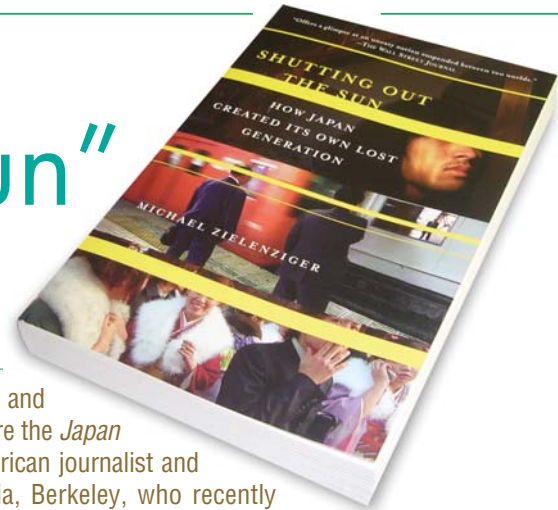


Meeting the Author of “Shutting Out the Sun” “Hikikomori” and Today’s Japan

By Natsuko TOYODA



It was early March in Tokyo. This year, the severe winter had yet to loosen its grip, and spring was still far away. At a cafeteria on the top floor of the Jiji Press Building, where the *Japan SPOTLIGHT* editorial offices are located, I met with Mr. Michael Zielenziger, an American journalist and now a researcher at the Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley, who recently published a book on Japan, “*Shutting Out the Sun*,” under the subtitle: “*How Japan Created Its Own Lost Generation*” (2006). I was sitting there as an assistant to the *SPOTLIGHT* editor-in-chief, Naoyuki Haraoka, who was conducting an interview with Mr. Zielenziger. Their dialogue gave me a great deal to think about, prompting me to write this article based on their interview.

This, in a way, is what this column is all about: a “promenade” where our editorial staff can share our workaday with our readers, freely baring our thoughts about interesting people we happen to meet, sharing our impressions about the intriguing things we encounter, the movies we watch, the books we read. We would be delighted if our readers find this column useful as a synopsis of modern Japan.

Mr. Zielenziger, the focus of our first *PROMENADE* project, moved to Japan in 1996 and for seven years served as a correspondent for Knight Ridder Newspapers, a US newspaper group, reporting on the Japanese economy as well as a broad range of other topics. It was based on this experience that he wrote this book on how the people in Japan, as the title of the Japanese edition of the book puts it, became a “nation of *hikikomori*,” the Japanese term to describe the phenomenon of recluse among adolescents and young adults who shut themselves up in their homes for lengthy periods of time.

This time, Mr. Zielenziger came to Japan on a speaking tour at the invitation of Kyoto University in connection with the publication of the Japanese edition of “*Shutting Out the Sun*.” Mr. Zielenziger is a fluent Japanese speaker and feels at home among Japanese. What made him interested in this phenomenon of young Japanese cloistering up? Let me cite one passage in the dialogue between Mr. Zielenziger and the *SPOTLIGHT* editor-in-chief that appears to me to be important.

Japanese “Homogeneity” Creates *Hikikomori*?

SPOTLIGHT: Mr. Zielenziger, what prompted your interest in this “recluse” phenomenon?

ZIELENZIGER: I have noticed that “homogeneity” in Japanese society has its positive side, but at the same time it imposes the same sense of value on everybody and forces everyone to behave in the same mold. It seems to me that homogeneity has given birth to a cultural environment where it is easy to ostracize people, to turn people into a pariah. During my stay in Japan, I happened to know a

hikikomori young man. Even though he was very bright and very creative, he was under visible and invisible pressure from people around him to conform, feeling the pressure that “I must think like everybody else, behave like everybody else.” In the end, he felt he was a mismatch with society and turned himself into a recluse. The Japanese sense of “homogeneity” is sometimes misunderstood in the international community as Japanese “exclusivity,” an indication of the “closed nature” of Japanese society. When people look at the issue along with the decline of the Japanese economy, it appears as if the entire Japanese nation is in a *hikikomori* mode. As someone who loves this country, I really want the Japanese people to be aware of this problem. This is why I wrote this book.



Mr. Zielenziger, author of “*Shutting Out the Sun*”

In Japan, the biggest virtue is “thoughtfulness,” i.e., to be caring to other people. This is undoubtedly a wisdom born from the fact that in Japan people must live together as neighbors in a land-deprived country. “*Edo shigusa*,” meaning good social manners in Japan’s medieval Edo period, includes many examples extracted from the wisdom of everyday life. For instance, on a rainy day when two persons holding umbrellas walk past each other, each person, out of thoughtfulness to the other person, should tilt his/her umbrella away from the other. To be diffident, to act in humility out of respect of others, is something Japanese do by nature.

On the other hand, there are also many examples of Japanese turning “self-conscious,” worrying too much about how they look in the eyes of others. From the Edo period through the Meiji era, for instance, public baths in Japan were shared by men and women. True, public baths in those days were built differently from the ones we have in Japan today, and it is difficult to generalize. But I think Japanese sensitivity toward the

human body was different from the way how people in the West look at the body. The fact that Japanese public baths today have separate sections for men and women does not necessarily mean that Japanese have come to accept the Western thinking toward the sexes; it is that Japanese have become self-conscious about their naked body in front of foreigners. I believe Mr. Zielenziger is right in observing that Japanese homogeneity has its positive and negative sides.



The author (left) talking with Haraoka, editor-in-chief.

Hikikomori as a Potential

SPOTLIGHT: Do you mean Japanese are not tolerant toward cultural diversity? To me, however, the so-called phenomenon of globalization is simply Americanization. After all, your portrayal of Japan smacks of American prejudice toward foreign cultures.

ZIELENZIGER: I'm from Berkeley and I have not the slightest urge to impose the American sense of value on other peoples. Berkeley and San Francisco are caring places for minorities. What I have been thinking is how to help young people living in recluse rejoin society. If only for the sake of lighting up the competitiveness of the Japanese economy, I think Japan should make use of the creative talents of these young people. In America, I hear people with great talents also shut themselves up when they were young. So, through education and other means, can't Japan create an environment where young people would not feel bad when they are different from others, but feel there is nothing to be ashamed of to be different? I hope Japan will have more of what I call "free space" where people can behave freely without caring too much about what others say.

SPOTLIGHT: The Japanese business community apparently does not think, for the time being at least, that an increase of people living in recluse poses a significant risk to Japanese industrial competitiveness. Of course, I understand you have interviewed many people and done a lot of field research in writing this book. You have all my respect.

Perhaps because I am a Japanese, I feel everyone in Japan has some sort of "recluse" mentality. For instance, how would Japanese children respond when they are scolded by an adult or shut out of their peer group by friends? Afraid of further pain being inflicted, they would clam up and internalize their emotions. Under such circumstances, I wonder how much an environment of, as Mr. Zielenziger put it, "you can be what you are" would help.

Of course, there are people who say, "Yes, I also had painful

memories and yet I have pulled it through. Don't be a baby!" During the course of our life, there is surely someone who would treat us warmly. The people who shut themselves out unfortunately have never had the opportunity to feel a sense of security with anybody. This is definitely not a problem entirely of their own making. Social factors abound: to start with, the mortality rate of children has shrunk dramatically and, with a small family, children have few opportunities to mingle with adults

other than their parents; what makes matters worse, as attitudes among people have drastically changed, the direction of one's future can be affected by one's achievements in English, or in mathematics. While we fare much better than people in the past in terms of material wellbeing, I think we have fewer opportunities to attain emotional security.

"Free Space" Is the Key

In his study of Japan, Mr. Zielenziger hit upon the phenomenon of "people in recluse." That is a very sharp observation indeed. In our November/December 2007 issue, we put together a special package on the "work/life balance." As noted by many experts in the field, Japanese society has great potential and one big reason why such potential cannot be fully tapped lies in that the Japanese public cannot get rid of the mentality that men should be the breadwinner and women should stay at home, do housework and take care of children. When seen from the standpoint of pattern oddity, the phenomenon of "hikikomori" is not that much different from the situation of women's labor power. While the mentality of seeking "homogeneity" might be essential in a crowded country, such mentality can at the same time become a drag to economic growth.

If there is more "free space" – the way small children take to adults who accept them as they are or the way they gravitate toward their nannies – all sorts of talents would be able to join the labor market and the economy would gain new vitality. Instead of becoming too self-conscious and "cloistering up," Japanese should take their "thoughtfulness to others" stance toward the world as a whole. Then good things will happen, talents will congregate and perhaps we will become a better nation. It is said that the 21st century is an age of global cohabitation and "sentiment" is becoming an important element in the economy. This is what Mr. Zielenziger has suggested, a message that is gaining increasing attention among other experts in the field as well. Frankly, such an idea is really comforting.

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