

## Internationalization in Everyday Life:<sup>\*</sup> The role of consumer co-ops in Japan<sup>1)</sup>

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Although internationalization (*kokusaika*) has been a major issue in Japan since the mid-nineteenth century when the isolated nation was forced to deal with the outside world (Passin, 1983), the concept gained status as a public policy goal when Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro proclaimed in a 1987 speech that the country needed to become an “international state” (Burks, 1991, 203). However, in spite of myriad government programs and the natural push of globalization, many observers believe that *kokusaika* is only a surface phenomenon in Japan (Robertson, 1997). Perhaps the vagueness of the term “internationalization” has contributed both to its popularity, and to its lack of satisfactory performance. Everyone seems to think that *kokusaika* is a good thing, but its definition varies from person to person in substance as well as degree.

Internationalization has many dimensions including state-level diplomacy, security, trade, cultural exchange, and investment. However, in this paper, I will focus on efforts to increase public awareness and participation in the global community. Several analyses of Japanese *kokusaika* suggest that encountering non-Japanese ideas, products, and people has only served to emphasize the uniqueness of Japan to many of its citizens. In fact, the existence of “Japaneseness” or Japan theory (*Nihonjinron*) is predicated on the presence of non-Japanese cultures, ideas, and people (McVeigh, 1998; Robertson, 1997; Davis, 1983). But as economic, social, and political problems are experienced across Asia today, there is a need for constructive internationalization which recognizes these crises as shared pain, and provides support for policies which will improve the well-being of all people in the region, and throughout the world. In the words of sociologist, Yoshio Sugimoto (1997, 170),

. . . contemporary Japanese society is caught between the contradictory forces of narrow ethnocentrism and open internationalization. Intolerance and prejudice are rampant, but individuals and groups pursuing a more open and multicultural Japan are also active, challenging various modes of racism and discriminatory practices.

While recognizing that there is still much room for improvement, Japanese education may be doing a better job of teaching about international issues. With increasing numbers of foreign teachers, revisions in the curriculum, and trips abroad, students have more opportunities for learning about the world (Ehara, 1992). But as McVeigh (1998) points out, state responsibility for international matters, including education, are compartmentalized in specialized bureaus and divisions in the ministries, which tend to emphasize maintenance of Japanese identity and values in the midst of interactions with the outside world (108–9).

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Whether or not Japanese education has had some success in broadening the worldviews of students, for an international perspective to retain relevance for all age groups, it is necessary to have other local-level institutions, which promote global values and actions. It is also necessary to ensure that there is support for grass-root initiatives in building international relations.

I propose that Japan's consumer co-operative movement, as a participant in a worldwide NGO network, is worthy of consideration for its efforts to build a new institution with a grass roots focus. Although co-operatives had their origin in Europe and have been organized with varying degrees of success in virtually every country over the last century, some of the largest and most successful consumer co-ops are in Japan. The biggest of these, Co-op Kobe, unlike many of the other Japanese co-operatives, is not aligned with any political party and does not receive any government funds, but with over one million, three-hundred thousand members, it has the potential to influence community life and public policy throughout Hyogo prefecture. In the search for true grass-roots organizations which promote international awareness and cooperation, I believe that Co-op Kobe and many other Japanese consumer co-ops offer valuable case studies because they address some of the fundamental concerns of internationalization; environmental responsibility, human rights, peace, and economic development.

In order to illustrate some of the variations among consumer co-operatives in Japan, I will first introduce a case study of Co-op Kobe, the largest and most financially successful of its type. A second case study will focus on the Seikatsu Club, a more activist group which concentrates on environmental issues. Finally, an attempt will be made to evaluate the effectiveness of the Japanese consumer co-operatives in addressing the country's process of internationalization. The data for this analysis were gathered in documents published by the consumer co-operatives, in interviews with representatives of Co-op Kobe, Seikatsu Club, and the Japanese Consumers' Co-operative Union, and through my personal observations as a Co-op Kobe member.

### Consumers Cooperative Kobe (Co-op Kobe)

Co-op Kobe is not only the largest of such organizations in Japan, its history is one of the longest among consumer co-operatives in the country. It was created in 1962 as a result of a merger between two cooperatives in Hyogo prefecture. Both of these organizations were originally established in 1921 with the resourceful involvement of KAGAWA Toyohiko, a social activist, who saw cooperatives as effective means of empowering poverty-stricken laborers and citizens in Hyogo's urban slums (Schlidgen 1988).

Even in the beginning, these co-ops had an international dimension because the inspiration for their creation was born from the knowledge about consumer cooperatives that Kagawa had gained from travels in Europe and studies of Western labor movements. The Rochdale Equitable Pioneer Society (Rochdale Cooperative), generally recognized as the founding organization for consumer cooperatives, was established in 1844 in Great Britain, and it served to promote the spread of cooperative associations throughout the world (Birchall 1994, Takamura 1995).

Although the Nada Co-op and the Kobe Co-op (the two entities which eventually merged to create today's Co-op Kobe) ultimately grew and prospered, their development was not without difficulties. There was opposition from business competitors who saw consumer-owned production and delivery systems as threatening to their own retail operations. The government was also skeptical about consumer movements, particularly when labor activism was taking a distinctly anti-establishment direction. However, with the business acumen of some early cooperative leaders and the establishment of women's guilds (*kateikai*), the forerunners of Co-op Kobe were able to weather financial difficulties and make themselves an integral part of the social and cultural landscape of the area. From the beginning, Kagawa had envisioned the

cooperatives, not only as economic organizations, but as a medium for improving the lifestyles of members through educational and cultural activities as well.

The war years were especially threatening to the survival of the Kobe and Nada co-ops. Many of the buildings in the Kobe area were destroyed by aerial bombardment, and many members and employees were called into military service, thus nearly shutting down operations. However, the poverty and scarcity of food in the immediate postwar years served to reinforce the necessity of self-help consumer organizations. Furthermore, in spite of the desperate situation of the communities after the War, the culture and education programs were revived as soon as possible in order to provide hope and enrichment in the lives of the members.

In the following years, even after the merger of the two Hyogo cooperatives, new crises posed challenges to the well being of the organization. One of the major problems encountered was adapting to a huge influx of members and maintaining a democratic management style. After the oil crisis in 1973, the desire to ensure availability and safety of basic necessities brought many new members to the cooperatives. While such a growth in membership was a positive development, the managers who had led the organizations through the postwar decades were not prepared to address the changes in society and the demands for participatory management. The dispute between Co-op management and the employees' union reached a climax in 1978, but disaster was averted when both sides replaced their leadership with new personnel committed to seeking input from co-op members and rank and file employees (Takamura 1995, 268).

Originally, co-op members had relied on the roundman system for ordering and receiving their products. According to this method, a co-op employee would visit each member's home every morning to take an order, and then deliver the items in the evening. In fact, this was the only way in which the co-ops marketed their products to members until a few small self-service stores were opened. It was not until 1961 that the first co-op supermarket was established in response to changing consumer demands and competition from other retailers. However, after the labor-management disputes in the 1970s, the roundman system was seen as too inefficient, so it was eliminated and replaced with a group purchasing system. This method utilized a concept, which originated in Japanese communities—the *han*. Each *han* group is made up of five to ten members representing households who make weekly orders of Co-op items (on forms, which today can be computer scanned). One *han* member is chosen as the leader to coordinate the orders and to accept their delivery on the appointed day each week. In recognition of the effort required to sort group orders, a refund is made to each *han* member every six months based on the value of items ordered during that period. From the Co-op perspective, *han* involvement builds loyalty to Co-op products and activities among the members, and permits more efficient distribution of the food orders. For example, because orders are received a week before delivery, it is possible for the distribution centers to arrange transport of perishable items just in time without expensive long-term storage in a supermarket or warehouse (Birchall 1994, 194).

In recent years, membership has continued to increase in spite of the hardships posed, on both the Co-op buildings and the membership, by the Great Hanshin Awaji Earthquake of 1995. However, because of the economic downturn in Japan and increased competition from private retail stores, Co-op Kobe has led the effort to evaluate its operations and receive feedback from members and employees about how well it is doing in achieving its goals. The six indicators selected for evaluation were reliability and consumer relations, democratic member control and participation, social responsibility and fairness, autonomy, solidarity and improvement, management efficiency, and future potential (JCCU 1999 a, 2). In the most recent report, results from evaluations done in fiscal years 1995, 1996, and 1997 were compared to see where progress was taking place, and where more effort needed to be made.

Because of Co-op Kobe's initiatives in consumer service and expansion, it has the potential to go beyond Hyogo prefectural borders and establish stores and member groups in neighboring regions. However, the 1948 Consumers Cooperative Law prohibits a particular cooperative from expanding beyond its prefectural borders, and thus Co-op Kobe must concentrate on its own territory, while cooperating, often through the Japanese Consumers' Cooperative Union (JCCU), with other co-ops around the country and abroad.

One of the ways in which Co-op Kobe communicates with its members throughout Hyogo prefecture, is through a weekly newsletter which is delivered to *han* groups together with the merchandise order forms, and is made available free at every Co-op store. News about the range of Co-op activities, new products, member interviews, and producer profiles are just some of the items included in this newsletter titled *Kyo-do*. In addition to recipes and tips for achieving a healthier lifestyle, *Kyo-do* also publishes notices of upcoming Co-op meetings, descriptions of meeting proceedings, the annual budget, and appeals for members to participate in decision-making, cultural, and volunteer bodies. It is through the *Kyo-do* that the Co-op philosophy of sharing and caring for the earth is reinforced. Personal testimonies are often featured, not only to inform readers about the merits of a particular Co-op product, but also to thank member volunteers for assistance rendered, or to describe the satisfaction of participating in a particular activity such as international outreach. During 1999, a regular *Kyo-do* front-page series focused on residents of Hyogo who are foreign nationals. Together with a full-color photo of the person (and family in some cases) and some representative dishes from the native country, each issue introduced at least one recipe which can be made from items found at the Co-op. According to the person responsible for this series, the stories have generated tremendous interest among the readers, and there have been many requests for contact information so that readers can meet with the featured individuals and learn more about their respective countries.

The last page of *Kyo-do* often highlights a particular Co-op item and the individuals who produce it. Usually the item is a food product, and there is a description of the location, the methodology, and the people who produce the rice, onions, or peaches, for example, which are being featured. With the generous use of photographs and maps, these articles attempt to bring the producer and consumer closer together. Although many of the food items are produced in Japan, the Co-op has begun establishing ties with food producers overseas. For example, it is importing bananas from a worker-owned cooperative plantation in the Philippines, which is seeking to improve the lives of the laborers and their customers by growing organic bananas. The story of this plantation and its bananas was featured in one issue of *Kyo-do*. Because of the organic growing method and the income they provide for the cooperative plantation members, these bananas are known as *furendoree* (friendly) bananas, and photographs of the workers and their farm in the Philippines are positioned just above the fresh fruit in the Co-op stores, with a description of their operation.

## Outreach Programs

From the time of their foundation in 1921, the Kobe and Nada Co-ops were dedicated to reaching out to the disadvantaged in the community and the world, in spite of the fact that most of their members were themselves disadvantaged. Many of the *Kateikai* study groups focused, not just on building better lives for the co-op members but, on how these members could reach out to others in need. A recent development from this outreach mission is the establishment, with assistance from local governments, of several subsidiaries expressly designed to offer job training and employment opportunities for the mentally and physically challenged.

Other outreach activities include coordination of volunteer activities, primarily to serve the elderly and

disabled with home assistance or just provide companionship. Government officials have taken an interest in these volunteer activities, and have cited them as models for community-based social support programs (Takamura 1991, 19).

In addition to local volunteer activities, Co-op Kobe has a long history of involvement with international peace and development issues. Donations for victims of the atomic bombs in Nagasaki and Hiroshima amount to more than thirteen million yen per year, and UNICEF contributions based on fund-raising campaigns are annually over fifteen million yen (Consumers Co-operative Kobe, 1995 b, 15)). Through the years, thousands of Co-op members have participated in anti-nuclear and peace demonstrations in Japan and around the world. During 1997, awareness campaigns were launched to educate Co-op members about land mines and the international movement to curtail their use.

As a result of its reputation as one of the most financially successful consumer cooperatives in the world, Co-op Kobe often hosts guests from overseas cooperatives. It also hosts two annual events for foreign residents and Co-op members to enjoy a celebration together, but then to encourage continuing relationships between individuals from the two groups. Therefore, at least at the management level, there is a great deal of awareness of international cooperation. However, some local *han* members and *kateikai* also provide assistance and special events for international students and foreign residents living in their areas.

Because environmental issues have been one of the central concerns of Co-op members, many of the products and services are designed to reduce waste and pollution. For example, most of the laundry and dishwashing soaps produced by the Japanese consumer cooperative network are biodegradable and do not irritate sensitive skin. Shopping bags are not automatically provided at the Co-op stores, and those who do not bring their own are expected to make a five yen contribution for each bag they take. Yet another example is the recycling bins positioned outside each Co-op store where milk cartons, Styrofoam trays, and pet bottles can be deposited and recreated as items for sale or use at the Co-op. Perhaps as important as these concrete reminders of responsibility for the environment are the education efforts found in the *Kyo-do-* and in various environmental study groups among the *kateikai*. In the November second (1999) issue of *Kyo-do-*, there is a two-page (p. 4–5) article explaining environmental hormones and their effects on the earth and human health. Other issues have focused on genetically engineered foods and production of organic rice. Because environmental problems often span national borders, Co-op members interested in such issues have become aware of shared concerns abroad, and some have participated in international environmental conferences through Co-op Kobe sponsorship.

## Seikatsu Club

While Co-op Kobe is the largest and most economically viable consumer co-operative in Japan, there are others which have attracted members who actively participate in environmental programs, and who enter politics as a result of their co-operative experience. One of the most noteworthy of these environmentally activist co-operatives is the Seikatsu (lifestyle/living) Club with branches in Tokyo and several other cities. Unlike Co-op Kobe, which had its origins between the world wars, the Seikatsu Club began in 1965, but both co-operatives provided economic motivation for their initial members. Coming at the time when Japan was concentrating all its energies on economic development, particularly for producers, prices had begun to rise, working hours were longer, education was focused on entrance examinations, and increasing pollution was seen as an inevitable side effect of industrialization (The Tokyo Initiative on International Cooperative Alliance 1992, 5). A group of young activists organized about 200 housewives in Tokyo's Setagaya ward to purchase 329 bottles of milk per day. With economies of scale permitted by the large purchase, each family could obtain milk at a significant discount. In just two years,

the number of members had increased to 800, and the daily bottles purchased grew to 2,000 (Sato 1996, 256).

As the Seikatsu Club grew, it began to offer a larger variety of food and household products. Although the lower prices allowed by bulk purchasing were important to members, concern for product safety was at least as critical. The Seikatsu Club strove to select only those foods which were produced with minimal toxic chemicals, and which were not full of artificial preservatives so that members could order items with confidence. At most retail outlets, it was difficult to know how foods had been grown or prepared, and the emphasis on economic growth encouraged many farmers and food companies to choose chemical short cuts.

Like Co-op Kobe, the Seikatsu Club was organized into *han* which were the basic unit for ordering products, and the only way of distributing their merchandise because even today, the Seikatsu Club does not have any stores, per se. In the case of the Seikatsu Club, the *han* also became the core of activist movements and the setting for homemakers, in particular, to discover their voice by taking initiatives for themselves and their families. In fact, one of the primary objectives of this cooperative organization is to nurture autonomy in each member, and thus to resist the slavery of capitalism (The Tokyo Initiative on International Cooperative Alliance 1992, 7). Participating in Club purchase decision-making also proved to be a significant eye-opening experience for many members. For example, a decision was made to purchase *mikan* oranges from the former fishing community which had contracted Minamata Disease (mercury poisoning) from the fish they caught in heavily polluted waters. However, as the relationship between the Minamata community and the Seikatsu Club members developed, the awareness emerged that herbicides and pesticides used in the cultivation of *mikan* were toxic to the growers as well as to their consumers in the Seikatsu Club. As a result, the Club members worked with the growers to significantly reduce the use of chemicals, and thereby to improve the health of all involved.

In the early 1970s, many members of the Seikatsu Club began to notice that the detergents they were using for cleaning and laundry were chapping their hands and causing rashes on their children's skin. They also learned that such detergents were polluting the waterways and affecting the ecosystem. As a result, the Club decided to switch from these synthetic detergents to pure soap products, and began an information campaign in 1974. Three years later, a majority of Seikatsu Club members were using pure soap rather than detergents, so the co-operative stopped carrying detergents altogether.

Another spin-off of the pure soap movement was based on the relationship between the Seikatsu Club and an agricultural co-operative in Yamagata Prefecture. This Shonai Agricultural Co-op provided much of the rice sold by the Seikatsu Club, and a strong relationship had developed between the members of the two organizations. A group of Seikatsu Club homemakers would visit Yamagata each year to assist with aspects of rice production, and it was natural that they discussed the issues of concern to them, including the use of synthetic detergents. Eventually, the Shonai Co-op store stopped carrying synthetic detergents, and soon pollution-sensitive whitebait fish, which had disappeared earlier, returned to nearby rivers.

Today the Seikatsu Club movement has spread to twelve prefectures and has well over 200,000 members. In 1989 the organization was granted the Right Livelihood Award, and thus achieved international recognition (Sato 1996, 265). Through this co-operative movement, many women, in particular, have gained the motivation and means for choosing a more healthful, more humane lifestyle for themselves and their families. Although the Club has not become the huge retail operation that is Co-op Kobe, the activism of its members has affected politics, agriculture, and education in the regions where the Seikatsu Club exists.

The concerns of Seikatsu Club members soon began to extend beyond Japanese borders. A group of them have attended The Other Economic Summit (TOES) since 1988 to stand in solidarity with the poorest countries of the world. TOES meets at the same time as the G-7 economic summits, and attempts to publicize the perspective of developing countries. As a result of their participation in such international events, the Seikatsu Club members have returned to Japan with valuable information to share and products to consider carrying through their cooperatives. An example of a product, which has been promoted through these international relationships, is the bananas from an NGO in the Philippines known as the Negros Campaign. Like the bananas featured by Co-op Kobe, the Negros Campaign carries fruit grown in worker-owned cooperatives with minimal agricultural chemicals. However, the Seikatsu Club goes even further to personalize the relationship by conducting tours for members and staff to go to Negros and meet the people who work and live through the banana cooperative.

Arranging for direct trade from depressed areas of the world can be very rewarding for all involved, but for the larger cooperatives, maintaining quality and quantity of supplies from workers' cooperatives abroad can sometimes be very challenging. For example, because Negros island in the Philippines is located in "Hurricane Alley," supplies of bananas from the farms there are not always reliable. Therefore, new relationships are being developed with banana producers in Thailand in order to supplement the shipments of the fruit to Japan. At this time, the growers in Thailand are still using some chemicals in their production process, but Seikatsu Club members are encouraging them to reduce the toxicity of their own environment and the bananas they sell to Japan.

Yet another country with close ties to the Seikatsu Club is South Korea. Since 1989, the Club has developed ties with the Kyongido Credit Union because of members' desire to link up with a civil society group in South Korea. One of the regular features of this relationship is the exchange program, which includes both information and personnel. Staff members are selected for extended stays of six months to one year in the other country, and regular cooperative or credit union members participate in short term exchange home stays. These exchanges, and the translation into Korean of a book about the Seikatsu Club, resulted in great interest in consumer cooperatives in South Korea as well, so the Kyongido Credit Union has sponsored three such co-ops which continue to serve their communities.

Many Seikatsu Club groups have also organized events for Korean residents living in Japan. These include opportunities for Japanese and Koreans to enjoy activities such as cooking classes and Hangul classes with each other. Even children's camps for Japanese and Korean youths to mingle in a relaxed setting are organized by the Club.

Because many of the Seikatsu Club members have joined the cooperative to pursue the improvement of their own lives and the condition of their communities, they are self-selected activists with a high level of consciousness about social problems. It is therefore not surprising that they would be more likely to see connections between their own situations and those of people struggling with various problems abroad. It is not unusual for Seikatsu Club members to also hold membership in a variety of other NGOs and NPOs through which they can express their efforts to improve the world around them.

## The Co-ops and Internationalization

During the "bubble economy" years of the 1980s and early 90s, consumer cooperative members had more disposable income to travel and to support international programs. However, with many households feeling squeezed by the current economic slowdown, the budgets for international activities have been reduced significantly. Nevertheless, the commitment to work with people in other countries has not been diminished, so projects are selected more carefully, and once implemented, they are evaluated regularly

for effectiveness.

While recognizing the importance of local co-op groups in raising consciousness and promoting activism for many global issues, we must acknowledge the influence of regional, national, and international associations of co-operatives. For example, soon after the Great Hanshin Earthquake, Co-op Kobe helped establish K-Net, a regional federation of 13 co-ops in western Japan (Consumer Cooperative Kobe, 1997 b, 17). Although K-Net has no real legal identity and focuses on retailing issues, it is only one of the associations which links Co-op Kobe to the wider world. One of the most important co-op federations is the Japan Consumers' Co-operative Union (JCCU). Not only does the JCCU help to coordinate nation-wide development and marketing of co-op products, it is the main link between Japanese co-operatives and the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA), which in turn has NGO consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Furthermore, the JCCU is active in promoting international activities for Japanese co-ops. For example, its slick bimonthly magazine, *Active Co-op*, has a regular feature entitled, "Global Friendship," which reports on international exchange activities pursued by various co-ops around the country. The January/February 1998 issue describes a program of the Miyagi Seikyo (Consumer Co-op) which sponsors co-op representatives from the Bombay area in India to visit the Miyagi operations, and to learn through a kind of internship participation. As the Japanese co-op employees work and relax with their counterparts from India, mutual learning takes place, and life-long relationships are forged. Furthermore, in the same issue of *Active Co-op* (1998, 7), there is an article about raising money for schools and land mine disposal in Cambodia.

In 1997, the JCCU celebrated the tenth anniversary of its program to assist cooperatives in other Asian countries by publishing a book highlighting some of the relationships that have been built over the decade (Asian Co-operatives Assistance Committee, 1997). To facilitate these international exchanges, the Japanese consumer cooperatives have made contributions to create the Asian Cooperative Collaboration Fund, which currently has a principal value of 860,000,000 yen. According to Yamauchi Akiko, Acting Manager of the JCCU International Department, The Fund is used as an endowment to finance a variety of activities with the interest earned each year. Through this JCCU program, and working on their own, most of Japan's co-ops have established ties with counterparts in at least one other country.

As mentioned above, the ICA is the organization for co-operatives, which is the most inclusive worldwide. By sponsoring a variety of events, exchanges, and communication fora, the ICA attempts to coordinate efforts and address common problems faced by its members. During the last few years, the ICA concentrated on issues of management to improve the internal workings of the co-operatives. However, the focus is now changing to recognize the necessity of responding to external issues such as the environment and sustainable human development (Paz, 1997, 39). As one of the oldest and largest NGOs in the world, boasting 750,000,000 members (40, 41), the ICA has the tremendous potential to make an impact on a range of problems from those of a local nature to those that involve other international organizations. Paz (1997) predicts that the co-operatives' role as a component of civil society will be the most effective in addressing the global problems of today. By "forging alliances" with like-minded groups, he believes that co-operatives can use their impressive numbers with greater effectiveness. Birchall (1997, 35) concurs with this notion that co-operatives associate with others to take advantage of their combined numbers, but he also expresses an idealistic rationale, which is that "the practice of co-operation leads to an underlying sense of solidarity among people, which leads them to identify with others regardless of national boundaries."

Through the efforts of regional, national, and international federations of co-operatives, the local *han* member has access to information and support for a variety of international activities and projects. However, there is also room for individual initiatives. For example, soon after the Hanshin Earthquake,

there was a large, damaging temblor in China. Several members of a Co-op Kobe *han* felt that as recent victims themselves, they could understand the suffering that must be taking place in China. So they worked through their co-op group to raise funds, but when the contributions were to be delivered, it was learned that all the schools in a particular region had been destroyed by the earthquake. The *han* members redoubled their efforts, calling on their colleagues throughout Co-op Kobe to assist with the project, and were able to raise enough to rebuild a consolidated school in the Chinese town within a little over two years.

Another similar example comes from Seikatsu Club cooperatives in Tokyo which originally had a policy of selling only domestically produced food. With the growing demand for soybean products, this cooperative eventually decided to establish a relationship with some soybean producers in China and began to import their beans to make natto. Because there was concern about the method of growing the soybeans, cooperative members and staff visited the Chinese farms on a regular basis, and have slowly convinced the producers to reduce their chemical use. When last year's big floods affected the region where the soybeans are produced, cooperative members in Japan organized a photo exhibit and raised funds to rebuild school buildings which had been lost in the disaster. Would these Japanese organizers have been able to implement such major international projects if it had not been for the cooperative network and support? It would be difficult to answer such a question, but it is likely that the dynamics within the consumer cooperatives empowered the initiative.

In *Public Knowledge and Environmental Politics in Japan and the United States* (Pierce, et al. 1989), the authors note that public involvement in environmental issues depends upon the motivation to learn about them and the potential to effect social change. Although Japanese citizens have many sources of information on the environment and other international issues, I would argue that the consumer cooperatives have a particularly important role to play in this education and heightening of awareness because of their relationship to daily living and integration into people's home settings. Not only do the co-ops, including the Seikatsu Club, provide regular information about environmentally friendly products and practices, they allow members to become involved in changing the norm of producer-centered, polluting consumerism. Beginning with steps as small as purchasing pure soap or recycling milk cartons, co-op members can expand their involvement by serving on representative committees to determine policy, and even become involved in politics. Today at least 152 local governments have joined an organization promoting purchase of environmentally responsible products, a number of which are manufactured by the co-ops. Evidently the government officials in these areas believe that there is public interest in effective use of resources and reduction in garbage (Karoji 1997, 9). Could it be the local co-ops which are helping to raise public consciousness?

When Japan's efforts at internationalizing are criticized for being too superficial, or for emphasizing nationalist tendencies, we can be encouraged by the work of the consumer cooperatives. As the scholar who has done the most extensive study of Seikatsu Club members, Sato Yoshiyuki (1996) recognizes the connections between daily life issues and international relations.

The co-operative movement is far ahead of politics and administration. By setting a precedent in its treatment of problems that the government cannot or will not solve, it illustrates that government authority and power is relative, not absolute... No matter how local or personal the problem, whether it be food safety, garbage reduction, recycling, the local environment, nuclear weapons, peace, poverty, overpopulation, the economy, or women, we must view all issues from a global perspective. Now more than ever, we need this kind of approach in which cooperation exceeds national boundaries (269).

Broad-based co-operative programs are reaching many participants who would have few other options for activism or services. While we cannot say for certain that the international activities within the Japanese co-ops are resulting in truly expanding world views, their integration within the day-to-day routines of member households makes them more likely to be absorbed into their consciousness.

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## Internationalization in Everyday Life: The role of consumer co-ops in Japan

### ABSTRACT

Although internationalization has been promoted in Japan as a public policy goal since the mid-eighties, critics suggest that efforts have been perfunctory and that a global perspective has not yet permeated the consciousness of most Japanese citizens. In order for people to regard themselves as a part of the international community, it may be necessary to have daily reminders of connections with people in other parts of the world. This paper argues that the consumer cooperative movement in Japan, which includes some of the world's most successful co-ops, provides citizens with links to international groups, movements, and values through daily life activities. Two case studies, Co-op Kobe and the Seikatsu Club, are introduced to demonstrate the variety of international content in consumer cooperative activities.

**Key Words:** consumer cooperatives, internationalization, Co-op Kobe, Seikatsu Club