

# Thoughts for the New Year

By Catrien Ross

At least 18 times in the last eight months, the train line along which I commute was stopped because of a suicide on the tracks.

Railway officials have no idea why so many Japanese are throwing themselves in front of trains along this 60-km stretch that runs between Tokyo Station and Takao Station in Hachioji. They only know that the Chuo Line has become a "suicide line" as more people every year choose to die on these tracks. Citing his main concern as the impact on railway users, one spokesman has announced that would-be suicides may be deterred by the knowledge that their families will be faced with a "very, very large" bill to compensate for disruption of train schedules that affect tens of thousands of commuters. Comfort indeed for those who feel compelled to end their lives this way.

Several years ago a Japanese friend, Takako, told me of a family whose son, a university student, had drowned in the moat surrounding the Imperial Palace in Tokyo. She was saddened, not only by the boy's young age, but also by the fact that his death was probably a suicide. It shocked her to think that someone who had much to look forward to, decided instead to drown himself. His was a solidly middle-class family enjoying the affluence of the early 1980s, a period when Japan became known for conspicuous consumption, corporate buying frenzies and world economic clout. Companies were thriving and university graduates could look forward to job security. Why should this youth take his own life?

Unfortunately, this was not an isolated incident, but part of what may be a growing trend in Japan. A report released by the National Police Agency last November showed that an increased number of young people in 1994 killed

themselves. Among children under the age of 14, the number of suicides jumped by 28, to 86. Compared with the previous year, the number of deaths by suicide was higher for elementary, junior and senior high-school students. The youngest to die was a nine-year-old third-grade boy. Suicides by people aged 15 to 19 increased, from 106 to 494, and those by people aged between 25 and 29 jumped by 170, to 1,281.

What is causing so much despair? For those under the age of 19, the top reason noted was poor school performance, followed by university entrance examination difficulties and strained relations with friends. Five junior high and two high school boys are thought to have killed themselves as a result of being bullied.

Accepted school bullying is now a pervasive problem throughout Japan. In classes I have taught in the past, almost every student I talked to admitted that he or she suffered varying degrees of bullying at school. One girl, who had

opted to attend college in the U.S., endured years of humiliation because her skin was a little darker than everyone else's. A boy was bullied merely because he was sensitive and quiet and kept to himself. His bullying torture ended when an older, much bigger boy befriended him and took him under a protective wing. Another girl was bullied because she had lived abroad during her father's frequent assignments overseas. She returned to Japan "too different" to be welcomed by her classmates, who shunned and then bullied her into an acceptable sameness.

Foreigners unfamiliar with Japan's educational system may find it hard to imagine why students should kill themselves simply because their grades are not good enough. But the standard litany repeated over and over to students is that high marks provide the ticket to a secure future. Diligent study improves grades and helps prepare for grueling university entrance examinations. Entry into a desirable university



The Suicide Line—JR Chuo Line

in turn means that after graduation students are assured job offers from equally desirable companies. For years, Japanese mothers, who are typically entrusted with the entire responsibility of their children's education, have coaxed, prodded and pushed their offspring into hours of punishing study and homework assignments. One mother I know sent her son to an intensive cramming camp where the boy was not allowed to sleep for even one hour over the whole weekend. He returned home close to collapse and with badly blistered lips, but he had done his part to prepare for the future his mother dreamed for him, namely a job and financial stability. Girls and boys younger than five are groomed by ambitious parents to pass interviews set by schools that can guarantee placement at their affiliated high schools and universities. For a hefty tuition price and the right sort of social standing, the child's economic outlook can be locked in.

But while homework and examination hells continue, circumstances within the targeted working world have shifted dramatically. With the bursting of the so-called bubble economy in the late 1980s, the bloom is clearly off Japan's industrial momentum. Gone is the optimism concerning economic growth. Instead, companies are trimming jobs and cutting back on hiring. In 1995, for example, some 70,000 recent college graduates had not found jobs as of May, the worst record since 1950, according to the Education Ministry. The situation was especially bad for women, with only 63.7% of 159,050 female graduates receiving job promises. During 1991, when employment of university graduates was at its peak, 81.8% of women obtained work. The crisis has renewed attitudes of discrimination against women in the workplace, and female graduates are now complaining of company interviews where they were asked about the size of their breasts or told to remove their jackets so that interviewers could have a better look.

The numbers are expected to be even

worse for 1996, since this year there will be 65,000 more graduates in what has turned into a prolonged economic slump with next to no signs of recovery. Yet parents, teachers and students themselves have continued to aim for a corporate framework that is rapidly disassembling. Whenever I see suitably dark-suited young people streaming in the hundreds to annual job interviews, I wonder how many have questioned whether this is the best path to take, given the changing industrial environment.

It depresses me to think that this lemming-like behavior remains the preferred choice of the vast majority of graduates. Is this the sole purpose of a university education? Why not view the downturn in the economy as an opportunity to enjoy at least one year off. To



*Room for improvement as reality of an ageing society stares Japan in the face.*

take a break from endless studies and develop personally unique strengths and interest. Travel. Be a volunteer. Learn new skills. Return to university for advanced study. Accept a temporary job or series of jobs that will allow time to discover true likes and dislikes. Develop awareness of the individual's role in shaping the future.

Could it be that there is a direct relationship between Japanese society's unimaginative harnessing of youthful energy and the significant rise in sui-

cides among the young? Is this a worthwhile price to pay for sticking to outmoded structures?

Not all parents, of course, allow their children to be so manipulated. I know one Japanese father who adamantly refused to send his two sons to the extracurricular cram school almost unanimously viewed as essential. Instead, he wrote letters to teachers stating his opposition to such a brutal system and his intention to preserve the capacity of his sons to enjoy rather than dread school. One son went on to post-graduate study in chemistry and a job with one of Japan's top research companies. The other will soon graduate as a doctor. Both are accomplished classical pianists, enjoy outdoor sports and have studied or lived overseas. Are they especially gifted young men or an

example of what can happen when children are allowed to develop a broader range of talents than the narrowness of Japanese education currently permits?

Successful graduation from an elite university alone is not sufficient to guarantee social maturity or responsibility. Top members of Aum Supreme Truth were previously among Japan's brightest and best. Is it because Japanese society has so little to offer that they

opted instead to join a fanatic group that plotted and murdered? Although public outrage is understandable, merely disbanding Aum and revising Japan's Religious Corporation Law will not correct the underlying social conditions that lead to such disillusionment among the young in the first place.

Dissatisfaction is not limited to the young, of course. Of the 21,679 suicides reported in 1994, a total of 5,511 deaths were committed by people 65 years old and older. The image of Japan

as a nation of ritual adult suicide has been fostered abroad by books and movies, but the reality is not so pretty as it is often portrayed. The pains of illness are the main reason for suicides among the elderly, who comprise Japan's fastest growing population sector. By the year 2007, one in five Japanese (who now number 124 million), will be over 65. Suicides are therefore likely to remain a problem in a society increasingly plagued by a despairing youth and the desperate elderly.

Nor does there seem to be much empathy between the two extremes. Riding the trains I have noticed a sharp rise in the numbers of both young and middle-aged Japanese who sit down in "silver" seats reserved for the aged and then refuse to give them up to, or intently ignore, any elderly person who struggles by. These days there is a noticeable lack of compassion at several levels of society.

Urbanization and changing lifestyles have led to a disintegration of family ties which formerly ensured that the elderly would be cared for at home. More and more old people are living alone and looking after the sick is a pressing burden for families still living with parents or grandparents. Even dead bodies have become a concern. In recent years so many people have wanted to donate their bodies to medical science that colleges are turning down offers because they lack storage space for the glut in corpses. There were 138,000 potential donors registered in 1993, twice as many as a decade ago. Some skeptics point out that this recent rush is due to the fact that while colleges do not pay for bodies, they do give incense money to donors' relatives, cremate the bodies, and enshrine the remains at university temples if families so wish. In other words, relatives need not worry about the high cost of burial or cremation, or the shortage of cemetery land. The parents of a friend recently paid ¥6 million (US\$60,000) for a tiny plot that will hold their urns. And people routinely shell out anywhere from several hundred thousand to several million yen to Buddhist monks who

select prestigious after-death names for these eager customers. Death in Japan spells big business.

### A catalyst for change

But Japan is a part of Asia after all, and it is the Chinese language ideograms which explain that the moment is both crisis and opportunity. Herein lies encouragement which many Japanese friends in their gloomiest moods tend to forget.

The current plague of troubles can burgeon unchecked, or they can be faced squarely with an eye to resolution. A crisis can become an opportunity for new thinking. This, however, requires the courage to take the first stand against the prevailing tide, a conspicuous action that would horrify most Japanese, who are much too afraid of what others might think of them. Under the watchful gaze of neighbors and associates, for example, it is a brave mother who steps out of line by defying the system to create educational alternatives for her child. It also requires a philosophical commitment that few people here are willing to make in the face of inevitable censure.

When I first moved to Hachioji, I proudly hung out my futons every morning, telling myself that I was truly experiencing Japanese life. Of course, being a foreigner, I should have known I was being even more closely observed. A few weeks later, my landlady's daughter knocked at my front door to tell me, very nicely and politely, that in Japan, futons are never left out to hang past three o'clock in the afternoon. Absorbed in work at my home office, I had been leaving my futons out until early evening, embarrassing the neighborhood. Such scrutiny of even the smallest details is encountered by Japanese on a daily basis. Being different is extremely difficult.

Still, many individuals can, and are, making radically bold changes in their lives. Traditional family roles are completely reversed for one Japanese friend who supplies us with organic vegetables from the mountain plot he is working as a sustainable agriculture farm. Formerly a professional baker, he is now the

househusband who cooks and takes care of two children while his wife, the breadwinner, teaches at a high school. They own no car and their lifestyle needs are very modest. When he comes to QRQ for treatment, we exchange therapy for his homemade bread and fresh produce.

If the road ahead is anything like 1995, then Japan is in for another rough ride. Last year threw up one disaster after another, from the Great Hanshin Earthquake to the gas attack on the Tokyo subways. There was the lingering resentment associated with the 50th anniversary of the close of World War II, as well as ongoing political corruption, crimes by former high-ranking bureaucrats, the housing loan industry catastrophe, the Daiwa bank scandal and troubled international relations.

Coping will require all the resources that Japan can muster, which will be impossible unless numerous internal matters are cleaned up. Concerning the economy, things are not going to be easy and many analysts predict they may well get much worse. Young people will be forced to recognize that the world for which they have so painstakingly prepared has changed. Whether their response is negative or positive will depend on how deeply they have been able to nurture qualities of resilience and flexibility.

A sense of helplessness about life and events has increasingly pervaded Japanese society, but the accompanying feelings of resignation should not be allowed to take root. Change is not only possible, it is necessary and even healthy. Without this, certainly the most viable option for growing numbers of Japanese people, both young and old, will continue to be suicide, whether it is death in the schoolyard or along the Chuo Line. JTI

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