

The Story of Four Japanese Junior High School Students

Teenage

TOKYO



Teacher's Guide

Presented by The Children's Museum
and The Japan Forum

INTRODUCTION

Teenage Tokyo is a comic book with a serious purpose. It was created by an American and Japanese team of educators, writers and artists to accompany the exhibition, "Teen Tokyo: Youth and Popular Culture," at The Children's Museum in Boston, Massachusetts. The comic book, or **manga** (MAHN-gah), format was chosen because it is readable, authentic and an essential part of Japanese popular culture.

Teenage Tokyo is designed to help students better understand how life in contemporary, urban Japan is both similar to and different from life in the United States. It explores universal concerns of school and family within the setting of modern Tokyo.

This teacher's guide provides background information and suggestions for using **Teenage Tokyo** effectively in the classroom. It is organized according to four central topics:

- How Japanese junior highs are structured and students are affected by the entrance examination system;
- How schools contribute to shaping social values, specifically by encouraging a sense of group participation;
- How family lifestyles and values vary in modern, urban Japanese society;
- How popular youth culture reflects changes in Japanese life.

Before assigning *Teenage Tokyo*, have students consider the following:

1. Write down what comes to mind when you think of Japan. Save this and do another list when you're done reading the comic. How have your impressions changed?
2. What interests and concerns do you think young people in America and Japan have in common? Make another list after reading the comic and compare them.
3. As you read **Teenage Tokyo**, think about who reminds you of yourself the most and why. What things that happen to the kids in the story have also happened to you?

SCHOOLS AND TESTS

"When asked what they would most want to do, 75% of Tokyo 9th graders said 'sleep'." *Asahi Shimbun*, (1989)

Japanese students take entrance examinations for both high school and college. The examinations they take in ninth grade determine what high school they will attend. Some schools are highly competitive while others accept almost everyone who applies. College entrance exams are taken in the senior year of high school. These tests largely decide an individual's future employment and life course. Students are tested in Japanese, mathematics, science, social studies and English. The intensive period of cramming for these exams as well as the system itself are often referred to as "exam hell".

Yuichi's parents want him to go to the best high school in Tokyo and are pushing him to study harder. Young people like Yuichi often are forced to forego after-school activities and hobbies in order to study. Most attend **juku**, after-school and Saturday "cram schools" and/or hire private tutors to help to prepare them for the exams. Although the number of students enrolled in **juku** has risen rapidly in recent years, not all students attend them or are under the same degree of pressure that Yuichi is facing.

While many aspects of school life are very similar to American schools, there are significant differences. For example, the academic year runs from April to mid-March, with classes on Saturday morning in addition to weekdays. Students in Japan go to school 240 days a year compared to the average American school year of 180 days. The school day starts at 8:30 and ends at 3:00 pm. Except for special classes such as home economics, junior high students stay in their homerooms and teachers circulate from class to class. Each class is approximately fifty minutes and students have a ten-minute break between periods.

Once a week or more, students have homeroom classes in place of one of the five daily subject periods. This often consists of "moral education," a time for students to discuss various school life issues, learn about personal hygiene, interpersonal relations and personal values. Students are taught to feel responsible for their school by being assigned to clean the school building and their classrooms. Also, in junior high schools that offer hot lunches, students in each homeroom take turns serving lunch to their classmates. Both of these practices begin in elementary grades. In many junior high schools students bring their lunches in **bento** lunch boxes like Kenji in our story (p.16).

Discussion Questions and Activities:

1. Which aspects of Japan's school system might work well here? Which aspects do you think wouldn't work?
2. What kinds of pressure do you and other students at your school experience? What advice would you give Yuichi?

HOME LIFE

In the case of Japan, the family, rather than the individual, is considered to be the basic unit of society. However, the modern family is not the same as the traditional family, nor, of course, is it identical to the American family. Rather, it has evolved in response to the socioeconomic changes that have occurred in Japan.

*A Teacher's Manual For A Young Family,
The Asia Society*

While the most prevalent image of the modern Japanese family is that of the white collar middle class, lifestyles do differ greatly and the values passed on to children in Japan may vary considerably from family to family. In many ways family patterns reflect the seamless blend of traditional and contemporary culture that characterizes all of Japanese life today. Each family expresses this mix in its own unique style.

The ways in which Akiko and Mika, the two heroines, are raised, including their possessions and family rules attest to the range of differences that exist among modern Japanese families. Mika's father and mother operate a small shop that sells hot **bento**, or boxed meals, a traditional form of "fast-food" in Japan. Everyone in the family works in the store, including the grandmother who lives with them. The family lives in the apartment above the shop. Akiko and Yuichi's families, on the other hand, are more typical of the nuclear white collar family. Akiko's mother runs a boutique. Her father is working overseas. Yuichi's mother is a housewife and what is called a "**kyoiku-mama**" (KYO-ee-koo mah-mah)—a mother absorbed in her children's academic success — while his father is a businessman. In the final scenes Yuichi and Mika come to realize the differences that exist in the values of each of their families.

Japan's traditional family structure has changed significantly in recent decades due to increased wealth, women's involvement in the workplace, a declining birthrate, a shift from the extended to the nuclear family system and other components in the complex process of urbanization and modernization. Today more than 75% of all Japanese live in cities and over 60% of all Japanese women work in some capacity. The characters in our story testify to only one aspect of the rapid and often disruptive changes in Japanese society.

Discussion Questions and Activities:

1. Identify some of the values emphasized by each of the families in the story (Mika's, Yuichi's and Akiko's).
2. Interview your parents or other adults about how home life has changed during their lifetime.

GROUP PARTICIPATION

"The nail that sticks up gets hammered down." Japanese saying.
"The squeaky wheel gets the grease." American saying.

As anthropologist Theodore Bestor has remarked, "What Americans don't understand is not how difficult it is to be different in Japan but how easy it is to be the same." From an early age Japanese learn how to work and play within a group. School plays a major role in teaching young people how to work well with others in a structured setting. Schools offer a number of annual events, some of which require student participation. These include intramural sports competitions - **kyugitaikai** (KYOO-ghee-tie-kie), annual school festivals - **bunkasai** (BOON-kah-sigh), and all-school or all-grade overnight and day trips.

Japanese teenagers are strongly encouraged to join various after-school clubs, for which they meet or practice in the morning or afternoon almost every weekday, as well as on weekends. It is understood that joining a group is a full-time commitment with a set structure of rules. Many students see the club as their main social group and learn there to respect the hierarchy between younger **kohai** (koh-high) and older **sempai** (SEM-pie) members. While there is a teacher who supervises the clubs, they are mostly self-governing and the older students, or **sempai**, and coaching alumni are respected, obeyed and, in some cases, idolized and feared by the younger members (p.13).

Other aspects of school life, such as uniforms, contribute to the sense of group participation. Japanese junior and senior high school students wear a school pin on their uniforms identifying their school, grade and class. Standards set for dress are part of the **kosoku** (KOH-so-koo), or school rules. The rules and the extent to which they are enforced can vary from school to school. Japanese young people enjoy individualizing their uniforms with accessories and other minor modifications. However, too much extravagance or deviation from the dress code is seen as a violation of school rules which may result in a reprimand from the school or from other older students (**sempai**), as in the case of Akiko and her hair perm (p.11).

Discussion Questions and Activities:

1. Do you like doing things in groups? What do you like about it? What don't you like about it?
2. What are some of the groups to which you and your friends belong? (e.g., scouts, church, music, drama etc.)
3. What values do you think your school is teaching you?
4. The United States is unusual in not requiring school uniforms. What would be some advantages of a uniform? Design a school uniform you would want to wear.

POP CULTURE AND THE NEW GENERATION

"An 18-year old in Denmark has more in common with an 18-year old in France than either has with the elders in their own country."
Fortune, "America's Hottest Export: Pop Culture"

"A New Yorker who eats sushi is no more Easternized than a Tokyoite who eats hamburgers is Westernized."
George Field, *From Bonsai to Levi's*

Contemporary Japanese popular culture testifies to Japan's increased wealth and internationalization. Much of popular music, sports, fashion and eating habits are greatly influenced by the West and can be found around the globe. However, closer examination reveals constant adaptation of foreign things to uniquely Japanese traditions. For example, while the imported Valentine's Day has become popular in Japan, it is celebrated in ways that fit in with traditional concepts of gift-giving. This reminds us that changes in pop culture don't necessarily imply revolutionary change in basic cultural values. In any case, as far as teenagers are concerned, it doesn't matter where hamburgers came from, they are just a natural part of everyday Japanese life.

Like their counterparts elsewhere, Japanese young adolescents live for more than school. Theirs is a rich and fast-paced culture of rock, rap and popular music, fads and fashions, comics and teen magazines, all types of fast food and an awe-inspiring array of specialized consumer goods. The rock group, **Shinsengumi** (SHIN-SEN-goo-me), that Akiko and Mika enjoy, typify the short-lived and enormously popular world of young "idol" singers. Teen magazines exhort young people to keep up with all the latest fashions and trends. With the increased amount of money this age group has to spend, the youth market has become very competitive and important. Akiko's room is packed with a great number of the goods the daughter of successful working parents can purchase.

The change in the standard of living in Japan since World War II has been dramatic. Parents worry that the present generation is growing up with too much money and little sense of the values of self-sacrifice and dedication that has made Japan such a rich nation. Others are concerned that young people aren't being taught to see themselves as citizens of the world. These inter-generational anxieties aren't new or unique to Japan and forecasts of the future are tentative at best.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Discussion Questions and Activities:

1. What interests do you share with the kids in the story?
2. What three things do you think best represent your generation?
3. Research the origins of your favorite foods, games, songs, celebrities, etc. Do you consider these things to be your own even if they come from another country or culture?
4. Compare the layout and drawing style of an American comic book with the style and drawings in the **manga**. List the differences you notice.



The Life of a Junior High School Student in Japan. Tokyo: International Society for Educational Information Inc., 1986. Koryo Building, 18 Wakaba 1-chome, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160.

The Life of a Senior High School Student. Tokyo: International Society for Educational Information Inc., 1986.

What I want to know about Japan-Brief Answers To Questions Asked By American Junior High School Students. New York: Japan Information Center, Consulate General of Japan, 1988.

White, Merry. *The Next Japanese: Identity, Sexuality and the Youth Market.* New York: Free Press, 1992.

Vogel, Ezra S. *Japan's New Middle Class.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991 edition.

Teacher resources and curriculum materials:

The Harvard East Asian Program

The Children's Museum
300 Congress Street
Boston, MA 02210
(617) 426-6500 x235

The National Clearinghouse for U.S.-Japan Studies

2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120
Bloomington, Indiana 47408-2698
(812) 855-3838

The New England Program for Teaching About Japan

Five College Center for East Asian Studies
8 College Lane Smith College
Northampton, MA 01063
(413) 585-3751

SPICE

(Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education)
300 Lasuen Street Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305-5031
(415) 723-1116

The Asia Society

725 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10021
(212) 288-6400

Afro-Asian Pen Pal Center

P.O. Box 337
Saugerties, NY 12477