

# Japan

Japan is an eastern Asian nation on an island chain between the North Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Japan, located east of the Korean peninsula. In early 2011 it had an estimated population of approximately 126,476,000 inhabitants, yet in land mass it is slightly smaller than California. It also has few mineral resources and almost no energy-producing natural resources, but it is ranked as the world's third largest economy.<sup>1</sup>

Japan is a fascinating country with a cultural and economic presence of historic proportions. It has used education to transform itself from a feudalistic society to a major industrial power, notably in the Meiji reforms from 1866 to 1912 and in the post-1945 reforms during and after the Allied occupation following World War II. Many observers believed that Japan's postwar educational reforms would not have a chance to survive once the Allied occupation forces left, but Japanese education changed extensively, not only by adapting ideas coming from the outside but also because of the ability of the Japanese people to create new institutions and educational processes.

## The Japanese economy and education

While educational reforms after 1945 may have contributed to Japan's economic boom, they also have sometimes been credited with fostering greater equality of educational opportunity for the Japanese people. Other interests also contributed to Japan's educational success, such as the development of a powerful teachers' union that challenged traditional ruling-class controls and resisted political intrusions into the educational process. Despite such resistance, however, tracking, ability grouping, and competitive exams were put in place under the assumption that such policies would encourage the development of talent for Japan's economic expansion.<sup>2</sup>

## Japanese diversity

Outside observers often seem to assume that the Japanese are a unique people who think and feel alike and who submerge their individuality for the good of the whole. Another assumption is that Japan is a society without a clear center, one that freely adapts innovations from other cultures to support its highly competitive economic power. In fact, Japan has an enduring and creative culture, and while Japanese officialdom often seems to encourage the myth of homogeneity, beneath this public face lies considerable diversity between public and private

life, rural and urban populations, and majority and minority ethnicities, to name a few.<sup>3</sup>

Critics of American education have used the Japanese educational system as an example to be emulated. They portray it as one in which everyone is taught the same basic subjects, and taught well because Japanese teachers have superior training and experience. However, Japanese teachers are not necessarily better trained or experienced, and Japanese students are not necessarily more intelligent or culturally homogeneous. Despite critics who maintain that Japanese children are superior in mathematics because their teachers are more demanding and pile on more homework, there is research indicating that Japanese teachers actually assign less homework and devote less instructional time to mathematics than such critics claim. Indeed, there are numerous aspects of Japanese culture and education to admire, but the assumptions that Japanese culture and education are monolithic success stories fail to recognize that Japanese educators—like many other educators around the world—are faced with problems such as school violence, dropouts, a need for better understanding of curriculum content, and a need for greater flexibility in the educational system.<sup>4</sup>

While Japan has made great strides toward providing better educational opportunities for all, research indicates that students who come from rural villages, are the offspring of foreign immigrants, or are from ethnic and linguistic minorities often suffer in comparison to students from mainstream Japanese backgrounds. For example, children of Chinese and Korean immigrants have faced educational discrimination, even in admission to high schools. Despite official claims that up to 95 percent of Japanese nationals enter and graduate from high school, many students from Okinawan backgrounds achieve well below the national average.<sup>5</sup>

The importance that Japan puts on university entrance examinations and the emphasis on graduating from top universities as the pathway to occupational success have contributed to the belief that test scores are the most important thing. Pressures extend downward through the educational system, such as the growth of private “cram” schools (or *juku*) that meet after regular school hours to prepare students for the examinations. There have also been instances of mothers attending classes so their sick children would not fall behind. Secondary schools also periodically drill students with mock examinations to prepare them for university entrance exams. One result of such pressure is rote memorization rather than critical and creative thinking. Concerns have also been raised about the impact on student health, such as myopia from eyestrain and the side effects of insufficient sleep. In addition, behavioral problems tend

to increase among high school students as university entrance examination time nears, and those who fail university admission exams sometimes experience severe psychological reactions, sometimes resulting in suicide.<sup>6</sup>

## Minorities

Among Japanese minorities are the *burakumin*, a group of people who were historically considered social outcasts because of their “impure” occupations (butchers, tanners, leatherworkers, etc.). Burakumin are indistinguishable from other Japanese in appearance, language, and ethnicity, but burakumin status is often assigned to descendants by their village or geographical place of birth, a status that is still considered by some Japanese to mean “impure,” even though all legal barriers were struck down in the Japanese constitution of 1947. In the past, such lingering prejudices has resulted in overt violence, as in 1974 when 52 teachers at a high school in the Hyōgo Prefecture (a prefecture is similar to a state or province) walked off their jobs in protest because student members of the Buraku Liberation League attempted to establish a study group on the problems of buraku students at the school. As the faculty left the building, they were met by a number of league members who shouted that the teachers were abrogating their responsibilities and should go back to work immediately. Violence erupted that lasted several hours, with more than 60 people injured, 48 of whom were hospitalized.<sup>7</sup>

## Linguistic minorities

Despite the apparent homogeneity of Japan, there are linguistic minorities who have resided there for centuries, although the government continues to favor *kokugo* (literally “the national language,” or standard Japanese) as the official language of instruction. Most of Japan’s population lives on the four main islands of Honshu, Kyushu, Hokkaido, and Shikoku, but the Japanese archipelago consists of more than 1,000 islands, among which several historically important linguistic minorities live. For example, the Ainu people who live mostly on Hokkaido have not been allowed to teach the Ainu language, history, or culture, in their public schools. Recent efforts to change this have been made through private groups that operate without government support.<sup>8</sup>

Among the other important minority languages is Ryukyuan, spoken on several smaller islands such as Okinawa. As with Ainu, the public schools are not allowed to teach the Ryukyuan language and culture, even though it is closely related to Japanese. Such policy threatens the survival of the language and the

culture it represents because young people do not learn to use it and the older generation of users is passing from the scene. Fortunately, there are private efforts to revive Ryukyuan, but without government support and the funding needed for the kinds of scholarly research that would help support a revival.<sup>9</sup>

Other important minority languages are those of immigrant populations, the largest of which are Chinese and Koreans, but more immigrants were brought in during the Japanese economic expansion in the 1980s, such as immigrants from the Philippines, who speak Spanish and Tagalog. Other immigrants have come from Vietnam, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and India, with even a few from Peru and Brazil. Thus, despite official education policies, Japan actually contains a variety of languages and cultural identities, although the number is small as compared to other countries such as the United States. As late as 1986, a prime minister of Japan created an international diplomatic incident when he declared that Japan was racially homogenous with a high intellectual level, unlike the United States with its racial diversity and heterogeneous peoples. As the twenty-first century arrived, Japan instituted curriculum reforms that included greater attention to foreign language studies such as English. As its small but restive ethnic and linguistic minorities attempt to contribute to Japanese society while also striving to retain or revive their unique cultural backgrounds, perhaps Japan will be encouraged by globalized social and economic developments to recognize more fully its internal ethnic and cultural resources and what they can offer to the wider society.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Central Intelligence Agency, "Japan," *The World Factbook*, at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ja.html> (accessed on May 16, 2011).
- 2 William K. Cummings, *Education and Equality in Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 3, 5, 7–14, 285.
- 3 Herman W. Smith, *The Myth of Japanese Homogeneity: Social-Ecological Diversity in Education and Socialization* (Commack, NY: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 1995), 1–2.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 8–9.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 10–15.
- 6 W. O. Lee, *Social Change and Educational Problems in Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 218, 223–6.
- 7 Susan J. Pharr, "Burakumin Protest: The Incident at Yōka High School," in *Education and Schooling in Japan Since 1945*, Edward R. Beauchamp, ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), 209–23.
- 8 Malcolm Foster, "Ainu stepping out of social stigma," *The Japan Times Online*, at <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20080813f2.html> (accessed on May 16, 2011).
- 9 Patrick Heinrich, "Language Loss and Revitalization in the Ryukyu Islands," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, at <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Patrick-Heinrich/1596> (accessed on May 16, 2011).

- 10 John Maher, "Linguistic Minorities and Education in Japan," in *Education and Schooling in Japan Since 1945*, 233–45; and Nanette Gottlieb, "Migration and Language Policy in Japan Today," The Tokyo Foundation, at [http://www.tokyofoundation.org/en/additional\\_info/migration-and-language-policy-in-japan-today](http://www.tokyofoundation.org/en/additional_info/migration-and-language-policy-in-japan-today) (accessed on May 16, 2011). See also Robert Fish, "Japan: Recent Trends in Education Reform," Asia Society, at <http://asiasociety.org/education-learning/learning-world/japan-recent-trends-education-reform> (accessed on May 16, 2010).