

*Juvenile Delinquency in Japan: Reconsidering the "Crisis."* Edited by Gesine Foljanty-Jost. Brill, Leiden, 2003. x, 275 pages. €71.00.

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This is a collection of essays by 14 scholars addressing various aspects of juvenile delinquency in Japan. The contributors are mostly quantitative sociologists and liberal educationalists, and though interesting in places, the collection ultimately demonstrates the dangers of social research that has drifted away from encounters with real people, leaving the sociologists enmeshed in statistical issues and the educationalists distracted by their own political preoccupations.

The book's title, with "crisis" in quotation marks, suggests that in fact there is *no* crisis in Japanese youth behavior. Certainly that is the line taken by Gesine Foljanty-Jost and Manuel Metzler in the opening chapter, which finds that recorded violent crime by juveniles is far higher in Germany than in Japan, where delinquency actually decreases with increasing age (p. 13). That position is supported by some contributors, notably Annette Erbe (pp. 51–73) and Hideo Tokuoka (pp. ~~103–14~~). Erber sets out to criticize dubious official crime statistics and sensationalist media that find new social trends in a handful of shocking incidents. Tokuoka accuses the Japanese media of succumbing to periodic moral panics (p. 110) and suggests that belief in these scare stories could morph into "self-fulfilling prophecy" (p. 113). These critiques of media sensationalism are broadly persuasive and are further backed by Christian Schwarzenegger (pp. 173–98), whose essay includes government data showing a rising but still very low rate of violent juvenile crime in the 1990s (p. 188).

I am somewhat less convinced by Chisaki Toyama-Bialke (pp. 19–50), whose study on "the Japanese triangle" of family, school, and adolescents is based entirely on secondary sources and strays close to uncritical

*Nihonjinron* in seeking to explain the abnormally low crime rate among Japanese teenagers. With its image of smoothly interacting social institutions, this essay is the most extreme example of the “Crisis? What crisis?” position.

In sharp contrast, other contributors in the volume appear to believe there really *is* a crisis in juvenile delinquency. Sometimes they even ground their arguments in the same government statistics that are criticized by other contributors. Compare, for example, the uncritical use by Hidenori Fujita (pp. 152–53) and Yoshiaki Nakano (p. 201) of bullying statistics whose unreliability has already been exposed by Erbe (p. 58). Fujita and Nakano, both strongly critical of the existing system, want to believe the alarming data undermined by Erbe.

No one would expect all contributors to have an identical perspective, and Foljanty-Jost does acknowledge some differences of opinion in the introduction (p. viii). However, the editor should at least have tried to establish a consensus on what constitutes usable data. There is even a disconcerting fuzziness as to what we are talking about: some writers focus on criminal acts by juveniles, others on classroom issues such as bullying and loss of control by teachers. The relationship between those two zones of behavior is left unexplored.

I also find problems with the methodology and argumentation in some of the chapters. Atsushi Kadowaki, for example, follows generations of sociologists in trying to define a new breed of Japanese youth, using data from the Tokyo Youth Survey to divide youth into four personality types—a doomed venture. The four types are “steadily achieving,” “malcontent,” “non-confrontational,” and “autonomous” (p. 81). How the survey selected these apparently random adjectives is not explained, and they are not mutually exclusive—in fact, I think at least three of them apply to myself. Kadowaki uses such unconvincing survey data to argue for the emergence of a new breed of listless malcontents who cannot *hokú* down a steady job and do not trust the older generation, but lack the will to revolt.

Mitsuru Taki (pp. 91–101) focuses on “problem behavior,” defined as bullying, absenteeism, and school violence, saying “all of them have been urgent problems with no sign of improvement for the last twenty years” (p. 91). That contradicts abundant data elsewhere in the book showing numerous fluctuations, at least in official statistics. He then, for no explained reason, picks out “stress” as the primary factor causing bullying (p. 92), presenting data from a comparative study between Japan and Australia that unsurprisingly shows that in both countries bullies and their victims alike tend to report high levels of stress. Despite the broadly similar patterns, he concludes that Japan, being a group-oriented society, needs a culturally specific program of peer support. His bleak view of Japanese schools shows no awareness of Toyama-Bialke’s functional Japanese triangle.

While Taki apparently believes that “bullying can happen at any time, at any school and among any children” (p. 91), Shigenobu Yonekawa (pp. 115–28) takes roughly the opposite view, seeing “inequality in family background as a reason for juvenile delinquency” (his title) and unsurprisingly finds that youths from low-income families and single-parent families are more likely than average to commit delinquent acts. He and Robert Yoder (pp. 129–42) are the only authors who foreground class issues.

Yoder, the only American in the book, is also the only author to give clear evidence that he has ever *met* a Japanese juvenile delinquent. His research on youths in Kanagawa spans 20 years and admirably demonstrates the importance of class in the personal development of Japanese youths. His account of the two communities of “Minami” and “Hoku” shows us both smoothly functioning schools and schools where the students have to be locked in to stop them escaping (p. 133). Yoder’s important contribution reminds us of the importance of local knowledge—of not regarding Japan as a sociocultural monolith.

Fujita (pp. 143–72) argues that educational reforms have gradually moved Japan away from a collective orientation and an educational/environmental approach and toward an emphasis on disciplinary and remedial approaches that Fujita associates with Western countries. Driven by a blend of liberalism, nationalism, and neoconservatism, successive Japanese governments have introduced educational reforms that ultimately put more pressure on schools and favor outstanding pupils at the expense of the rest. Despite Fujita’s scrupulous distinctions between ideological strands in educational reform, he is ultimately suspicious of nearly all reforms. He sees Japan’s education system abandoning its responsibility to deal with delinquency, resorting instead to blaming individual perpetrators and victims (p. 170). That may be so, but I think Fujita implicitly overstates how good it was in the old days before they started collecting bullying statistics. He is also overly harsh in his judgment on recent educational reforms, some of which (reduction of school hours, more freedom for teachers to design curriculum, etc.) have been genuinely progressive, in intent at least. His claim that reforms unjustly favor gifted pupils neglects the possibility that old-fashioned convoy-style public education may drive more and more of those gifted pupils into the private sector.

Schwarzenegger, the only criminologist in a collection dominated by education scholars, gets us back to the topic of delinquency with a very thorough, informative overview of Japan’s juvenile law and recent reforms to it. The postwar Juvenile Law comes across as a rather cozy, family-style system firmly based on the principle of rehabilitation rather than punishment. Schwarzenegger is inclined to credit it with keeping juvenile crime at very low levels. Recent reforms show an understandable concern to improve the rights of victims of juvenile crime, while making judicial proce-

ture more comparable to that for adults and applying harsher penalties to younger perpetrators (pp. 191–92). The parallels with the educational reforms described by Fujita are striking: it is a similar mix of liberalism and neoconservatism. Again like Fujita, Schwarzenegger recognizes the mix but is skeptical of the reforms, blaming the media (p. 194) for exaggerating problems with the existing system.

Nakano and Masaya Minei clearly *do* believe in a classroom crisis and discuss responses to it: school counseling programs and local networking, respectively. Minei (pp. 210–20) offers a cursory look at several worthy schemes to discuss youth issues in the local community. Nakano follows Fujita in blaming recent education reforms for making an already stressful school situation worse (p. 203), fearing that the government program placing part-time counselors in state schools is inadequate and misdirected: it is based on a “clinical model,” targeting problem students, when it should be based on a more preventive “educational model” (pp. 204–5). An interesting chapter, it is marred by confusing and unexplained statistical data.

Anne Metzler offers a thoughtful account of juvenile training schools (*shōnen'in*), the main institution for juvenile offenders in Japan. Drawing heavily on Tano Tetsufumi’s colorful collection of accounts by youths who have stayed at these places,<sup>1</sup> and brief visits of her own, she describes a system that demands obedience for its own sake and earmarks activities for every minute of the day (pp. 230–32). Perturbed by this Orwellian scenario, Metzler nonetheless has to admit that the recidivism rates (22.5 per cent in 1999, against 70 to 80 per cent in comparable German institutions) make the *shōnen'in* a “clear success” (p. 248). She can only hope that success derives from the stress on socialization—role-playing games and personal development discussions—rather than the seemingly pointless rules and regimentation. Meanwhile, she observes that the *shōnen'in* show many resemblances to junior high schools: they have the same emphasis on obedience, character building, and team spirit, though the *shōnen'in* have a much grimmer atmosphere.

Manuel Metzler and Foljanty-Jost respond to that hint in the final essay, studying discipline regimes at three junior high schools in Niigata. They find that despite various cases of delinquent behavior, “the overall picture is one of well-integrated students who occasionally ignore the everyday school rules” (p. 260). Metzler and Foljanty-Jost see these schools as a largely successful control society, with problems of deviance exaggerated in order to justify strict permanent control. They conclude that “the issue of deviance thereby effectively serves—maybe unconsciously or by design—as a means of integration” (p. 265). Interestingly, that is exactly the opposite view to that of Tokuoka, who earlier in the book sees “repression of deviancy as a reason

1. Tano Tetsufumi, *Shōnen'in ni ite mairimashita!* (Tokyo: Kōseido Shuppan, 1998).

for recent deviancy” (this is his title, p. 103). Probably the truth of the matter is that heavy emphasis on repressing deviance has a polarizing effect. As Yoder puts it: “The isolation and bunching together of school failures and troublemakers at low ranked high schools kept them away from and thus minimized their influence on students at higher ranked schools” (p. 140). That policy of containment, maintaining an orderly and tractable majority by dumping a disorderly and disadvantaged minority into failing state schools (“sink schools,” in British parlance) has been around for a long time, contrary to Fujita’s implied image of an egalitarian school system in the good old days. Yet Manuel Metzler and Foljanty-Jost find their three schools broadly similar in institutional arrangements (p. 254) and imply a more general uniformity. This is far from Yoder’s image of class-differentiated schools. In choosing two sharply contrasting field sites, and focusing on senior high schools (slightly less controlled than junior high schools because they are outside the period of compulsory education), Yoder may have gone out of his way to look for illustrations of class difference; but by the same token, Metzler and Foljanty-Jost, choosing three junior high schools in a rural area, may have gone looking for uniformity.

This book is presented as a coherent collection on a common theme, yet there is little common ground among contributors. Statistics, which may or may not be plausible, are used, modified, discredited, or ignored in order to show that there is or is not a crisis in juvenile delinquency in Japan, which may be defined as bullying in schools or as street crime by juveniles. There has been far too little fieldwork, and virtually none of the authors makes any reference to any of the other essays in the book. The final chapter makes no effort to address the many contradictions, instead adding yet another interesting but questionable perspective.