

## Ambivalent Japan turns on its 'insular' youth | The Japan Times



On March 15, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe officially announced Japan's participation in Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) free-trade negotiations. Japan's decision to join the talks shows that at least some in government have accepted the fact that "opening up" Japan is in the nation's best long-term interests.

"If Japan does not participate in the negotiations," warns the draft proposal compiled by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's committee on TPP issues, "it will be unable to take advantage of growth in the Asia-Pacific region." In this sense, Japan's participation in the TPP is very much a litmus test of its commitment to globalization.

Opposition, however, remains strong to the TPP specifically, and to globalization in general. Japan's ambivalence towards opening up is illustrated by recent calls to secure global human resources (*gurōbaru jinzai*). These resources are increasingly portrayed as absolutely crucial for Japan's future in the face of its global competitive de-

cline. On the other hand, talk of global human resources is often accompanied by hand-wringing over Japan's inward-looking (*uchimuki*) passive youth who are seemingly less and less interested in venturing outside Japan.

Certainly, the number of Japanese studying and working abroad in recent years has fallen significantly. As the graph shows, since a peak of 82,945 Japanese studying abroad in 2004, numbers have dropped significantly, roughly returning to the level they were at in 1995. Since the most popular destination for Japanese students has always been (and remains) the U.S., the rapid fall in Japanese students attending American universities has been the focus of attention: In terms of numbers of foreign students studying at U.S. universities, Japanese ranked 7th in 2011-12 at 19,900, down 60 percent from the peak of around 47,000 in 1997-98, when Japan was America's largest source of students.

Behind criticism of *uchimuki* youth lies the fear that Japan is being overtaken by its closest neighbors. Media reports often highlight the rapid rise of Chinese and South Korean students studying in the U.S., the implication being that Japan is being left behind in the race to develop global human resources. "In a Japan that is showing signs of being pushed aside by China and South Korea's focus on the economic sphere," lamented the Yomiuri Shimbun in a front-page August 2012 article, "it is said that the youngsters who have to shoulder the burden of the next generation are *uchimuki*."

The question is, however, whether an "inward-looking orientation" (*uchimuki shikō*) among young people is the main reason behind the fall in Japanese studying abroad. A 2010 survey by the British Council found that the majority of Japanese high school and university students were actually interested in studying overseas, and if anything had become more interested over the past five years. The survey highlighted worries over safety, expenses and negative influences on school/work as reasons why youngsters ultimately didn't go abroad.

A 2010 Sanno Institute of Management survey on the "global consciousness" of new employees produced similar findings. While 49 percent replied that they didn't want to work overseas at all (up from 29.2 percent in 2001), the most common reason given was the "risk" involved. Although "risk" was not specified, the deterioration of the economic situation from 2008 — a period that saw the number adverse to going abroad jump from a third to almost a half of respondents — suggests financial risk, echoing the British Council survey.

What is interesting here is how the *uchimuki* mentality is offered as the reason for falling numbers when a closer look at the data suggests social and economic conditions may offer a better explanation. Perhaps the problem is less about young people — who are typically blamed for all sorts of social ills — and more about society and the companies that hire youngsters. In particular, Japan's rigid and inflexible job-hunting system — currently in the middle of a “super ice age” — has been picked out as particularly problematic.

Although a number of high-profile Japanese companies — such as Rakuten and Fast Retailing — have taken concrete measures to cultivate global human resources, not all Japanese companies seem eager to move away from traditional employment models. Indeed, there is evidence that Japanese hierarchical corporate culture is not necessarily comfortable with confident and outspoken returnee students. [A long article in The New York Times last year](#) described the experiences of a number of Japanese with study-abroad experience who found Japanese companies unenthusiastic and even reluctant to hire them. The article cites a survey of 1,000 Japanese companies on their recruitment plans in which less than a quarter said in fiscal 2012 they planned to hire Japanese applicants who had studied abroad.

Japanese companies' lack of global awareness has been criticized both in and outside Japan. The trade ministry's Global Human Resource Development Committee described top management's inaction as the same as sitting idly by, literally “waiting to die” (*zashite shi o matsu*). Jennifer Stout, U.S. deputy assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific affairs, offered similar criticism. Talking about the drop in Japanese students studying in the U.S., Stout rejected stereotypical discussions of *uchimuki* youth, suggesting that Japanese corporate culture doesn't always rate overseas experience and English ability. Indeed, overseas experience can even be a disadvantage for job-hunters.

In its recent proposal to lower the grade when elementary school students start studying English, the government's Education Rebuilding Implementation Council noted that students in many Asian countries begin much earlier than in Japan. Writing about the relationship between Japan and the English language — particularly Japan's slowness, compared to its Asian neighbors, in introducing English as a regular subject in elementary schools — Nobuyuki Honna, a professor emeritus at Aoyama Gakuin University, suggests that there is a deep-seated notion in Japan of English not as a global language but as something that belongs to someone else — to Britain

and the United States.

This attitude epitomizes Japan's ambivalent attitude towards globalization. On the one hand, the country is aware that in order to remain economically competitive it must open up, instigate reforms and embrace globalization in all its aspects; on the other, there remains a strong tendency to close in, reject global norms and standards, and retreat inwards. The discussions over global human resources capture the dilemma of a country caught in two minds, a quandary that explains Abe's ultra-cautious approach to entering even negotiations over TPP.

One of the biggest ironies in these discussions on global human resources is how young people have been made scapegoats for Japan's failure to resolve this dilemma. Thus, Japan's problems in attracting and securing such resources are typically explained not by the rigid job-hunting system, parochial immigration policies or conservative corporate culture, but by inward-looking uchimuki youth.

In sum, it may be more accurate to talk of an uchimuki government or even society, one that remains rooted in an insular world view that sees globalization as an external process, something owned by somebody else. Just how far Japan is prepared to emerge from its global hibernation will become clear in October when the 12 TPP countries meet at the sidelines of APEC to hammer out a basic agreement.

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