

Returnees of Japan

This paper will be focusing on the chapter “The changing perception and status of Japan’s returnee children (kikokushijo)” written by Roger Goodman from the book *Global Japan: The experience of Japan’s new immigrant and overseas communities* published in 2003. This paper will explain the returnees within Japan, how this concept came about, the advantages and disadvantages the returnees faced, and how non-returnee students were effected.

According to the author, the idea of returnee, or in Japanese *kikokushijo*, came about towards the late 1960’s as more Japanese workers were being transferred oversea. In a span of about twenty years, from 1971 to 1993, the number of returnee children grew from about 1,600 to over 13,000 children. To fall into the category of “returnee” there are several points that needs to be fulfilled. They are; both parents must be Japanese, the child was overseas before the age of 20, spent more than 3 months overseas, and then was entered back into mainstream Japanese education upon return. These points didn’t included the loss of “Japanese cultural traits” and adoption of foreign behavior like so many people believed were the main the main defining characteristics and this did happen, but not to many of them.

As returnee children, they faced several disadvantages and advantages. In the beginning the main disadvantage towards returnee children was the lack of a proper Japanese education while abroad. As a result, oversea Japanese schools and supplementary schools were opened. Despite these schools, it was seen that the returnees were struggling in in certain subject such as, social studies, mathematics and even in Japanese language. There was also struggles in adapting to Japan’s culture, since the returnees were seen as outsiders they were excluded and they also lacked in certain “cultural skills” that made it difficult for them to follow the values of Japanese society.

While the returnee children faced a few problems early on, they were then given opportunities that would help them succeed once more. Schools and universities in Japan began give the returnee children special privileges. For example, returnees were three times more likely to be accepted into top universities because the *tokubetsu waku* system, or “special quotas, made entry easier for them. With privileges that where provided to the returnees saw that forty-eight percent of those returnee that applies to the four-year university were successful. Their success also continued into their careers as companies had a special recruiting system just of the returnees. Comparing this to the rest of the student population at that time, only about thirty-seven percent even continued their higher education.

Seeing the success that returnees were having because of the privileges, parents of non-returnee children started to abuse the system during the 1980’s. In order to have their children receive the returnee privileges, parents were sending their children abroad. This started happening because for non-returnee students it was between three to six times more difficult to enter certain schools. Towards the mid-1980’s, the focus was no longer being put on getting returnee students to re-Japanize and have them fit in Japanese society, but to groom them for the purpose of becoming an “international elite” that non-returnee students can learn from.

Within a relatively short span of forty years, returnees went from a possible minority group that could have faced bullying and have been ostracized unless they were re-Japanized to an elite group within Japanese society. Now, entering into the twenty-first century, there has been another shift in views. It now depends where and how longer a person lived abroad and

how their experiences could benefit them in the long run that is valued by employers and among others in society. The shifts can also be seen in how the returnee view themselves, which is no longer all the same and unfortunately alienated when looking at the younger generations as they feel too conservative.

This chapter was interesting to read as this concept of returnee was completely new to me and there were a few things that I found were very interesting. The first being in the subjects that returnee students were struggling with while abroad, mainly the mathematics and Japanese language. When I had first read this article, I had found it very ironic that these were some of subjects that were problematic. The one reason being the stereotype that Asians are good at math and these returnee were Japanese. Although, this is just a stereotype and of course does not mean that all people of Asian ethnicity are inherently good at math, so I also had found it interesting to see this common stereotype broken. Although, these issues didn't last long with the establishment of Japanese schools the privileges they were given once they returned to Japan and the schools there.

The second thing that I found interesting was the rapid change in how returnees were viewed. The author said they were pitied in the beginning for having to go overseas, but then they became this elite class because of the privileges they were receiving. While I do think these privileges that were offered to them were beneficial in the beginning with helping them and making sure they are not falling too far behind their non-returnee peers, but I can also see how frustrating it could have been for the non-returnees. The non-returnees were, at the time, the ones behind left behind and forgotten simply because they never went abroad for at least 3 months. They had no guaranteed entry or secured spots for them in schools and a good percent of them would struggle to even continue with higher education. This is why I can sort of understand why parents and students started to abuse the system to get them qualified as a returnee, so they too could receive the benefits to set them a path to success.

Although there were a few points that I wish the author had gone more in depth into, like the two I discussed above, this chapter was still very interesting and explained returnees very concisely where anyone could understand it.

Work Cited

Goodman, Roger. "The Changing Perception and Status of Japan's Returnee Children (kikokushijo)." *Global Japan: The Experience of Japan's New Immigrant and Overseas Communities*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. 177-190. Print.