Foreign Desk; A

**JAPAN'S SCHOOLS: EXAM ORDEAL RULES EACH STUDENT'S DESTINY**

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TOKYO -- American students, by and large, take examinations to get out of school. Japanese take them to get in. One result is that once Japanese students get to college, they can relax. Their life bears little resemblance to the regimen of lectures, seminars, exams and papers that are the pattern in the United States. "We are supposed to spend two hours preparing for every hour of class," said Masato Koiso, a 20-year-old sophomore at Sophia University here, "but nobody does that. This is the only time that you can take it easy and enjoy life."

"You sleep late, and you play a lot of mah-jongg," agreed Motoharu Saito, a graduate student at Sophia. In Japan, what is most important is not what a student learns in college but which college he goes to, and that is determined entirely by the score he makes on a one-day battery of tests.

This basic fact of life - that every Japanese child who has any hope of going to college must face crucial, detailed, impartial tests of his or her basic academic knowledge - defines what is taught in Japanese schools, shapes the extracurricular activities and determines the way Japanese children spend their free time. There is nothing comparable in the American system of education.

Most colleges and universities in the United States require applicants to take either the Scholastic Aptitude Test or the American College Testing Program examinations, but high school grades and other factors ranging from extracurricular achievements to athletic ability are usually more important criteria for admission to college.

It would be unheard of in the United States for a high school graduate who did poorly on the college boards to go a cram school for a year just so he could make a better score. In Japan, however, one out of six youngsters just out of high school does exactly that, and some of them go for several years. They are called "ronin," which literally means a masterless samurai warrior.

One of them is Atsushi Shiraishi. At the age of 18, he graduated from high school in March with high hopes of going on to study architecture at Waseda or Tokyo Kogyo Universities. He failed both entrance examinations, however, so he is preparing to try again.

Mr. Shiraishi lives in the dormitory of the Yoyogi Seminar, a private cram school, with other unsuccessful university applicants, their parents having paid $4,000 for a year of intense preparation for next year's exams. They attend lectures six days a week and virtually give up social life in order to devote all their time to memorizing vast amounts of material.

"I often get tired," Mr. Shiraishi conceded, "but I have to keep it up because I want to enter a first-choice university." Strain on Parents and Children

The inevitable anxiety over how to prepare for the examinations that loom in the future puts strains on Japanese parents and children. In extreme cases, the so-called "examination hell" has led to suicides by students who failed.

Furthermore, the examination system has spawned a multibillion dollar industry of private cram schools, practice examinations, correspondence courses and drill books that supplement the public school system.

"It's almost impossible to get into college without some kind of extra work," said Yuko Inome, a 16-year-old student at Mukogawa Girls High School in Osaka. "It's not enough to rely on what you learn in school."

Japanese students take exams not only to get into college, but also into high school. Japanese students attend heterogeneous elementary and junior high schools, but after the ninth grade, they are funneled into senior high schools of varying quality. Junior high school grades and teacher recommendations play a role in determining who will get into the best high schools and vocational schools, but the most important element is the student's score on the examinations that each school administers to prospective students. Test Score Is Sole Criterion

Then, in the senior year of high school students again compete through examinations to get into the best possible university. The test score is the sole criterion for who is accepted and who is not.

The most desirable employers, such as prestigious Government ministries and large corporations, recruit from a limited number of top public and private universities.
"In Japan, a large part of your success in life depends on which university you went to," said Yasuaki Takemura, vice president of the Yoyogi Seminar school. "It's a passport you have to have, and the race to get it starts early in life."

The Scholastic Aptitude Test in the United States is designed to measure relatively broad verbal and mathematical reasoning skills. In Japan, however, examinations are designed in keeping with the Confucian tradition that education is essentially the conveying of factual knowledge. Multiple-Choice Questions

The examinations pose multiple-choice or other short-answer questions to which there is a single correct solution. "Interpretive skills are not tested," said Thomas P. Rohlen, an American expert on Japanese high schools. "But skills in natural science problem-solving are important, and the degree of detailed knowledge required is astounding. The exams are the kind for which a capacity to grind away at preparation for years makes a difference. Intelligence is important, but self-discipline and will power are equally essential."

A recent examination for Tokyo University, for instance, contained the following question on world history: "Mohammed's younger cousin and son-in-law Ali became caliph in 656. That was because: (a) The caliph was elected in those days. (b) The caliph was succeeded on a hereditary system corresponding to father-son succession in those days. (c) Ali defeated former caliph Uthman in the Battle of Camel." Students aspiring to join the elite ranks of Tokyo University alumni should have known that the correct answer was (a). Stress Put on Factual Material

Such questions define the content of the curriculum in Japanese schools from the elementary level on. Schools focus almost entirely on the subjects covered by examinations - Japanese, mathematics, social studies, science and English - and the goal of lectures is to convey as much of the factual material that might appear on some future examination as possible.

Many of the better high schools rush through the prescribed curriculum in two years and then devote the entire senior year to a review of old examinations and related materials.

In the United States "computer literacy" is coming to be viewed as a major objective of public schools from the earliest grades. In Japan, however, despite the country's emphasis on production of computers, they are conspicuously absent from the classroom. That is because there are no questions about computers on entrance examinations.

Public schools routinely require students to give up athletics and other after-school activities when they reach the critical ninth and twelfth grades. Teachers inevitably view the success or failure of their students on such examinations as a measure of their own effectiveness.

Students who do not pass entrance examinations or for other reasons do not go on to college often attend public or private technical schools in fields ranging from cosmetology to fishing, and some of them have entrance examinations. Role of the 'Education Mother'

The competition inherent in a system where a child's entire future prospects can be determined by his or her performance on a single morning and afternoon produces anxiety for the whole family.

The most obvious expression of this is a phenomenon known as the "kyoiku mama," or "education mother," known for her aggressiveness in pushing her children, especially boys, toward higher educational achievements.

"Japanese fathers work long hours and come home late, and they abdicate many responsibilities to their wives," said Nobuo Shimahara, a professor at Rutgers University. "In this kind of setting, women tend to identify themselves with their children more closely than with their husbands in terms of interaction and expectations."

Noriko Oonishi, who lives in Tokyo and whose husband, Tadashi, is the general manager of a shipping concern, is one Japanese mother who takes her education duties seriously. "A child doesn't have the intelligence to know what schools are good and bad," she explained. "It is my responsibility to encourage them to study hard and get into a good high school."

Both Sons in Private Schools

The Oonishis have two sons, Tomoyuki, who is 16 and a junior in high school, and Takayuki, who is 12 and in his first year in junior high school. Both are in private schools that required the passing of entrance examinations, and both began attending an after-school juku, or cram school for high school entrance examinations, in the fourth grade.

Takayuki, for example, was enrolled in the Tokyo Noritsu juku, which itself required an examination for admittance and which focused its program upon practice tests every Sunday morning. When it turned out that her son was not doing particularly well on these tests, Mrs. Oonishi enrolled him in another juku that specializes in preparing students for the Tokyo Noritsu practice tests.

She estimated the extra cost of preparing her sons for private school at $1,000 for the older boy and $3,500 for the younger. "If a child's ability is less, you have to pay more," she commented.

"Americans go to the Boy Scouts, Japanese go to jukus," declared Karoku Itoh, vice president of the Tokyo Gakuen juku. Cram School Provides Friends

The effects that jukus have on Japanese children is a matter of considerable debate. Some children, like Toshihiko Nishioka, a sixth grader who attends the Tokyo Gakuen juku several times a week, clearly enjoy it. "I like coming here because I have lots of friends," he said.

Mrs. Oonishi said that while her sons lost much of their free time during their upper elementary school years, she felt good about their situation. Since both learned enough to gain entrance to private junior high schools that guarantee admission to
an affiliated high school, they will not have had to go through the "examination hell" as ninth graders.

Others, however, have reservations about a system that requires many students to devote so many of their childhood hours to memorization.

Masajiro Shimamura, who lives in the Tokyo suburb of Hachioji, said that he and his wife Kazumi were "in a dilemma" regarding their 12-year old daughter, Kyoko, who is in the seventh grade. "She loves to read books, and if we send her to a juku, then she will have to give up a lot of her reading time," he said. "The juku is not education. It is training to pass an exam. We want her to have a liberal education." Correspondence Courses Used

Thus far the Shimamuras' solution has been to subscribe to correspondence courses that provide exercises each month for Kyoko to do in her spare time. The father conceded, though, that by the time she reaches the ninth grade a juku will become "a necessary evil."

"We don't encourage students to go to jukus," said Noboru Matsumoto, principal of the Uchikoshi Junior High School in Hachioji, who estimates that two-thirds of his students do so anyway. "The students go to cram schools until 9 or 10 in the evening, and they still have their homework to do. Some don't get to bed until midnight, and the next morning they are sleepy."

Lou-Anne Wesler, an American who spent two years teaching in Japanese schools, said that she had observed a "real difference" in students as they approached the time for high school entrance examinations.

"Seventh graders are enthusiastic kids," she said. "By the time they reach ninth grade, there is a heaviness that Americans don't have. They become dead-faced. You teach, and there's no response." Exams Are Public Ritual

Examinations are public ritual. In contrast to the United States, where colleges inform students of their admissions decisions by private letter, students and their families learn of their academic fate by scanning bulletin boards on which the names of successful and unsuccessful applicants are posted.

There are exceptions to the general rule that Japanese college students basically relax for four years. Engineering students or those in Tokyo University planning to take the examination for a job in the Foreign or the Finance Ministry, for instance, study quite hard.

But generally, according to Tadashi Yamamoto, director of the Japan Center for International Exchange, college in Japan "represents four years of tremendous waste of human resources." Critics argue that the low level of academic work during the undergraduate years undermines the overall quality of the Japanese education system.

Japanese companies generally do not view this as a problem. Since they can usually count on keeping the new employees for their entire careers, the companies invest heavily in training them for the skills the companies need. "Business firms want fresh people," said Yasuo Sakakibara, a professor of economics at Doshisha University in Kyoto. "If they need somebody who can work a computer or speak Spanish, then they assign them to spend three months learning computers or Spanish." The Rich Have the Advantage

There is a paradox in the role of private jukus, cram schools and other facilities that have been estimated to gross $10 billion a year, or $1 for every $7 spent on education.

One of the basic goals of the examination system was to put bright but poor students on an equal footing with the sons and daughters of the privileged. Instead, youngsters whose parents have the means to purchase educational services outside the public schools have an enormous advantage in competition for admission to the best colleges and universities.

Mr. Rohlen, the American expert on Japanese education, calculated that between 1961 and 1974 the number of students from the poorest two-fifths of the population who gained admission to such universities dropped to 27 percent from 40 percent. Over the same period, the number of students at prestigious universities from the wealthiest fifth of the population increased to 34 percent from 26 percent.

NEXT: What Americans can borrow from the Japanese.

Illustrations: photo of Atsushi Shiraishi (page A8)

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