

"RITE OF PASSAGE":
THE JAPANESE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION SYSTEM

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Philip Suek
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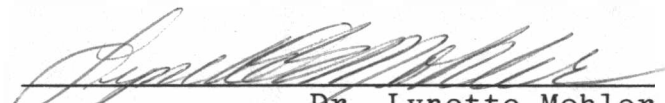
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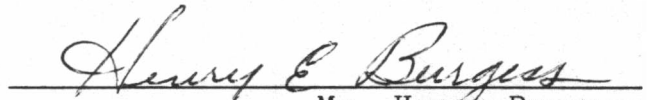


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This thesis for honors recognition has been approved
for the Department of English (Writing).


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April 1, 1985

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PREFACE

During the summer of 1984, I was fortunate enough to be selected as an exchange student to Carroll's sister college, Kumamoto University of Commerce in Kumamoto, Japan. Now, the Montana mountains take on a slightly different hue when mingled with memories of a drooping sun over Mt. Aso and tangled, forest green hillsides on the outskirts of Kumamoto. This overseas adventure proved to be a remarkable experience personally, as I am a small-town Montanan who had never even stepped into a taxi before (let alone a bullet train). The trip was academically stimulating, too, since it allowed me to explore entrance examinations from the grass roots level first and to hear what people from all walks of life think about the system.

I am particularly indebted to those in Japan who cared for me during my visit. Thanks go to: Yoshio Momoi for giving so much time and warmth; Tadaomi "Teddy" Kiyota, Ryu "Tony" Kunitake and Yoshihiro "Hiro" Ikeda for allowing intercultural friendships to unfold; my three host families for taking me into their homes and helping me to learn about Japan and its people via osmosis; and to Mitsuru Sugiura and his wife, Hiroko, for taking me under their wings in Tokyo. (Throughout this thesis, I have adopted

the policy of listing Japanese family names last.) Many more friends, students, professors, and administrators deserve thanks for your omnipresent hospitality. To all of you. . . arigato gazaimus!

A sincere thank you to Northwest Orient Airlines personnel who graciously provided air fare for the trip and hosted me during my first night in Japan.

Thank you, Dr. Mohler and Mr. Burgess, for being readers of this thesis. Thanks, Dr. Swartout. . . timely word choices, impeccable editing skills, and the warmth and sensibility of a father strongly affirm your invaluable guidance as my director for this project.

Thanks to: Dan Whyte for staying up all night while we wrapped up our theses; interested students who make this topic gain more tangible value; Mom and Dad for life-long encouragement and support; Grandma for being amazed at my ability to write an extensive paper.

Thanks, Julie, for you.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the devastation suffered by Japan in World War II, the Japanese people have wrestled their way to the top--reigning as one of the chief economic powers in the world today. One of the greatest driving forces behind this postwar surge is Japan's national educational system, a system that has garnered the admiration of some and the wrath of others. Whatever one's opinion of the educational system, it has helped Japan to achieve one of the highest literacy levels of any country in the world. The inability to read and write is almost nonexistent, as the Japanese literacy level is generally considered to hover above 99 percent.¹

However, as with most highly-touted institutions, the Japanese educational system has its quirks and imperfections. Although it succeeds in educating the general mass of Japanese people, the system drives many to despair and frustration every year when entrance examinations grab the nation's attention during February and March. This "rigid process of endless examinations funnel[s] the best students to the pinnacle of educational accomplishment. . ." but does not allow for the less-fortunate students to achieve a similar measure of success.² Not gaining

acceptance to a prestigious university places a major roadblock in a student's attempt to later enter the higher echelon of Japan's economic structure.

Reiko Kitamura, a nine-year-old student from Tokyo, for example, has already found herself strapped to the demands of the exam system. As a fourth grader, Reiko has already decided she wants to be a doctor--"like my father." She is not simply expressing a vague dream, like many youngsters in America who eagerly announce that they want to be doctors, firefighters, professional athletes, and the like. She knows that her intensive studies must begin now if she hopes to be accepted into one of the best universities nine or ten years down the road. Consequently, she has asked "to enroll in a juku [a school, in addition to regular classes, which provides examination drilling] to help her prepare for the junior high school entrance exams she'll take in two years."³

To gain an appreciation for the situation in Japan regarding entrance examinations, I will begin with a discussion of the history and structure of Japan's educational system, and how entrance exams play a part in that system. Then, after providing a brief explanation of how the entrance exam system functions, I will delve into specific characteristics created by exam mania.

NOTES

¹Ezra F. Vogel, Japan as Number One (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1980), p. 161.

²Michael Uehara, "Rethinking the School System," PHP (Peace, Happiness and Prosperity), August 1984, p. 7.

³Terry Trucco, "The Lucrative Learning Industry," PHP (Peace, Happiness and Prosperity), August 1984, p. 23.

CHAPTER ONE

JAPANESE EDUCATION:

STRUCTURAL AND HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

Japan's entrance examination system, sometimes cheered and sometimes jeered, has worked its way to the forefront of Japanese education, where it dictates for many the future course of their lives. Yet this notoriety has not been accomplished overnight, nor in a vacuum. The exams are not new to Japan and are not set apart from Japan's educational structure. Rather, the exams are--and have been--an integral cog in the everyday life of Japanese students.

After World War II, Japan reshaped its educational structure under the direction of the Occupation forces--mainly under the United States Education Mission to Japan. Entrance examinations had existed long before the postwar changes. However, previous to World War II, competition was focused almost exclusively on the college entrance exam. And at that time, not many students continued their education at the university level.¹ Nonetheless, the few who went on to college had to battle for a handful of openings in a nation with few universities.²

In recent years, however, the competition to enter

particular universities has increased and has had a ripple effect on lower levels of Japanese education. Yearly, thousands of Japanese students clamor to gain acceptance to Japan's top universities. But many are turned away because openings are relatively scarce at the most prestigious universities. In 1970, for example, "the national universities accepted only ten percent of the 650,000 applicants to their freshman classes."³ Consequently, the pressure to decide who may be accepted to which university has filtered down through the educational system, and entrance exams, inserted at various structural break-points, have become more commonplace as well as crucial.

This chapter explores Japan's educational history. Such a focus enables one to fully understand the impact of entrance examinations and to gain a clearer perspective of Japan's present educational structure and philosophy, to which the exams are closely linked. Also, without a basic understanding of Japanese education, indepth analysis of the entrance examination system would prove fruitless.

Japan has always been a country that has emphasized the education of its people. Even as far back as the Tokugawa period (1603-1868), education had been stressed in Japan. The often-glamorized samurai warriors of ancient Japan are well-known for their battle instincts and swordmanship. These balding gladiators, however, were strictly instructed to be not only men of war, but also men of

learning. And, although the Japanese educational system did not really bloom until the early stages of the Meiji period (1868-1912), the Tokugawan leaders had at least succeeded in developing the basics of "how to learn."⁴ With the groundwork laid, it became a matter of applying this appreciation for learning to the style of education that was important to Japan in the Meiji period.

Just into the Meiji period, in 1871, a flourishing Japanese nation established its first Ministry of Education and looked abroad for assistance in strengthening its educational system. Many Japanese students were sent overseas to study in foreign countries. Japan looked to America for ideas and eventually decided to apply the U.S. elementary school system in Japan. The Japanese government even went "so far as to employ David Murray of Rutgers University as their National Superintendent of Education from 1873-1878."⁵

But the liberal western approach was soon preempted with a more conservative, nationalistic style. This style of education, which adopted some of its characteristics from the German philosophy of education, stressed moral education, or shushin. This militaristic approach was reinforced in the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education.⁶ The shushin philosophy meshed perfectly with Japan's nationalistic surge in education, which urged support of the central government. Education became most valuable in the degree to which it emphasized patriotism and fidelity

to the government. By 1938, the Japanese military-style government virtually controlled education.

Soon after that, World War II erupted. With the final surrender of the Japanese to the Allied Powers in August 1945, nearly everything in Japan underwent drastic change. Even the Emperor, who was strictly revered and unconsciously obeyed, reversed a stalwart belief held by his people when he denied his deity. Japanese education, which was high on the reform list of General Douglas MacArthur, Commander of the Occupation Forces, was also coming under examination by the Japanese people as a result of the humiliating loss of the war. Scarred by war and eager to begin anew with its education, the Japanese government put forth in August 1946, just one year after the end of World War II, a pledge calling for "dedication of our whole energy to the reconstruction of education in order that [,] learning from the errors of the past and the tragedy of the present, we may be able in the future to contribute to world peace and human welfare."⁷

General MacArthur commissioned 27 Americans to form the United States Education Mission to Japan, a select group whose goal it was to assist "the Japanese in designing an educational system for peace-time Japan."⁸ From September to December of 1945, the big push took place, changing the motivational basis of education in Japan from militaristic to democratic. Japan's nationalistic drive was purged as the U.S. education team arrived in 1946 and began to

reform Japanese education. The school system was decentralized, giving more control to local communities; courses such as social studies were substituted for the traditional moral education; and a teacher's union was established in Japan for the first time. With such major changes as these, plus numerous other remodeling steps, the report formulated by this group eventually served as the framework for reform in Japan's educational network.

Until a 1952 peace treaty ended the United States Occupation of Japan, American advisors and Japanese educational experts worked side by side on educational reforms being implemented in a weary, war-torn environment.⁹ Then, with the Americans departed, the Japanese leaders started altering the educational system to better suit the people of Japan. As a result, the educational system became more conservative again, or more precisely, "more Japanese."¹⁰

Over the next three decades, the educational system began evolving more specifically into what it is today.¹¹ The relatively liberal Japan Teachers Union and the more conservative Ministry of Education often disagreed over the proper course which Japanese education should follow. Nonetheless, the two opposing factions steadily guided Japan toward a middle position lying somewhere between old and new educational ideas.

A new postwar structure in Japan's education, for example, emerged and is illustrated by the following chart

(Figure 1).¹² This format, modeled after the American system, shows the present school system in Japan as the familiar 6-3-3 pattern--six years of elementary school, three years of middle school, and three years of high school. Also, the subsequent years of study after high school, including junior colleges, universities, and technical institutions, are patterned after the United States format.

The Japanese, however, did not adopt all of America's education methods, but rather, as earlier suggested, emphasized more of their own educational needs that were unique to Japan. In the United States, for instance, students attend class 180 days per year compared with 240 days for their Japanese counterparts.¹³ At the elementary and junior high school levels, the Japanese Ministry of Education exerts a strong influence over what is taught to students and "distributes a very detailed curriculum for each course."¹⁴ In addition, high schools in Japan, although not part of the nine years of compulsory education, boasted a 94 percent attendance rate in 1984, a typical year.¹⁵ Of those students entering high school, approximately 90 percent complete graduation requirements during an average year.¹⁶

Also, with regard to the impetus for learning, a philosophical difference exists between the United States and Japanese educational systems. Japanese students are drilled with the idea that only through self-discipline

ORGANIZATION OF THE PRESENT JAPANESE SCHOOL SYSTEM

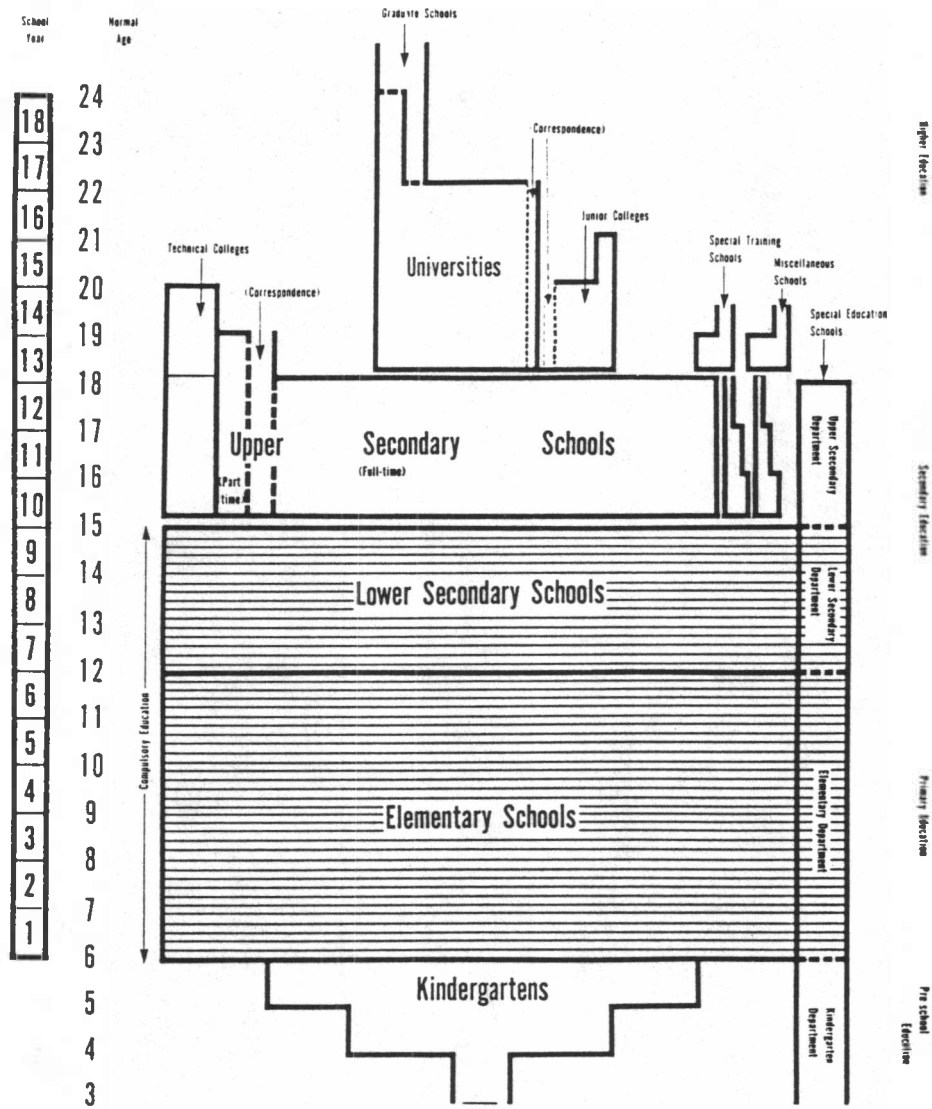


Figure 1

Source: Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Education in Japan. Japan: Gyosei Publishing, 1982, p. 14.

and hard work will they achieve success (in the long run). Students in the United States, on the other hand, are challenged more often to be free and critical thinkers, with comparably less memorization than Japanese students.

Imbedded within this Japanese structure and philosophy, however, lies the one element of Japanese education--entrance examinations--that not only existed before and after the American Occupation, but actually intensified after World War II. The stress on entrance exams has become so great that some kindergartens even require students to take entrance exams for a spot in their school. At each successive level--from elementary school to junior high school, from junior high to high school, and from high school to college--an entrance examination must be taken for acceptance to the school of one's choice at the next level. The more prestigious a school is noted to be, based on a nationwide ranking scale, the more difficult the entrance examination to that school will be. Thus a natural selection process occurs whereby the best students tend to pass the hardest exams and are lumped together, just as the poorer students (at least "poorer" test-takers) are lumped together in less-prestigious schools.

In postwar Japan, and certainly in Japan of the 1980's, the importance of the university entrance exam, toward which all schooling through senior high school is aimed, cannot be underestimated. Japan has evolved as a culture

highly oriented toward business; and consequently, the business sector, along with Japan's governing body, play the lead roles in the country's success. When a Japanese company recruits college graduates for employment within its firm, the company looks almost exclusively to one question: from which university did the prospective employee graduate?¹⁷ Therefore, the students' goal is to gain acceptance to the "best" universities in Japan so that they will instantly be recognized and hired by top companies.

However, the postwar increase in the number of Japanese universities and in the number of students hoping to attend college has resulted in fierce competition for relatively few openings. As a result, examination pressure has intensified since 1945 not only at the university level, but even more drastically at lower levels of education. With anxieties mounting, the outcry for reform grew to the point that students rioted at several universities in the 1960's. In 1969, student riots were so disruptive in Tokyo that University of Tokyo officials were forced to cancel entrance exams for one year.

Thus the entrance examination has a tremendous role to play in the present structure of Japan. "Scholars have claimed that much of the Japanese appetite for formal education is rooted in the belief that the system is the only route to mobility and success in society."¹⁸ That is, if one wants to succeed, that person must take part

in the present system because the majority of the nation accepts the rules of the system.

The goal of Japan after the war, says Professor Shiro Nakano of Kumamoto University of Commerce, was to "catch up to developed countries."¹⁹ Japan was at one time a powerful and wealthy nation. Then, after being devastated by World War II, the drive to rebuild the Japanese nation was revitalized. The entrance examination system helped the nation to achieve that goal. According to Nakano, the exams force people to study "the basics" and to memorize many facts, thus creating a "question and answer" type of person. "The Q.A. is the ideal person type to catch up to other western countries," Nakano emphasizes.

As demonstrated by Japan's speedy recovery and worldwide economic success--Japan's economy grew at a rate of over 10 percent per year throughout the 1960's--the entrance exam has played its role well, yet not without creating some negative side effects, which will be taken up later in this thesis.²⁰ Daily, millions of Japanese students are motivated to study diligently, simply because they want to pass the all-important entrance examinations. From a time when entrance examinations were only a formidable obstacle at one stage of life, and for relatively few students, the exams today have become a major concern in everyone's life. One professor even went so far as to say that now he "couldn't imagine" what Japan would be like without entrance examinations.²¹

NOTES

¹Terry Trucco, "The Lucrative Learning Industry," PHP (Peace, Happiness and Prosperity), August 1984, p. 24.

²Ronald S. Anderson, Education in Japan: A Century of Modern Development (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 181.

³Edward R. Beauchamp, "Shiken Jigoku: The Problem of Entrance Examinations in Japan," Asian Profile, December 1978, p. 546.

⁴Edward R. Beauchamp, Education in Contemporary Japan (Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1982), p. 11.

⁵Ibid., p. 12.

⁶William K. Cummings, Education and Equality in Japan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 19.

⁷Herbert Passin, Society and Education in Japan (U.S.A.: Teachers College Press, 1967), p. 285.

⁸Beauchamp, Education in Contemporary Japan, p. 15. A thorough study of postwar reforms is Report of the U.S. Education Mission to Japan submitted to the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, Tokyo, March 30, 1946 and republished by Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1977.

⁹Beauchamp, Education in Contemporary Japan, p. 16.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Nobuo K. Shimahara, Adaptation and Education in Japan (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1979), p. 67.

¹²Japanese Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, Education in Japan (Japan: Gyosei Publishing, 1982), p. 14.

¹³Ezra F. Vogel, Japan as Number One (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1980), p. 161.

¹⁴Robert C. Christopher, The Japanese Mind (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1984), p. 73.

¹⁵Michael Uehara, "Rethinking the School System," PHP (Peace, Happiness, and Prosperity), August 1984, p. 6.

¹⁶Christopher, The Japanese Mind, p. 80.

¹⁷Beauchamp, "Shiken Jigoku," pp. 548, 551.

¹⁸Uehara, "Rethinking," pp. 6-7.

¹⁹Interview with Mr. Shiro Nakano, Professor of Economics, Kumamoto University of Commerce, Kumamoto, Japan, July 1984.

²⁰1984 Statistics Bureau, Prime Minister's Office, Statistical Handbook of Japan (Tokyo: Japan Statistical Association, 1984), p. 24.

²¹Nakano interview, July 1984.

CHAPTER TWO

HOW JAPAN'S ENTRANCE EXAMINATION SYSTEM FUNCTIONS

Japan's entrance examination system is spearheaded by the Ministry of Education, or more directly, by the National Center for University Entrance Examination. The center, established in May of 1977,¹ is designed to conduct entrance examinations and to research methods for improving university admission procedures. The center grew from a need to evaluate the entrance exam system, which dramatically affects countless Japanese students every year.

At one time, candidates taking university entrance examinations took only the individual test offered by each school. Regardless of whether a university was public or private, only one entrance examination was required.

In 1979, however, the public university system divided its testing into a joint First-Stage Achievement Test and a Second-Stage Entrance Examination.² Now, anyone desiring to attend a national university must participate in the joint testing format. Those wishing to attend private institutions need only take a single exam, similar in scope to the national Second-Stage Entrance Examination.³ The first test is more general in the knowledge it seeks of candidates. It is devised jointly by the public uni-

versities and the National Center for University Entrance Examination. The second-stage allows each university to create its own, unique test. It provides the universities with an opportunity to create a test that will assess "whether the candidates['] capability and attitude are acceptable to the purposes and the nature of the faculty [at that particular university] and course he/she wants to enrol[1] in."⁴

The difficulty of each test is reflected in the different prestige levels of the schools. Tokyo University, for example, which is widely considered to be the top university in Japan, naturally offers the most difficult entrance examination. If a student does not aspire to attend such a noted university, the student may apply to a lower-ranked university with a correspondingly easier entrance examination.

Japan's dual testing system, which has been used for the seventh time this year, begins in January when the First-Stage exam is administered. The First-Stage exam is administered at the same time and on the same day throughout the nation. The second exams are given at times (in February or March) deemed appropriate by each school administering the test.

Questions for the First-Stage exam are selected by the Expert Committee on Setting Test-Questions.⁵ The committee is comprised of about 230 members, who are selected from national universities throughout the country.

First-Stage subjects on which students will be tested include: Japanese Language, Social Studies, Mathematics, Sciences, and Foreign Languages. In all but the Japanese Language section, students have a few specific areas within each general heading from which they can choose to answer questions. Second-Stage and private university exam questions, however, are devised by departments within each individual university.

Tests from one year to the next vary slightly, as the exam from the previous year serves as the main guide for the test being formulated. This allows for consistency from year to year. Such consistency is vital because so much is at stake with each exam that sudden changes can make years of study by upcoming candidates ineffective. Content of the exams is therefore an extremely sensitive issue, and any changes in the exams' content "moves with glacial slowness."⁶

The questions asked, as well as the manner in which they are posed, carry a heavy responsibility. Since millions of students study for the exams, and schooling and textbooks are directly mirrored in the exams, the tests actually set the pace for what the Japanese government chooses to emphasize in educating its people. If all entrance exam questions required essay answers and were graded substantially on the answer's introduction, for example, all students would force themselves to learn how to answer essay questions and to produce dynamic intro-

ductions.

Test questions generally emphasize "mastery of facts, control over details, and practical and scientific principles."⁷ The exams are designed to be objective in nature largely because the questions on objective tests, as opposed to essay tests, have only one answer and it is the most efficient kind of test to correct.

Second-Stage and private university entrance examinations have two parts: compulsory and elective. For these exams, all students must prepare for questions in the fields of Math, English, and Japanese, as well as specializing in either Science or Social Studies. Departments of each university create tests with various degrees of difficulty. Applicants seek to be admitted to a specific department when signing up for the exam, and if accepted to the department, almost never change majors. Also, students seldom transfer to different schools because a move to another university means starting over again as a freshman and taking the entrance examination(s) required by that school.⁸

The following is a question which appeared on the Kobe University entrance examination in 1974, before the two-stage system was implemented. The question is from the Social Studies section and has been translated into English from its original Japanese form. (This question is being asked of pre-college students, most of them still seniors in high school.)⁹

Select the appropriate answer for each numbered blank space from the list that follows the passage below. Fill in the dates directly.

The philosophy that arose in ancient Greece had an enormous influence on subsequent human thought. The earliest form, (1) _____ philosophy, arose in the (2) _____ century in the (3) _____ region. Liberating itself from the mythological approach to natural phenomena, this philosophy aimed to explain the fundamentals of nature in a rational manner. (4) _____, who explained the origin of things to be water, and (5) _____, who treated the basis of matter mathematically, were representative scholars of the age. Following the war with (6) _____, democratic government was implemented with Athens as its focal point, and a school of teachers, the (7) _____, arose to give instructions to citizens in the arts of public debate. This development began the division of philosophy into component fields. As can be seen in the famous phrase, "Humans have many ways of measuring things," of (8) _____, the existence of absolute causality was denied by the assertion of subjective understanding. (9) _____ offered counter-arguments to this in his teaching. Known for his special questioning of students as a way of teaching them to understand the truth, he was misunderstood by his society and sentenced to death. One of his students, (10) _____, recorded his words and also bequeathed to the world a theory of idealism and a treatise on political utopia, and another student, (11) _____, drew together and synthesized all of existing Greek philosophy, for which he is now regarded as the figure representative of Greek learning at its zenith. In the latter half of the (12) _____ century, Hellenism arose, and reflecting the decline of the democratic independent city-state philosophy shifted from being primarily part of the education of a democratic citizenry to being part of the tendency to seek psychological solace and contentment. The (13) _____ school, which explained matters in terms of pleasure and pain, and the (14) _____ school, which sought to eliminate appetites, were characteristic of the age. Both subsequently spread to the aristocracy of ancient Rome, where Emperor (15) _____, who wrote his confessions, and the philosopher (16) _____ were representative figures.

- | | |
|-------------------|------------------------|
| a. Academia | u. Attica |
| b. Aristides | v. Aristotle |
| c. Aristophanes | w. Archimedes |
| d. Antoninus Pius | x. Ionia |
| e. Euripides | y. Epicurean |
| f. Cicero | z. Xenophon |
| g. Chrysippus | aa. Enlightenment |
| h. Constantine | bb. Natural Philosophy |
| i. Natural Law | cc. Absolutism |
| j. Existentialism | dd. Stoic |
| k. Seneca | ee. Socrates |
| l. Sophists | ff. Thales |
| m. Solon | gg. Hadrian |
| n. Dorian | hh. Phaedrus |
| o. Pythagoras | ii. Protagoras |
| p. Plato | jj. Persia |
| q. Hesiod | kk. Polybius |
| r. Peloponnesus | ll. Marcus Aurelius |
| s. Macedonia | mm. Laconian |
| t. Mycenae | |

Answers:

(1) i, (2) 6th B.C., (3) x, (4) ee, (5) o, (6) ii, (7) l, (8) hh, (9) ee, (10) p, (11) v, (12) 4th B.C., (13) y, (14) dd, (15) kk, (16) k.

It is typical for such emphasis of detail and memorization of facts to be central to entrance examinations at all levels. But subjects like Social Studies usually require more analysis than a short-answer test can provide. Other test sections, such as Math and Science, are quite straightforward. The short-answer approach used in entrance examinations fits these subjects much better. All sections, nonetheless, are rigorous. "The level of accomplishment expected on science and math questions," states Thomas P. Rohlen, who has authored a recent work on Japanese high schools, "is probably roughly equivalent to what is taught to second-year science and math students in the best American universities."¹⁰

The entrance examinations are based largely on the public school curriculum and several trial tests are conducted, during classtime, throughout the year for students preparing for upcoming exams. Such practice tests enable the teacher to spot the strengths and weaknesses of the individual test-taker and to better advise the students on "which course of study and which university's examinations they are likely to pass."¹¹

University entrance examinations are taken by students during the last term of their senior year. "The majority of students," says professor Edward R. Beauchamp, a noted scholar on Japanese education, "converge on Tokyo, and each year one sees long lines of young people in railroad stations waiting to buy tickets and others who are strangers in strange towns wearing worried looks on their faces."¹² Such is the state of education, and of most of Japanese society during the months of January, February, and March. Even though not all are directly involved in the exams, everyone is acutely sensitive to the examination season.

During that "season," everything a student has studied up to that point will be wagered on the entrance exam. Japan's entrance examination system delivers an astounding impact upon students' lives--in the years before and after the test--and, though it has obvious strengths, the entrance examination system fosters many serious weaknesses. These strengths and weaknesses will be explored in the following chapter.

NOTES

¹The National Center for University Entrance Examination, Exam (Tokyo, 1984), p. 9.

²Ibid., p. 5.

³Private universities have considered adopting the joint testing format, but, as yet, they remain under the original system. Edward R. Beauchamp, "Shiken Jigoku: The Problem of Entrance Examinations in Japan," Asian Profile, December 1978, p. 560.

⁴The National Center for University Entrance Examination, Exam, p. 5.

⁵Ibid., p. 18.

⁶Thomas P. Rohlen, Japan's High Schools (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 96.

⁷Ibid., p. 95.

⁸Ibid., p. 94.

⁹Ibid., pp. 96-97.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 100.

¹¹Beauchamp, "Shiken Jigoku," p. 554.

¹²Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

ENTRANCE EXAMINATIONS: JAPAN'S RITE OF PASSAGE

No single event, with the possible exception of marriage, determines the course of a young man's life as much as entrance examinations, and nothing, including marriage, requires as many years of planning and hard work. . . . There is virtually no limit to how much one can prepare for examinations. . . . These arduous preparations constitute a kind of rite de passage whereby a young man proves that he has the qualities of ability and endurance necessary for becoming a salary man. The Japanese commonly refer to entrance examinations as shiken jigoku which literally means "examination hell."¹

The University entrance examination is the critical hinge upon which the gate of Japanese education pivots. Nearly everything before this test and everything after it balances on the outcome of an applicant's score on the exam. In light of its immense notoriety, the entrance exam system has notable positive and negative effects, but most people believe the deleterious effects of the examination system outweigh its benefits. While speaking with dozens of people--working citizens, students, parents, teachers, and school administrators--during my two-month stay in Japan, I never met a person who did not believe that Japan's entrance examination system harbors disastrous side effects. Professor Nakano of Kumamoto University of Commerce asserts that few people in Japan are content

with the entrance examination system. "Maybe one percent" are satisfied, he says.²

Why Are the Exams So Important?

As discussed in chapter one, most Japanese companies hire employees based entirely upon the university from which a prospective employee graduated. The key to university admission is the entrance examination system. Nothing carries as much weight as the college entrance exam when it comes to determining whether an applicant will be admitted to a particular university. Some institutions do require a student's academic records to be passed on from high school to college; but little, if any, emphasis is placed on such records. If a student passes the entrance examination to a highly-ranked university, that person will have a free pass to the upper levels of Japan's business and societal regions. Failure of exams at these same top schools will result in the elimination of any possible free pass for the student.

A brief analytical comparison, as expressed by one Japanese high school principal, between the entrance exam system and a set of parallel railroad tracks, helps to illustrate what it is like for a student to break into Japan's competitive job market.³ If a student passes the university entrance exam to a prestigious university, that student has boarded the train headed for the upper crust of Japan. There is little to slow that person down.

For once a student is hired by a major company, that student will likely remain with that company for life since Japan is deeply rooted in the lifetime employment system.

Conversely, if a student fails the entrance examination at an elite university and must settle for admission to an institution of lower rank, that student will ride another railroad track, headed toward a less-appealing slice of the Japanese crust. The best companies largely overlook those students and such students will usually seek employment with a small company. Due to the lifetime employment system, both the students who fail the exam and the ones who pass the test will remain at their respective levels in society. Little, if any, social mobility is afforded once a person becomes attached to one of the railroad tracks. The tracks run parallel without exchange; and university entrance examinations buy the ticket for each railway.

Although companies also administer their own examinations to applicants, these exams constitute a relatively insignificant portion of the company's decision to hire or reject applicants. What really matters is which university the applicant attended, as "four out of five [companies] specify the university from which they will accept applicants."⁴ Kyushu University, for example, which is placed among the top five universities in Japan, recently attracted over 300 companies that were hoping to lure employees from a pool of 40 students in a particular field

of study. These students were sought only because they were attending Kyushu; the grades they had earned at Kyushu were immaterial.⁵

Normally, Japanese companies look for "general talent" and latent intellectual abilities in prospective workers.⁶ Most Japanese companies train their employees on the job and thus find the university ranking system compatible with their most efficient recruiting methods. The companies feel that the best students will be in the highly-ranked universities. Most students, too, look for employment with large companies because they offer greater job security than small companies and usually offer a better overall package.⁷

Consequently, students scramble to gain admission to top universities. If students are not accepted to top universities, most will still attend another college elsewhere because, as Edward Beauchamp, an expert on Japanese education, affirms, "Japan is an intensively education-oriented society and graduation from a university is a virtual prerequisite to success in that society."⁸

Pressure to Succeed

With such incredible emphasis placed on which university students attend, and with acceptance to universities based almost singularly on entrance examination scores, it is easy to imagine the pressure students feel during examination season. The following example, an extreme

case (though not uncommon), serves to illustrate this kind of pressure and substantiates use of the term "examination hell." In Tokyo, an 18-year-old boy jumped to his death in front of a commuter train after an argument with his father. The following message was found in his pocket:

At the end of March last year, my father told me to take the entrance examinations for such and such a university and to leave home if I failed the exam.

I made up my mind to commit suicide and only pretended I would take the exams for the university which he commanded me to go to in order to patch things up for the moment.⁹

Literally, as one group's findings reveal, "a student's performance on one crucial examination at about the age of 18 is likely to determine the rest of his life."¹⁰ Frustration and emotional distress, therefore, are not uncommon offshoots of exam pressure. For instance, a noteworthy study, reported at the Fourth Congress of the International College of Psychosomatic Medicine in 1977, showed a direct link between examination pressures and a recent upsurge in the number of stomach ulcers among schoolage children.¹¹ It is not surprising that competition for a university position is fierce and anxieties run high when over 750,000 students are taking university entrance examinations nationwide every year, and one fourth of that number of openings are available.¹²

Competition among students, however, has motivated thousands of young people to study ardently. A famous Japanese saying--"Four hours sleep, pass; Five hours sleep,

fail"--is somewhat exaggerated, yet accurately expresses the spirit with which many students prepare for the exams. The following is a daily schedule of an above average high school student during the three months prior to taking a college entrance examination:

The student got up at 6:30 a.m. and reached school at 7:30. From 7:30 - 8:30 he received morning supplementary drilling (four times a week), followed by regular morning class at 8:50. Classes ended at 3:10 p.m. and were followed by afternoon drilling (twice a week) from 3:40 - 5:00; he returned home by 6:00. After supper he began to study at 8:00 and continued until 1:00 in the morning.¹³

Junior and senior high school entrance exams, though not crucial for their own sake, play a critical role for students as they prepare for college entrance examinations. All students are cognizant of the fact that attending a highly-ranked junior high and/or high school greatly enhances their chances of passing entrance examinations at select universities. Therefore, as young adolescents many Japanese students have already decided that they want to attend a prestigious university and thus study many hours to pass entrance exams to the best junior high and high schools. Such intense pressure to succeed and to determine one's future at a young age often produces youngsters who are confused and disappointed with their lives.¹⁴

As a result, when the preparation time comes for upcoming exams, the lifestyles of students can change dramatically. Ordinarily, students within a year or two

of an upcoming exam are advised to give up sports, hobbies, music and dance lessons, and other forms of recreation and clubs in order to devote more waking hours to study. Everything students do centers around exam preparation. At home, if a child is preparing for an entrance examination, other family members are told to assume that child's household duties and to keep quiet during study hours.

Normally, the child's mother is the driving force creating the proper household study atmosphere. Japanese mothers are well-known for their influence in their children's lives during examination time; so much so that the term kyoiku mama (education mama) has been tagged on them.¹⁵ The mother works hard to guarantee that her children have the best possible chance of passing the entrance examinations. She often spends time investigating educational expenses, organizing entrance requirements, visiting prospective schools and checking the schools' placement records, and generally making sure that every possible preparatory measure has been completed to insure the best chance of success for her child.¹⁶

Although a mother's assistance may relieve some of the extra tasks necessary when applying to take exams, and is an obvious sign of support for the child's success, such support can also lead to excessive parental pressure on many students. A student may not yearn to attend a highly-ranked college, for example, but the parents, who pay for their child's education, may have a different

idea. Hence, parental pressure, most visible in the mother, is thrust upon the student, and some young people feel compelled to study even more intently just to satisfy their parents.

One Japanese college student whom I met in Kumamoto, expressed the feeling that this excessive pressure is often exerted by teachers as well as parents.¹⁷ He was constantly told to study harder and to be a better student in order to pass entrance examinations--to get into a top college--so that he could get a good job. He said that, with his parents' permission, the teachers were given freedom to hit him if he was not studying at school; and he was hit more than once on the head. (Incidentally, when asked if he agreed with this method of using force to motivate students, he said he did agree despite his own experiences.) Now a college student, he feels he should have studied more in high school. Since he was not accepted to one of Japan's prestigious universities (he failed the entrance exams at those schools), he has given up hope for a really good job.

At a time when young people feel an inclination toward creative play and social interaction,¹⁸ many Japanese students are tucked away in their rooms, studying for faraway entrance exams that will affect their entire lives. This lifestyle, which forces young people to map a course for their futures extremely early, does little toward developing the total person, as frustration levels mount

with no available outlet.¹⁹ One Japanese junior high principal reflects:

I think many of the junior high school students have just given up. They know they'll never make Todai [Tokyo University] or Waseda, so they quit. Right here--at age thirteen. I don't know what could be sadder than to think your life is finished at such a young age.²⁰

With internal and external pressures nearing the boiling point, many students resort to violence. Japan, a harmonious and safe country, noted for its relatively low crime rate, has encountered some major problems with school violence. A teacher at a private high school in Tokyo expressed a fear of violence in daily classroom situations. "I've studied kendo and judo," the teacher said, "but I couldn't imagine taking on a class of boys."²¹ Violent outbreaks, usually in larger schools, have happened at many age levels, but ordinarily occur among students preparing for high school exams and seem to be a result of overall pressure to succeed in Japan's exam-riddled educational system.²²

Educational System Distorted

Entrance examinations, with all the hoopla and paranoia they have created, have seriously affected Japan's educational system. One group that has widely studied educational systems of various countries bluntly reports: "Japanese education has come to this: just cram and try to get into a good university."²³ Students regard admission to certain universities as especially crucial, to the point that

every year thousands of students who fail entrance examinations spend the entire next year (or the next two or three years) studying only for entrance examinations. These students have been given the title of ronin, a Japanese word that formerly was used during feudal days to describe "lordless wandering samurai" who had no masters.²⁴ The term aptly describes Japanese students "wandering" from one point in their lives to the next between formal breaking points in Japan's educational structure.

Instead of the formal 6-3-3 educational structure in Japan, many educators now claim that Japan actually fosters a 6-3-3-X-4 system. The "X" represents the time which Japanese students take off in order to bone up for university entrance examinations. Ronin students are very much accepted in Japan and are not looked down upon as inferior when they step out of the normal educating sequence to prepare for exams which they failed on the first attempt. Rather, these students are lauded for their perseverance and patience in disciplining themselves to study rigorously just to pass entrance examinations. It has gotten to the point, however, that some students--after failing a high school entrance examination--step out of the schooling process between junior high and high school to prepare for another high school exam, thus creating a 6-3-X-3-X-4 system.²⁵

Approximately 200,000 ronin take university entrance exams every year, which constitutes roughly one-fourth

of the total number of those taking college exams.²⁶ In 1976, 54.2 percent of the successful candidates were ronin.²⁷ In fact, among high school seniors battling university entrance exams for the first time, one in three fail to gain acceptance.²⁸ Many become ronin. Thus, with thousands of students taking the extra time to gain acceptance to a preferred university, the competition for available openings at universities intensifies.

Ronin students almost always spend much of their extra study time in cram schools known as yobiko.²⁹ Yobiko are designed to prepare students for college entrance examinations; and often such cram schools are directly affiliated with Japanese universities. Thus, students attend this kind of yobiko only to learn how to pass the entrance examination to one particular university. Yoyogi Seminar in Tokyo, for instance, is the largest of the 241 yobiko in Japan, with an approximate enrollment of 33,000 students in 1984.³⁰ Amazingly, it costs more per year to attend Yoyogi than to attend Tokyo University, the most prestigious university in the country.³¹

Another means of providing help for students to pass entrance examinations is the practice of enrolling one's child in juku, a less-formal version of yobiko. Juku are also cram schools, but on a smaller scale. Students attend juku, before or after regular classes or in the evening, as supplementary drilling during the regular school days. Usually youngsters enroll in juku to prepare for a school's

entrance examination, but some juku also require entrance exams. "It's not unusual," says one educational analyst, "to send a child to a juku that prepares for another juku's entrance exam."³² This can all occur during junior high school and even during elementary schooling. A 1976 study involving thousands of Japanese students revealed that 60 percent of the urban student population in grades seven, eight, and nine were enrolled in a cram school or were being coached by a private tutor. Further, the poll showed that 40 percent of all fourth, fifth, and sixth graders in Tokyo were going to a juku.³³ "Most parents," reported Thomas Rohlen, "deeply regret sending their children to juku, appreciating full well the loss of fun and innocence involved, but they fear their children will lose out in the race without such extra stimulus."³⁴

With yobiko and juku schools attracting a considerable clientele all over the nation, one can see the additional financial drain typical Japanese parents face when providing extra schooling for their children. "The more you can afford to spend on your child's education," says Kiyoo Nakakoji, secretary general of Nikkyoso [Japan Teachers Union], "the better he or she will do in the exam and, thus, the job market."³⁵ Obviously, families with a high degree of wealth possess a decided advantage over less-able families when providing educational extras for their children. But that does not necessarily keep those economically disadvantaged families from making financial sacrifices

to provide supplementary lessons for their children.

Impetus for Learning

While I was living in Kumamoto, a city with more than 500,000 inhabitants, a local newspaper conducted a survey of area residents concerning the attitudes of the Japanese people toward education in Japan.³⁶ One portion of the survey revealed that 60 percent of the students polled felt that the best teachers were those who helped them prepare most for entrance examinations. This attitude is the result of such grave importance being placed upon entrance examinations by the Japanese people. In large measure, education in Japan has become most relevant to the degree in which it helps students pass difficult college entrance exams.

Yobiko and juku schools, for example, do little to promote learning as an intrinsic value. They are privately run businesses and operate as such. Consequently, they attract customers only if they can assure students that their cram school will prepare them best to pass entrance examinations. "In this context, the notion of knowledge for its own sake seems foreign and utterly frivolous; the business at hand is selective, almost brutal, cramming."³⁷

In addition, a student's senior year in high school is largely devoted to preparation for the college entrance examination. The required classroom material is passed

over quickly in the first two years of high school and is generally overlooked the final year in many schools. This practice is most prevalent in highly-ranked high schools. These high schools, in order to maintain their top status, which is based on the number of students from their schools accepted to Tokyo University and other top colleges, use a tremendous amount of class time for exam drilling.³⁸

Studying for entrance exams also requires a student to be prepared for arbitrary questions. The following example, from the English Language section, infamous for its ambiguous and tricky questions, asked test-takers where the word "evidently" should be placed in the sentence, "What he said is true." According to those conducting the test, the only correct response was following the word "is."³⁹

Thus, educational emphasis is placed on learning how to take tests and memorizing facts. Surmised Professor Hiroshi Orihara of Tokyo University after studying the attitudes of college freshmen with regard to their exam experience:

. . . concentration of a student's entire energy on passing tests shrivels his natural curiosity and impairs his ability to solve problems and explore knowledge. . . . Thus a student knows that his test preparation will be evaluated by the concrete results achieved: his test scores and his relative ranking with respect to other students--a rank determined by mastering information in references and textbooks. But what is needed . . . is creative teaching that shows a student how to solve problems by setting up hypotheses and testing them against facts. . . .⁴⁰

Surely large numbers of people are motivated to learn "the basics" of education in order to pass entrance examinations, and thus Japan's literacy rate is very high. Japanese students consistently finish among the top scorers in international math and science tests.⁴¹ An intellectual fervor and breeding ground of sorts is created in Japan whereby nearly everyone is aiming for success on examination days. Many people have this same goal. The goal, however, is not the acquisition of knowledge for internal reasons; but rather, the "goal is the gate [the university entrance examination], not the world after the gate."⁴² Although entrance exams have the potential to motivate people to greatness, more often they simply become ends in themselves.

It is common, for example, for students to study passionately up through high school, then to coast through four years of college--a time when their intellectual capabilities are just peaking--simply because they need a break from the many years of preparation for their college entrance exams.⁴³ They know the fun will end when graduation from college rolls around and the austerity of a daily job sets in. Dr. Yoshiyuki Nakai, professor of Comparative Culture at Seikei University, explained this phenomenon:

At the beginning--I came back [from teaching in the United States] four years ago--I was mad with them, the lazy Japanese students, and then I gradually came to realize that it's a depressing type of life that they're expecting, this very rigid hierarchy that they have to face. Anything intellectual is depressing to

them, they don't want it. It's a very brief moment of freedom they have, just four years--before that it was the entrance exams, and after it's the life of a salaried man--and they don't want to waste it.⁴⁴

During my stay in Japan I was at Kumamoto University of Commerce for about 40 days, during which time regular classes were in session. Only once did I ever see (or hear of) a student studying outside of class. One male student explained it this way: "Some people study hard in college, but they don't have any more of a chance to get a good job, because grades don't matter--only the university. So why study?"⁴⁵ He has a valid point since graduation from Japanese universities, which is virtually assured if one makes it through the second year, is running at about 95 percent.⁴⁶

The first half of the following chart (Figure 2) further demonstrates the fact that many schools have parlayed learning for learning's sake into learning for the sake of passing entrance examinations. This chart displays a fairly even response throughout all levels of education, beginning at the middle school level. The second part of the chart shows the acceptance by students of the hierarchical ranking of schools in Japan. The education received at some schools is valued greatly over the education at other schools simply because those schools place more seniors in the best Japanese universities.

Kumamoto University of Commerce, for example, is not highly ranked in Japan's pyramidal university structure.

ATTITUDES OF JAPANESE YOUTHS TOWARD THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

	Educational Attainment			Total
	Middle School	High School	Higher Education	
Schools overemphasize exams relative to human qualities	74.1	71.0	73.2	71.4
Regardless of qualifications, the social prestige of one school counts more	66.4	61.5	66.2	63.2

SOURCE: Sorifu (Prime Minister's Office), *Sekai Seinen Ishiki Chosa Hokokusho* (Report on the International Survey of the Consciousness of Youth).

From: William K. Cummings. Education and Equality in Japan. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 230.

Figure 2

Consequently, if a student is educated at K.U.C., that person has a relatively slight chance to break into a large company. Although the student may be gifted and intelligent and may receive an education from very competent professors, that student's education does not carry a substantial impact into the job market. The students realize this and many are attending K.U.C. because they did not pass the entrance examinations given at more prestigious colleges, which were ultimately their first choice.⁴⁷

Everyone in Japan understands this "social prestige"

ranking of one school over another and most disagree with it fundamentally, yet accept it. Subsequently, the entrance examination system perpetuates itself. "Hardly a soul in the entire country will say anything publicly in its favor," says Rohlen, "yet private behavior feeds the competition."⁴⁸

Affecting the Nation's Psyche

The entrance examination system has created a dangerous label among its participants that can easily remain with them for the rest of their lives. Those who pass entrance exams to prestigious universities often gain a superiority complex, yet they may not be any better or smarter than the student who took the same test--but failed. Since the successful student is rewarded with acceptance to a preferred university and eventually snags a position with a top company, the student's belief is reinforced that he/she is somehow "better" than those who failed the examination. And the unsuccessful students possess an inferiority complex. Thus the majority of the nation's people, those not accepted to prestigious universities, are frustrated "losers" at the only game that can allow them access to the peak of Japan's business network.⁴⁹

As a result, elite groups are formed in Japan known as gakubatsu.⁵⁰ These cliques, rarely talked about openly, represent the people who have mastered the educational system and have risen to the upper crust of Japanese socie-

ty, then have slipped safely into large corporations and government positions. According to student Toshimi Yokoyama, these elite "listen to no one else because they feel that they have all the answers within their own high I.Q. group." The winners of the entrance examination game, he says, tend to neglect the losers; or, indirectly, the leaders neglect the followers.⁵¹

This phenomenon, though it overlooks the individual in many cases, does serve the Japanese nation well in that it draws strong leaders to the top via success at entrance examinations. Thus the exam system promotes good things for the nation as a whole, and, consequently, people are willing to live with the anxiety, tension, and ill effects that come with the exams.

Education in Japan, says the Dean of Education at Kumamoto University of Commerce, is oriented toward manpower rather than toward manhood.⁵² In other words, Japan employs its educational system to make the nation competitive on the world level, rather than promoting an educational system that creates well-rounded individuals. Before World War II, for example, Japan utilized its educational system to promote military strength and growth. Today, that same philosophy is employed to tap the resources of 120 million people in order to make Japan economically competitive on the world level. The entrance examination system meshes well with the manpower philosophy, as it is ideal for "making a good businessman."⁵³

NOTES

¹Ezra F. Vogel, "The Gateway to Salary: Infernal Entrance Examinations," in Learning to be Japanese: Selected Readings on Japanese Society and Education, ed. Edward R. Beauchamp (Hamden, Connecticut: Linnet Books, 1978), pp. 213-214.

²Interview with Mr. Shiro Nakano, Professor of Economics, Kumamoto University of Commerce, Kumamoto, Japan, July 1984.

³Interview with Mr. Sonoda, Shodai High School Principal, Kumamoto, Japan, July 1984.

⁴Edward R. Beauchamp, "Shiken Jigoku: The Problem of Entrance Examinations in Japan," Asian Profile, December 1978, p. 548.

⁵Interview with Mr. Yoshio Gondo, Dean of Faculty of Education, Kyushu University, Fukuoka, Japan, July 1984.

⁶Nakano interview, July 1984.

⁷Vogel, "The Gateway to Salary," pp. 214-216.

⁸Beauchamp, "Shiken Jigoku," p. 543.

⁹Edward R. Beauchamp, Education in Contemporary Japan (Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1982), p. 35. Although the number of suicides linked directly to entrance examination pressure is relatively low, the issue is significant in light of the fact that even these few commit suicide because of examination pressure.

¹⁰Nobuo Shimahara, College Entrance Examinations and Social Cohesion (Bethesda, MD: ERIC Document Reproduction Service, ED 336 979, 1984), p. 5.

¹¹Beauchamp, Education in Contemporary Japan, p. 34.

¹²Nobuo Shimahara, Adaptation and Education in Japan (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1979), p. 82; Thomas P. Rohlen, Japan's High Schools (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 84.

¹³Shimahara, College Entrance Examinations and Social Cohesion, p. 13.

¹⁴Nakano interview, July 1984.

¹⁵Robert C. Christopher, The Japanese Mind (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1984), pp. 79-80.

¹⁶Vogel, "The Gateway to Salary," pp. 219-221.

¹⁷Interview with Mr. Seigo Iizuka, college student, Hotakubo, Japan, July 1984.

¹⁸Rohlen, Japan's High Schools, p. 106.

¹⁹Nakano interview, July 1984.

²⁰Michael Uehara, "Rethinking the School System," PHP (Peace, Happiness and Prosperity), August 1984, p. 8.

²¹Ibid.

²²John J. Cogan, "Should the U.S. Mimic Japanese Education? Let's Look Before We Leap," Phi Delta Kappan, March 1984, p. 466.

²³"College Days: Rest and Recuperation," PHP (Peace, Happiness and Prosperity), August 1984, p. 20.

²⁴Rohlen, Japan's High Schools, p. 84.

²⁵Beauchamp, Education in Contemporary Japan, p. 33.

²⁶Rohlen, Japan's High Schools, p. 84.

²⁷Beauchamp, Education in Contemporary Japan, p. 33.

²⁸Rohlen, Japan's High Schools, p. 84.

²⁹Ibid., p. 16.

³⁰Terry Trucco, "The Lucrative Learning Industry," PHP (Peace, Happiness and Prosperity), August 1984, p. 22.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., p. 27.

³³Rohlen, Japan's High Schools, p. 104.

³⁴Ibid., p. 106.

³⁵Uehara, "Rethinking the School System," p. 11.

³⁶Asahi Shinbun (Kumamoto), 6 June 1984.

³⁷Trucco, "The Lucrative Learning Industry," p. 22.

³⁸Ibid., p. 25.

³⁹Beauchamp, "Shiken Jigoku," p. 544.

⁴⁰Ronald S. Anderson, Education in Japan: A Century of Modern Development (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 189.

⁴¹Vogel, Japan as Number One (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1980), p. 159.

⁴²Interview with Mr. Toshimi Yokoyama, former college student, Fukuoka, Japan, July 1984.

⁴³Cogan, "Should U.S. Mimic," pp. 466-467.

⁴⁴"College Days," p. 15.

⁴⁵Iizuka interview, July 1984.

⁴⁶Cogan, "Should U.S. Mimic," p. 467.

⁴⁷Beauchamp, "Shiken Jigoku," p. 551.

⁴⁸Rohlen, Japan's High Schools, p. 81.

⁴⁹Yokoyama interview, July 1984.

⁵⁰Sonoda interview, July 1984.

⁵¹Yokoyama interview, July 1984.

⁵²Interview with Mr. Iwanaga, Dean of Education, Kumamoto University of Commerce, Kumamoto, Japan, July 1984.

⁵³Nakano interview, July 1984.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Entrance examinations lie at the heart of this thriving, multi-island nation and serve as the checkpoint for anyone hoping to advance along the Japanese educational road. Indeed, the Japanese culture has profited greatly over the years from a stable national education system. However, the entrance exam system, though it has reinforced study, has also amassed such power that it has come under increased scrutiny. With only one predominant form of social mobility available in Japan, via the educational system, it is important that many possible avenues for success be made available within that system. But at present, entrance examinations are the only significant avenue provided.

"The weaknesses [of the entrance examination system]," says the Dean of Education at Kyushu University, "are bigger than the merits."¹ Yet the examinations have evolved as such a crucial part of Japanese society that it is extremely difficult to alter the system. The Japanese people, and the way they view mobility in society, are the crux of the entrance examination phenomenon. Consequently, to drastically change or abolish the exam system one

would "have to change the thinking of the entire nation."² Such a process, of course, takes time. But, says one high school principal, "The system is changing little by little."³

The joint testing format, for example, is one visible change that has taken place in attempts to lessen the pressure of "examination hell." In addition, the Japan Socialist Party has been advocating removal of high school entrance examinations, and the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with national universities and high schools, has established a Students' Ability Institute to improve the university entrance examination system.⁴

It is true that since the number of available spaces in leading Japanese universities is limited, the entrance examination system helps to "weed out" the large quantity of students who apply to these schools. But the selection process is tightly limited to review of examination scores. Japan's Ministry of Education does encourage "universities to make effective use of transcripts in order to arrive at a more comprehensive evaluation of applicants' upper secondary school education,"⁵ but as yet, entrance exam scores dominate the basis for admission to junior high schools, high schools, and universities.

Possible improvement areas for the entrance examination system lie not only within the educational network, but within the entire Japanese society. Major companies and government bodies, for example, perpetuate the system

by favoring a relative handful of universities when accepting employees. Naturally, students will continue to aim for the best universities and the education at low-ranking institutions will remain less valued. Moreover, rigid ranking of schools, from junior high schools to colleges, is continually reinforced as top universities hire graduates from their schools to return as professors, and many junior high and high schools continue to put tremendous emphasis on placing their students in the best universities.

Some people, such as Toshimi Yokoyama, feel the entrance examination system has the potential to play a more positive role in Japan. "The entrance exam system can work," says Toshimi, a former Japanese college student who has also attended college in the United States, "provided that it encourages the majority of people to study more, instead of frustrating the majority of people."⁶ But others, as voiced by the Japan Teachers Union, urge the elimination of the exam system altogether:

. . . [the] present day system of conducting entrance examinations for admission to universities has aggravated [the] entire phase of Japan's education, particularly upper and lower secondary education, and even primary and kindergarten education. . . . Many plans have been worked out with an aim to improve the situation, particularly regarding subjects of examinations. Such improvements, however, are far from effective in solving the problem, because they only help to divert the people's attention from the very cause of the problem. . . . The present entrance examination system should be abolished, and universities, as an organic part of youth education, should be open for all young people who desire to enter them and are considered as qualified.⁷

Many Japanese people voice concern over the entrance examination system, but at the same time are willing to accept it. An attitude of shikata ga nai [translated roughly as "it can't be helped"] toward "examination hell" pervades the Japanese people.⁸ They recognize the inherent harms of the system, but are so caught up in it themselves that they are willing to accept the negative consequences.

Shichihei Yamamoto, a Japanese social critic and author, summarily expresses the state to which the entrance examination system has carried itself:

The system as it stands, has served Japan well. It has provided Japan the national strength to surge ahead economically. But, what is needed now is something that will serve the future of our country well.⁹

In other words, while the entrance examination system has stimulated Japan's economic growth by providing the business sector with ample working minds, it has failed to meet the human needs of the Japanese people.

NOTES

¹Interview with Mr. Yoshio Gondo, Dean of Faculty of Education, Kyushu University, Fukuoka, Japan, July 1984.

²Interview with Mr. Iwanaga, Dean of Education, Kumamoto University of Commerce, Kumamoto, Japan, July 1984.

³Interview with Mr. Sonoda, Shodai High School Principal, Kumamoto, Japan, July 1984.

⁴Victor N. Kobayashi, "Japan's Examination Hell," Education Forum 28 (November 1983): 23.

⁵Educational Affairs Study Group, Education in Japan ("About Japan" Series 8) (Tokyo: Kinji Kawamura, May 1978), p. 17.

⁶Interview with Mr. Toshimi Yokoyama, former college student, Fukuoka, Japan, July 1984.

⁷Nobuo Shimahara, Adaptation and Education in Japan (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1979), p. 86.

⁸Kobayashi, "Japan's Examination Hell," p. 23.

⁹Michael Uehara, "Rethinking the School System," PHP (Peace, Happiness and Prosperity), August 1984, p. 13.

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