

Cross-cultural upbringing: A comparison of the “Third Culture Kids” framework and “Kaigai/Kikoku-shijo” studies

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Abstract

This paper will look at two fields of study which, although dealing with a similar subject matter, have up until now grown quite independently from each other. American scholars who look at the phenomenon of “Third Culture Kids” and Japanese scholars in “Kaigai/Kikoku-shijo” studies are both interested in the impact of a cross-cultural overseas upbringing on a child’s subsequent life experience. We will examine some of the main findings from the respective fields, and point out their common theoretical issues as well as differences in perspective. The paper will argue that whereas scholars in the TCK field tend to use the individual as the unit of study and focus on the personal characteristics resulting from a highly mobile and international upbringing, the Kaigai/Kikoku-shijo field also includes studies with a more societal approach, i. e. studies that analyze the impact of overseas-grown children on Japan, its education system and cultural fabric.

Key Words: cross cultural upbringing, Third Culture Kids, Kaigai/Kikoku-shijo, education, personality formation

Introduction

In any field of study, scholars should strive for a comparative perspective in order to keep a sense of balance. Thanks to the Internet it is becoming increasingly easy to look beyond the confines of our national borders for scholars who may be conducting similar research in other countries, and we thus have no more excuses should we fail to do so.

The aim of this paper is to present two bodies of research which have grown quite independently from each other, while dealing with essentially the same subject-matter. “Kaigai/Kikoku-shijo (Overseas/Returnee Children)” studies in Japan, and the “Third Culture Kids (TCKs)” studies in the United States are both concerned with the impact of an extended, yet temporary, overseas stay on a child’s upbringing. It is my belief that Japanese and American scholars, as well as scholars from all over the world, would certainly benefit by sharing their findings and pooling their wisdom for further research.

The target-group of both Kaigai/Kikoku-shijo and TCK studies are children who experience life

overseas because of their parents' job requirements: thus, it does not include young adults who decide on their own to study abroad. Nor does it include immigrant children, because both Kaigai-shijos and TCKs are eventually expected to return to their parents' home country. This is not to say that findings from the two fields are relevant only to children of temporary expatriates, but it is important to set certain parameters to sharpen the research focus. It is indeed the young age of the subjects, combined with their lack of input as to their international mobility, and their re-entry into their passport countries, that often produce a set of recognizable characteristics in their subsequent life-experiences.

In the first chapter I will outline the TCK conceptual framework using two main references, John & Ruth Useem (who originally coined the term "Third Culture"), and David Pollock & Ruth E. Van Reken (both recognized as specialists on the TCK topic). In the second chapter I will present a brief historical overview of the Kaigai/Kikoku-shijo phenomenon, the Japanese government's response to it, and the development of the field of Kaigai/Kikoku-shijo studies. Similarities and differences between the two fields will then be pointed out, and we will see what scholars on either side can learn from one another (Chapter III).

I. The "Third Culture Kids" framework

1. Early studies

"Third Culture Kid" is a term that was first coined by scholars John Useem and Ruth Hill Useem, a team of husband-and-wife sociologists and anthropologists. The Useems conducted research in a Sioux reservation in South Dakota in the early 1940s, and became interested in the interaction between the American Indians on the one hand, and the white doctors, administrators, teachers and religious missionaries on the other. Their research findings led them to think about "people who cross societal borders under the aegis of an organized endeavor and whose work or occupational roles are involved in relating two or more societies, or sections thereof, to each other" (Useem, 1999 [1993]).

Subsequent research took the Useems to India, where they spent two one-year study periods in the 1950s, accompanied by their three children. It was during that time that the Useems started to use the term "third culture", as a "generic term to cover the styles of life created, shared, and learned by persons who are in the process of relating their societies, or sections thereof, to each other", and that of "Third Culture Kids" (TCKs) to describe "children who accompany their parents to another society" (ibid: 2). The Useems are careful to point out that the term *third* is not used in reference to the "Third World": the *first* culture is that of a person's country of origin, the *second* culture that of the host country, and thus a *third* culture is one that develops among ex-

patriates in any given overseas posting location. The Useems called this an *interstitial* culture, because it seemed to them “a culture between cultures”, shared by the expatriate community but not quite the same as the culture of their home country or that of their host countryⁱ.

2. TCK reconceptualized

It is important to note that the Useems’ initial framework was based on observations in a very specific setting. They were studying groups of *American* expatriates who mostly remained clustered together, relying on their own social networks and setting up separate schools for their children within the host society. One can easily envision “third cultures” developing among people sharing such circumstances, those cultures being further influenced by the type of sponsoring agencies which sent those people to work overseas, be they religious, military, governmental or corporate. However, things changed since these early observations, and not all expatriates nowadays live in well defined communities, at a distance from the host social systems. More and more variations are appearing as to the degree in which people interact with the host society: the parents may be working in environments where most of their colleagues and supervisors are from the host population, and children may be attending local schools, while the whole family lives in a neighborhood where compatriots are few and far between. In keeping up with such changes, studies on “Third Culture” underwent theoretical permutations as well, and we shall look at one of the more recent conceptual frameworks, recently put forth by David Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken (1999), with a special focus on the minor dependents of expatriate families, or the aforementioned “Third Culture Kids”.

Pollock and Van Reken’s definition of TCKs is as follows:

A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture. The TCK builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK’s life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background. (ibid: 19)

As can be seen from the structure of their book, Pollock and Van Reken aim at outlining a profile of the TCK (i. e. their characteristics in terms of personality traits, practical skills, relational patterns and developmental issues) and giving some concrete tips as to how to maximize the benefits of the TCK experienceⁱⁱ.

i As quoted in Pollock and Van Reken (1999: 20)

ii Both authors are much in demand as conference and workshop speakers around the world, and their audiences include parents, educators, as well as current and adult TCKs. Pollock is also a co-founder of Global Nomads International, an association which supports and studies families with a highly-mobile and international lifestyle.

One of the highlights of Pollock and Van Reken's theoretical framework is the four relational patterns TCKs may have with their surrounding culture: 1) the "Foreigner—Look Different, Think Different" pattern, in which the TCK differs from the majority of people surrounding them in both appearance and thinking style, 2) the "Hidden Immigrant—Look Alike, Think Different" pattern, in which the TCK may not be physically distinguishable from the surrounding population and yet be different in terms of the way they think, 3) the "Adopted—Look different, Think Alike" pattern, in which the TCK may not share the typical physical characteristics of the surrounding population and yet has assimilated their worldview and behavior, and finally 4) the "Mirror—Look Alike, Think Alike" pattern, in which the TCK shares both physical similarities and way of thinking with those surrounding him/her (ibid: 53).

Anybody can be a "Foreigner" or a "Hidden Immigrant" when they live overseas, and be a "Mirror" in their home country. What distinguishes TCKs from most people is that they can fit in any of the four patterns in either the host society or the home society ("home" in the sense that it is the one their parents are originally from).

Pollock and Van Reken report that they have time and again witnessed people being surprised and greatly elated to discover the label "Third Culture Kid" (ibid: 271). The discovery lets these people finally put a name on what they had considered to be personal psychological issues (such as feelings of rootlessness, restlessness, alienation from their parents' culture, or of not being able to commit to a long-term relationship); and realize that these might in fact be the by-products of their earlier transnational/transcultural lifestyle. Expatriate groups such as "Military Brats" (children of American servicemen) and "Missionary Kids" (children of American religious missionaries) were already known to share certain characteristics, both by the people from such backgrounds, as well as by scholars and the public at largeⁱⁱⁱ. However TCKs, as recently conceptualized, include a wider array of people. Pollock and Van Reken are comfortable using it for such disparate people as "someone from Australia who grew up in Brazil" and "someone from Switzerland who grew up in Hong Kong" (ibid: 33). They believe, like sociologist Ted Ward, that TCKs are the "prototypical global citizen of the 21st century"^{iv} and have an important contribution to make at a time when more and more people around the world are affected by the so-called globalization trend. In that regard, many other scholars share their view and are eager to study the TCK experience as the precursor to a future, much more widely spread phenomenon.

For example, the Useems, in collaboration with Ann Baker-Cottrell (1996), are currently conducting a survey analysis of over 700 adult TCKs (ATCKs), and their preliminary findings show

iii See Ender (1996) for a literature review on the experience of "Military Brats", and Van Reken (1996) on life as a "Missionary Kid".

iv As quoted in Pollock and Van Reken (1999: 7)

that ATCKs 1) are internationally experienced and continue their international involvement, 2) are adaptable and easily relate to a diversity of people, 3) are helpers and problem solvers, 4) feel different but not isolated (1996: 31–35).

This is not to say that TCKs do not experience drawbacks from their international upbringing. In the same study, Hill and Cottrell point out that although ATCKs are often high-achievers both at school and in their professional lives, they can also display a “delayed adolescence”, and have to cope with the process of “fitting in” wherever they go, even in their parents’ home country (ibid: 26–28). However, the majority view in this field seems to be that the TCK identity is worth affirming: people with such a cross-cultural upbringing are a precious, untapped resource which could enhance intercultural communication between various countries.

II. Kaigai/Kikoku-shijo studies

We have seen that the American TCK phenomenon was brought about by four main types of sponsoring agencies—religious, military, corporate and governmental—which sent American families to live all over the world. In contrast, the appearance of a large number of Kaigai/Kikoku-shijos was first and foremost the result of Japan’s economic expansion which started in earnest in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Table 1 Statistics on Japanese temporary overseas residents and Kaigai-shijos^v.

	1971	1976	1981	1986	1991	1996	2002
Number of temporary overseas residents	63,939	150,068 (+86,129)	204,731 (+54,663)	251,545 (+46,814)	412,207 (+160,662)	492,942 (+80,735)	544,434 (+51,492)
Number of Kaigai-shijos	8662	18,092 (+9,430)	30,200 (+12,108)	39,393 (+9,193)	50,773 (+11,380)	49,740 (-1,033)	52,046 (+2,306)

Table 1 shows the changes in the number of Japanese overseas residents and their minor dependents in five year-periods from 1971 (when the number of Kaigai-shijos was first officially accounted for) to the latest statistics available. It also includes the increase or decrease in number compared to the previous period. Only the *temporary* residents are reported in the table, since permanent residents (i. e. Japanese emigrants) are not the topic of our discussion.

The number of Kaigai-shijos more than doubled between 1971 and 1976, rose by approximately

^v From the statistics of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2002). Japanese overseas nationals are divided into two categories, Temporary and Permanent, the latter referring to those who acquired permanent (or immigrant) status in their respective host society.

10,000 for each period thereafter before hitting a plateau of 50,000 in 1991. Their number seems to have stabilized in the last ten years. The overall number of temporary residents also showed a sharp increase from 1971 to 1976, and again between 1986 and 1991.

The first increase in both numbers can be explained as much by a move by Japanese corporations to establish overseas branches, thereby boosting the size of their overseas staff, as by a world-wide relaxation of regulation regarding immigration and foreign funds transfer. The second increase coincides with the so-called “bubble economy” which Japan experienced in the mid-1980s, understandably bringing about the proliferation of overseas bureaus and expatriate staff.

In this chapter, we shall follow the changes in public perception toward Kaigai/Kikoku-shijos through three broad chronological phases, and point out how closely this perception was linked to the manner in which advocates of the Kaigai/Kikoku-shijo cause, as well as educators, scholars, and the Japanese government dealt with those children.

1. “Educational orphans”

As early as 1966, the Japanese Ministry of Education was aware that Japanese children who returned from an overseas sojourn presented a challenge to the highly centralized national school system. According to the first large-scale “Study on Children of Overseas Workers”^{vi}, close to half of the returnees of middle-school and high-school age were entering a grade below that which they would normally attend, in order to make up for the (Japanese) school years that they had missed. The study also found that only 40% of the minor dependents accompanied their father^{vii} if he was posted in Africa or Asia, while 70% did so if the overseas mission took place in North America or Europe.

Two areas of concern were thus identified, which interestingly overlapped with the geographical location of the overseas posting: 1) children who had accompanied their parents abroad (mainly to the “Western” world such as North America and Europe) had trouble reintegrating the school system upon their return (or *kikoku*) to Japan, and 2) in the case of a posting in less industrialized countries, parents felt there was a need for better schooling opportunities if their children were to accompany them overseas (or *kaigai*). The Ministry of Education, in consultation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, set out to address these concerns based on two separate strategies: establishing a system of re-entry for the Kikoku-shijos, while assisting the Kaigai-shijos by building full-time and part-time Japanese schools in areas where parents requested them.

The trickle-down effects of the ministerial decisions were not felt immediately however, and the voices of Japanese expatriates who advocated on their children’s behalf began to get louder in the

vi Japanese Ministry of Education (1966).

vii The parent sent on an overseas mission was almost always the father.

1970s. Gunei Sato, a specialist in Kaigai/Kikoku-shijo education, conducted a thorough analysis of newspaper and magazine articles and found that many concerned parents made themselves heard in the media from the mid-1970s to the 1980s (1996: 206–240). The first of these articles was written by Journalist Junji Kitashiro in 1975, an inflammatory “Open letter to the Minister of Education” in which he claimed that the government had failed their duty toward Kikoku-shijos, making them “educational orphans (*kyoiku kimin*)”^{viii}. Sato argues that Kitashiro’s rhetoric set the tone for a public perception of Kikoku-shijos as “poor children in need of rescuing” (ibid: 217).

2. “Symbols of Japan’s internationalization”

Sato’s analysis further shows that media reports on Kikoku-shijos abruptly changed in the mid-1980s: not only the number of articles had increased dramatically but they were painting a much more positive picture of these children. “Internationalization” having become the national slogan of the 1980s, Kikoku-shijo, with their overseas upbringing and language skills, were seen as the perfect symbol of a future Japan was aspiring to. Another characteristic in media coverage during this period was that Kikoku-shijos themselves, instead of their parents, were making appearances and talking about their experiences. The public got to see first-hand what those internationalized youths were about, and the perception shifted from the negative “deficient Japanese” image to that of a “New Elite”.

The turnaround in public perception can also be attributed to a much-improved system of reintegration for Kikoku-shijos, a large network of schools all over Japan that accepted them and provided special academic and counselling support. Fewer cases of Kikoku-shijo maladaptation, bullying, or discrimination were heard of, and in an ironic twist, claims were raised that the special treatment Kikoku-shijos enjoyed amounted to “reverse discrimination” toward home-grown Japanese students. It was argued that the otherwise extremely competitive university entrance system was made unduly easy for Kikoku-shijos, who were admitted under separate criteria and therefore gained unfair advantage over students who had toiled all the while in their home country.

3. Stabilization

Just as the number of Kaigai-shijos seems to have reached a plateau, the annual number of returnees also remains steady at about 10,000 per year. This steady stream and resulting pool of Kikoku-shijos has made their presence a fact of life in Japan. Kikoku-shijos are highly visible among media reporters and news anchors, in the entertainment business, and ubiquitous in the

viii As quoted in Sato (1996: 214)

business and academic community. Even Crown Princess Masako is a former Kaigai-shijo, as well as her sister-in-law, Princess Kiko.

Such a “trivialization” of the Kikoku-shijo phenomenon does not mean however that stereotypes about returnees have disappeared. Few people realize that approximately one third of all Kaigai-shijos attend a full-time Japanese school and live a secluded life away from the host population, or that a great number of Japanese children in California are classified as LEP (Limited English Proficiency) students even after several years of residence^{ix}. Yet Kikoku-shijos are almost always perceived as being fluent English speakers, with a profound knowledge of the host society and culture resulting in some type of “emancipated” personality^x.

The number of studies on Kaigai-shijos and Kikoku-shijos, peaking in the mid- to late-1980s, have also decreased in number. It would seem that there is a loss of interest among Japanese scholars now that these children are encountering fewer problems of adaptation, both abroad and back in Japan. Rather, the focus of their research has shifted to the experience of the “New-comers” (children of new immigrants to Japan) and the challenge they present to the Japanese education and society as a whole. In that sense, Kikoku-shijos have lost their exclusive status as students and citizens in need of special attention.

III. Comparison of the two fields

1. Government involvement

The most obvious difference between the TCK situation and that of Kaigai/Kikoku-shijos pertains to the degree of governmental involvement. As was pointed out above, the Japanese Ministry of Education was keenly aware, almost forty years ago, of a potential “problem” being brought about by the increase of Japanese overseas residents and strived to keep on top of the situation in order to maintain the system’s integrity. We can thus say that the Japanese government initiative was taken well before the business community started sponsoring studies regarding their employees and their families, well before it became a trendy topic for academic research, and even well before overseas residents and returnees managed to organize themselves.

Although it took the better part of two decades and the results may still not be totally satisfying, the Japanese government slowly managed to establish a system of re-integration for the returnee students, and responded to the needs of Japanese overseas residents by extending the distribution of educational resources beyond national borders.

ix Sato (1996: 119–123)

x Every year, I take a survey of over 300 students during the first class of my “Kikoku-shijo Studies” course, and invariably get such a response.

TCKs may also experience difficulties upon re-entry to their home country, but as far as the American context is concerned, those difficulties would not be in the area of linguistic and academic reintegration, at least not of the same magnitude as those presented by a highly centralized and uniform model followed by the Japanese education system. It may be that because of a long history of immigration, the notion of diversity is already deeply ingrained among American educators and administrators, so that no special mechanisms were felt to be necessary in order to accommodate returning nationals.

Consequently, it is only natural that there is no allegation of “favoritism” toward TCKs regarding high-school or university applications, just as there have been no complaints of “systemic” discrimination against TCKs such as were brought up by parents of Kikoku-shijos in the 1970s.

2. Common public perception

Contrasting degrees of governmental involvement in Japan and the United States in turn produce a difference in the degree of public recognition of what an unique (not necessarily in a positive sense) background a TCK or Kikoku-shijo possesses. There does not yet seem to be a widespread and quasi-uniform perception among the American public about who a TCK is, and what his/her characteristics are. In comparison, catering to the needs of Kaigai-shijos and Kikoku-shijos having been a major priority in the government’s agenda for the past thirty years, this could not but become a matter of national concern for the Japanese public at large. The Japanese have a very definite image of what a Kikoku-shijo is, however skewed that image may be. Most people know of the pitfalls that may await their children should they be brought up overseas, but they are also well aware of the potential advantages of such an experience.

One interesting consequence of this common public perception (or lack thereof), is that while the “Kikoku-shijo” label is often shunned by returnees as well as their parents and scholars for conjuring up too stereotypical an image, the “TCK” label is said to have a liberating effect on the people who appropriate it. This may be due to the fact that “TCK” is still a relatively little known label, and has not had the time to become “loaded” with constricting connotations. However, it may also be that the term “Kikoku” puts too much emphasis on the “return” from overseas, and does not take into account what came before or will come after that point in time, thereby rendering the label irrelevant after a few years.

3. Theoretical focus in academic research

Finally, we will touch upon some trends in the academic research on TCKs and Kaigai/Kikoku-shijos.

Shifts and developments in the history of the Kaigai/Kikoku-shijo phenomenon are closely re-

flected in the works of scholars who made it their subject matter. Most studies were initially of an exploratory nature, conducted by education specialists, and aimed at understanding the characteristics of Kikoku-shijos in so far as they were related to their school performance back in Japan. This is a direct result of the studies having been commissioned by the Ministry of Education, with the expectation that the research would become the basis for concrete policies. The main keyword for research at the time was “(mal) adaptation”, showing the government’s concern to somehow find a way for returnee children to “fit” the national academic standard again.

However, the challenges raised by the presence of Kikoku-shijos soon drew attention from fields other than education. While “adaptation” remained a central theme, the onus to change was shifted from Kikoku-shijos themselves to Japanese society in general, and its education system in particular. More studies appeared that focused on what schools and teachers could do to accommodate cultural diversity among their students (i.e. Ebuchi, 1986; Kawabata, 1987). It was also in the 1980s that scholars with Kikoku-shijo experience started to make their work known, and provided an “insider’s view” on the matter (i.e. Horoiwa, 1983). Anthropologists and sociologists, some from outside of Japan, contributed to the discussion by widening the theoretical framework within which Kikoku-shijos could be studied (Minoura, 1984; White, 1988; Goodman, 1990). A more recent trend is to situate the Kikoku-shijo phenomenon in a wider context of “international (or cross-cultural) education”, which Japan has to implement in order to deal with the influx of immigrants from other (mostly Asian) countries (Sato, 1999).

A quick survey of TCK-related literature reveals quite a different situation^{xi}: studies and books on this topic are mostly written by people who themselves are ATCKs, or at least have very close connections to TCKs, and are about personal experiences of grief or emancipation, identity, and culture shock. A lot of TCK material is practical, i.e. support and advice from “those who have been through it”, again an approach to the issue that is individual rather than social-systematic. This is not to say that Kaigai/Kikoku-shijos and their parents do not have private support groups and literature produced by those organizations. However, the TCK field seems to be more focused, at least at this stage, on reaching out to the people who are still unaware that TCKs are a distinctive social/psychological phenomenon, whereas in the case of Japan, Kaigai/Kikoku-shijos have long been recognized as a problem/challenge/blessing worthy of study, even by those who have never had such an experience themselves.

xi Other than the aforementioned works (by Ender, Pollock & Van Reken, Useem & Useem, Useem & Baker-Cottrell), please see Bell (1996), McCluskey (1994).

IV. Conclusion

We discussed a set of preliminary observations when comparing TCKs and Kaigai/Kikoku-shijos, their perceived characteristics, and the literature they have spawned. Having conducted my own research in the field of Kaigai/Kikoku-shijo studies, the TCK framework is still new to me and I look forward to exchanging ideas and findings with scholars on “the other side”.

In the meantime, I would argue that even while dealing with a similar subject matter, the two fields seemed to be headed in opposite directions. TCKs and Kaigai/Kikoku-shijos do share common characteristics such as involuntary international mobility, immersion in various cultures, distance from “home culture”, and resulting feelings of “marginalization/emancipation”. However, while the TCK literature reports an eagerness on the part of the TCKs themselves to reaffirm a common identity based on those characteristics, Kikoku-shijos have a tendency, at this point, to emphasize the variety of their experiences and regard their being grouped together in one category as constricting rather than comforting.

This is a topic that is definitely worth investigating, but unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.

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