

Japan's Generation X Ready to Challenge Tradition

By Leslie Helm
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SHIBUYA, Japan—They hang out on the side streets of this overcrowded Tokyo hub, bathed in the blazing neon of a thousand bars, game arcades and fast-food stores.

They send coded messages to each other on pagers and worship the heroes and heroines of their favorite video games.

They love to drink beer and sake, sing in shoe-box-sized "karaoke" rooms and have their palms read by old ladies in the dim light of paper lanterns.

Call them Japan's Generation X, its Junior Boomers.

Born at a pivotal point in history when rapid growth created a previously unknown level of prosperity here, these young people, ages 19 to 22, are developing a culture centered on technology, fantasy and a yearning to break out of the stiff confines of Japanese tradition.

Already, as they begin to enter the work force this year, no one seems to doubt that their new values and experiences will resonate and collide with Japan's traditional corporate culture and may have a profound influence on Japanese business and society.

The core of the Junior Boomers' generation, the offspring of the globally notorious baby boomers, were born between 1971 and 1974. They constitute a demographic force numbering 8 million here. As an attractive market and potential labor pool, they have been dissected, surveyed and psychoanalyzed by corporations and consultants.

Experts find the Junior Boomers to be pampered by their parents and unchallenged by their schools. They are physically imposing, all too often possessing limited social skills and lacking traditional loyalties. They are prodigious but skeptical consumers. And most important for this strait-laced strivers' society, they often appear to be nonconformist, selfish and indifferent workers.

At first glance, the Junior Boomers—beneficiaries of some of the best diets and health care in Japan's history—look very different. The men average 5-feet-X, 4 inches taller than their fathers. Many wear their shoulder-length hair in a ponytail. The women, too, have grown taller and favor miniskirts to show off the long, slender legs that are the envy of an older generation. The "surfer" look, now in for both sexes, requires them to use bronzing lotions or to go to "solar salons" and to bleach their hair.

Their differences, though, are more than cosmetic. Dentsu, the giant advertising agency, calls them the "Dolphin Generation" because they are said to travel in small groups. One writer calls them "slime," contending that they have a weak sense of self and adapt to whatever environment they happen to be in. Some analysts say they conform and lack initiative. Nonetheless, others suggest they are creative individualists.

Whatever the case, early indications are that many of them won't take readily to the suffocating conformity and frequent drudgery demanded by Japanese corporations. In surveys, young people express pity for their parents, the grinding corporate "salaried men." The young people resolve to put their own needs first.

"I just want lots of my own time," said Keigo Kugimoto, 20, voicing a common view. Kugimoto, who is saving his money so he can travel, works long hours delivering lunches for his father's business. "I want to go anywhere I haven't been," he said. "To see lots of things. To learn what I don't know by meeting lots of people."

Takashi Kurokawa, 19, who wears popular baggy, knee-length shorts and desert boots, wants to work for a trading company when he gets out of school. But he knows his priorities, saying, "I want to work so I can have time to surf."

A decade ago, a "New Breed" of young people also thought they would be different from their workaholic parents.

But raised by authoritarian fathers when Japan was still on its upward sprint, the "New Breed" turned out to be old-fashioned. While their elders initially criticized them for their ignorance about such corporate basics as knowing how to bow and greet people, they were, within a few years, suddenly winning praise. They had fallen into line, changed their ways to get ahead and were dubbed "New Hard Workers."

The Junior Boomers are different, analysts insist. They are not made of the stuff it takes to create "corporate warriors." Traditional values like perseverance and patience have given way to instant gratification.

This Japanese generation's defining characteristic—a life in the lap of prosperity—may explain why it differs from its counterparts around the globe, or even from its parents.

By 1970, the year when some of the first Junior Boomers were born, key elements of Japan's infrastructure, including the bullet train and a new road system, were completed as part of two decades of rapid growth. The nation celebrated its arrival in the modern world with Expo '70, a lavish demonstration of its cultural and technological strengths. When Junior Boomers had turned eight, half of their families had cars, 90 percent had color televisions.

The early 1970s also proved to be a boom time for weddings, as the '60s generation of student radicals began to marry and have babies. The new parents rejected their own parents' authoritarian ways, giving their children clothes, toys, fat allowances and often private rooms. Their children were expected to study, but otherwise they seldom were disciplined.