Introduction

I was a teenager in the 1950s, when the American idea of the teen itself came of age. Our house was on the line dividing two towns: one self-consciously liberal and academic, the other working class and industrial. Some official arbiter had determined that our house was taxable in the first town, and so my parents could claim the more prestigious mailing address. But they constantly reminded us how close we were to "the gangs," and how dangerous the other town was. And how vulnerable WE were, as innocent overeducated, nubile, and weaponless teens ourselves, to the barbarous, violent influences of the raging hordes just over the line behind the house. When a beer can ended up in our yard, or when, on a hot summer night the air carried the sound of firecrackers or a revved-up jalopy, our parents would lock the doors and windows muttering, "It's the JDs"—that particularly potent epithet for juvenile delinquent. We were all paralyzed with fear—of teenagers.

Since the 1970s, I have worked with teens as teacher and researcher in the United States and Japan. In the United States, I

now live—again—near the turf of those gangs of the 1950s. In Japan, I recently lived in an industrial wasteland on the edge of a provincial town. Almost every night, *bōsōzoku*, motorcycle gangs, circled there under my apartment windows, and I was often snapped awake by the frightening roar of their engines. Today, my Japanese neighbors worry about these working-class youth much as my parents did in the early 1950s.

Elite Japanese today worry about their children as well, though their children are very like those of the "right" side of the American tracks in the 1950s, childlike, innocent, and sometimes studious, rarely a concern to society. However, the growing Japanese media and consumer focus on youth as a market has now created an alternative concept of the *cheenayja*—a more diverse and less predictable image, one of some concern to their society.

The Material Child is an attempt to show how images and realities converge and diverge, how within Japan there is a diversity invisible to most visitors and how among both American and Japanese teens, the mirroring of diversity helps to clarify our view. "Material" may be taken literally or figuratively: our children are all trend slaves to some degree living in "a material world." It is not, however, things alone they crave, but the relationships and identity that are part of their new profile, encouraged by the market that has in part created them. But youth are also "material" to our survival as societies; they cannot be ignored or contained as transitory phenomena or fearful threats—they are our future.

To me, the boys on their motorbikes in my Japanese neighborhood are not a concern, only a nuisance; they seem to present no real risk. I know that even rebellious adolescents in Japan have self-imposed limits and goals for the future, and that drugs and lethal weapons are very scarce. There is no equivalent to "wilding" in Japan. Having been present at the formation of the contemporary American concept of the teen, and having been trained in the images and realities of young people in both societies, I was drawn to a comparative study of the nature of adolescence.

Comparisons, to be true to the differences, must not be drawn in strict parallel: a category that counts in Japan, such as entrance exams to high school, may have no clear counterpart in the United States. I have chosen to emphasize Japanese youth and to use American experiences and evidence as a mirror, I hope both reflecting and illuminating.

I began the study in June of 1988. I had been visiting Japan

since 1963, and had conducted research on children's lives there since 1975. I expected no surprises in learning about these older children, but rather, continuity with my prior research on younger children, because to some degree I had bought the notion that the American brand of teen doesn't exist in Japan, and because Japanese themselves did not project a view of an indigenous but recognizable model—at least, not at first.

I started slowly, soaking up atmosphere in Tokyo teen territories. What *was* evident at first was that teens were in the marketplace, so, looking for crowds of them, I strolled the youth consumer hubs. Here is an excerpt from my notes from my first Sunday afternoon, prime teen shopping time:

> I took with me the section from *An-An* (a girls' magazine) on Shibuya, and followed its recommended course with illustrated maps to trendy places for teens to hang out. I started at Hachiko (the statue of a faithful dog in front of the station, a well-known meeting point), and followed the young crowds to Seibu, Loft, Wave, Seed, and Parco (trendy department stores and specialty shops catering to young people). Wow. These young kids are spending $150 for a shirt, $200 for a jumpsuit, and more for French imports, without blinking. The "look" now seems to be gamine, perky and black, but not quite punk. The favorite hat is a small, round, brimmed, black felt, perched back on the head, worn by boys and girls. They look easy, relaxed, happy, "self-expressive." But even all the self-expression doesn't lead to jaywalking or rowdy behavior. They all wait, well-socialized, for the lights to change even with no cars in sight—even the androgynous kid in ominous black lipstick, oval shades, one long earring, and black leather.
>
> I went on to Yoyogi and the rock dancers. Something has changed from two years ago, when I last saw them. They are not all the gentle highschoolers I remember. Some are clearly professional, full-time performers. Some are counterculture druggies. Many are clearly dropouts and working youths, since they have high-spiked punk hairstyles and permanent hair dye, not the temporary stuff they used to apply to their school-appropriate school haircuts and wash out before going home. I wonder if the pros, well-organized and disciplined, have taken over this site, and if the sweet part-time deviants are elsewhere now? I'm impressed, nonetheless, with these performers. I'm impressed with the affluence of these "delinquents," if that is what they are. Their costumes must be expensive. They could, I calculate, cost them up to $10,000 a year for gear and clothes. Affluence affects even the margins.

The weeks after these diary entries were filled with more focused interviewing and data collection, and meetings with marketing researchers, trend-spotting social commentators, as well as psychologists, teachers, and sociologists. I spent the next three years alternating between Japan and the United States, visiting and revisiting the same teenagers and the same observers in both countries.

What I learned was surprising. Rebellion, for example, does not dominate the experience of teenagers in either society. What does command attention is the combination of conformity and diversity dictated by adolescent development and the seeking of an identity, and by the demands of peer influence. These universal elements are differently experienced in Japan and the United States, but in both societies, they are promoted and amplified as the age group becomes targeted by consumer industries: marketing and the media tell them how to be a teenager.

What teens say reveals similarity and diversity, but overall, Japanese and American teens echo each other: Who am I, and do you like me? We're cool, but they aren't. I like her but I can't tell her that. Mom, I can't wear that, it's nerdy. If I do the dishes, maybe my mother will stop bugging me. I don't have any money so I can't go out with my friends.

And what adults say in both countries sounds similar as well: These kids are sending our country down the drain. They are nothing but children, and we have to protect them. They won't listen to us. When I was your age....

American parents remember their own teen years, and those of us raised in the 1940s and 1950s remember an especially complicated environment—our parents feared *for* us, feared on our behalf, feared the influences that might assail us in blackboard jungles, and, later perhaps, feared our being drafted and sent to the jungles of southeast Asia.

There was a big gap in experience between our parents and us—they knew the Depression and World War II and the mobilization for survival demanded by both. They did not understand the possibilities for rebellion of the 1960s, or any reason for it.

Japanese parents since that war have been concerned about the educational imperative, the engine driving the examination experience, and its effect on children's lives. Americans, however, now both fear *for* our children, and we also fear our children *themselves*, even though in material and historical terms, we

have more in common with them. Parents of current teens were raised in times of greater peace and prosperity, though we may have fought, or fought against, the war in Vietnam and many of us recently have known hard times.

It is easy to understand what we fear *for* them: we fear physical violence—even in their schools—we fear drugs, rape, unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, crime, and psychological pathologies. We fear that our children will be disaffected and lose their self-esteem and ambition. We fear they will run away and end up pictured on a milk carton. We also fear *them:* we fear that they will not love us, that they will reject us, not trust us, and that they will not accept our love, knowledge and authority.[1]

Some of what we fear our parents feared for us. Although we of the 1950s, with the rosy lens of nostalgia, may remember a comfortable middle-class childhood and yet do not think ourselves soulless or amoral, we imagine that our "material children" have no moral core. Our parents too felt that our interest in *things* was of a lower order. Our media also sold *us* sexual images and "dangerous" lifestyles (drinking, smoking, and fast driving), and yet we worry that our children whose music similarly tells them to take risks will go to the dogs much faster—and much more permanently—than we did.

But some of our teens' experiences may be new. There have been changes in our children's environment, and in them. Children are now at an early age, at least superficially, far more sexually knowledgeable, learning from friends, the media, and from adult warnings about sexual disease and violence. Information is not the same as experience, however, and we can assume that many young teens are only talking a good game.

Children are, however, truly tougher and quicker on the streets—at least urban kids are—because for many, being streetwise means survival. Their music is no longer only about romance and seduction (Come on, let's do it, baby) but also tough and self-protective (something like "Go fuck yourself, you louse"). It is not just *our* fears, from a more protected past, but those of the children themselves that shape their environment and behavior.

Our media and marketers have similarly become streetwise and savvy. Both in the United States and Japan, advertisers know their audiences, and more than in the 1950s, have helped to amplify the separateness of a "youth culture" in their societies. With more disposable income from parents or part-time employment,

middle-class American and Japanese young people can support habits of consumption beyond those of even their baby-boomer parents, and what is purchased is often not teen versions of adult goods, but footgear (pump sneakers), music (rap), and clothing (neon stripes on leather) created for and dedicated to the youth market. In America, younger children and even adults might imitate teens, but teens rarely imitate the clothing of another age group. In fact, you are more likely to see a tee shirt on an adult saying "Middle-Aged Mutant Ninja Father," than a teen in suit and tie.

Changes in school experience have also been notable. In America, there have been palpable losses in mood and learning. Our teens are testing no better in math and science than their counterparts twenty years ago, in spite of Sputnik, and the German and Japanese postwar miracles. In these subjects, American teens test thirteenth of fourteen countries in a recent survey.[2] Literacy has fallen as well. Half of our young people cannot use a map, read, and understand simple documents such as job applications, or balance a checkbook. The test scores of Japanese children in academic subjects are so good as to provide grist for the trade war mill: a protectionist American reaction might be that Japanese children are being disciplined and programmed as instruments of Japanese economic supremacy. The Japanese literacy rate is 99 percent to our 80 percent, and all high-school seniors have studied calculus, earth sciences, physics, chemistry, and biology. All children have studied two musical instruments and several artistic media, including calligraphy—well-known tools of economic imperialism. Meanwhile, American SAT scores, results of the test given only to college-bound high school seniors, have fallen continually during the past fifteen years. Ninety-five percent of Japanese highschoolers test at a level achieved only by our top five percent.

However different the test scores are, and however different the atmosphere of the streets, both American and Japanese parents are concerned about their teenagers. International supremacy in math and science doesn't make Japanese parents complacent about their schools: they are highly critical. We both are concerned about the effects of changing family structure on children, of absent fathers and working mothers, or stress caused by economic hardship, of the effects of modern affluence on the moral condition. Japanese parents are worried, too, about a per-

ceived decline in the mental and physical health of their children; but unlike American parents whose health cares focus on drugs, sex, and AIDS, Japanese parents consider a fast-food diet and habits of late-night study to pose dire problems for the future.

Japanese teenagers, like their American counterparts, are a relatively recent discovery and invention. American teens emerged or were identified in the postwar years as "teenagers," feared by parents and sought by marketers in a newly affluent "youth society." Japanese teens have appeared and been identified only more recently, as the economic boom of the late 1970s and 1980s targeted and reached a new "youth market." In both societies, the conjunction of adolescent development and new affluence produced generations both intrinsically conformist, ready to buy as a cohort what the market defined them as wanting, and intrinsically diverse, needing distinctions for a newly identified sense of self. Teens want both the safety of numbers and the safety of solitude. Both needs are amplified by media and marketing in both countries.

This book deals with commonalities among and differences between Japanese and American teenagers' lives. We will examine the social and economic forces influencing their experiences, their aspirations, and their search for identity. The voices of approximately 100 teenagers interviewed in both countries between 1988 and 1991 are used to illustrate these themes in young people's lives. With my research assistants, I interviewed adolescents in several parts of Japan, in Tokyo, Yokohama, Gumma Prefecture, Osaka, Saitama Prefecture, Hiroshima, and Chiba Prefecture. Teens also prepared diaries, time budgets, and essays on their school life, friendships, and hopes for the future. Also heard are family, parents, teachers, psychologists, marketing specialists, and music promoters as they describe the lives of adolescents and their influence on and expectations for these young people. Family, school, friendship, sexuality, and the consumer market are treated as focal topics in the consideration of adolescents' lives.

Above all, teens in both countries are the product of our cultures and the product, to some degree, of our abundance. They are marked by the "stage" they are in—by the hormonal surges and the social marginality of adolescence. In both Japan and America, they are also torn almost schizophrenically between the *busshitsu-teki*, "material" side of their lives, on the one hand and

the outward-looking idealism characterizing their new awareness of a larger world and bigger obligations on the other. While Americans might find this contradiction between materialism and idealism puzzling, Japanese young people comfortably embody both, for the same children who are spending large amounts of money on expensive clothing and "trend goods" are also talking of spending years of service in volunteer corps activities in Africa or Southeast Asia, working to improve the environment at home, or are already working in their communities in homes for the elderly or in day-care centers. All our children seem to want to help; all want to live in a more peaceful world.

Looking at modern society through the eyes of its teens illuminates two kinds of transition: the personal passage from childhood to adulthood, and the historical development of new models for youth in a postindustrial age. The study also forces a startling revision of several commonly held notions about culture and society; looking at Japanese teens in the comparative reflecting glass of the lives of American teens allows us to see commonalities in lives and life courses and distinctions caused by historical, economic, and cultural factors. Commonalities and distinction should equally give us pause, for the teens of both our countries are the future for us all, and perhaps, given the disproportionate influence of the two nations, for a much wider world as well.