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## Tackling “Examination Hell” in Japan, 1920 to 1945: Children’s Well-being, Fair Competition, and the Needs of the State

*Abstract:* This essay examines attempts between 1920 and 1945 to tackle “examination hell,” meaning the pressures on children that resulted from competition to enter secondary school. Debates about “examination hell” centered on harm to children, to education, and ultimately to the nation. Arguments weighed issues of fair competition between individuals, alongside the needs of the state. From 1939, reforms to secondary entrance procedures manifested radical statism, in parallel with extensions of state control in other areas of national life. This wartime movement away from selectivity prepared the ground for postwar reforms, as well as later efforts to combat “examination hell.” In recent decades, however, such efforts have been eroded, leaving unresolved questions about the appropriate relationship between individual freedom and state control.

*Keywords:* Japan, secondary school, examination, Taisho, Showa, selection

### *Introduction*

For much of the post-1945 period in Japan, “examination hell” and attempts to relieve it have been perennial, well-publicized concerns, focused on high school and university entrance exams. Agonizing about the harms of “exam hell” and endeavors to tackle them go back much further, however, to debates about secondary school entrance exams from the 1910s onward. In this article, we analyze this earlier history, arguing that it adds a

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new dimension to understanding of the developing ideological contentions that engaged Japan in the decades culminating in the Asia-Pacific War, as well as illuminating recurring dilemmas about the trade-offs that educational assessment systems involve. Furthermore, the resonances with policy debate and development in postwar Japan show that, in education as elsewhere, 1945 was far from being a clear-cut dividing line; rather, ideas and approaches that had taken shape before the war's end possessed continued power thereafter, albeit often with differing justifications in new ideological contexts. Finally, the debates before 1945 about how to banish "exam hell" pose questions still unresolved in Japan or elsewhere about how to weigh the claims of individual freedom, the well-being of children, and the good of the whole, whether conceptualized as "society," "the nation," or "the state." These debates engaged fundamental issues about how schooling in a modern society should operate—what counts as "merit," the role of chance, modes of evaluation and their limitations, the relationship between education and assessment, and the place of individual aspiration and state control in social formation—which all retain high salience today.

Debate and policy development about secondary school entrance exams engaged a wide spectrum of those involved in the educational world, from politicians and bureaucrats to university and normal school professors, school principals and teachers, and journalists. There were two major phases of debate and action before 1945. The first spanned the 1920s, the period often called "Taisho democracy" when political parties controlled government. The major focus of concern was the harmful effects of excessive competition and exam preparation on the health and well-being of children, along with interest in alternative forms of assessment and selection that might not only relieve exam pressure but also prove educationally superior. The second phase began in the mid-1930s, with Japan close to total war, political parties and democratic processes increasingly sidelined, and an ideological climate becoming dominated by radical ideas about the need for intensified national unity and control within the emperor-focused state. While children's health and well-being continued to be major concerns in this second phase, they were increasingly seen in the context of the needs of the state. The importance attached to such needs intensified from the late 1930s, becoming used to justify radical measures that moved secondary education away from the competitive selection that had reigned since Meiji and toward increased egalitarianism. Such changes smoothed the way for postwar education reforms under the U.S.-led occupation and found echoes in later decades, as prefectures sought to tackle a new "exam hell" resulting from competition to enter prestigious high schools.

The debates and policy actions that took place over these two phases can be seen as encapsulating several major currents of thought about education, the individual, and the state. The first of these was a belief in the importance

of fair competition and effort as drivers of improvement that would benefit both individuals and the state. This went back to Meiji and the influence of Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism, but as Mark Jones has shown, it was supercharged from the 1910s by the emergence of a new middle class striving to better itself through education, urged on by an expanding media and dynamized by economic and urban growth.<sup>1</sup> In reaction, a second major current of thought emerged, arguing for sparing children the harms resulting from the competitive struggle, both for their own sake and for the good of the state. This joined with ideas about improving assessment and selection to shape the debates of the 1920s. When debate caught fire again in the mid-1930s, it involved a new current of thought that prioritized unity and equality in the service of state mission, and soon amid total war. Hans Martin Krämer has shown that equality of educational opportunity was widely and influentially advocated as beneficial for the nation during the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> From the late 1930s, moreover, there were increasingly loud arguments for offering equal secondary education to as many as possible by leveling differences between schools. The context was broadening and strengthening views among figures in the political, military, intellectual, and labor spheres that Japan must move away from liberalism and *laissez-faire* capitalism toward a totalist state where class conflict and individual competition would be renounced in united devotion to national mission.<sup>3</sup> Though educational competition still had defenders, it was increasingly attacked as selfish egoism that undermined the national struggle. It was this new emphasis on state imperatives that would enable more radical reforms from 1939 onward—though not without questioning and resistance.

### Increasing Competition to Enter Secondary Education in Taisho—and Its Consequences

Between 1907 and 1947, compulsory education in Japan consisted of six years of elementary education between the ages of six and twelve. Children with sufficient academic proficiency and financial resources could then enter selective, single-sex secondary schools—five-year boys' middle schools (*chūgakkō*), four or five-year girls' high schools (*kōtō jogakkō*), and

1. Mark A. Jones, *Children as Treasures: Childhood and the Middle Class in Early Twentieth Century Japan* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2010), pp. 175–242.

2. Hans Martin Krämer, “The Prewar Roots of ‘Equality of Opportunity’: Japanese Educational Ideals in the Twentieth Century,” *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (2006), pp. 521–49.

3. See, for example, William Miles Fletcher III, *The Search for a New Order: Intellectuals and Fascism in Prewar Japan* (University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Andrew Gordon, *Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan* (University of California Press, 1991); Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (University of California Press, 1998); Janis Mimura, *Planning for Empire: Reform Bureaucrats and the Japanese Wartime State* (Cornell University Press, 2011).

vocational schools (*jitsugyō gakkō*) whose programs sometimes started at age twelve, and sometimes at age fourteen. Other children could progress to (non-selective) two-year higher elementary schools. Beyond middle school, the most desirable path was success in the entrance examination for the three-year higher school (*kōtō gakkō*), which led to an imperial university; next most desirable was progress to a professional college such as the Tokyo University of Commerce, or to a private college, especially Keiō or Waseda. Graduates of girls' high schools could enter professional colleges such as women's normal schools, but only very rarely universities.<sup>4</sup>

Economic development, especially the boom during World War I, drove expansion in secondary and higher education. From below, there was pressure on prefectures from local notables to build secondary schools to develop localities. Meanwhile, the government became persuaded of the need to enlarge Japan's leadership cadre by expanding higher education, as recommended by the high-powered Extraordinary Commission on Education (Rinji Kyōiku Kaigi) in 1918. Twenty-six new higher schools were built by 1926, new professional colleges were established, and selected private colleges were given university status.<sup>5</sup> More places in higher education further encouraged growth in secondary education.

The position of middle schools was always ambiguous, however, and their role conflicted. Japan's first Minister of Education, Mori Arinori, stated in 1887 that while a few middle school graduates would enter higher education as preparation for national leadership, the vast majority would be of practical use in the middle ranks of society.<sup>6</sup> Middle schools were thus charged by successive governments with the mission of producing both a minority of potential leaders, and a mass of mid-level functionaries. However, most students were attracted to middle school as a means to higher education and elite status. The result was an irreconcilable tension between individual aspirations and government notions of the collective good. By 1929, less than a third of middle school graduates typically entered employment; about 30 percent progressed to higher education, while the remainder prepared for another attempt to do so. Efforts to establish employment-oriented courses in middle schools repeatedly struggled due to unpopularity. Though educationalists and officials argued that middle

4. Herbert Passin, *Society and Education in Japan* (Teachers College Press, 1965), pp. 103–8.

5. Yoshida Aya, "Meiji-Taishōki no chiiki shakai ni okeru chūtō kyōiku no shakai-teki kinō: Saitama-ken Kawagoe chihō no jirei," *Kyōiku shakaigaku kenkyū*, Vol. 40 (1985), pp. 150–64; Yoshida Toyoharu, "Taishōki no chūtō kyōiku: Oita-ken ni okeru chūtō kyōiku no hirogari," *Oita-ken chihōshi*, Vol. 164 (1996), pp. 57–68; Kokuritsu Kyōiku Kenkyūjo, *Nihon kindai kyōiku hyakunenshi (daigokan)* (Kyōiku Kenkyū Shinkōkai, 1974), pp. 305–35.

6. Naka Arata, *Gakkō no rekishi: daisankan, chūgakkō/kōtō jogakkō no rekishi* (Daiichihōki Shuppan, 1979), pp. 12–13.

schools should be understood as offering a completed education (*kansei kyōiku*) rather than preparatory education (*yōbi kyōiku*) for the next stage,<sup>7</sup> the truth was that the conflicting demands on middle schools forced them to perform both these roles. Policymakers’ desires that most middle school students spontaneously limit their aspirations were unavailing.

Even in the first decade of the twentieth century, there were problems in meeting demand for secondary school places. In 1909, only 53 percent of applications to middle school and 59 percent of applications to girls’ high school were successful nationwide, though there were dramatic differences between prefectures (for example, the success rate for middle school applications in Saitama was 84 percent, against a mere 28 percent in Fukuoka). During the following decade, the increase in application numbers outpaced the increase in school places, so that the nationwide percentage of successful applications to middle school dropped to 39 percent in 1920, while the figure for girls’ high schools was 41 percent. Thanks to school expansion programs, the proportions of successful applications to these two types of selective school rose again to 50 percent and 53 percent respectively in 1925, but the ever-increasing number of applications meant that the actual number of unsuccessful candidates rose.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the problem of “difficulty in gaining admission” (*nyūgakunan*) could not be solved simply by increasing secondary school places. This was because as the number of schools rose, a hierarchy of desirability developed. The schools hardest to enter were those with the best academic reputations, whose graduates were most successful in progressing to higher education and glittering careers. This hierarchy of desirability particularly affected Tokyo. In 1921, for example, fewer than one in six applications to the public middle schools in Tokyo were accepted, whereas the chances of acceptance at a private middle school were better than one in four on average. Furthermore, many Tokyo applicants applied to multiple middle schools; in 1929, for example, over 60 percent did so, with 27 percent of applicants applying to three or more. This artificially inflated application statistics and made entry to middle school seem harder, whereas in fact, 90 percent of Tokyo applicants were able to enter a middle school in 1929.<sup>9</sup> The “problem,” however, was that many failed to enter their first choice.

7. Kokuritsu Kyōiku Kenkyūjo, *Nihon kindai*, pp. 168–69, 190–93; Abe Akira, *Bunsei shingikai no kenkyū* (Kazama Shobō, 1975), pp. 203–5, 219–20.

8. For school expansion, see Jones, *Children as Treasures*, p. 237. The number of applications to middle school rose from 62,237 nationwide in 1909 to 151,322 in 1925, while the number of applications to girls’ high school rose from 27,641 in 1909 to 150,018 in 1925. All figures from *Monbushō nenpō* (various years).

9. Takeishi Norifumi, “Tōkyō-fu ni okeru chūgakkō juken kyōsō mondai to shiritsu chūgakkō: Taishō chūkōki – Shōwa shoki no nyūgakunan jittai to sono kaiketsusaku,” *“Kyōiku to shakai” kenkyū*, Vol. 15 (2005), pp. 71–79.

This educational competition was fueled by economic expansion that increased the numbers of those who could afford secondary education, by a growing urban population dependent on educational credentials for their children's careers or marriage prospects, and by print media that fed aspirations with stories of educational success and advice about how to achieve it. This competition in turn spurred exam preparation, through extra preparatory classes by elementary school teachers, as well as exam prep books and magazines.<sup>10</sup>

#### Public Concern about Entrance Examinations and Attempts at Reform

As early as the mid-1910s, concerns were expressed that excessive exam study endangered children's health.<sup>11</sup> In 1918, the Extraordinary Commission on Education stated that "it is necessary to rectify the bad practice of pouring effort into preparatory education for secondary school admission, so that children are not made to do excessive mental work."<sup>12</sup> It was also feared that teachers overemphasized entrance exam subjects (Japanese and mathematics) at the expense of other subjects, and that exam preparation caused a narrow focus on memorization and instrumental learning at the expense of creativity and genuine human development.<sup>13</sup> In 1922, an instruction from the Minister of Education stated that "Competition for school entrance is becoming keener every year, and special education is being conducted for the sake of exam preparation; as a result, intellectual education is being overemphasized and moral and physical education neglected."<sup>14</sup>

Entrance exams were not only criticized for supposedly causing harm but also for failing to measure students' abilities appropriately. Educationalist Nagano Yoshio claimed that "Exams to date have mainly looked at whether a set amount of knowledge has been stuffed in or not. . . . Such things as the quality of that knowledge and intellectual ability have been almost

10. William W. Lockwood, *The Economic Development of Japan: Growth and Structural Change 1868–1938* (Princeton University Press, 1954), pp. 38–45; Saitu Yoshiaki, "Chinō tesuto wa nani o hakarō to shita ka: Taishō makki ni okeru chinō tesuto no shakaigaku-teki kōsatsu," *Rinshō shinrigaku kenkyū*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (1990), pp. 71–84; Jones, *Children as Treasures*, pp. 177, 196–232.

11. Saitu, "Chinō tesuto," p. 71; Jones, *Children as Treasures*, p. 234.

12. Ishioka Manabu, *100-nen mae no "nyūshi kaikaku": 1920-nendai chūtō gakkō nyūgakunan mondai ni miru kyōiku to senbatsu* (Keisō Shobō, 2025), p. 32.

13. Amano Masateru, *Kyōiku hyōkashi kenkyū* (Tōshindō, 1993), pp. 247–48; Amano Masateru, "1920-nendai ni okeru chūtō gakkō nyūshi senbatsuhō no kaikaku," *Kyōto daigaku kyōikugakubu kiyō*, Vol. 41 (1995), p. 63; Jones, *Children as Treasures*, p. 233; Ishioka Manabu, "1920-nendai Nihon no chūtō gakkō nyūshi kaikaku rōgi ni okeru 'chūsen' ron ni miru senbatsu no kōseisei," *Kyōiku shakaigaku kenkyū*, Vol. 94 (2014), pp. 173–93.

14. Takeishi, "Tōkyō-fu," p. 73.

entirely ignored."<sup>15</sup> In 1926, the conclusion of a government survey report on secondary schools in Tokyo stated that "It is almost impossible to predict grades after school entrance by grades in the entrance exam, excepting slight predictiveness in Japanese."<sup>16</sup>

Such widespread dissatisfaction led to arguments about how to reform or replace examinations for secondary school entrance. Two of the most important reform proposals involved intelligence tests and lotteries. The Binet-Simon intelligence test, the first for children, began to be discussed by Japanese educationalists only two years after its invention in 1905, and intelligence tests had already been used by Japanese businesses to try to improve efficiency before being proposed for use in school admissions.<sup>17</sup> In 1919, the principal of the Tokyo Fifth Prefectural Middle School (Gochū), Itō Chōshichi, asked leading Japanese psychologist Tanaka Kan'ichi to conduct a study of entrance examination questions. Tanaka created an intelligence test which was administered to Gochū applicants alongside the regular entrance exam. In 1920, he reported that the intelligence test results correlated with students' first-year grades much better than did the entrance exam results. From 1921, an intelligence test was also introduced into the entrance exam of Tokyo Higher Normal School's attached middle school. Attracted by the apparent effectiveness of intelligence tests, many secondary schools introduced them between 1922 and 1924 as an element in their entrance examinations.<sup>18</sup>

Very few schools relied solely on an intelligence test to determine entrance, however. Indeed, Tanaka's results led to a lively debate about the role of intelligence tests in admissions. When Tanaka reported his results in 1920, Furukawa Takeji of the elementary school attached to Tokyo Women's Higher Normal School responded that intelligence tests could measure only congenital intelligence, not effort, and so were unfair unless used alongside a conventional subject exam. Tanaka countered that most of the effort exerted in exam prep came from the parents and teacher, not the child, and even if the child did make efforts, this was under compulsion rather than spontaneously.<sup>19</sup> Others argued that coaching could prepare children for intelligence

15. Nagano Yoshio, "Shiken zenpai ron," *Kyōiku gaku jutsukai*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (1920), pp. 343–44.

16. Monbushō Gakkō Eiseika, *Shakai kyōiku panfuretto daisanshū: nyūgaku shiken ni kan suru chōsa* (Shakai Kyōiku Kyōkai, 1926), p. 48.

17. Jones, *Children as Treasures*, p. 360; Eguchi Kiyoshi, "Senkanki no nyūgaku shiken kaikaku ni okeru mentaru tesuto no eikyō: Tanaka Kan'ichi no senbatsu kōsahō kenkyū to chūgakkō nyūgaku shiken kaikaku," *Kyōikugaku ronshū*, Vol. 49 (2007), pp. 185–207. According to Saito, "Chinō tesuto," p. 83, a variety of terms were used in Japanese to denote "intelligence test" during the period under study, including *mentaru tesuto*, *soshitsu kensa*, and *seishin kōsa*.

18. Eguchi, "Senkanki no nyūgaku shiken," pp. 187–91, 195.

19. Eguchi, "Senkanki no nyūgaku shiken," pp. 190–91. Similar arguments continued to be advanced in the late 1920s; see Jones, *Children as Treasures*, pp. 239–40.

tests too, and that such exam prep would be even more damaging, because it would be completely divorced from curricular content. As a result of a heated press debate to this effect, Osaka's middle schools compromised on their original plan to replace conventional entrance exams with intelligence tests in 1924, instead using an exam that combined the two. Contemporary exam prep books suggest that by 1924, many entrance exams used such a combination, or else sought to reformat conventional subject exams in an intelligence test style.<sup>20</sup>

Advocates of lotteries for school entrance did not cite overseas examples to support their arguments; they seem to have been a homegrown idea. Some favored selecting entrants by lottery alone; for example, in 1925 Tokyo municipal school inspector Kagura Entarō expressed this view, asserting that all elementary school graduates were qualified to enter secondary school.<sup>21</sup> Only a minority argued thus, however; most advocates agreed with the view of Toshima Normal School principal Sakurai Kenzō that “the essence of a good scheme is to pass those at the top, who are outstanding, fail those at the bottom, and select those who belong to the large majority in the middle by lottery.”<sup>22</sup> The unspoken premise underlying this argument was that intelligence followed a normal distribution, as was stated repeatedly in contemporary books on secondary school entrance exams.<sup>23</sup> A further argument advanced in favor of limited lottery use was that tests could not measure abilities precisely enough to differentiate the many middling students.<sup>24</sup>

Many also opposed lotteries, however. They advanced two main arguments. First, lotteries were seen as unfair, as by Motohashi Denji, principal of Imaichi Middle School, Tochigi Prefecture: “It is extremely unfair (*fukōhei*) that going on to a higher level of education should be prevented by the chance result of a lottery. . . . Whichever way you look at it, it is a matter of course that those who possess outstanding ability (*nōryoku*), even to an extent, should gain priority.”<sup>25</sup> Secondly, they were criticized for denying effort (*doryoku*) and the spirit of self-improvement. The vice-principal of one Tokyo girls' high school asserted that “A lottery is the worst method. I wish it to be the motto of sound education that everything in life must be

20. Saitsu, “Chinō tesuto,” pp. 74–75; Eguchi, “Senkanki no nyūgaku shiken,” p. 195.

21. “Fukyōikukai, makō kara shiken teppai no ketsugi,” *Kyōiku Shūhō*, November 28, 1925, p. 7.

22. Sakurai Kenzō, “Shiken seido kaiseian zehi,” *Teikoku kyōiku*, No. 544 (1927), p. 8.

23. For example, Okabe Yatarō, *Kyōiku-teki sokutei* (Kyōiku Kenkyūkai, 1923), p. 425; Ichikawa Genzō, *Chūgaku kōjo aiji no nyūgaku* (Meiji Toshō, 1928), pp. 9–10, 32.

24. For example, Kishidaka Takeo, “Jidō no shinsei kōsa (3),” *Teikoku kyōiku*, No. 469 (1921), pp. 48–53.

25. Motohashi Denji, “Shiken seido kaiseian yōkō o hyō su,” *Kyōiku no seiki*, Vol. 5, No. 10 (1927), p. 19.

the crystallization of effort.” Chiba Haruo, a leader in Japanese language education, agreed; lotteries were “no cause for rejoicing, as they are too speculative and chancy, and ignore effort, which should be prized in human life.” Diet member and Nihon University director Arakawa Gorō thought likewise: “It is not at all good to make students depend on chance and other external forces, when they should go forth energetically relying on their own hands and their own efforts.”<sup>26</sup> For these critics, whether exams did a good job of selecting students fairly was a secondary issue at best. Their main function was as a spur to effort, and as a signal about the importance of self-reliance.

*The Ministry of Education’s 1927 Prohibition of Written Secondary Entrance Examinations*

Agitation to solve the entrance exam problem reached a new height in autumn 1925, with the formation of the League for the Abolition of Secondary School Entrance Examinations (Chūtō Gakkō Nyūshi Teppai Kisei Rengōkai). Centered on Tokyo, where exam competition and its effects were most evident, the League’s forty-seven affiliated bodies included influential groups such as the Tokyo Prefecture and Tokyo city Education Associations (*Kyōikukai*), the Imperial Education Association (Teikoku Kyōikukai), the Tokyo city Elementary School Principals’ Association and Teachers’ Association, and the education associations of boroughs, cities, and counties throughout Tokyo.<sup>27</sup> At its first meeting in Hibiya Park on October 17, 1925, over 100 members were present, calling on the Ministry of Education, Tokyo Prefecture, and Tokyo city to reform secondary school entrance exams as well as provide more public secondary schools, along with subsidies for private secondary schools. On November 12, the League presented Minister of Education Okada Ryōhei with a resolution calling for the replacement of subject exams (*gakka shiken*) with alternative selection procedures. On December 13, a reported 500 parents joined a League meeting at the Aoyama Kaikan, testifying to bitter experiences at the hands of what was labeled “a murderous secondary school entrance exam system that imperils the future of the state.” A few days later, the League issued

26. Miyagawa-sei, “Shiken gokuraku to naze iwanu,” *Kyōiku no seiki*, Vol. 5, No. 10 (1927), p. 31; Chiba Haruo, “Futatabi chūtō gakkō nyūgaku no mondai ni tsuite,” *Kyōiku kenkyū*, No. 320 (1927), p. 131; Arakawa Gorō, “Shiken seido kaiseian ni tsuite,” *Teikoku kyōiku*, No. 544 (1927), p. 19. See also Jones, *Children as Treasures*, p. 241.

27. Ishioka, “1920-nendai,” p. 183. Education associations (*kyōikukai*) were made up of teachers as well as, in at least some cases, school administrators and local officials. Originally created by teachers in the Meiji period, they became less independent of the state as time went on. They served as professional networks and consultative bodies. See Brian Platt, *Burning and Building: Schooling and State Formation in Japan, 1750–1890* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), pp. 240–46.

proposals for a revised secondary school admissions system, based on elementary school grades, a physical examination, an oral examination, and (if necessary) a lottery. An editorial in the *Tōkyō Asahi Shinbun* newspaper urged the Ministry of Education to resolve the problem quickly.<sup>28</sup>

Within Tokyo itself, the response to the League's agitation was swift. On January 15, 1926, Tokyo city announced that following consultation with elementary and secondary school principals, written exams for entrance in April 1926 would be abolished with immediate effect, to be replaced by a selection process similar to the League's proposal. In that year, the First Municipal Middle School selected 210 entrants from 1,400 applicants, while the Second Municipal Middle School selected 212 entrants from 800 applicants.<sup>29</sup>

A year later, the *Tōkyō Asahi Shinbun* bemoaned lack of change despite repeated calls for reform, as "the [examination] day approaches when the lid is lifted on the fearful hellish cauldron that saps the energies of young and helpless boys and girls," with competition of twice or even four times as many applications as places at prefectural secondary schools in the capital.<sup>30</sup> Behind the scenes, however, the Ministry of Education was preparing to revise secondary school entrance regulations. In June 1927, a ministry committee was set up, educationalists invited as members, and surveys initiated. In September, a concrete plan was produced, on which consultation took place with principals' associations for middle schools, girls' high schools, vocational schools, normal schools, and elementary schools. Finally, on November 22, 1927, the ministry issued revised regulations (*shikō kisoku*) for middle schools, girls' high schools, and vocational schools, removing the instruction to select entrants by examination. Instead, the ministry set out a three-stage selection process. First, secondary schools should select students based on reports from their elementary school that provided information about their last two years' grades, physical condition, special characteristics, and aptitudes. Applicants who passed the first stage would then undergo a "personal examination" (*jinbutsu kōsa*), mainly involving an

28. "Kawaisō na nyūgaku shiken wa honnen kagiri teppai seyo to," *Tōkyō Asahi Shinbun* (yūkan), October 18, 1925, p. 2; "Nyūgaku shiken teppai ketsugi teishutsu," *Tōkyō Asahi Shinbun*, November 13, 1925, p. 10; "Nyūgaku shiken teppaigo no senbatsuhō," *Kyōiku shūhō*, December 19, 1925, p. 8; "Shiken teppai undō, shingikaian o kaketsu," *Kyōiku shūhō*, December 26, 1925, p. 7; "Nyūgaku shiken mondai to bunshō," *Tōkyō Asahi Shinbun*, December 23, 1925, p. 3.

29. Amano, "1920-nendai," pp. 68–69. Tokyo city had established the First and Second Municipal Middle School and the First Municipal Girls' High School in 1924. Their prestige was considerable, though less than that of the prefectural schools, partly because of their recent foundation. See Kuwahara Sanji, *Tōkyō-fu kōritsu chūgakkō kyōikushi* (Takayama Honten, 1981), pp. 129–39.

30. "Ōbosha nibai, ōki wa yonbai ijō," *Tōkyō Asahi Shinbun* (yūkan), February 17, 1927, p. 1.

oral examination, and a physical examination to ensure their fitness. If the number of successful applicants after these two stages exceeded the number of available places, a lottery should be used.<sup>31</sup> The similarity of these procedures to the proposals by the League for the Abolition of Secondary School Entrance Examinations suggested the latter's influence.

Not surprisingly, the new admissions rules sparked an intensified debate. All three stages of the new procedure were questioned. It was pointed out that different elementary schools might judge children by different standards, and that favoritism might easily creep into school reports. Moreover, it was argued that substituting school grades for exam grades would simply transfer the competition to the upper years of elementary school, and would not necessarily get rid of supplementary education to aid secondary school entrance; furthermore, there would be no second chance for those who failed to secure good enough school grades. Some argued that the guidance about the oral exam was vague—failing to make clear whether written answers were allowed, for example—and that it was difficult to make an objective assessment of large numbers of applicants by this method in the limited time available.<sup>32</sup> Lotteries were also criticized, for the reasons discussed above.

Regardless of criticisms, schools had to cope with the new situation. Some prefectures, including Nagano, Hyōgo, and Aichi, bent the rules by an interpretation that allowed schools to hold "oral exams" where the questions were given orally, but candidates wrote their answers. One survey of eighty-six secondary schools found that the majority were using such a method, and that the questions set often resembled those in written exams of previous years. Secondary schools also quickly devised procedures for giving points to applicants based on their elementary school reports and adding these together with their oral exam scores. Some elementary schools, meanwhile, started to administer a series of tests to all sixth-grade pupils; in some cases, these common tests were even administered at all elementary schools within a district. In these ways, secondary and elementary schools attempted to overcome the perceived problems of lack of objectivity and fairness in the new system. For the Ministry of Education, however, such approaches betrayed the spirit of the new entrance system, and they were condemned in a Ministry pamphlet sent out to schools early in 1929. Meanwhile, there were indications that the new system did not enable

31. Monbushō, "Monbu jikan tsūchō (Hatsufu 304-gō)," in *Shōwa 2-nen Monbushō reikiruisan*, ed. Monbu-daijin-kanbō-bunshoka (Monbu-daijin-kanbō-bunshoka, 1928), pp. 41–43. The statement in Jones, *Children as Treasures*, p. 240, that this reform introduced a mandatory intelligence test is inaccurate.

32. Yamamoto Tamotsu, "Shōwa shoki chūgakkō nyūgaku shiken seido ni tsuite: Gifu-ken o rei toshite," *Tōkyō daigaku kyōikugakubu kiyō*, No. 21 (1981), pp. 235–45; Ishioka, *100-nen mae*, pp. 204–13.

the most academically demanding secondary schools to select students who could cope with their standards. One such school, the Fourth Tokyo Prefectural Middle School, conducted exams for new entrants three weeks into their first term, and found in 1928 that about 30 attained failing marks; this number increased to over 100 in 1929.<sup>33</sup>

Shortly after the Ministry's announcement of the revised entrance system, the Vice-Minister of Education expressed the view that selection by lottery would seldom be needed.<sup>34</sup> However, some suspected that the Ministry had always privately expected that lotteries would be used, given the difficulties of selection using only the elementary school report and an oral examination. The director of the girls' high school attached to Nara Women's Higher Normal School, Sanada Yukio, criticized the proposed new rules on precisely these grounds, shortly before the announcement of the finalized system: "the revised proposal will boil down to a proposal for selection by lottery, as long as there is no special test besides the report of the elementary school principal. . . . In that case, it will cause enormous harm." Morita Yōsaku, principal of Sawara Middle School in Chiba Prefecture, similarly concluded that the result of the new system was, "Don't conduct too precise a test, no need to select too finely, make a rough selection and decide by lot between those that cannot be distinguished," continuing, "Whether or not this suits the Ministry of Education's true intentions, I do not know." In fact, as 1928 neared its end, Ministry inspector (*tokugakukan*) Kumaki Suteji explicitly advised using lotteries to select middling students: "What I advise is to sort applicants broadly into four categories [using elementary school reports and oral exams]: excellent, very good, inferior, and hard to decide. Of these, accept all the excellent and very good applicants, discard the inferior ones, and select by lottery from those who are hard to decide about. I believe this is the most reasonable, suitable, and practical method for selection by our human capacity."<sup>35</sup> Similar advice came from the Ministry in an article of January 1929: "It is strained and harmful when distinctions are made, by forced award of marks, between applicants who are hard to distinguish. This is inferior to the safe alternative, using a lottery."<sup>36</sup>

33. Amano, "1920-nendai," pp. 75–76; "Kaisei no seishin o uragiru jōjitsu, kagen, kyūkan," *Tōkyō Asahi Shinbun*, December 28, 1928, p. 3; Takeishi, "Tōkyō-fu," p. 74.

34. "Shiken seido kaisei ni kan suru Yamazaki seimu jikan no setsumeishi," *Monbu jihō*, No. 261, December 11, 1927.

35. Sanada Yukio. "Nyūgaku shiken no kaisei ni tsuite (2)," *Kyōiku jiron*, No. 1525 (1927), pp. 3–4; Morita Yōsaku, "Nyūgaku kōsa jikkōgo no shokan," *Gakkō kyōiku*, No. 180 (1928), p. 214; Kumaki Suteji, "Chūtō gakkō nyūgaku seido: seishin no ryōkai o nozomu," *Kyōiku shūhō*, November 24, 1928, p. 1.

36. Monbushō Chōsabu, "Chūtō gakkō nyūgakusha senbatsu ni kan suru seido no jisshi ni tsuite," *Monbu jihō*, No. 299, January 21, 1929, p. 28.

Not only did schools encounter problems with the new entrance system, but its effectiveness in preventing exam prep education also seemed limited. In July 1928, there were reports from a meeting of the Ministry of Education and school inspectors (*shigakukan*) that “preparatory education at elementary schools is flourishing and competition over class ranking has become more intense than before.”<sup>37</sup> In January 1929, the Ministry sent a notification to its provincial directors reiterating that elementary schools were prohibited from undertaking exam prep education such as extra lessons and mock exams. In October 1929, Tokyo Prefecture notified its local authorities similarly, and authorized inspectors to enforce the ban through unannounced visits to elementary schools. Such measures indicated that the problem continued. In addition, 120 elementary school staff (principals and teachers) in Osaka Prefecture were disciplined in 1929 for falsifying applicant reports.<sup>38</sup>

The revised entrance system was thus failing to achieve its main purpose of relieving study pressure on children and had brought other problems in its wake. In July 1929, a Minseitō cabinet under Prime Minister Hamaguchi Osachi replaced the Seiyūkai cabinet of Tanaka Giichi, under which the changes had been introduced. In September, the *Tōkyō Asahi Shinbun* reported that the Ministry of Education was drawing up plans to improve the system, since it was hard to rely primarily on elementary school reports given their susceptibility to favoritism and the varying standards used by schools to award grades.<sup>39</sup> The following month, the Secondary School Principals’ Association asked the Ministry to let them use written exams again, a prospect which the *Tōkyō Asahi Shinbun* reported as “the imminent approach of examination hell,” though also reporting the widespread complaints about the perceived unfairness of the new system.<sup>40</sup> Then, in November 1929, the Ministry revised its guidance about secondary school entrance procedures. The new guidance made the “personal examination” the main selection method, relegating elementary school reports to secondary status; most importantly, it stated that “when necessary” written exams could be used. Though this was qualified by the face-saving stipulation that exams should deal with “simple” (*heii*) matters rather than encouraging memorization,<sup>41</sup> in practice it amounted to a capitulation. A radical attempt to tackle “examination hell” had ended in ignominious failure.

37. “Karen na jidō o kurushimeru shōgakkō no sekiji kyōsō,” *Tōkyō Asahi Shinbun*, July 5, 1928, p. 2.

38. Ishioka, *100-nen mae*, pp. 223–24.

39. “Nyūgaku senbatsu seido kaizen no gutaian,” *Tōkyō Asahi Shinbun*, September 22, 1929, p. 2.

40. Amano, “1920-nendai,” p. 77; “Shiken jigoku o me no mae ni gyakumodori suru nyūgaku seido,” *Tōkyō Asahi Shinbun*, October 29, 1929, p. 11.

41. Amano, “1920-nendai,” pp. 77–78.

*Exam Prep, National Mission, and the Second Abolition of Written Entrance Exams*

The most competitive secondary schools reintroduced written entrance exams immediately, in spring 1930. The economic downturn at the end of the 1920s had depressed application numbers, allowing a much higher proportion to be successful than five or ten years before: nationwide, 69 percent of applications to middle school and 65 percent of applications to girls' high school were successful in 1930, though in some prefectures the success rate was much lower (for example, 42 percent and 41 percent respectively for middle and girls' high schools in Tokyo). In Gifu, for example, none of the prefecture's nine middle schools had enough applications to fill their places in 1930, and only four administered a written entrance exam, declining to only one in 1931. However, thereafter application numbers increased with economic revival, and so Gifu middle schools mostly reintroduced a written entrance exam.<sup>42</sup> In metropolitan centers such as Tokyo, meanwhile, exam competition remained intense. Though places at secondary schools rapidly increased nationwide during the 1930s, they were outpaced by escalating numbers of applications, and so educational competition became still keener.<sup>43</sup>

In the second half of the 1930s, renewed concern about the effects of intensifying exam competition led to repeated attempts to tackle the problem. By 1935, the Ministry of Education was instructing local educational authorities to inspect entrance exam papers after use, on the grounds that schools had been contravening Ministry guidance by setting excessively difficult questions. If an exam was found to test material beyond elementary school level, the school should be given a severe warning and reported to the Ministry.<sup>44</sup> Next came limits on the scope of entrance exams. Contemporary exam prep guides indicate that in 1936, public and many private Tokyo middle schools set entrance exams in between five and eight subjects.<sup>45</sup> Osaka Prefecture became a pioneer in reducing such numbers after a 1936 survey found that all sixth grade and most fifth grade students in Osaka elementary schools surveyed were receiving after-school exam

42. Yamamoto Tamotsu, "Shōwa shoki chūgakkō nyūshi seido kaikaku ni tsuite: Gifu-ken no jōkyō," *Tōkyō daigaku kyōiku gyōseigaku kenkyūshitsu kiyō*, No. 1 (1980), pp. 120–30.

43. 58 percent and 59 percent of applications to middle and girls' high school respectively were successful in 1935; the figures in Tokyo were 34 percent and 36 percent. By 1940, the proportion of successful applications had dropped to 51 percent and 58 percent nationwide, even though the number of middle and girls' high school places both increased by more than a third over the five intervening years. All figures from *Monbushō nenpō* (various years).

44. Amano, "1920-nendai," p. 78.

45. Kimura Hajime, "'Nyūgaku shiken mondai' no shi-teki tenkai: senzen Tōkyō ni okeru chūgakkō nyūgakusha senbatsu no hensen o chūshin ni," *Kyōiku hōhōshi kenkyū*, No. 4 (1992), pp. 117–49.

prep classes at their schools, 60 percent of them for at least three hours. The following year, an official told the prefectural assembly that schools were even conducting exam prep during ethics and physical education classes. In July 1936, the prefecture announced that because of the harm to compulsory education from exam prep, entrance to its secondary schools would be decided by a written exam in just one subject (history), along with oral and physical examinations and a report from the elementary school. History was chosen for written examination because of its perceived importance for students' understanding of the national polity (*kokutai*). The decision received widespread criticism from educational experts, assembly members, and the press, concerned that it would result in lopsided studying that neglected subjects such as Japanese and mathematics.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, other prefectures also reformed their secondary entrance procedures from 1937. Some, such as Tokyo and Shimane, reduced the number of subjects for written examination to two (Japanese and mathematics), adding an elementary school report and physical exam, while others, such as Nara and Kyoto, imitated Osaka but abolished written exams altogether. In July 1937, the Ministry of Education instructed all prefectures to minimize written examinations, and by the 1938 school year, only one prefecture (Saitama) was holding written exams in more than three subjects.<sup>47</sup> Further prefectural-level reforms were preempted by the September 1939 decision of the Ministry of Education again to abolish written entrance exams for all secondary schools.

The context for this second abolition was significantly different from that of its 1927 predecessor. Through the 1930s, Japanese education had been one of the leading arenas for the gradual strengthening of ideological control that affected the entire nation. It was a period of intense debate about reform of the education system, in which the predominant tendency was to emphasize the need for greater social and ideological unity in the service of the state. Reform proposals came from a wide range of groups and individuals, including established bodies such as the Imperial Education Association and political parties such as the Seiyūkai, but also newly founded groups with powerful connections, such as the Education Research Association (Kyōiku Kenkyūkai), linked to future prime minister Konoe Fumimaro. The proposals tended to focus on the importance of education for the mass of the nation (*kokumin taishū*), especially by extending compulsory education from six to eight years, by improving equality

46. Yoshikawa Takuji, "1930-nendai kōhan no nyūshi seido kaikaku to kokumin tōgō: Ōsaka-fu chūtō gakkō nyūshi ni okeru 'kokushi ipponyari' no kokoromi to zasetsu," in *Jendā to kyōiku*, eds. Fujita Hidenori, Kurosaki Isao, Katagiri Yoshio, and Satō Manabu (Seiri Shobō, 1999), pp. 449–71.

47. Kuwahara Sanji, *Kyūsei chūgakkō no nyūgaku shiken* (Kuwahara Sanji, 1986), pp. 187–90; Matsue Kita Kōtō Gakkō Hyakunenshi Henshū Iinkai, *Matsue kita kōtō gakkō hyakunenshi* (Shimane-kenritsu Matsue Kita Kōtō Gakkō, 1976), p. 965.

of educational opportunity (notably through provision of scholarships), and by a system of part-time schooling for all working adolescents. Meanwhile, reformers often advocated shortening higher education for the minority, usually by curtailing programs at the elite higher schools or merging higher schools with universities. The general view was that in the contemporary context, national strength required prioritizing improved education for the masses. The Meiji system's focus on developing a leadership elite, reformers suggested, tended to sacrifice the education of the majority to that of the select minority; but fifty years on from the 1880s, changing national needs demanded a reassessment of this Meiji approach. Reform proposals also tended to bemoan what they saw as the education system's overemphasis on intellectual education and knowledge transmission (*henchi kyōiku*) at the expense of developing moral qualities such as character (*jinkaku*) and the spirit of work (*kinrō seishin*). Though this reform discourse did not reject educational selection outright, it expressed a clear shift of priorities away from developing a super-educated intellectual elite, and toward wider access to education, along with greater emphasis on character and morality. This shift was fundamental to changes from the late 1930s both to overall education policy and to secondary entrance procedures specifically.<sup>48</sup>

From July 1937, Japan was engaged in full-scale war with Nationalist China, and a National Spiritual Mobilization Campaign was launched by the Konoe government in August 1937.<sup>49</sup> In May 1937, the Ministry of Education issued the booklet *Kokutai no hongi* (*Fundamentals of Our National Polity*), which rejected “Western” individualism and enjoined renunciation of self in the service of the emperor. In December 1937, the Konoe cabinet set up an Education Council (Kyōiku Shingikai), whose report, a year later, argued the need for “fundamental training” (*kiso-teki rensei*) of the people so that the whole power of the state could be brought to bear in building the New Order in East Asia.<sup>50</sup> From 1938 onwards, the concept of *rensei*—comprehensive disciplined human formation for the purpose of service to the Imperial Way—loomed large in the discourse of educational policy and practice. The Education Council argued that this human formation should be the chief purpose of the national schools (*kokumin gakkō*) that its report

48. For details and discussion of the development of educational policy and debate during the 1930s, see Ishikawa Junkichi, *Sōgō kokusaku to kyōiku kaikaku-an; naikaku shingikai, naikaku chōsakyoku kiroku* (Shimizu Shoin, 1962), Yoneda Toshihiko, *Kyōiku shingikai no kenkyū: chūtō kyōiku kaikaku* (Noma Kyōiku Kenkyūjo, 1994), Hachihongi Kiyoshi, *Ryōtaisenkan no Nihon ni okeru kyōiku kaikaku no kenkyū* (Nihon Tosho Sentā, 1982), and Krämer, “Prewar Roots.”

49. Krämer, “Prewar Roots,” p. 526.

50. Terasaki Masao and Senjika Kyōiku Kenkyūkai, eds., *Sōryokusen taisei to kyōiku: kōkokumin “rensei” no rinen to jissen* (Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1987), p. 1.

proposed as a reformed version of existing elementary schools, and which came into being in April 1941.<sup>51</sup>

The second abolition of written entrance exams for secondary schools was announced by the Ministry of Education on September 28, 1939. The new entrance selection system resembled that used during 1928–29 in comprising three components: an elementary school report, a physical examination, and a “personal examination” (*jinbutsu kōsa*) conducted by the secondary school. However, the last was to assess not knowledge, but children’s moral judgment (*tokusei ni motozuku handan*) through oral questions about everyday life experiences. According to one top Ministry of Education bureaucrat, what should be evaluated was “reasoning, judgment, sentiment, will, actual practice, and attitude when answering, as these appear in the course of the questioning, rather than the correctness of the answers.”<sup>52</sup> If there were still applicants who could not be separated, a lottery was to be used.<sup>53</sup> The Ministry’s top civil servant Ōmura Seiichi explained the rationale for abolition in a radio broadcast the next day, alluding to the needs of the state alongside those of children:

As a result of causing physically and mentally immature children to devote themselves to exam prep, not only are these sincere children’s hearts pained and their healthy physical and mental development hindered, but the main purpose of national education is distorted, as in subject education too children’s personal character and real ability are not formed truly, but exam prep classes for cramming and memorization are conducted fervently. We cannot leave things as they are when the entire nation should be pouring its whole power into accomplishing the sacred work of developing Asia.<sup>54</sup>

The reform’s merits and demerits were extensively debated over months by prominent figures in the educational world, including Ministry officials, school principals, teachers, school inspectors, university and normal school professors, and journalists. Many educationalists were enthusiastic. The influential Imperial Education Association announced its support for the abolition of written exams a week before the announcement.<sup>55</sup> The chair of

51. Hachihongi, *Ryōtaisenkan*, pp. 249–55; Monbushō, *Gakusei hyakunenshi* (Monbushō, 1972), pp. 572–73.

52. Koyama Chiichi, “Kaisei chūtō gakkō nyūgakusha senbatsuhō ni tsuite,” *Yamaguchi-ken kyōiku*, No. 475 (1940), p. 75, as quoted in Kimura Hajime, “1930-40-nendai shotō Nihon gimusei shotō gakkō no dōkō to saihen no kadai: shotō kyōiku no henyō to chūtō gakkō nyūshi kaikaku no dōkō ni chūmoku shite,” *Hitotsubashi daigaku kenkyū nenpō shakaigaku kenkyū*, No. 38 (2000), p. 229.

53. “Chūtō gakkō nyūgakusha senbatsu ni kan suru ken,” *Teikoku kyōiku*, No. 733 (1939), pp. 28–29.

54. Ōmura Seiichi, “Chūtō gakkō nyūgakusha senbatsu ni tsuite,” *Teikoku kyōiku*, No. 733 (1939), p. 25.

55. “Nyūgaku gakkō shiken haishi o zenkai itchi de shiji su,” *Kyōiku shūhō*, September 23, 1939, p. 2.

the Tokyo Elementary School Principals' Association, Miyauchi Kōsaborō, welcomed the changes as in line with his association's thinking,<sup>56</sup> and was positive about the results at a roundtable organized by the Imperial Education Association in March 1940:

Because there's no written exam, children's daily life has become cheerful. All the teachers feel it. Children are enjoying doing sports too. . . . We can conduct compulsory education in all subjects without undue bias to any. We've also become able to carry out school events such as sports day, revue (*gakugeikai*), and seasonal celebrations with education-focused enjoyment, unlike before.<sup>57</sup>

Such a view stressed the benefits for children's well-being. However, other educationalists such as secondary school principal Tatsuno Teiichi blamed entrance exams for nurturing moral failings, which they connected to a wider social critique; for these advocates, reform was not only for the sake of children but also the whole nation:

The liberal and individualistic (*jiyū-shugi kojīn-shugi-teki*) education since Meiji has somewhere turned into self-interest (*rikō-shugi*) and ego-justification (*jiga-dokuzen-shugi*) and is running riot through the country. . . . Can we leave things in their present state, where boys and girls who should be pure and innocent like angels are turned into thoroughgoing egoists, individualists, and result-oriented utilitarians, for the sake of their anticipated school entrance, to which everything else is sacrificed?<sup>58</sup>

Meanwhile, the strongest opposition to the abolition of written entrance exams came from secondary schools themselves. The National Association of Middle School Principals issued a statement warning that treating children equally without regard for relative merit would make them idle and hamper national progress:

We must not lose the value of selection as the goal of children's efforts at improvement. Competition is inescapable in life and drives effort.

In any case, the statement continued, basing secondary entrance on elementary school performance would only result in an earlier start to exam prep and competition. Concretely, the principals suggested addressing their concerns by adding a relatively simple written exam in all elementary subjects to the Ministry's proposed procedures.<sup>59</sup>

56. Miyauchi Kōsaborō, "Wareware no shuchō ga irerareta," *Kyōiku shūhō*, September 30, 1939, p. 2.

57. "Nyūgaku shinseido kentō zadankai kiroku," *Teikoku kyōiku*, No. 738 (1940), p. 27.

58. Tatsuno Teiichi, "Shiken jigoku zetsumetsu ronsō (II): mazu kyōikusha tagai ni shinrai seyo," *Kyōiku shūhō*, September 23, 1939, p. 4.

59. Zenkoku Chūgakkōchō Kyōkai Jōmu Rijikai, "Chūtō gakkō nyūgakusha senbatsuho kaizen ni kan suru ikensho," *Teikoku kyōiku*, No. 733 (1939), pp. 34–37.

Individual secondary school principals also articulated objections, some of which echoed those voiced in the 1920s. Hyogo middle school principal Masudo Tsurukichi warned that if the abolition of written entrance exams led to elementary school teachers putting less effort into teaching the three Rs, the capability of secondary school entrants would deteriorate; in any case, competition and exam prep would continue so long as applicants preferred prestigious schools.<sup>60</sup> At a roundtable organized by the journal *Kyōiku* (*Education*) in March 1940, further concerns were raised by Nishimura Fusatarō, the principal of Tokyo First Prefectural Middle School (Ichū), the country’s most prestigious. Nishimura stated that it was practically impossible to separate Ichū applicants academically, as all had outstanding elementary school reports; Ichū was thus forced to look at class rankings. Relying on school reports was also problematic because it led to parental suspicions about teacher favoritism; moreover, the criteria used by different elementary schools were not necessarily comparable. He expressed misgivings about the “personal examination” too, as he thought it inappropriate to judge children’s personal character at such an immature age. Saying that he thought the new entrance procedures adopted “egalitarianism” (*byōdō-shugi*) in opposition to “selectivism” (*sentaku-shugi*), he expressed the view that they would lead to less studying and a drop in academic attainment (*gakuryoku*), at least outside big cities.<sup>61</sup> Allied views appeared in the press, arguing that competitive spirit might be lost, that exams developed perseverance, and that passing exams built confidence.<sup>62</sup>

Arguments against the abolition of written entrance exams implicitly or explicitly appealed to national interest by warning of risks from declining effort or academic attainment. However, advocates of abolition countered by appealing either to the need for moral renewal, or to an alternative conceptualization of ability, in either case for the sake of national mission. Waseda professor Ozawa Kōichi exemplified the former when he responded to “those who think that learning for exams is effective because it motivates more serious effort than learning without a goal”:

You should make an effort at learning because you love knowledge and seek truth. However, learning for the sake of exams aims only at passing, reduces interest in learning once you enter your next school, and makes your motivation for learning impure. This sort of practice is not only unfavorable for learning, but leads to embracing a results-oriented, utilitarian view of human life, fosters calculating, crafty characters, and is inconducive to the creation of an ethos of sunny magnanimity, simplicity

60. Masudo Tsurukichi, “Shiken jigoku zetsumetsu ronsō (III): hatashite gakka shaken zenpai subeki ka,” *Kyōiku shūhō*, September 30, 1939, p. 4.

61. “Shinnyūgaku kōsahō kentō zadankai,” *Kyōiku*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1940), pp. 110–33.

62. Miwa Masahiro, “Nyūgaku shiken kaisei to yoron,” *Kyōiku*, Vol. 7, No. 11 (1939), pp. 27–36.

and fortitude. Now, when our land should nurture a great nation for the building of the New Order in East Asia, we must dauntlessly resolve on a complete renewal of the entrance exam system.<sup>63</sup>

In the *Kyōiku* roundtable of March 1940, the head of the Ministry of Education's research division, Adachi Tadashi, commented that "there seems to have been quite a lot of talk that intelligence (*chinō*) may decline because we no longer have a written entrance exam." His response was to reframe the issue in terms of the quality of learning, connecting this to the advent of national schools:

There's a great danger that when we do exam prep, knowledge is superficial and just gets into the top of your head, rather than being knowledge that truly sinks into your body. . . . So when elementary education is carried out normally according to the national school way of thinking, the resulting students will really have capability that has permeated their body (*shintai ni shintō shita . . . jitsuryoku*), not just in their head as now.<sup>64</sup>

Such views that knowledge, capability, and learning had to go well beyond "head-knowledge" and be unified with moral and physical being were representative of much educational discourse by figures within or allied with government at this period. A notable example was the radio broadcast of Minister of Education Hashida Kunihiro on March 31, 1941, the day before elementary schools became national schools:

We will fundamentally reform the bad practices of what is termed the undue bias to intellectual education (*henchi kyōiku*), which tends to consist of nothing but teaching abstract concepts. The main purpose of education will become the disciplined formation of unified knowledge and virtue, body and mind that leads to the Imperial Way (*kōkoku no michi ni kisuru chitoku-ichinyo, shinshin-ittai no rensei*).<sup>65</sup>

The new secondary entrance selection system was similarly based on the notion of the "inseparability of intellect and morality" (*chitoku sōsokufuri*);<sup>66</sup> in the words of a 1941 Ministry publication on the system, "virtue (*tokusei*) comes into its own when supported by intellect (*chisei*), and intellect becomes true intellect when it is raised up into virtue."<sup>67</sup>

Despite such arguments that national mission and educational ideals demanded reform, practical concerns about the role of the "personal

63. Ozawa Kōichi, "Shiken jigoku zetsumetsu ronsō (I): nyūshi teppai no dankō," *Kyōiku shūhō*, September 16, 1939, p. 4.

64. "Shinnyūgaku kōsahō," pp. 132–33.

65. Hashida Kunihiro, "Kokumin gakkō kaisetsu ni sai shite (hōsō)," in *Rekidai monbu daijin shikijishū*, ed. Monbushō (Monbushō, 1969), p. 392.

66. Amano, *Kyōiku hyōkashi*, p. 252.

67. Monbushō, *Kaisei nyūgaku kōsahō no honshi* (1941), p. 22, as quoted in Kimura, "1930-40-nendai," p. 229.

examination" and elementary school report in the new system were repeatedly raised, especially in relation to fairness and unintended consequences. Commentators in the educational press questioned whether personal character could be judged by a short oral exam, and whether the oral format didn't favor extrovert over taciturn children.<sup>68</sup> Also problematized, as after the 1927 reform, were the comparability of reports from different schools, or rankings in different classes, the potential for outside influence on teachers and consequent favoritism, and the risk of competition for grades and class ranking among elementary schoolchildren.<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, the new entrance system did not completely eliminate exam prep; in fact, resources to help candidates prepare for the new oral exam appeared as early as November 1939, when *Kiyama's Character Guide for Testing Appropriate Reasoning and Depth of Sentiment Based on Virtue* came out in the Kiyama exam prep series published by Juken Kenkyūsha. This book focused especially on morality vis-à-vis the state, with summaries about figures such as the paragon of imperial loyalty Kusunoki Masashige, but also included model answers for questions about the application of morality; for students, these included doing as they were taught, studying hard, saving, and making financial contributions to the war effort. The existence of such exam prep materials made it even more doubtful whether children's morality could genuinely be ascertained through an oral exam.<sup>70</sup>

### *Toward Secondary School Districts and the Integrated Selection System*

During the debate about the abolition of written entrance exams, several commentators associated with the reformist journal *Kyōiku* argued that this measure alone could not solve the problems of competition and exam prep. As educational psychologist Yamashita Toshirō put it,

It is common knowledge in society and shown by statistics that the cause of the entrance exam problem lies in the concentration of applications to certain schools and the accompanying intensification of competition.<sup>71</sup>

One such statistical demonstration had come from Sekiguchi Tai, a leader writer at the *Tōkyō Asahi Shinbun* who was associated with both *Kyōiku* and think tanks that favored statist reform, such as the Shōwa Research

68. Masudo, "Shiken jigoku"; Miwa, "Nyūgaku shiken," p. 32; Yamashita Toshirō, "Nyūgaku shiken no mondai," *Kyōiku*, Vol. 7, No. 12 (1939), pp. 56–59; "Chūtō gakkō nyūgaku seido ni kan suru iken kōkan no kaigō," *Teikoku kyōiku*, No. 734 (1939), pp. 68–71.

69. Miwa, "Nyūgaku shiken," p. 33; Yamashita, "Nyūgaku shiken," p. 58; "Chūtō gakkō nyūgaku," p. 69, "Shinnyūgaku kōsahō," pp. 113–28; Moue Kōtarō, "Shinseido no kahi oyobi shōrai e no kibō," *Teikoku kyōiku*, No. 738 (1940), p. 32.

70. Kimura, "1930–40-nendai," p. 230.

71. Yamashita, "Nyūgaku shiken," p. 57.

Association (Shōwa Kenkyūkai, hereafter SRA) and Education Research Association.<sup>72</sup> In his 1935 book *Problems of Educational Policy*, Sekiguchi pointed out that in 1933, there had been 21,714 applications to Tokyo middle schools but only 11,329 applicants, because 7,741 children applied to two or more schools. 9,100 applications were successful, a pass rate of 80 percent of applicants, though only 42 percent of applications. The harm caused by exam prep was for the sake of excluding a mere one-fifth of applicants, Sekiguchi concluded. He pinned the blame partly on Tokyo Prefecture, for being too stingy to build enough secondary schools, and partly on Tokyo's prefectural middle schools themselves, which, he alleged, wanted to gather the best students and boast of their high application numbers, yet failed to produce creative young people. The root of the problem, he argued, lay in the excessive differences in quality between middle schools, which he suggested use of a lottery for entrance would eliminate.<sup>73</sup>

By November 1939, however, Sekiguchi had a different solution for the problem—a secondary school district system (*gakkusei*). He proposed that schools should be prohibited from accepting applicants from outside a set district containing one or more schools. Unacceptably large differences between schools should be eliminated by a leveling up process that could include teacher transfers. Sekiguchi argued that though some might resist this as a restriction of freedom to choose, currently such freedom was limited anyway. Moreover,

we must think more of the needs of the state than of individual freedom . . . just as henceforth school organization and facilities must be dealt with from the standpoint of the state or the whole (*kokka-teki to iu ka zentai-teki no tachiba kara*) and cannot be abandoned just to the wishes of freely competing individuals (*jiyū-kyōsō-teki na kojīn no shibō*), so the distribution of school entrants must surely be decided from that standpoint too.<sup>74</sup>

He claimed that “the basic cause of today’s situation is that secondary schools cannot rid themselves of the idea that they have the right and freedom to select entrants; they oppose restrictions on that freedom, and they disallow infringement of that right.” This was mistaken, he argued, because the Middle School Ordinance (of 1899) established the principle that all elementary school graduates could enter secondary schools, as “higher ordinary education institutions” (*kōtō futsū kyōiku kikan*). Therefore, entrance must not become only a privilege for some. Rather, “as a whole, secondary schools have the duty and responsibility to admit all who wish to apply.” Entrance procedures should not be considered as giving the right to select

72. Yoneda, *Kyōiku shingikai*, pp. 44–47.

73. Sekiguchi Tai, *Kyōiku kokusaku no shomondai* (Iwanami Shoten, 1935), pp. 126–33.

74. Sekiguchi Tai, “Nyūgaku shiken haishi no mondai,” *Bungei shunjū*, Vol. 17, No. 21 (1939), pp. 208–9.

only the excellent; rather, they were to exclude those special cases who did not have the necessary ability for secondary school study.<sup>75</sup>

Sekiguchi was not the only commentator associated with *Kyōiku* to make such arguments. A month later, Yamashita Toshirō similarly argued that the exam prep problem could not be solved without addressing differences in secondary school quality, again advancing school districts as a solution. At the March 1940 *Kyōiku* roundtable, secondary school districts were advocated both by Tokyo elementary school principal Oguro San and college lecturer Aoki Seishirō, the former commenting that “problems won’t disappear as long as selectivism continues,” the latter wanting to “create enough secondary schools to admit all who wish to go.” Separately, art teacher Okanobori Teiji also argued that “from a state standpoint and in terms of mechanisms for social development, we should grant equal arrangements as far as secondary education to . . . all children who wish to receive it.”<sup>76</sup>

*Kyōiku*’s leading spirit was educationalist Kido Mantarō. Like Sekiguchi Tai, he was closely associated with Konoe Fumimarō’s so-called “brains trust,” the SRA, and with another SRA associate and key advocate of wider access to secondary education, recently deceased Tokyo University professor of education Abe Shigetaka. Like Abe and Sekiguchi, Kido favored a stronger role for state planning to overcome educational problems; he labeled his own ideological position as “cooperativism” (*kyōryoku-shugi*) that “sublates liberalism and dirigisme, individualism and socialism,” a position that Satō Hiromi argues closely resembled the cooperativism (*kyōdō-shugi*) of fellow SRA associate Miki Kiyoshi.<sup>77</sup> The attacks by Sekiguchi and other *Kyōiku* associates on “selectivism” and differences between secondary schools, and their advocacy of school districts and access to secondary education for the vast majority, represented a step beyond the rather vague calls for “equality of educational opportunity” that had been a common feature of educational reform proposals during the 1930s.<sup>78</sup> These statist reformists prioritized secondary education of equal quality for the vast majority, stopping only slightly short of advocating equality of outcome at secondary level for all. As Sekiguchi clearly stated, this would involve restricting the freedoms of individual schools and applicants for the putative good of the whole—the state.

Ministry of Education officials did not go this far, but they too saw a shortage of secondary school places and quality differences between

75. Sekiguchi, “Nyūgaku shiken,” pp. 203–4. The validity of Sekiguchi’s interpretation of the Middle School Ordinance is not addressed here.

76. Yamashita, “Nyūgaku shiken,” pp. 57–59; “Shinnyūgaku kōsahō,” pp. 117–26; Okanobori Teiji, “Nyūshi sokuji teppai yōbō,” *Kyōiku shūhō*, September 9, 1939, p. 4.

77. Yoneda, *Kyōiku shingikai*, p. 47; Satō Hiromi, *Sōryokusen taisei to kyōiku kagaku* (Ōtsuki Shoten, 1997), pp. 53, 57. For Miki’s “cooperativism,” see Fletcher, *New Order*, pp. 112–14.

78. Krämer, “Prewar Roots.”

schools as problems. In his radio broadcast of September 29, 1939 announcing the abolition of written entrance exams, top Ministry bureaucrat Ōmura promised that more schools would be built and differences between schools eliminated in order to tackle the harm done by exam prep. Adachi Tadashi reiterated this at the *Kyōiku* roundtable of March 1940.<sup>79</sup>

In November 1941 the Ministry of Education recommended for the first time that localities consider adopting a school district and/or integrated selection system (*sōgō kōsasei*) “depending on regional circumstances.”<sup>80</sup> “Integrated selection” meant that children applied to a group of schools, not to a single school; successful applicants were then allocated to one school in the group. Five prefectures introduced a school district system for the 1942 school year, and one, Kyoto, also adopted an integrated selection system; six more prefectures imposed some distance restrictions on applications. According to Ministry official Sogabe Hisashi, the benefits of these systems included more educational consistency through stronger relations between elementary school, secondary school, and family, reduced differences between secondary schools, and fewer suspicions of favoritism, suspicions which he said had regrettably increased since the abolition of written entrance exams. Sogabe lauded the integrated selection system introduced for middle, commercial, and girls’ high schools in Kyoto city, whose details were described by prefectural education official Tamura Yoshio in early 1943. Tamura explained that children made a single application, stating their preferred school; if that school was over-subscribed, successful applicants who lived farthest away were allocated to the alternative nearest their elementary school. According to Tamura, the system minimized failures, swept away the idea of differences between schools, and prevented favoritism, since applicants were identified only by number, and a particular applicant’s assessor was unknown beforehand. He enthused that integrated selection did away with the mistaken idea of differences between secondary schools and responded to the needs of the state, instead of being grounded in ideas of individualistic competition. Following this apparent success in Kyoto, in December 1943 the Ministry of Education instructed all prefectures to adopt school districts and integrated selection “in principle.” In Tokyo, this resulted in the implementation of four school districts, each containing six to eight middle schools.<sup>81</sup> The Ministry’s new stance showed a decisive shift away from the ideas that individual competition or the development of an intellectual elite at secondary school level were good for the state.

79. Ōmura, “Chūtō gakkō,” p. 25; “Shinnyūgaku kōsahō,” p. 112.

80. Kuwahara, *Kyūsei chūgakkō*, pp. 199–202.

81. Sogabe Hisashi, “Honnendo chūtō gakkō nyūgakusha senbatsu ni kan suru gakkusei oyobi sōgō kōsasei no jissai ni tsuite,” *Monbu jihō*, No. 762 (1942), pp. 10–18; Tamura Yoshio, “Kyōto-fu ni jissai shita gakkusei o kamiseru sōgō kōsahō,” *Nippon kyōiku*, Vol. 2, No. 11 (February 1943), pp. 100–105; Kuwahara, *Kyūsei chūgakkō*, pp. 212–16.

However, this was not the only significant change to the secondary school entrance system in spring 1944. The Ministry of Education also allowed use of written exams along the same lines as oral questions "where circumstances necessitated," seemingly retreating somewhat from the 1939 prohibition. *Education Weekly* saw this as a policy forced upon bureaucrats by Minister of Education Okabe Nagakage, and questioned its appropriateness.<sup>82</sup> Written exams seem to have been widely reintroduced, though a comparison of the written exams of 1938 and 1944 at Tokyo's Icchū shows how much simpler was the forty-minute 1944 exam.<sup>83</sup> The reasons for allowing their reintroduction are unclear, but may have been related to apparently widespread perceptions, including among parents, that children's academic ability had fallen since the introduction of national schools in 1941.<sup>84</sup> Normal school teacher Yamauchi Yoshinobu advanced the counter-argument that "the true spirit of the national schools (magnanimity, firm and rich sentiment) appears intensely in children's attitudes in the practices of daily life, and cannot be measured by examination methods as used hitherto," but academic Kaigo Tokiomi pointed to factory managers' practical concerns that inadequate subject teaching was endangering productivity.<sup>85</sup> Even the intensification of government wartime control efforts could not silence such questions about national education policy. For all the longstanding criticisms of supposedly undue bias to intellectual education in Japanese schools, many clearly still valued knowledge and skills.

Potential further developments were overtaken by events. The evacuation of children and air raid destruction prevented many entrance exams in 1945, and secondary schooling was suspended from April that year.<sup>86</sup> The introduction of compulsory, non-selective three-year junior high schools for all under the postwar U.S.-led Occupation then rendered debate about secondary entrance procedures redundant.

### *School Districts and Integrated Selection in Postwar Japan*

The use of school districts and integrated selection did not disappear after 1945, however. Once entrance procedures for the new high schools (equivalent to the upper years of the pre-1947 secondary schools) became

82. "Okabe bunshō ni yōbō su," *Kyōiku shūhō*, December 25, 1943, p. 2.

83. Kuwahara, *Kyūsei chūgakkō*, pp. 214–19; Kimura, "1930-40-nendai," p. 254, note 109; Hibiya kōkō hyakunenshi kankō iinkai, *Hibiya kōkō hyakunenshi (jōkan)* (Hibiya kōkō hyakunenshi kankō iinkai, 1979), pp. 634–38, 813.

84. Yamauchi Yoshinobu, "Seiseki kōsa no hensen o miru," *Nippon kyōiku*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (July 1942), pp. 104–9; Naitō Usaburō, "Gakudō no gakuryoku ginmi," *Nippon kyōiku*, Vol. 4, No. 8 (November 1944), pp. 18–25.

85. Yamauchi, "Seiseki kōsa," p. 105; Kaigo Tokiomi, "Tochigi no tatakau kyōiku taisei," *Nippon kyōiku*, Vol. 3, No. 12 (March 1944), pp. 43–48.

86. Kuwahara, *Kyūsei chūgakkō*, pp. 219–21.

necessary, Kyoto city adopted a policy resembling and influenced by that pioneered by the prefecture for secondary entrance from 1942. Reasons given again included ease of travel and the desirability of obviating differences between schools (now relabeled “feudal practices . . . based on meaningless tradition and vainglory”).<sup>87</sup> The Kyoto model, previously lauded by the wartime Ministry of Education, was to become praised by left-leaning postwar commentators as an egalitarian alternative to the new “exam hell” of competition to enter hierarchized high schools elsewhere. Six other prefectures adopted versions of the school district/integrated selection system before 1970, and by 1980 as many as fifteen prefectures had done so. However, many metropolitan parents reacted to integrated selection by sending their children to private schools, most notably in Tokyo, where the 1967 introduction of the system resulted in an inversion of the academic hierarchy as private high schools replaced public as most successful in sending graduates to top universities. From the 1980s the system was increasingly abandoned, ostensibly for promoting undesirable uniformity and giving rise to problematic differences in academic attainment within high schools, but probably also because of a desire (rarely officially articulated) to recreate elite public high schools that could rival their private counterparts in the competition for places at leading universities. Perhaps fittingly, in 2013 Kyoto became the last prefecture to end integrated selection.<sup>88</sup>

### Conclusion

Japan’s pre-1945 debates about “examination hell” and secondary school entrance centered on issues of persistent importance for any modern society with a degree of representative government. Could the aspirations of individual citizens and the good of the nation be reconciled? Could assessment be fair and rigorous without warping education? Furthermore, Japan’s early adoption of examinations and educational qualifications as keys to career success meant that its debates have come to foreshadow similar arguments elsewhere, as the global dominance of credentialist meritocracy leads to interrogation of resulting problems. Recent years have witnessed

87. Koyama Shizuko, “Shōgakkusei,” in *Sengo kōkyōiku no seiritsu: Kyōto ni okeru chūtō kyōiku*, eds. Koyama Shizuko, Sugai Yoshinobu, and Yamaguchi Kazuhiro (Seiri Shobō, 2005), p. 9.

88. Thomas P. Rohlen, “Is Japanese Education Becoming Less Egalitarian? Notes on High School Stratification and Reform,” *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1977), pp. 37–70; Koyama, “Shōgakkusei,” pp. 4–5; Takehiko Kariya, *Education Reform and Social Class in Japan* (Routledge, 2013), pp. 81–85; Hosogane Tsuneo, “Kōkō nyūshi kaikaku to sōgō senbatsusei: senzen, sengo o tōshite,” *Kikan kokumin kyōiku*, No. 59 (1984), pp. 145–57; Peter Cave, “Education in Japan since 1945: Equality, Hierarchy, and Competition,” in *Reconsidering Postwar Japanese History*, ed. Simon Avenell (Amsterdam University Press, 2023), pp. 162–77.

high-profile criticisms of testing’s effects on school education, advocacy of both intelligence tests and lotteries as cures for the ills of meritocracy, and arguments that meritocratic selection is inimical to the collective good.<sup>89</sup> The fundamental issues that engaged Japanese educationalists a century ago are still central to contemporary debate.

Harold Noah and Max Eckstein have argued that examination systems are almost inevitably “configurations of tradeoffs,” “a set of provisional compromises among competing values,” since it is difficult if not impossible for any system to deliver all the benefits that stakeholders may desire.<sup>90</sup> The debates over secondary school entrance exams in pre-1945 Japan provide exemplary support for their claim. Written subject exams seemed to come closest to delivering fair competition untainted by favoritism or inappropriate influence, as well as spurring study effort and indicating academic potential. However, they were repeatedly criticized for the harm they indirectly caused by encouraging excessive exam prep. Alternative assessment methods seemed to alleviate much of this harm but were unable to provide the benefits that written exams delivered. Lotteries were proposed as a rational means of sifting similar performers while cooling competition but were also vociferously opposed for subverting the ideology of merit. Such dilemmas persist to this day in Japan and elsewhere.

That Japanese policymakers had such difficulty resolving these dilemmas between 1920 and 1945 shows the power of the rival interests and ideologies that were engaged. During the first phase of debate in the 1920s, the major arguments centered around which types of assessment were most appropriate and why. Those who defended the existing entrance exam system did so on the grounds that it evaluated children fairly and incentivized effort. Those who sought reform did so because they thought the system harmed children, damaged education, and failed to assess adequately. Both sides appealed both to the good of individuals and the good of the state, reflecting the ideological and social context of the time, as desires for individual freedom and flourishing expanded, yet within a broadly shared commitment to a strong imperial state. The dramatic swings regarding secondary entrance procedures in the late 1920s showed how finely balanced were the issues. Reform was ultimately stalled through a combination of factors: the many problems of the new system, a change of government, and

89. Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Basic Books, 2016); Adrian Wooldridge, *The Aristocracy of Talent: How Meritocracy Made the Modern World* (Penguin, 2023), pp. 376–83; Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit* (Allen Lane, 2020), pp. 184–88; Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy* (Routledge, 2018).

90. Harold J. Noah and Max A. Eckstein, “Tradeoffs in Examination Policies: An International Comparative Perspective,” *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1989), p. 17.

the release of pressure on places as a result of economic crisis. However, the return to the *status quo ante* was to prove temporary.

When the pressures of “exam hell” revived in the late 1930s, many of the arguments of the previous decade were again rehearsed. However, debate now took place in a new ideological and political context. Reform proposals for an education system with wider access to secondary education and more equality of opportunity had proliferated through the 1930s. As the decade advanced amid political crisis and international conflict, far greater emphasis became placed upon the imperatives of state mission, which was increasingly seen by influential figures across intellectual, social, and political spheres as a solution to the problems of liberal capitalist society. Attempts to advance individuals’ interests through education were now attacked as selfish egoism, while differences in secondary school quality were seen as a national problem. Academic entrance exams were viewed as part of a school system excessively focused on memorization of “head knowledge” rather than the promotion of healthy all-round development, intellectual, moral, and physical. These changes meant that the replacement of written entrance exams in 1939 was a far less fragile reform than its 1927 predecessor. Furthermore, the emphasis on state mission, intensified with the expanding war, encouraged further reforms assaulting post-Meiji freedoms and hierarchies, in the form of the introduction of school districts and integrated selection. Selection and stratification of adolescents was increasingly seen as in tension with the development of a unified national citizenry.

In limiting the freedom of competing secondary schools to select students, the secondary school entrance reforms from 1939 onward can be seen as an educational manifestation of the radical statist thinking that contemporaneously led “reform bureaucrats” to seek to control business activity to serve state purposes.<sup>91</sup> Middle and girls’ high schools resembled major firms in being prestigious, established players in the post-Meiji world of free and meritocratic competition, and like firms, though with less success, secondary schools resisted reforms that threatened their rights and status. Moreover, as the post-reform expressions of concern about “falling academic ability” indicated, they were not devoid of support in their view that intellectual excellence should continue to be prioritized. The continued power of such views no doubt accounts for the gradual way in which the school district and integrated selection policies were introduced, as well as helping to explain the reintroduction of written entrance exams, albeit in simplified form, in 1944. As in the case of resistance by business, this illustrates the limits to the Japanese state’s power even during the Asia-Pacific War.

91. Fletcher, *New Order*; Young, *Japan’s Total Empire*; Mimura, *Planning for Empire*.

Educational reform under the U.S.-led Occupation effectively ended debates on secondary entrance, but the readiness with which non-selective public junior high schools were accepted can be partially attributed to the groundwork laid by strengthening educational egalitarianism before 1945.<sup>92</sup> Wartime changes were to continue their influence in later decades. Kyoto city applied the entrance reforms pioneered from 1942 to its postwar high school system, and the Kyoto system became a model that inspired widespread emulation in the 1960s and 1970s, as a new “examination hell” resulted from rising competition to enter high school and university.

Yet the postwar adoption of the Kyoto model stalled. It was undermined because parents were willing and able to send their children to more selective private schools which then leapfrogged public high schools in the educational hierarchy. Herein lay the crucial difference between the wartime and postwar situations. The 1939 entrance exam reform applied to public and private schools alike—there was no opportunity for private schools to market themselves as a more academically demanding option.<sup>93</sup> In contrast, no such restrictions were placed upon private schools in the postwar decades.

This dilemma of freedom and control had been anticipated in the 1930s by one of the leading reform voices of that decade, Tokyo Imperial University professor Abe Shigetaka. Abe pointed out that the Japanese education system was an uneasy combination of the two principles of freedom and state control; he argued that this was a problem that demanded re-examination, with a view to strengthening state control.<sup>94</sup> The dilemma persists to this day, though memories of wartime have strengthened aversion to government control in Japan. How should the balance be struck between freedom—to apply to schools or select from applicants—and state control with an eye to the good of the whole? In recent decades Japan’s high school entrance system has swung emphatically toward freedom: integrated selection has been entirely abandoned, and half of Japan’s prefectures have also abolished high school districts. This may reflect falling numbers of children, easier entrance to university (though not the most prestigious institutions), pressure for greater individual choice, and attempts to raise the competitive status of public high schools vis-à-vis their private counterparts.<sup>95</sup> The term “examination hell” is heard much less often in Japan nowadays, yet about 60 percent of third year junior high students report receiving out-of-school

92. The National School Ordinance of 1941 had also extended compulsory education from six to eight years, though this was postponed in practice as a wartime emergency measure; Monbushō, *Gakusei*, p. 574.

93. “Shiken haishi ni fukujū senu baai,” *Kyōiku shūhō*, October 10, 1939, p. 7.

94. Abe Shigetaka, “Gakusei kaikaku mokuhyō no saiginmi,” in *Kyōiku kaikakuron*, eds. Munakata Seiya and Miwa Sadanobu (Meiji Toshō, 1971), pp. 53–63.

95. Cave, “Education in Japan,” pp. 168–69.

tuition, and steeply rising junior high school non-attendance (*futōkō*) rates raise questions about possibly intensifying pressures on children.<sup>96</sup> The future may perhaps hold further swings of the pendulum in the long history of contention over school entrance procedures in Japan—a history highly relevant to global debates about education and society today.

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96. For out-of-school tuition figures 2010–21, see Kokuritsu Kyōiku Seisaku Kenkyūjo, “Reiwa 3-nendo zenkoku gakuryoku/gakushū jōkyō chōsa hōkukusho: shitsumonshi chōsa,” August 2021, <https://www.nier.go.jp/21chousakekkahoukoku/report/data/21qn.pdf>, p. 22 (accessed January 18, 2023). The junior high non-attendance rate had risen to a record 3.9 percent in 2019, even before the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic: Monbukagakushō, “Reiwa 2-nendo jidō seito no mondai kōdō/futōkō nado seito shidōjō no shokadai ni kan suru chōsa kekka no gaiyō,” October 13, 2021, [https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20201015-mext\\_jidou02-100002753\\_01.pdf](https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20201015-mext_jidou02-100002753_01.pdf), p. 15 (accessed January 18, 2023).

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