

Supplementary education in Japan

For the past five years or so, I have answered questions about my research interests in Japan very simply: “*juku*” (塾). Generally, this is met with a surprised look, so that I specify further: “academic *juku*” (学習塾), but that only seems to resolve this puzzle to a small extent.

Julian Dierkes



IT SEEMS STRANGE to many Japanese interlocutors that any scholar would concern himself with supplementary education (*juku* being the catch-all term for the various forms of schools within the supplementary education industry that parallel conventional primary and secondary schools), even though virtually all of these same interlocutors would concede that their children—if they have any—are attending or have attended *juku*. The existence of *juku* is taken for granted to an extent in Japan that no aspects of this industry are questioned by scholars, and *juku* and supplementary education more broadly are still marred by the whiff of the slightly illegitimate, along the lines of “It’s too bad *juku* exist, but it can’t be helped.”

In the course of my research (funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) I have visited over forty *juku* in Tokyo and its surrounding prefectures, in the Kansai area (Osaka, Kyoto, Kobe), in Hiroshima, as well as in Shimane, a rural prefecture directly to the west of Hiroshima toward the southern end of Honshu. I have been able to visit many of these *juku* through a snowball sample emanating outward from Tokyo where I met a group of activist *juku* operators very early on in the research. In other locations, I have been able to either contact *juku* directly (especially in Shimane Prefecture) or to rely on contacts through my growing network of *juku* operators. In addition to direct visits to *juku*, I have met over 100 *juku* operators in a variety of contexts, primarily through meetings of various associations and study groups associated with education and with supplementary education more specifically.

On my visits to *juku*, I have seen much that has been inspiring and admirable, and some aspects that are disturbing. As with any attempt to capture aspects of an entire industry through targeted visits to a very small percentage of the industry players, I can make few claims as to the representativeness of my observations except for some niches within this large industry. At the same time, my fieldwork has given me some insights into how small operators in an industry that is increasingly dominated by corporate actors, position themselves and their entire industry as it evolves.

My initiation to *juku*

Although I had been visiting one particular *juku* (focused on teaching young school children use of the abacus, no less) for over a decade and a half, my first visit to a Tokyo-area *juku* came in October 2006. Subsequently, I have visited Inaho-*juku* most often over the years and have developed a friendship and research partnership with the operator of the *juku*, Mr. Hirabayashi. The *juku* is located in an industrial area between the large commuter station of Shinagawa at the industrial city of Kawasaki in Tokyo’s Ota-ward, close to Haneda Airport. Ota-ku is a part of Tokyo that is rarely visited by researchers or tourists unless they have a particular interest in industrial downtown (下町) areas of Tokyo.

From the train station it is about a 15-20 minute walk deep into this Shitamachi neighbourhood to reach the *juku*. Along the way, every other building seems to be a small industrial workshop. Large bins with discarded metal bits seem even more common than the ubiquitous vending machines.

After crossing a major thoroughfare, I reached the *juku* itself. Despite my attempts to keep an open mind about *juku*, I approached this first visit with the term ‘cram school’ echoing in my mind and associated images of young children stuck in neon-lit classrooms having their brains forcefully injected with useless factoid knowledge. The *juku* is housed in the bottom floor of a residence, a common arrangement for owner-operated *juku*. It is in a small side-street off a larger, though not major, road. The name of the *juku* is advertised in a neon-lit sign, though the sign was clearly installed some time ago. There are no other forms of advertisements (flyers, brochures, posters, etc.) offered, which many other *juku* commonly present to interested passers-by.

As is also very common, the front door opens to a typical, tiled entrance area that is lined with an oversized shoe/slipper shelf where students and visitors exchange their outdoor shoes for slippers to be worn in the *juku* itself. After stepping up into the *juku*, the first impression is of scholarly chaos. Bookshelves everywhere, the walls are lined with posters announcing a standardized English test (英検), the furniture could easily fill several hipster apartments with 1970s retro chic. This cramped, slightly dilapidated atmosphere is one that I have seen in many slight variations since then.

But the real surprise awaited me when the students arrived. Inaho-*juku*—as is the case across *juku* in the 23 wards of Tokyo—focuses on the upper primary grades. Over the past 20 years the prestige hierarchy among schools has been reversed; while public high schools were perceived as the apex of this hierarchy, now it is private middle schools where the entrance examinations are most competitive. Following this shift, *juku* instruction is now most intensive in preparation for middle school entrance examinations. This trend has been largely limited to Tokyo, however, and its impact does not seem to extend even into the surrounding prefectures.

As I watched a group of fifth-graders (10-11-year olds) file in for their Japanese (国語) class, I was expecting pale, harrowed faces. Instead, I saw deep tans acquired in the summer and lingering into fall. Even more surprisingly, I saw many skinned knees. This may have been the romantic German humanist in me speaking too loudly, but children who enough play outdoors to have bloody knees was not what I had been expecting in an urban, industrial area ‘cram school’ in Tokyo.

The history and roots of supplementary education in Japan

There is no doubt that the widespread existence of *juku* is rooted in deep and long-standing traditions and pedagogical preferences. Clearly, *juku* are a version of Confucian education

at some level, however immeasurable to the social scientist. The general focus on knowledge rather than understanding in Japanese schooling is a symptom of the same orientation. The importance of standardized examinations may be yet another aspect of this orientation.

There are also some significant historical roots of contemporary *juku*, certainly linked to the term ‘*juku*’ itself. The most prominent example that comes to most Japanese interlocutors’ mind are early Meiji educational institutions like Fukuzawa Yukichi’s Keio Gijyuku, now Keio University. Clearly, over 150 years ago the term ‘*juku*’ also denoted a private educational institution that existed under the tutelage of a charismatic and respected teacher and outside of what became state-sponsored education.

To many observers, including operators of *juku* themselves, this vague link with Confucianism and the continuous use of the term ‘*juku*’ suggests that *juku* are an indigenous form of education with a long and unbroken history.

While such observations have a point when it comes to common behavioral patterns that make Japanese parents consider private supplementary education as an obvious option to help their children face challenges in conventional schools, these claims to a continuous history seem to be somewhat specious. In many conversations with *juku* operators, it has come to light that *juku* were quite rare prior to the ‘*juku* boom’ of the early 1970s. In fact, not only were *juku* rare, but they were clearly lacking in legitimacy, leading to challenges to *juku* entrepreneurs in terms of the financing of expansion plans and in terms of facing prospective parents-in-law who were skeptical about the financial viability of supplementary education. ‘*Juku*’ as a term competed with other terms like ‘勉強室’. This is not to say that *juku* did not exist at all, but they appear to have been very rare in the pre- and postwar era prior to the 1970s.

The *juku* boom of the 1970s quickly established supplementary education as an important element in the Japanese education system. The roots of this boom can be found in a combination of factors. The Japanese total fertility rate dipped below 2 for the first time in the early 1970s, signaling the rapid shrinking of Japanese families. The fast-paced economic growth of the Japanese economy in the 1960s and the parallel national income doubling plan began to have an impact on individual incomes in the early 1970s, a trend that became even clearer with the dissolution of the Bretton Woods system in 1971. These two factors combined to give families some disposable income by the early 1970s.

Higher education had been expanding in Japan throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s. While only about a quarter of Japanese high school students were planning to attend post-secondary institutions in the 1960s, this proportion

Highly institutionalized, yet in flux



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had risen to nearly half by 1975. Not only did the aspirations for higher education rise, but actual enrolments and even the number of tertiary education institutions rose massively in this period. Most of this expansion occurred through the growth of private universities.

The final factor that contributed to the *juku* boom, at least in Tokyo, was the availability of entire cohorts of university graduates to become *juku* operators. While the Japanese student movement in the late 1960s was neither as far-reaching nor as violent as it was in North America or Europe, it did lead to significant turmoil on some campuses and involved a substantial number of students, particularly at the most prestigious universities like the University of Tokyo and Waseda University. For many of the student radicals involved, their activism spelled doom to any traditional career. They would be blacklisted from public service jobs, and most private corporations at the time did not hesitate to hire investigators to check on an applicant's past and would not have been keen to hire a (former) radical. Yet, these were graduates of universities at the pinnacle of the rigid prestige hierarchy of Japanese universities, and they were highly motivated to have an impact on the world. For at least some of them, the concurrent occurrence of the *juku* boom represented an attractive job opportunity where their credentials were an asset.

The case for *juku*

As any observer of Japan notices, the country has been in a funk since the bursting of the economic bubble in the early 1990s. While many cross-national measures make Japan seem like a paradise of safety, stability and a high quality of life, the past two decades of economic stagnation – albeit on a very high plateau of wealth – have cast a pall across all areas of social relations in the eyes of many domestic observers.

Education has not been immune to this atmosphere of doom and gloom. Although neo-liberal criticism of Japanese education was prominently instigated by Prime Minister Nakasone in the confident 1980s, this perspective has become more prevalent in recent years. The generally negative attitude toward public education in the media and among pundits has been exacerbated in the past decade by some of the mishandling of educational policy by the Ministry of Education, MEXT. When the rapid development of the internet economy in the United States reinforced some of the doubts about a lack of creativity and entrepreneurialism raised by the 'lost decade' of the 1990s, MEXT responded with a so-called liberalization of education that introduced some elements of choice and a greater project orientation to secondary schools while reducing overall content and eliminating Saturday classes.

While some of these changes had been demanded by parents and educators for years, MEXT introduced them at best half-heartedly, as evidenced by the lack of teacher training associated with the '*yutori kyoiku*' reforms.

This half-heartedness has subsequently contributed to a renewed boom in supplementary education in that it has reinforced (often mistaken) notions of a 'decline of academic abilities'. What seem like terrific results in cross-national comparisons (e.g. the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment, even in 2006) have become causes for moral panics as minor changes in results have been magnified in populist discussions. The various social ills that seem to have befallen Japanese education (bullying, truancy, etc.) only add to this sense of crisis. Japanese media discussions around the PISA results of 2009, released in December 2010, have been somewhat more positive, but a sense of losing in competition, especially with Asian neighbours, pervades these discussions.

In this atmosphere of crisis, many observers continue to praise the virtues of a marketized education system and thus of *juku*. A visit to a large Japanese bookstore can quickly lead to a shelf filled with books of *juku* and *juku*-related punditry exhorting the virtues of the introduction of competition and choice into the educational system. The gist of the argument of such punditry is echoed by *juku* operators in the interviews I have conducted. In fact, these interviews are so uniform in some of the claims that *juku* operators make that they almost seem to follow a standardized script.

The main argument for *juku* hinges on two tenets:

1. A strong functionalist interpretation of the existence of *juku*, and
2. A surging emphasis on being responsive to individual needs.

—If *juku* didn't work, they wouldn't exist!

There is a certain persuasive logic to this functionalist argument. Just as it is hard to argue with someone who fervently believes that *juku* exist because Japan is a Confucian society, so it is hard to question the taken-for-granted nature of a claim that if it exists, it must be working. This logic generally infuses answers to questions about the existence of *juku* in Japan on the systemic as well as the organizational level:

— *Juku exist so they must be fulfilling some need among parents/students.*

— *This juku exists so it must be good at supplementing conventional education.*

Answers along these lines point out that *juku* are addressing some shortcomings of conventional schools. When *juku* focus on remedial education, then the argument points out that students who have fallen behind are not well served by the large classes common in conventional schools and by the 'salary-man' mentality typically ascribed to contemporary teachers. Likewise, *juku* that focus on accelerated tuition point out that there is no streaming or tracking in Japanese schools and that they are meeting the demand for such differentiation.

This functionalist logic is also applied to competition between *juku*. Virtually every *juku* operator points out that their students are under no obligation to attend and will therefore leave the *juku* if it is not delivering results. The results that are expected are somewhat amorphous, of course. While remedial tuition may produce satisfaction simply because of an improvement in the understanding of subject matter by the student, or an improvement in the student's grade, accelerated teaching ultimately is not tested until the student takes an entrance examination. However, the equally large test-taking industry provides students with ample opportunities to test their abilities against scores of other students to produce standardized results.

In the context of the ever-present threat of students voting with their feet, *juku* operators emphasize that all students in urban regions have a plethora of alternatives to choose from. This is true for the vast urban landscape of the Kanto region as much as it is for a major city like Hiroshima. Even in the rural towns of coastal Shimane, students do not hesitate to take a forty minute train ride to a neighbouring town to attend a *juku* there. Technology has opened new channels for teaching and learning to students in rural areas, so that almost all operators see themselves as being under threat from competitors.

Technological advances and investments

It is clear that large, corporate and franchise *juku* are all operating in a highly competitive market that has become even more so due to the corporatization of this industry. Marketing budgets are immense, as attested by the ubiquitous ads for *juku* everywhere from Tokyo's subway to Shimane's rural bus service.

Technology and infrastructure investments are equally large. When I visited Up's newly-constructed main facility near Nishinomiya train station in Kobe in October 2007, the scale of the building and the obvious investment in infrastructure were stunning. Up is a very large regional player in the *juku* market with a total of over 20,000 students. Nishinomia is a bustling train station and the new Up building is sitting in a prime location very close to the station.

After showing us some of their satellite operations in a nearby mall, including the franchised Lego Lab that introduces elementary school children to engineering tasks, an Up manager took us to the new building. We ascended to the 7th floor (!) of the building for a tour of some of the technology investments. What I saw there surpassed anything I have seen in all but the most technology-driven university facilities in Asia or anywhere else. Flat screen monitors everywhere (now a commonplace, but a fairly awesome sight to me 3 years ago), and a whole battery of studios where instructors could teach in real time with several students at once distributed across the country or even internationally.

For users of WebCT or similar software on North American campuses, the proprietary Up software clearly offered so many more features that this looked like a clearly viable delivery method. Up managers confirmed that they see delivery method as the area where they can most easily distinguish their teaching from that of conventional schools and other *juku*.

Small-scale strategies

None of this is even remotely possible for the vast number of owner-operated *juku*, of course, unless they choose to franchise teaching systems from one of the larger corporations and off-load technology investments onto their customers. But owner-operated *juku*, like the large corporate *juku*, do not really compete on price; there seems to be a common national rate for the basic *juku* package (two school subjects taught twice a week at around ¥6-7,000, or US\$75-85) that varies little and is not overtly undercut by any of the players in this industry. While several *juku* operators suggested that they gave some steep discounts, quasi-scholarships, to deserving families, this was never mentioned as a competitive strategy. In fact, small *juku* do not seem to actively engage in competition with other *juku*, not even those nearby.

Geographically, small urban *juku* have withdrawn deep into neighborhoods, far away from the transportation hubs that the corporate and franchise *juku* have staked out as their territory. Many of the long-time small *juku* operators rely exclusively on word of mouth in recruiting new students and some recalled common incidents of having to turn away prospective students to limit the total number. Typically, these small *juku* are now teaching approximately half the number of students that they enrolled at their peak, usually in the mid-1990s. While a typical size for urban owner-operated *juku* is now around 100 students, many of them had close to 200 students 15 years ago.

When I explicitly asked operators what the annual turnover rate among their students was, many suggested levels under ten percent. While operators may have been low-balling their estimates, or may in fact have been offering instruction of outstanding quality, this strikes me as rather a low rate in a consumer market characterized by large advertising budgets and myriad choices for consumers. Along with many other indicators, this low turnover rate points to the important social functions that small *juku* are fulfilling, from simple, but seen-to-be-safe child-minding for single parent households, to providing opportunities to meet neighborhood friends and former classmates.

Juku today

In addition to the shifts in delivery methods brought about by technology, a number of changes loom on the horizon for the *juku* industry. For owner-operated *juku*, the absence of successors coupled with the keen competition for customers represented by franchise and chain *juku* suggests an uncertain future. In contrast, the increasingly formal role that *juku* play in the education system, for example through contracts with school boards to provide tuition in public schools, may offer significant growth opportunities. Likewise, an expansion into international markets may also promise such growth, at least for larger players.

Despite some of these changes, however, the *juku* industry is firmly institutionalized and few doubt that it will continue to be a major element in the education of Japanese children and youth for some time to come.

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