

Japan's Bleary-eyed Children

By Ato Ekusa

Every spring the Japanese eagerly await the day when they can head for a nearby park or scenic spot, lay out their picnic mats, and enjoy drinking, singing and other frolicking under the picturesque but short-lived cherry blossoms, one of the popular symbols of their country.

One of the best places to view the cherry blossoms in Tokyo is in and around Chidorigafuchi Park, near the Imperial Palace and the British Embassy. Due partly to the highly speculative bubble economy, the cherry blossom viewing at the park last year was very merry indeed—in some cases, even overly merry. I remember one man, colorfully dressed and looking very much like a real estate agent, who, bottle in hand, barged in on a flower-watching party of a firm in the finance industry and momentarily stole the show with his clowning and crooning into a microphone. He obviously wanted to win over some friends in the financial business.

In contrast, probably because the bubble has burst, this year's cherry blossom viewing at the park was a much tamer affair. Usually groups of people enjoy nighttime parties under the blossoms, bringing along their own lighting for the show. But this year there was scarcely any of this. For the first time in several years, there seemed to be a general calmness about the occasion.

It seems that a certain calmness has been restored to the traditional week's holiday at the beginning of May, too. According to one travel company, young working women have begun to feel the pinch as the economic recession bites into their bonuses. Instead of taking expensive vacations overseas, they made do with domestic trips that were shorter and much closer to home. Many people living in Tokyo, for example, took a day trip to Kamakura, the seat of Japan's samurai administrative government in the Middle Ages and the home of many shrines, temples and historical sites. Here they

whet their holiday appetites by gazing at the sea and getting a taste of history.

In this way, Japanese adults seem to be changing their lifestyles slowly but surely to meet the needs of the time. But not so Japanese children, who seem to be as wrapped up in competition as ever.

At one elementary school in Tokyo, a lesson was interrupted by the beeping of a pupil's automatic pager—a form of mobile communication in which the caller's telephone number is displayed on a small liquid-crystal screen, so the carrier of the pager can soon return the call. For adults, the pager has become a symbol of a tightly controlled society held together by a chain of radio waves. In other words, their bosses can keep in contact with them at all times.

Recently, though, even elementary school children have come to carry pagers in their pockets. In the case described above, the call was from a busy working mother asking her child to do the shopping for dinner on the way home from school. A growing number of teachers in Tokyo's elementary schools grumble that children have started bringing pagers to school and that the beeping interrupts classes.

If Japanese children cannot escape during school hours, they cannot get away after school, either. They are, as ever, the victims of Japan's infamous examination hell. In Tokyo as many as four out of five youngsters attend a cram school. So when they return home from regular school, more often than not it is simply to change books before heading off for further studies.

The cram schools are divided into two sorts—those that prepare students for entry into famous private junior high schools, and those that offer supplementary education for children who have a hard job keeping up with lessons at their regular school. The children often study until nine in the evening. In the case of noted preparatory cram schools, youngsters frequently commute long distances



by train, so they can often be seen at station kiosks—alongside tired salaried workers—downing a much-needed vitamin drink.

As a result of the heavy load on them, children no longer have a chance to play outdoors with their neighborhood pals. One youngster is attending a cram school, another is having a piano lesson, and another is learning calligraphy.

In the past children played mothers and fathers with their dolls and thereby learned about their roles in society. But nowadays children have no time to learn about society. Instead they make do with so-called virtual reality, donning special eyeglasses and, with the help of computer graphics, falling into the illusion that they are, for example, romping about on a meadow on a bright spring day. It is rather like the simulation devices that budding pilots use to practice takeoffs and landings.

Today's children still play mothers and fathers—but alone, sitting in front of a computer. This stay-at-home crowd is expected to increase in the future. I doubt whether they can gain any real understanding of social roles through this kind of virtual reality.

This autumn public kindergartens and elementary, junior and senior high schools will switch over to a five-day week once a month, with the lessons that were scheduled to take place on Saturdays being held on other days. Rather than having more time to themselves, however, Japanese children will probably just stay longer at the cram school. With a younger generation like this, one wonders when Japan will really be able to cast off its image as a nation of ants.

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