



Japan's Preparatory Schools

BOARD the Bullet Train in Tokyo and as you near Nagoya, you'll find signs like "Yoyogi Seminar," and "Kawai Juku" catching the eye. There are so many of these signboards that they get in each other's way.

All of these advertise preparatory schools aimed at high school students and graduates who want to gain admission into universities. In the case of Nagoya, the Nagoya-based Kawai Juku is engaged in a no-holds-barred struggle with Yoyogi Seminar, which invaded the area from its base in Tokyo.

In Japan, a diploma from an ordinary high school doesn't automatically give you direct entry into a university. More than half of those who are admitted do so after spending one to two years as ronin, a term which means wandering samurai and is used today in reference to high school graduates who are at loose ends because they haven't been accepted by a university. Moreover this trend is accentuated by the emphasis on advanced education. This philosophy takes the form of advice which runs, "Get admitted to a strong, outstanding university. Then, after graduation, you will acquire a stable job and social status."

It is the function of these preparatory schools to instill in the ronin students the knowhow for passing university entrance examination. Of course, they give them concentrated instruction in their school subjects, but in the process they eliminate the waste and go directly to the heart of

what the students must know to pass the tests. In this, their teaching methods differ radically from those of ordinary high schools.

Each preparatory school studies thoroughly the tests given in the past by leading universities, and conducts mock tests based on, say, the examinations at Tokyo University. Some of these schools publish their own reference books for entering universities.

As of today, the number of yobiko (preparatory schools) throughout the country is 216 (not counting the many branch schools.) The market for this industry is estimated at several hundred billion yen (Y100 billion is roughly \$625 million). Large schools have a network of branches throughout Japan.

The largest of these are the Surugadai Preparatory School, the Kawai Juku and Yoyogi Seminar. The three schools combined have annual sales of Y100 billion, 80,000 students and 3,000 instructors.

In former days, the preparatory schools were distributed in patterns of regional blocs, like, feudal fiefs. Former professors retired from the area's national university and ex-teachers of the famous local high schools formed the bulwark of the preparatory schools founded to smooth the way for high school graduates to enter the national university in their prefecture. But around the 1960s, large yobiko like Yoyogi Seminar made their appearance, and began applying pressure on these local yobiko. The deciding factor which swung the balance in

the favour of the giant schools was the adoption by the Education Ministry of a common primary entrance examination for universities in Japan, the so-called kyotsu shiken.

This test is the first-stage examination used by all national and public universities in Japan. Adopted in 1979, its objective was to draft a standard test which would do away with the unfairly difficult or bizarre question, and dissuade students from turning to preparatory schools. Ironically, however, the effect was just the opposite. Knowing in advance the probable line for passing grades and aiming for that line could best be done by measuring one's self against the many other students in a large preparatory school. The result was to strengthen the preparatory schools, not weaken them.

In the bitter war thus sparked, the yobiko have been resorting to every measure possible to get advance information of plans and strategies of rival schools—they call it "studying" but "spying" is a more accurate word—and ferret out what teaching methods are being used and the number of students they attract.

School administrators are keeping an especially sharp eye out for teachers who enjoy exceptional popularity with the students. Luring them away has become a common practice. The number of "name" teachers that a school has on its rolls is the measure of its quality, and students often stand in line to enroll in classes taught by

them.

The popular lecturers often move around by plane, from north to south and back again to keep up with their superhuman schedule. Of course, they are compensated generously for the calls on their time. Some instructors receive several hundred thousand yen (Y100,000 equals \$625) for one lecture, and draw down annual stipends amounting to several tens of millions of yen (Y10 million equals \$62,500).

The students themselves accept the yobiko as an integral part of their school system. Attending preparatory schools is no longer regarded as drudgery which must be endured to win entrance into a university, but something to be enjoyed.

As students gravitate toward the three big preparatory schools the lines are being drawn for a bloody war of survival. In this situation, the schools cannot slacken up on plans for the future. Surugadai intends to build a comprehensive educational system embracing its own university and high school. Kawai Juku is bolstering its computer education programme in preparation for new advances in office automation and is polishing up plans for a network of vocational schools.

As times change, the yobiko industry is expanding into diverse fields of business, and the ensuing competition can be expected to escalate to new heights.

(YOKE)