Supplementary Education in Japan: Issues and Prospects in a Growing Unequal Society

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ABSTRACT

The increasing spread of shadow education worldwide shows an evolution of school systems integrating more and more a commercial dimension of education. In Japan, this tendency is very strong especially since the several neoliberal reforms undertaken at the different levels of the education system since the 2000s. The rapid expand of shadow education - that is gakushū juku and yobikō - did not use to be questioned in the context of rapid growth and mass-education of post-war Japan; however, in the new context of growing social inequalities that characterizes today’s Japanese society, the stakes of private tutoring are changing. Alongside the trend to invest into education at an early stage of schooling through using the services of private tutoring companies in order to access prestigious private lower secondary schools or even primary schools or kindergartens, an opposite tendency may be also observed – a growing number of young people compelled to refrain from entering higher education for economic reasons. Recent studies have showed the impact of economic resources of families on children’s academic performances as well as inequalities in academic results depending on whether children frequented private tutoring companies or not. However, these facts run counter to the fundamental principles of equality of access in education, on which Japan was based on after World War II. In this article, we will focus on the stakes and prospects of private tutoring in the context of growing inequalities, as well as on the impact of such a tendency towards merchandising education on the perceptions of education and society as a whole that Japanese youth develop - through their experiences.

KEYWORDS: Japan, supplementary education, inequalities, gakushū juku, yobikō

Introduction

Japan’s shadow education, taking place mainly at gakushū juku and yobikō (Figure 1) – that is educational businesses outside formal school where are taught academic subjects are taught – started to expand from the late 1960s...
onward, along with the increasing proportion of students going to high school and university. At that time, attending a gakushū juku and yobikō was not put into question in the context of rapid economic growth. However, in the context of economic crisis and growing inequalities that has characterized Japan since the 1990s, the role and stakes of private tutoring have changed.

Figure 1: Yobikō and gakushū juku

In the first place, we will present the development of shadow education in the context of post-war Japan’s mass education and meritocratic educational system, characterized by a high social mobility. Then we will show how the role of Japanese education system as a meritocratic “social elevator” started to decline since the 1990s, as a consequence of the economic recession. Finally, we will present the new role and stakes of shadow education in the context of a growing unequal society.

1. Mass-Education and Meritocracy in Post-War Japan
Japan’s shadow education developed rapidly from the late 1960s onwards. Along with the postwar educational expansion, the number of young Japanese attending a gakushū juku or a yobikō also increased. An official national survey on shadow education was first conducted in 1976 by the Ministry of Education in order to monitor the growth of the phenomenon. It was in response to several media reports focusing on the
downsides of excessive shadow education in the 1970s. Actually, as a result of the rapid expansion of enrollment rates at high school between 1960 and 1980 which increased from 57.7% to 94.2%, almost all of young people became eligible for tertiary education. As a consequence, the competition for university places, whose access continued to be limited, became fiercer, and shadow education, until then was mostly used by elite students, expanded rapidly through the 1970s and 1980s. During this time, taking lessons at a *ga kū shū juku* or a *yū bikō* became a “normal” activity that not only involved high school students or high school graduates retaking exams (i.e. *rōnin*), but also spread to include middle school students and to a lesser extent – elementary school students.

![Graph showing the evolution of *ga kū shū* attendance rates by primary school and middle school students (MEXT 2008)](image)

**Figure 2: Evolution of *ga kū shū* attendance rates by primary school and middle school students (MEXT 2008)**

In addition, the institution of a widely known hierarchy of universities with tight links to status levels in the white-collar labour market contributed to the competition among high school students in order to be accepted at the “best university possible” (Galan 2018).

At that time, shadow education was not questioned in terms of “equity” since the majority of people – belonging to what most believed to be the “new middle class” – could afford it. Furthermore, the Japanese conception
of the child, which assumes that all children have identical capacities and that results are determined by their efforts (Galan 2005), has probably encouraged many families to embark in good faith on the path of academic competition and to have recourse to private tutoring as an education strategy. Moreover, the education system was considered egalitarian and meritocratic, and social promotion through education was guaranteed. As Kariya Takehiko explained, Japan’s late industrialization progressed at a rapid pace and a large-scale occupational transformation accompanying this process occurred over a very short time period of thirty years, from 1950 to 1980. The rapid speed of educational expansion in secondary education took place more or less in parallel so that “structural mobility” was large both in the realm of employment and in the realm of education (Kariya 2013). A strong symbiotic relationship between systems of secondary and higher education and economic structures developed so that schools increasingly became more and more feeders for the economic institutions. Therefore, a kind of educational/economic pipeline (Figure 2) emerged, at least in the popular imagination.

Figure 3: Educational/economic pipeline system (Yamada 2009)

This system is represented by an offshoot of pipelines through which students are carried and automatically find a job corresponding to the level of their diploma. For instance, after graduating from an industrial high school (kōgyō kōkō工業高校) one could become a regular employee in a
factory; after graduating a commercial high school (shōgyō kōkō 商業高校) one could work in the commercial service of a medium-sized company; graduating from a junior college (tandai 短大) allowed one to get an ordinary job in a big company; a graduate from university (yonensei daigaku 四年生大学) could be employed as a white-collar worker in a big company (Yamada 2009).

Social selection by education rapidly expanded into a mass phenomenon so that most young people belonging to the generation that went to high school in the 1970s could experience for the first time meritocratic selection through schooling. As a matter of fact, the affluence brought by high growth removed, albeit not completely, the obstacle of limited household means as a barrier advancement to high school. Having experienced such a high social fluidity in a short period had a considerable impact on the popular perception of education as a means of climbing up the social ladder.

2. Transition Towards an Unequal Society

However, the bursting of the financial bubble in the early 1990s and the ensuing recession have profoundly changed Japanese society and its job market. Consequently, the role of Japanese education system as a meritocratic “social elevator” started to decline. Young graduates had more and more difficulty in finding a job adequate to their level of qualification. A university degree did not guarantee any more a white-collar job in a well-known company. For instance, between 1991 and 2000, the graduate rate employment fell from 81.3% to 55.8% (MEXT 2017). The excessive cost of university education and the very few “real scholarships” (that do not need to be repaid), have compelled increasing numbers of students to quit university. Moreover, a growing number of graduates are driven into debts because they are unable to repay the great financial burden of the “scholarships”, or shall we say “student loan”, that they have received in order to study at university. Therefore, we may say that Japanese society has been caught in what Louis Chauvel, a French sociologist, calls the “spiral of decline”, that is the emergence of intergenerational poverty (a cycle of poverty of poor families who become impoverished for several generations) (Chauvel 2016).

The pipeline has, in the minds of many, broken (Figure 3). Although the end of the pipeline is getting smaller in terms of employment opportunities, the size of the pipeline does not change. In some case, it also gets bigger (for instance graduate schools accept more students). Consequently, pipelines start breaking up and leaking. Therefore, graduating from a given
school does not guarantee anymore getting a job corresponding to the level of qualification.

Figure 4: Broken pipeline system (Yamada 2009)

According to Yamada, this reality has profoundly transformed the relationship between families and universities and, more widely, the entire education system, which degenerated into a breach of trust. Therefore, a feeling of despair has started to spread among young people who began questioning the pertinence of such sacrifices in terms of financial as well as personal investment: “Is it worth studying so hard and spending so much money if there is no reward in the end?” (Yamada 2009). The declining faith in the education system was reflected in the last decades among young Japanese people as a decline in the motivation to study. Nonetheless, this group is not homogeneous with respect to motivation. As Kariya Takehiko’s statistical analysis demonstrated, class disparities in study effort (measured by the amount of learning time outside school) expanded in the years 1980-2000. In other words, there is an increasing polarization occurring on a social basis between students who are highly motivated or make continued effort, and those who merely try to
get by or disengage from study altogether. That is what Kariya calls the “incentive divide” (Kariya 2013).

In a recent study, Mimizuka Hiroaki has demonstrated a strong impact of attending a shingaku juku (gōshū juku specialized in preparation for entrance exams) on academic performance among sixth year’s primary school students in the Kanto area. In order to measure only the impact of gōshū juku, he isolated the variables related to the children’s family background such as “family’s wealth” and “family’s cultural background”. The grades (in arithmetics) of students who attended a shingaku juku were considerably higher than those of students who did not (Mimizuka 2014). As the distribution of grades shows, whereas the non-attenders’ grades reach a peak around 30-39 points (21%), for those of the attenders’ a peak can be seen at 90 points and more (21.9%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>&lt; 10</th>
<th>10 ≤ 19</th>
<th>20 ≤ 29</th>
<th>30 ≤ 39</th>
<th>40 ≤ 49</th>
<th>50 ≤ 59</th>
<th>60 ≤ 69</th>
<th>70 ≤ 79</th>
<th>80 ≤ 89</th>
<th>≥ 90</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not attending (%)</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending (%)</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Distribution of grades of 6th year primary school students in arithmetics depending on they went to a shingaku juku or not (Kanto area) (2003) (Mimizuka 2014)

In his report, Mimizuka has also highlighted the different variables that have an influence on the school results in descending order: (1) out-of-school investment, (2) parents’ educational aspirations, (3) income, (4) mothers’ diploma. This suggests that school’s grades of children living in large urban zones tend to be highly determined by their families’ socioeconomic background and families’ educational practices. Mimizuka identifies therefore a rise of what he calls “parentocracy”: nowadays, the parents’ wealth and aspirations determine their children’s school achievements, instead of the children’s ability and efforts as it used to be in the late meritocracy.

On one hand, there is fierce competition to get into the few pipelines that still work properly (i.e. guarantee a good job upon graduation, a case in point being medical studies which apply a strict quota). For those whose
family has chosen such an elitist path, the competition is fierce and starts at
an early age, as shows by the constantly rising rate of children taking
entrance exams at private and national middle schools, especially in Tōkyō
metropolitan area in the last decades. For instance, in this area, the
percentage of children enrolled in the last year of primary school that were
registered for an entrance exam in a middle school (private, national or
public combining middle and high schools) has more than doubled
between 1986 and 2008 from 8% to 20.6% (Nichinōken shingaku jōhō
shitsu, 2008). In Tōkyō, 25.4% of children are enrolled in a private or
national middle school as opposed to the Japanese average of 7.9% (Nikkei
2014). Needless to say that in order to be accepted by a private middle
school, preparation in a shingaku juku is necessary. Given the expense of
the preparation for entrance examinations of private schools at a shingaku
juku, not to mention the tuition and fees charged by the private schools
themselves, differences in economic resources are bound to matter (Kariya
2013).

On the other hand, money has become a barrier to education, especially
tertiary education as the recent rise in university dropout rates suggests
(chūto taigakusha 中途退学者) of recent years: from 2.41% in 2007 to
2.65% in 2012, according to a survey conducted by the Ministry of
Education (MEXT, 2014). According to the same survey, in 2012 the
percentage of students who left college temporarily (kyūgakusha 休学者)
was 2.3% as opposed to 1.7% in 2007. The lack of money was the top
reason given by students who quit (20,4%) or took leave from university
(15.5%). By contrast, only 14% and 15,4% respectively did so in 2007.
Therefore, as we can see, there is on one side a tendency among privileged
families to choose elitist educational paths, whereas on the other hand,
students have to drop out for economic reasons.

3. Stakes and Prospects of Shadow Education
In such an unequal society, it appears that going to a gōshū juku heavily
influences children’s future educational path, and consequently their future
professional life. More than a “simple individual choice”, going to a
gōshū juku also has, on a larger scale, a decisive impact on society as a
whole since it tends to make competition even more unfair.
This situation has led to what Yamada Masahiro calls a “society with
unequal hopes” (kibō kakusa shakai 希望格差社会), that is a society in
which there emerges a bipolarization between those whose efforts are
rewarded (i.e. the “winners”, kachigumi 勝ち組) and those whose efforts
are useless (i.e. the “loosers”, makegumi 負け組). Yamada thus compares
this situation of limited access to employment to the one depicted in the book (and film) Battle Royale\textsuperscript{1}, that is a metaphor of Japanese society in which only the winners’ group survives:

勝ち組（期待通りの職に就け、当該の学校に行くという努力が報われた人）は、「敗者は自己責任」と無関心にならざるをえない。逆に、教育負け組（学校に入っても、期待する職に就けない人）は、努力が無駄になると絶望を感じ、かつ、努力が無駄になった責任を自分で追わなければならない。(Yamada 2009)

“The winners’ group, that is those who managed to find the job that they expected and thus had their educational efforts rewarded, is bound to feel indifferent to the losers. The former consider that the latter are entirely responsible for their failure. Conversely, the losers’ group, that is those who, despite they graduated, did not manage to find the job that they expected, are driven to despair by the discovery that their efforts were useless and they have to bear full responsibility for this uselessness.”

This reality makes academic competition even more unequal and contributes to increase a feeling of despair among young people, influencing the students’ motivation to study, especially of those from underprivileged backgrounds, and has led to what Kariya has called the “incentive divide”.

In this context, the role of gakushū juku and yobikō has changed. One of the main results that came out of our doctoral fieldwork\textsuperscript{2} was that they tended to be considered by students as “hope and motivation providers”: They do more than just transmitting knowledge, they try hard to motivate students by convincing them that their efforts will be useful and rewarded. In that sense, one of their new functions in this context of “collective disillusionment” (Galan 2018), is to provide hope and motivation for

\textsuperscript{1} Battle Royale is a movie directed by Kinji Fukasaku and based on the eponymous book written by Kōshun Takami.

\textsuperscript{2} Our fieldwork took place in 2012-2013 in a well-known and private university of Tōkyō among a hundred students. We used both questionnaires and interviews, asking students about their admission to university. The aim was to identify the different factors (social, economic and cultural background), previous education (high school) and gakushū juku and/or yobikō attendance that had influenced their educational career.
students. Thus, many students explained that they went to gakushū juku or yobikō in order to get motivation to study:

家で自主的に勉強するのが大変で、周りの子も通っていったから。
“It was hard to study alone at home and other students around me also went there.”

私は課題をだされたり、見はる人がいないと勉強が進まない性格だったから。
“If there is no one behind me to give me homework and keep an eye on me, I don’t study.”

英語の授業に関してのみですが、やる気がでない時でも、一定の量の問題が出るので勉強をつけられたため。
“I took only English lessons but since we regularly had exercises to do, I could keep on studying even when I didn’t feel motivated.”

自習ができない人間だったので家でない所強制的に勉強させようと思った
“Since I can’t study alone, I wanted to force myself to study outside home.”

This tendency was confirmed also by a juku director we interviewed. He explained that the main problem they had to deal with nowadays was children’s lack of desire to study:

日本では90年くらいから学力低下ということ随分言われているのですが、我々はその学力低下の手前にもっと大きな問題があると思います。それはつまり学習意欲の低下です。 [...] さらに今度は学習そのものの崩壊が始まったんです。つまり生徒からの質問で多いのが「先生勉強の仕方がわからない」今の子供はすぐそれを言います。
Since the 1990s, the problem of the decline of academic level has been pointed out in Japan, but comparatively we think that the main problem is the decline of the desire to study. In addition, there is a new problem emerging: »the collapse in learning«. In other words, students often say: »I don’t know how to study.« Today’s children say that right away.”

In the context of “collective disillusionment” that applies to the current reality of young Japanese people, who experience higher difficulties to find a job corresponding to their level of diplomas, gōshū juku and yōbikō’s new role consists in providing motivation and hope to students in order to legitimize their own existence. Furthermore, given the growing financial difficulties faced by families struggling to pay university fees, the issue of the burden of educational expenses can no longer be neglected. New measures such as the introduction of new, non-repayable scholarships, which do not need to be refunded, have been undertaken by the government. Moreover, in order to provide to poor families, in April 2015 the government introduced a new “Law of assistance for the autonomy of destitute people” (seikatsu konkyūsha shien seido 生活困窮者支援制度). It aims at preventing as a preventive measure against intergenerational poverty through education (Koseirōdōshō 2013 : 9). In order to do so, it finances a new kind of “free juku” (muryō juku 無料塾). These muryō juku are meant to provide more equal educational opportunities to young people who cannot afford to pay for a gōshū juku or a yōbikō.

Conclusion
In the new context of growing social inequalities that characterizes contemporary Japanese society, the stakes of private tutoring are changing. Since the 1990s, it has no longer been accessible to a majority of the population. On the one hand, the economic background of families (that materializes through gōshū juku or yōbikō investment) has more impact on the educational destiny of children. On the other hand, we observe a growing number of young people compelled to drop out of higher education for economic reasons.
However, it should be recognized that the government’s position is still ambiguous since public money is invested at the periphery of the education system, that is in free supplementary education or “free juku”, instead of inside the public education system. Acting this way, the government contributes to reinforcing the dependance of schools and families on
supplementary education, and therefore encourages families to feel even more responsible for their children’s education.
Furthermore, it is also paradoxical to notice that among the providers of free supplementary education activities within the legal framework of the “Law of assistance for the autonomy of destitute people”, there are also private supplementary education companies.

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215
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