AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi

Students take a break outside a classroom building at Japan's elite but decrepit Tokyo University.

By Jane Barnes Mack-Cozzo

If You Think We Have Problems...

Japan's Inferior University System

After more than 12 years of living and teaching in Japan, I'm still amazed at the plethora of myths and clichés surrounding Japanese culture. Perhaps the most egregiously false of these perceptions is that of Japan's "superior" educational system.

The Japanese educational system does, indeed, work differently from those in the West. That Japanese elementary and high school students are assigned hours of daily homework and sent to *juku* (cram schools), is well known among educated Westerners. It's also well known that so-called *kyoiku* mamas ("education mamas"), ambitious for their children, have them enrolled in pre-kindergarten cram schools almost as soon as they're born. These schools cost nearly $750 a month for two days a week. Over a quarter of pre-schoolers attend such cram schools in order to be admitted to a prestigious kindergarten. From there, in the "escalator system," pupils are virtually assured admission to primary, middle, and high school. This, in turn, facilitates acceptance at a corresponding university.

All this effort is expended in preparation for the vaunted and near-sacred university entrance examination, the successful completion of which will determine the course of these young people's lives. "Examination hell," as it is known in Japan, is considered a small price to pay for admission to a national university such as Todai (Tokyo University) or one of the *roku dai* (Six Best) private universities in the country.

The ritual associated with these exams is treated with an almost religious solemnity. During my years of teaching at Japanese universities, I was able to witness this annual event firsthand. It's different from the way we do things, but it isn't better.

Consider, for starters, the English language exams. Selected members of examination committees are charged with writing the all-important English language questions. Quite literally, hours are spent analyzing everything from usage to punctuation. We *gaijin* (foreigners) are asked to serve on these committees, ostensibly for native speaker input.

Yet we native speakers find ourselves in a verbal tug-of-war with Japanese *sensei* (professors), who insist that our usage is incorrect. These same professors, however, don't even conduct their upper-level classes in English. One listening-

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comprehension question concerned the town of Carmel, California. I corrected the town's pronunciation from the accent on the first syllable to the accent on the second, but this carried no weight, even though I am a native Californian. The professors' Japanese dictionary stated that the first usage was correct.

All of this pointless pedantry results in students memorizing grammatical rules but failing to acquire speaking proficiency. Those who are admitted to a university have already had six years of English, but can hardly speak a word because their study of the language is oriented to passing the grammar and reading-comprehension questions on the entrance exams. Indeed, Japanese scores on the international TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) exam are among the lowest in the world.

Katagana, the system of characters the Japanese use for foreign words, also holds students back. Because katagana conforms to the constrictions of Japanese pronunciation, English words are consistently mispronounced. Years ago, a student mentioned she had seen the American film "Buru Berubeto." After many requests to repeat the title, I deduced she was talking about the film *Blue Velvet.* (Katagana changes V to B and L to R.)

Once students gain admission to university, virtually all learning and study cease. What passes for education would be a source of embarrassment to almost any other university system in the world. My colleagues have had students who attend perhaps two classes during the entire school year and then show up for the final exam thinking that if they are allowed to take it, they will automatically pass the course—knowing full well that attendance was mandatory. A favorite explanation is "if I don't pass this course, I can't graduate." The administration will often back the student and simply override the failing grade.

The students who do attend class exhibit behavior befitting youngsters half their age. Boys and girls studiously avoid sitting next to each other, giggling when they are asked to do so. Every time this happened, we *gaijin* were immediately reminded of our own behavior—when we were in the second grade. Their disengagement from learning is so fundamental that they often pack themselves in the farthest back seats of the classroom, so they can gossip, sleep, or use cell phones undisturbed.

Most Japanese *sensei* tolerate such behavior, sitting at the desk in the front of the classroom and burying their heads in the textbook from which they read. They rarely get up, even to write on the blackboard. They are poorly prepared for their classes and rarely comment on student papers.

Many students routinely neglect to bring either textbooks or writing materials to class, and a request to write anything at all will send them scrambling to borrow pencils and paper from the few students who have them. Homework is completed only under threat of a failing grade or a worse consequence, because it interferes with the all-important social-club

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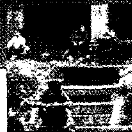

activities. Cheating is not an unusual occurrence and is expected to be excused by an "I'm sorry" (as is almost every other infraction in Japanese society).

Weekly classes are officially 90 minutes long, but seldom last more than 70 minutes. When I first started teaching at a Japanese university, I wasn't aware of this "tradition," and I asked one of the professors if, as a new foreign instructor, I shouldn't teach the entire 90 minutes.

"Oh, no, *sensei*. That simply isn't done. If you do, it'll just cause resentment."

Later, when I had planned to go to Hong Kong during the December break, I discovered that the proposed departure date conflicted with the last class. I mentioned this to one of my Japanese colleagues, and he chastised me for giving it a second thought. "Of course, you should simply cancel your classes on that day."

"But isn't that a bit irregular?" I asked.

"No, *sensei*, don't worry. Besides, the students expect it. In fact, you should have at least two *kyuko* (cancellations) a semester. That's normal."

At one school where I taught, the chairman of the English department organized a summer course at a sister school in Tennessee for his students. He explained to me how he would motivate his students: "I'll let the girls who speak English hold the teddy bear." One Japanese psychology professor rationalized this arrested development by stating that "college students make good use of the prolonged adolescence while enjoying campus life." He viewed universities as a kind of "moratorium" playing a major role in helping students restructure their lives. In other words, the childishness which is so endemic in the society as a whole (Douglas MacArthur called Japan a "nation of 12-year-olds"), is reinforced perhaps because the rest of these students' lives is so asphyxiatingly programmed.

At the same time, creative original thinking is actively discouraged, for it goes against the *wa* ("harmony"). An oft-quoted Japanese saying that "the nail that stands up must be hammered down" reflects the all-pervasive conformity of the society. Small wonder that Japan, despite having a massive, technologically advanced economy, has produced only eight Nobel Prize winners. Many of them left the country to do their research.

Donald Ritchie, a well-known expert on Japanese culture, once remarked that the Japanese lack a sense of inner struggle, of irony, of dialectic, of contradiction—all qualities that are vigorously repressed. Those few individuals who dare to "make themselves visible" are shunned. It comes as no surprise that many observers view Japanese students as not only naive but vapid. Yet for the most part, these students remain cooperative and congenial, and in today's world, that goes a long way toward redeeming them.

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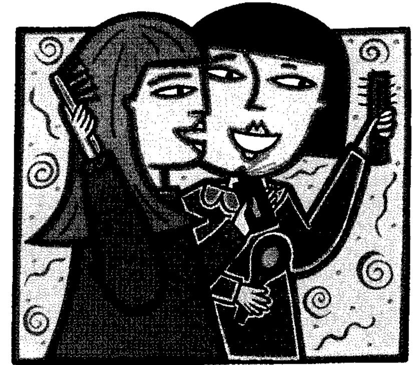
In Real Life

First-person America



A Reunion

By Karina Rollins

We were best friends in grade school. True best friends—the kind where you're virtually inseparable, and, if alone, classmates asked, Where's the other? Spending the night at each other's homes was the greatest treat. Her name was Andrea.

We attended an American school in Germany, where our fathers were both stationed with the military. After fifth grade, Andrea's dad was sent back to the States. She promised she would write as soon as she knew her new permanent address.

I waited. And waited. The letter never came. At some point, my father, through military channels, was able to get her family's address. But by the time I tried to reach her, that address was no longer valid. This was in the days before e-mail and the wonders of the Internet, and options for a 13-year-old to find a lost friend were limited. After several years, I accepted that I wouldn't hear from her. But I never forgot her, and always, I wondered: Why?

The first time I came to live in the U.S. was in 1989, when I moved to Maryland for my last two years of college. Shortly after I arrived, I resumed my search for Andrea by calling directory assistance, in Georgia, where I knew she had lived for a while, and in other states with big military bases like Texas and North Carolina. Nothing.

Fast-forward to 1996. I'm living in New York, working as an editor at *National Review*. That year, we get new computers and make the leap to the cyber age. My colleagues and I crowd around the computers to try out the Internet.

Still a bit bewildered about exactly what we should be trying to do on this great World Wide Web, a co-worker stumbles across phonebook listings for the entire country, available right there, at our fingertips. "Anyone want to find someone?" he asks. It hits me. "Yes," I said. "I'm looking for my best friend."

She could have married and changed her last name, but I had always remembered her father's name, complete with middle initial, so we tried that first. A single address matched; it was in Seattle. Could this be it? I called the phone number right away. A machine came on announcing that I had reached "Harry and Sabine." Sabine? Yes, that was her mom's name, wasn't it? I left a message. Still, I didn't dare to hope.

When I came home that night, I found a note from my roommate telling me that a Sabine from Seattle had called and was very excited to talk to me. A shiver ran through my body. Then I became giddy. I had actually found her! I danced around the living room. My fingers trembled as I dialed the number 3,000 miles away. A friendly woman answered, and I announced it was me. "Karina!" she exclaimed. "How are you, dear? How did you find us?" My mind reeled. It had been 17 years. Overwhelmed, all I could do was babble "Is it you? Is it really you?" "Yes of course it's me!" Andrea's mother exclaimed. She asked me about where I live, about my job, how my mother is doing, and I answered dutifully. But my brain was pounding: What about Andrea? Why doesn't she say something about Andrea?

The longer we talked, a feeling of horrible, terrible dread started to spread over me. Something awful must have happened. Had she become estranged from the family? Had she become addicted to drugs? Had she disappeared? Finally, I couldn't bear it anymore and blurted out "Do you think Andrea still remembers me?" Her answer: "I'm sure she would, honey, if she were still alive."

No. God, no. I hadn't yet adjusted to finally finding her after all those years, and now I had already lost her again. "I'm so sorry" I stammered as the tears spilled from my eyes. Andrea had been hit by a car. She was 14 years old.

But that heart-wrenching phone conversation was not the end. My best friend's mother wanted me as a part of her life—which is one of the greatest gifts I have ever received. I hadn't lost Andrea completely after all. We continued to call each other, and a year later, I visited Seattle for the first time. That visit cemented our relationship. We see parts of Andrea in each other.

It is a wonderful feeling, six years later, to answer the phone and hear: "Hello dear. It's Sabine."

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