

EXAM BLUES

Story by Chris Mathews

At a private high school on a wooded hill outside Yokohama, 17-year-old Sayako has reached the half-way point in the most important year of her education. At the end of this year, she will sit the exams that decide which university, if any, she enters, and the direction her subsequent career will follow. Sayako is acutely aware of the significance of the exams and the effect they will have and comments, "I have to do well this year. This year is the most important year of my schooling. It can decide everything for my future."

Sayako is far from alone. She is joined across the country by over a million students who are now embarking on their final, crucial year. School in Japan is divided into three parts: six years of elementary school, three years of junior high, and three years of high school. Although mandatory schooling finishes at the end of junior high when students are fifteen, over 97 percent of Japanese students attend high school. Fifty percent continue on to four-year university or two-year junior college courses. These are the students that, like Sayako, face the trials of preparing for the university entrance exams.



Japanese students spend 240 days a year at school, 60 more than their Western counterparts.

The main exam for national and public universities is the unified exam, the *senka-shiken*. It is required by more than half of the nation's universities and is taken by over half a million students every year. However, the more prestigious universities such as Tokyo, Kyoto, Keio and Waseda each have their own entrance exams, which many students sit *in addition* to the unified exam. The competition for places in sought-after departments at leading institutions is astounding—first-year academic positions can be 30 times or more over-subscribed. It is no surprise that early this year a leading daily newspaper ran a large photo of a student who had been accepted into the country's most elite institution, the University

of Tokyo. The student was shown being thrown into the air by his school's rugby team in celebration of his achievement.

Sayako would love to emulate him. "My goal is to get into Todai (University of Tokyo), because that would [enable me] to get a job with the best employer. But I will have to work very hard this year. I must be completely committed." Sayako's resolve and determination to do well are echoed by classmate Yosuke, also seventeen. "I must study hard this year and do my best. All my family are relying on me. I can't be lazy like last year; I must be strong in my studies."

One of the consequences of the pressure students are under is the effect on their well-being. In the third year of high school, an already time-consuming educational regime is intensified to a level that actively endangers students' health. Sayako is particularly concerned with this issue. "I must stay healthy this year. Two years ago, my older sister got sick because she was working so hard. She failed her entrance exams and had to spend last year in a *yobiko*. My parents were very sad. But we are all happy now, because she passed the university exam in February! I will work very hard and not get sick and I will pass this year too."

The *yobiko* that Sayako mentions is a special kind of *juku* (cram school) that exists solely to prepare students for university entrance exams. As well as preparing existing high school students for exams, these schools also take care of modern day *ronin*—those students who failed and spend the following year (or two) studying privately and preparing to try again. *Yobiko* are expensive and the financial burden on parents combined with the risk of an extra year of schooling acts as extra pressure for students to succeed. They do, however, offer a second chance to those students who fail the final year exams, although there other options for the brave, as Asako, twenty-two, notes: "Some people study by themselves instead of attending *yobiko*. My friend studied by himself for a year and made it into Waseda."

Asako recently completed her final year of university and remembers clearly the strain of high school. Luckily, she benefited from a supportive family. "My parents told me that I could go to whatever university I wanted, but parents of some of my friends said 'you are going to



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Tokyo' and they were under a lot of pressure." Asako recounts a tale that is tellingly similar to Sayako's. "Fortunately, I didn't get sick, but my friend Emi couldn't eat because of the stress. She ate, but threw up. She failed the exams, then she went to *yobiko* for a year and passed after that. Another friend was also sick, but she managed to pass the first time."

Asako herself seems to have coped well with the final year. "I was lucky, because I could graduate automatically from my [private] high school directly to its university, but I wanted to go to a better university. I sat exams for five universities, passed three, and ended up at Keio University." She has now commenced a career with a top real estate agency. Not being one to counter the popular perception that university in Japan is little more than a formality, Asako appears to have spent a commendable portion of her university time either playing tennis, drinking or sleeping. "For me, university was much, much easier than high school. But for some people, it is much harder."

So just how hard can Sayako and Yosuke expect to work this final high school year?

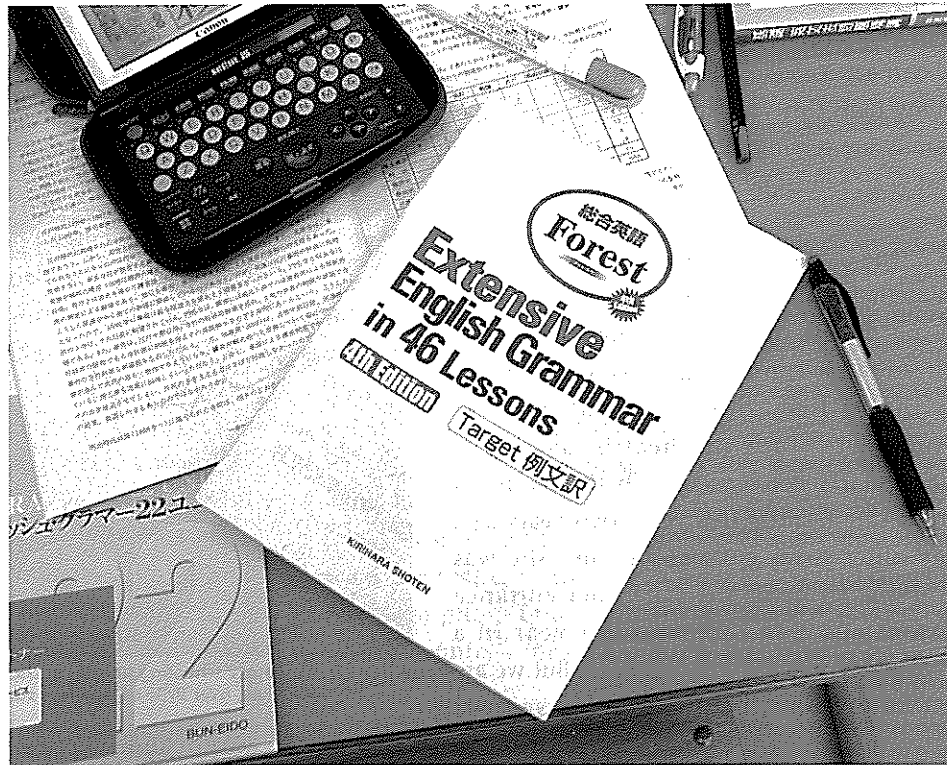
Even before the added strain of final exams, Japanese high school students spend an extraordinary amount of time at school: 240 days a year, almost 60 days more on average than their Western counterparts. There is also the virtually mandatory after-school participation in club or sports activities, which also places a large demand on holiday time, and in effect constitutes the student's social life. High school has a highly developed social structure that both supports students and dominates their lives. Mirroring the hierarchical relationships in other areas of Japanese society, it revolves around group activities and is backed up by the relationship between *senpai* (senior) and *kohai* (junior). For the most part, finding a boyfriend or girlfriend is something that is left until after the completion of school.

In the third year as a high-school senior, the club activities that previously dominated so much of the student's time are set aside, as the student's schedule becomes an endless succession of school, study, and *juku*. *Juku* can be extremely demanding. Asako remembers attending from 5.30 – 9.00pm every weeknight and 10.00am – 9.00pm on Saturdays. In addition, there are special intensive courses during the spring, summer and winter holidays. Nevertheless, it was not anything unusual to her by then: "I first went to *juku* when I was five years old, in order to enter elementary school."

At a private high school, the university entrance exams at the end of the final senior year can easily be mistaken for being the ultimate goal of the Japanese education system. These are academically-minded schools, and there is an almost pathologically limited focus on performance in these exams to the exclusion of all else. Education in these schools is rarely about producing a well-rounded young adult equipped with the skills needed to deal with adult life—other than the "skill" of being a well-molded Japanese citizen. Rather, it is the acquisition of the colossal amount of knowledge needed to score well in the final exams.

High school instruction in Japan focuses strongly on textbooks and is teacher led. Japanese high school

teachers lecture and students listen; students attempt to solve practice problems and teachers explain the ways to solve them. The teaching of English as a foreign language is a prime example of this methodology. The more quantifiable aspects of the language are given priority: students are drilled in mathematically-presented grammar rules and immerse themselves in "vocabulary" books, cramming themselves with the facts required to pass an English exam. Little emphasis is placed on the



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language as a means of communication; only those with a personal interest in learning English ever acquire any notable conversational ability. The rest are left with heads full of intimidating grammatical structures and vocabulary that they are unable to articulate.

Japanese teachers do not feel that the exclusive emphasis on the examinations is a problem. "No," replied one teacher when asked if there was too much focus on exams, "this is the Japanese system. It is very demanding for the students because we want them to achieve their best. But they must prove themselves. We want them to learn to persevere."

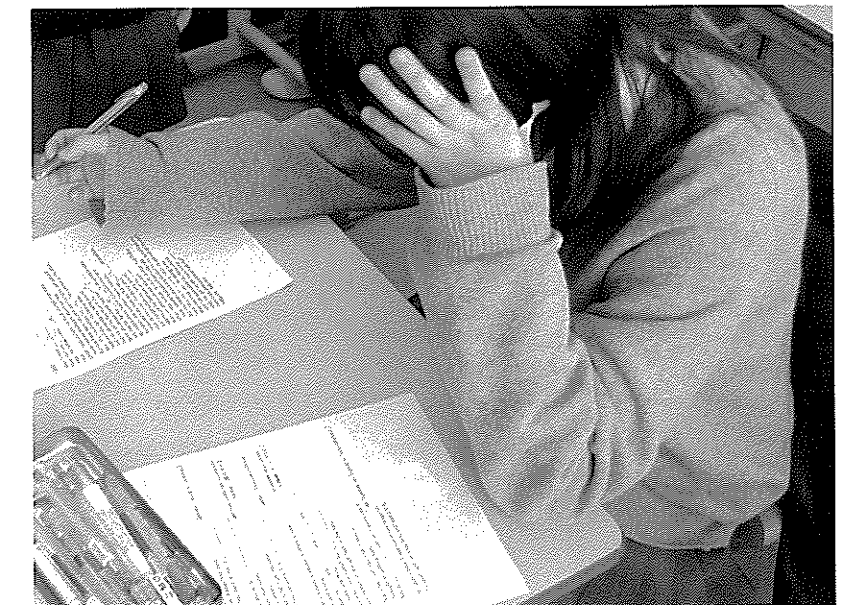
Foreign teachers in the Japanese school system often fall foul of the system's narrowness. Glen, a qualified teacher who has taught in British high schools, related the following experience. "Finding in the textbook the example sentence 'He is much the best runner' I pointed out to my Japanese co-teacher that this sentence doesn't even approximate



Every year, over a half a million students sit the university entrance exams.

standard English. The teacher, however, refused to consider teaching it any way other than what was presented in the textbook. When I pressed her for a reason, she replied 'Because that's what will be in the exam. The exam is based upon this book. We have to prepare the students for the exam.' Her logic was simple: the textbook was written by the people who set the exam, therefore the textbook is the final authority on what is to be taught. Students are taught for the exam, and the exam only. The fact that the four foreign English teachers at the school repeatedly questioned some of the formulations in the textbook stood for nothing."

Glen has witnessed firsthand how consumed with achievement tests the students become. "The students at this school are deeply preoccupied with the final exams. I had second-year [high school] students obsessing about them by the middle of last year—over a year and a half before they are to sit them. When I set a pre-Christmas text question about New Year's resolutions an overwhelming majority wrote about how hard they must study the next year. It just never leaves their minds. In England, the kids were focused on their final assessment, no doubt, but it was nothing like the intensity of the situation here."



Students often suffer health problems as a result of intense study regimes.

The Japanese school system is unique in the unprecedented importance of exams that dominate the final year of school. The education systems in Western countries spread their final assessment across the final year or two of school, and is balanced between coursework and examination. Not so in Japan. Exam results alone determine which university a student enters; the university a student attends determines where they will enter the job market: the most prestigious companies select from the most prestigious universities. Exam results determine your place in the Japanese social order.

None of the students interviewed for this article questioned the extraordinary pressure that is placed upon them by their teachers, families, and the educational system itself in the final year of high school; it is all accepted as a necessary rite of passage on the route to adulthood and an opportunity to show their strength, determination and dedication. When they speak of the challenge in front of them, an air of firm resolve descends on them. Sayako in particular accepts the situation without reservation. "If I work very hard and do well this year, I can enter a good university and then I will have a good career. It is worthwhile." ♥