Windows on Japanese Education

Edited by

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These efforts will produce positive benefits, not only for internationalizing Japanese education but also for the larger society. The positive promotion of ethnic education will produce a win-win situation in which important benefits will accrue to both resident Korean and Japanese children.

NOTES

2. Ibid., pp. 33–34.
4. These statistical data were collected from the Mindan and Chosoren by the author.
5. Interview by the author, October 1988.

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"Examination Hell"

Peter Frost

Which of the following cannot be changed into a word ending in ‘ion’: decide, destroy, depend, intent or describe?

Students seeking to enter the literature faculty (gakubu) of Tokyo University were required to answer this question, as well as a host of others equally difficult. To prepare for this ordeal, students and their parents scheme to get into the best primary and secondary schools, enrolled by age twelve in elite cram schools (yobiko and juku), and, often, spent at least one extra year as rōnins, a term that literally means masterless samurai, but in this case simply describes anyone who spends an extra year or more studying for the university entrance examinations. This general phenomenon is popularly known as "examination hell." This term refers not only to the fact that over 30 percent of the age cohort is applying for admission to Japan's universities under a system that seems a great deal more tense than does university admissions in the United States, but also to the idea that admissions decisions are almost solely made upon the basis of written achievement (vs. aptitude) tests administered by the university faculty themselves. Most of these questions are in the form of multiple choice requiring an encyclopedia-like knowledge of information that most Americans would consider quite trivial.

Compounding the problems that Americans face in understanding this particular kind of university admissions system is the fact that the Japanese themselves do not appear to like it. At least since the 1920s there have been repeated complaints in the Japanese press that examination hell has prevented Japanese
students from having a healthy childhood, has blunted intellectual curiosity, has discouraged females from applying to universities, has overlooked less academic leadership skills, and has encouraged those students who finally do get admitted to do almost no academic work while in college. The typical prospective examinee has come to be close-minded, selfish and lonely," wrote Tokyo University Professor Shimizu Yoshihiro in 1963. "Even his parents tend to become nervous and be on edge." Stress upon memorized facts, added Shimizu's colleague Orihara Hiroshi in 1967, does not encourage Japanese children to "hold a lantern to the unknown." It is necessary "to correct excessive competition in entrance examinations" intones an otherwise extraordinarily bland preliminary report by a blue ribbon commission studying Japanese education in 1985. "Medicinal reading for those of you who are desperate to get into Tokyo University!" trumpets the dust jacket of the current best-seller Bye-Bye Tokyo U. (Sayonara todai). Why, then, an American may well ask, do Japanese have as a central part of their educational life a system of university entrance examinations that they themselves call "hell"?

Part of the answer, suggests American sociologist Ezra Vogel, lies in the fact that the strong Japanese value of "particularism" or loyalty to the group needs to be balanced periodically by the value of "performance" or quite rigid and objective testing. As a society that stresses the close personal ties of students in a particular homeroom, Vogel says, Japanese educators prefer not to separate students out into honors or nonhonors tracks or even to hold back marginal students, but rather to confide any possible competition into a brief examination period which has the further advantage of being distant from the school and hence well outside the normal relations of the group. A system of short but brutally effective tests thus separates primary school classmates into secondary schools on the basis of ability, refines the groups again for university admissions, and does the same before elite males begin lifetime employment. The system thrives despite "horror stories" that are "small in number," writes Vogel in his deliberately provocative book Japan as Number One, because it is fair, supports those who work hard, and encourages the basic education that most Japanese think is needed for Japan's survival.

Psychologist Christie Kiefer agrees with Vogel's claim that examinations help to minimize competition within the classroom, but he notes that plenty of competitive tension still exists within the Japanese community. This tension is actually rather helpful to the traditional Japanese family structure, he asserts, because it allows Japanese mothers to maintain a considerable amount of control over what happens to their children's education. Help with homework, late night snacks, and a sharing of the joys and sorrows of examination results also keep Japan's mothers closely tied to their male, and, in rarer cases, female offspring. At the same time, continues Kiefer, the fact that the child's teacher—also usually a male—serves as a coach for the examinations rather than as a harsh judge of progress permits a warm relationship to develop between teacher and student.

This makes it far easier for the Japanese male student to move psychologically from the mother-centered world of the child to the male-centered world of bureaucracy. Since Kiefer also claims that this phenomenon helps to explain the "displaced anger" the university student feels toward the outside world, his theory is obviously broadly drawn, extremely difficult to prove, and clearly more provocative than conclusive. Kiefer's analysis does alert us, however, to the idea that examination hell may well be a good deal more useful socially than most Japanese appear ready to admit.

Ronald Dore, by contrast, draws our attention to the international implications of examination hell. It is a characteristic of later developing countries, he states, for there to be a very noticeable gap between a relatively small elite, who enjoy top jobs in the bureaucracy or modern sectors of the economy, and the great mass of the populace, who are likely to remain in agriculture or other traditional sectors of the economy and hence to have less income, less prestige, and a good deal less security. In such cases, continues Dore, there is naturally tremendous pressure put upon the government to guarantee that access to this limited elite will be decided in the fairest possible way. This need for fairness, in turn, creates a tendency for access to be decided by formal tests in which there are very objective "right or wrong" answers for which a widely enrolled school system can prepare. To put this another way, there is less pressure to get into a good university in the United States because there is, or at least has been, a wider variety of reasonably prestigious jobs and graduate training available to American university graduates. Dore's work thus has the particular advantage of comparing the Japanese situation to countries as diverse as China, Cuba, and Sri Lanka. His work reminds us that in many respects it is the American attitude toward learning that needs explanation rather than the presence of tough entrance examinations in Japan.

These three schools of interpretation are clearly pointing toward the heart of the entrance examination problem, and it is necessary to expand upon this framework by adding a considerable amount of historical detail. Vogel and Kiefer, for example, are certainly correct in suggesting that examination hell fits certain particular Japanese psychological needs, yet both works tend to describe an existing situation rather than to seek to find the historical roots of the problem. Similarly, Dore's "late developer" thesis is immensely useful in reminding us of seemingly similar situations in other countries, and yet there are many areas of the problem in which—as Dore's keen mind is the first to recognize—the unique aspects of the Japanese university admissions process ought to be underscored.

For a variety of reasons, then, this chapter traces the development of examinations from the earliest, rather Chinese-inspired, educational system, through the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European-inspired models, to the postwar university system as developed under the American Occupation of Japan (1945–1952). The aim is not so much to choose among the admittedly different and even contradictory Vogel, Kiefer, and Dore analyses, but rather
to add crucial details, particularly in the construction of a state ideology, which might help to make clear why the Japanese have maintained a system that they themselves have professed to dislike.

CLASSICAL INFLUENCES

To journey into classical Japanese history in order to find the roots of present-day examination hell might at first glance appear to be a singularly odd decision. Certainly, the Japanese never seemed to accept the Chinese idea that civil service positions should be open to any male, regardless of social rank, who could pass formal written examinations or difficult Confucian classics. As Edwin Reischauer puts it in his popular text *The Japanese*, this educational ideal was "too foreign to their highly aristocratic society to be readily acceptable." "Both rank and position in the Japanese bureaucracy," Reischauer continues, "quickly became determined by inherited status rather than individual merit."12 Surely too the Japanese in this period opted not so much for Confucian scholarship with its tremendous, even pedantic, emphasis upon talmudic memorization as a Zen or, perhaps, Bushido-like emphasis upon nonverbal action by a warrior class ready to die on the spot for their superiors. If traditional Japan consisted largely of a peasant mass dominated first by the courtly aristocrats of the Nara (710–794) and Heian (794–1185) periods and then by the "centralized feudalism" of the Tokugawa (1600–1868), why look here for the source of a modern educational dilemma?

Part of the reason to look back lies in the scholarly reverence that has been given to some of Japan's oldest heroes. The great Imperial Prince Shotoku Taishi (574–622), for example, has traditionally been credited not only with writing the "Constitution" of 604, but also with creating a twelve-cap (or level) system of bureaucracy, being one of the few Japanese to master the very intricate Buddhist sutra, and founding the Hōryū-ji temple near Nara, a magnificent structure whose full name has often been translated as the Temple for the Study of the Circulating Law (Hōryū Gakumon-ji).13 "Few men are utterly bad. They may be taught," wrote the prince in his constitution, a document that is actually more a set of moral maxims than a legal document. "When wise men are entrusted with office," he continues, "the sound of praise arises . . . therefore did the wise sovereigns of antiquity seek the man to fill the office, and not the office for the sake of the man."14 In the myths and accomplishments of Shotoku Taishi's life, in sum, we can see a very clear link between the idea that academic study is important for religious enlightenment and the idea that bureaucracy or the state should be organized around the best people. Study, religion, and state duty are symbolized both by Shotoku Taishi's own life and by the institutions that he created.

Sugawara no Michizane (845–903) provides another example of the ways in which the traditional Japanese court valued scholarship more than we might think. Descended from a very old aristocratic family, both Michizane's father and grandfather had been active in the adaption of Chinese culture to Japan. At the age of seventeen, Michizane entered the official Confucian university (daigakuryo) which, contrary to Reischauer's broad generalization, had been established by the Omihakai (c. 670) and the more famous Taiho Code (701) as part of a system whereby aristocrats of the fifth rank or above—and by Michizane's time a few commoners as well—could study the traditional Confucian classics in preparation for Chinese-style civil service examinations. After studying at the university for eight years, Michizane passed the apparently rigorous examinations and was promoted to very high posts within the imperial court government at Kyoto. Sugawara no Michizane thus, first of all, reflects an educational ideal that his biographer Robert Borgen at one point claims was "[i]n a few aspects . . . actually more egalitarian than its T'ang model." Borgen supports this startling statement in part by quoting a Japanese professor at the university who in 827 protested loudly that "great talent is not limited to the aristocracy."15 Strong words indeed!

More important, Sugawara no Michizane's fame as a noble scholar has in a way outlived these initial attempts at civil service examinations. Apparently ousted most unfairly from the capital city in Kyoto in 901 and forced to die in exile in 903, Michizane's unsatisfied spirit was said to have been responsible for a series of plagues and other disasters that soon swept over the city. Frightened, the emperor overcame opposition from the Fujiwara family who dominated court politics at the time, and promoted Michizane posthumously to a high rank in the government. Since then, the so-called Temmanzashi Shinto shrines to Michizane and the sacred bull who is said to have saved his life in 901 have served as rallying points where a supposedly nonreligious current Japanese populace can regularly be found hanging up votive offerings (ema) asking for success on examinations.16 A fine example of what the late Ivan Morris called "the nobility of failure," Sugawara no Michizane has stood for centuries as the model of a dedicated patriot whose sense of scholarship as the true criteria for public office stood out in a period when the traditional court was all but overwhelmed by the grubby world of politics.17 The link, to repeat, was once again among scholarship, ethics, and state power. This was a link that would survive even in the most militaristic periods of Japan's feudal experience.

Indeed, the rise of a warrior society and the accompanying emphasis upon the Zen religion should not be thought completely antithetical to the concepts behind the modern examination system. Certainly Zen's well-known verbal riddles (kōan and mondo) and many of its most famous ink paintings asserted that a truly moral person could not rely upon conventional academic study. Yet Buddhist temples in general and Zen temples in particular regularly taught both those commoners who wanted to read the holy books and those who wished merely to have an education. The Tokugawa period (1600–1868) also saw the establishment of the Shōheiko or official Confucian university (daigaku) and of various schools for the samurai in the various parts of Japan not directly administered by the Tokugawa. As the Western world began to threaten Japan's
autonomy in the middle nineteenth century, the Tokugawa authorities quickly established schools for the investigation of barbarian culture (Bansho Torishirabesho, 1856), military science (Kobojo, 1856), and medicine (Igakusho, 1858). Like the earlier government universities, these schools had an importance that went well beyond their small size and limited number of influential graduates. They were rather yet another statement that the central government should establish schools of higher education which could prepare bright and moral young men for careers in civil government.

The training that these bright young men received was heavily slanted toward memorization and repetition. Aptitude was not really recognized, nor was creative individualist thinking. Rather Zen stressed the absolute subordination of a terribly working student to a strict but ultimately loving teacher. "Draw bamboo for ten years, become a bamboo, then forget all about bamboo when you are drawing," notes George Duthuit in a passage quoted approvingly by the classic Zen writer D.T. Suzuki. "In the possession of an infallible technique, the individual places himself at the mercy of inspiration." This concept, adds Ronald Dore in his definitive English-language study of Tokugawa education, was also helpful in bridging the gap between the Tokugawa political practice of assigning young men jobs by social rank and more egalitarian theories of education; if effort counted, then anyone, however stupid at birth, could by hard work live up to the obligations of the job assigned to him. Theory and practicality combined to stress effort rather than originality, teacher dominance, memorization skills, and a level of detail that Americans might find trivial. Diligence was what was being tested, just as surely as moral discipline was the ultimate aim of the education.

Ninomiya Sontoku (1787-1856) thus stands out as a third cultural hero of the premodern period. Apparently an orphan boy who was raised in poverty and also suffered, Cinderella-like, from wicked stepparents, Ninomiya studied hard, taught and published on the need for an agrarian-based morality, and eventually became one of the very few Japanese admitted to honorary samurai status despite his peasant birth. By the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ninomiya was rather commonly depicted in school yard statues as a small boy of obviously humble birth who steals a large bundle of sticks on his back with one hand while he holds a book in the other. Ninomiya hence symbolizes the kinds of mental abilities that come more from hard work than from the natural gifts of aptitude. He also represents the rather radical notion that anyone who wants to ought to be able to get an education. Finally, Ninomiya stands once again for the notion that the purpose of study ought to be the training of people who would be of practical value to the state. While it is certainly true that civil service examinations never took hold in Japan as they did in China, in sum, a quick look at both the educational institutions and the cultural heroes of early Japan repeatedly suggests the close link between pre-1868 education and the post-1868 development of a formal examination system.

**EUROPEAN INFLUENCES**

The traditional link among personal morality, education, and national security became even stronger after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Basing government policy upon the emperor's promise that "All classes high and low shall unite in vigorously carrying out the administration of affairs of state" and that "knowledge shall be sought throughout the world so as to strengthen the foundations of Imperial rule," the new government attempted to establish a system of national education as early as 1872. Four years of required primary education were planned in 1872, required in 1886, reaffirmed after some slipage in 1900, and extended to six years after 1907. Students then went on to middle school (chūgakkō) which by the twentieth century taught students from the seventh to eleventh grades (ages 12 to 17), and from there, if they were college bound and hence male, to higher school (kōtōgakkō) which went from grades twelve to fourteen (ages 17 to 20), and finally the university (daigaku) which educated students for three years (ages 20 to 23). The first, and best-endowed, such university sprang from an amalgamation of various institutions which was officially called Tokyo University in 1877, Imperial University in 1888, and Tokyo Imperial University in 1897. Imperial universities at Kyoto (1897), Tohoku (1907), Kyushu (1910), and Hokkaido (1918) soon followed; private universities, many of which had started earlier, were permitted to use the daigaku name after 1918.

Enrollments steadily increased in the primary and middle school level not only because the population itself was in the process of doubling, but also because Japan's increasing urbanization and prosperity made it possible for a greater percentage of parents to consider sending their children to school; products of an age that talked openly of raising their social status (risshin shusse), who devoured books such as Samuel Smiles' Self-Help and enshrined an American educator's apparently casual remark, "Boys be ambitious!," it was not surprising that Japanese children increasingly filled the schools. Estimates of primary school attendance are hard to come by, but apparently the number rose from perhaps 40 percent for men and 20 percent for women in the early Meiji period, to 60 percent for men and 25 percent for women in the 1880s, and practically to 100 percent for both sexes by the start of the twentieth century. Middle schools expanded rapidly to keep pace with this demand, increasing their spaces from 27,758 in 1900 to 142,957 in 1943; this rapid growth actually increased the acceptance rate for the first level after compulsory education from 60 percent in 1900 to 73 percent in 1943. This tremendous growth both in absolute and in percentage terms was obviously the first reason why Japan began to face a problem in school admissions by the beginning of the twentieth century.

Prior to 1945, however, the chief bottleneck for admissions was not at the university level, but rather at the higher school level. The main cause of the problem was that despite a sixfold increase in available spaces from 1,210 in
1896 to 6,454 in 1943, the number of applicants swelled so dramatically that the acceptance rate for all higher schools, Masuda Koichi tells us, dropped in this same period from 56 percent to a mere 9 percent. Compounding the crisis was the fact that the greater age, endowment, and prestige of the imperial universities—particularly Tokyo Imperial University—their legions of famous graduates, and their surefire connections for the most rewarding public and private sector jobs made entrance into these institutions, and hence into the five nationally sponsored higher schools—again, particularly Higher School Number One in Tokyo—absolutely essential. Using a slightly different set of figures, therefore, Herbert Passin has suggested that only one out of thirteen middle school graduates could attend higher schools, and only one out of twenty-five could expect to make it to the nationally run higher schools. "You students of First Higher," intoned the famous educator Kinosita Hiroji upon his arrival at the Tokyo school in 1888, "will someday stand in the upper crust of society."

In such circumstances, it is not surprising that the government was unable to stop the various higher schools from administering very difficult written entrance examinations. In 1927, for example, the government suggested that written examinations for the middle and higher schools be made optional, with greater attention being paid to the school record, the principal's report, and an oral interview. Wartime regulations also urged greater emphasis upon the physical examination and tried to force students to go to school in their own district, the idea here being that a residency requirement might flatten the hierarchy of schools by spreading the ablest students around. Unfortunately, the various admissions officers found it hard to make decisions based simply on school records limited to one particular school. Principals' reports were regarded as untrustworthy, as they would usually praise a student without much discrimination. Oral interviews thus often became simply another form of entrance examination, and many schools simply exercised their option to have a written examination if they so desired. Clearly what was at stake here was, as Dore has already suggested, a deeply perceived need to use written, factual examinations that could be graded right or wrong as a means of making completely objective admissions decisions. Given the high stakes, anything else would have been sheer disaster for higher school authorities.

Underlying the prewar examination system, in sum, lay a number of complex factors, the first and most obvious of which was that there was only a limited number of spaces in a clearly defined educational hierarchy for the increasing number of Japanese men who wished to get ahead. The idea of judging these students by written examinations, Masuda Koichi tells us, was not only a concept dating back to early Japanese traditions, but also an educational practice in vogue in those European school systems that the Japanese were using as models in their own nation building. With so much at stake, short, factual, or "right or wrong" answers seemed to be the most objective and hence both the fairest and the most discriminating way to distinguish between students who probably did not differ all that much in their training and ability. Most important of all, the rising notions of progress, social mobility, and the right of the individual to serve the state if able were still in conflict with a society bound by obligations and a sense of place. "Probably no Meiji leader thought about matters in quite this way," notes Thomas Rohlen, "but the fact remains that outside of education, particularism retained its extraordinary power, and the Meiji leadership was anxious to assure that the nation would benefit from the secure flow of talent to the top. The sacredness of exams in Japan, even today, seems proportional to the power of particularistic forces it holds at bay." 31

AMERICAN INFLUENCES

Japan began a third major period of educational reform when the Allied Occupation of Japan (1945–1952) saw American officials working with their Japanese counterparts to rebuild completely the prewar school system. Inspired largely by a report written by Dr. George Stoddard, soon to be the president of the University of Illinois, in March 1946 after consultation with the counterpart Education Reform Council (Kyōiku Sasshin Inkai), Occupation officials extended compulsory education from six to nine years, required coeducation at basic levels, and changed the traditional multitrack system of various schools for men and women to a largely single-track 6-3-3-4 system of elementary, junior high, senior high, and four-year undergraduate universities operating at the standard American age levels. Two-year junior colleges were quickly added, most of which catered to women seeking to terminate their education at that level. Other reforms sought to simplify the written language, to decentralize some of the power of the Ministry of Education, to hold elections for local school boards, and to encourage adult education. These reforms were vigorously pushed through in the Occupation period despite the fact that Japan was still impoverished from the war. They had, it should be emphasized, the support of at least a strong minority of liberal educators. 32

Rereading the Stoddard report today, it is easy to see why the Occupation would be opposed to the prewar examination system. Arguing that "there has been too great a gap between the world of higher learning occupied by scholars, and the unidentified millions of the Japanese people," the report proposed instead to build new universities which would have as their "three great functions" guarding "as a treasure beyond price the tradition of intellectual liberty," preparing "young men and women of talent for positions of leadership," and training these same citizens "for technical proficiency in both old and new professions." 33

Given this stress upon the role of the university in training citizens, it is not surprising that the report considered the traditional examinations to be "formal and stereotyped," to encourage "conformity upon the part of teachers and students," and to stifle "freedom of inquiry and critical judgement, lending itself readily to manipulation by the authorities in the interests of a narrow bureaucracy rather than of society as a whole." 34 This final concern was subsequently height-
questions after the outbreak of war with China in 1937. American concerns about the pedagogy of the examinations thus dovetailed rather nicely with the broader American belief that a few evil leaders had tricked a poorly educated public into an immoral war with the United States.

A counterpart began almost immediately. To begin with, by lowering the age at which students entered the new high schools (vs. higher schools) from seventeen to fifteen and by greatly increasing the number of such schools, the Occupation in effect switched the main "crunch" or competition for scarce spaces from getting into the new high schools to getting into the new universities. Here the American and Japanese authorities suggested that admissions decisions be decided now upon the basis of a high school transcript, less fearful achievement tests to be given by each faculty (gakubyu) of each university, and a new standardized aptitude test known as the shingaku tekisei kensa (literally, investigation of the ability to proceed with schooling) or shinteki for short. The test, Vivian Edmiston Todd reported at the time, was designed by a number of "outstanding Japanese psychologists," and took two and one-half hours to complete. Fifty percent of the test consisted of "disarranged sentences," vocabulary, mathematical reasoning, and "following directions." The rest consisted of passages testing literary and scientific comprehension. Despite problems, some 129,966 students took the test in 1947 to loud Occupation claims that the newly designed university admissions system was ideal because it tested past performance (school record), present accomplishments (achievement exams), and future promise (the shinteki). The new test rather quickly ran into the kinds of difficulties that have always plagued efforts to introduce any educational reforms. On the one hand, conservatives appear to have been upset that the test was conducted largely at the insistence of the Americans, and they hence wished to restore the traditional mode of achievement testing that had been so prominent in traditional Japanese pedagogy. Progressives, on the other hand, worried about surrendering any autonomy in testing to central authorities; reacting both to the abuse of academic freedom prior to 1945 and to the alleged American "reverse course" from at least 1947 on, faculties (gakubyu) within the university structure insisted upon maintaining control over how student admissions would be decided. Both high school authorities and parents felt that students were studying for the new examination, thereby simply adding to already heavy burdens, and few could be found to defend the idea of aptitude testing. For a variety of reasons, then, the shinteki was dropped in 1954, a mere two years after the Occupation had officially ended.

Behind these immediate criticisms lurked the incredible pressures emanating from a rapid rise in the applicant pool. The number of applicants to the universities apparently rose from 176,125 in 1949 to 596,461 in 1954, the year in which the shinteki was dropped. Economically, this great rise reflected both the gradual recovery of Japan from the hardships of the war and the increasing necessity of a good education for students wanting jobs in a steadily modernizing economy.

Educationally, the rise undoubtedly reflected some of the effects of single-track schooling, as well as a shift from the high schools to the universities as the point at which a really competitive admissions process occurred. While admission to the new high schools—as opposed to the older higher schools—could still be a tense and difficult process, particularly when Occupation efforts to make students attend school in this district largely fell apart, the growing social homogenization of the society, a tendency for women to begin competing for spaces in the university, and the increasing possibility and desirability of a university education made this process the key one in the educational ladder.

Compounding the difficulty was the fact that the Occupation reforms never effectively ended the domination of the traditional elite universities. The Occupation stripped the universities of their old imperial (teikoku) name, but it did not abolish either the particular institutions or the chair system (kouza) under which these elite institutions received extra funds for prestigious faculty posts. Newer public universities were often hastily thrown together amalgamations of former higher schools and other institutions which had neither the facilities nor the prestige of their elite competitors. Private universities, meanwhile, got special encouragement from the Occupation but suffered heavily from a lack of endowment and a sharp postwar inflation. By 1968, a government report tells us, private universities charged on an average five times as much as public institutions, but they spent one-half as much money per pupil ($611), had but one-third as much per pupil floor space, forced over 40 percent of their students to work part time, and had a student faculty ratio that was three times as large (1:37). Not surprisingly, many of the students enrolled in private education expressed dissatisfaction with their education, thereby increasing the pressure to get into a few better and cheaper national institutions. The discrepancy between universities meant that increasing numbers of students simply would not accept the university to which they were admitted after high school. These students became known as ronin, a term that literally meant "masterless samurai," but in this case meant students studying for at least one postgraduate year to take the examinations again. By 1980, notes Rohlen, the number of seniors seeking a higher education had increased from the 596,461 figure quoted for 1954 to approximately 636,000; some 452,000 of these students were competing for places in the various four-year universities that now numbered roughly 412,000. The "fit" here would obviously not have been too bad, continues Rohlen, had there not been some 200,000 additional ronin trying for these same spaces. To put this another way, only one in three graduating seniors was able to get into the university faculty (gakubyu) that he or she ("he" in 80 percent of the cases) wanted; 33 percent of the entering classes of these universities would consist of ronin. The net effect of the postwar reforms was thus a tremendous increase in the number of students able and willing to take university examinations, a noticeable widening in the distance between high-quality and low-quality institutions, and consequently a greater tendency for students to take the examinations more than once before being admitted.
TOWARD THE FUTURE

Policies started in recent years to attack the examination problem have so far borne little fruit. After the university riots of the mid-1960s, for example, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party attempted to flatten the hierarchy of universities by beginning a new national university at Tsukuba Research City, which was to some extent patterned upon smaller American residential colleges, and by getting government aid to hard-pressed private universities. Both policies were no doubt helpful in checking a further widening of the gap between the most and least competitive universities, and yet the amount of money involved was nowhere near enough to give the traditional elite institutions such as Tokyo any real competition. As one rather flippant Tsukuba University student told his teacher when asked an unusually hard question, "If I'd known the answer to that, I'd be at Tokyo." The precedents of these two policies might be useful for future efforts, and yet the hierarchies remained.

Similarly, the decision in 1979 to begin a new preliminary screening examination known as the kyōitsu shikken or "first screening test" was a policy longer on promise than performance. Now required of all applicants wishing to take the particular tests of the various national universities, the new test has served as a useful screening examination, but it has not yet succeeded in substituting a more aptitude-oriented test for an achievement one, or in getting the various university faculties (gakubi) to drop their insistence upon giving their own examinations. While it is important that such a test is in place should feelings change, the suspicion of the national government and the difficulties of cooperation between the various universities have still combined to make the kyōitsu shikken a test that has only a very limited value in reducing the tensions of examination hell.

The current situation is thus rather confused. On the one hand, an optimist might say, a blue-ribbon commission has been appointed to review the educational system as a whole. As noted earlier, this commission has argued that the "excessive competition" for university entrance is unhealthy, and it has suggested that an alarming increase in school bullying (ijime) reflects the fact that too many students are absorbed in the mindless quest for facts to be exposed to questions of basic human values. Japan has now largely caught up to Western levels of knowledge and technology, the report continues, and hence it is clearly time for the Japanese school system to worry about fostering creativity; the suggestions for doing this take full note of the universities' need for autonomy, yet still stress the desirability of the optional use of a common test, the creation of more formal admissions offices capable of making significant distinctions between students, and the use of criteria other than achievement test scores. The report thus goes well beyond the usual Japanese "tut-tutting" about the difficulties of examination hell—a response, it was suggested earlier, that really reflected an admiration for the character-building difficulties inherent in the system. To put this another way, the fact that Japanese young people now feel confident that they will get a decent enough job may encourage them to be less nervous about their chances of getting into a good university at precisely the time that the Japanese government is becoming concerned about the dangers of too much studying. Creativity and free time may become important to both students and educators for different yet equally compelling reasons.

Cynics, on the other hand, might suggest that too many people profit from the present system for it to change easily. Publishers selling examination guides, the lucrative "cram school" industry, and the universities which make money for themselves and their faculty from giving and correcting examinations simply have too much at stake to change. Even those who have no stake in the system, our cynic might continue, are convinced, despite evidence to the contrary, that objective factual testing gives any student a chance regardless of social class or wealth. Separate university achievement tests simply have too long a history and meet too many of the needs outlined in this chapter to disappear simply because a new generation is beginning to be truly worried about them. The growing crop of eighteen-year-olds (peaking in 1992) guarantees a fierce competition for places, particularly as long as the university system remains hierarchical. And what top education official, our cynic triumphantly concludes, could ever seek to dismantle the very system that propelled him and a few elite male students to the top?

Sadly enough, the cynics may well have the better of the argument. As this chapter has tried to suggest, the current university admissions system is a combination of traditional ideas about the value of rote learning, deep and quite legitimate concerns about objectivity in a highly particularistic society, and a university system in which it is quite clear exactly how good any particular institution is. Japanese parents have long schemed to get their children into the best of these institutions so that the children could then be assured of the most prestigious jobs and secure futures. Prior to World War II, this meant preparing a child for the tense higher school examinations; after the war, the most crucial bottleneck became the four-year university. If and when the Japanese economy becomes so sophisticated that ordinary jobs appear to have almost as much status as those jobs open only to elite university graduates, then increasing numbers of potential examination takers may well say, "Bye bye Tokyo U." Given the depth of this historical tradition, on the other hand, it seems that for some time to come, separate, difficult achievement examinations will continue to be a fiery rite of passage for Japanese high school students.

NOTES

1. Kyōgakusha, comp., '77 Daigakubetsu nyūshiki shiritsu: todai bunka (Tokyo: Kyōgakusha, 1976), 51 nendo. 2. As will be made clear later, the publication of these yearly examination guides is a big business in Japan.


5. “Summary of First Report on Educational Reform” (no author or date). This is an English-language summary of the Japanese report that was distributed by the Japanese Embassy in the United States.


8. Ezra Vogel, Japan as Number One (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), especially pp. 163ff. It is worth noting that this book was very popular in Japan.


11. Ibid., pp. 35ff.


16. Ibid., p. 2. The question of ema has been discussed by my colleague Jennifer Robertson in a yet unpublished paper.


18. For a clear summary of educational changes in Japan, see Kobayashi Tetsuya, Society, Schools and Progress in Japan (Exeter, Eng.: Pergamon, 1976).


25. Masuda, Nyugaku shikken, chart one (no page number).