5

Diversity and Unity in Education

1 Demography and Stratification

The postwar Japanese education system is patterned on the American model. At the age of six children enter primary school, which has six grades. They then proceed to middle school, which comprises three years, completing it is mandatory. Some 97 percent of those who complete compulsory education then progress to three-year high school. Thus more than nine out of ten students complete twelve years of schooling, making high-school education virtually semi-compulsory. All government schools are coeducational, but some private schools are single-sex.

Beyond this level, four-year universities and two-year junior colleges operate as institutions of higher education. Nationally, only two in five students proceed to this level, and those who graduate from four-year universities comprise only about one-quarter of the relevant age group. While the proportion of students enrolling in tertiary institutions has steadily increased, those who possess university degrees amount to some 12 percent of the entire population. Japanese who are university-educated are a tiny minority; the vast majority of Japanese have had little to do with university life.

Outside the sphere of universities and colleges, an increasing number of unregulated, private commercial schools called shonin gakkō (special vocational schools) run vocation-oriented courses for those who have completed high-school but who are unable or unwilling to gain admission to universities and colleges.

The average formal educational level of the Japanese is among the highest in the world. Parents and students in Japan are conscious both of the prestige associated with higher educational credentials and of the
long-term pecuniary rewards that they bring. As Figure 5.1 indicates, the average level of lifetime salaries and wages of university graduates is twice that of those who completed only middle-school education. Interestingly, some studies have cast doubt on the popular view that one's educational qualifications influence one's long-term monetary rewards more decisively in Japan than in Western societies. With the general rise of living standards, however, parents are increasingly prepared to invest in education in the hope of their children acquiring a comparative material advantage in future life.

The most visible class cleavages emerge at the level of entrance to high school. There are various types of high schools. Some are government funded and others are privately funded, the respective student numbers being in the ratio of seven to three. With regard to curricula, high schools are divided into two main groups: those providing general education with the expectation that a significant proportion of their students will advance to universities and colleges, and those specializing in vocational education (such as for agriculture, industry, and commerce) on the assumption that their students will enter the job market of their specialization upon completion of their studies. The distinction between the two types is somewhat blurred; some general school students start working immediately after finishing high school, while some vocational students proceed to universities and colleges. A further significant proportion enters private vocational schools (senmon gakkō). The demography of the high-school student population is given in Table 5.1.

1. Two Paths of Schooling: Academic and Vocational

Three major options are open to those who complete high school education. The first is taken by about a third of all high-school graduates who progress straight to universities and colleges. Though nearly half of all high-school students aspire to a tertiary education in some form, the number of places available is limited. A majority of institutions of higher education provide four-year degree courses. Such institutions are of three types. The first comprises national universities and colleges.

Table 5.1: Demographic distribution of the high-school student population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School type</th>
<th>Academic path (universities and colleges)</th>
<th>Vocational path 1 (jobs)</th>
<th>Vocational path 2 (senmon gakkō)</th>
<th>Approximate percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximate percentage</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Percentage figures are rough estimates based on 1994 data extracted from the School Basic Survey of the Ministry of Education.

* In 1994, this figure was made up of 22% for four-year university tracks and 14% for two-year junior college tracks.
universities supported financially by the central government, including many of the most prestigious, for example Tokyo and Kyoto Universities. The second type comprises a smaller number of public universities funded chiefly by prefectural or municipal governments. The third group consists of private universities and colleges, including such well-known institutions as Waseda and Keio Universities. Out of a total of over five hundred four-year universities and colleges, approximately three-quarters are private institutions. Institutions of higher education differ greatly not only in reputation but in the nature and quality of the education they provide and the quality of their students. Though called universities and colleges, most cases in the bottom half of this group of institutions do not really deserve the label.

In addition, there are junior colleges which provide two-year and four-year courses, where only 30 percent of students at this level are female, contrasting with female students at the junior college. With little academic motivation, many of them regard their time in these institutions as a phase between high school and marriage. Though junior colleges are classified as academic institutions, most of them are private and vocational schools in their educational substance, with much emphasis placed upon training for home-making and domestic science.

It is widely believed that the Japanese educational system is of a "tournamnt" type in which losers who have failed in their teens are virtually unable to take up the same challenge in life. This propels students, particularly in elite schools, to make fervent preparations for university entrance examinations. Upon close inquiry, however, the Japanese system is closer to the "league" type where one defeat is not the end of the road because a "return match" is built into the system. It induces many unsuccessful candidates to devote another year or even two or three years to prepare for the entrance examination of their desired faculty. These students, who are between high school and university levels, are popularly labeled "ninans" (lordless samurai), as they are attached to no formal educational institution and are therefore regarded as "masterless." Many ninans attend private cramming schools which train students specifically for entrance examinations. This group constitutes about 10 percent of the total number of high-school graduates.

The second available route is the employment track, which approximately 50 percent of high-school graduates opt for. Most vocational or commercial high schools prepare their students for this path, and some students who have graduated from general high schools also choose it. One should bear in mind that more than half of Japan's youth do not advance beyond high-school level, and most make no preparation for university entrance examinations. With clear vocational orientations, the second-sector students are less achievement-driven and more practical. The well-publicized "examinator hell" belongs to less than half of Japanese youth.

The 30 percent or so of high-school leavers who do not succeed in entering the tertiary education path or the employment route take a third option: that of attending privately managed vocational schools. These include schools for secretarial assistance, English conversation, cooking, sewing, bookkeeping, nursing, computer programming, flower arrangement, and so forth. Such vocational schools, which have thrived outside the formal education system, absorb potentially unemployed youth into a vocational training environment. To a considerable extent they mask the extent of latent unemployment. Enrollments in these vocational schools have expanded since the mid-1970s concomitantly with the decline in job vacancies open to high-school graduates. These private institutions accommodate many of those who have completed studies at low-ranking general high schools but who cannot pass a university entrance examination or get a job; in this sense they provide a rescue mechanism for mediocre and low performers at high school. Privatized, commercial, and profit-orientated, these institutions remain outside government regulations and subsidies, drawing their earnings almost wholly from students' tuition fees on the basis of a full-fee user-pays principle.

Students entering universities and colleges and ninan students may be grouped together as being in the academic route. One can also lump together the second and third paths as the vocational route. Those on the academic route are fewer than those on the vocational route. Because of the increasing commercialization of Japanese education, the route students take increasingly hinges upon their parents' financial resources.

2 The Ideology of Educational Credentialism

The ideology of educational credentialism pervades Japanese society and spreads an examination culture across considerable sections of Japan's schools. In the distribution of occupational positions in Japan, it is believed that educational background plays an exceptionally important role. At the level of higher education, universities are rank-ordered in terms of prestige and reputation in such a way that degrees from top-ranking universities are regarded as essential qualifications for high positions in the occupational hierarchy. Large corporations and the public bureaucracy in particular are believed to promote employees on the basis of the university they graduated from. Such a belief induces many candidates for university examinations to choose prestigious universities rather than disciplines in which they are interested or
departments which have good reputations. Thus, those who aspire to tertiary education are intensely competitive in preparing for the entrance examinations of prestigious universities.

The increasing severity of the competition at this level has filtered down through high school in such a way that middle-school pupils struggle to get into high schools which produce large numbers of successful entrants to highly ranked universities.6 Pupils who begin this process early commence their preparations in elementary school, so that they may gain admission to established private secondary schools which have systematic middle- and high-school education geared to university entrance examinations and high pass rates for entry into prestigious universities.4

Extensive mass media coverage of these tendencies influences the normative framework of Japanese education, making its top layer the model to be emulated. In fact, Japanese children spend more time in school than their Western counterparts, being required to attend school on Saturdays for half a day fortnightly, and having shorter vacation periods. Students are expected to digest a considerable amount of material to reach the levels demanded by the examinations of high schools and universities.5

The examination-orientated culture of Japanese education necessitates an elaborate system of criteria for assessing students’ knowledge. On the pretext of avoiding subjective evaluation, these criteria give priority to the supposedly objective appraisal of pupils’ capacities to memorize facts, numbers, and events and solve mathematical and scientific equations. This framework attaches little importance to the development of creative thinking, original problem formulation, and critical analysis in the area of social issues and political debates. Thus, rote learning and the predominance of repetitive drill in Japanese education, particularly at secondary-school level, where examination culture permeates deep into the classroom. Consequently, Japanese students rank high in international comparisons of mathematical and scientific test scores. The transfer of these skills to the practical world produces an army of desk-bound engineers, scientists, and learned professionals with a lower rate of unemployment, but who lack the capacity to think critically or creatively.

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than a public commodity. Public universities funded by national, prefectural, or municipal governments constitute only a quarter of institutions of higher education. They charge their students tuition fees which amount to about 10 percent of the national average income of salary earners. Though partially subsidized by national government, private universities and colleges have much higher tuition fees plus considerable entrance fees, which exceed the national average annual income at some institutions. Scholarships are few in number and low in value. Furthermore, since most tertiary institutions are clustered in major metropolitan centers, students from rural and provincial areas must pay considerable accommodation costs. Accordingly, students depend heavily on their parents’ financial support during their university years. Thus, parents’ capacity to support their children affects their advancement to the tertiary level.

Parents’ willingness to invest in their children’s education has paved the way for “shadow education” outside formal schooling. There is an examination industry which controls and makes profits from extra-school education. Most important in this industry are juku-schools, after-school coaching establishments that thrive because of the intense competition over school and university entrance examinations. These schools range from large-scale, private training institutions to small, home-based, private tutorial arrangements. At the primary and middle-school levels alone, over forty-five thousand were operating in 1993, attended by about five million pupils — more than one-third of the relevant population. At the middle-school level, nearly two-thirds of students go to juku after school. Some attend to catch up with school work. Others prepare for entrance examinations. Still others regard these schools as places for spending time with their friends. Whatever their reasoning, the mushrooming of juku means a decline in youngsters’ leisure time after school. The juku phenomenon also implies that schools have failed to satisfy students’ educational needs.

The extent to which parents can invest in the education of their children depends very much upon their resources, and those younger students who have had excellent training in basic factual knowledge but limited education in critical social thinking.

3 The Commercialisation of Education

Education in Japan is an expensive business. The system imposes a considerable financial burden on families because, except in public primary and middle schools, all students must pay tuition fees. Education is especially costly for those studying in private schools and universities. University education in Japan is regarded as a private privilege rather
each student in a large sample with a view to predicting the probability of his or her passing the entrance examination of a particular school or university. This measure, called honsachi (criterion score), is designed in such a way that the mean of scores for a group of students taking a test is always fifty and from time to time, commercial test companies organize prefecture-wide or nationwide trial examinations taken by a large number of students from various schools. Locating each applicant's honsachi score on the distribution curve, the company can measure the likelihood of success with high accuracy on the basis of past data on the minimum entry score for the school or university department in Japan. These scores have provided valuable information for applicants wishing to decide which schools they should apply to enter.

This system of measurement is so widely used that until 1992 most middle schools allowed commercial test companies to conduct honsachi-producing tests in their classrooms. The Ministry of Education banned this practice in 1993 in a bid to stem increasing commercialization in school precincts. However, students remain interested in obtaining pre-examination numerical data on their scholastic attainments compared with those of students from other schools. Consequently, firms in the examination industry have continued to conduct examinations outside schools. In the absence of inter-school comparative data prior to high-school entrance examinations held in January and February, teachers and parents too choose to rely on commercial tests that produce students' honsachi.

At the top end of the high-school hierarchy in major metropolitan areas, reputable private high schools (Cell B in Table 5.1), which have a stake in the business of recruiting high-scoring middle-school students, give them "acceptance commitments" mid-year, well in advance of formal entrance examinations, on the basis of their early third-year marks. While officially prohibited, this underhand practice continues unretarded, appearing to emulate the corporate practice of firms which offer advance contracts of employment to promising university students who have graduated the following year. Honsachi arrangements are routine among high-school students vying for university places. They sit for commercially organized trial examinations which provide candidates, both third-year high-school students and seniors, with an accurate estimate of their chances of getting into their preferred university. These scores not only rank students, but do so in relation to a numerical ranking of universities.

Education culture within the elite school setting has gradually come to reflect corporate culture within the enterprise environment. Just as ability-based salaries increasingly represent the human worth of each employee, so too are the numerically calculated honsachi marks treated as though they were the sole indicator of the total value of each student. Educational sociologists regard the situation in academic-track schools as a "convergence of various human abilities into an index of honsachi," a "flat, absurdly linear hierarchical definition of essentially multidimensional abilities," and a "one-dimensional system of the rank ordering of abilities measured solely by honsachi scores."  

4 School-Business Interactions

Companies in Japan make a practice of recruiting fresh graduates through schools' guidance-counselling units. Therefore, Japanese schools interact intensely with the business community in providing job placements for students. In this nexus, many dedicated high-school teachers devote themselves to finding jobs for their students. The teachers in relatively disadvantaged schools where most students go into the job market immediately after high-school education play a vital role in helping them secure jobs.

Through the assistance of these school officers, high-school students who wish to find work would normally start looking for a job and sit employment examinations for various companies in the summer or fall of their final year. New recruits complete high school in March and commence work en masse on April 1, the first day of Japan's financial school, and academic year. On this day throughout the nation, companies conduct formal ceremonies where new employees assemble in large halls to listen to pep talks given by their executive bosses. An overwhelming majority of job-seeking high-school students—over 80 percent—found work this way in the 1990s.

The school-based recruitment system, which is legally supported by the 1949 revised Employment Substitution Law, became a widespread practice in the 1960s and 1970s. Allowing employers to choose the schools to which they would send job-application forms and related employment information, Students attending schools which companies do not approach have virtually no way of gaining an interview. If prospective employers are dissatisfied with the quality of students they hire from a given school, they can switch their preference to other schools. This situation causes guidance-counselling teachers to maintain and expand their recruitment channels with companies, in rivalry with their counterparts at other schools. In turn, corporate personnel officers compete with each other to secure a constant supply of quality students from quality schools. Locked into reciprocal transactions, schools and enterprises thus form a central nexus in the recruitment market. These school-firm interactions
also shape the hierarchical ranking of schools in each area, a school's ranking reflecting its standing with companies as a supplier of quality job applicants, and the standings of the companies it deals with. Within this context, counseling teachers go to great lengths to find a job for every student.8 Their dedication and commitment in this regard make the scheme work.

A similar system prevails at university level. Prospective graduates commence job hunting early in their final year, but large corporations (and prestigious ones in particular) consider applications only from students of the universities that they have designated in advance. Students from mediocre universities have no opportunity to be evaluated by these firms. This practice, which is known as the university designation system and which operates either openly or covertly, is the major reason for the stratification of tertiary institutions in the job market. Corporations justify the system on the grounds that, in the absence of dependable detailed information about the quality of each student, the most reliable indicator is the level of the university which he or she has succeeded in entering: the more difficult it is to get in, the more ability the prospective employee must have.

From a corporate manager's point of view, the level of difficulty of entry to each department of each university can be measured most credibly by its entrance examination score as reflected by the kenshu. With the kenshu-based university designation system firmly established, high-school students who wish to advance to higher education must pass an entrance examination of a university with a high kenshu standing in order to have the prospect of obtaining a good job after graduation. Given that employment opportunities with the best material rewards exist in the internal labor market, particularly in the large-corporation sector, students' kenshu scores not only represent their chance of gaining admission to a reputable university but are constant reminders of their position in the race for good employment.

Superimposed upon the three regular paths for high-school graduates is the external labor market, composed of part-timers, casual workers, temporary agents, and other non-regular employees. This has grown as a consequence of the shrinkage of the internal labor market. While on-the-job training of an enterprise's regular employees is a concomitant of the internal labor market, the continual expansion of the external market raises the question of who should be responsible for training its workers and bearing the cost involved. Given this fact that vocationally oriented senior high schools produce many who enter the external market, the socalled expansion of these institutions provides a partial solution to this problem.8 Further, more middle-class life-time employees are switching companies, thereby creating a new external job market.

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5 Articulation of Class Lines

Educational institutions are in principle meant to provide avenues for upward social mobility and to perform equalization functions among different social classes. Provided sufficient educational opportunities are available, the bright son of a laborer in a rural area should be able to pursue higher education and to climb to higher positions in the social hierarchy. Most Japanese perceive that this is not really the case. They regard the education system as more unfair9 than the areas of wealth, occupation, and gender.10 Educational-class lines are discernible in at least three areas: differences in family socialization processes, stratification in high-school culture, and macroscopic patterns of social mobility.

(a) Differentiation of Family Socialization

The ideology of achievement-based meritocratic competition in schools often veils what defines what is meritocratic and who gains an advantage over whom on the basis of defined criteria. An example is the way in which class background affects the process of acquiring language skills. A study of compositions written by upper-level primary-school children11 shows that city pupils tend to use a wider variety of conjunctions, adverbs, and adjectives than rural pupils. City children also appear to identify the subject of a sentence more frequently than their countryside counterparts. With regard to patterns of conversational communication, urban, middle-class children are distinctly superior to urban, working-class children and to rural children in both descriptive and abstract sentence construction. These observations give credibility to the proposition that pupils with disadvantaged backgrounds are generally deprived of chances to develop formal language skills and gain overall linguistic abilities.

The educational ambition of girls is conditioned by the occupational position of their fathers. A study of high-school girls in Tokyo12 found that most daughters of professionals and managers aspire to advance to four-year universities, while the daughters of small-business owners and blue-collar workers expect to go to junior colleges, or to end their education after completing high school. At an early age, girls are immersed either in a cultural environment that takes it for granted that girls should obtain university degrees, or one that assumes girls do not need academic qualifications. The value orientations of mothers also greatly influence their daughters' aspirations. In families where the mother does not hold the conventional view of gender-based role differentiation, her daughter is likely to aim to achieve higher educational goals. The extra-school milieu thus determines the educational selection process in a fundamental way.
Highschool students' interests differ significantly between high- and low-rankaged schools. "Examination hell" in high-ranking schools provides merely a partial picture. A study of high-school students in the Tokyo metropolitan area reveals that students at the bottom rungs of the school ladder find more significant meaning in their part-time jobs outside school, regarding them as enjoyable, meritorious, fulfilling, and relaxing. Many of them hardly study at home, distance themselves from class work and extra-curricular activities at school, and self-actualize in outside work where they willingly acquire a sense of responsibility and the qualities of perseverance and courtesy. Their less-privileged students expect to live independently of their parents, to become self-supporting in their future full-time job, and to marry earlier than school-oriented students. In this sense, part-time jobs facilitate students' self-reliance, self-support, and independence. In comparison with students in schools at the top of the school hierarchy, those near the bottom acquire real-life experiences outside school and mature relatively quickly.

At the lowest end of the scale, students who do not measure up to the standards gauged by the kensachi-based yardstick—many of them being in cells C, D, E and F of Table 5.1—find more realistic to drop out of the school system entirely. In fact, the consolidation of the kensachi system has been accompanied by a rise in the number of dropouts. Furthermore, because the emphasis on kensachi marks generates a culture in which scholastic ability is viewed as the only measure of individual competence, low kensachi performers also tend to have low self-esteem. This leads these students into the so-called insupportable—a tendency to defy school and community authorities and to obstinately have their own way.

A study of the Osaka area identifies four subcultural types of high-school students. The first type shows a strong orientation to academic achievement. The emphasis upon fun and friendship in school life, cultivating social skills and having a good time among classmates. The third group is oriented to social activism, with involvement in student council activities, participation in social movements, and interest in ideological issues. The fourth orientation displays a non-conformist tendency, unwillingness to study hard, or get involved in school events and activities. Positive academic orientations are strong only in elite schools; other orientations are distributed variously among all types of schools. The same study also observes that, while a large proportion of elite-school students aspire to occupational success, a majority of students in vocational-oriented schools are primarily interested in having an ordinary but stable family. Students' home appears to differ depending upon the school type.

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At the bottom of the high-school hierarchy are more than one thousand evening schools which operate throughout the nation. These schools cater to a wide range of students numbering more than one hundred thousand. Though little attention is given to this segment of the student population, these evening high schools accommodate a broad variety of disadvantaged students underachievers at middle-school level, so-called "problem children," ex-sufferers of "school phobia," drop outs from daytime high schools, and the physically handicapped. Other students include middle-aged and elderly adults who could not go to high school in their youth, and foreigners who work during the daytime.

The current profile of evening high-school students differs significantly from that of earlier decades. In the 1960s and 1970s, an overwhelming majority were, for economic reasons, blue-collar workers by day and self-supporting students by night. In this period the number of students who studied in evening classes exceeded half a million and constituted more than 20 percent of the high-school student population. Since the 1970s, the number of evening school students has declined with improvement in the standard of living. These schools began to enroll a more diverse range of students who suffer problems of a non-economic nature. Though small in number, they too are part of Japan's high-school culture.

(c) Macro Patterns

At the macroscopic level, the SMU project presents three major findings in this area. Firstly, the impact of class background upon the probability of advancing from middle school to high school has diminished. Family occupational and educational background has a declining influence on whether students proceed to high school. At this level, therefore, educational opportunities have been equalized. Secondly, the class background of high-school graduates continues to influence their likelihood of proceeding to university or college, and the amount of influence has not significantly changed. Accordingly, educational stratification remains relatively constant. Thirdly, students from families of high educational and occupational background have much better chances of entering prestigious universities, and this pattern has intensified over time. In this area, a restandardization of educational opportunities has transpired.

The social backgrounds of students at Tokyo University are concentrated in the elite sectors. The average income of their parents exceeds 150 percent of the national average income of male wage-earners in their late forties and fifties. About half the students at this university come from the top twenty high schools, eighteen of which are private high schools connected with their own middle schools; students in these schools are trained in a six-year continuous course. With regard to
parental occupation, income and school background, there is little doubt that the children of those who occupy the higher echelons of the social hierarchy and possess greater economic and cultural resources comprise an over-represented portion of Japan's student population. Class plays a major role in determining high-school students' access to top institutions of higher education.

III State Control of Education

The Japanese education system is characterized by a high degree of centralization and depersonalization. This pattern derives from the fact that Japan's modern school system was developed in the last quarter of the nineteenth century at the initiative and through the intervention of the powerful Ministry of Education. Japan had an extensive colonial empire extending towards the end of its feudal years, in the form of many overseas temple schools run by priests and local intellectuals, as well as schools for—youths of the samurai class managed by feudal lords. But the strong leadership of the central government determined not only the tempo of the spread of schools as modern institutions, but also the shape and content of their curricula. And although the education system was decentralized and democratized immediately after World War II, the postwar liberalization process never overturned the dominance of the state in the management of schools. Even today, the Ministry of Education controls the content and tone of all school textbooks, supervises curricula throughout the nation, and has considerable power over the administration of universities. The vestiges and legacy of prewar centralized education remain a potent force, which maintains a wide range of practices common to most schools in the country. Because of the concentration of power in the Ministry of Education, its political and ideological stance has provoked heated controversy throughout the second half of the twentieth century. This structure counteracts the diversification of school culture and propels the unification of education in a number of ways.

1. Textbook Censorship

The Ministry of Education has the power to censor the contents of all textbooks used in primary, middle and high schools. In prewar years, it compiled its own textbooks and endorsed their use at primary and secondary levels throughout the nation. After World War II, the system of state textbooks was abolished, and numerous commercial publishers began producing their own textbooks for various subjects. However, the Ministry retained the authority to modify the matter and wording of any textbook and made it a legal requirement that no textbooks could be distributed without its authorization. Because of its power of censorship, the Ministry's policy on the contents of textbooks on social studies and Japanese history has often galvanized the public. By and large, the Ministry's textbook inspectors have sought to censor descriptions of Japanese atrocities during World War II, depictions of political dissent and social movements against the government, and discussions of individual rights and choices. They have tried to steer the writers towards emphasizing nationalism and patriotism, submission and obedience to social order, and duties and obligations to society.

The Ministry attracted international criticism in the 1980s for its directives that the textbook description of Japan's military activity in Asia in the 1930s and 1940s be changed from "aggression" to "advancement." Similar emphatic disapprobation was voiced when it was revealed that textbook examiners insisted that Korea's independence movements during the Japanese colonial period be portrayed as violent rebellions, and attempted to dilute the depiction of Japanese wartime activities.

The constitutionality of the government textbook authorization system surfaced as a controversial issue with a series of lawsuits brought by Professor Saburō Ienaga, an eminent historian, against the Ministry of Education. The Supreme Court ruled in 1995 that the system was constitutional and maintained that the state had the right to control the substance of education.

The present system enables examiners to pass or fail judgment and to provide "opinions for revision." The writers cannot expect to pass further screening without complying with these "opinions." Authors of social studies textbooks can view instances where the Ministry advised them to change their wording from "the rights of senior citizens" to "the welfare of senior citizens" and from "the rights of consumers" to "the life of consumers," and also suggested they should include a sentence about the legality of the Self Defense Forces.

Furthermore, approved textbooks are chosen for use in the classroom not by individual teachers or by schools but by the education committee at prefectural, county, or municipal level, and are bought and distributed en bloc. Because of the size and profitability of the textbook market thus organized, publishers cannot avoid making pecuniary calculations in dealing with Ministry textbook examiners. Thus, market-driven conformity prevails because of monetary considerations on the part of publishing houses.

2. Curriculum Guidelines

The Ministry exercises further control over the substance of education through its requirement that schools follow gakushū shiido jōgen, the detailed guidelines on what to be taught and how it is to be taught at
each grade from primary school to high school. It has been debated among educators as to whether these guidelines legally bind individual teachers, but in reality the Ministry uses them as a directive to force teachers' compliance with the educational framework established by the government. For example, the 1980 guidelines (the sixth revised version since the first provisional guidelines of 1947) abolished social studies and introduced life studies at junior grades of primary school, and split social studies into two separate subjects, geography and history as one subject and civics as the other. The new social studies also required all schools to hoist the Rising Sun flag as the national flag on ceremonial occasions and to sing the Kimigayo song as the national anthem. The public is still divided over these requirements because the flag and song were used as symbols of nationalistic moral education during the war years, but the Ministry remains adamant.27

3. Conformist Patterns of Socialization

The fact that Japan's education structure has developed under the guidance and domination of the central government has left its mark in the way in which routines, conventions, and practices cut across regional lines. Several common patterns of socialization at school deserve attention.

(a) Militaristic Ethics

Japanese schools invoke militaristic ethics for the "personality formation" of students. These ethics have multiple layers but all embrace the notion that some physical training is needed to produce a socially acceptable person.

At the mildest level, Japanese children are expected to follow various forms of military discipline in classrooms. It is part of Japanese classroom routine for a class leader to shout at the beginning of a session, "Kobito!" (stand up), "Rei!" (bow), and "Chaokoshi!" (sit down) = calls that the entire class are expected to follow as their greeting to the teacher.

It is also customary for teachers to arrange their pupils by height order in classrooms and assemblies. While this gives the external appearance of sequence and regularity, the underlying presumption is that the taller the better; students are always conscious of their physical location in the height order of their classmates.

The most standard school uniform for boys is still a semi-military style of black jacket with a stand-up collar, and black trousers. Some schools, and many school sports clubs, require male students to have their hair cropped close, a practice similar to that applied to soldiers in the Japanese military before and during World War II. This convention prevails in more than a quarter of government middle schools throughout Japan and remains most entrenched in Kyushu and Hokkaido districts, with a majority of schools at this level making it compulsory.28 The idea is that Spartan simplicity in school life will cultivate a strong, manly, and austere personality.

The system of quasi-military age-based hierarchy is ingrained at the interpersonal level. Commencing at secondary school, pupils are introduced to a pervasive student subculture in which junior students (kōbō) are expected to show respect, obedience, and subservience to senior students (senbō). Even outside school, kōbō students are expected to bow in greeting when they encounter senbō on the street. Inside school, the senbō-kōbō relationship is perhaps most intense and articulated in sports club activities; the new members, who are usually first-year pupils, are normally required to engage in menial tasks for the initial phase of their membership. At the instruction of older members, they must serve as ballboys or girls, clean the playing field and equipment, and even wash team members' clothes, without being allowed to practice or train themselves for the probationary period. This convention stems from the rationale that one can become a good player only after one has formed a submissive personality, willing to follow orders from a coach or captain. The belief is that one can develop a proclivity for subservience by being chastened by a series of humiliating tasks.

Every day after school, children must clean their own classrooms, school hallways, stairwells, toilets, playground, and so forth. Behind this practice is the notion that pupils learn to be both humble and hard-working through sweeping with a broom, wiping the floor with a damp cloth, and getting their hands dirty. This routine is supposed to train pupils to be compliant, cooperative, and responsible citizens.

(b) Psychological Integration

Schools in Japan have developed techniques to promote psychological uniformity and cohesion among pupils. It is standard routine in many subjects for a teacher to instruct an entire class to read a textbook aloud, in unison. This gives the class a sense of working together and makes it difficult for any child to deviate from the set pattern. Not only high and middle schools but all primary schools in Japan have their own school song, which pupils sing together at morning assemblies, sporting events, and other ceremonial occasions to promote emotional integration.

Every school has a few annual events for which pupils collectively prepare and which are designed to generate a sense of group cohesion
and achievement. A sporting day (unisaka) which all schools have in fall is among those key events. On that day every pupil competes in running, hurdle races, relays, and so on. By convention, pupils are divided into red and white groups which vie with each other for a higher total score. Teachers and parents participate in some races, and unisaka is usually an exciting community affair. A day for dramatic and musical performances is another important occasion on the school calendar. Before an audience of the entire school, each grade performs a drama, some classes sing several songs, and some clubs play music, traditional and Western. Every pupil is expected to take part in this occasion, for which a full day is reserved.

All children in Japan also learn standard gymnastic exercises in group; these are practiced to the accompaniment of certain tunes broadcast by the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK). The so-called radio gymnastics program has been broadcast every morning since prewar days, and schools across the nation adopted it as part of their physical education curriculum. As a result, most people in Japan know how to perform the exercises. Not only are these exercises expected to be performed in physical education classes, but also at athletic meets and many other sporting events. On such occasions every participant is expected to perform the exercises in a standard tune, generating an atmosphere of unity and solidarity.

(c) Check-ups and Self-discipline

Japanese schools generally have excellent physical examination programs. Each school has a school doctor or doctors who conduct physical check-ups of all pupils on a regular basis. All schools in Japan keep good records of the height, weight, and vision of each pupil, measured at least once a year. No doubt this meticulous concern with pupils' physical condition contributes to early detection and treatment of their health problems.

A similar interest in the well-being of pupils extends to their attitudinal and behavioral "correctness." Slogans such as "goal for this week" and "aim for this month" usually fill the walls of Japanese classrooms. These class aims are normally of a moralistic nature: "Let us not run in the corridors," "Let us try to answer teachers clearly," "Let us keep our school toilets clean," and so on. In some cases teachers set the objectives; in other cases pupils are instructed to collectively formulate them in class discussions. These exercises, designed to keep pupils in line, are followed by "soul-searching sessions" in which the entire class is expected to discuss whether the set objectives have been attained and, if not what should be done in the future. In many schools, each class has...
iceberg. For instance, seven teachers buried two middle-school children up to their necks on a beach in Fukuoka in the summer of 1990, as a punishment for the students’ acts of vandalism. In 1992, in a Chiba District Court ruling in favor of the plaintiff, it was confirmed that a student required medical treatment for five months in 1986 because his teacher had forced him to sit on the floor, and had twice kicked him hard in the face because he was late for a school band. The student received lacerations to his lower lip, two of his front teeth were knocked out, and his tooth nerve became paralysed.

These are of course extreme cases, but incidents that occur in Japanese schools every day. Nonetheless, teachers’ violence against students is not a rare occurrence, and many cases remain unreported for obvious reasons. Some Japanese educators, particularly many teachers of physical education, believe that the military style of training is necessary to make pupils face the world. They see education as a way of fostering in pupils what they call kampyū, the fighting spirit, tenacity, and doggedness. These teachers rationalize the use of violence as necessary to achieve this goal.

To make the matter worse, a considerable number of parents encouraged or connived at the imposition of illegal corporal punishment on pupils at primary and secondary schools. A national survey on human rights conducted by the Prime Minister’s Office in 1988 reveals that one-third of respondents regard it as an acceptable practice. Some discipline-oriented parents praise violent teachers as educators full of zeal, enthusiasm, and motivation to teach children. These teachers presume on this sort of community attitude.

(b) School Regulations

Another area of national controversy is the extensive application of detailed school regulations. These rules include a range of trivial restrictions on the length and color of hair, mode of dress, size and type of school bags, type of shoes, and so forth. In many schools, teachers stand near the school gate every morning to ensure that pupils wear the correct items in the correct way, in accordance with school regulations. The strict application of rigid school rules has led to tragic occurrences. In Kobe in 1990, a high-school girl died when she attempted to run into the school grounds to avoid being late for school. The school made it a rule to close the machine-operated school gate at exactly 8:30 a.m., locking out tardy pupils. The girl tried to force her way in but the teacher on duty, knowing of the girl’s attempt, nevertheless closed the gate. As a consequence, her head got caught between the gate and the wall and was crushed. She was killed instantly, and the teacher in question was found guilty on a charge of professional negligence resulting in death. While he was tried in a court of law, the real issue was the rigidity of school rules which make students fearful of the costs of deviating even minimally from the expected standards. In this sense, this was not an isolated case.

The Japanese education system displays patterns contrary to trends in other industrialized societies where a style of learning shaped by permissive choice-oriented guidance is favored over authoritarian training. Ironically, since commercialism and consumerism dominate the world outside school, the very discrepancy between these two spheres of life induces some students to indulge in deviant behavior.

2 Costs of Regulatory Education

The regimented style of education leads to student frustrations, which are often translated into the gloomy situation which some observers call the "desolation of school culture." Its two aspects have formed the focus of national debate.

(a) Ijime

Ijime (bullying) has become rampant in schools since the mid 1980s, the very time when Japan’s economic performance became the envy of other industrialized nations. Ijime is a collective act by a group of pupils to humiliate, disgrace, or torment a targeted pupil psychologically, verbally, or physically. In most cases of ijime, a considerable portion of pupils in a class take part as supporting actors. In this sense, it differs from other types of juvenile delinquency whose actors are restricted to a few individuals. In ijime, a majority brings ignominy upon a minority of one; a strong group gains satisfaction from the anguish of a pupil in a weak and disadvantageous position; and a large number of spectators pupils acquire such a pleasure in being chosen as targets themselves. In the peak year of 1985, some 155,000 cases of ijime were officially reported across the nation. Although the number has declined in the 1990s, school bullying remains a constant feature of Japan’s school life.

Some children victimized by acts of ijime have committed suicide. An example is a widely discussed incident in Tokyo in which pupils and teachers played "funeral" with a pupil who had been subjected to bullying. During this student’s absence from school (because of injuries he had received when skateboarding), a group of pupils who had bullied him for some time pulled his desk near the blackboard, positioned his photo on it and next to it placed a milk bottle in which they put some flowers, to set up his mock funeral. The group also prepared a square
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Against this backdrop, unofficial and unlicensed "rehabilitation schools" have thrived. These are organized by individuals with no formal teaching qualifications, who claim that they have special techniques to retain problem children. Some parents turn to these as a last resort. In reality, many of these rehabilitation schools confine children in accommodation in a remote area and subject them to violence, which their trainers regard as an essential component of the rehabilitation program. These trainers contend that they can change the children by putting them through a series of severe physical tests. As a consequence, many cases of serious injury and death have resulted. These self-appointed educators rigorously attempt to mold pupils and students into a narrowly defined confine of acceptable behavior, either manipulatively or by force. Such teacher action meets only a limited challenge and finds considerable acceptance in the community.

Violence, disorders, and other "problems" in schools are not unique to Japan. Casual observations suggest that their frequency and intensity may be less in Japan than in other developed countries, though no firm comparative data in this area are available. The cost aspects of Japanese teacher and student bullying of this sort. In the ruling in the "funeral game" trial, the court declared that it is extremely difficult to eradicate bullying practices simply and "children must be exposed to the process of growing up." To the extent that the world of children reflects that of adults, the "funeral game" phenomenon is likely to mirror the way in which the pressures of conformity and ostracism operate in work environments and the community at large.

(b) School Phobias, Dropouts and "Rehabilitation"

The regulatory education system that emphasizes corporal control produces students who suffer from "school phobia." Refusing to attend school, they stay at home in their own rooms and often take on autistic tendencies, not even communicating. Some of these children become violent, inflicting injuries on family members. The number of middle-school students who failed to attend school more than tripled in the decade from 1975 to 1985. In 1992, the number of primary and middle-school children who attended school for more than thirty days a year exceeded seventy thousand. The sudden increase in school refusal cases since the mid 1970s appears to coincide with the rise of the authoritarian style of education and to show the growth of "corporate resistance" among some students against corporal control in schools. Cases of school refusal are in a sense children's body language or body messages in response to school attempts to control their bodies.
afford to be lazy because Japanese firms hire university graduates not so much on the basis of what and how much they have studied, as by the kensachi ranking of their university. The employment rate is more or less fixed after the college entrance examinations, and grades achieved in university subjects do not significantly alter the situation. University students are aware that employers are not interested in what students have learned in their university training and experience, and they are several teaching techniques to train their new university graduates.

It is true that ambitious students who intend to pass competitive state examinations for the legal profession or for elite public service jobs study hard. The same is true of medical, engineering, and some other science students. But on the whole, Japanese students do not see their university life as a valuable period for preparing for future life. They think of their university life as a moratorium period to be enjoyed, prior to their entry into the job market. Higher education means not so much productive pursuit of knowledge as a consumption phase of relatively uncontrolled leisure time.

Because of the high expenditure that university life requires, most students engage in so-called заробіток (casual or part-time) jobs, ranging from private tutoring of primary and secondary pupils to various kinds of manual work: working in restaurants, serving as shop assistants, delivering goods by truck, cleaning offices after working hours, and so on. While university students work as part-timers and casuals all around the world, such work is almost built into Japanese student life, and the Japanese economy depends heavily on the external labor market filled by university students' заробіток.

By and large, university staff are lax in their duties and are prepared to pass most students without a thorough evaluation of their academic performance. They are allowed to cancel their classes a few times a year without arranging substitute sessions. Students take this for granted and are often delighted with the announcements on campus notice boards. Above all, faculty members in non-science, arts-based departments are derelict in their duty to seriously assess their students, and it is most surprising that, once one is admitted to a university, one rarely fails to graduate from it. This is why a maverick professor at Meiji University attracted national attention in 1991 when he failed a significant proportion of students in his subject who had already received job offers from large corporations.

The hierarchical structure of Japanese academia resembles that of Japan's business community in several respects. A system of короткая akin to the corporate world is widespread among institutions of higher education, with low-ranking universities being affiliated with established high-status universities. Professors of major prestigious universities have informal power to transfer their postgraduate students and junior staff for appointment to minor universities under their control, just as large companies relocate their employees from time to time to smaller enterprises under their command. In universities of repute, "inbreeding" remains the governing norm, with alumni occupying the high tiers of faculty positions. Upon retirement of a full professor holding a chair, his or her associate professor is normally promoted to the chair. In top-ranking universities, very few outsiders who have graduated from other institutions are appointed to highstatus posts, though this pattern has been relaxed in recent years. Just as large corporations maintain a system of lifetime employment, so do universities of high standing fill their positions with their own graduates. In both cases, long-term insiders occupy the executive or professorial posts, and outsiders even of high merit find it difficult to make inroads. Universities normally do not publicly advertise vacant positions; these are, in most cases, filled by internal deliberations on candidates recommended through personal networks of high-ranking academics.

VI Some Unresolved Issues

Japanese education appears to be both fastclass and uncritical. It looks modern in some areas and postmodern in others. The somewhat contradictory picture of Japanese education has given rise to a variety of scholarly and policy-orientated debates. Three areas require particular attention.

First of all, scholarly views of the overall quality of Japanese education differ greatly. At one end, many praise its high standards, egalitarianism, and meritocratic orientation. At other end, a number of observers point out that Japanese education is geared to producing students who are good at answering multiple-choice questions but who lack creativity and originality in thinking. These analysts maintain that Japanese schools suppress spontaneous behavior and enforce discipline so harshly that bullying and other forms of desolate behavior darken school life. For these analysts, Japanese education represents a case not to be emulated. The two competing perspectives reflect some fundamental ideological differences among researchers regarding the extent to which educational institutions should perform functions that legitimate the existing order and transmit social values and basic skills from one
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generation to another, or should liberate youngsters from past conventions and traditions.

The second issue concerns the degree to which educational credentialism actually prevails in Japanese society. There are studies which suggest that, in the private sector, promotion rates of graduates from prestigious national universities are in fact lower than those of graduates from some less well-known private and local institutions. This finding has been debated at length, and points to the possibility that the promotion structure of Japanese companies may be based more on competition among individuals and on merit than on a rigid ranking according to educational background, particularly their alma mater.

Practical attempts have been made to weaken the influence of university ranking on status attainment in the occupational sphere. In recruiting fresh graduates, some companies have instituted a practice of refraining from asking the name of the university from which an applicant is graduating. The government introduced the national bureaucracy in 1993 to reduce the proportion of graduates of Tokyo University in its career-track positions to below 50 percent by the end of the century. Whether these attempts elicit the elite bastion against egalitarianism or have little bearing upon the overall trend, the fact remains that the upper echelon of the Japanese hierarchy is embroiled in debate over the definition, extent, and consequences of educational credentialism in Japan.

Finally, there are signs that the business community and the public bureaucracy are increasingly at odds with each other over the degree to which the state should regulate the education system. In the governmental Extraordinary Education Advisory Council in the late 1980s, a strong group of businessmen and academics successfully pressed for what they called the liberalization of education, in line with the philosophy of privatization and deregulation that reduces government control and the operation of the free market; overly obedient workers without much initiative are counterproductive to the increasingly internationalized Japanese economy.

The Ministry of Education warns against the expansion of education outside formal institutions, such as the spread of juku and the examination industry. In 1993, for example, it attempted to stop governments' middle schools sending pupils to private high schools. The Ministry has long refused to hold informal talks with the representatives of juku groups for fear of giving the public the impression of recognizing them officially. With this tug-of-war developing, it is inevitable that the rift between the state bureaucracy and commercial interests will affect Japan's education at all levels.

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Notes

1 The percentage is the 1994 figure based upon the School Basic Survey of the Ministry of Education.

2 For example, Ishida 1985 shows that the relationship between the two variables is stronger in the United States and the United Kingdom than in Japan.

3 Takeuchi 1991a. He argues that the US system is closer to the Japanese system than the "tournaments" type arrangement.


5 In response to the increasing trend for five-day working week in industry, Japan's education hierarchy is studying the possibility of introducing a five-day work into the school system. Hopefully, this would provide pupils with more time outside school to play and enjoy individual freedom. Ironically, however, the proposed system would provide the commercial education industry with the opportunity to compete intensely for the expanded market.

6 With more and more students studying at juku and other after-school establishments, the planned arrangement might simply transfer a large section of the student population from the formal school system to the commercial sector.

7 Though in comparative terms they are few, pupils who go through the so-called examination hell are overrepresented in media stories and scholarly writings partly because mass journalism and academics themselves trod this elite path, and tend to identify with those who follow it. Newspapers and magazines play up how hard these students work to pass a series of examinations - carting sleeping, abandoning summer and winter vacations, and studying unceasingly during weekends. The public is accustomed to annual media hype over which high schools produced how many students successful in gaining admission to which universities. Each year, public commentaries routinely lament the negative impact of examination hell on the psychological well-being of students.

8 In total, they attend school 240 days a year, two months more than Americans, and three months more than the French. In addition, Japanese highschool students spend nineteen hours a week studying outside their school classes, middle-school students spend sixteen, and primaryschool pupils spend eight hours. See Kosyu 1992, p. 29. A Japan-United States comparative study suggests that, including extracurricular studying hours in calculations, Japanese pupils spend twice as much time studying as American pupils. Timura Mekin, winning edition, November 5 1991, p. 7.


10 Ministry of Education survey conducted in October 1993.


12 Inui 1990.


14 See Okano 1990 and 1994 for detailed ethnographic studies in this area.


16 The third report of the Extraordinary Education Advisory Council in 1987 recommended the establishment of a lifetime education system and a national certification system. This endorsement is consistent with the
expansion of the third track made up of "remain gakki," which would benefit from the introduction of such systems.

17 Kosaka 1994, p. 200, Table 10.1.
21 Fukusuke Shoten 1992. The study was conducted in 1991, with a sample of 3,346 students in seven high schools.
22 Takeuchi 1995, pp. 120–1.
23 Yonekawa 1978.
24 AM April 15, 1993, p. 10.
26 NHK TV, "Tangeko a tomo" ("Questioning universities"), special program televised on April 1 and 2 1992.
27 The response to the Ministry of Education on this issue has been regionally diversified. Most prefectures followed its instructions, but two prefectures (Koito and Okinawa) staunchly resisted the government position on the national flag and the national anthem. Koito was the only stronghold of the Japan Communist party, and Okinawa had a postwar history very different from that of the rest of Japan.
28 MM September 16, 1993, p. 1. In Kagoshima prefecture in the southern part of Kyushu, 99 percent of government middle schools retain this practice.
29 According to the Ministry of Education in 1991, a total of 698 cases of illegal corporal punishment were reported, with 2,271 pupils being the victims of such violence.
31 The statement by the principal of that school, before some fifteen hundred students at assembly the following morning, indicates the degree to which school regulations are modelled on corporate norms. He stated: "If you can save one minute each, one thousand and six hundred minutes are produced. If you save five minutes each, more time will be manufactured. Corporation managers say these things frequently, but I think that I am entitled to make a similar statement to you. If you get up only ten minutes earlier, teachers do not have to give you instructions in a loud voice not to be late for school." (Shukan Asahi October 27, 1990)
32 Ministry of Education statistics show that, even in 1992, reported cases still exceed ten thousand.
33 A survey of 15,444 middle-school children conducted by the Ministry of Justice in 1994 indicates that 36 percent have observed instances of same, 43 percent have participated and 50 percent have been subjected to (AM April 17, 1995, p. 31).
36 The best-known case with such an outcome is that of the Tomioka Yacht School which operated in Aichi prefecture. This school received many dropouts from around the country for recreation, as it claimed that "yacht training could effectively treat those emotionally disturbed children" who were chronically violent at home or who refused to attend school. At the request of their parents, the teaching crew picked up these children from their homes; if the children resisted they were often beaten, handcuffed, and then taken away. At the institution they were virtual prisoners, subjected to violent discipline, including beatings, kicking, and other forms of physical punishment. A few deaths during the program in 1982 led to criminal prosecutions, but the court ruling of 1992 was ambivalent. The mass media also had divided attitudes to this case, reflecting the strong support for the use of physical violence against children who deviate from the general expectations of the public.
Another incident involved a small private facility, Kekenno School, in Kosai Island, Hiroshima prefecture, where parents sent children who had tendencies towards emotional disturbance or juvenile delinquency. Two children died of heartbreak in the summer of 1993 after being locked in a freight container for two consecutive days as a punishment for having smoked cigarettes.
37 Kamara 1984.
38 The total study time per week of Japanese university students amounts to only thirteen hours and compares quite unfavourably with the fifty-three hours of their American counterparts (Kan 1992, p. 85).
41 Wolfenstein 1990; Schoolland 1996.