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CHANGING TIMES FOR YOUNG MINDS

Declining Class Size and *Shūdan Seikatsu* Ideology in Hokkaido Preschools

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Abstract

Preschool educators and parents in the West commonly express the hope that young children become independent, creative individuals. In contrast, Japanese preschools work to achieve a harmonious group of children whose views and behaviour are mirrored by those of their peers. Studies point to classes as large as forty as an effective way of introducing children to “life in the group” (*shūdan seikatsu*), and to Japanese social values that will become essential as youngsters move into adulthood. While numerous ethnographies have been written concerning preschools in urban Honshu, how does this representation echo or differ from the contemporary experience of children, teachers and parents in rural Eastern Hokkaido? This remote area of Japan is currently facing economic decline, a dropping birthrate and depopulation which has resulted in preschool classrooms with as few as two or three children. Based on participation-observation fieldwork at five diverse preschools, this study seeks to map the relevance of *shūdan seikatsu* ideology to Hokkaido educators, and to identify how demographic pressures are changing classroom dynamics.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

On New Years Eve 1999, while people around the world welcomed in the new millennium with champagne and fireworks, my husband and I were desperately trying to calm our howling newborn son in a tiny flat in a northern Japanese town. It was mid-winter in Japan, and in Hokkaido, where we lived, the snow was relentlessly piling up outside in enormous drifts. We had arrived in Hokkaido sixteen months earlier, having been employed under a Japanese government scheme to teach English and “internationalization” to local school students.

Originally, we had been posted to different towns, my husband to a large eastern city, and myself to a tiny fishing village on the edge of a national park, where I was the only foreigner (*gaikokujin*) in town. Despite speaking no Japanese when we arrived, the isolation of our situations had proved a great incentive for us to learn the language as quickly as possible. We were eventually relocated together to a ski town close to the prefectural capital, Sapporo. While we had grown accustomed to the culture, food and even the sub-zero climate of Hokkaido, our greatest challenge was to yet come when I became pregnant in early 1999. Although we could now speak Japanese, trying to decipher the complicated *kanji* to find the obstetrics department, undergoing constant ultrasounds and weight checks accordant with typical Japanese ante-natal practices, and dealing with advice on what seemed to be endless superstitions surrounding pregnancy was bewildering. My son was born on the shortest day of the year, after a 43 hour labour, during which my husband was encouraged to get some rest before the long drive home over the icy mountain pass.

Even before my baby’s birth, my husband and I had begun investigating childcare as we were well-aware that my contract required that I return to work when my eight week post-natal leave expired.¹ Although we had not predicted too much difficulty in finding suitable care (after all Japan is a developed, wealthy country, we reasoned), we had drawn a blank by the time my son arrived. The locally funded day-cares (*hoikuen*) only accepted

¹ In my case, the amount of ante and post-natal leave I was entitled to was specific to the job contract I had signed as a foreign national working in Japan. Legally, Japanese men and women are entitled to one year’s parental leave although not all those eligible take the leave due to work and social pressures (Roberts 2002:70).

children who had turned one year old by the start of the new school year in April, likewise kindergarten (*yōchien*) were for children aged from three years upwards. According to our friends, there were no nanny or babysitting services available in the town, and mothers of young children who worked usually enlisted the help of extended family members. With all our family living on the other side of the world, this was not an option and we began to feel increasingly anxious about the whole situation. We also had the distinct impression that several people disapproved of our search for childcare for such a young baby. We were also uneasy about it, precisely for the reason that our son was so tiny, but also we wondered how childcare practices in Japan would correspond with our own views.

Eventually, my husband was taken aside by one of his workmates, Takada san, who admitted that he knew of someone who might look after our son, but we would need to meet her and be interviewed. He also explained that this *hobosan* (caregiver) was unregistered and ran the day-care centre from her home, but that he was satisfied with the level of care having placed his own children there from time to time. The next day, Ohashi san greeted us in the foyer of her home, a modern, spacious house by Hokkaido standards. With the help of Takada san, who also happened to be an English teacher, we explained our dilemma. Ohashi san listened quietly, and then explained her fees, hours, and the child-rearing philosophies she advocated as evidenced by her bookshelf packed with texts by prominent Japanese and Western paediatricians. While I was keen to continue breastfeeding, and had established a routine to this end, Ohashi san dismissed such 'scheduling' as detrimental to baby's well-being, instead advocating days packed with piano songs, traditional Japanese food, communal naptime and plenty of opportunities to interact with the other children in the small lounge area assigned as day-care space. She also instructed that we should drop off and pick up our son at the same time every day, even if we finished early, to avoid upsetting the harmony of the group of two to six preschoolers in her daily care. Regardless of whether the child was away or sick, the charge for this service was to be ¥55,000 per month which was a little over NZ\$1,000 at the time.

We managed to come to an agreement over the breastfeeding issue, as I took advantage of Japanese legislation which allowed mothers two 30 minute breastfeeding breaks per day, plus my lunch break, to drive over snowy roads to breastfeed my baby several times a day. Ohashi san had declared my son would never accept this practice, but

she only occasionally had to heat breast milk for him which had been frozen as a back-up. We also rejected the notion that our child should stay at day-care if we were at home, and despite continuing to pay full fees, we gradually began picking him up whenever we could, as well as not sending him during the long school vacation periods. Although Ohashi san was firm but fair, and provided nutritious meals, toys, crayons and musical instruments, the space seemed incredibly small for a group of young children, especially during the long winters when everyone was confined inside. Privately, we disagreed with Ohashi san's view that socialisation was so important for our baby. Publicly, we subverted her authority, by limiting our son's time in day-care in favour of spending as much time as we could with him. Overall though, we were relieved to have found a satisfactory solution to our search for day-care, and sad to say goodbye to Ohashi san when we returned to New Zealand in mid 2001.

Before leaving we had agreed to new jobs in Eastern Hokkaido, and by March 2002, we were back in Japan and living in a small inland town. We now had two sons; our eldest was two years old while our second had been born eight weeks earlier in New Zealand. We had arrived at the end of the Hokkaido winter, and within two weeks, both children had contracted influenza. While our eldest was correctly diagnosed and given an antidote, our newborn became very ill and was hospitalized in the city, forty minutes drive from our town where there were no medical facilities. We once again needed urgent day-care for my older son, so I could be with my baby in hospital and my husband could begin his new job. The Board of Education managed to direct us to a public day-care on the edge of town where my son could be cared for. This marked the beginning of another round of Japanese preschool experiences, as my oldest remained at this day-care until he transferred to the local private kindergarten at four years old. Meanwhile my second son began at a private day-care centre in the city (which accommodated babies) while I did part-time work, transferring to the same local public day-care as my older child when he turned two, then spending his final months at a Japanese private kindergarten with his brother. In July 2004, I gave birth to my third son, who also attended private day-care while I worked part-time teaching English at kindergartens.

Like anthropologists Ben-Ari (1997a), Benjamin (1997), Lewis (1995) and Hendry (1986a) before me this study was sparked by observing the lives of my own three children

as they negotiated Japanese preschool. For me, the experience of being both mother and ethnographer was at once frustrating and illuminating, yet above all, it clarified for me the centrality of culture to early childhood education practices, and solidified my desire to study this subject in more depth. Once I began to review the literature surrounding childhood in Japan and the institutions of early childhood education, I found there had been numerous studies carried out which dealt with issues such as mother-child relationships (Caudill and Weinstein 1969, Caudill and Plath 1986, Chen and Miyake 1986, Latham and Garrick 1996), the Japanese preschool as a state institution (Rohlen 1989, Ben-Ari 2002), the preschool as a site of childhood socialisation (Lewis 1995, Tobin, Wu and Davidson 1989, Peak 1989, Sano 1989, Hendry 1986b) and for the socialisation of mothers (Fujita 1989, Allison 1991).

Other scholars delved into issues such as cooperation (Kotloff 1998, 1993), body projects (Ben-Ari 1997a), curriculum (Peach 1994), organisational frameworks (Ben-Ari 1997b) and academic achievement (Lynn 1988, Stevenson and Lee 1990) while the diversity of preschools has been discussed by De Coker (1990) and Holloway (2000). However, the term that cropped up in almost all discussions of Japanese preschools, was *shūdan seikatsu*, a form of socialising children which translates literally as “life in the group”. Scholars linked this key aim to classes as large as forty students (Tobin 1987; Tobin, Wu & Davidson 1990, 1991). I began to question how relevant this paradigm was to rural Hokkaido where preschools are facing classes with as few as three or four students.

Hendry (1993:225) notes that most anthropological studies of Japanese mothers and small children have been carried out in the Kanto region, which suggests there may be differences in other prefectures throughout Japan.⁷ In contrast, other academics insist that the preschool system and the experiences of both parent and child is relatively

⁷ The majority of ethnographic studies of preschools have been conducted on Japan's main island of Honshu: Hendry 1986a [Chiba]; Kotloff 1998 [Kanazawa]; Boocock 1989; Tobin, Wu & Davidson 1989 [Kyoto]; De Coker 1990 [Kyoto]; Peak 1991 [Nagano]; Ben-Ari 1997a, 1997b [Kyoto]; Lewis 1995 [Nagoya, Tokyo]; Holloway 2000 [Osaka, Kobe] and most of them have concentrated on preschools in urban areas. An exception to this is the study by Hendry, which is based in part on fieldwork in preschools in rural Kyushu: Hendry 1986a [Kurotsuchi, Fukuoka prefecture].

homogeneous (Peak 1989; Ben-Ari 2002). While study of the indigenous Ainu³ has long been a favourite with Japanese and foreign anthropologists alike (Ben-Ari & Van Brennan 2005, Eades 2005:82), there appears to be a lack of ethnographic research published in English which focuses on issues within the context of contemporary Hokkaido.⁴ More specifically, I have been unable to locate any ethnographies solely focused on preschools which have been carried out in the prefecture.⁵ This confirmed for me that the neglected study of preschools in Hokkaido warranted scholarly attention, and I hypothesized that I might find points of difference to the Kanto studies, due to Hokkaido's rural outlook, economic struggles and plummeting birth rates. Located hundreds of miles north of Tokyo, Hokkaido's sub-arctic climate and geographical isolation marks it as distinct from mainland Japan, and it is also the only region (apart from Okinawa) to have experienced colonisation of its indigenous people following the Meiji Restoration in 1868.⁶

These days, the island is more likely to be invaded by domestic tourists who have been lured to Hokkaido by travel brochures boasting glossy photos of snow-capped mountains, rugged coastlines and vast fields sprinkled with wildflowers. For many of these visitors, their time is spent in anonymous hotel complexes where they are protected from the sub-zero temperatures by sophisticated heating systems, their days punctuated by numerous soaks in the volcanic hot springs. Most don't linger long enough to look beyond the utopian image of Hokkaido, and perhaps they don't wish to.

While Hokkaido is certainly blessed with an abundance of picture-perfect scenes of nature, the current economic reality faced by rural Hokkaido residents is far from idyllic. According to data collected in 2004, the population of Hokkaido stands at 5,644,000

³ The number of Ainu in Hokkaido is presumed to be about 24,000 (Murphy-Shigematsu 1993), but could be as high as 300,000 as estimated by Ainu themselves. Official statistics are based on free choice, and many Ainu refuse to register in protest at the way the Government deals with their situation (Sjoberg 1993:152). For an overview of the numerous studies concerning Ainu in Hokkaido, see Chamberlain (1887), Landor (1893), Morse (1936), Hilger (1967a, 1967b), Peng and Geiser (1977), Hammel (1988), Sjoberg (1993), Niessen (1994, 1996), Howell (1994), Siddle (1995a, 1995b, 1999a, 1999b), Fitzhugh & Dubreuil (1999), Hiwasaki (2000) and Cheung (1996, 2004).

⁴ Exceptions to this are Mock's (1996) analysis of Sapporo hostesses and Bethell's (1992) research at a home for the elderly in central Hokkaido. Kolesova (2004) has focused on the efforts of Hokkaido's Popular Education Research Movement (PERM) in challenging Japanese educational policy.

⁵ While Davies and Kasama's (2004) exploration of Japanese preschoolers' interpretations of feminist fairytales included a short period of ethnographic research in a preschool in Kushiro, their focus was more on the implications of gender than identifying cultural patterns.

⁶ For historical information and more detailed analyses of the impact of colonisation in Hokkaido, see Morris-Suzuki (1994), Siddle (1995a, 1999b), and Ono (1999).

people. A great many of these citizens live on the Western side of the island, either residing in the capital city of Sapporo, or in the cluster of towns spreading out from it. While the general Hokkaido population has seen a small drop in the nine years between 1995 and 2004 (- 48,000), it remains essentially stable. In comparison, regions traditionally popular for ethnographic study, such as Tokyo and Kyoto, have seen their populations increase slightly by 604,000 and 8,000 respectively over the same period. What is demographically significant about Hokkaido, however, is that the number of children aged between 0 – 14 years, has dropped a massive 18.5% between 1995 and 2004. In Tokyo, this figure has not significantly changed, while the number of children aged up to 14 is down by 9% in Kyoto (Japan Statistical Yearbook 2006:49). This comparison alone goes some way towards explaining the huge waiting lists for children wanting to enter kindergarten or day-care in Tokyo, while in Hokkaido preschool directors talk of closing down or amalgamating institutions in order to remain economically viable.

Within Hokkaido, while the population of urban Sapporo has been increasing, the rural hinterland has taken the full brunt of the effects of the economic downturn and rapid depopulation. Tsutsuji, the village at centre of my fieldwork has seen its population decline by 726 people in the past four years alone, a significant drop of 7.7% in a town of only 8,617 (2006). It is worth noting that the total population figure includes not just residents of the town, but locals living in numerous hamlets and farms within the boundaries of Tsutsuji's geographically large district (564.32 square km, Takakura 1969:287).

Once upon a time, Tsutsuji was a thriving lumber town of over 18,000 inhabitants (Takakura 1969:287), where workers toiled to supply much of the timber needed for reconstruction across postwar Japan. These days, the wood arrives cut and packaged from cheaper sources like China. As local jobs decline, the town is clinging on to the few remaining sources of employment, such as the chopstick factory which supplies disposable chopsticks for school lunches. Modernity has greatly impacted on the landscape of Tsutsuji, and as national pressure groups work to raise awareness of the environmental consequences of disposable chopsticks, factory employees are realistic about the tenuous nature of their jobs.

My second fieldwork site, the nearby city of Yuri, has remained demographically stable over the same four year period, with a drop in population of less than 1% to its

current level of 110,126 residents. In comparison to the economic woes facing the farming villages, urban areas like Yuri are locally regarded as prospering in Hokkaido, although the empty main streets are a far cry from the bustling industrial centres of Honshu. But a closer look at the statistics reveals that while the overall population of Yuri appears unchanged, there are wide variations of growth and decline between different age groups. For example, the number of elderly (over 65 years) has climbed from 26,715 to 29,730 (+11%) between 2002 and 2006, while the number of preschool children aged between zero and four has dropped from 4,896 to 4,554 (-7%) during the same period.⁷ With the economy of Hokkaido dependent on state-allocated funding (Japan Statistical Handbook:166), it is not difficult to predict the kind of pressures local government will soon face in dealing with this “coming up-ended triangle” (Roberts 2002).

It is within this context, that of modern-day Hokkaido, that my study examines the ideology and practice of five diverse preschools;⁸ two working-class *hoikuen* and one Catholic *yōchien* in small-town Tsutsuji, a middle-class *yōchien* and an elite private *hoikuen* in the city of Yuri. Although each preschool will be described in more detail in subsequent chapters, it is worth outlining the background behind each institution (see also Table 1).

Hinode Hoikuen is located on the outskirts of Tsutsuji, and is administered by the local Board of Education which also provides funding from town taxes to supplement that received from prefectural and national sources. Most of the children are from farming families, although there are a few whose parents hold professional jobs (teacher, nurse) with long hours. The five teachers have all attended training courses approved by the Ministry of Health and Welfare. The physical setting of the *hoikuen* is pleasant enough, as it backs on to fields of wildflowers and there are adequate resources for the children. However, much of the long day at Hinode is spent in unstructured, free play which seems to

⁷ These statistics were obtained by personally visiting the Tsutsuji and Yuri town halls, where detailed and specific information is held regarding the two districts. Other sources, such as the Japan Statistical Yearbook provide statistical data on Hokkaido as a whole, which is skewed by the presence of Sapporo's calculations.

⁸ While other authors have variously written about nursery schools, childcare centers and so forth, I use the term 'preschool' here as an umbrella term, one that encompasses both the kindergarten (*yōchien*) and the day-care centre (*hoikuen*) as I have been unable to find an appropriate term in Japanese which includes both kinds of institution. I have also chosen to alternate between the English and Japanese terms depending on my emphasis.

have contributed to marking Hinode students as the most rambunctious of the five institutions.

With its modern exterior and prominent statue of the Virgin Mary, Tenshi Yochien is easily identifiable on one of the main streets of Tsutsuji. Part of a chain of Catholic preschools across Hokkaido, the ideology of Tenshi's curriculum incorporates not only Christian beliefs but Montessori educational philosophy. Most of the mothers of Tenshi students are full-time homemakers, and committed to advancing their children's social and educational causes. The daily routine here is highly organised, and includes individualised academic study in the morning, followed by structured group activities for the rest of the day. The teachers hold Teacher's Certificates which are granted by the Prefectural Boards of Education.⁹

Oka Yochien is the largest kindergarten in the city of Yuri, famous for its bright, spacious facilities and an enormous clock which reveals dancing animals on the hour. While the teachers here are generally younger than staff at the other preschools, they are well-qualified, very energetic, and spend their days planning exciting activities for the children. Oka's curriculum has a firm emphasis on 'fun' group life, and the preschool is a popular choice for middle class parents.

Unlike the other institutions, Mori Hoikuen is not licensed to offer day-care services. The *hoikuen* was established in the post-war years by parents who were frustrated by repeated requests for an official preschool. Their aim was to provide childcare during the peak agricultural summer months, and to stem a rash of accidents involving unattended children. Gradually the hours were extended to all year round. The village of Mori is very isolated, and when the local mine closed down thirty years ago, the population crashed leaving only a handful of families still farming the land. The *hoikuen* is now based in the community centre, having been moved there from its home at the Shinto shrine following the collapse of its roof during a snowstorm. Although Mori now receives limited funding from local government towards the salaries of its two young teachers, the bulk of its revenue comes from parents which is reflected in the scant resources available to the children.

⁹ For training methods of preschool teachers in Japan see Noguchi 1992, Ishigaki 1992, Shoji 1983.

In Yuri city, Chibikko Hoikuen is also outside the bounds of national and local government influence. Fully-funded by tuition fees, this private *hoikuen* caters to preschoolers of all ages but is especially popular with professional families willing to pay for a day-care service that also offers academic and moral training. Chibikko is run by a family originally from Tokyo, even securing a top Tokyo chef to cater for the children's daily meals. While previously the physical setting of the *hoikuen* was rather cramped, 2006 marked a move to a new purpose-built facility on the edge of the city. Except for a period of free play in the afternoon, the children remain with their class group as they negotiate various academic and sporting exercises each day.

The purpose of this research is to map the diversity of Hokkaido preschools, their familiarity and use of *shūdan seikatsu* ideology in a demographically changing society, and to use detailed ethnographic data to expand on the sometimes oversimplified models represented in the literature. As this is a small study, it is by no means exhaustive, and cannot possibly represent the myriad of preschools currently operating in Hokkaido, or throughout Japan. Rather, it can be seen as a first step towards a framework for more extensive research.

This thesis has been organised around a series of themes, which integrate literature, theoretical discussion and ethnographic material within each chapter. Following my discussion of methodology (Chapter Two), Chapter Three explores the cultural ideology of Japanese childrearing practices, incorporating Doi's (1973) work to argue the centrality of *amae* (dependence) to Japanese mother and child relationships within the *uchi* (home) setting. The second part of this chapter traces the contrasting historical origins of the *yōchien* and *hoikuen*.

Chapter Four commences with ethnographic descriptions of the five preschools within Holloway's (2000) classification framework before exploring the meaning of the term *shūdan seikatsu* ("life in a group"), and demonstrating how children's participation in the *shūdan* environment of the preschool contrasts with the indulgent *amae* atmosphere of the home. The second part of Chapter Four expands on this discussion through an analysis of how the aims of *shūdan seikatsu* are implemented and achieved by the preschools on a practical level, with a focus on celebrations as a pedagogical device to reinforce group interdependency.

Chapter Five discusses methods of social control within the preschool arena, which links to the supporting roles played by mothers, who are themselves being socialised by school and state. Chapter Six asks if large class sizes are necessary for *shūdan seikatsu* to be an effective form of socialisation, and discusses the challenge of individualism to this process. The chapter concludes by examining the impact of the birth rate on the power of Japanese parents as consumers of preschool services.



Figure 1: Girls brush their teeth before naptime.

Map 1: Japan



Source: <http://worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/asia/lcolor/jpcolor.htm>