

Japan's Lost Generation

In a world filled with virtual reality, the country's youth can't deal with the real thing

By RYU MURAKAMI

HIKIKOMORI HAS BECOME A MAJOR ISSUE IN JAPAN. LOOSELY translated as "social withdrawal," *hikikomori* refers to the state of anomie into which an increasing number of young Japanese seem to fall these days. Socially withdrawn kids typically lock themselves in their bedrooms and refuse to have any contact with the outside world. They live in reverse: they sleep all day, wake up in the evening and stay up all night watching television or playing video games. Some own computers or mobile phones, but most have few or no friends. Their funk can last for months, even years in extreme cases. No official statistics are available, but it is estimated that more than 1 million young Japanese suffer from the affliction. One such young man was the protagonist of my latest novel, *Symbiosis Worm*.

Hikikomori is a consequence of the phenomenal growth of the Japanese economy during the latter half of the 20th century and the tremendous technological progress the country made during that time. Japanese youth could not afford to be socially withdrawn if their parents were not affluent enough to provide them a home, meals and extras that have come to be thought of as basics—audio and video equipment, software, mobile phones, computers. And there are plenty of newer technological devices for these youths to pursue.

Great changes in a country's social structure have always caused stresses. These, in turn, can create new forms of neurosis. In 19th-century Europe, doctors often diagnosed "hysteria" as a neurosis (almost always applied to women) that indicated a suppressed desire for social fulfillment. Once it became common for women to leave the home and take up positions in society, this "hysteria" became a rarity.

So maybe Japan's socially withdrawn kids are a harbinger of a new way of life, one forged by the vast changes the country has undergone in recent years. Japanese society is caught in a paradox: it is concerned with the increase of socially withdrawn kids, while at the same time it applauds gizmos like the new Sony PlayStation, which comes equipped with an In-

ternet terminal and a DVD player. Technology like that has made it possible to produce animated movies and graphics, as well as conduct commercial transactions, without ever stepping out of the house. It inevitably fixes people in their individual space. In this information society, none of us can be free from being somewhat socially withdrawn.

Miscommunication prevails throughout our society: in the family, in the community, between management and employees, between the financial world and the Ministry of Finance, between the government and the people. Yet this malfunctioning of communication has nothing to do with Japan's "uniqueness," some essence inherent in its history or tradition that sets it apart from other nations.

ILLUSTRATION: ONE TIME BY MURAKAMI



The cause of the malfunctioning is more simple. It is the fact that, by the 1970s, we had already achieved the national goal. We had worked hard to restore the country from the ruins of World War II, develop the economy and build a modern technological state. When that great goal was attained, we lost much of the motivating force that had knitted the nation so tightly together. Affluent Japanese do not know what kind of lifestyle to take up now. That uncertainty has pulled people further apart and caused a whole raft of social problems. *Hikikomori* is naturally one of them.

"Socially withdrawn" people find it extremely painful to communicate with the outside world, and thus they turn to the tools that bring virtual reality into their closed rooms. Japan, on the other hand, must face reality itself. The country has to accept that World War II ended long ago—and so did the glory days of national restoration and economic growth. We don't need the state to come up with an alternative national goal. Instead Japan should develop into a society in which each member is able to set his or her own aims. That's not easy, but nor is it impossible. If the culture cannot adjust and drowns in a tsunami of technology, Japan will end up sinking even deeper into a labyrinth of confusion. ■

Japanese novelist and film director Ryu Murakami won one of the country's top literary prizes in 1976 for his first novel Almost Transparent Blue. His other works include Coin Locker Babies and In the Miso Soup