

Japanese Schools Take Root Overseas

By Toshio Iwasaki, editor of the *Journal of Japanese Trade & Industry*

Sounds of children at play fill the air in the beautiful greenery of a countryside area of eastern France, not far from the German-Swiss border. Somehow, they seem to be out of place, for this is Kientzheim in Alsace. The cries are in Japanese, the only language they speak.

The children are playing near a group of several buildings that must have braved wind and snow in a corner of the village surrounded by trees. The buildings are genuine Japanese junior and senior high schools, operated by Lycée Seijo d'Alsace. There are 180 Japanese boys and girls who attend classes from seventh to 12th grade. Lycée Seijo d'Alsace was founded in 1986 by Seijo Gakuen, a well-known Japanese educational foundation operating schools from kindergarten to university in Tokyo.

The students come from homes not only in Alsace but also from Germany, Italy and almost all parts of Europe, the Soviet Union, Africa, Asia and even from Japan as well. They all live in school dormitories.

The number of overseas elementary and junior high schools for Japanese children has increased in postwar years in parallel with the growth of the Japanese economy and the surge in the number of Japanese corporate employees dispatched abroad. However, there was no senior Japanese high school outside Japan until Rikkyo School in England was founded in 1972 in the suburbs of London. It remained the only overseas Japanese senior high school for the next 14 years.

The education system in Japan is believed to have played a large part in blocking the establishment of any senior Japanese high schools for children of Japanese nationals abroad. It placed extreme emphasis on university admission tests. A good deal of time in senior high schools in Japan was thus devoted to preparing for strenuous college and university entrance examinations. It has be-

come common particularly for seniors in high school to take refresher courses and practice test papers and go to cramming schools in order to gain admission to the university of their choice.

Children of Japanese nationals abroad were free from such pressures, but this was a cause of concern for their parents. It was hard to motivate the youngsters to study for university entrance examinations. Parents who wanted their children to go to a university in Japan usually kept them with them until they were through junior high school, and then sent them back to Japan to attend a senior high school. It had become the practice for some parents to go abroad and leave their children behind to let them learn firsthand the difficulty of winning admission to a university.

Scope of schooling

This situation began to change in the mid-1980s. Since 1986, private senior high schools have been opening each year in countries outside Japan. A total of 13 such schools have debuted through fiscal 1991. They are located in Britain, France, Germany, Denmark, Ireland and the United States. The sole exception is Shibuya Makuhari Senior High School, which is located in Singapore. Additionally, several others are said to be planning to open up overseas branches.

These private senior high schools vary in the scope of education they offer. Some provide only for senior high school curricula while others have the facilities to take in children for elementary and junior high school as well as senior high school students.

They are all operated by bona fide private Japanese school foundations especially for children of Japanese nationals in foreign countries. Graduates of these schools are given requirements for admission to a university by the Ministry of Education. Most of the Japanese schools are boarding schools and keep in touch

with their sister schools in Japan and take on the educational characteristics of Japanese private schools.

Why was there a push for the establishment of private Japanese senior high schools abroad in the mid-1980s?

One reason is that it was about this time that the Japanese economy began making rapid strides toward internationalization. Japanese companies shifted their overseas business activities from being export-oriented to direct investment. They stepped up their active efforts to manufacture products abroad. There was also an increase in the number of Japanese corporate employees working away from their offices and plants at home. These moves made the education of Japanese children abroad a pressing problem.

The establishment of Lycée Seijo d'Alsace had its origins in a campaign launched by officials of the local Alsace administration to invite Japanese companies to locate plants in their region. Alsace officials mapped out a plan to invite a Japanese school to establish a branch in Alsace as a part of their strategy to spur Japanese enterprises to become interested in their campaign. Seijo Gakuen became interested in Alsace's invitation as it came at a time when it was seeking ways to start an overseas school as part of a commemorative event in 1987 to mark the 70th anniversary of its founding. The negotiations came to a successful conclusion in 1984 and Lycée Seijo d'Alsace came into being in 1986.

Attraction for companies

This turned out to be the beginning of a Japanese corporate advance into the Alsace area, since Sony decided at that time to locate its plant there. Ricoh and several other Japanese companies then followed Sony in setting up factories. This case was typical of the way in which overseas expansions by Japanese companies are tied in with the establishment of Japanese schools going abroad.

Prof. Ryoichi Kuroha of Tsukuba University, however, says this was not the only reason for the rush of Japanese schools abroad. Pointing to the steady decline in the birthrate in Japan in recent years, he says there is certain to be a drop in the number of schoolchildren in the future. Private schools in Japan, he says, are beginning to engage in fierce competition for a share in the shrinking market to ensure their survival.

In Prof. Kuroha's view, one of the motives of owners of private schools in advancing into foreign countries is that if they operate a school abroad it creates an image of an international-oriented school rich in an education of international scale and is useful in attracting young people aspiring to go to university. Of course, it is natural that in the background of such a conception are the educational ideals and expectations held by the schools and parents, who feel that the times require internationally talented young people.

Let's look at the experience of another school. At the end of August this year, Tetsuo Tamura, director of Shibuya Kyoiku Gakuen, departed from Tokyo's Narita Airport for Singapore. The purpose of his trip was to attend a ceremony marking the completion of new buildings of Shibuya Makuhari Senior High School in Singapore, of which he is the principal.

Shibuya Kyoiku Gakuen owns and operates a university, a college and four high schools in the Tokyo vicinity. Tamura was an early proponent of the need to establish an international-oriented education for young Japanese people. He practiced what he preached by establishing Makuhari Senior High School about 10 years ago to accept and educate children of Japanese nationals returning from abroad who were having trouble getting adjusted to the education system and environment at home.

Tamura says the reason he became interested in the education of Japanese returnees was that many of the most outstanding people he knows got their early educations overseas. He also learned about a particular phenomenon in the education of returnees—the unfounded sense of alienation created among the returnees from Europe, America and

Asian countries. This realization prompted him to establish a school branch in an Asian country. He says he wanted to correct such a sense of alienation, and educate them to be truly internationally oriented.

Looking toward Asia

Tamura felt Japanese private schools were slanted toward Europe and America in having branches there, and that was one reason why he wanted to establish a Shibuya Kyoiku Gakuen branch in Asia.

As a temporary measure, the Singapore branch of Makuhari Senior High School opened in April this year at a local Japanese kindergarten. It started with some 50 Japanese students who came from Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Brunei to enroll in the high school's class for first-year students. The school leased 20,000 square meters of land from the Singapore government on very favorable terms. Construction of the school buildings, dormitories and athletics facilities was completed in the summer and the students were due to move into the new establishment in September for the second semester. This is also an indication of the internationalization of industry.

The third reason for the boom in Japanese high schools in overseas countries is the growing desire among better-off families to have their children educated in such schools rather than at high schools in Japan. Originally, Japanese schools abroad were set up to educate offspring of Japanese nationals in foreign countries. This is why the Ministry of Education designated them as authorized Japanese schools and the local governments in

the places where they established themselves extended cooperation in the establishment of the schools. But today overseas Japanese schools accept many students from Japan. Prof. Kuroha believes the upsurge in the establishment of overseas Japanese schools will continue for sometime. And the intensified competition for accepting students from Japan appears to have become an element which cannot be ignored from the standpoint of school management.

The operators of Japanese schools abroad strive to establish harmony with the local community.

In the case of Lycée Seijo d'Alsace, a total of 200 Japanese teachers and students descended on a village with a population of 800. Thus, the school is making all-out efforts to foster a sense of harmony with the villagers, inviting them to visit the school for an "open house," and sending students to participate in a village-sponsored marathon. Seijo Gakuen has established a cultural center in the nearby city of Colmar which is used to hold lectures introducing aspects of Japan, to show movies, and to keep books and printed materials on Japan.

The Singapore branch of Makuhari Senior High School has an astronomical observatory which it plans to open to local Singapore high school students as part of efforts to establish interchanges between Japan and Singapore.

Education is a time-consuming undertaking. It will probably take a little while to confirm whether Japanese schools abroad, responding to the needs of the times, can really take root as an indispensable part of internationalized Japanese educational institutions. ■



The spread of Japanese high schools overseas reflects the internationalization of Japanese industry.