

Rules in Japanese schools

Uniform, Hairstyle... A nightmare or the guarantee of a perfect society? **Page 2**

Rescue Hikikomori!

Programs aim to address needs and promote reintegration into society **Page 3**

Is teaching less attractive?

The most ancient and noble profession is in decline in Japan **Page 4**

Never ending overwork

When can you finish your shift? Overworking and overtime in Japan **Page 5**

Tattoos in Japan

Negative stigma across history, through generations, and within culture... **Page 6**

Save Our Children: A deep dive into Japanese Child Custody Laws

Insight into the impact of divorce on children

By Shosei HAGIMORI, Samantha E. MCKAY and Laetitia X. V. ROBIN

Sophia (pseudonym) needed to take a deep breath before she could explain her relationship with her father, and how he never took the initiative to contact her. Sophia is 23 years old and was born to a Brazilian mother and a Japanese father who divorced when she was a child. She has only met her father once since her parents divorced. In Sophia's eyes, "he acts like a child." The most disappointing part of the divorce for Sophia was watching her own father's behavior: "When we had a fight, he said really mean things to me. I'm not angry at him, I'm just disappointed a little bit because he is supposed to be the adult in my life, but he isn't."

Lately, the Japanese Government has been debating whether Japanese child custody laws should consider joint custody as an option. Because the debate is centered on whether the parents want to see their children, the child's perspective comes last. Indeed, the problems of a broken couple should not become the problem of a child.

Article 766 of the Japanese Penal Code states that "the child's interests must be given the highest priority." However, in many cases, the parent's feelings toward their ex-partners are prioritized over the needs of the child. When the parents are supposed to be pillars of support, they place their children in difficult and hurtful situations. It is time to recenter debate about custody law around children.

Currently in Japan, children of divorced couples are subject to sole custody laws, meaning that only one parent after the divorce makes every decision for their children. This assumes that couples have no intention of maintaining contact after divorce, granting custody rights to one parent.

According to a survey by the Ministry of Justice, 80% of the Japanese population claim to be satisfied with current sole custody laws. One reason for this wide-spread support is that people believe sole custody prevents fights between divorced couples, especially domestic violence. Sophia experienced this firsthand, recalling that her parents "were fighting a lot, for a long time" before they divorced. For Sophia, spending time with her mother was what she wanted, and she could see that her mother was happier after the divorce.

The sole custody system allowed Sophia and her mother to live happily without the worry of Sophia being taken by her father. She explained that she had always been closer to her mother, "My dad was more financially stable but my mom, she took care of me more, because my dad was always away. I wasn't close to my dad." Even years following the divorce, she did not feel like he had any interest in her.

According to Tanabe, a practicing lawyer specializing in family law, Sophia's case is not unusual. Mr. Tanabe has noticed that many of his Japanese clients, who are not granted parental authority, are satisfied by the decision, because they do not need to maintain contact with their ex-partner.

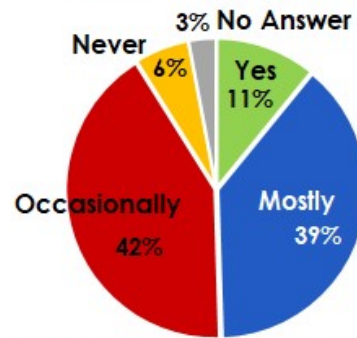
Mr. Tanabe also notes that, although some clients ask for visitation rights, they often end up relinquishing the rights after a few years. The main reason is that visitation rights are limited, making it difficult for the child and parent to develop a strong connection.

For Sophia, the current sole-custody laws in Japan created a friction that resulted in a disconnection with her father. She explains that he failed to maintain a bond with her. "The last time I saw him, I was 15, so it's been 8 years." Her father also failed to support her family. "He never helped my mom financially or anything. And it's the same for my sisters. So, yes, it's hard." Just like many other Japanese parents without parental authority, Sophia's father let her family suffer financial problems.

The current child custody laws stipulate that, in many cases, the parent without custodial rights should provide some financial support for the child. However, in practice, financial support is not always sought out through court cases, due to how lengthy and emotionally draining the court process can be. Furthermore, even if financial support is acquired, it is not always sufficient for childcare expenses.

According to article 766 of the Japanese Penal Code, parents should try to resolve matters regarding child custody through mediation during the divorce process. The matters that need to be discussed include custody rights, visitation rights, other forms of contact between parent and child, and the sharing of childcare expenses. However, if mediation is not possible, the family court will settle the case.

Q: Is it better for parents to make mutual decisions about their children?



(Source: A survey of the Ministry of Justice)



Many children end up with their mother and lose the bond with their father (illustrated by Delamare Leane)

In general, the most recent caretaker of the child will be granted custody rights by the courts. However, this creates an issue. Knowing that courts rule in favor of the most recent caretaker, many parents contemplating divorce will race to 'abduct' their children, sneaking away with the child so that they will be considered as the most recent caregiver.

The Japanese police released a statement that they adhere to the principle of non-intervention regarding the removal of children. The principle of "non-intervention" means that the police, who belong to the executive branch of the government, cannot intervene in civil cases, which are the purview of the judicial branch. In other words, because child custody cases are handled by the judicial branch, the police will not intervene when a parent runs away with their child in the wake of a divorce.

A way to potentially alleviate such 'abductions' for the time being is to allow more visitation rights. According to Mr. Tanabe, the courts do not allow visitation very often. A survey released by the Ministry of Justice in February 2022 reported that 53.8% of court dispositions regarding childcare and custody are withdrawn or dismissed.

Values and systems regarding child custody change from country to country. In Japan, Mr. Tanabe explained how custody law assumes that parents do not want to maintain contact after divorce. In the western world, the inclusion of both parents in the upbringing of a child is highly valued.

Thus, in many cases, children are only granted the opportunity to bond with one parent, even when the other parent wishes to meet them.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Justice's survey revealed that 91% of the Japanese population believe that both parents should have at least some say in childcare decisions. Increasing visitation rights could be the answer to providing both parents with a say in their child's life. Although 80% of the population is satisfied with current sole custody laws, 50% of the population

hope to see joint custody introduced into Japanese law.

Mr. Tanabe explained that some people believe joint custody to be like the American system, which is when parents equally share custodial duties as co-parents, but joint custody can take several forms other than the traditional 50:50. In most cases, both parents find a mutual arrangement that also works for the child. There are many aspects that are taken into consideration, such as the children's emotional bonds with their parents, their parent's current abilities, and maintaining consistency in relationships. However, this process re-

quires parents to engage in open dialogue, despite the breakdown of their relationship, resulting in potential friction. Although Japan's sole custody system aims to reduce a child's exposure to conflict, some cultures find more value in using joint custody to maintain a close relationship between the child and both parents.

Values and systems regarding child custody change from country to country. In Japan, Mr. Tanabe explained how custody law assumes that parents do not want to maintain contact after divorce. In the western world, the inclusion of both parents in the upbringing of a child is highly valued.

Sophia ends her interview with a wider perspective: "In my case, I think [sole custody] is a really good system, but I know that it's not always the case. I know that sometimes both parents want to be really in their children's lives." Is it possible to have both sole and joint custody in Japan? No matter the country, custody law exerts direct and profound impacts on the relationship between a child and their parents. To accommodate the various needs of children and make them the focal point of custody debate, the law needs to become more open and diverse.

Tip "Joint Custody" According to a survey by the Japanese Ministry of Justice (2020), 22 of the 24 countries surveyed have adopted "joint custody." India and Türkiye only had "sole custody," similar to Japan. (Y)

Rules in Japanese schools

A nightmare, or the guarantee of a perfect society?

By Marion M. G. COSTES-ROSSIGNOL, Maaya HAYANO and Hatsune SATO

According to a survey in Fukui Prefecture, reported by the Chunichi Shimbun on April 26th, 2023, "only 19% of Japanese schools allow girls to wear slacks as their school uniform, which means that 81% of Japanese schools make girls wear skirts, no matter the season." Strict school rules are alive and well in Japan, now resembling outdated customs that fail to adjust to the times.

In both global and domestic debate, Japan's strict school rules have been criticized as a draconian nightmare that lacks true educational value. According to the Japanese Ministry of Education's Student Guidance Manual, a school rule can be considered exceedingly strict if it deviates from the "necessary and reasonable scope to achieve educational objectives" and is not "within the scope deemed reasonable under socially accepted norms." The manual's wording remains vague, leaving schools nation-wide to decide which rules are necessary for student growth, and which represent the aging underbelly of an outdated past. Where will Japan draw the line?

Indeed, by teaching students discipline and responsibility, while fostering a safe school environment, school rules can have positive effects on learning outcomes. However, it is questionable whether many school rules in Japan truly contribute to student education.

One of the most famous and controversial of Japan's school rules is the obligation to wear a school uniform: slacks for boys and skirts for girls, no matter the weather. Enforcing girls to wear gender specific school uniforms has become problematic both because skirts are not warm enough during the winter, and many girls are uncomfortable with how skirts expose underwear and emphasise body lines.

On top of that, the 21st century has seen world-wide discussion regarding gender identity and the deconstruction of the gender binary. In Japan, this discussion has manifested in such trends as genderless fashion. How will Japan's gendered uniform culture react to a changing world that increasingly ceases to operate according to clean-cut gender lines?

To understand more about public opinion regarding Japan's strict school rules, we interviewed both a former schoolteacher and two current students who want to become teachers in the future. We also asked 38 random Japanese students and 13 international students their point of view, so we could have a wider range of opinions.

Most of the international students were all against rules regarding uniforms, citing that they do not influence one's ability to learn, potentially expose underwear and emphasise body lines, and prevent students from expressing their personality by wearing what they want.

The teacher that we interviewed explained that uniforms are expensive, but nonetheless believed that some sort of dress code is necessary, suggesting that a good alternative might be for students to go to school with jeans and a black shirt instead. The teacher adds: "Japanese people are easily judged by their appearance." Some believe that "people with blond hair are delinquents," or "people with tattoos are *yakuza*." Some school rules are made to protect students from being subject to judgement.

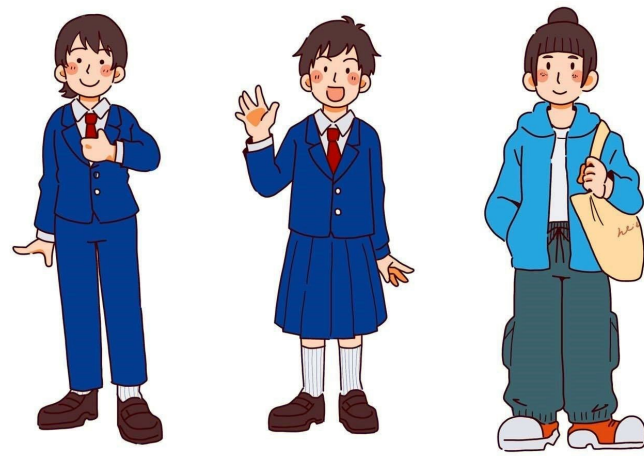
On the other hand, the two future teachers think that uniforms are necessary, because "they are cultural, give students a sense of belonging, and are something you can only experience for a certain period." Moreover, "they save students from wasting time in the morning, since they don't have to think about what to wear." Many students, both Japanese and international, raised the gender issues implicated in wearing uniforms. Indeed, even if almost 20% of girls are now allowed to wear slacks as their school uniform in Japan, it still means that more than 80% of female students and 100% of male students are still not allowed to choose the kind of uniform they want to wear.

In a world that increasingly questions the concept of gender, the obligation of wearing a uniform according to one's sex assigned at birth has become more problematic. Almost every interviewee, who is not against uniforms, still emphasized the importance of having the right to choose. Choosing one's clothes is not just about free will, it is also about physical and psychological comfort: students become able to experience and express their gender as they please. Many students stated that, even without regards to gender, some girls simply do not feel comfortable wearing skirts, and on the contrary, some boys may simply want to wear skirts due to fashion preferences.

Opinions about uniforms seem to vary, but what about accessories? Might being allowed to wear more accessories grant students a stronger sense of freedom, individuality, and self-expression? In our survey regarding relaxing rules about accessories, 90% of students said that they are bothered by accessory related rules and would like things to change. The main reasons are the same as those regarding uniforms: nowadays students want to have more freedom to develop their personality, and want the diversity of the LGBTQ+ community to be represented in the rule making process.

Some students explain that being able to wear bracelets, necklaces, earrings, and piercings may be dangerous, since they can get stuck somewhere and hurt the children who are wearing them. According to many of the interviewees, the prohibition of tattoos is also important: since in Japan tattoos are linked to delinquency and *yakuza*. They also want to avoid children being exposed to prejudice because of the accessories that they choose.

On the other hand, they claim that,



Two students wearing a uniform that matches their gender identity, and one wearing personal clothing (illustrated by Koharu Ishihara)

even if they must wear uniforms, being able to dye their hair, cut it the way they want, and use smartphones during class breaks, would make them "feel more free," and school days more enjoyable. The teacher added: "Nowadays, elementary school

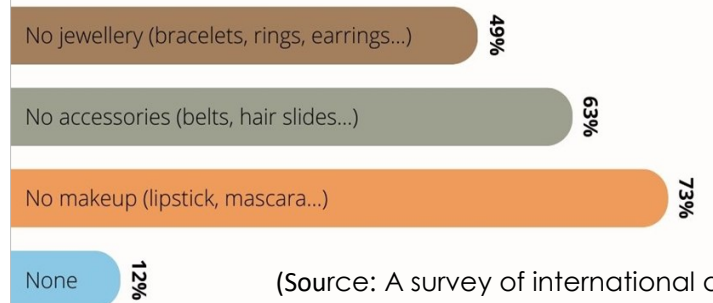
students have smartphones, but they are told not to bring them to school." The first reason for this is that children influence each other. If one student brings a phone to class, the others will want what their classmates have. The second is that teachers and parents are worried that phones will interfere with the children's studies.

Every single student we interviewed emphasized that they want at least some of these rules to change in Japan, especially the ones regarding appearance. Many Japanese schools still tell students to dye their hair black, even if their natural hair colour is brown. As Japan seeks to combat its declining population, inviting in more and more foreign residents, students of foreign nationalities will increase in number. The more children of various nationalities there are, the more schools must accept differences in appearance. Students also think that if people are free to express themselves, that they will develop a better open-mindedness and spirit of acceptance towards those who are different.

Binding students with school rules makes everyone look the same, eliminating differences, and possibly comforting students with a sense of uniformity. But is this a good thing? By being allowed to freely express their personality through clothes, students could gain a strong sense of individuality and open-mindedness. This could also encourage students to critically think and talk about social issues regarding self-expression, such as gender expression, which is currently a very important debate occurring around the world.

Some of the students interviewed also stated that school rules in Japan continue to impact Japanese people even after they graduate high school, since they "control self-expression during the most formative years of students' lives" and "teach people to follow rules, submitting to a higher authority regardless of their own feelings." However, students did note that some rules can be helpful in promoting healthy rou-

Among these restrictions, which one(s) should be relaxed



(Source: A survey of international and domestic students at NUFSS)

tines.

Following rules about cleanliness from a young age, for example, can have a very positive impact on one's health and future habits.

Due to increasing dissatisfaction towards school rules, we can expect Japan's school rules to evolve from now on. Though teachers consider school rules an important way to help students focus on academics, many students feel that there are too many school rules in Japanese schools and want to bring about change. Currently, we can find an extensive amount of rules in Japanese schools, addressing things such as sock color, underwear color, hair color, hair style, and makeup. Does this plethora of different school rules really help students concentrate on their academic work?

The increasing push from students for a change in school rules makes us wonder how rules could evolve in the future. Is there any point of maintaining these rules? What consequences could modifying them have?

Giving students the right to make decisions by themselves will undoubtedly lead to them having their own ideas. Developing students' ability to act freely is vital to survival in our increasingly progressive world, but school rules seem to have robbed students of the opportunity to develop their individuality.

They were established a long time ago, according to the needs of the society at that time, and are failing to keep pace with modern times.

Luckily, 21st century students want things to change, and some schools have already begun making this a reality. A high school attached to Chuo University, located in Koganei, Tokyo, does not have any school rules. Students are free to decide everything, even when it comes to hairstyles, piercings, and nails. The high school in Koganei ultimately shows us that it is truly a school who have the last word about rules: if they want change, they can make change happen.

Hikikomori in Japan Creative yet simple solutions to social integration

Programs aim to address the needs of those suffering with social isolation

By Luis E. MARTINES, Minami MATSUI and Levi N. PECORARO

On the corner of Aichi, Kasugai, stands a local shop called Wanpoteito. Aside from serving customers with food and drinks, this cafe is known to support social recluses. Wanpoteito is a place where young people can come to work for as little as 15 minutes, gradually building up their confidence and abilities as workers. Japanese employment commonly requires long hours with little to no breaks and bullying remains a common issue, but with people and communities like Wanpoteito, there can be a better future for more people. The cafe also hosts crowdfunding campaigns to aid children and young people who are currently suffering with social withdrawal.

Hikikomori refers to socially withdrawn people who stay at home, rather than going to work or school. Over a million people in Japan have experienced social isolation, a trend that emerged in the 1970s and has been a growing concern since the 90s. While some social recluses may engage in online communication, many have little social interaction. Helping social recluses can be very difficult—and finding them can be just as challenging. There can be many reasons why someone becomes socially withdrawn, however it is important that they overcome their struggles to reintegrate into society.

Losing the will to move forward, while being trapped in a constant downward spiral of negative emotions can lead someone to a mental breakdown. Despite the desire to escape this cycle, it can be incredibly difficult to find the necessary support and motivation. Social isolation can take years to overcome, potentially straining relationships with family and friends. To further aid our understanding of the issue, we consulted with the Mental Health Welfare Center, and Minoru Kawakita, an associate professor of Aichi University who specializes in the field. Social recluses commonly suffer from severe anxiety and depression, followed by heavy psychological pressure, caused by bullying, or the perceived inability to keep up with societal expectations. Mr. Kawakita also mentions: “Due to the stresses of living in modern day Japan, people have fewer opportunities to go out. This could directly affect mental health as well, creating mood swings or furthering someone's depression.” Japan's declining birth rate and economic strain only further contribute to the issue, exerting increased pressure on the younger and working generations. Issues of severe social isolation has sparked public interest and concern, raising questions about modern society's pressures, mental health, and the potential long-term consequences of being socially withdrawn. Mr. Kawakita explains, “A couple of the major indicators that someone is at risk of becoming a social recluse is the tendency to isolate follow-

ing a transition in life. By life transition, I mean someone who starts working as a fulltime employee or living alone.” Understanding the causes, characteristics, and impacts of the socially withdrawn is crucial for developing effective strategies that foster a more inclusive and supportive society.

Efforts to support socially isolated individuals are already underway. Experts in the mental health field play an important role by offering personalised therapy sessions to help people overcome their anxiety and depression, as well as to create a safe space for patients to talk about their emotions and fears. Through one-on-one sessions, therapists and counsellors work closely with socially isolated individuals to identify and understand the root causes of their withdrawal. This may involve exploring experiences of trauma, social anxiety, depression, or other mental health challenges that have contributed to their isolation. They also help individuals develop problem-solving skills, and self-management strategies, gradually increasing their capacity for social interaction. An unfortunate drawback about these therapy sessions is that, in some cases, it can take up to months to get an appointment.

Community outreach programs are a crucial component of addressing the rising number of social recluses in Japan. These programs involve social activities, and group therapy sessions designed to gradually expose social recluses to interaction in a controlled environment. By providing a supportive and non-judgmental space, these programs aim to rebuild social skills, foster a sense of belonging, and help individuals establish connections with others who have faced similar challenges. Wanpoteito is a great example of this, as they provide a reasonable and simple system for helping socially isolated individuals. To answer some questions and provide their insight of the current situation, we conducted an interview at the cafe.

While discussing the topic of social recluses and how the cafe came to be, the owner, Ms. Kana Oguri shared a personal story: “The period when my daughter became unable to attend school was the starting point. Despite our efforts to support her to return to school, she couldn't overcome her challenges and it caused anxiety about her future. It was during this time that I realized there must be many individuals who want to work but are unable to do so. I felt a strong determination to immediately create an employment opportunity for these people.”

One strategy Wanpoteito has implemented for socially isolated individuals is providing work slots as short as 15 minutes. “The duration of 15 minutes for working was decided with my daughter, who was a second-year middle school student at the time. It's a time frame that is not too long and not too short. Working for 15 minutes lowers the psychological hurdle, and encourages young people to take a step



forward and try working. We did not actively advertise job openings, but received numerous inquiries from individuals expressing interest in working.”

The owner ended with a comment on her hopes for the initiative: “I hope this kind of initiative will spread throughout Japan, fueling the creation of employment opportunities for social recluses in more diverse places, such as city hall. By doing so, more people could reintegrate into society, and the number of socially isolated individuals would decrease. Unfortunately, as things are now, the number of social recluses will only continue to increase. Social interaction opportunities are available for them, but there only a limited number of places to work. Workspaces are necessary for skill development, and through work, the socially isolated can develop self-esteem and a sense of purpose, leading to their reintegration into society.”

In addition to Wanpoteito's work-focused approach, the Mental Health Welfare Center highlights four support initiatives: consultation support, human resource development, information dissemination, and collaboration/rear support. There is a significant drop in energy levels leading up to hikikomori, and the time required for recovery depends on the individual's energy capacity and surrounding support. To further assess the situation, we interviewed Mr. Kawakita.

Q: How can someone assist a friend or loved one who is suffering from social isolation?

A: Continuing with casual conversations and engagement is crucial. If you share common hobbies such as fishing or bowling, it's also beneficial to utilize those interests when extending invitations. Maintaining conversations and social connections is essential for fostering relationships with others. Forcing socially isolated individuals to engage with society can be extremely challenging and may have counterproductive effects. It is important to provide a means for individuals to have a point of contact with society and to engage with them in a way that supports their needs. Indeed, it can be helpful to gauge the other person's reactions and provide information in small doses. Sharing personal experiences such as saying, ‘I went through a similar situation myself,’ can also be beneficial when providing information. It is crucial to engage in a back and forth conversation and avoid being perceived as pushy, as it can lead to the other person shutting down and avoiding further communication. That's why casual conversation is important. As a friend, it is important to maintain the rela-

Interview with Wanpoteito owner Kana Oguri(left back) by Minami (left front), Luis(right back), Levi (right front)=Kasugai, Aichi pref.

tionship by respecting the other person's pace and adjusting accordingly.

Q: What kind of solution would you offer to help people who are currently a social recluse?

A: There is a need to understand individuals who are not working, not attending school, and not engaging in training to prepare for their future, as they lack social involvement with society. I believe that, if going to training programs becomes a normal alternative to work or school, it can help prevent extreme cases of social withdrawal. However, in Japan, such ideas are not easily embraced, and there is a prevailing notion that if someone quits their job, they should return to their parents' home and rely on their care. Training programs should ideally be accessible through support systems, but the reality is that the options are limited. It would be great to have a wider range of choices like the “15-minute cafe,” which are diverse and not strictly work-related, but still beneficial for personal growth.

Q: How can we help?

A: It is important to create an atmosphere where you can help social recluses without pressuring them to reintegrate. In any given case, there can be more than two or three ways to help, and one can always look out for an improvised or alternative route. Each case of social isolation is different in its origin and reasons, but every effort should be made to find a solution.

According to Mr. Kawakita, social isolation is a complex issue with many possible solutions, but one common denominator involves strengthening community ties. As the issue worsens, support continues to be refined and offered to the public across both private and governmental sectors. By creating a reassuring environment and gaining understanding from those around them, social recluses can discover their own interests and pursuits at their own pace. What other diverse initiatives can Japan create to strengthen community ties and curb social isolation? Wanpoteito's 15-minute-shift initiative suggests that the solution need not be grand but may reside in an unexpected place.

Tip “Support portal site” The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare provides information about consultation desks. You can also watch videos from those suffering social isolation, their families and supporters. (Y)



Teaching: a less and less attractive profession in Japan

By CHAN Chit, MATSUDA Kanon, MINHAJI Sheryne and Sako TOIDA

A survey held by the Ministry of Education in 2021 revealed that there is a shortage of teachers in 5.8% of schools throughout Japan. In the last decade, the Japanese education system has been declining, with teaching jobs becoming more difficult and less attractive. Teaching is still regarded as a highly respected and essential profession in the mind of many, but despite education being indispensable for preparing the future generations of the country, the government has failed to improve the teaching profession and prevent professors from leaving the field.

What are the reasons behind this shortage? Is the attractiveness of the profession declining because of low wages, long working hours, or even the working environment? What makes teaching less and less attractive, and what are the solutions to fight it? We interviewed one principal, one former principal, and one former teacher to explore the issues contributing to the decline of the teaching profession in Japan.

As the data to the right shows us, there is a clear decline in the teaching workforce. Our interviewees first suggested that the decrease in teachers was linked to the fall in the birth rate. Yet, despite Japan's declining birth rate, schools still face a 5.8% shortage in teachers, meaning that there is a surplus of positions available. So why is the number of teachers declining amidst a national shortage?

One reason, mentioned several times in our interviews, concerns wages. The principals were all estimated to be underpaid for their work. They consider this a factor that could discourage people from teaching. The salary of teachers at Japanese public schools is not commensurate with the amount of work they do, including as working overtime and supervising club activities.

Wages are one of the most important factors people consider when choosing a job. It can tremendously affect the decisions of people who want to become teachers or others who consider quitting, especially when the salary does not correspond to the amount of work done.

In addition to low wages, teachers are not properly remunerated when it comes to overtime work. According to the Ministry of Education, they are only paid 4% of their monthly salary as a "teaching adjustment amount," which acts as compensation for overtime work that cannot be accurately calculated. This compensation is often considered to be disproportional to the amount of overwork.

Yet, the teaching profession is infamous for the amount of overtime work that it requires. Indeed, surveys from the Ministry of Education reveal that about 64% of elementary school teachers and 77% of junior high school teachers are working over the limit for overtime work, which is 45 hours per week. Exceeding this number of hours

per week can lead to what is called "Karōshi," an expression referring to death caused by overworking.

A former Japanese teacher we interviewed, Ms. S, shared with us how overworked she felt. "Working hours are long. There is no end to the work, and we often multitask. Class and direct involvement with children were only a small part of my work. I had to do a pile of other tasks that could not be seen from the outside, such as school management, cooperation with the community, parental care, and office work."

The number of teachers with mental illness is also increasing. An official from the Ministry of Education said that the amount of work is uneven, and communication between teachers and staff has become difficult due to the COVID pandemic. In addition, they explain that there are fewer workers in their 40s who will act as guides for younger teachers. Less consultants and guides makes it difficult to support new teachers in their 20s and 30s, resulting in physical and mental health issues amongst the new generation of teachers. Consequently, a higher percentage of younger teachers take leaves of absence or mental illness.

Another issue involves dealing with students' parents. A principal we interviewed told us: "parents often complain to teachers and me, for instance, asking 'why was the sports festival canceled?' and that sort of thing." Parents can become a supplementary source of anxiety for faculty. The added pressure from parents, on top of an already underpaid, overworked environment, can be the breaking point for many teachers.

Moreover, the teachers all agreed to say that classes are overcrowded, and the shortage of teachers only worsens the problem. On average, there are about 40 students per class in Japanese high schools. A large number of students amplifies the workload, increasing the amount of marking time required for each class. One of the principals mentioned that teachers are so busy that they do not have enough time to study teaching materials. Short deadlines, oversized classes, personnel shortages—all of this adds up to a work environment that pushes teachers' working abilities to the limit.

The problem of a decline in teachers might also be amplified by us, the media. Both principals that we interviewed complained about how the profession was portrayed in newspapers and how it could contribute to making the teaching less attractive. For instance, one of the principals told us that the "media exaggerates the hard parts of being a teacher, rather than the good ones." Indeed, floods of news coverage that labels teaching as a "black profession" and link it to death by overwork provide a polarized image, emphasizing the negative aspects of the job.

Despite the growing unpopularity of the job, many teachers find a lot of joy

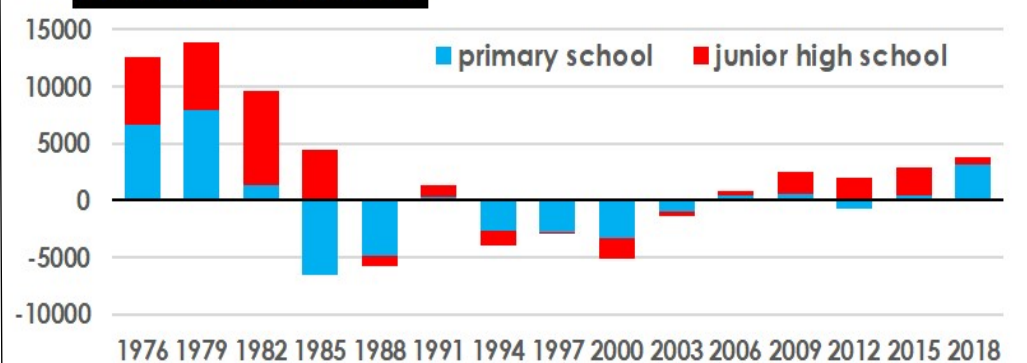
Teaching in Japan sinking to status of 'black' profession

May 2 | 04:10 pm JST | 17 Comments

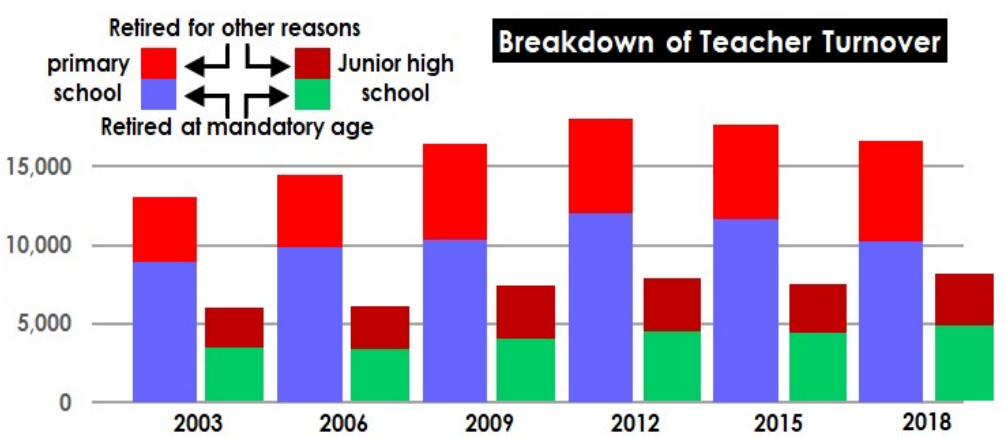


▲ News headlines criticizing teaching ▲

Transition of the Workforce



The graph above was constructed from a survey by the Ministry of Education on the number of hired, transferred and retired teachers. It depicts the difference between the newly hired and retired teachers each year. In 1985, for instance, more teachers left than entered, which resulted in a loss of around 6000 teachers. As the graphic shows us, there is a very low level of interest in the profession. Elementary and secondary schools are important places that form the foundation of education. When teacher attrition occurs, it can have a significant impact on the educational process.



in what they do. For instance, one of the principals expressed a strong sense of satisfaction and meaning in his work, because it involves educating the next generation. The other principle mentioned that they love "watching children grow up and seeing their smiles."

We concluded our interviews by asking interviewees what the government could do to make the profession more attractive.

All interviewees agreed that fixing the problem of overwork was a priority. Ms. S stated that many changes need to be implemented to fix the overwork issue, including "increasing the number of employees, subdividing the work into tasks and reallocating the work accordingly," or "reducing the number of students per class by raising the budget provided to the school."

Ms. S also pointed out that, while teaching in the public sphere, one is prohibited from doing side jobs, which can discourage people who want to enjoy other professional activities from continuing their work as a teacher. If teachers were free to pursue other professional interests outside of work, they

may feel more refreshed and motivated to engage in teaching.

Another solution is to hire more foreigners in public education. The current state of the Japanese education field presents an opportunity for foreign professors to integrate themselves into the teaching scene. Foreigners already come to Japan as assistant language teachers, so many schools have the programs and infrastructure in place to hire personnel from abroad.

For now, it seems that increasing the number of employees is an arduous challenge to overcome for the educational system, since fewer and fewer people seek teaching jobs. Consequently, enhancing the popular aspects of the profession may revive its attractiveness.

Teaching is a beautiful and meaningful profession, but it comes with a lot of responsibilities that one person cannot carry alone. It is essential to take care of the physical health and mental health of the people that educate the next generations. The Japanese Government needs to act if it wants to avoid further consequences for the future of its educational system.

When can we finish our shift?

Overworking and overtime in Japan

By Zoe BOUSQUET, Yuzuha TANAKA and Piper M. TAYLOR

Every country has their own ideal fantasy world, full of impossible situations. The United States dreams of everyone having superpowers like in Xmen, and Australia has people living controversial and explosive lives in Home and Away. However, Japan's fantasy world looks a little different. It involves a businesswoman leaving work at 6pm sharp to relax afterwards. NO WORKING AFTER HOURS! is a recent Japanese television show that brings to light the lack of work-life balance within Japan.

The show has sparked discussions about overworking, so we decided to uncover the reality of overworking within Japan. To get to the bottom of this crisis, we investigated the effects of overworking on people, how early it starts in a Japanese person's career, why it's happening, and what other countries are doing to prevent overwork. From this investigation we discovered that a considerable number of people begin overworking in their side-jobs during university, and the main cause of this is staff shortages.

It can't be that bad, right?

Japan is infamously known for its approach of extreme dedication within the workplace and towards working. This dedication, however, can lead to physical disorders, mental disorders and even death, something known as *Karōshi*, or "death by overworking." According to the Research Center for Overwork-Related Disorders in Japan, *Karōshi* provides a link between work and physical and mental disorders, such as increased stress, fatigue, and anxiety.

These work-related problems also negatively affect the birth rate, as overworking leaves no time for children or relationships. Japanese men especially cannot spare enough time away from work to focus on their families, with a study from Japan's National Center for Child Health and Development in 2022 discovering that 70% of Japanese fathers spend a maximum of 30-40 minutes on housework and childcare per day (More Work, Fewer Babies: What Does Workism Have to Do with Falling Fertility? DeRose and Stone, 2021).

Are part-time students working overtime already?

We conducted a survey on over 100 university students to understand their working conditions. Of those we surveyed, a quarter reported that they work under conditions different to what is on their contract, and over a quarter reported to have already started working overtime at their jobs, a number that is only expected to grow with time. The main three reasons that these students have started overworking are because their workplaces are understaffed; they find it difficult to say no to overwork; or want to receive the extra work.

Employees should not be taking on the employer's burdens, if the workplace

suffers when one person goes home on time, then the employer needs to reassess workloads or hire more staff. Feeling uncomfortable and refusing work will have employees taking on more than they can handle, overwhelming themselves. Refusing extra work allows people to manage their workloads properly and stay focused on their current task.

What are the overworking conditions like?

To gain deeper insight into students' opinions and their working conditions, we interviewed a couple of working university students. The students have experienced overwork at their jobs, with one working 1 ½ hours and the other working 4 hours of overtime, on average, a week. Both students worked anywhere from a minimum of 4 hours to over 7 hours a shift, but only one of the students was notified of when their shift was going to finish.

It was shocking to discover that only one of the students received breaks, because this is illegal in other countries, such as Australia, where employees are not allowed to work longer than five hours without a break. The student that did receive breaks had to take their break either half an hour into the start of their shift or after working for 7 hours straight.

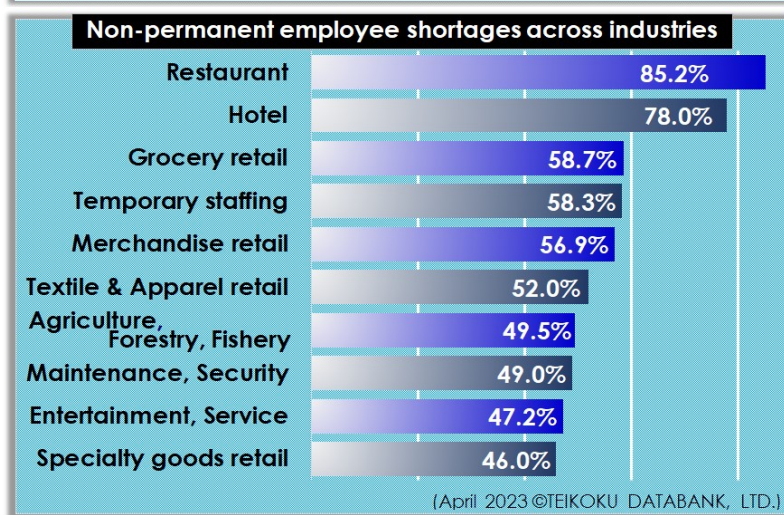
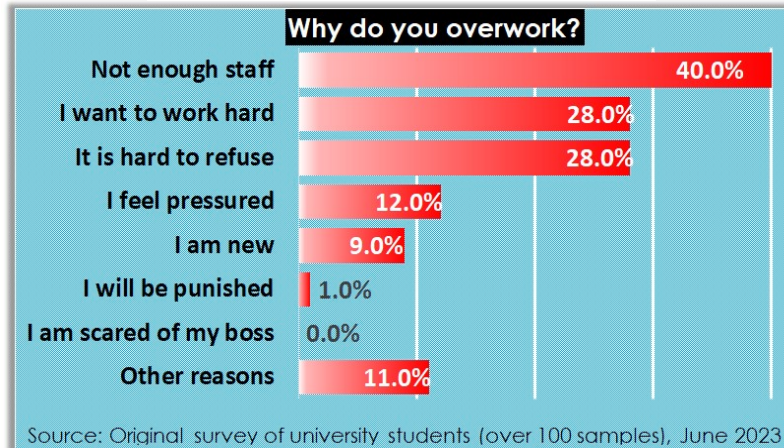
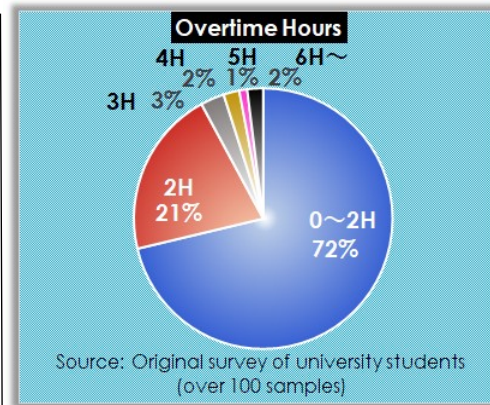
The student who received no breaks did not realize that they had agreed to this upon signing their work contract and would not have signed it if they knew. The employer did not notify them about the arrangement until after they started working. Break times should always be discussed before signing up for a position, and it is important that people carefully read and ask questions about what they are signing up for before they take on a job.

Employers should also notify any potential staff about all the specifics of a job position before they sign their work contracts. Not being upfront leads to employees taking on workloads that they are not prepared to handle. Working nonstop without a mandatory break is illegal in many overseas countries for a multitude of reasons. Working for too long can deteriorate an individual's health and wellbeing, leading to high stress levels and burnout (Breaks During the Workday, Michigan State University, 2022).

Why are staff overworked?

To understand the employer's point of view regarding why staff are overworked, we interviewed Akinori Ōtsu, who works for the Personnel and Labour Consulting Division of Meinan Management Consulting CO., LTD

Mr. Ōtsu repeatedly mentioned the importance of both companies and workers, understanding current Japanese labour laws, as these dictate what



is expected from both parties in relation to their work. These laws dictate that companies must let their employees know what is expected from them before they are hired. If companies are unaware of this law, then their employees may find themselves in the same position as our interviewed students, so it is crucial for people to educate themselves.

Mr. Ōtsu also discussed that it is important for workers to create a relaxed environment within their workplaces. Having employees regularly communicating with one another removes stress from the work environment, allowing workers to open up and discuss any concerns they may have.

When we asked why employees, especially working university students, are being overworked, Mr. Ōtsu provided us with a graph and told us it was mainly due to staff shortages. A lot of university students get jobs within the hospitality and service industries (restaurants and hotels). Most of the students we interviewed responded that they work within these industries, and since these industries have the largest staff shortages (around 80%), they were expected to begin overwork at a younger age.

But you may be asking yourself, just as we did, why are these popular industries experiencing such major staff shortages? The answer: these shortages of non-permanent staff were caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the staff within these fields were let go at the height of COVID because they require face-to-face contact. Part-time workers, such as university students, were fired because of social distancing laws and found jobs in other industries. Because many employees in these in-

dustries found employment elsewhere, when social distancing was no longer enforced, the industries found themselves short staffed, leaving any remaining or new employees with no choice but to overwork themselves to keep up with demand.

What are other countries doing to minimize overworking?

Many other countries have different approaches to work. Australia places a strong emphasis on not overworking, having one of the lowest working hours in a week globally, and the highest minimum wage worldwide. Employers make their staff leave as soon as their shift ends, and if overtime is needed, they will give staff plenty of notice and financial compensation. Most stores close around 5 pm and weekends have shorter operating hours so people can relax. Weekend shifts also have increased pay as many people refuse to work on these days without it.

France encourages flexible working time arrangements and reduces overtime. France is the only country with a dual form of overtime compensation, which includes compensatory rest and financial compensation. In comparison, Japan's overtime compensation is only financial. Japan is also the only country to set no legal limit on overtime hours.

What does this all mean?

By having a popular drama such as NO WORKING AFTER HOURS! touch on an important topic like overworking, a common part of Japanese work culture, we were able to discuss the reality of overworking in Japan and get to its root cause.

Overworking is related to several physical and mental health issues, and leaves individuals with little time for family or relationships. Overworking occurs very early on in Japanese careers, with over a quarter of working university students already starting to overwork at their jobs. With COVID-19 causing people to lose their jobs and find work in other industries, some industries have been hit hard by staff shortages, making them resort to overworking staff to keep up with demand.

To combat this overworking crisis, more staff will be needed, especially within the hospitality and service industries, since they are the most understaffed.

Companies and workers also need to educate themselves on the current Japanese labor laws to avoid undesired working conditions and overworking staff. Employees also need to work on making their working environments more comfortable by regularly communicating with each other. Another way Japan could minimize overwork is by drawing inspiration from other countries' working methods, such as setting a legal limit on overtime hours.

Tip "Overtime wages" The Labor Standards Act makes it mandatory for companies to pay extra wages for overtime work performed in excess of legal working hours and a late-night surcharge for work performed between 22:00-5:00. (Y)

By Ryuukei L. DALLAS, Joel B. WYNNE JR and Ayaka YONEMOTO

Tattoos Post-Yakuza

Is the stigma still necessary?

“Gang members, people with tattoos (including fake tattoos), and people who are intoxicated are strictly prohibited from entering.” This is the warning given by many *onsen* that ban people with tattoos from utilizing their services across the country of Japan. Dating as far back as the fifth century, Japanese people have been wearing tattoos as a lifestyle choice, be it for religious reasons or simply for appearance.

Those who choose to wear tattoos, however, are faced with challenges that make it difficult for them to find jobs or even participate in other extracurricular activities, such as relaxing in one of Japan’s many *onsen*. Due to the rising number of people interested in tattoos and tattoo culture, we set out to try and better understand the negative stigma surrounding tattoos, how it affects residents in Japan, how it affects foreign travelers, and determine if people would be more open to accepting tattoos.

Our first discovery was that older and younger generations in Japan view the issue of tattoos very differently. In May, we conducted a survey on Instagram, receiving thirty-nine responses to our survey. One of the questions we asked participants was if they noticed a difference between older and younger generations opinions on the issue of tattoos. All respondents who participated answered yes.

We spoke with Dr. Lucy Glasspool, a professor of pop culture at the Nagoya University of Foreign Studies, about this generational gap, and she attributed the difference of opinions to cultural memory. Older generations tend to remember when tattooing and tattoo culture was illegal, or, at the very least, an art form that needed to remain well hidden. Younger generations of people, on the other hand, did not live through that period, and therefore do not tend to view tattoos in such a negative light.

According to Ms. Glasspool, western pop culture is primarily what shapes the opinions of younger generations and because tattoos are more widely accepted in the west, younger Japanese people tend to view tattoos as fashion or an expression of oneself that should be seen.

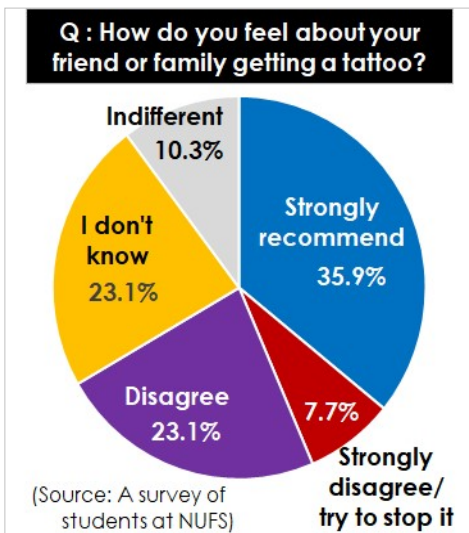
The most cited reason for the negative stigma surrounding tattoos is *yakuza*, Japan’s version of the mafia. Historically speaking, tattoos in Japan are heavily associated with *yakuza* because those were the people who would have them. According to Dr. Glasspool, *yakuza* would wear full body tattoos that could not be hidden. The earliest forms of tattooing in Japan were used to mark criminals and outcasts in Japanese society, representing unrefinement and barbarism.

“Perhaps this historical background and the influence of older generations are what drives younger generations to support tattoos even while avoiding getting one themselves,” we said as we examined the results of our Instagram survey. One of our questions asked students if they were interested in getting a tattoo in the future. A quarter of respondents said they were interested in getting a tattoo, while the remaining said that they were not. While the da-



Left: Traditional Japanese tattoos often take inspiration and motifs from folklore and *yokai*. This illustrated design above combines a Japanese style dragon with motifs of *Oiwa* (Designed and illustrated by Ryuukei L Dallas)

Below: “No tatoo”—Sign in the lobby of the Meito Onsen Hanashobu (Nagakute-city, Aichi-pref.)



ta, and historical background seemed to correlate with this hypothesis, our own team member, Ayaka, a domestic student from Nagoya, would provide insight into how complex the issues of tattoos are in Japan.

Ayaka, much like many of the respondents in our survey, is more open to accepting tattoos in Japanese society. She told us, “I believe we cannot judge a person based on whether or not they have tattoos. I think this kind of opinion is likely to be popular among young Japanese people.” Additionally, Ayaka shares the opinion that tattoos should be allowed in *onsen*.

Ayaka however, is a bit more reluctant to getting a tattoo herself and is equally reluctant in allowing someone close to her, like a friend or family member, get one. She said to us, “I think tattoos are cool and good, and I don’t have a bad image of people that have tattoos, but I can’t strongly agree or recommend giving tattoos to people, because tattoos are not easily accepted in Japanese society.” Additionally, Ayaka told us “I think also it’s one of the reasons that young people hesitate to have tattoos, because there are not many people who have tattoos around us. Having tattoos is not common and Japanese people tend to hesitate to act differently around other people, because they’re very conscious of how others perceive them.”

Ayaka’s sentiments on tattoos correspond with the responses we received from students who answered how they felt about a family member or friend getting a tattoo. About 35.9% of participants said they would strongly recommend, 10.3% were indifferent on the



issue, 23.1% said they would be against it and 7.7% said they would actively try to stop them from doing it. The remaining 23.1% of participants were unsure of how they would react. The reluctance shown by participants in the survey as well as the difference in opinions corroborate Ayaka’s opinion that, because tattoos are not as widely accepted in Japanese society, people tend to be supportive of the culture but would prefer trying to avoid actively participating in it if necessary.

Ayaka’s interview and our Instagram survey helped us understand where Japanese society stands on the issue of tattoos and tattoo acceptance. It also helped put into perspective the policies and opinions of staff members of the various *onsen* that we went to in the process of researching how *onsen* go about handling people with tattoos. Ryuukei was unable to join our research at *onsen* as he has numerous large tattoos which can clearly be seen on both of his arms. Nevertheless, we carried on with our research.

One of our most notable visits was to the Meito Onsen Hanashobu in Nagakute City, Aichi prefecture. Hanashobu is what we learned to be what’s called a “super sento.” Not only is it a bath house, but it also has sauna, spas, and recreational centers or places where people may exercise. Hanashobu is very direct in its approach to dealing with potential customers with tattoos.

“Gang members, people with tattoos (including fake tattoos), and people who are intoxicated are strictly prohibited from entering.” This quote is pulled directly from the sign displayed

in the lobby as soon as you enter. Additionally, a staff member answered some questions we had for them. It is Hanashobu’s policy to ban all people with tattoos not just from entering the bath, but from even entering the lobby entirely. It also does not matter how big or small the tattoo is. If you have one, you cannot enter.

Other bath houses, especially ones in Aichi prefecture, are not as direct in their policies regarding people with tattoos. Instead, warnings are posted and the terminals where you purchase entry tickets will tell you that tattoos are banned. Those who can cover the tattoos may be able to enjoy the bath they are visiting but must be aware that service may be refused at any time and that if asked, they must leave.

The issue of banning tattoos also has economic implications. Ayaka spoke to a staff member at Koen no Yu, an *onsen* in Gifu prefecture, which accepts people with tattoos much like many other *onsen* in Gifu. Ayaka asked them if people should be barred from using *onsen* if they have a tattoo. The staff member responded by saying that they do not prevent people with tattoos from using their facility, because the majority of already existing *onsen* in the country ban anyone with tattoos from entering.

Additionally, these *onsen* recognize that many foreign tourists have tattoos, so providing them with service also benefits their business, as tourists make up a large portion of the economy. With our research, surveys, and interviews conducted we asked ourselves if the stigma was still necessary. While we agree that the stigma is unnecessary, the fact remains that there still exists a stigma around tattoos, but public opinion is slowly starting to improve. Dr. Glasspool mentioned that *yakuza*, while still existing in Japan, are not as great in number, nor have as much influence as they once did.

The main issue hindering the acceptance of tattoos and tattoo culture is the negative image that surrounds them. Even with the *yakuza* being far fewer in number today, tattoos in Japan have historically had negative connotations, which affects the opinions of many older Japanese citizens. While it certainly seems that waiting for older generations to move on will have a significant impact on accepting tattoos in society, the answer is a bit more complicated. Ayaka and our survey participants emphasize that, because tattoos are not accepted by society, it makes it hard to openly work to try and accept those who do have them.

Older generations of people are only a single factor as to why tattoos remain as taboo as they are. It also does not consider the possibility that none of these factors influence a person to accept or not accept tattoos in society. It is easy to blame older people or a collective society, but the answer is much more complicated than it seems. What seems to hold everyone back from fully allowing tattoos in society is a lingering history of prejudice. Bath houses like Hanashobu are unable to distinguish between the *yakuza* member and the person wearing a tattoo for fashion. Therefore, they must ban anyone with tattoos from entering. When does the negative stigma end? Simply put: when society in Japan decides it is time to make that change.

By Anna-Pearl DIAMOND, Ui HO-RI and Boyan R. YOVCHEV

Idols, while not exclusive to Japan, are a prominent part of Japanese popular culture. Japan's biggest idol group, AKB48, has sold more than 60 million CDs since their formation in 2005, making Japan one of the countries with the strongest CD sales in the world.

While many things about idols are fascinating, such as their energetic personalities and performances, their flashy colorful costumes and cheerful songs, what might be most intriguing is their relationship with their fans. An idol fan in Japan is called a Wota, short for *Wotaku*. The term comes from the term *Otaku*, which describes a person that is into anime and manga.

Wotas are known for being the driving force behind an idol group. A force so intense, they would attend every event that they could, and spend a lot of money on either merchandise or CDs. So much so, one would have to wait in an online queue for the opportunity to pre-order tour goods. Because most idol promotional events require the purchase of a CD for a fan to participate, some fans purchase multiple copies just for the chance to have a small interaction with their favorite idol.

Tetsuya Aoyama, a producer in record label Avex, acknowledges this in an interview: "In this age where CDs are no longer selling, we try to give special perks for the fans who purchase them. By buying a CD, one gets a chance to meet their favorite idol and participate in an event. There is a variety to these events. If one purchases a copy of a CD, they can hold their favorite idol's hand for 10 seconds, and if they buy two copies, they can even take a picture together. This is what motivates fans to buy their favorite group's music."

The success of many groups depends solely on their fans, so there is a big emphasis on these events during the promotional tour of a group.

The idol industry thrives on the relationship it creates between a fan and an idol. The relationship can best be described as a parasocial relationship, or a one-sided relationship, where one is fascinated by another party, so much so that they are willing to invest a lot of money, energy and time into the relationship.

Besides interacting at events, the efforts to develop a parasocial relationship with fans are noticeable in many forms of content produced by an idol.

Mr. Aoyama mentioned that the most essential quality for an idol is not just good looks but rather a strong personality, as that would leave an impression with both fans and members of the industry. Idols with a strong sense of character may also be labeled as the "center," or the face of the idol group. They would be offered more opportunities, and with the idol's participation in extra promotional activities outside of their group, they would be able to draw in more fans.

When one looks at idol photo books, it can be observed that the poses tend to indicate a sense of intimacy. The idol would look directly in the camera, as if they are looking into the eyes of the fan. If the shot includes food, that

The Life of Wotas

How fans give it all for their favorite idol



Above: A collection of idol paraphernalia
Left: Ms. Yumana Takagi, ex-member of SKE48, based in Nagoya

would also be pointed at the cam-

era, as if that sweet treat is shared with the fan.

To maintain the fantasy and fuel it, an idol is supposed to keep a clear, innocent image and act in a way which would suggest to their fans that it is possible for them to be in a relationship. Shots including an idol posing with a love letter, subtly suggesting that it's being given to the fan, are also prominent.

For that same reason, a lot of idol groups have the so-called "love ban," where members are forbidden to enter a relationship. Very few groups would explicitly state that the rule is in place, as it is something that is usually expected from fans. The rule is frequently broken, yet if it gets public, the idol is usually forced to apologize to the fans by the management, or their activities would be put on hold for a short amount of time.

There have also been instances where

they would be removed from the group. Idol group Juice=Juice's member Sayuki Takagi was terminated from the group after being spotted by media outlets on a date.

It might seem odd to an outsider, but there is a sense of community amongst the idol fans. Even the idols themselves can feel it. When speaking to Ms. Yumana Takagi, an ex-member of Nagoya-based SKE48, a sister group to AKB48, Yumana shared that, despite joining the group as a fan of AKB48, it was her own fans that kept her going. They would cheer her on during handshake events and develop more personal relationships. "I had a fan, a woman, who was the same age as me. She would share with me the most important bits of her daily life, such as getting accepted to university, finding a job, and getting married."

Because idols have busy schedules,

there are times when they would interact with their fans more than with their own family, so while idols and fans cheer on each other, it creates a sense of a second family, according to Yumana.

This ability for constant interaction with an idol and sense of community amongst fans is what makes idols attractive. With social media being integral to everyone's everyday life nowadays, people have more opportunities to interact with idols.

Idols would frequently update their fans on their daily lives, or simply comment on popular topics, offering encouraging words for exam season and job-hunting etc. Some would use social media, others would have blogs, or even both. The blogs may also be behind a paywall, with the promise that an idol would post frequently and share pictures from their daily life exclusive to the blog.

Even though Japanese idols barely do any promotional activities outside of Asia, their charm has still managed to capture the hearts of many overseas fans. So much so that, according to a survey conducted by us, more than 200 participants, over half of the surveyed

fans, said that they are willing to invest in a trip to Japan just to see their favorite idols.

Though they are willing to travel to Japan, foreign fans tend to show their support by purchasing a group's music, merchandise, and promoting them on social media. It differs depending on a fan's age and financial situation, but most survey respondents said that they purchase merchandise 2 to 3 times a year.

Foreigners can also directly interact with idols without having to travel. One of the outcomes of the way the COVID pandemic affected the idol industry was the so-called "video call events." In an event of this sort, after purchasing a CD, fans can talk to their favorite member for a short period of time via video call. Despite the opportunity itself, the language barrier remains an issue for foreign fans, hence why only 18% of our survey respondents have participated in such an event.

"When I talk to idols during video calls or online talks, I am able to express how I feel toward them in so many words, while also learning more about them," says one of the respondents about their experience. When asked about their overall experience as an idol fan, they stated that they find the experience itself to be a joyful one filled with excitement and happiness. "It is exhilarating, often leaving me wanting for more and appreciating the time and effort these idols put into their work as performers for the fans. Seeing an idol live reminds you that they work hard and face various challenges.

Their ability to perform abroad or speak to fans overseas showcases how far they have come in their work.

"Without idols, I would have lost my love for music," shares Alexis, an idol fan from America. "I got to discover Japanese pop music through Japanese exchange students in my university. I genuinely enjoy idol music and the message that they send out to their fans."

Another fan, Celina, states that idols motivate her and make her feel good about herself, "Being an idol fan has brought me a lot of happiness and enjoyment. I love supporting the idols for who they are and cheering them on while they go for their dreams."

The impact of idols on Japanese culture is significant, and while the whole culture behind idols can be easily dismissed by an outsider as peculiar and strange, the fans of idols are most certainly a force to be reckoned with. Whether it's for the visuals, the fun, cheerful music, or simply an idol's personality, people are intrigued and some even go head over heels for their favorite idol.

With the constant flow of content and opportunities for personal interactions, and how exhilarating meeting an idol can be, being an idol fan can become a lifestyle for some. Fans in their 40s and above are not uncommon amongst Japanese *Wotas*.

For the enjoyment and happiness an idol performance would bring them, or receiving words of encouragement from someone they admire, many would say it's worth it. Even if it's just a parasocial relationship.

By Iina LEHTONEN, Tamao MATUSMOTO and Aleksandra ZUKOWICZ

Tonari no Kamisama

Do Japanese people still believe in kami?

Strolling around any city or village in Japan, sooner or later, you're bound to see a shrine. A red *torii* gate welcoming passers-by into its grounds, or at the very least a miniature shrine, *hokora*, standing next to the road. Sometimes one does not even notice meeting with the sacred, quickly casting an eye over a tree with twisting *shimenawa* ropes around it. Fast-paced modern life does not always give much time to contemplate the metaphysical. Still, most well-known shrines are hardly empty, especially during holidays or weekends. All of these people cannot possibly be tourists?

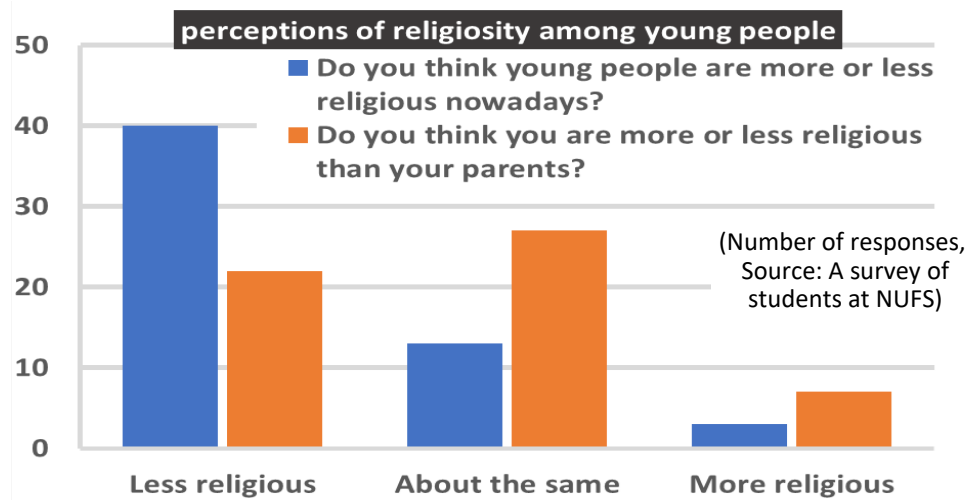
Shintō has been on a slow but steady decline in Japan for many years as people turn away from traditional beliefs. There are many reasons for this, including a lack of interest in traditional Japanese culture, a desire for more individualistic ideas, and a growing skepticism towards religion in general. Despite this decline, many people still practice *Shintō* and believe in the power of *kami*.

When speaking about religion, Westerners tend to mention how the people in their countries are becoming less and less religious. Statistics prove that point - according to data from various countries, the rate of people affiliating with any kind of official religion is declining. It is happening both in modern countries, such as the United States, where 34% of Generation Z declares not to be religious, and in Eastern Europe, where the percentage of people identifying as Catholic is steadily dropping. But in Japan, even collecting this kind of data is trickier than one may think.

The results of the surveys among Japanese people often give contradictory information, depending on the methodology. Some try to divide people following *Shintō* and Buddhism, estimating both roughly at around 50%. Others put *Shintō* and Buddhism together, making it almost 92% of the population. And yet some surveys produce peculiar results where the total amount of answers exceeds 100%. That is due to the possibility of choosing multiple answers. These researchers admit that the groups of people believing in *Shintō* and Buddhism overlap.

Shintō, which can be translated as 'way of the gods,' is the native religion of Japan, and it includes both traditional beliefs and practices. It has been practiced for thousands of years and revolves around *kami*, bringing out the relations between humans and gods. *Shintō* can be mostly seen in people's social life and way of living rather than more formal practices. Unlike the Western monotheistic religions, such as Christianity or Islam, in this belief system, there are countless gods. In the local folklore, *Shintō* and Buddhism are sometimes so intertwined that it is difficult to tell which parts came from which tradition, resulting in overlapping statistics.

Both religions coexist peacefully in Japan. Most Japanese consider themselves *Shintō*, Buddhist, or even both. While *Shintō* is the ethnic religion of Japan, Buddhism was introduced to Japanese people in the sixth century.



The main reason *Shintō* and Buddhism can coexist is that they are both polytheistic by nature. Both are belief systems where spirits, souls, and life perspectives play the main part. While birth and marriage are typically celebrated by *Shintō* ceremonies, funerals are predominantly Buddhist ceremonies.

Foreigners unfamiliar with the local culture might view *Shintō* as superstitions or pointless practices. Still, to many Japanese people, this is simply their reality. The existence of a *kami* residing in a tree is as true as the tree itself. It is not a case of going to church once a week, but rather an awareness of the existence of the metaphysical around them. This different way of engaging in religion is why it is hard to pinpoint the decline of religion in Japan through data—we cannot get a full picture through something like church attendance numbers.

"The European way of perceiving religion requires a founder. [In *Shintō*], the scripture does not exist because there is no founder. Without scripture, there is no doctrine. It makes it easy to describe whether something is a religion or not from the Western point of view," said Yoshida Wataru, the Chief Priest of the Shiroyama Hachimangu shrine in Nagoya. While explaining to us the meaning of *Shintō* in the life of Japanese people, he told us that most people visit the shrine for personal reasons, such as praying for success or celebrating important moments of life. "Few people go to shrines with religious awareness. Most people visit shrines as a way of life," said the Chief Priest.

This statement is supported by the survey results we conducted among the students of Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. By asking students di-

rectly about their religious practices, we gained a good picture of the religious attitudes of young Japanese people. We thought that younger generations might be less religious than older people, however, that is not exactly the case.

The replies we received came mostly from young female students aged between 18 to 21 years old. Almost all of them said they believe in the spirits living around them and affecting their lives. Similarly, around the same number of students admitted they believe in *kami* inhabiting the shrines, even though not all feel the influence of the spirits in their everyday life. They admitted to practicing the religion occasionally, visiting a shrine for New Year, or keeping an *omamori* amulet with them.

The most popular reason for not believing in *kami* was their invisibility. In a true positivist fashion - what you cannot see, you do not believe in. It is almost impossible not to notice religion in Japan, as there are estimated to be around 100,000 *Shintō* shrines in Japan, but it is just a part of the scenery for some young people. "Few people actively belong to a religion. I can say that I'm an atheist, although I am unaware of it," said one of the students. "Due to the development of technology, people tend not to believe in *kami*. For example, thanks to advanced medical technology, people would rather go to the hospital instead of praying to *kami* or going to a shrine" added another. This can be the case, but as the Chief Priest of the Shiroyama Hachimangu Shrine told us, he did not notice any particular changes in the demographics visiting the shrine. Indeed, as we were strolling around the shrine before and after the interview, quite a few people were visiting, despite it being an early afternoon on Wednesday.

There was also a group of students that were skeptical about the role of *Shintō* in Japan. "I think *Shintō* is not such an important part of our society, so it doesn't affect our society." Another student brought up the eclectic nature of the Japanese belief systems: "I don't think there are many people in Japan who are religious, so many Japanese believe in *kami* regardless of whether they are Buddhist or *Shintō*." Therefore, even if the *Shintō* population declines, I do not think it will have a profound social impact. In other words, the idea of being religious in Japan is much more connected to cultural practices than to official affiliation. It also suggests that only believing in *kami* is enough for *Shintō* to survive.

Maingate of the Shiroyama Hachimangu (Chikusa-ku, Nagoya city)
For more info, see the "Tip" at the bottom

Almost all the respondents to the questionnaire thought that young people are less religious than their parents nowadays. But when asked about their personal beliefs, their answer was different. More than half of students decided they were just as much or even more religious than their parents. This was especially interesting since young people think that, overall, religion is declining. However, it may still be on the rise. On the other hand, some of their answers suggest that there is a feeling of uncertainty regarding the future of *Shintō* in Japan.

"Japan's declining birthrate and aging population make it difficult to pass on the faith to the next generation. This has the effect of erasing the idea of religion from Japanese society," said one of the students. Another agreed, saying, "It becomes difficult to pass on the existence of *kami* to future generations." Another student claimed that "busy schedules and distant relationships with family can make it difficult to pass traditional beliefs and practices between generations, ultimately erasing the idea of religion from Japanese society."

The Chief Priest mentioned that he had not seen any difference in the demographics visiting the shrine, implying that there was no exodus of young people from traditional beliefs, as in the western world. There are many ways to be religious in Japan. In most western countries, you are either religious or not. In Japan, the gray area is much bigger, thanks to the nature of the local spiritual practices. There is also a shift from public to private ways of practicing one's faith.

Although occasions such as *matsuri* festivals or New Year celebrations still attract many people to shrines, they have markings of more cultural and social gatherings than religious ceremonies. And yet most of the young people admit that they still believe in *kami*, unlikely as it may seem from the perspective of foreigners. But just as *Shintō* is the 'way of the gods,' so too is religious eclecticism the 'way of the Japanese,' and this will ensure the survival of the traditional beliefs in Japan for many years to come.

Tip Shiroyama Hachimangu There is a sacred tree called "Renriboku" at the shrine. It is a rare tree with a height of 15m and a trunk that once split but continued to grow again. It is believed to be a symbol of a happy married life. (Y)
Location: 88 Shiroyama-cho, Chikusa-ku, Nagoya-city