6 The Drive for Economic Great Power Status

The Japanese belief that they are a unique people of homogeneous culture, which today remains their greatest weakness, gave considerable advantages when the economy began to expand in the early post-American Occupation years. The decision to go for economic growth at virtually any cost demanded a commitment to what has been termed Japan Incorporated which would not have been possible to the same degree in most other countries. The emotional attachment to being Japanese, and thus not like other peoples, could be harnessed to national effort and economic achievement. Year after year in the 1960s Japan thus attained the unheard of economic growth of 10 per cent thereby doubling its economy every seven years or so. The education system reaffirmed Japanese sense of separateness and both supplied the right style of workers and confirmed and approved the national priority.

Kokichi Masuda in her paper ‘Changing Japanese Mothers’ (in Non-formal Education for Women, edited by Kazufusa Moro’oka, National Federation of Social Education of Japan, 1982) suggests that,

Looking back upon the past thirty years, it seems to be possible to divide them into three stages in order to understand the changes of Japanese society, the family, and the mothers. The first stage can be called that of the silent, fundamental change which started around 1955. This stage corresponds to the famous rapid economic growth in Japan. The impact of that growth upon the domestic setting was such as the Japanese had never before experienced. Certainly it did prepare the basis for the second stage. However, surprisingly enough, remarkable changes were invisible at least in terms of social problems in spite of the drastic economic changes. Irrespective of growing material affluence, people seemed to retain the traditional ways of life. The second stage, which began around 1965, was a really dramatic one just like an eruption of a volcano. The rapid progress of industrialization and urbanization at last brought explicit problems in political, economical and social aspects during this period. People began to notice the evil aspects
behind the material affluence. Many kinds of social issues such as the environmental pollution, women's liberation, anti-nuclear protests, students' unrest and others came out in public all at once. These movements were mainly supported by the young people, who were born just after the end of World War II, during the period of the baby boom. They were the bearers of new ideologies that ran against the traditional ways of life. Thus, the problem of the generation gap became visible and explicit in Japanese society. The third stage is from the mid-'70s to the present. This stage is characterized by the new conservatism and the emerging new social problems parallel with the tendency of highly industrialized countries. In other words, Japan was involved in international social problems usually observed in developed countries.

At the same Asian-South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education conference at which Kokichi Masuda gave her paper, Professor Kazuyo Yamamoto ('Women's Welfare and Social Participation') dealt with the standing of Japanese women and saw less change over the period from the 1950s to 1980s: 'One of the reasons for this unsatisfactory status lies in the traditional Japanese frame of concept, that is, men are supposed to work outside the home and women inside. This concept is still quite persistent, and has restricted the activities of many women. As a result, women themselves have a tendency to depend on men and to evade confronting the public and other situations of responsibility. Furthermore, women have not been given enough opportunities and experiences to train themselves socially, and consequently they lack social abilities and confidence'.

Women are in the majority in Japan and make the most important indicator of social change since the 1950s. Similarly, the world is aware of Japan's phenomenal economic growth, but other factors will be equally, if not more important to the Japanese and their culture. For example, in 1948 there were 198,946 kindergarten pupils, but in 1987 2,016,224; university students in 1948 numbered 11,978, but 1,934,483 in 1987; there were no junior colleges until 1950 when they had 15,098 students, but by 1987 there were 437,641; upper secondary schools in 1948 had 1,203,963 students and in 1987 5,375,107. Obviously such figures suggest a better educated population if only because the Japanese are in full-time education longer than the immediate postwar generation. With something like a third of the population beginning schooling at three years and ending at 22 a large proportion of the next generation of Japanese are, by