

# Hammering Screws:

The Negative Effects of the Japanese Education System on its Students

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Spring 2008  
General University Honors

*This paper is dedicated both to idea of democracy and to every Japanese child who is, or has been, the victim of bullying.*

There is a well-known Japanese saying describing the importance of uniformity in Japanese culture: “*Deru kui wa utareru*,” or “the nail that sticks up will be hammered down.”<sup>1</sup> As a foreigner, the four months I spent living in Japan taught me what it means to be *aruku deru kui*, a “walking sticking-up nail.” While in general I encountered only polite, cordial Japanese, there was always a profound sense of *otherness*, a tangible feeling that I lacked something extremely important, that I was in some way incomplete. Many times, for example while being stared at when simply riding the train, I felt that I would do almost anything to escape the constant negative attention and sense of exclusion. Although I deeply enjoyed my time in Japan, upon returning to America I felt a weight lift – once again, I could go through the day without attracting stares and feeling entirely out of place. Thinking back, I realized that I was suffering from the negative effects brought on by the pressure to conform that is pervasive in Japanese society. Anyone who seems out of place in any way becomes the target of ostracism and contempt by a culture structured around uniformity. The modern Japanese education system was constructed as a testament to this ideal, and today many argue that it functions more as an assembly line, producing millions of identical workers to be employed in corporations, than as any form of well-rounded schooling. The intense pressures of such an impersonal system deny many Japanese children the chance to even enjoy childhood; it can be said that, in effect, Japanese schooling hammers its students until they fit into a desirable mold, completely disregarding their psychological well-being or rights to individualistic self-determination. The people in charge of the system, the

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1 Yoshida.

people holding the hammer, are themselves products of that culture, and there is no end in sight.

Although many experts agree that the Japanese system is badly in need of change, and Japanese society publicly applauds the artistic achievements of creative individuals, the urges to follow tradition, respect one's elders, and fit in to society's plan are simply overwhelming.<sup>2</sup> In fact, every year school-related stress drives nearly 2,000 young Japanese to depression and suicide, with no leavening of this trend in sight.<sup>3</sup>

This paper will explore those aspects of the Japanese education system that cause psychological harm to students. Opening with a description of the origins and structure of the modern Japanese education (and corporate hiring practices, which are much more intimately involved with the education system than is traditional in the West), it will consider the unique school- and corporate-focused culture that has emerged to give Japan a reputation for being the most workaholic nation in the world. Following that will be an analysis of the many different sources of stress for a student, both concrete and abstract, ranging from pressure from family members and teachers to peer pressure to societal expectations. It will then adopt a special focus on the psychology behind suicide among Japanese youth, exploring the cultural, historical, modern and psychological forces influencing students to kill themselves. The locus will then shift to the forces pushing for uniformity and the negative impact they could have on students who feel their individuality being crushed. Furthermore, it will touch on the trials faced by women in Japan today, concluding with some recommendations for change and prediction about the future of Japan's labor pool.

During the course of my researching this topic, I made use of certain sources in addition to the traditional academic literature available. This paper has benefited not only from the four months I spent living in Japan, but also from the five years I have spent intensively studying Japanese language and culture, living in close proximity with Japanese high school and university students and observing

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> DeOrio.

how they interacted with one another and, more importantly, how they approached their schoolwork. I have supplemented this experience with notes taken from interviews I conducted with several Japanese citizens (mostly college age, but some from the previous generation) about their own experiences with the Japanese education system. Those interviews helped me to form a better picture of the problems facing Japan today.

Since I first began studying Japan, I have been consistently astonished by the suppression of individual thought that is so ever-present in its society. It is a country where things must be done in consensus, or not done at all; while there are a series of social mechanisms whereby one may force consensus with relative ease (everyone being subjugated under the most respected person present, for instance), I was immediately struck by the disconnect between this system and democracy; how can a culture so based on obeisance and accepting the opinions of more distinguished individuals possibly sustain a political system that depends on informed individuals formulating their own opinions and making an important decision based on that? If the Japanese model truly works as advertised, and citizens are trained from birth to accept the decisions of others rather than asserting themselves, then democracy is truly in danger in Japan. Therefore, a secondary objective in writing this paper is to encourage a restructuring of the education system to promote individuality in a way that will defend Japanese democracy. Democracy may be a new concept in Japan, but historically it is not much newer than the education system.

After opening to the world in 1854, Japan underwent a rapid push towards modernization that is known as the *Meiji Restoration*. Recognizing their technological inferiority, the Japanese government immediately took steps to rectify the national backwardness.

Many characterize what Japan did at this time as "rational shopping." They borrowed technology, social systems, infrastructure, and educational methods from countries around the world and adapted and fitted them to their own needs and culture. They used what worked and abandoned what did not. To do this, the Meiji oligarchs set off

on an around the world junket in 1871 known as the Iwakura Mission, named for the head of the delegation, Iwakura Tomomi. They spent several months each in the United States, England and Europe, and studied everything they encountered from banking systems to zoos. They brought home anything which might be useful to Japan, in one form or another, including a police system modeled somewhat on the French system, an educational system influenced by both America and Prussia, and new forms of agriculture.<sup>4</sup>

While some of those nations or systems have since passed out of existence, in Japan many of their traditions are still alive. The Japanese education system, mostly based on the Prussian model, even today boasts distinctive uniforms, a focus on patriotism and a strong physical education element to prepare the populace for military service.

To best understand the structure of Japanese education, it is important to realize that every step of the process, even from the first days of preschool, is in pursuit of the ultimate goal of placement in a high-profile company. Students generally enter an elementary school based on its proximity to their homes, but there are also cases of series of schools operating under the same ruling body, where passing the intelligence test as a preschooler guarantees acceptance into the associated elementary, middle, high school and university. However, this format is not the norm, and there is fierce competition at every level for acceptance into high-rated schools. The overriding notion is as follows: acceptance into a good school at a lower level improves one's chances at being accepted into a good school at the next level, eventually leading to acceptance to a good university from which the best corporations will recruit their students. Each rung of the academic ladder is climbed not through the rounded application process favored in America, but by passing a series of grueling entrance examinations. Many students spend as much time outside of school preparing for these exams as they spend in class each day (and don't forget that in Japan, school is year-round, six days a week). These exams are monoliths of math, science, and language facts, requiring Herculean efforts of memorization

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4 Christensen.

rather than relying on cognitive reasoning or critical thinking skills in any way. The English requirement that most universities include on their exams is a special challenge; despite English being part of the curriculum of every Japanese school, it is generally taught by teachers who are not fluent in English themselves, focusing only on reading and writing to the exclusion of conversation. A student's entire future, then, can be determined by the outcome of a single exam. Students who fail their university entrance exams are known as *ronin*, a term that used to refer to a samurai without a master, someone who had lost his purpose in life. For good reason, this gauntlet of tests has become colloquially known as *juken jigoku* – examination hell.<sup>5</sup> It is easy to see how this barrage of tests could cause enormous stress in any student, as worry from the unbearable pressure eats away at his or her psyche. Knowing that your prospects for financial success, marriage, social status and influence are counting on your performance in a single test sounds like an untenable proposition, but that is how the Japanese system works. As many Japanese corporations guarantee lifetime employment to their new hires, and restarting a career in a new company is an extremely difficult prospect, one's initial placement is a more important factor than intelligence, hard work or any other reason for advancement in society. As White says,

It is important to note that in Japan there really is only one moment of critical importance to one's career chances – the entrance examination to college. There are few opportunities to change paths or retool. Americans' belief that one can be recreated at any time in life, that the self-made person can get ahead, simply is not possible in Japan – thus the intense focus on examinations.<sup>6</sup>

Extrapolating purely from the rest of the system, one could reasonably expect the corporate hiring process to be insanely competitive and to include a very difficult exam. However, the most stressful point in a Japanese student's academic career is actually his or her university entrance exam.

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<sup>5</sup> Rohlen.

<sup>6</sup> White, 99.

College life itself is famously easy; it is all too common for students to skip nearly every class session, putting in an appearance only for the finals (the contents of which are generally drawn entirely from textbooks), and graduating from college without any difficulty.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, in getting into a highly ranked university, a student has basically “made it,” as far as Japanese terms of success are concerned. Moreover, within corporations, businessmen socialize and identify with each other based on *habatsu*, which are factions formed within companies based on which university each faction's members call their alma mater. *Habatsu* are also split along ideological lines about which direction the company should take, and great battles for control are fought outside of the bounds of normal company operation, battles fought entirely on university-of-graduation lines.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of the university-based conflicts that play out in the workplace, all of these sources of stress worsen the experience of Japanese students by an incalculable degree. However, there are many stressors affecting them which are not directly caused by the exam system (or at least are an optional component when participating in the system). The intense pressure on students to do well in their exams is not solely a personal pressure; many of them are strongly urged by their families to make great sacrifices in their pursuit of good grades, their teachers to draw the maximum benefit from their classes, and their fellow students to not excel so much as to shame their colleagues. Mothers in particular, often robbed of their opportunity to do else than care for their children and mind the house by the strict traditional gender roles in Japanese culture, find themselves measuring their success as parents in terms of the academic success of their children. Although some of the Japanese people I spoke with recalled their parents expressing no concern for academic success, when schooling is the topic at hand an attitude of blasé detachment is every bit as harmful as overemphasizing its importance. This leads many parents to enroll their children in something known as *juku*, cram school, which is essentially another few hours of schooling every day *in addition to* the regular curriculum. *Juku* are generally run as for-profit enterprises, with

7 Office of Japan Affairs 9.

8 Shimada 803.

many advertising that they help prepare for the exact questions on university exams, and in some cases offering a money-back refund should the student fail to pass. While children the world over are forced to spend part of every day on their education, it is these few hours extra that the Japanese sacrifice in the name of academic achievement that truly prevents young people from enjoying a happy childhood. Depression among eight-year-olds is a terrible concept, but unfortunately some children start *juku* that early in their academic careers.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, sometimes a student's greatest pressure comes in the form of peer pressure. Student grades are openly posted in schools, so it is easy for each student to compare his or her scores to everyone else's. Students who score in the top of the class are rewarded with positions of responsibility and authority, but they run the risk of scoring too high and making the other students look bad. This sort of average-centric mindset permeates Japanese society; I spoke with one woman who recalled her own difficult experience as part of a professional orchestra in Japan. Her ability to play her instrument was at a level above anyone else in the ensemble, but she was unable to play to her fullest potential because the obvious difference in ability would have shamed the rest of the orchestra. While this is easy to understand in principle, there is an important factor here which clearly demonstrates a key difference in Japanese and Western culture: this woman never had any kind of conversation with any other member of the orchestra about her problem. The rest of the orchestra, in fact, never even realized that she was able to play at a higher level; an important part of functioning in Japanese society is being sensitive to the mood of the group and making automatic accommodations for it. In the group-centered culture of Japan, standing out too far is always a crime, even if the way one stands out is by being superior; anyone who dares to excel too much, such as a student who shames her classmates by scoring too high, often becomes the victim of ostracism, the worst punishment available in their culture. Yet competition is not the only cause of students picking on other students; bullying is a serious problem in Japanese schools. There have been several documented instances of bullied

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9 Library of Congress.



students committing suicide, leaving behind notes explaining that their chief motivation was to escape the bullying.<sup>10</sup> Bullies (known as *ijime*) humiliate their targets physically and psychologically, force them to hand over money and generally harass them in any way that seems convenient. While this of course varies by case, in Japan bullying generally occurs for the same reason a stellar student becomes an outcast: a perceived difference sets him or her apart from the main group, at the same time opening that student up as a target of harassment and discrimination. One girl, after having earned the ire of one of the tougher girls in her class, soon found herself being bullied by no fewer than six of her classmates! Despite having no clear understanding of what she had done to anger the other girl, she was repeatedly teased and tormented by her classmates. In fact, every Japanese person I have spoken to concerning this subject can remember either being bullied personally or witnessing a “pack” of students banding together to terrorize one. In each case, the bullying was due to an immediate, well-known characteristic setting the target apart: distressingly, one woman I spoke to recalled her classmates acting cruel towards a mentally handicapped child. It seems that any difference, no matter how harmless or uncontrollable, is grounds enough for ostracism from the group. Worse yet, this type of bullying often continues for years on end; if no other more obviously different target presents itself, the bullies tend to settle in for the long haul. Usually such an arrangement will last until the students all graduate from their current school; should several of the bullies wind up together again in the next school with their target, the status quo is more than likely to be maintained. The Japanese graphic novel series *GTO* [an acronym for Great Teacher Onizuka, the tough-as-nails high school teacher with a heart of gold] features a prime example of this phenomenon. In the series, a young-looking male high school student finds himself the victim of three of the girls from his class. Their bullying consists mainly of humiliating him by physically overpowering him and forcing him to dress in a ridiculous fashion; they harden the psychological impact, however, by taking degrading pictures all the while and

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<sup>10</sup> Matsumoto.

threatening to release them should he ever complain about their actions openly. His teacher enters the plot when he must save the life of the boy, who has decided to kill himself in order to escape his tormentors.<sup>11</sup> While *GTO* is fiction, it unfortunately draws its content more or less from real life circumstances that have been highly publicized by the Japanese media.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, this publicity has done nothing to discourage bullies from continuing their practices or to encourage victims to come forward. Consequently, bullying takes place not only within grade levels, but across them as well. Upperclassmen take advantage of the younger students within their clubs, treating them as virtual slaves in a cycle that will repeat itself once those underclassmen have taken over. This practice is institutionalized in what is known as the *sempai-kouhai* (upperclassman-lowerclassman) relationship. Similar to the corporate culture, the superior member of any relationship may make virtually any demand of the inferior; denying one of these requests is a more terrible social gaffe than most Japanese are willing to make. Japanese society is rife with *sempai-kouhai* relationships, as the elder member in any relationship is required to take the dominant role.<sup>13</sup> This of course creates a great deal of unfairness, but there has never been any pretense to a merit-based society in Japan; although respect can be earned in varying degrees through personal achievement (most notably becoming a doctor, lawyer, or similar professional), in the end age acts as a trump card to completely override any other consideration in determining who deserves the greatest respect. This exploitative relationships that result are part and parcel of the Japanese system; indeed, the *justification* for it is that, one day, the exploited themselves will be older, and thus able to inflict their whims on the upcoming generation. For a nation that stands to have next to no upcoming generation over the next decades, this reliance on bullying the younger set is a frightening proposition.<sup>14</sup> But *sempai-kouhai* relationships are institutionalized and expected, and complaints often go unheeded due to the general Japanese desire to

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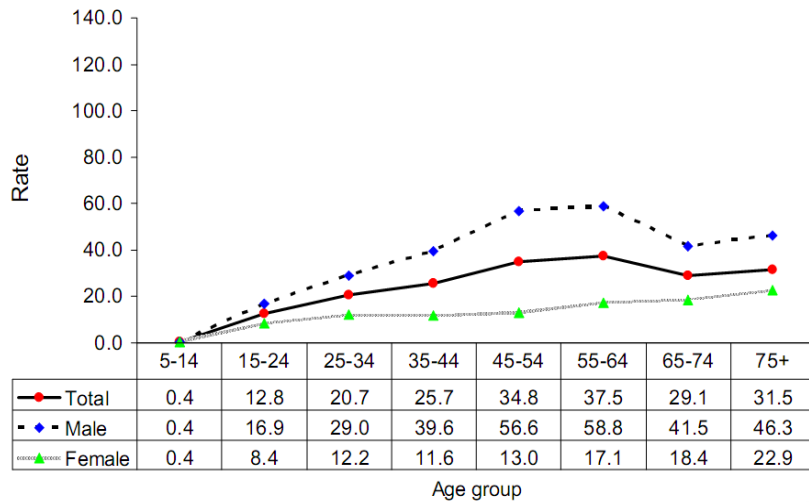
11 Fujisawa.

12 Watanabe.

13 Yamamoto.

14 Chapple.

Suicide rates (per 100,000), by gender and age, Japan, 2004.



*Data shown is from the World Health Organization*

pretend that there are no problems and act as though everything is progressing smoothly in the interests of group harmony. These problems are made all the worse by the unwillingness of teachers to get involved in what they view as a matter between students. Unfortunately, it is likely that many teachers in Japan also contribute to student stress levels. Teachers are allowed to encourage good grades by physically punishing underperforming students, and frequent house calls to discuss a student's poor grades with his or her parents are considered the standard duties of a teacher. However, these meetings often have little effect on the student's behavior; many parents adopt a hands-off approach, relying on the schools to offer their children the structure needed to learn and grow. Regretfully, a teacher can cause as many problems being hands-off as when he or she is too involved; one woman I spoke with described to me how a certain professor "liked the Asahi Newspaper, so any paper handed in to him that cited it was sure to receive an A." She recalled another professor who insisted that her students

regurgitate her opinion back to her nearly word-for-word if they wanted a good grade. This sort of lazy teaching is as damaging to students as overworking them, as it leaves them softened and completely unprepared for the high-pressure, individually demanding reality of a full-time job (or even a normally graded class!). Lastly, as stated before with the *ronin* issue, societal pressure can be a very serious form of stress. The Japanese system lays out a set of very specific expectations, the least of which is that an individual does his or her part to contribute to society. The elevation of the salaryman in terms of pure social status is a strong indicator of the importance of fulfilling the plans of society; therefore, failing to get into college hurts not only oneself. When a Japanese student cannot pass the college entrance exams, he or she is considered not only to have shamed parents and teachers, but also to have let down society at large. It is easy to see how this sort of pressure could weigh on a person's psyche, and that anyone would seek a means of relieving it. Unfortunately, for various reasons, suicide all too often becomes that means of escape.

As of 2004, Japan had the 9th-highest suicide rate in the world, and numbers one through eight are either third-world nations or former Soviet satellites.<sup>15</sup> The suicide epidemic in Japan is not restricted to one age group, unfortunately. While the elderly represent the highest rates of suicide, teenagers contribute a significant enough portion to be very troubling, and there are even a discomfoting number of suicide before the age of 10. In addition to the universal reasons to commit suicide (despair or a desire to escape from misery), Japan has several cultural elements which lead to an increased awareness and acceptance of suicide as a viable alternative to continued life, as well as a romanticized view of suicide in the form of the *samurai* tradition *seppuku*, colloquially known as *hara-kiri*. Furthermore, the attention given to the problem of suicide publicizes the issue and makes it popular, and the anonymity of the Internet provides a convenient forum for potential suicides to goad each other on. This nonchalance towards the value of human life is understandable, given certain

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15 World Health Organization.

aspects of Japanese history. Before its unification under the Tokugawa shogunate in 1600, Japan endured more than a century of constant, merciless warfare. This time period is known as *Sengoku*, or the warring states period. Alliances were formed and broken, entire families were executed over the failure of one member, and the nobility and perfection of the *samurai* warrior ideal found its proving ground. Part of that ideal was a strong compunction against incurring any sort of shame. Shame could be acquired by failing at any task, being captured in battle or earning the displeasure of one's *daimyou* (feudal lord). Living with any sort of shame could be unbearable for a *samurai* warrior, and therefore *seppuku*, the ritualized method of cutting one's own stomach open (often with the help of a second, known as a *kaishakunin*, to cut off the dying *samurai's* head and spare him the terrible pain of a stomach wound), became popularized as the manly way of coping with failure. It was every *samurai's* wish that he either die in battle or by his own hand; anything else would be too shameful to comprehend. It is important to keep in mind that *seppuku*, although considered the height of manliness, was in no way limited to just men. Although it took a different form (that of stabbing a dagger through one's throat), female members of the *samurai* class had equal recourse in turning to *seppuku* to make up for shame that they or their families had incurred; this is an important consideration given that the proportion of Japanese female suicides is higher than the international average (male suicides outweigh females by approximately 3:1, on average).<sup>16</sup> Although the *samurai* and their sources of shame have disappeared from Japanese society, their legacy remains as a noble ideal, and *seppuku* is a part of this ideal. Additionally, Japanese culture has never been strongly inculcated with the Judeo-Christian moral tradition. What a Western morality takes for granted can never be assumed when considering the Japanese ethics/moral system. The strongest influence on Japanese morality has been Buddhism, which argues that nirvana is achieved through the mastery of the self, at which point questions of whether to continue living are entirely the choice of the individual,

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16 NiMH.

and are largely academic. This stands in stark contrast to the Western moral tradition, where suicide has long been considered an affront to God. Many Western governments (although it is not just limited to the West), through their laws, explicitly deny people the right to choose suicide for themselves (either by banning assisted suicide [which is actually sometimes a component of *seppuku*!] or establishing a penalty for attempting suicide [and surviving]) to die. In other words, in the West, suicide is generally associated with *failure*. In Japan, suicide is more properly interpreted as *successfully coping with failure*. Lacking any strong prohibitions against suicide, it becomes very easy for a distraught Japanese to see suicide as his or her best choice. Unfortunately, the group dynamics of Japan can mean that a decision to commit suicide can easily lead others to do the same.

Since the introduction of mainstream Internet use in Japan, Internet message boards and chat rooms have provided a place for depressed and lonely individuals to make connections and share their views on life and experiences with each other. Unfortunately, as with most things on the Internet, there is a dark side to this new communication. Safe behind the Internet's anonymity, many Japanese have made arrangements with each other to commit suicide, effectively goading each other on. Although they may never even meet, knowing that theirs is a shared experience and having someone to discuss it with may be all the comfort these people need to do what they never would have been able to on their own.<sup>17</sup> To make matters worse, the Japanese media has given high amounts of publicity to this subject, meaning that it is steadily permeating Japanese society as one more effective means of dealing with stress.

In addition to suicide pacts, the Japanese media's coverage of suicides has another unintentional side effect: it leads to a high number of copycat suicides, known in Japan as *atoijisatsu* (lit. chasing-after suicide).<sup>18</sup> These are not unheard of even in Western cultures; individuals, upon hearing of a particularly memorable suicide, or one by someone whose circumstances were a close match for their

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<sup>17</sup> BBC News.

<sup>18</sup> Asia Times Online.

own, find themselves inspired to follow in that person's footsteps. Granted, this is a much more serious problem in the highly homogeneous society of Japan; it is much more likely that individuals will have more in common (at least on the surface, but what else can a news program express?), and Japanese group dynamics mean that any connection with the deceased implies an immediate camaraderie that does not exist in the West.

In some ways, the Japanese media actually contributes to the suicide problem by glorifying suicide or treating it lightly. Television samurai dramas, which have always been extremely popular in Japan, often end the main character honorably committing *seppuku* or engaging in a lover's suicide with an illicit romantic interest. In addition, in 2002 the Japanese film *Jisatsu Saakuru* (Suicide Club) was released, which depicts an unexplainable wave of mass suicides throughout Japan. The film is filled with shots of Japanese students killing themselves by nearly every imaginable method, but leaping in front of trains or off of buildings is especially prominent. While the movie clearly attempts to maximize the horror of the mass suicides, it ends with absolutely no value judgment; there is a conspiracy to make children commit suicide, but those who discover it do nothing to denounce or stop it. Indeed, the movie implies that suicide is a way of becoming more in touch with oneself!<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Apple.



*A depiction of a scene shown thousands of times in the game Persona 3  
(Image from GameplayMonthly.com)*

Film and television are not the only instances of Japanese media in which suicide is glorified or viewed as a means to an end. The 2007 PlayStation game *Persona 3* is set in a Japanese high school where players must attend classes and balance their interpersonal relationships by day, then descend into a dungeon located under the school to battle monsters at night. In order to battle those monsters, however, the students must activate ever stronger powers within themselves; the key to doing this is a tool shaped like a gun, which the player must have his character hold up to his or her head and fire.<sup>20</sup> Although the game stresses that this is not a real gun and there is no harm to the character, the game portrays the flash and bang of gunfire, as well as the character's eyes going blank and head recoiling from the blast. As a sign of the Japanese desensitized attitude towards suicide (or perhaps its obsession

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<sup>20</sup> Gameplay Monthly.



with it), since its release *Persona 3* has sold 370,000 copies in Japan (compared to only 200,000 in the United States).<sup>21</sup> Although it would be ridiculous to claim that the Japanese media is responsible for the high youth suicide rate in Japan, it certainly bears its share of responsibility (especially with regards to *atoijisatsu*). However, it is necessary to keep in mind that the media elements which especially highlight suicide (the TV programs, movies, and video games) are niche games, possibly made popular by capitalizing on the controversy of portraying suicide rather than seeking a market which *wants* to see suicide in its media. In other words, whatever the ultimate root of Japan's suicide problem, it is unfair to focus only on the media.

All of the Japan-specific explanations for the high suicide rate aside, there remains only one serious cause, one serious excuse, for suicide. The cause is despair, hopelessness, a sense that things will never get better (or, more accurately, that they could not possibly get any worse, so ending them would be an improvement). Suicide, by definition, means giving up the prospect of finding any other solution to one's problems. In the West, there is a strongly reinforced taboo against suicide, so it is very difficult to reconcile it as a personal choice. In Japan, however, no such stigma exists, and cultural approval offers suicide as a ready tool to escape from a bad situation. Nevertheless, it may be that Japan's cultural proclivities towards suicide are ultimately meaningless; as the highest suicide rates in the world are in former Soviet satellite countries, it may simply be that Japan is among the most depressing, despair-inducing, soul-crushing places to live in the world

In our examination of sources of stress in Japan up until now, it became obvious that the high levels of stress can make life miserable for many Japanese students. However, the analysis of suicide was unable to present a suitable reason for a Japanese person who has **not** failed or incurred shame to take his or her own life. There must be valid reason for Japanese students who are not facing the prospect of becoming *ronin* to kill themselves. Even the *ronin* issue is not a concrete one; there are

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21 VGChartz.com.

ample employment opportunities for Japanese who have not gone to college; a modern *ronin* is explicitly someone who, having failed the college entrance exams, plans to try again the next year. There is nothing stopping anyone who fails the college exams from immediately entering the work force, although admittedly in a position of lower prestige and salary. There is no reason a hard-working, intelligent individual cannot be every bit as successful in one of these jobs as in a corporation. The reasonable conclusion, then, is that there is something endemic about Japanese society which causes certain people to dread living in it so much that they are driven to kill themselves. While the stresses and pressure of modern life in Japan are certainly a component in this decision, I believe that this decision is actually a subconscious rejection of the very shape and fabric of Japanese society. French-Algerian author Albert Camus once said, "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide." Yet the construction of Japanese society is specifically designed to deny individuals the freedom of personal choice; it is a society founded on responsibility to the group and obeisance in all things towards those older than oneself (even if only by a couple of years). Everything is founded on the group; uniqueness is the greatest crime possible for a Japanese. Even the supposedly individual choice of suicide in Japan becomes indelibly associated with the group through Internet pacts and copycat suicides. Certain people point out the unorthodox trends of Japanese fashion as examples of individuality blossoming, but a deviation from the norm does not mean individuality if it is actually a subculture. The innumerable groups of Japanese young people who set themselves apart from mainstream society aesthetically still feel the undeniable urge to fit in, at least with each other. The importance of belonging to a group can be the most psychologically harmful part of Japanese society; in particular, the Japanese are often required to put their obligations to their jobs (the company is considered to be one group, though it may be made up of many smaller groups as described earlier as *habatsu*) ahead of all others, including their families. Anyone unable to do so is considered less than a team player, and effectively shunned. There are other ways in which the economic needs of

corporations have great influence over the rest of Japanese society; schools focus on math, sciences, and other technical skills to the exclusion of more artistic pursuits. This is part of a deliberate effort to produce better workers for corporations, so skills that will aid businessmen are the most heavily stressed. In order to create better worker drones, the education program is heavily reliant on rote memorization of facts rather than cognitive reasoning or critical thinking; this emphasis on the importance of what is already known implicitly rejects individual-based thinking, including curiosity and creativity. The Japanese ethic is one of respect and obeisance towards one's elders; the general understanding is that whatever one needs to know can be learned by listening to someone older. Elders therefore discourage critical thinking, as a genuine examination of a certain situation (as opposed to blind obedience) could hurt their control over society. The Japanese history classes that are a required component of secondary education never deal with the *how* or the *why* of historical occurrences; they are entirely composed of memorization the names of individuals involved and the dates of historical events. This focus on pure recall is telling; in the Japanese worldview, an individual will be fine as long as he or she can remember the instructions of their elders – hence, the strong emphasis on memorization over critical thinking in their examination process. As a result, Japanese students never learn to *enjoy* learning; their academic experiences are entirely composed of being forced to do things they would rather not. There is none of the intellectual curiosity present in other educational environments, and education is fully considered an obstacle to be overcome in the pursuit of a good job. This narrow way of thinking naturally limits the ability of individuals to consider their situations well. The full extent to which individual thought is suppressed can be very troubling; one university staff member described to me how Japanese students, studying abroad in the United States, would come to her asking for help with paper subjects (the university workload is much, much heavier in America than in Japan). Upon asking them what they wanted to write about, they would immediately begin to describe their topic, but would be very careful to express no opinion; they have been

conditioned, more or less, to accept opinions from above. It may be that those young people who kill themselves in Japan do so because they cannot bear the thought of living in a society that is so closed off to recognizing or tolerating the value of the individual; even in spite of the group dynamics that play into it, there is still no more individual choice than suicide. Finally, there is a serious gender discrimination problem in Japan; women, historically, have been treated somewhat as second-class citizens, lacking the same degree of career choices and social freedoms that men enjoy. Social roles are heavily formalized, meaning that women who get married are expected to become homemakers and devote themselves fully to raising children (although, obviously, the “raising children” part of this equation has been decreasing in recent years); companies are unwilling to hire women to important positions, operating under the assumption that they will all get married, have children, and stop working. At all times, women are required to adhere to stricter standards of language, speaking respectfully to men whereas the men may address the women without Japanese terms of respect. The ideal Japanese woman, in a Japanese man's eyes, is completely submissive, placing in all things a man's interests ahead of her own. This feudal leftover contrasts sharply with the modern independent, strong-willed career woman that has become the new Barbie doll ideal in America. In fact, Western women living in Japan often encounter difficulty finding dates; their self-confidence comes across as far too masculine for Japanese tastes, either intimidating Japanese men or making them feel too much like they themselves are dating a man.<sup>22</sup> All of this means that a woman growing up in Japan has fewer options available to her than a man, and much greater societal pressure to settle down and get married (especially in late of the coming population crisis!). A strong woman who desires to maintain her independence and consciously avoids getting married may be subject to the same social stigma as any other boldly different element of Japanese society, generally shunned and barely tolerated. Every Japanese woman I have talked to about this facet of society freely acknowledges the general unfairness,

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<sup>22</sup> Supacat.

although older women are much more likely to view it as a necessary part of Japanese culture. I talked to one woman whose higher education and career were informed by her decision to “escape” from Japan and its rigid gender structures. Living in America, she has been able to attain a level of professional respect that would have been impossible back in Japan. Many young Japanese women recognize their limited opportunities; given enhanced communications and new chances to study abroad causing them to learn more about the comparative circumstances of women in other countries, it is no wonder that many of these women will decide to build their lives outside of their home country. This is especially important to realize in light of the incredibly low birth rate in Japan; if there is one thing this island nation cannot afford, it is the loss of prospective mothers.

The structure of Japanese society and education creates a system of stressors, pressure and stamps out individualism in a way that makes students miserable and contributes directly to most young people's suicide. The highly competitive exam system, which hinges students' whole futures in a single test, causes them great duress, and the stigma attached to going to a bad college, or not going to college at all, creates one more negative incentive which is only harmful for students in the end. They encounter further stress from the system of exam preparation which requires absurd commitments of time and effort, denying them a real childhood. Competition with classmates causes even gifted students to fear doing too well and facing reprisals from their peers. Bullies create an unbearable environment for any student who shows any sign of being different, and teachers run the gamut from pushing students too hard to not taking enough of an interest in their educations. Parents are in the same boat, either relying too much on the schools to give their children life skills or taking too active a role in their child's education, pressuring them by making it obvious that the family's hopes are riding on the child's academic success. Lastly, the strong impulse to succeed that pervades society causes students a great deal of pain if they are unable to live up to the expectations of the world around them. With such a vast array of factors causing them trauma, students under all this stress are often driven to

suicide, which is acceptable under the cultural traditions of Japan. The noble ideal of the *samurai* and the media's obsession and publicization of suicide, in addition to the ease of finding willing partners for suicide pacts over the Internet, lead to a high likelihood of an unhappy Japanese choosing suicide as the answer. However, the real problem probably lies in the underlying assumptions of Japanese society and the influence of corporations on the schooling system and social group relations.

Japanese culture does not acknowledge second chances. Perhaps because of the *samurai* tradition of killing oneself after a single significant failure, there is little to no belief in redemption, in making up for one's failure. While the *ronin* are a notable exception, they endure unremitting pressure from their families and society until they are accepted to a university or give up on their dreams. This stands in stark contrast to America, where opportunity is one of the nation's founding principles, and there is no shame attached to failure so long as one is willing to try again. This creates a huge well of despair for any young Japanese; they have nothing to look forward to but chance after chance of ruining their futures. The despair embodied by this life of drudgery and stepping-in-time will wear down at the resistance of even the most intelligent, capable individual. Repetition and dullness is even more difficult for gifted individuals to handle, as their latent desires to express themselves conflict with the restrictive mores of Japanese society. Of course, there are many Japanese who do find ways to express themselves as individuals despite the nature of their culture; if uniformity is a disease, then Japanese society is certainly sick, but corporations are the vector.

The schooling curriculum in Japan has been shaped to meet the needs of corporations, producing technically skilled, extremely obedient workers. Unfortunately, by their very nature, corporations are incapable of acknowledging the value of the individual, and uniqueness, excess creativity and risk-taking are heavily frowned upon as irresponsible ways of ordering a company. These characteristics are hardly confined to Japanese corporations; any office setting, structured as it is upon the same basic template, will lead to a similar environment. The sterile office, having been

identified as the most conducive setup for profit-making, has spread throughout the world. Yet only in Japan has its influence extended so thoroughly through the rest of society. Several Japanese have told me that the *sarariiman* [salaryman, businessman] has replaced the *samurai*, but their spirits are the same. The briefcase has superseded the sword, but the financial battle is as meaningful as physical conflict in modern Japan. Just as feudal Japanese society was designed exclusively to cater to the whims of the *samurai* class, Japan today is a virtual national shrine to the *sarariiman*. This is the reason for the school system being structured the way it is; the nation is a slave to its highest ideal, and at the moment its highest ideal is business. This acumen for focusing on whatever can produce the best workers for corporations, combined with the strong societal stigma against being different in any way, is the root of the negative psychological effects of Japanese schools. It will be a long road before any of these systems change in a meaningful way.

Nevertheless, there are some ways in which small but systemic change could be likely in the near future. In order to correct the harmful aspects of the Japanese education model, several important alterations must occur. These include correcting the incredibly stress-inducing exam-based university admissions process, encouraging exchange programs to increase familiarity with and toleration of difference, discouraging the lifetime employment system of most corporations, and apportioning greater individual choice in class selections for secondary school students. First, the system of exams must be replaced with a more holistic acceptance process (at the very least for the universities), to alleviate some of the burden of “exam hell” and diversify the set of important intellectual factors (other than the ability to memorize) that are involved in the college admissions process. Second, the intense homogeneity and isolation of Japanese culture and experience must be countered in some way, if only to offer some examples or role models of someone different who is also right. This could be achieved through government-sponsored programs emphasizing the value of individualism (some minor efforts like these are, in fact, already in effect) or by increasing the rate of immigration (an unlikely prospect at

best), but the most telling key to this problem would be an increase in the rate of student exchanges with other countries. Bringing foreigners into Japan will naturally increase the tolerance of the Japanese for what is different, while sending Japanese out into the world will give them experience with foreigners and enable them to compare the Japanese system with another example in the world. Third, the practice of guaranteed lifetime employment in Japanese firms must come to an end (or at least be scaled back heavily, although this process has already begun). Such a business structure only leads to stratification and stagnancy, encouraging petty squabbles between rival *habatsu* cliques and decreasing the likelihood of fresh ideas or talent becoming influential in any way. Last, there must be a greater focus on individual choice in the curriculum for secondary school students; whereas at the moment, school curricula are organized based on the general needs of the student body vis a vis entrance examinations (although many students claim to derive absolutely no benefit towards these from their high school classes, in comparison to cram school), there is a great need for a system in which students are encouraged to pursue their interests in a classroom environment, rather than restricting generally non-academic pursuits such as art, sports, music, and shop to a less important club setting. While clubs often come to dominate a students' life, his or her performance within that context resolutely lacks significance in his or her future. It is important to give students a chance to try out all of their skills, rather than forcing them to dedicate most of their time to one hobby or interest area.

The Japanese government itself has already begun work on correcting some of these critical issues. As with most instances of a government being spurred to action, in this case the motivation is the economy. Recognizing that the shape of first-world economies has moved away from sheer industrial production to more creativity-based commodities (for example, entertainment goods like movies and music, software and high-quality electronics) requires a response consisting of a renewed (or perhaps, in Japan's case, the adoption of a) focus on individual creativity and innovative thinking. The catalyst for this change, simply put, was the terrible economic downturn that Japan suffered in the



1990s. It can be considered the end of Japan's honeymoon with modernization; rapid economic growth, unchecked, inevitably leads to recession as the country fails to notice the change in the economic climate until it is too late to respond and avoid it. Just now coming out of that recession, Japanese economic experts are advising this change in industrial paradigm both as a means of better participating in the new world economy, and providing a sort of insurance against a revisiting of the economic trials of the 1990s. During Shinzou Abe's tenure as Prime Minister, the government introduced the Innovation 25 Initiative, designed to promote “human resource development—the encouragement of people who think creatively or ‘out of the box,’ often called ‘the nail that sticks out.’”<sup>23</sup> Refreshingly, “accepting diversity” is also an explicit part of this set of innovations. While at the moment it remains no more than a statement of values (especially given the fall of Abe's government), hopefully the fact alone that such a statement can be made at the highest level of Japanese society is a good sign of the development of views on individuality.

If all of these suggested changes are implemented, then perhaps within the next twenty years there will be some major change in students' perception of the quality of their own lives. The key elements to happiness in one's life, a sense of belonging and satisfaction, are achievable in many ways. Japanese students generally find it easy to feel like they belong; with the notable exception of the bullied, Japanese society is structured in terms of groups, and students will never feel left out so long as they are not picked on. And while a sense of satisfaction is certainly attainable given the right conditions, the quickest way to bring about that state is to allow an individual to determine what makes him or her happiest, and then to do his or her best to gain it. Although the claim exists that seeking to maximize one's personal gain is a selfish, un-Japanese trait, the corporate system and capitalism itself espouse the same goal. Perhaps these, too, have contributed to the psychological harm incurred by the Japanese populace, increasing the number of suicides which take place each year.

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<sup>23</sup> Yoshida.

In conclusion, the modern structure of the Japanese education system causes psychological harm to many of its students, in some cases creating enough stress in their lives to drive them to suicide. A student's progression through primary, secondary, and university education has an imbalanced form, often consisting of long stretches without any real requirements punctuated by life-altering exams. The importance of one school in determining the chances of getting into the next causes this to be a tiered system that categorically denies the top places in society to those who make mistakes early in life or are simply slow developers. This sense of elitism carries on in the workplace, where *habatsu* cliques wage minor political battles based on their alma maters. Students find themselves increasingly stressed by the all-consuming exams, the need to attend classes outside of school to prepare for them, and the constant brutal competition with classmates. Stress also comes from bullies, teachers, parents and the cultural paradigm in general urging them to succeed. Unfortunately, for many, the only way to deal with these negative feelings is by taking their own lives. Whether from a cultural predilection for suicide, a desire to emulate historical heroes who killed themselves, the pervasive attention given to suicides in the Japanese media or simple, horrid despair brought on by the bleakness of facing a lifetime in Japan (or a combination of the above!), suicide becomes all too often the preferred method to escape from their misery. This despair is probably in large part due to the rigid structure of Japanese society, where individualism is suppressed and the group is paramount. The leading groups in Japan today, the corporations, are the gods to whom all of society sacrifices, in order to benefit the nation. Their influence has shaped the class curricula, placing a premium on technical skills and English while moving more artistic pursuits to the back burner, while replacing critical thinking exercises with the kind of rote learning that serves one well in a board meeting, but nowhere else. A restructuring of the education system is clearly necessary, but it need not be too groundbreaking in order to still enact a suitably remedial plan. Some small changes encouraging creativity and removing some of the rigidity inherent in Japanese society will go a long way towards

eliminating many of the sources of stress for young Japanese who find themselves to be just a little different.

Japanese society has many problems, but the solutions are not as severe as they are often purported to be. Expanded opportunities to express themselves in a context that is acceptable to society will provide students with an invaluable outlet for their turbulent emotions, helping them “let off steam” without having to resort to violence. There are many strong components in the Japanese education model; it succeeds at producing plenty of industrious, technically skilled workers to fuel its economy, and obviously it is considered at worst an acceptable evil by most of the people who go through it (or else, one hopes, it would have changed already). Japan's place in the global economy is proof enough of the effectiveness of its educational methods, but this success comes at a human cost that is more and more obviously unacceptable. Change looms in the future for Japan whether the Japanese are ready to face it or not; the aging population, economic rise of China, increasing endangerment of Taiwan and declining influence of the U.S. are all major signs that the status quo will not continue for long. Japan must adapt or prepare to return to the appendix of world history.

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