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Derek L. Burleson, Series Editor
Education in Contemporary Japan
by Edward R. Beauchamp
This fastback is sponsored by the Broward County Florida Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa through a generous contribution by one of its members, Miss Bessie Gabbard.
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Introduction

Japan—a semi-feudal society in 1868, victorious over Imperial Russia in 1905, a devastated empire at the end of World War II—today is both our rival as a world economic power and our strongest ally in Asia. What accounts for this phoenix-like rise, this extraordinary post-war recovery? To understand Japan's remarkable achievement over the past century, we must consider the role of education in mobilizing this energetic, intelligent, and ambitious people.

Contemporary Japan is intensely education-oriented and places a high premium on formal education. This is, in part, a legacy of traditional influences, (primarily Confucian), which emphasized the importance of literacy and book learning and the resulting moral insights as the basis for the ruling class. That the Japanese spend over 12% of their national budget on education but only 7.7% on the military is indicative of the priority given to education. The U.S., on the other hand, spends seven times as much on military expenditures as it does on elementary and secondary education. Whereas functional illiteracy is a major problem in the U.S., in Japan, virtually no one fails to learn to read and write—no small achievement in that Japanese is considered one of the most difficult languages to learn.

Official Ministry of Education figures show that in 1976, 92% of all students completing the required nine years of compulsory education continued their studies at the upper secondary level (including first through third years of technical college). In 1975, 97% of those students entering high school completed it as opposed to only 79% of their American counterparts. Today there are more than 1,000 institutions of higher education in Japan with over two million students in attendance. This means that more than 40% of Japan's youth are enrolled in some form of higher education.
The Japanese are voracious readers. A short ride on any commuter train or subway will impress an observer with the very high percentage of passengers reading newspapers, magazines, and books. The quality of these materials varies widely, but the fact remains that the Japanese are a reading people. A recent study reported that Japan’s daily newspaper circulation is 550 per 1,000 population, second only to Sweden’s 574 per 1,000. The total circulation figures of Japanese newspapers are the envy of American publishers. Japan’s three leading newspapers, the Asahi, Yomiuri, and Mainichi have a total morning edition circulation of more than 16 million. These same papers also publish evening editions with approximately one-half the morning circulation figures. In contrast, the largest U.S. newspaper is the New York Daily News with a circulation of 1.9 million, followed by the New York Times and Washington Post with circulations of 841,000 and 514,000 respectively.

The figures for book publishing are only slightly less impressive. In 1976 over 36,000 titles were published in Japan, a figure exceeded only by the United States and the Soviet Union, which have much larger populations. Japan’s periodicals number almost 10,000 and range from high quality intellectual journals to pulp pornography. Circulation figures are often astounding; for example, about 1,400 monthly magazines are published with a total circulation of well over 90 million copies!

While Americans debate the merits of the “back-to-basics” movement, Japanese youngsters achieve superior academic results as reflected in their performance on the International Evaluation of Educational Achievement Tests. Japanese students ranked among the world’s best in both the mathematics and science portions. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that the typical Japanese high school graduate is better informed, not only about international affairs but also about American history, than is his American counterpart. In fact, many Japanese businessmen and diplomats stationed in the United States prefer to leave their families in Japan so that their children will receive the academic skills needed to compete successfully for a place in a prestigious Japanese university, which is the “escalator” to success.

Despite this glowing picture, it would be a mistake to conclude that
Japan is an educational utopia. The Japanese are concerned about decline in standards, growing anti-social attitudes among young people, the deleterious effects of shiken jigoku ("examination hell"), and the power of the leftist and militant Nikkyoso (Japanese Teachers Union)—problems not uncommon to other industrial societies. On balance, however, it would be hard to disagree with former U.S. Ambassador to Japan and Harvard historian Edwin Reischauer's comment that "Nothing, in fact, is more central to Japanese society or more basic to Japan's success than its educational system."

This fastback provides a historical perspective for understanding Japanese education today, describes its structure and organization, and discusses those factors that are at once its strength and the source of its problems.
Japanese Education—A Brief History

Japan’s success in rebuilding its shattered society after World War II is usually attributed to its excellent educational system. It is important to recognize, however, that this educational system did not spring full-blown after 1945 but evolved over several centuries and particularly since the Tokugawa Period (1603-1868). Recent Western scholarship has revealed the important contributions of Tokugawa education to Japan’s modern development.

Roots of Modern Japanese Education

The Confucian system of thought, which dominated Tokugawa Japan, placed a high priority on learning. Learning, benevolence, justice, courtesy and individual integrity were the five classic virtues of Confucianism. Tokugawa education was class-based, and the samurai (warrior) class were expected to be men of learning as well as of war. The founder of the regime, Tokugawa Ieyasu, in 1615 issued a law declaring that the “arts of peace,” i.e. learning, and the “arts of war” were of equal importance and both must be mastered. The government, therefore, supported educational institutions for samurai children throughout most of the period. The capstone of this early educational system was a Confucian college, the so-called Shoheiko, established in Tokyo in 1630.

The content of samurai education can best be described as a combination of moral education and vocational education, i.e. the study of Confucian classics to develop moral character and the acquisition of the skills needed to serve in the government. By the 1860s this curriculum was found in more than 300 schools throughout the Japanese archipelago.
The education of commoners received the encouragement, if not the financial support, of the Tokugawa government, which believed that people steeped in the Confucian view of the morality contributed to a harmonious society. However, the education received by those commoners who attended terakoya (temple schools) was rudimentary and practical.

Ronald Dore, perhaps the leading student of Tokugawa education, points to the relatively high literacy rate of Japan at the time of the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and suggests that it compared favorably with the "developed nations" of the day. Most important, the Japanese people had learned "how to learn" and were psychologically prepared to advance rapidly once the country was opened up and Western ideas and practices flooded the country. In a neat phrase, Dore suggests that by 1868 the Japanese were "not just a sack of potatoes."

After 1868, Japan wholeheartedly accepted Western learning and became enthusiastically committed to modernization. The national goal, under the leadership of a small handful of oligarchs cleverly using the imperial symbol to legitimate their actions, became a "strong army and a wealthy nation." Education played a paramount role in attaining this goal.

With the promulgation of the landmark "Imperial Charter Oath of 1868," the young Meiji Emperor decreed that "Knowledge shall be sought throughout the world." Implementing this charge took two major forms. The first was the dispatch of hundreds of young Japanese students to England, France, Germany, and the U.S. to learn the "secrets" of Western technology and production. The second was the invitation, at premium salaries, of several thousand oyatoi gairokujin, or foreign employees, whose task it was to teach the Japanese to help establish a wide variety of institutions, from the founding of a mint to the construction of railroads, from the writing of a constitution to the introduction of modern agricultural methods.

A highly centralized Ministry of Education was established in 1871 and a liberal "Fundamental Code of Education" was promulgated the following year. The ambitious plan was to divide the country into eight university districts, each subdivided into 32 middle school districts, which in turn were divided into 210 primary school districts. The
organizational structure, based on the French model, was never fully implemented for financial and other reasons, but it is important because it clearly illustrates the new government’s strong commitment to public education as a means of development. By 1893, more than 13,000 elementary schools were in operation, and 46% of elementary age boys and 17% of elementary age girls were in attendance.

The curriculum of Meiji era schools reflected American educational practices. A Japanese mission to the West, the Iwakura Embassy of 1872, spent much time observing American schools and were so impressed with the ideas of Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, Calvin Stow and others that they adopted the U.S. elementary school model for Japan. They even went so far as to employ David Murray of Rutgers University as their National Superintendent of Education from 1873-1878.

There exists in Japan today a kind of Colonial Williamsburg, called Meiji Mura, whose artifacts include a restoration of an 1875 school house with a classroom identical to what one would have found in Boston at the time. Even American style textbooks were used in many of the schools until Japanese texts could be written and published.

The year 1880 marked the end of the American educational approach and the beginning of a more conservative and nationalistic approach. A formal nationalist-oriented course in moral education (shushin) was introduced to the curriculum; and the Ministry of Education began its control over textbook adoption, which was to last until 1945. The more conservative German pedagogical thought, especially that of Herbart, came into vogue; and the number of foreign employees was drastically slashed as Japanese finished their overseas schooling and returned home to take over jobs for which they had been trained.

The early Meiji liberal approach ended and would not again play an important role, except for a brief period in the 1920s, until after Japan’s crushing defeat in World War II. The new educational order was accurately reflected in the 1890 “Imperial Rescript on Education,” which served as the legal and moral underpinning for more than half a century. The importance of this document is such that it is worth quoting at length.
Our Imperial Ancestors have founded Our Empire on a basis broad and everlasting and have deeply and firmly implanted virtue. Our subjects ever united in loyalty and filial piety have from generation to generation illustrated the beauty thereof. This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire, and herein lies the source of Our education. Ye. Our Subjects, be filial to your parents, affectionate to your brothers and sisters; as husbands and wives be harmonious, as friends true; bear yourselves in modesty and moderation; extend your benevolence to all; pursue learning and cultivate arts, and thereby develop intellectual faculties and perfect moral powers; furthermore advance public good and promote common interest; always respect the Constitution and observe the laws; should emergency arise, offer yourselves courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coequal with heaven and earth. So shall ye not only be Our good and faithful subjects, but render illustrious the best traditions of your forefathers.

The core of pre-World War II Japanese education was the shushin course. The contents of its textbooks were firmly grounded in the assumptions of the Imperial Rescript quoted above. Nationalism and militarism were the offspring of this curriculum. During the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, for example, Japanese patriotism was stressed in every subject. The imperial declaration of war, the exploits of Japanese troops, the meaning of duty, and the need for sacrifice on the home front were the focus of learning. Science and mathematics teachers used lessons revolving around torpedos, submarines, carrier pigeons, and other war-related topics. Military marches were heard in the music classes throughout the country.

The end of hostilities in 1905, however, did not signal an end to nationalistic education. Although the 1920s did see a brief spurt of interest in American progressive educational thought, especially the ideas of John Dewey who visited the country in 1920, the major approach of Japanese education remained nationalistic. In 1925 a "Peace Preservation Law" was passed to ensure that the people would not be infected by leftist ideas; and a Special Thought Police was created to enforce it. In 1938 the military completed its takeover of the educational system with the appointment of General Araki Sadae as Minister of Education.

The schools continued to teach children to read and to write effec-
tively, to acquire basic knowledge and skills; creative thought was not only rare, it was dangerous. An American teacher who lived and taught in pre-war Japan concluded that Japanese schools produced "willing, efficient workers in a smoothly operating industrial machine."

The Transformation of Japanese Education

When the Pacific War ended in August, 1945, the Japanese Empire lay in ruins. Almost 2,000,000 Japanese were dead and millions were wounded. Suffering was extensive, but no single group suffered more than the young. An American estimate of conditions on the day of surrender found 18,000,000 students idle, over 4,000 schools destroyed, thousands more heavily damaged, and a severe shortage of teachers and teaching materials. Available teachers had to be screened for militaristic leanings, and most available textbooks were unsuitable because they were full of militaristic propaganda.

The mandate of General Douglas MacArthur was to implement the provisions of the 1945 Potsdam Proclamation, which declared that "There must be eliminated for all time the authority and influence of those who have deceived and misled the people of Japan into embarking on world conquest." The major goals of MacArthur's command were, therefore, the demilitarization, democratization, and decentralization of Japanese society.

The initial phase of MacArthur's educational reform efforts was highly authoritarian. A Civil Information and Education (CI&E) section was created by the Supreme Commander Allied Powers (SCAP) to work closely with the highly centralized Ministry of Education. The Americans issued directives and the Japanese used the existing governmental structure to carry them out.

Between September and December 1945 SCAP promulgated four sweeping educational policy directives, which essentially cleared away most of the foundation of pre-war education. These directives re-oriented Japanese education from militaristic to democratic ends, provided a framework for purging teachers with "militaristic and ultra-nationalistic" tendencies, abolished State Shinto, and suspended all courses in morals, geography, and history that had served as the primary instruments of nationalistic indoctrination. On 1 January 1946
the Emperor issued an Imperial Rescript denying his divinity and endorsing the principles of the 1868 Charter Oath, which had served as the basis for educational modernization during the early Meiji period.

The end of this initial phase of educational reform was marked by the arrival of a U.S. Education Mission in March 1946. This high-level delegation of 27 American educators, led by George Stoddard, New York Commissioner of Education and president-elect of the University of Illinois, was charged with assisting the Japanese in designing an educational system for peace-time Japan. The mission spent the better part of a month in Japan studying educational conditions and problems, meeting with educational bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education as well as with teachers and school principals, and viewing firsthand a wide variety of educational institutions. Their report, delivered directly to General MacArthur, touched on nearly every aspect of Japanese education and served as a framework for its reform.

Among the report’s major recommendations were the decentralization of Japanese education “in order that teachers may be freed to develop professionally,” the introduction of an American-style 6-3-3 educational structure with the first nine years compulsory and free, the substitution of social studies for moral education, a greater emphasis on physical and vocational education at all levels, the encouragement of adult education and modern methods of guidance, the transformation of teacher education by integrating it into four-year universities, and the Romanization of written Japanese. The most controversial of these recommendations, written language reform, was the only one not embraced by the Japanese.

General MacArthur warmly endorsed the work of the U.S. Education Mission and encouraged the implementation of its recommendations. The mission’s call for decentralization was especially attractive to SCAP because of the widely held view that Japan’s highly centralized education system was responsible for the indoctrination of pre-war and wartime Japanese youth. Following the American tenet that local control of schools is a characteristic of democracy, the Japanese decentralized their system in 1948 by popular election of American-style school boards. The following year legislation was passed that stripped the Ministry of Education of most of its power and confined its activi-
ties to advising, gathering data, and conducting research studies. The system of school inspection was scrapped, and the practice of tight centralized control over school textbooks was modified but not abandoned. Finally, teachers were encouraged to unionize, and hundreds of thousands did so, making Nikkyoso (Japan Teachers Union/ JTI) a powerful force.

After the 1952 peace treaty restored Japan’s sovereignty and ended the Occupation, the government began to modify and, in some cases, reject many of the educational reforms imposed during the preceding seven years. Over the next two decades the Japanese made efforts to trim back the more objectionable reforms and to make the remainder take root in Japanese soil. This process is usually referred to as a “Reverse Course;” some have charged that it was a reversion to the “bad old days.” Although it is undoubtedly true that Japanese education became more conservative, the new political and social context of post-war Japan made a reversion to pre-war days unlikely. For one thing, the new Japan Teachers Union, although not strong enough to get their way on all issues, possessed enough political muscle to force the Ministry of Education to compromise on most issues. As the Ministry’s bureaucrats fought to regain their pre-war preeminence, they were opposed every step of the way by the JTU and its allies in the Socialist and Communist parties.

Gradually, however, the pendulum began to swing back to what critics call a conservative system of education or, perhaps, “a more Japanese” system. In the 20 years following the peace treaty, elected boards of education were replaced with appointed boards; the textbook selection system was tightened thus restoring much of the Ministry’s control over curriculum content; and a less objectionable morals course was reinstated with popular support.

Although not without its defects, the American role in reshaping postwar Japanese education was generally a positive one. The Occupation purged the worst of the militaristic teachers and administrators and created a check on the power of the Ministry of Education for the first time in the history of modern Japan. In addition, it provided a model of one type of democratic education that is still the basic framework of education in Japan. The Occupation also opened Japan
to fresh educational thought, including Marxist and antidemocratic ideas, that Japan had not known since the 1920s. One of the most notable achievements of the Occupation was probably the opening of educational opportunities to the single largest minority group in Japan—its women. The Occupation laid down the legal principles for the emancipation of Japanese women; and the American-imposed Constitution of 1947 provided a guarantee of equality of the sexes that is still not found in the U.S. Constitution in 1982. As a result, the numbers of women pursuing higher education and entering the professions in Japan has increased fairly rapidly.
The Structure of Japanese Education

Until the end of World War II Japanese education was characterized by a multi-track system, which prepared the mass of young people for productive labor and a handful of the more able for positions of leadership and privilege. Contemporary Japanese education, however, is a legacy of both the American Occupation's educational reforms and the post-1952 reactions to some of these reforms. In 1946, for example, the Japanese accepted the single track 6-3-3 American organizational structure, but after the Americans left, modified it to include three tracks at the high school level.

The Japanese School Year

The school year begins on April 1 and ends on March 31 of the following year. Elementary and junior high schools generally operate on a trimester system—April to mid-July, September to late-December, and January to the end of March. Some high schools use the trimester plan, while others operate on the semester system. Japanese youth have shorter vacations than U.S. students, typically four to six weeks from mid-July through August. However, many schools assign substantial projects to be completed during this period.

By the end of grade six Japanese children have attended school more than a year longer than American children due to Saturday morning classes and shorter vacation periods. Although some variations occur, most schools are in session from 240 to 250 days annually, compared with typical 180-day school year in the U.S. This means that the Japanese are in school about 25% longer each year.

Fig. 1 shows the structure of the Japanese educational system.
Kindergarten

An optional but increasingly popular first rung on the educational ladder, the kindergarten provides one- to three-year courses for chil-
dren beginning at age 3. In 1979, 64% of the 3 to 5 age group were in attendance. Even though approximately 70% of all kindergartens are private, they must meet standards established by the Ministry of Education based on the advice of a national School Curriculum Council. The six areas of study in kindergarten classes throughout Japan are health, society, nature, language, music, and art. An alternative to kindergarten is the day nursery, which has a similar program but is operated by the Ministry of Welfare.

The school day usually begins at 8:30 a.m. with a free play period with relatively little teacher supervision, although the teacher may help children construct castles and sculptures in the sandbox, play with them on the slide or other outdoor equipment, or participate in a myriad of other activities. The major difference between Japanese and American teachers at this level is that the Japanese actively participate with the children rather than just supervise them.

The free play period ends in mid-morning. After a restroom break, a morning assembly is common where the principal greets the children, the school song is sung, or a circle dancing game is played. This is followed by more formal schoolwork directed by the teacher. A half-hour or so of free play follows lunch, and after a few moments to put away their things and clean the room, the children go home at 1:00 p.m.

Elementary School

Every child who has passed his sixth birthday is required to attend six years of elementary school. The aims of elementary schooling contained in the School Education Law of 1947 stress the cultivation of a spirit of cooperation; a knowledge of local and national traditions; a spirit of international understanding; an understanding of and ability to use language, mathematics, and science; and an appreciation of music, art, and literature.

The school day for elementary children usually lasts from 8:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. with the youngest children attending only in the morning. The prescribed elementary curriculum includes Japanese language, social studies, mathematics, science, music, art, home economics (last two years only), physical education, and an hour a week of moral education. Although the term "moral education" reminds one of the pre-
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| Total hours per week | 24 | 25 | 27 | 29 | 31 | 31 |

**Fig. 2. Weekly schedule of subjects taught in elementary schools**


War, ultra-nationalistic approach, today's version is tame by comparison, more closely resembling our own "values" education.

Fig. 2 shows the weekly schedule of classes in a typical elementary school.

Depending on the grade level, anywhere from 20-35% of a student's time is devoted to the mastery of the Japanese language. The Ministry of Education prescribes 1,850 Kanji (ideographs) as essential for everyday communication, 881 of which are expected to be mastered during the six years of elementary school.

Elementary teachers in Japan place great emphasis on students doing careful work and developing cooperative behaviors. This emphasis on group cooperation rather than individualism reflects...
Japan's general societal values and lays the foundation for attitudes and behavior expected at higher levels of schooling. For example, even young children are expected to clean up their classrooms and to take turns serving lunch. Generally, they are far more responsible than American children toward their school environment. This sense of responsibility translates into substantial savings for Japanese schools because there is less need for the custodial support than is common in American schools. By the end of elementary school the vast majority of children have internalized traits of self-discipline and cooperation, while at the same time absorbing great amounts of information.

Junior High School
At about age 12 the typical Japanese student enters the final phase of compulsory schooling—the three-year lower secondary or junior high school. These students generally wear a distinguishing uniform—boys in dark blue high-collared jackets with brass buttons and school insignia, set off by a visored cap. Girls wear navy blue skirts and blouses, but change into white each June. These uniforms are worn proudly because they confer a sense of identity and a measure of status upon the student.

The organization of secondary level classrooms is very traditional. The teacher is the center of the learning process and lectures from a dais at the front of the room. Students sit in straight rows of desks and take careful notes. Class discussion is not common. Upon the arrival of the teacher in the morning, all rise and bow. Students also rise and stand next to their desks to recite. Most teachers are careful to follow the textbook since they feel it contains the information considered important by the people constructing entrance examinations.

The curriculum prescribed by the Ministry of Education allows few deviations (see Fig. 3) and is officially geared to enable the junior high graduate to become an effective and useful member of society. An unspoken but ever present objective, however, is to prepare those who wish eventually to take entrance examinations for institutions of higher education. In this regard, it is common for most junior high school boys and an increasing number of girls to begin to attend the ubiquitous “supplementary” schools that specialize in examination
### Required subjects

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<td>Health and physical education</td>
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<td>Industrial arts (Home-making)</td>
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### Total number of hours

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**Fig. 3. Standard weekly number of school hours for junior high schools**


preparation. There are also other kinds of supplementary schools for this age level that specialize in cultural pursuits such as calligraphy, playing musical instruments, and tea ceremony.

An important part of the school life at all levels of Japanese pre-university education are field trips or class excursions. A major excur-
sion normally occurs at the end of both elementary and junior high school. The typical ninth grader looks forward to the class visit to a historic or scenic location in the spring, prior to graduation. This trip, about a week long, is planned up to a year in advance; and families lay aside money on a regular basis to finance it. Costs are kept low so all students may participate. In hardship cases the local PTA usually intervenes to ensure full participation. In addition to its educational value, class excursions serve other important purposes; they often act as a social glue that ties classmates together in lifelong friendship. Indeed, it is common for many adults to reminisce about these trips through tear-filled eyes.

High School

Upon completion of compulsory education some youngsters go into the workplace, but the vast majority proceed to high school. There are three basic types of high schools available to the junior high school graduate: full-time, part-time, and correspondence. The full-time course is three years duration, and the part-time and correspondence options are at least four years long. Less than 6% of the high school students choose to attend part-time courses (usually at night) or take correspondence classes.

Approximately 36% of the full-time high schools are comprehensive, that is, they offer both academic and vocational tracks. Because of higher prestige, most students opt for the academic track, even though they may not plan to attend university. In practice, the academic course is both college preparatory and terminal, depending on the student’s plans.

The most common type of comprehensive high school offers students an academic track, plus one vocational track. The first year is devoted to general education for all. In the second year the university bound students begin their specialization—humanities and social science, or science and technology. Fig. 4 illustrates the studies required of the college preparatory high school student.

The full-time high schools with only an academic track make up 40% of the total. Those with only a specialized vocational track make up 24% of the total. The vocational track is designed to provide ap-
<table>
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propriate training for those youth who have decided on a specific vocational field, such as agriculture, commercial, domestic arts, fine arts, fishing, and others.

The part-time high schools utilize regular high school facilities and teachers but usually take four or more years to complete because they are often conducted at night. Correspondence education is also geared toward full-time workers, but has traditionally been held in low esteem by the public.

Junior colleges have grown rapidly in Japan. Almost 500 junior colleges throughout the country offer two- to three-year programs in such diverse fields as agriculture, humanities, kindergarten education, auto mechanics, literature, food processing, cosmetology, photography, electronics, and many more.

Education for Women

One of the more interesting facts about junior colleges is that 85 to 90% of their enrollment are women. A junior college education for women is generally seen as good preparation for marriage. It is widely believed that a national or highly prestigious private university is not a suitable choice for females since it greatly reduces the number of possible marriage partners from which to choose. It is considered unseemly for a male to marry a woman who attended a "better" university than he attended. Therefore, many women, despite high ability levels, are likely to attend a women's college that is not as academically rigorous, but is known to cultivate "good wives and wise mothers." The one bright spot for the female in this context is that she is not faced with the same kind of "examination hell" pressure as her male counterparts.

Other Educational Options

Other kinds of schools in Japan offer additional educational options for students. Technical colleges in a number of engineering fields admit students after graduation from junior high school and offer five-year courses that combine three years of high school with two years of post-high school education. There are also special training schools to improve the job skills and to raise the level of general education. These so-called miscellaneous schools provide young people
with vocational and practical training in such diverse fields as book-keeping, cooking, automobile repair, dressmaking, computer programming, typing, etc. The admission standards vary from school to school, and the length of program varies from three months to a year or longer. In addition to these kinds of schools many business and industrial firms operate their own extensive and sophisticated educational and training programs.

Japanese attitudes about the importance of education combined with the wide variety of educational choices available have earned Japan its reputation as a "learning society." Not content with this, however, the government continues to experiment in a number of areas, from preschool through media-assisted correspondence courses and schools specially designed to re-integrate into Japanese society a significant number of young people whose elementary or secondary education was outside of Japan.
Examinations—Life Determiners

Each year children, age 12 to 18, and in their final years of either elementary, lower, or upper secondary schools, begin intensive preparation for the entrance examinations for the next level on the educational ladder. These examinations determine where they will go the next academic year and indeed, for some, whether they will even continue in school. The examination “season” in Japan is February and March. During this time, thousands of students are put to the test that will not only determine their educational future but also their lifetime career.

Professor Ezra Vogel, author of Japan as No. 1: Lessons for America, has commented that “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.” Therefore, students who desire to compete for admission to university find that they must start preparing for the examinations at the lower secondary level, or earlier. The examination competition is reflected in the Japanese saying, “Four hours sleep, pass; five hours sleep, fail”—that is, every extra moment a young person devotes to exam preparation, the greater the chance of success. A newspaper article described a high school student who spent all day at school, slept three hours a night, and studied the rest of the time. When he was advised by a physician that the best hours to sleep were from 10 p.m. to 3 a.m., he rigged a tape recorder to the timer of a rice cooker, so he could begin his study day at 3 a.m. with the sound of his own voice yelling “get up, get up, get up.” It is not uncommon to find weary youngsters riding the subway or commuter
trains at 10 p.m., after having attended supplementary lessons since late afternoon. The pressure to climb the ladder of success through education begins at a very early age.

The Kyoiku Mama

The infamous kyoiku mama ("education mama") plays an important role at each level of her child's education. This is reflected in the many bizarre, but usually true, stories about the sorting process that begins at the kindergarten level. One preschool, which was unable to devise adequate tests for its two-year-olds, solved this dilemma by deciding to test their mothers instead. The most ambitious mothers enroll their children in kindergarten preparatory schools because ordinary kindergartens teach only games and crafts, which they consider quite inadequate preparation for entrance examinations into "good" elementary schools. At the other end of the ladder, it is estimated that 15 to 20% of students taking entrance examinations to the University of Tokyo are accompanied by their mothers. Such preoccupation with their children's success in education no doubt reflects the typical Japanese mother's lack of opportunity for personal achievement outside her family. Working to ensure her child's success enables her not only to satisfy her duty as a mother but also to achieve position and prestige in the neighborhood and among her friends and acquaintances. It is not unusual at high school graduation ceremonies for mothers, who have worked exceptionally hard to ensure their children's academic success, to be commended by the principal and awarded honorary diplomas.

Parents, and especially mothers, work very hard to help their children pass the examinations at each level of the educational ladder. The pressure is particularly great on a son, since he has often been selected by his family as the focal point of their efforts and their money. This is particularly true in "salaried man" families that have no property to pass on. Thus the spectre of university entrance examinations dominates the lives of children whose families see education as the key to success; and graduation from a university is a prerequisite to success in Japan. But university graduation is not enough—the real question is "From which university did you graduate?"
The Universities

Japanese universities are hierarchically ranked according to prestige. While the relative prestige of universities is an element found in other countries, in Japan the gradations of universities, faculties within universities, and the prominence of professors studied under is difficult for outsiders to comprehend. If viewed as a pyramid, the apex of Japanese higher education is the University of Tokyo; and the most prestigious faculty within that institution is its Faculty of Law—in Japan a combination of political science and public administration. Just beneath Tokyo are some of the former imperial universities such as Kyoto, Kyushu, and Tohoku, followed closely by a handful of prestigious private universities such as Keio and Waseda. The broad base of the pyramid contains hundreds of other institutions, many scornfully referred to as diploma mills or ekiben daigaku ("lunch-box universities").

In nearly all Japanese universities, success on the entrance examination is by far the most important, and often the sole criterion, for admission. Those who are able to pass the examination for a prestigious institution, preferably Tokyo, can look forward to an assured future, since once the student enters the university, completion of the degree is almost automatic. The competition for the University of Tokyo is fierce. It is not uncommon for only one of every 10 to 12 applicants to be admitted to various Tokyo faculties. This statistic has added meaning when one realizes that only the best students are encouraged by their teachers to apply. In other words, a pre-selected elite take the University of Tokyo examination and only 10 to 15% of these applicants succeed.

For those who are successful, however, the rewards are considerable. Almost 25% of all presidents of firms listed in the A category of the Tokyo Stock Exchange are Tokyo graduates; over 60% of all government employees serving above the rank of section chief in the bureaucracy are Tokyo graduates; more than 20% of elected members of the Diet (legislature) are Tokyo graduates. Statistics are similar for virtually every category in the Japanese establishment. Lower but still significant statistics reflect the influence of other elite institutions of higher education.
Examinations Distort Lower Education

Pressures on students to pass the entrance examinations to prestigious universities distort lower levels of education. High school teachers drill their students incessantly in order to increase the number going on to prestigious universities. Junior high teachers take their cue from the high school teachers and become similarly absorbed. It is not unheard of for primary school teachers to conduct mock examinations to prepare their students for the system of examinations.

Japanese entrance examinations do not simply test the student’s academic potential and intelligence; they deal exclusively with testing achievement. Therefore, whoever learns the most facts and develops skills in test-taking is most likely to be successful. The examinations are notorious for containing tricky or arbitrary questions. For example, a recent English examination asked the applicants where the word “evidently” should be placed in the following sentence: “What he said is true.” According to the test examiners, the only correct answer was to place it following the word “is.” Such rigidity is typical in the Japanese classroom. Cognitive learning is emphasized at the expense of affective and socialization concerns.

At the junior high school level, teachers begin discussing the vocational and educational tracks available, because in the second year, students must decide whether they want to compete for further education. At this time an intensive program begins in preparation for high school examinations. About 60% of all high school places are for university preparation and competition is intense. Even among high schools a prestige ranking exists: a school’s prestige is determined by its success in placing its graduates in the top universities. Those schools with the best track record of placing students in the University of Tokyo are Nada, Komaba, and Azabu High Schools, all located within a few minutes of the university. There is, of course, considerable competition to be admitted to one of these high schools, and parents do everything possible to ensure that their offspring are able to attend them. They circumvent school district residence regulations by renting a room in the desired district, by sending their child to live with relatives in the district, or simply by paying someone for the use of their address.
The student's life in junior high school is ruled by extra study, extra texts, and practice examinations—all directed toward the university examination competition. The number of students participating in these examination preparations is increasing. One recent survey of fifth graders concluded that 80% of the boys and 86% of the girls were taking outside lessons. Reports in the Japanese press indicate that publishers of supplementary texts for junior high students and the ubiquitous "supplementary" schools that offer "cram" courses for both junior high and high school students are all thriving. Tokyo bookstores are filled with students of all ages selecting books and pamphlets on techniques to help them pass the examinations. Samples of past examinations are in great demand. Sections in the bookstores are conspicuously marked with signs: "For Secondary School Entrance Preparation;" and the shelves are stocked with such titles as The Complete Study Guide for Passing the "X" University Entrance Examination or English Vocabulary Most Likely to Appear on the Entrance Examination, etc. All this, of course, is big business for publishers.

The school year prior to taking any entrance examination is devoted to preparing for it. At the high school level, the regular education program is virtually ignored because both students and teachers are preoccupied with the forthcoming exams. It is not uncommon for students to drop out of sports and other extracurricular activities in order to devote full time to preparation. Teachers administer a number of trial tests in class to check students' progress. These practice tests help teachers identify individual student strengths and weaknesses so they can advise them regarding which courses of study to emphasize and which university's examinations they are likely to pass.

Entrance examinations take place during the last term of the senior year and disrupt regular classes. The students travel to the universities to take the examinations. The majority of students converge on Tokyo. A common scene each year are long lines of young people in railroad stations waiting to buy tickets with worried looks on their faces.

The typical candidate, often accompanied by his mother, arrives a few days in advance to acclimate himself to the new environment. Until he returns home, he will receive the very best of care in order to be as "ready" as possible when it is time to take the examinations. It is not
unlike the training of a boxer before an important bout—heavy training, a special diet, and even rubdowns. Relatives living near famous shrines are asked to send special amulets to help in passing the exams. Without question, the entrance examinations are the most critical event in the student’s young life, on the outcome of which rests his chances for the future.

**Students Without a School**

Those who fail the examinations face intense pressure to study harder for another year (or more) to make another attempt to pass the examination for a prestigious school. These students who make a second effort to pass the examination are called *ronin*, a term used to describe samurai of feudal days who had no masters. Today’s *ronin* are better described as “students without a school.” There was a mild shock among Japanese when in October 1977, the Ministry of Education announced that there was a group of youngsters *between* junior and senior high schools who were *ronins*. The Ministry concluded that seven out of every 1,000 junior high graduates “delay, or are forced to delay, their advancement for a year or so—time which is spent in cram schools.” One newspaper, commenting on this practice of junior high graduates attending cram schools to improve their chances for admission to prestigious senior high schools, stated, “If they don’t manage that, the chances of winning entry into a prestigious university are diminished.”

Today, being a *ronin* is a fact of life for many high school graduates. An extra year or two of *ronin* life is considered a good investment if one is eventually able to enter a preferred university. *Ronin* are successful; each year a large percentage of *ronin* applicants pass the entrance examinations for the prestige institutions. In 1976 there were a total of 850,000 applicants for 350,000 national university places, and 190,000 (54.2%) of the successful applicants were *ronin*. The fact that a student stands a much better chance of passing if he can afford to spend an extra year or more on preparation has led to the development of what many educators call a “6-3-3-X-4” system, sometimes even a “6-3-X-3-X-4” system. The “X” refers to the period the *ronin* spends preparing for another try at the entrance examination.
Deleterious Effects of Examinations

The psychological burden imposed by the "examination hell" period results not only from the student's own wish for success and status but also from the pressure placed on him by his school and family to succeed. With the school's reputation depending on the number of its graduates who pass the college entrance examinations, teachers are under pressure from the school administration to ensure a high percentage of successful students. The teachers will advise students to drop extracurricular activities in order to spend more time studying.

A government White Paper on School Children and Youth links examination pressure to personality changes in children. "Shunning of outdoor play has caused children . . . to avoid socializing. Gregariousness which used to be a common hallmark of school children can no longer be taken for granted." The paper goes on to say that because of the constant pressure to pass the examinations "high school students study an average of a little over eight hours a day and junior high and elementary school pupils a little less than eight hours, while college students only a little more than four hours."

Also there is solid evidence that an increasing number of medical problems among Japanese youth are related to the stresses of the examination system. For example, a 15-year study, reported at the Fourth Congress of the International College of Psychosomatic Medicine in 1977, showed a dramatic increase in the incidence of stomach ulcers among schoolage children over the past decade. This sharp upsurge was attributed to the stress of entrance examination preparation. The study's principal investigator revealed that between 1963 and 1973 he had found only 27 cases of stomach ulcers among children under age 14; but in the period 1974-75, however, he found 25 such cases, and virtually all were "children whose parents were overly anxious for them to succeed in school entrance examinations."

A tragic dimension of the examination system is the high rate of suicide among the age group taking the university entrance examinations. The Ministry of Education released statistics showing that between 1972 and 1975 there were approximately 300 suicides a year involving junior high and senior high school students; Welfare Ministry statistics show that there were seven suicides a year during the
same period at the elementary school level. Recent newspaper articles on the subject suggest that the situation has not improved. The Japanese press has carried many articles on this subject, but the following will suffice to make the point. After a dispute with his father, an 18-year-old student leaped in front of a commuter train in Tokyo. A note found in his pocket read:

At the end of March last year, my father told me to take the entrance examinations for such and such university and to leave home if I failed the exam. I made up my mind to commit suicide: but to patch things up for the moment, I only pretended I would take the exams for the university to which he commanded me to go.

The student's mother was quoted as saying that she and her husband talked with him about going to a prestigious university, but "my son said he liked painting and wanted to go to an art school." Commenting on these kinds of tragedies, one newspaper editorialized: "There is no mystery about the cause of this unfortunate trend. These young suicides sought refuge in death from the pressures of having to prepare for the highly competitive entrance examinations."

There are, of course, other less extreme emotional problems resulting from examination-induced tensions, such as acute anxiety, depressive periods following failure, and various types of learning blocks. While examination pressures are not the only cause of these disturbances, Ezra Vogel believes that "the severity of the disturbance and the particular form it took did seem to be related to the examination pressure."

As a result of the examination pressure, it is not surprising that the typical Japanese high school graduate is far ahead of his American counterpart in terms of knowledge acquisition. However, it should be pointed out that this intense competition in Japan is focused on gaining entrance to higher education and not on achievement once the student is in the university. Many Japanese students do not study seriously once they have entered the university of their choice. At this stage the American university student tends to catch up and even pull ahead of the Japanese student.

Some psychiatrists have found that many Japanese university fresh-
men undergo a so-called "May Crisis" (because May is the month following the beginning of a new school year). Studying for the all-important entrance examination is over. Students suddenly discover they have more time than they know what to do with. The university is not the place of intellectual stimulation students envisioned. They find that they don't have to study very hard and begin to doubt whether it was all worthwhile. This leads to profound feelings of alienation and depression. Some suggest that this vacuum is filled by becoming active in the politics of the Japanese student movement.

Although there is much to criticize in the Japanese examination system, and many Japanese criticize it with a vengeance, in Ronald Dore's words:

"One suspects that Japan's more conservative leaders, though they are prepared to shake their heads over the system with those who deplore it, are secretly well satisfied. The examination hells sorts the sheep from the goats... as long as you can keep adolescents... glued to their textbooks from 7 in the morning to 11 at night, the society should manage to stave off for quite a long while yet that hedonism which, as everybody knows, destroyed the Roman empire, knocked the stuffing out of Britain, and is currently spreading venereal disease through the body politic of the United States."

Dore may be given to overstatement, but the fact remains the Japanese education system has served the nation well, bringing it to a position of world leadership. We may not agree with the means used to do so, but it is hard to quarrel with the results.
Conclusion

The Japanese have consistently displayed an ability to adapt to new situations and, especially, to new ideas. In the 1870s the Japanese embraced Western educational ideas and practices with abandon. Later, a conservative reaction set in, and modifications were made that made it more congruent with Japanese attitudes and values. The Japanese combined American, French, German, Scandinavian and nativist elements, which resulted in a system that can best be described not as a foreign model, but a uniquely Japanese one.

After World War II the American impact was especially strong, but again a conservative reaction—the “Reverse Course”—followed in the 1950s with results similar to the earlier period. Even today the Japanese are very sensitive to educational developments in foreign countries, and do an excellent job in evaluating and adapting these developments to their own system.

American education is usually characterized as a system of mass education, with uneven qualitative levels; while European education is often viewed as elitist. The Japanese have adapted elements from both and have molded a unique system which, although having some serious problems, comes closest to being both a mass system in which meritocracy is a fundamental principle. In any event, there is no doubt that the postwar educational system has served Japan very well indeed, and we should all take to heart the subtitle of Ezra Vogel’s book, Japan as No. 1: Lessons for America.
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