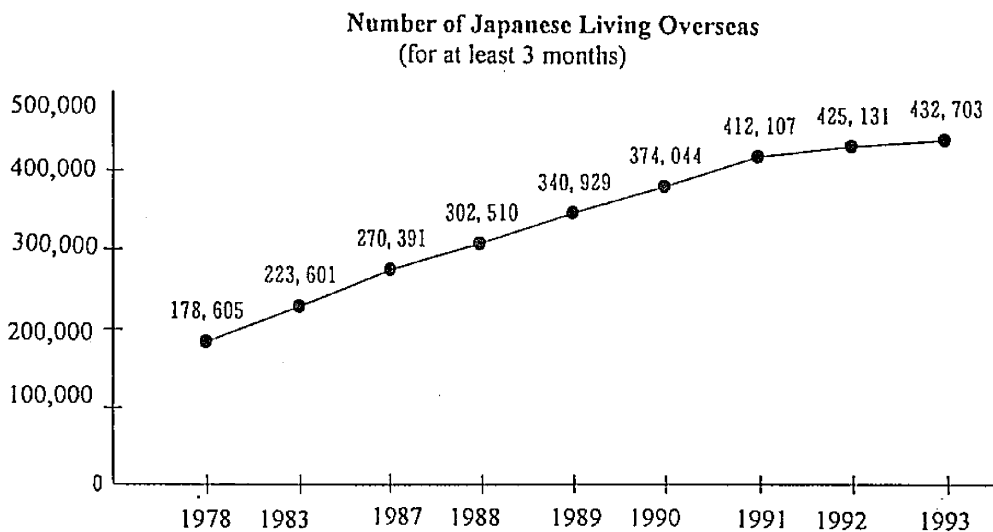
In this report, the focus of attention will be on the 'kikoku shijo,' Japanese returnees—the majority of whom are the young people who have accompanied their parents outside of Japan. The fact that a special term has been coined which has come into general usage is significant, and it is even more significant that both Japanese government and business circles have devoted money, facilities, research and even administrative offices to this special group—the kikoku shijo.

In an attempt to understand this phenomenon of the kikoku shijo and to understand some of the trends and issues of this group, a series of interviews were conducted between November 1995 and February 1996. The participants in this study include professionals who work with kikoku shijo, several of whom were kikoku shijo themselves earlier in their lives, as well as young people who have been abroad for two or more years and have returned to Japan within the last two to three years.

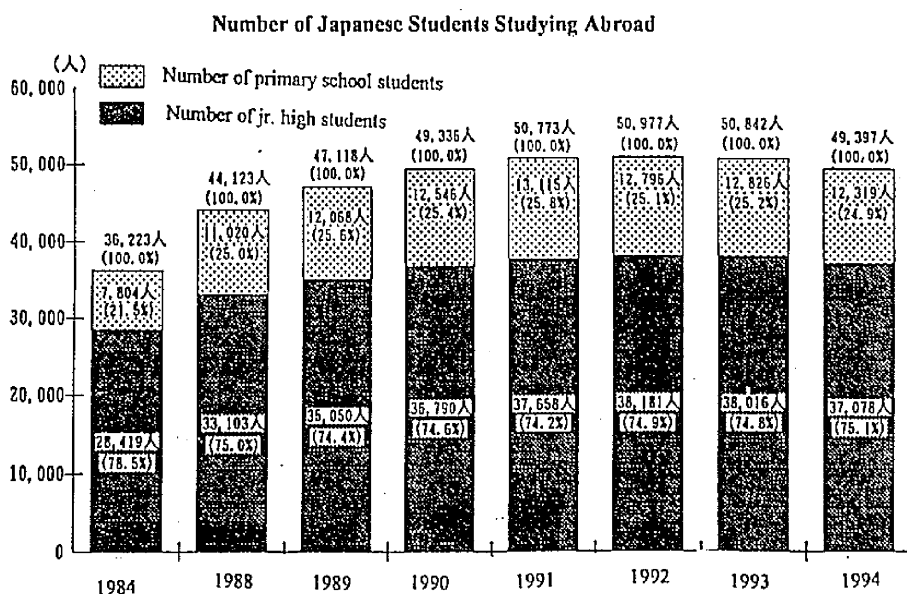
The Numbers of Kikoku Shijo

According to statistics compiled by the Monbusho (Ministry of Education) Kaigai Shijo Kyoikuka (Section of Overseas Education of Young People), the number of Japanese

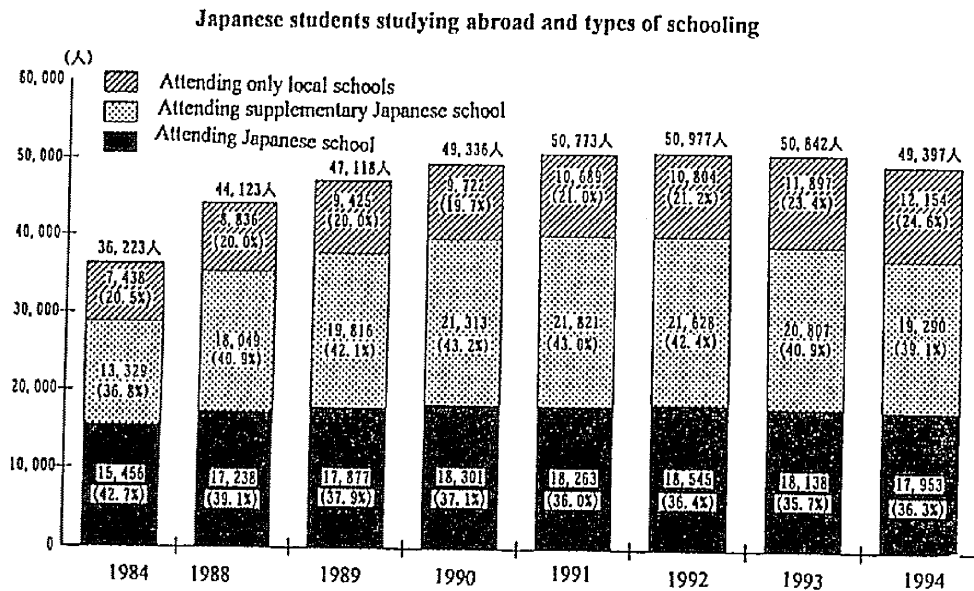
who have left Japan for more than three months (not including those who are outside of Japan indefinitely) has been on the increase since the late 1970s. There has been a 24.2% increase from 1978 to the year 1993. The following graph shows the increase from 1978 to 1993.



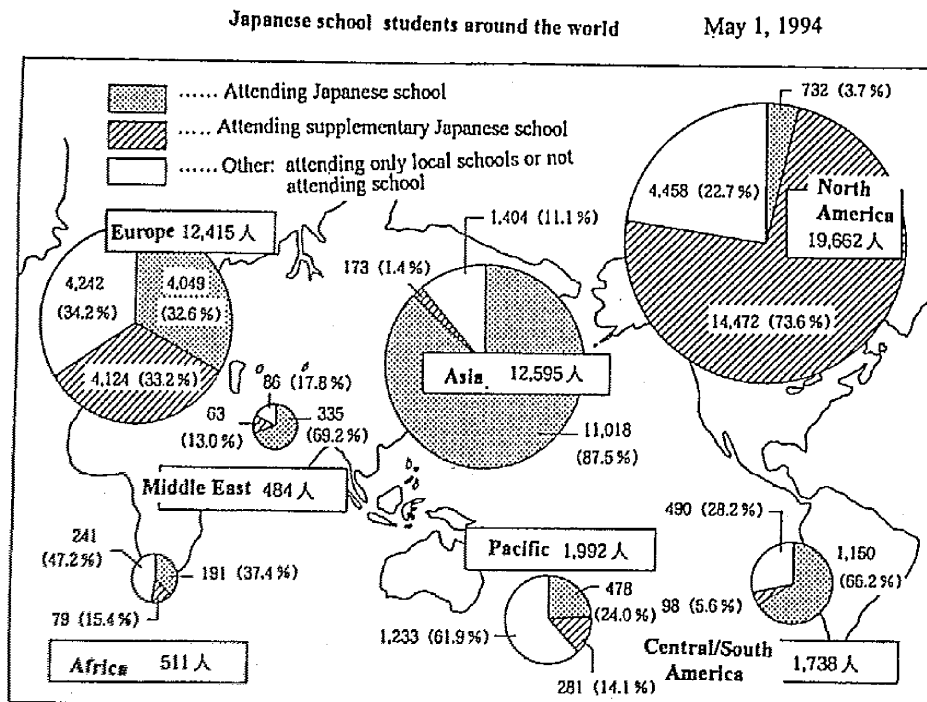
Correspondingly, there has been a similar increase in the number of young people who are living and going to school outside of Japan. In 1978 there were 36,223 elementary and junior high school-aged children living and going to school abroad. Then at the peak in 1992, there was a 14% increase to a total of 50,977. Compared to figures from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1994, the total of 49,397 young people still represents a 13.6% increase relative to 1978. The following graph shows the numbers over a 10-year period.

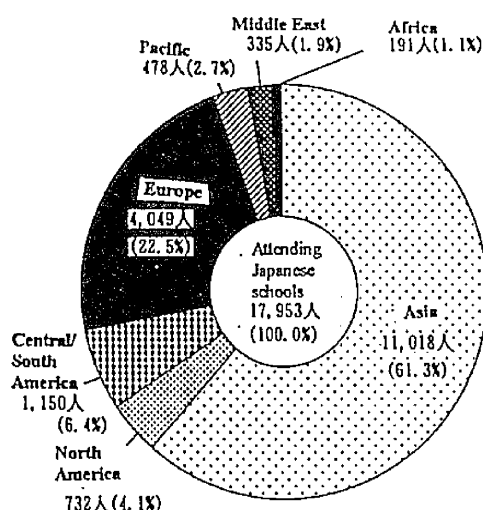


The following illustrates the types of schooling and the numbers of young students studying overseas.



The map shows what regions of the world these young people are living in and what type of schooling they are involved in.





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Services and Facilities for Kikoku Shijo

Because of the increase in numbers of kikoku shijo, the Japanese government is faced with new issues when it comes to dealing with the needs of this particular group. The highest priority tends to be that of education. Since the Japanese educational system is restricted to certain time and test hurdles, the concern of not only parents but also government, educational institutions and businesses themselves is raised by this returning group.

One important service available to the public is the Japan Overseas Educational Services (JOES). This is a non-profit private foundation which was established on January 29, 1971 on the initiative of Japanese corporations and with official approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education. The main purpose of JOES is to promote the education of Japanese children outside Japan. Funding for the organization comes mainly from donations from 700 Japanese corporations. For fiscal year 1993, the general accounts budget totaled 1.93 billion yen while donations to overseas schools and facilities amounted to 3.72 billion yen.

JOES helps to build and maintain Japanese schools outside Japan providing funds, staff and teaching materials. Within Japan JOES conducts research on the education of overseas children or of kikoku shijo, offers research grants to organizations, and maintains a library of publications and information for the public. It also provides a number of services, among them orientation for families preparing to go abroad, correspondence courses for

elementary and junior high school students living abroad who are not attending Japanese schools, counseling services, and foreign language retention classes to help returning children retain and develop the language learned while abroad.

In their language retention program there are approximately 30 teachers for 650 students in 7 schools in the Kanto area—three in Tokyo proper and one each in the Yokohama, Kanagawa, Chiba and Saitama areas. In Osaka there are 5-6 teachers for approximately 200 students at one school. Almost all of the classes are in English, but French is also taught. The age of the children ranges from third grade in elementary school to junior high. Ninety percent of the staff for these schools are native speakers of the language and 10% are Japanese who were once returnees. According to the language program coordinator in Tokyo, the demand for these classes continues, and it is still common for parents who wish to enroll their children to be placed on a waiting list for up to six months. (Feb. 1996).

About a decade ago the language retention classes focused almost exclusively on speaking; however, in the last three or four years classes also target reading and writing skills, areas which parents are anxious for their children to retain and develop further. Classes are generally held on Saturdays, however, a few are held on weekdays after attendance at the regular school. Class size tends to be small, from 4 to 12 students, and there is a wide range of teaching styles depending on the teacher.

The writer visited one of the schools in Tokyo and observed four different classes. In some classes the teachers used only English while students responded in English to the teacher but spoke to each other in Japanese and in English. In one of the classes the instructor spoke in both languages, and the students responded to the teacher and to each other in both languages as well. The atmosphere could generally be characterized as relaxed and unregimented. There was little time spent on testing, memorizing or reciting, and instructors spoke to the students in a friendly and familiar manner. Games, props and authentic materials were used in addition to class textbooks. The language program coordinator stated that though all the instructors were native speakers of English, not all were trained in EFL or had Master's degrees. There is no particular training program through JOES, and instructors are generally free to prepare their own lesson plans. The coordinator expressed her hope that in the future the level of training for their instructors can be increased and that there would be a more rigorous curriculum for reading and writing.

Some Views of Kikoku Shijo

For this report 14 instructors and administrators who work with kikoku shijo were interviewed between November 1995 and February 1996. Seven work in the Tokyo area, three in Ibaraki, one in Tochigi prefecture, two in the Osaka area and one in Chicago in the U.S. Half are instructors of classes of only kikoku shijo or of mixed classes and the other half work as administrators for programs dealing with kikoku shijo. Four of the professionals interviewed are Japanese, two of whom were kikoku shijo 10 to 15 years ago. The others are non-Japanese from the U.S., Britain and Canada.

Perhaps an issue which surfaced again and again in these interviews was the fact that the term itself, 'kikoku shijo' or 'returnees,' is no longer as powerful as a descriptor. Shijo is the legal term for 'children,' and Article 26 of the Constitution of Japan (which was drafted in English) reads, "All people shall be obliged to have all boys and girls under protection receive ordinary education." The 'boys and girls' here was directly translated into 'shi' (boys) and 'jo' (girls) and, thus, kikoku (return to one's country) shijo, which translates into English as, 'returnees.'

According to those interviewed, perhaps 20 to 25 years ago, the term was more meaningful than at present simply because it described a group of people who were rather unique. At that time, it was rare for Japanese to stay for an extended period of time outside of Japan and also at the time the majority of them returned from North America or English-speaking countries. Perhaps 20 years ago it was not so uncommon to hear about the 'sufferings' of kikoku shijo; we heard that a number were having mild to severe difficulties readjusting to Japanese society, and also that some returnees were experiencing 'ijime' or bullying at the hands of their classmates who focused on the 'differentness' of the returnees. The interviewees informed me that it was in response to this concern for the welfare of the returnee that counseling and classes were then being provided and that some of these Saturday English retention classes were meant to address not only language, but also provide a place where returnees could interact with people who understood their situation as well as for returnees to meet other returnees who may share their feelings and experiences.

Through these interviews I heard numerous times that when re-adjusting to Japanese classrooms and communities, returnees would often find a common coping strategy was to disguise their different way of thinking and behaving. They went 'underground,' so to speak, and consciously disguised their fluent English accents or their knowledge of language and

culture which they had acquired abroad. It has become common knowledge that the kikoku shijo often are more competent in speaking and understanding English than their Japanese teachers of English, and oftentimes are placed in the untenable situation of not being able to demonstrate their competence as it would make their teachers lose face. While some could be legitimately classified as 'fluent' speakers of English, the returnees, in fact, don't do well in the English class in Japan as the English studied is geared for tests, and test instructions are given in Japanese. The returnee perhaps doesn't understand the Japanese and, more likely, doesn't understand why the question is being asked in the first place.

According to one interviewee, "Up to the time the bubble economy began, the kikoku shijo were regarded as people who have lost their Japanese attitudes and were not welcome in most jobs. Sometimes it was better for them to hide their backgrounds, and so had to keep up their pride in deep closets." The same person then explained that later, "the time came when 'bilinguals' were a fad. This coincided with the bubble, and businesses were eager to hire the 'spearheads for their international development' of their companies, and while most college graduates were quickly grabbed by major companies, the kikoku shijo were the first among them to be hunted down. Being a kikoku shijo had then become a 'brand' that everyone envies. In the schools, they were seen as 'teachers' in the efforts to 'internationalize' the students, and were given chances to speak in front of the whole student body on assemblies and other occasions, but not many of the kikoku shijo themselves welcomed the change in schools. To stand out in a group and be envied poses a psychological difficulty as much as being despised."

Most of the interviewees commented that the group of kikoku shijo they work with is a rather diverse lot. While 20 years ago the majority of Japanese sent abroad were white collar workers, in later years there have been more and more blue collar workers as well going overseas. Rather than mostly workers at the managerial levels being stationed abroad, Japanese companies were sending workers from many different departments and factory floors. This means then that the group that was conveniently labeled kikoku shijo is now more diverse, and it is becoming more and more difficult to be able to talk about them in an all inclusive manner. There is now a wider array of children from different families who have differing styles and different expectations about education and work.

With the business trend of Japanese expansion in Asia and the Middle East, the numbers of children returning from non-English speaking countries is also on the rise. The experiences of these returnees are qualitatively different from the by-now-stereotypical

kikoku shijo. According to one interviewee who has worked with children who have lived in Hong Kong, "When they get back to Japan some students were disappointed that classmates were not interested in them. They expect questions about life in Hong Kong. There may be some homeroom classes to listen to them but there's no active response. These returnees don't speak English any more than their classmates do. They don't know Chinese." So there's nothing outwardly different about them, but inwardly they are different from their classmates who have never been abroad. "After a while they decide to bury the experiences in Hong Kong. I know some of my ex-students form a group of 'Hong Kong ex-expats' in Japan. That's the only place they can talk about life in Hong Kong. Some said they could never mingle with new students because they don't share the same topics. On the surface they made lots of new friends, getting along with them pretty well."

The same interviewee explained further, "Even among Japanese kids there was some discrimination against other Asian people....They didn't realize their own feelings of discrimination when they were in Hong Kong, but when they get back they are shocked to know they (themselves) are discriminated (against) by other Japanese kids. The kids returning from the States can be admired (Wah! He speaks English!)," but for them no one seems interested in their experiences in Hong Kong. "(Ha? Back from Hong Kong? That smugglers' country? Always dirty and smells bad). The returnees normally love Hong Kong and are proud of the place,....but then with time they stop talking about it. This is typical."

Another interviewee discussed an additional qualitative difference in the kaigai (overseas) shijo experience. "As more full-time Japanese schools and 'jokus' (cram schools) sprang up abroad, the expectation of the parents changed from 'to be accepted by any school upon return' to: 'to be accepted into better schools,' and the pressure of the entrance exams got heavier. This was also fueled by the opening of more schools for kikoku shijo."

An issue of the Sunday edition of the Tokyo Shinbun in May 1995 deals with the issue of the 'juken senso'—the 'examination war' outside Japan. It reports that private jokus are springing up everywhere, citing 18 countries with approximately 92 schools. New York alone has 20 jokus; Singapore is next with 10; Los Angeles has 6, Hong Kong 5 and London and Sydney each having 4. As one of the interviewees noted, unfortunately, the positive experiences of being exposed to another culture are being negated by this all-encompassing drive to keep Japanese children in the competitive track, no matter whether they are in Japan or abroad. The interviewee referred to this phenomenon as the 'tunnel effect.' Since

children abroad attend Japanese schools which follow the same Monbusho guidelines as those in Japan, they end up virtually never leaving Japan, living a Japanese life style with their families and attending a Japanese school, speaking Japanese and associating mostly with other Japanese.

When they become *kikoku shijo*, they may be referred to as *kikoku shijo*, but qualitatively they are no different from the Japanese who remained all the while in Japan. While others may expect them to speak another language, they are unable to demonstrate the now-stereotypical characteristics of the *kikoku shijo* and as their predecessors before them coped by hiding their experience abroad, these new *kikoku shijo* also hide their experience but for other reasons. "Once upon a time, the same attitude of hiding was simply to avoid being stigmatized for not being a typical Japanese, but nowadays, it is to avoid being required to act like a typical *kikoku shijo*."

Most of the interviewees felt that the term, *kikoku shijo*, would either fade, change or disappear altogether precisely because of the diversification of this group. One said, "In a way the concept of 'returnees' will be faded. Some schools already removed the policy to have (a) special quota for them." Another said, "It may be that the Japanese word may change to '*kikokusei*.' The English word itself, *returnee*, may stay the same. It seems that with more and more foreigners coming to Japan and bringing their children here, that the *kikoku shijo* problem will not be such an isolated problem in the Internationalization or Globalization of Japan." A third interviewee discussed "the diversification within the *kikoku shijo* group, that could be defined by the length of stay, the ages of the children while abroad, the area (number /concentration of Japanese children), the educational policies of the family, and so on. Some of them bring back very different lifestyles, attitudes, values, academic achievements, while others may be very similar to an average child who's never been out of this country. The term '*kikoku shijo*' would then be insignificant, and perhaps another term would be invented to label those who are very different and (either) give (them) special treatment or stigmatize (them)." A fourth interviewee predicts that the term *kikoku shijo* will disappear in the future. She says that the *kikoku shijo* themselves don't like the label because the expectations of them are too high. People expect that if you are a *kikoku shijo*, then your foreign language ability should be high and they don't like to be labeled as such. One of the interviewees who was once a *kikoku shijo* himself, states emphatically that 'no one especially those of us who get to be called by the term, have liked the word *kikoku shijo*. The word

sounds so bureaucratic and it is used to label us anyway.” “There is a whole issue of labelling us with a hidden meaning to mistreat us.”

From the Young People's View

In addition to the interviews of the professionals who work with kikoku shijo, the writer also interviewed four young women who could not technically be called kikoku shijo as they left Japan in order to do undergraduate studies for approximately two years in the U.S. They had all recently returned to Japan and were adjusting back to Japan and into new job situations. Since their experiences are similar to their younger counterparts, I chose to interview them as I conjectured that they would have not only the language ability to articulate their thoughts in English, (interviews were conducted in both English and Japanese depending on the individual's comfort and proficiency level), but they might also have the maturity to make interpretations which may be more difficult to get from interviewing the same number of junior high or elementary school children. In addition, I spoke at length with a teacher who has worked for over eight years teaching kikoku shijo in both the Saturday schools and in international schools in Tokyo and who has successfully gained the confidence of a number of her students. Through her firsthand experiences and talks with them, I was able to gain some insights into the struggles they faced as recent kikoku shijo.

The following is only a brief treatment of the comments made by these young people, and I will restrict the discussion to areas where there was a clear overlap in the experiences and reactions. (I will continue to include the information gathered from the interviews with the 13 instructors and administrators.) For all these young people, the re-entry period was clearly difficult, and for some more than others, rather painful. The teachers who work with returnees often say that at-first when the young people join their classes, they are animated, talkative, expressive and positive. With time, however, they begin to conform more to the Japanese norm of being less expressive and less talkative. The instructors who have worked with returnees for more than five years claim that these days the kikoku shijo take less and less time to “lose those qualities” of “taking initiative,” “being vocal” and “being expressive.” Four interviewees voiced the impression that returnees are getting “more adept at hiding” or “adapting to the Japanese frame of reference” than in years past. Though the impression was shared, no one could come up with a solid explanation for why this should be so. They all agreed, however, that it shows the students' desire to conform and not appear to

stand out. Though several of the non-Japanese instructors expressed disappointment that students lost their spontaneity, all who were interviewed agreed that it generally shows a healthy coping mechanism, an essential behavioral reaction that enables students to adapt and survive in the Japanese context.

Many interviewees say that they feel that the classrooms specifically for kikoku shijo provide a place that students can interact with others who share the experience of having functioned in another culture where other rules, norms and values operate. Several mentioned that they feel the students respond positively to having the opportunity, even if for only 60 to 90 minutes at a time, to be able to act differently than they do in the regular classroom. Several also expressed the view that the classroom was offering more than just language, but it was providing psychological and social support for these young people.

The general consensus was that these young people are at some point or another experiencing stress, inner struggles and tensions. They may be adept at hiding their emotions, but the adults seemed aware of and sensitive to the normal and unusual pressures which operate in this society.

When asked directly, the young interviewees replied strongly and unanimously that behaving in an appropriate way in Japan took a conscious effort and can at times be extremely taxing. They all seemed to feel that they wanted very much to share their recent experiences with other people, but felt very frustrated that they couldn't. One woman explained how she automatically felt a strong bond with anyone who was non-Japanese in Japan, and she had to hold herself back from approaching them to offer her help. She wondered why it wasn't obvious to everyone around her that she was no longer the Japanese person she had been before leaving Japan, and she wished that people could sense how different she was. It was painful to her that she could not express herself as she had done in the U.S.

Several of the students who had come to trust their Canadian teacher revealed very personal thoughts to her, something that perhaps they would not be able to express to Japanese teachers or even parents. They complained of feeling trapped, of feeling deep resentment and anger. What was notable was that these students appeared to their teacher, and certainly to others, so calm and well-adjusted on the outside. She says it shocked her that these students could express themselves with such depth of feeling, yet be able to function so calmly and competently.

It seems that all the young people interviewed went through an identity crisis upon their return to Japan. They went through a period of questioning themselves and their lives, of being highly critical of family and friends who had not left Japan, of over-exaggerating and idealizing their recent experiences abroad and of feeling out of place in situations that were once completely normal to them before leaving. They seemed to feel that they didn't have many friends, and, in fact, the people they spent time with were people who had traveled or also lived abroad. Even when they had lived in completely different cultures, they still felt an affinity, a bond, and a degree of comfort in being in their company.

It appears that all of the young people had gained an appreciation of their own individuality, and they all were coping in their own way to realign themselves to the Japanese context after having gone through an experience that had affected or changed them. The overall view (or perhaps hope) of the more mature interviewees was that these experiences of returnees (although varied as the individuals are different), collectively, they will undoubtedly have a positive impact on the society in the future. Some feel it's inevitable, while others are more pessimistic. One says that unless "we Japanese open our mind," this won't happen and the experiences of the *kikoku shijo* 'will be buried.' A shame, she adds. Another feels that because there are larger numbers of returnees, it is more likely that some things will change. "Japanese travel more, have more control, more awareness—it all takes time. My students though see that it's not going to happen during their time." And finally another interviewee expresses the hope that "Japanese society will be open to different kinds of people. I want it to be more diverse and heterogeneous, more multicultural. I hope that the *kikoku shijo* who are 'different and special' should become a factor to open up the homogeneity of this society."

In Closing

Even within this small sample of interviews, a variety of views and thoughts have been uncovered. We have gained a sense of the changing nature of this group of people which cannot so easily be captured under one term. We have gained a sense of the frustrations and expectations of this group whose members do not like to be labeled. And we have gained a sense of the enormous personal and collective difficulties they face in re-adjusting to their own culture. Deciding what to hold on to and what to let go of is part of the adaptation stage, and while some may appear on the surface to have made the transition

smoothly, this set of interviews has hinted that what is visible on the surface does not truly indicate what goes on underneath.

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