

# Social Education and Kominkan

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**T**HE KOMINKAN, community-based social education institution run by the education board of the local government, has become a symbol of social education in Japan. It has played a role in ensuring that people at the community level were able to exercise their right to education. It has invariably been involved in facilitating education on various social issues.

In 2009, a network of civil society organizations on social education in Japan prepared a report that dealt with the various aspects of social education in Japan including the role of the Kominkan. The report entitled “Social Education/Adult Education in Japan: Policies, Practices and Movements During the Last 12 Years” was prepared by the Japanese Domestic Grass-roots Meeting for the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) in November 2009.<sup>1</sup>

Below is an edited excerpt of sections of the report focusing mainly on social education and the Kominkan - their history, significance and the challenges being faced.

## I. Social Education in Japan

### Japanese Concept of Social Education<sup>2</sup>

In Japan, ‘adult education’ (*Seijin Kyouiku* in Japanese) is not a concept or term that enjoys wide currency. The commonly used concept is ‘social education’ (*Shakai Kyouiku* in Japanese), which can be roughly translated into adult and community education and is widely used in laws and government policies, and in research and practice.

The forms of education in Japan are conventionally categorized into:

- a) Home education, which is held privately at home for children;
- b) School education, which is the formal education for children or adults at schools; and
- c) Social education, which includes all educational activities in society at large falling outside the above a and b categories.

A wide variety of educational activities come under the term 'social education': they can be nonformal education provided by social education institutions such as the community learning centers run by local governments called Kominkans, public libraries and museums, or learning that accompanies voluntary activities of citizens in clubs, volunteer organizations, community organizations, and so on: they can be conducted inside the classroom in school-type environment where learners are taught by teachers, or outside the classrooms as self/mutual education activity of a group of citizens who teach and learn from each other: and participants can be of any age (children, youth, adults or the elderly) and a mixture of different age groups (e.g., children and adults).

Social education is closely connected to home education and school education. It includes such examples as parents' learning to improve their home education and the activities of Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) aiming for the betterment of school education. Some local governments have come to offer social education to the residents almost solely related to home education.

This phenomenon was promoted by the revision of the Social Education Act in 2001, which clearly stated that a board of education in a local government has the responsibility for promoting the residents' learning concerning home education through classes, assemblies and public lectures.

In the three categories of education, adult education overlaps both school education and social education: the institutions in the field of school education include universities, vocational schools (*Senshuu Gakkou*) and miscellaneous schools (*Kakushu Gakkou*, where practical skills such as driving, cooking and foreign languages are taught) and those in social education are Kominkans, museums, public libraries, public sports facilities and educational institutions for young people with a lodging function called *Seinen no Ie*.

Adult education is also provided in various institutions that are not administratively designed for education: for example, the labor administration offices/labor information centers offer seminars and public lectures for employees and employers.

While the Japanese government has conducted a 'social education survey' every year, it has been largely indifferent to the profiles (such as the sex and age) of the participants of social education unless the educational programs in question are targeted to specific sex/age groups. It has tended

to be satisfied with such rough data as budgets or the number of users of a given social education institution. For this reason it has not been very useful when one would like to know the state of adult education/learning included in social education in Japan.

As mentioned above, the concept of social education itself is all-inclusive and indiscriminate about who (and how old) the participants are. While this is a unique way of categorizing education and has its own merit, in order to grasp in detail the reality of social education, with which adult education/learning partly overlaps, it is necessary to modify the methods of collecting data for a social education survey.

### **The Constitution and Fundamental Law of Education**

After World War II, Japan enacted a new Constitution with three major principles: sovereignty resides in the people, respect for the rights of people, and renunciation of war for peace and democracy. Under this Constitution, the Fundamental Law of Education was enacted in 1948. This law has the core idea that the purpose of education is to respect and foster the freedom and autonomy of individuals and that it is important to protect the independence of education from political powers. Under this idea, local autonomous bodies (especially municipalities, not prefectures) have the responsibility for educational administration. And each local autonomous body must have an education board that is different and independent from the other administrative sections in order to keep educational policies free from any political control from other fields.

From the following year, 1949, a series of education-related laws were enacted including the Social Education Law in 1949, Library Law in 1950, Museum Law in 1951, Promotion Law for Youth Class in 1953, and Promotion Law for Sports in 1961.

### **Right to Social Education**

The Social Education Law was soon revised in 1951 with the addition of a new chapter on regulations for social education director. Revision of some articles of this law also occurred in 1959. The 1959 revision met resistance because of fear that political control of social education would become stronger. Subsequent amendments of the Social Education Law were minor, usually with a change of a few words.

The local governments mainly implemented the social education/adult education policies under these education-related laws.

Movements on learning and social education would at times support or join the local governments in implementing educational policies, but also oppose them at other times. Some movements called for change in these policies.

In line with the philosophy of the Fundamental Law of Education, Article 3 of the Social Education Law provides that “State and Public Bodies” (meaning the national and local governments) have to perform their “function” of assisting in the maintenance of “congenial environment” for the development of social education. Article 12 strictly prohibits these “State and Public Bodies” from controlling social education organizations and their activities.

These articles uphold the philosophy of ‘social education’ that the learners are the subjects who decide on how to develop their own learning, what cultural and sports activities under some conditions could be created through a variety ways. In short, they state the right to learn from both points of view of freedom and welfare.

Despite these ideas under the Social Education Law, social educational policies started to change from late 1950s toward control of learning programs for local residents. Some of the social education (government) officials who supported the residents’ right to learn were moved from the social education section to other parts of the administration office for political reasons. This problem was then known as the “unfair shift of social education officials.” This problem often occurred during the 1960s and the 1970s. Moreover, some local governments refused to allow some learning activities of residents to be held in public education facilities.

Against this policy trend, movements of people articulating the right to learn and the idea of ‘right to social education’ became popular. In some municipalities, the power of residents espousing the idea of ‘right to social education’ changed the social education policies to those that made the residents themselves the leaders in promoting them.

During this period of tension between people and the national and local governments, national-level social education movements were born. For example, *Monthly Journal Social Education* started in 1957. This journal started the annual national conference for social education study in 1961, which gave birth to the Japan Association for Promotion of Social Education

in 1963. These developments in the social education movement democratized social education once more and helped social education develop more. The journal, the association, and the movements are still existing at present.

### **Contradiction Within Lifelong Learning Act**

However, the enactment of the Lifelong Learning Promotion Maintenance Act<sup>3</sup> in 1990 changed the previous trend mentioned. This law provided legal justification for the 1976 report of the Council of Social Education (National), the 1981 report of the Central Council for Education, and the policies of 'lifelong education' and 'lifelong learning' that had already started to be implemented with budget from the 1981 fiscal year. Moreover, the Ministry of Education put the Lifelong Learning Department at the first tier in the structure of the ministry and made social education part of its function.

The government enacted the Law on Promotion and Maintenance for Lifelong Learning with no consideration for its relation to the Social Education Law. The Law on Promotion and Maintenance for Lifelong Learning mainly covers policies of prefectural governments and for districts whose areas are bigger than municipalities. It also covers not only about the policies related to the Ministry of Education but also those related to the Ministry of International Trade and Industry. The government tried to implement lifelong learning policies beyond the power of local governments, and also explored a market for lifelong learning business.

In the first half of the 1990s, many Ministries implemented policies that used the words 'lifelong learning.' This made 'lifelong learning' not merely a component of educational policies but part of policies on many other issues (industrial, welfare, labor, home affairs, community, etc.). Some local governments (both prefectural and municipal) responded to this new policy movement and sought opinions from the public in making their own lifelong learning policies. Some of them made their social education plans on lifelong learning through their education boards. But before the local governments were able to implement their plans in mid-1990s, they started to face financial difficulties alongside the implementation of the decentralization program of the national government. While there is no research data to be able to analyze whether the local governments were effective in implementing their lifelong learning plans or continued them in the 1990s, it is clear that the boom of lifelong learning policy has gone away.

### Revision of the Social Education Law

Looking back at the legal and political trends in the social education field since the mid-1990s, several features arose:

- a. The regulation that promoted participation of residents in the process of adopting social education policies has been weakened,
- b. Control by the government of social education has prevailed, and
- c. Ideas and policies to protect and support the right to social education have been set aside.

The decentralization policy of the national government in mid-1990s promoted the deregulation policy in order to reduce the budget of the local governments. In line with this process, the 1999 revision of the Social Education Law made the provision on participation of residents in policy-making unclear. The membership of the local residents in the Kominkan Advisory Committee and the Advisory Committee of Social Education became vague with the use of the phrase “persons who are related to school or social education.” The provision that suggests democratic selection of representatives from among the residents has disappeared.

The Social Education Law was again revised in 2001, just two years after its last revision. A new provision was added in Article 3, the article that provides for the principal philosophy of the law (the idea of ‘congenial environment’ for social education). The new provision, as the second provision of Article 3, provides that the national and local governments are responsible both for linking social education to school education and for improving home education. The 1999 revision was again revised with the phrase “persons who contribute to making home education better” being used instead. This again affected the membership of the Kominkan Advisory Committees and the Advisory Committees of Social Education from among the residents.

Article 5 of the Social Education Law (Affairs of Local Board of Education) was revised with the insertion of two new sections: “Matters concerning the planning of courses in the provision of learning opportunities for home education, the sponsorship of meetings, and the encouragement thereof” and “Matters concerning the implementation of projects to provide young people with opportunities for social service experience, including volunteer activities, nature experience and the encouragement thereof.”

These 2001 revisions showed the new policy direction of controlling social education activities, which seemed to be inconsistent with the basic principle of 'deregulation' in the 1999 revision.

### **2006 'Revision' of Fundamental Law of Education**

The Fundamental Law of Education was significantly revised in December 2006. New articles were added that provided a different perspective on education.

A new article entitled "Lifelong Learning" was added parallel to the article on social education. In this new article, "lifelong learning" was presented based on the framework that separates "individual learning" from the society to which individuals contribute by the fruit of one's learning. The article on social education was also revised by stating that social education should meet both individual demands and social needs.

The idea of education in these two new articles under the 2006 revision differs from the original idea under the 1948 Fundamental Law of Education. The original provision in the 1948 Fundamental Law of Education states that society should develop through the development of the whole personality and positive spirit of individuals, whereas the new articles in the 2006 revision define education in the framework of two parallel poles - the 'individual' and the 'society'. In addition, the purposes of education in the 1948 law are stated modestly and philosophically. The 2006 revision adds narrow and moralistic purposes such as respect for discipline in school and love of hometown ('love of the country and region'), which do not seem to fit the 1948 purposes of education.

The 1948 provision that education "shall not be subject to improper control, but it shall be directly responsible to the whole people" was revised in 2006 by replacing the clause "but it shall be directly responsible to the whole people" with "and shall be carried out in accordance with this and other acts." This latter new clause allows other laws to be enacted and read into the main law, the 1948 Fundamental Law of Education, and thus views the profound idea of freedom of education in reverse. This revision, in effect, weakened the idea of freedom of education.

Another new article, now Article 17, adds the idea of a "Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education" that the national government should adopt. But the new article also requires local governments to adopt their own educational plans with reference to such national plan. While this latter com-

ment seems to restore the idea that local governments have primary authority on educational policy and administration, an important principle of educational administration in Japan, it actually strengthens the control of the national government over education.

Under this situation, there is a need to ensure the autonomy of local governments in both the national basic plan and local plans. It is also important that the local residents elaborate the local educational plans to be able to promote the learning activities of people and keep the freedom of learners and educational institutions. It is a challenge to social educators to continue and develop the philosophy of 'congenial environment' in the future policies for the promotion of social education.

### **2008 'Revision' of the Social Education Law**

The Social Education Law was amended in May 2008 in accordance with the 2006 revision of the 1948 Fundamental Law of Education. A new section was added to Article 3 of the law regarding the importance of stronger connection of social education to both school education and home education. Moreover, under a new section, the local legislative councils were given the authority to decide on support for the education of primary and secondary school students. The amendment of Article 13 loosened the system on public subsidy for social education. Under the previous system, only the Advisory Committee on Social Education as a legal committee with representatives of local residents could give to the local government the approval for its subsidy on social education groups. This was meant to keep the subsidies to these groups not subject to government control. The new amendment permitted the local government to subsidize social education groups without the approval of the Advisory Committee on Social Education, though they need the final approval of another committee.

Under these amendments of the Social Education Law, there was concern that the important system of participation of citizens in the Social Education Advisory Committee would weaken. Also, the participation of the citizens in the policymaking process on adult education would also weaken with no alternative system for citizens' participation having been presented.

The 2008 revisions also changed the qualifications for the position of social education director by adding as necessary qualifications the experience of being librarian or museum curator to the experience of being a so-



cial education associate director or a school teacher. And a new article was added regarding the “evaluation” of the management of Kominkans.

### **Outsourcing the Management of Institutions for Social Education**

During the decade of 2000s, the national government compelled local governments to outsource the management of public facilities under the decentralization policy. The 2003 revision of the Local Autonomy Law introduced the designated manager system. Although this revision was expected to exempt social educational facilities, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) supported the application of the system to social education facilities by issuing a statement entitled “About the Application of Designated Manager System to Social Education Facilities” in January 2005. People involved in social education, Kominkan and public libraries opposed this stance of the MEXT. Those opposing the MEXT stance included Kominkan Advisory Committees in several municipalities, even the one in Hiroshima city where the Kominkans had already been outsourced to its public foundation. Some of them made petitions to their local governments against this outsourcing.

The Japan Association for the Promotion of Social Education (JAPSE) expressed in January 2005 its opposition to the introduction by MEXT of a new system in managing public social education facilities.<sup>4</sup> JAPSE listed what it saw were problems of the new system:

- It spread the idea that beneficiaries should pay for public services in social education
- It created an obstacle to the participation of the residents in policymaking
- It destroyed the freedom of learning because the designated institutions system prefers profitability and efficiency
- It denied the continuity of social education
- It made the working conditions worse and less professional for people working for social education.

But the MEXT document started to influence some local governments leading to the change in the management system of some public institutions and facilities of social education such as Kominkans, libraries and museums.

### Local Governments and Social Education Staff

Social educational policies and programs are mainly implemented by local governments. After World War II, social education gained support with staff under the local Education Boards. In the 1970s, the number of local governments that officially employed workers for social education gradually increased. Some local governments took care of ensuring staff allocation for social education, allowed them to remain working in social education for a longer period if they wanted to do so, and some of them even hired specific workers as social education staff who worked only for adult education policy or programs.

But in early 1980s, some local governments started to assign staff to social education programs for shorter periods than before. They transferred staff working on social education to the other administration offices easily. They seemed to have been influenced by the new theory of managing local governments. At the same time, due to the national government demand for the reduction of the number of local government staff, some local governments pretended that they were reducing, or not increasing, the number of staff. In the adult education fields, they did it by outsourcing the management of social education facilities to outside public corporations that local governments have helped establish.

In the 1990s, local governments tended to replace the number of permanent staff by part-time staff. They also introduced the outsourcing system more widely. They did the same thing in social education field too. Under the "designated manager system," the relations between the social education staff and the local government staff weakened because the social education staffs were hired by outside designated organizations. Local governments' contact with social education staff was coursed through the designated organizations.

Similar situations usually gave rise to a social problem in the official workers system caused by low employment rate of part-time staff. Part-time workers were usually employed for short periods and their wages were low and usually could not be raised. Their situation worsened even more when they were transferred by the local governments to the organizations that managed the facilities under the management outsourcing scheme.

In general, therefore, the people working on social education policies and programs could not keep their professional positions anymore and also faced the same deterioration of working conditions that local government

personnel encountered. This trend created a serious challenge to social education under the administration of local governments.

For a long time, the national government has not adopted a policy that respected the particular importance of social education and has not improved and reinforced the professional status of the social education staff. There is a qualification system under three laws for the position of the social education director, the librarian and the curator. The national government lowered the level of qualifications under the 1996 revision of government regulations for the qualifications for these three positions. With the change of government rules on social education staff system, the recommendations of the Advisory Committee for Lifelong Learning based on these qualifications resulted in people with such qualifications not being able to get proper jobs. The understanding within the government of the value of social and adult education jobs and their particular quality, and the vision for recovering or recreating the social education staff system failed to progress.

### **Abandonment of the Youth Education Policies**

Before World War II, national and local governments took care and sometimes organized women and youth organizations, and used them to implement their social education/adult education policies in Japan. These women and youth organizations were disbanded, and then revived after the war. They eradicated their old image of having supported the government regarding the war, and continued their important role in social education in local communities. But urbanization caused the gradual decrease in the number of these organizations, and their role in social education weakened.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the activities of PTAs, the social education classes in Kominkans, and other activities led to the creation of many groups of young mothers. They covered a variety of areas of learning and developed their own activities. They developed both as target and stakeholders of social education.

In the 1960s, social education programs in Kominkans focused on classes for young people who migrated from rural to urban areas with the aim of helping them live active life in their new places of residence. At the same time, the activities of youth organizations in rural areas continued. But with the rise in the number of youth enrolling in secondary schools and universities from late 1970s and early 1980s, the youth became less interested

in activities in local communities and the place of youth education in social education programs weakened.

Due to this trend the Law for Promotion of the Education Class for the Youth enacted in 1953 was repealed, along with the revision of one hundred fourteen laws, under the new Package Promoting Decentralization Law in 1999.

The Law for the Promotion of the Education Class for the Youth had problems. There were youth and other movements that opposed the law due to fear that it would lead to government control of the educational activities that were freely developed by youth organizations in local communities. The law was also opposed on the ground that it promoted a cheap way of educating young workers, instead of giving more financial support to encourage them to take night courses under the official secondary school programs.

However, the repeal of the Law for the Promotion of the Education Class for the Youth was not due to these opposing views. It was in line with the trend of abolishing youth education programs initiated by some prefectural governments since the early 1990s, similar to the ending or abandoning and turning over 'Youth House,' institutions and buildings to municipal governments. Thus both national and local governments retreated from supporting youth education.

The Advisory Committee for Lifelong Learning, which prepared some provisions on the deregulation of the education activities under the Package Promoting Decentralization Law, explained that the Law for Promotion of the Education Class for the Youth lost the need for its existence because of the increase in the number of youth going to upper secondary and higher level of education. Consequently, this situation weakened the youth education policies in the communities.

At the heels of the decreased support for youth education in late 1990s rose the phenomenon of youth who did not have the "will to work" giving rise to popular terms like "freeter" (young person who refused to become permanent employee, taking temporary or part-timework instead)<sup>5</sup> and "NEET" (not in education, employment, or training). The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare launched projects such as "Supplementary School for Self-help of Youth" from July 2005, seminars, and Support Station for Youth in Community all over the country. But these projects were limited to supporting the youth in gaining employment by 'enlightening the youth about work' and 'supporting the youth to adapt to the society.' They were far from

the educational projects that support the youth in freely organizing learning movements by themselves.

In December 2006, the government issued 'the Integrated Plan for Supporting Re-Challenge', consisting of projects from the different ministries. The plan does not only have projects on youth education but also on adult education. The plan seemed to be based on the idea of making people adapt to the existing social structure. Would this plan develop its perspective and include educational projects that support the development of people's critical consciousness in a variety of fields and bring up people who would make their own society by themselves based on this consciousness? Would this plan include the education on labor unions that support workers' consciousness about their right to work? But the ruling party changed in 2009 and a different policy was adopted.

### **Social Movements Related to Social Education Movements**

Japan has a long history of labor and union education movements since before the World War II. The Labor College of Tokyo and the Labor College of Osaka, established in the 1920s (Taisho era), fostered the thoughts and culture of workers who led the labor union movement and sometimes engaged in labor disputes. After World War II, many study/learning clubs within the labor unions came about. At present, there are also some active learning movements of workers such as the Association for Labor Education or the Unions of Civil Engineering and Construction Workers.

From the 1960s, some local government public workers' movements started to develop their activities together with the movements of residents in developing municipal-level learning movements to change local government policies. Social education staff often managed such movements as members of local government public workers' union. Teachers' unions also organized learning movements in the community such as 'Meetings on Education,' and some of them developed programs together with the learning movements of residents in the 1970s and the 1980s. In some cases, the farmers' cooperative movements and other cooperative movements developed together with or including social education movements.

The establishment of the Japanese Trade Union Confederation in 1989 was a momentum for the labor movement organizations in Japan. This development can also be viewed differently. It can either be seen as the unification or the division of the labor movement. Actually, labor movements

lost their power gradually during the 1970s and the 1980s. According to the summary of the results of the basic survey on trade unions made by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, the number of trade union members was highest at 12,699 in 1998 but started to decrease until 2007. The rate of union membership among all workers has been decreasing since 1975 and was at 18.1 percent in 2007. From 2005 to 2011, the rate has remained at 18 percent average, and decreased to 17.9 percent in 2012.<sup>6</sup>

However, there are some movements that steadily continue as well as some new movements. For example, in some regions, local government public workers learning movements continue or recover their strength together with the residents' learning movements. The activities of the Institutions for the Study of Problems of Local Bodies in some regions of Japan and the continuation or the recovery of the Learning School Movements of Local Bodies are also examples. Moreover, new labor movements of non-regular workers have arisen due to their worsening working conditions. These movements should get the attention of people in social education to know how and what learning movements would develop from them and how do social education movements learn from and contribute to them.

## **II. Kominkan**

The Kominkans constitute one of the primary institutions for social education in Japan. In July 1946, the then Ministry of Education recommended through an official letter to local governments the establishment of Kominkans in the communities. The Kominkans were established not only for people to learn about democracy and engage in educational and cultural activities, but also to provide a place for people to meet and develop their abilities together by performing industrial, welfare and other activities that help develop the community. Because funding was not fixed, Kominkans varied in size and manner of operation. The number of Kominkans established in each municipality also varied. The total number of Kominkans increased rapidly and reached 36,406 in 1955. It was the highest number of Kominkans in history.<sup>7</sup>

### **Present Condition of Kominkan**

The Kominkans were covered by Article 7 of the 1948 Fundamental Law of Education. After the establishment of 'Board of Education' in every

municipality by the then new administrative system of education in Japan, Kominkans spread widely as public institutions for social education. Public-service corporations were permitted to establish Kominkans, though they could only establish a small number of them. Prefectural governments were not permitted to establish Kominkans. As a result, the Kominkans were rooted in local communities as public institutions for adult education.

Some Kominkans were seen as community learning activities because they did not have their own buildings, and used facilities such as primary schools and temples for their activities. These Kominkans were often called “Kominkans with no roof but the blue sky” or “Kominkan with only a sign-board” in their early stages. With the consolidation of many towns and villages in the 1950s, the total number of Kominkans decreased rapidly in the 1960s. The condition of their buildings hardly changed. By 1968, there were only 13,785 Kominkans.

In the 1970s, they began to increase in number. During this period, most Kominkans had their own buildings; the “Kominkans of the town” had prevailed. By 2005, there were 17,143 Kominkans. Counting also the quasi-Kominkans, the total would be more than 18,000. This number was much bigger than the number of lower secondary schools in Japan, which was 11,035 in 2005. Because of their big number, Kominkans can be considered the primary institution for social education in Japan.

### **Changes from the Mid-1990s**

A review of the policy trend on the Kominkans during the past decade reveals some problems.

According to government report on the “number by types of facilities for social education,” the total number of Kominkans and quasi-Kominkans combined reached 19,063 in 1999.<sup>8</sup> But they decreased to 18,810 in 2002, and to 18,182 in 2005. The number of Kominkans has decreased from 18,257 in 1999 to 17,947 in 2002, and then to 17,143 in 2005. This means that 1,114 Kominkans disappeared from 1999 to 2005. Compared to other facilities for social education that increased in number, though a little bit, except for women’s education facilities and private sports facilities, the decrease in the number of Kominkans as primary institutions for social education shows the deterioration of social education policies in Japan.

Local governments have reduced the number of Kominkans in two ways: first, by giving different name and category from social education

to newly-established institutions that should actually be properly considered Kominkans; second, by changing the name and category of the existing Kominkan. The latter case often happens when they rebuild the existing building of Kominkan or when they reform the administrative structure of local governments.

Some local governments adopted these policies because the national government stopped giving support to Kominkans.

There was no funding support from the national government when the Kominkan system was established just after World War II, although the national government recommended their establishment. They explained that people in each community had to build and manage their own Kominkan by themselves. But soon after, in 1950s, the then Ministry of Education started to subsidize the building or management of Kominkans by the local governments, although the 1959 revision of Social Education Law restricted the use of the subsidy only to building the Kominkan facility. The subsidy continued and increased a bit till 1980. Although the subsidy continued but in decreased amount after 1980, a lot of the local governments were encouraged to build or rebuild Kominkans using this subsidy. The amount of decreased subsidy for each Kominkan ranged from five million Yen (nearly 50,000 US dollars at current rate) for each of the forty-seven Kominkans with regular size, and eighty-five million Yen (around 830,000 US dollars at current rate) for each of the nineteen big Kominkans under the 1995 budget. However, the national government stopped new requests for subsidy for Kominkans in the 1997 budget, and gave the last requested subsidy in the 1998 budget. A press release by the then Ministry of Education stated that the national government stopped this subsidy because they understood that the conditions of existing community facilities were sufficient.

### **Removal of the Name “Kominkan”**

The removal of the name “Kominkan” is one of the reasons for the decrease in the number of Kominkans. It is also a deliberate violation of the freedom to learn and undervalues social education.

The consolidation of towns, resulting in lesser number of towns, could be a cause for the reduction in the number of Kominkans as earlier mentioned. However, whether or not this was a major cause in reducing the number of Kominkans is unclear. Some towns kept the existing Kominkans even after consolidation. They used them for their community activities.



Some local governments preferred to convert the Kominkans from educational facilities to other purposes such as community centers, because they want to use them mainly for community development. Others made only ad hoc change, such as changing the administration of Kominkan from under the Board of Education to another body, because they wanted to keep the name of Kominkan to avoid trouble from concerned residents, or they wanted to use the popularity and “legacy” of Kominkan in each community.

A similar policy trend in the 1970s was observed when the Ministry of Home Affairs promoted community policy. However, this policy did not affect the number of Kominkans. Many local governments established more Kominkans during this period.

In 2000s, some local governments dared to change Kominkans even though these Kominkans were performing excellently in their social education programs. The use of their buildings was changed to that of ordinary community buildings, with no relation to education or to the nature of Kominkan.

For example, in 1990 Nagoya city had sixteen Kominkans whose names were originally ‘Social Education Centers’ and then changed to ‘Lifelong Learning Centers.’ But their legal category was the same as that of the Kominkans, and their staff had undertaken very good social education activities with the residents in each district. In 2000, Nagoya city changed their legal category as Kominkans and put them under the jurisdiction of the community development department in each district’s administrative structure (which belonged to the general administration section) instead of the Board of Education. This happened despite the fact that a large movement of people was opposed to it.

After that, in Nagoya city, a scheduled lecture in a Lifelong Learning Center was stopped by the city government on the ground that the person who would give the lecture seemed to be opposed to the position of Lifelong Learning Center, which should support the policies of the local government. This was reported by the newspapers in 2001.

In another example, Kitakyushu city had Kominkans that were also doing excellent work in close collaboration with the local communities. The city added the name and function of ‘Community Welfare Center’ to the Kominkans. But the two names created a problem. The city changed the names to ‘Citizens Centers’ and moved their legal category to that belonging to the general administration section.

Another case is in Hirakata City. In 1963, the Advisory Committee on Social Education and Kominkan of this city clearly stated the idea of social education in its report entitled "Social Education for All Citizens," *Social Education in Hirakata*, No. 2. They stated the idea in short sentences with some explanation: 'The citizens based on their own view undertake social education,' 'People have the right to social education,' 'The essence of social education is to learn the Constitution,' 'Social education has to empower the autonomy of residents,' 'Social education is the learning part of popular movements,' 'Social education has to grow, cultivate and protect democracy.' These statements were later called the 'Thesis from Hirakata.' These statements encouraged people who were engaged in social education movements in 1970s all over Japan to promote the idea of the right to social education and the freedom of learning.

New residents in Hirakata city in the early 1980s learned about these statements. They created active movements for the establishment of Kominkans, undertook activities, and requested the Hirakata city government to establish more Kominkans.

But in 2006, Hirakata city abolished the Kominkan system and changed the names of existing Kominkans to 'Lifelong Learning Centers'. It also changed the jurisdiction over them from the Board of Education to the general administration section, despite several years of opposition of many people to it.

These cases show that some local governments abolished the Kominkan system along with their social education policies in order to diminish the value of social education and adult education, or to restrict the purpose of learning of the residents to that which would only fit community development. It can be assumed that such policies also influenced the decrease in the total number of Kominkans since the same trend occurred in other local governments as well.

### **Designated Manager System and the Kominkans**

As earlier discussed, in promoting the decentralization policy since the 1990s, the national government recommended that local governments outsource their enterprises to private sectors. With the 2003 revision of the Local Autonomy Act, the national government introduced for-profit organizations into the designated manager system, although they were not permitted to manage public facilities before. The government strongly request-

ed the local governments to use this system in their administration. Under the new guideline for administrative reform of local governments (issued in March 2004), the local governments were requested to evaluate all existing public facilities to check the possibilities for outsource management to “designated managers” until September 2006.

This 2004 guideline influenced the social education facilities in Japan when some local governments introduced the ‘designated manager system’ to public social education facilities. The number of Kominkans that have been outsourced to the “designated manager system” reached five hundred seventy-four in 2005.

The adverse effect of the designated manager system on the Kominkans has been raised, even at the *Diet* (parliament). During the discussion on the revision of the Social Education Act in 2008, the Diet issued a resolution stating that the government should “...take sufficient care about the bad effects of introducing the designated manager on staffing for social education facilities like Kominkans, libraries, museums, in order to support lifelong learning of people and meet the increasing learning demand.”

The number of Kominkans that have been outsourced to the “designated manager system” once reached 1,220 in 2008, but decreased to 1,161 in 2011.<sup>9</sup>

### **Deterioration of the Residents’ Participation**

As mentioned earlier, when the Social Education Law was revised in 1999 together with many other laws under the decentralization policy of the government, the role of the residents’ participation system in the Social Education Law was minimized. The Kominkans were no longer required to have Advisory Committees, the bodies that represent the founding philosophy of Kominkan. The Kominkans were supposed to operate from the time of their founding in line with the intention, and through the power, of their respective community residents.

The report of the Central Advisory Committee of the Ministry of Education, which proposed the 1999 revision of Social Education Law, discussed the role of the Kominkan Advisory Committee system in terms of ‘deregulation,’ but also virtually stated that the Advisory Committees were not working well. Actually there were active Kominkan Advisory Committees whose members were “elected” in a process similar to official elections, held official meetings often (more than once a month), actively discussed

issues, and sometimes presented recommendations to the Directors of the Kominkans on various matters including the appointment of the Directors.

Data shows that from 1999, the number of Kominkan Advisory Committees had been decreasing. Some local governments established another system that allowed the participation of residents in the Kominkan operations, but there were no statistics on these cases. With the opposition of people and staff of Kominkan to the law revision, some local governments dared to keep their existing ordinances related to Kominkans in spite of the 1999 revision. Moreover, one local government even strengthened its ordinances on the participation of residents in the Kominkans.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Standards for Establishment and Management of Kominkans**

The Standards for the Establishment and Management of the Kominkans, adopted through the revision of the Social Education Law in 1959, were actually minimum standards (referring to area coverage, facilities, staff, etc.). The national government wanted the local governments to make their own improvements on the Kominkans using the minimum standards. This started the discussions in the local governments on what the Kominkans should be. There were proposals from the then Ministry of Education itself and the National Kominkan Association that was founded in 1951.

In 1973, the Kominkan staff and a researcher in a Tokyo suburb called Santama came up with an excellent proposal entitled “Looking for the New Kominkan Model.” The proposal, later known as the “Santama thesis”, contained four roles for the Kominkan:

- a. Open space for the residents
- b. Base for group activities
- c. The residents’ own “university”
- d. Park for creating culture.

There were also seven management principles:

- a. Promote freedom and equity
- b. “No fees”
- c. Keep the Kominkan independent as an institution for learning and cultural activities
- d. Have qualified staff
- e. Allocate one Kominkan to each community

- f. Have sufficient and varied equipments, and
- g. Facilitate the participation of the residents in its management.

The Santama thesis contributed to the creation of movements of people around early 1970s that campaigned for the establishment of Kominkans. The movements also presented ideas on how the Kominkans should be established and operated using the Santama thesis.

But after twenty-five years, two revisions of the Standards Provision for the Establishment and Management of the Kominkans dealt with the

- a. removal of the word “specific” referring to the Director and officers of the Kominkan that indicated the importance that these positions be occupied by people who have special knowledge on social education (1998 revisions)

- b. removal of articles on facilities and equipments in line with the decentralization policy, removal of provision on the need for specific officials with social education qualification (2003 revisions)

- c. addition of articles that recommended various activities such as family education, voluntary activities by youth and cooperation between school, family and community, and so on, and addition of an article on self-evaluation of operations (2003 revisions)

- d. addition of an article encouraging the introduction of “night services” according to the condition of each community (2008 revisions).

It is easy to imagine how a legal provision like letter “d” above lengthens service time to attract residents without careful consideration, and how the revisions of the standards provisions are promoted to support the outsourcing of public services to private sectors.

The revisions of the Standards for the Establishment and Management of Kominkans, on one hand, and the challenges of financial allocation and physical condition of Kominkans, on the other hand, changed the activities of the Kominkans to serve other purposes.

### **Social Education Practices through Kominkans**

Social education practices through the Kominkans are varied and their targets are not only adults and youth but also children. Their district coverage is usually as small as a public school district for primary school or lower secondary school.

There are a lot of small Kominkans that are like affiliated Kominkans. Some small Kominkans fall within the categories of Kominkans in the Social Education Law, but others are not counted as Kominkans by the local government even though people call them 'Kominkans' or similar names. These latter types of Kominkan are generally known as 'hamlet Kominkans' or 'autonomous Kominkans' and there are no national statistics about them yet. People often perform their community activities using both types of Kominkans as their base.

On the other hand there are also other types of Kominkans that have a lot of programs and projects. Kominkan officials plan and implement these programs and projects with the community residents. Some residents' groups are sometimes born from such programs and projects and usually continue their activities after the implementation of the programs and projects ended. This type of Kominkans is typical of those established after 1970s. And they have a variety of programs and projects.

### **Recommendations**

The Kominkan, which is established and firmly rooted in the community, can cultivate diverse learning and promote cultural and sports activities that support people's development of local communities based on their own efforts and will. Considering this, the following are recommendations in support of the Kominkans:

A. To promote the establishment of a Kominkan in every local community and to keep the Kominkan even when rebuilding the facility

In order for local governments to support the establishment of Kominkans with the appropriate size and number necessary for the daily life of people in each local community:

(1) The national government should provide financial support to the local governments for the establishment and maintenance of Kominkans

(2) The prefectural governments should also provide financial support to the towns for the establishment and maintenance of Kominkans

(3) The local governments should keep the Kominkans as institutions for adult education, provide them with enough budget to be able to perform tasks for the empowerment of residents, and keep the system to protect the freedom of the residents to learn.

B. To appoint specific officers with qualification for social education to each Kominkan

(1) The national government should establish a national qualification system for Kominkan officers.

Kominkans need qualified staff who understand both the essence of social education and the functions of Kominkan, and have appropriate abilities to be able to perform the activities of the Kominkans in accordance with the challenges faced by the residents in their local communities.

It is the better policy to make the specific staff qualification system for Kominkan rather than a general qualification system for social education facilities. This is a more effective system according to the experiences in the long history of social education in Japan.

(2) The local governments should make the best effort to appoint highly motivated staff with the appropriate abilities to the Kominkans and to let them work at Kominkans for a long time in order to make the best of their own experiences.

(3) The town, city, prefectural and national governments should each make such policies that support the Kominkan staff in developing self-designed training courses to develop their motivations and abilities. The policies should include sending Kominkan staff to training courses in accordance with their requests, supporting them to organize and implement training courses by themselves, and so on.

C. To appropriate budget for the appointment of Kominkan officers

The national government should appropriate budget to support the local governments' appointment of officers to each Kominkan.

D. To promote the democratic management of Kominkan

(1) The national government should declare and adopt basic regulations on the importance of the participation of the residents in the management of Kominkans. The Kominkans should empower the residents and use their varied abilities in Kominkan management; and the Social Education Law, the Standards for the Establishment and Management of Kominkans and other legal requirements should be appropriately revised.

For example, the Advisory Committee system for Kominkans must have, or develop, the regulations for democratic operations by introducing clearer ideas for residents' participation.

(2) The local governments should keep the Kominkans as educational institutions and independent from any political control, with the understanding that Kominkans should contribute to the development of the local community and support policies of governments only when they support and promote independent learning of residents including the learning to research, analyze and critically discuss the policies by themselves.

E. To develop social education practices through the partnership of residents and Kominkan officers

The community residents and Kominkan officers should develop learning free from the fear about creating tensions between or among them in both processes of learning and actions, and also develop learning from the wider view beyond their community, by making the best use of the place and operations of Kominkans.

## Conclusion

After CONFINTEA VI in 2009, the number of Kominkans continued to decrease from 17,947 in 2005 to 15,943 in 2008, to 14,681 in 2010.[i] This means that 2,462 Kominkans disappeared or were changed to other facilities from 2005 to 2010. This number is more than twice the number of Kominkans that ceased to exist from 1999 to 2005, numbering 1,114. Actually, more Kominkans could have disappeared or been changed to other facilities because a few local governments established new Kominkans during the same period.

Keeping the name “Kominkan” and changing only the administration structure from under the Board of Education to another body (because of mainly community development policy shift) seem to prevail even among the municipalities that were famous for excellent social education practices of their Kominkans and the Kominkan officers.

Moreover, some local governments seem to try to use Kominkans for political purpose by keeping them as social education institutions despite lack of understanding of education that promotes human rights, which means education that respects freedom of learning.

Even some excellent social education officers or Kominkan officers dare to accept those distorted Kominkan policies in order to keep the Kominkans in their municipalities under the pressure of financial crisis. These decisions



were dangerous. A severe dispute on this issue exists among civil society movements.

The national government is now trying to change the education system, even the education board system. Moreover, there is a move to change the Constitution.

We all have to learn more and more critically about the many challenges to social education at every level not only at the community level. We also have to take care that the political powers do not use social education institutions including Kominkans for their own purpose, similar to the situation before World War II. The political powers, even those with good intention, easily fall into the trap of using education only for their own political purpose.

Under these present complex situations in Japan, we the social educators through the civil society movements network have to promote and invent stronger and more flexible social education system by utilizing the legacy of social education experiences including Kominkan experiences and by ensuring the prevalence of and adherence to the excellent and important philosophy of the right to learn and the freedom of learning among all of us.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>CONFINTEA VI was held from 1 to 4 December 2009 in Belém, Brazil.

<sup>2</sup>This section 'is an edited version of "1. 'Social education' and adult education: a word on the term and concept" included in the chapter I-2 of the first part of the 2009 report, written by Miho Tokiwa-Fuse of Japan Society for the Study of Adult and Community Education (JSSACE). The rest of the article are edited excerpts of the following sections: "3. The 'Revisions of some laws close[ly] related to Social Education,'" "4. The other trends of policies of social education," "6. Some other topics among changes of recent social education policies or so on" in chapter I-2 of the first part, and of chapter II-1 'Kominkan' in the second part of the report. These sections were, written and translated by Yoko Arai of Japan Association for Promotion of Social Education (JAPSE). Yoko Arai also wrote the concluding paragraph, as new text.

<sup>3</sup>The formal title of the law is: Law Concerning the Establishment of Implementation Systems and Other Measures for the Promotion of Lifelong Learning.

<sup>4</sup>"The Opinion of JAPSE on the 25 January 2005 document of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology about the designated manager system."

<sup>5</sup> See Reiko Kosugi, Youth Employment in Japan's Economic Recovery: 'Freeters' and 'NEETS,' *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, [www.japanfocus.org/-kosugi-reiko/2022](http://www.japanfocus.org/-kosugi-reiko/2022).

<sup>6</sup> See Table 1, The transition of the number of trade unions, membership and density rates, General Study on labor-management relations FY 2012, 2012 December, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, in Japanese. See also Table 7-1, Trade union membership and density rates (national official statistics), *Databook of International Labour Statistics 2013*, Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, [www.jil.go.jp/english/estatis/databook/2013/07.htm](http://www.jil.go.jp/english/estatis/databook/2013/07.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Education, *The History of Kominkan During the Past Ten Years* (Tokyo: Ministry of Education, 1958).

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, *The Social Education Research Report, FY 1999, FY 2002, FY 2005* (Tokyo: MEXT).

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, *The Social Education Research Report, FY 2008, FY 2011* (Tokyo: MEXT).

<sup>10</sup> "Modern Approaches to the Legal System Related to Adult and Community Education," *The Annual Book* No. 47 (Tokyo: JSSACE, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit.