International Journal of Lifelong Education ›

Volume 24, 2005 - Issue 3

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Original Articles

Changing adult learning in Japan: the shift from traditional singing to karaoke

HIDEO WATANABE

Pages 257-267 | Published online: 11 Aug 2006

Cite this article https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370500134982

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Abstract

Lifelong learning in Japan involves various cultural and/or sporting activities for personal enjoyment rather than for individual or national economic benefit. Currently the study of karaoke at a variety of public and private organizations is very popular among older Japanese and housewives. This article explores the emergence of karaoke as a newer form of adult learning, discussing students' learning objectives and the consequences thereof. It also explores how karaoke differs from traditional forms of singing and why students are more interested in the newer form of learning. Fifteen months of fieldwork included participant observation, interviews and a quantitative survey. Karaoke learning offers freedom and simplicity and is less expensive than traditional singing. The structure of karaoke is flexible, generative and egalitarian. These characteristics perfectly match current Japanese adult interests and make the learning of it popular.

Notes

Hideo Watanabe is Assistant Professor of Languages and Cultures at William Paterson University. He is a cultural anthropologist. His research interests include education, music, and religion in Japan and Korea. He can be contacted at William Paterson University, Wayne, NJ 07470-2103, USA; e-mail: watanabeh@wpunj.edu

Culture Centres are commercially operated adult education centres built in the period 1980–1984. They offer courses in a wide variety of subjects for a fee.

Karaoke is singing to recorded background music and was invented in Japan in the 1970s.

Kata is the stylized gestures or movements observed in Japanese arts and martial arts.

Iemoto is a hierarchical social structure of classical arts under which various disciples are interlinked with other disciples through their masters.

According to Japan’s Statistics Bureau, the entire Japanese population was 8,320,000 in 1950, 11,706,000 in 1980, 12,693,000 in 2000 and 12,769,000 in 2003.

Utai was developed 500 years ago in the Muromachi period (1333–1568) and was studied by samurai as a means of self-cultivation. In the Edo period (1600–1868) it also became prevalent among wealthy merchants. Encouraged by the national government, it became popular among successful businessmen in the Showa period (1926–1989). Since utai has been heavily protected by people in power over a long period of time it has an image as a high class naraigoto.

Nagauta is a major form of lyrical songs accompanied by shamisen (a three-stringed plectrum instrument). Although nagauta was born in the Kyoto–Osaka area during the Edo period, it developed in Edo (now known as Tokyo). Since nagauta was originally practiced primarily by geisha girls it had the image of vulgar culture, however, having taken songs from utai, it has developed into a sophisticated naraigoto. Nagauta was widely practised by common people at the beginning of the Showa period, but at present has the image of a naraigoto for wealthy people.

Kabuki is a stylized traditional Japanese play with singing and dancing created in the 17th century for the common people.

Shigin usually has no musical accompaniment. It developed at the end of the Edo period and was loved by samurai. Nowadays shigin is widely studied by elderly people and housewives.

Min’yô differs from other forms of traditional singing created by composers in the sense that it originated in local areas and was passed down from generation to generation. There was a min’yô boom some years ago, but that has now past.

Additional information

Notes on contributors

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