

YOUTH CULTURE IN *Asia*

WEEK FIVE

This is the final week of Youth Culture in Asia, a Newspapers In Education series in partnership with the University of Washington Jackson School of International Studies.

Photo courtesy of The University of Washington.

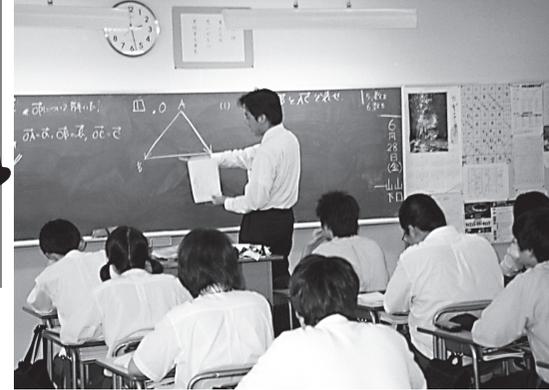


Photo: Japanese students review math homework.

School and Exams in Japan

by Leila Madge

In the last year of middle school and high school Japanese students go through what they call “examination hell.” In February and March they take highly competitive exams. How well they do determines not only the next school they will attend but also what kind of job, spouse, social status and lifestyle they will enjoy in the future. The importance of the exam in the current Japanese educational system started in the Meiji period (1868-1912). Before that time, government positions had been filled by samurai. With the end of that system, and the end of the caste system, education began to be used to decide who would have what kind of jobs. Since the end of World War II, education has been a means for upward mobility, especially for the middle-class who have no business or land to will to their sons.

Economic growth, the democratization of Japanese society and new job opportunities in the post-war years meant competition for higher education increased along with the pressures of exams. This period of “examination hell” is not unique to Japan but characterizes much of East Asia (Korea and China) which share a heritage of Confucian respect for scholarly endeavors and family obligation. China and Korea also currently understand exams as a way to get ahead in society.

What is school and home life like for students and parents during examinations? As the time for exams draws near all non-academic activities such as music and sports clubs are put on hold. All classroom learning is geared towards memorizing factual information. After school, children attend cram schools (juku in Japanese and hakwon in Korean) or study with tutors, and vacations are spent attending special study camps.

Many students of more ambitious families have been participating in these activities since kindergarten. Some students barely eat, sleep or even bathe. A common expression in both Japan and Korea is “Pass with four (hours of sleep), fail with five.” Parents have felt the stress of this time since their children started school. Fathers feel they must earn enough to provide the money for tutors and tuition at cram schools. Mothers strive from the time their kids start kindergarten to provide them with a home life to reinforce school lessons, fulfill the child’s physical needs and work with teachers to make sure their kids get lots of attention at school. Mothers are often praised or criticized by family members, and in newspaper or television shows, for their children’s school successes.

Parents, students, business leaders and government officials like the exam system, even if it is hellish. Ironically, just as American corporate leaders, politicians and educators are looking to imitate the Japanese exam system with standardized exams, the Japanese are thinking of changing their own system. During “examination hell,” suicide, violence at school and home, and dropout rates increase. Since the 1990s, with an economic downturn in Japan, the rewards of the system aren’t so great any more. In addition, many business leaders and government officials are blaming Japan’s economic woes on workers’ inability to creatively compete in a 21st century global economy. For this, they blame the education system. Many wonder if the pressure of exams is worth it and educational reform is now a hot topic in Japan. Reformers often look to the United States and call for more flexible curricula, fewer school days, abolishing uniforms — all to encourage more student creativity and engagement with the real world. Hopefully by looking at each other, both the U.S. and Japan will be able to create education systems that serve both individual students and society at large in the 21st century.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Why have middle and high school examinations been so important in East Asia, specifically in Japan?
- 2) Why do you think that American educators have tried to imitate the Japanese educational system?
- 3) Why is the examination system currently being re-evaluated in Japan?

MORE TO EXPLORE

Do you believe that high-stakes testing facilitates learning? Why or why not? Search The Seattle Times archives at www.seattletimes.com/archive for articles related to high-stakes tests in Washington state. Using evidence from your research and from personal experience, write a one-page essay for your teacher explaining your opinion on the topic.

01074224_06 3/20/07



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