feature

by Michelle Lalonde
Canadian University Press

Everybody needs a hero, and for most capitalist countries, Japan fits the bill.

The Japanese educational system, for instance, is touted by those in politics and big business as the ideal to which Canada should aspire. Japan's booming economy and low unemployment rate are often attributed to a school system which sees nearly 40 per cent of high school students entering university, and boasts ten lucrative job offers for each university graduate.

But hero worship can be dangerous, and Japan's system, like any other, has its bugs.

At 6 p.m. on a perfect spring evening in Tokyo, 40 restless ten-year-olds sit in a classroom at Toshin juku, a coaching school, studying geometry. The students have already put in a full day of regular school and will be hard at work at the juku until after 9 p.m.

"I go to juku every evening so I can go to a good junior high like my sister," says one girl in the class. "On Saturdays I have regular school in the morning, then piano lessons, and then calligraphy lessons. Sundays, I go to another juku."

The walls in the juku are plastered with photos and names of past students who are now studying at Tokyo University (Todai), the most prestigious university in Japan. There are also lists of the "Best 10" and "Best 30" students enrolled at the juku; monthly school-wide examinations feed the spirit of competition among the students.

"At my daughter's school," says Akiko Shinoda, a freelance interpreter, "the teachers ask us not to send our kids to juku because they come to school so tired every day."

Shinoda, like many young Japanese mothers, is very critical of the juku system.

"They teach you little magic equations — like puzzles — so you can pass a certain school's examination," she says, "but you can never use that knowledge again. They do not teach you how to think."

But the number of jukus in Japan is approaching 200,000 and one out of every three Japanese children go to juku at some point in their education. There are jukus which specialize in helping students pass tests to get into the better junior and senior high schools and universities. There are even jukus which help students pass exams to get into the better jukus.

Combined, jukus pull in over nine billion yen (almost $85 million Canadian) each year.

"In Japan, parents have only a few children," explains Shunzo Shinohara, principal of Higashihara junior high school in Tokyo, "so they want their children to enter prestigious high schools and universities. We are becoming what is called an academic society."

> "The market is directing education in Japan."

But there are other factors, besides a culture which equates success with education, that put pressure on Japanese youth to perform. One such factor is business involvement in education.

Until recently, large corporations in Japan could boast of freely accepting applicants from only the top institutions (i.e. those with the most difficult entrance exams). Though this kind of blatant elitism is now discouraged, the best jobs still go to graduates of the top five schools: Todai, Keio, Waseda, Chuo, and Kyodai.

"The fact is, if you want to send your child to the best schools, you have to send them to a private tutor or a good coaching school, and unless you are well off, you can't afford it," says Oshima.

Many companies own residences or other facilities which students can use while at school so company loyalty is developed even before the student is hired.

"The market is directing education in Japan," says Hiroshi Oshima, an official at the Ministry of Education.

Designed to separate the wheat from the chaff, the fiercely competitive entrance examinations also serve to separate the rich from the poor. According to the Ministry of Education, 65.5 per cent of students at Todai come from upper-middle-class families.

The Japanese government, headed by the very conservative Liberal Democratic Party, is well aware of the elitism inherent in the system.

"The university entrance exams are very hard and the bad effects of this are felt in the lives of students at every level," says Oshima. "We must remedy this situation where young people's lives are dominated by entrance exams."

Oshima said a goverment committee on education reform is looking at several problems in the system, including "Examination Hell."

"While we can't make them easier, last year we reduced the number of subjects on the tests from seven to five and this year we changed the system so students have two chances to pass the exam instead of one," he says.

Instead of eliminating the exam system or regulating jukus (juku teachers are not required to have teaching certificates or special training), the government has decided to get in on the money and is considering state-run jukus.

"The reason 'Examination Hell' will not end in Japan is because so many businesses have invested money in it," says Shinoda.

Shigera Yanase is a teacher at Toshin Juku. Yanase was very involved in the student movement in the 70s which opposed industrial involvement in education, but, like many juku teachers, he has resigned himself to the fact that jukus will exist as long as there is a demand for them by Japanese society.

According to Yanase, there are four factors which support the current education system in Japan. "One: the Japanese are industrious and competitive. Two: this is a country where it is difficult to assert one's identity or beliefs. You have to fit in"; thus, a standard system is favoured. "Three: Japan prides itself on being a classless society. In a classless society, the harder you try the more success you will have"; thus, the exam system. "And finally, Japan is poor in natural resources, so the only way to survive and prosper is to provide value-added goods"; thus, the emphasis on hard work, competition, and company loyalty.

The effects of heavy standardization are very apparent to a westerner visiting Ichikawa Higashi High School in Ichikawa City, a Tokyo suburb.

The alternate rows of girls and boys in their crisp navy uniforms with gold buttons present a rather military image. They are strikingly quiet and well-behaved; school teachers in Japan complain more about their students' reservedness than discipline problems.

The students are memorizing English phrases from a government-prescribed textbook. They have learned to say "good morning, sir" to all visitors regardless of sex, and to use overly formal phrases in conversation such as "It is a very fine day". The teaching of patternized English is only one example of the problems which arise when curricula are not adapted to the needs of individual schools or students.

"The biggest merit of the Japanese system is we have a government-prescribed course of study which is regarded as the minimum requirement," says Oshima.

"This means the overall standard of education is quite high. At the same time, it means our overall system is overly standardized and there is little allowance for individuality or personality."

The government committee on education reform has made three sets of recommendations on the major problem areas of the system. These include a move toward lifelong education (only four per cent of Japanese graduates go on to post-graduate studies), a more flexible curriculum, and changes to the examination system.

"In Japan, it is very hard to enter university," says Oshima, "but it is very easy to graduate. We must make the content of university education more substantial."

All the gruelling preparation and coaching is for exams, not for university itself. In fact, a university education in Japan is little more than four years of relaxation and socializing. Society and government alike see university as a reward for passing the entrance examination.

"Some of my friends have been to only two or three classes this term," says Kaori Inada, a student at the International Christian University (ICU), just outside of Tokyo.

> "In Japan, it is very hard to enter university, but it is very easy to graduate . . .

"That is called Bakayama, which means "Fool's Hill," she says, pointing to a grassy mound in front of the main building at ICU. "It is called that because many students sit there in the sun all day instead of going to classes."

Yukio Hatoyama, a prominent LDP member of the Diet (the Japanese parliament), explains the reasoning behind a light university curriculum.

"In Japan, students have to study so hard in primary and secondary school to win the severe entrance examinations," he says. "Because of the vigorous competition, they have no time to make friends, to play or to associate with other people. In that respect, I think a university education is valuable. If they really want to study, they go on to a graduate school."

University students are usually busier with "club activities" than with studying. They consciously build connections which will help them when they leave school and enter a business world where what you know is less important than who you know or where you went to school.

The Japan Teachers' Union, representing 49 per cent of the country's teachers, is one of the loudest lobby groups on education reform. The JTU attracts criticism because of its opposition to nationalism in the classroom and standardized education. The Union's annual spring convention in Tokyo this year attracted strong protests from rightist groups.

"The Teachers' Union is our National Enemy," was the slogan proclaimed by rightists over loudspeakers as their vans flooded the busy city core where the conference was taking place. Riot police were stationed on the site and near government buildings.

"The Japan Teachers' Union is very anti-government, says Kunio Hatoyama, brother to Yukio and also a Diet member. "They are very hostile. One specific example is they refuse to sing the Japanese national anthem or have the Japanese flag hoisted at the schools. They also reject the government-prescribed curriculum and government-issued textbooks. They really oppose all moves made by the government to improve the quality of education."

The hostility on both sides has meant the Ministry of Education and the teachers' union have not negotiated in twenty years. And if the government is not responding to the pressure from this, the most active lobby group on education in Japan, neither does it respond to a student movement which is virtually non-existent.

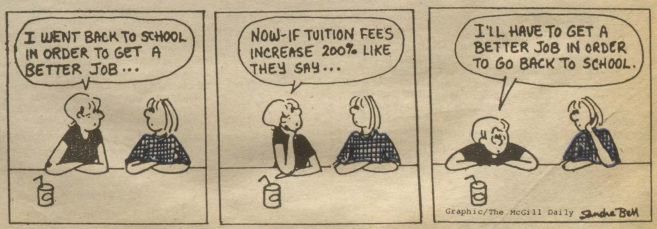
"In the days when we were students," says Hatoyama, "the student movement was very active. In the last 20 years or so there has not been any major student movement in Japan. There is hardly any likelihood of (students') voting behaviour changing the political map."

Students currently studying at Tokyo University confirm the apolitical attitudes of students in Japan today. The student newspaper is not critical of their own student government or administration, much less of the national political scene.

"Most students, except for law students, do not support the Liberal Democratic Party," said editor-in chief Yuichi Ichikawa. "The majority do not support any other political party, because none of the existing parties are worth supporting."

In Canada, student lobby groups such as the Canadian Federation of Students are active, but the threat of greater industrial involvement in education is very real. The upcoming National Forum on Post-Secondary Education, set for October in Saskatoon, will be attended by more employers of graduates (25 per cent) than students, who will represent only ten per cent of participants.

Canada can learn much from Japan's education system. But before we begin to emulate, we must look beyond the statistics and decide: what is the real price?



The Japanese Foreign Ministry sent Michelle Lalonde, as a representative of Canadian University Press, to Japan for twelve days last May as part of a Visiting Journalist Program. All expenses were covered by the Japanese government.