

# Success for sale? Roles, perspectives and motivations within the *juku* scene in Japan

LISA SIHVONEN

*Juku*, Japanese private supplementary teaching institutions, are an extensive feature of the Japanese educational landscape. A shadow (Bray 1999; Yamato & Zhang 2017) that follows and fills in the gaps of mainstream education. This article focuses on the *juku* industry surrounding the entrance examination system for junior high school in Japan and looks at the different roles individuals interacting with *juku* play and how they change over time. It uses interview data from the author's 2024 fieldwork and situates it within the existing literature on the topic. It finds that *juku* is a complex experience not easily labeled as positive or negative and that former students who had negative experiences as children do not necessarily view *juku* as a negative thing as adults. It raises the question of whose opinion matters most, children, or the adults those children will become.

**Keywords:** Cram School, Shadow Education, Japanese education

**J**uku is the Japanese word for cram school. These are private supplementary educational institutions catering to a wide variety of educational needs. Cram schools fall under the umbrella of “shadow education”, a term coined by Mark Bray in a 1999 UNESCO booklet (Bray 1999). He uses the metaphor of a shadow, existing because formal schooling exists and changing when formal schools change. Globally, shadow education is varied but cram schools are far from a Japan or Asia exclusive phenomenon. Although they are heavily featured in the East Asian educational landscape, with perhaps South Korea and their *hagwon* most prominently seen in media today, cram schools are a global phenomenon. The case of Japan tells us about the outcomes of neoliberal education reforms and the aide or crutch shadow education can become when entrenched into the educational landscape. It also raises the question about whose opinion is most important when deciding if and how to invest in shadow education. This article does not aim to answer these questions, but rather to contribute to nuance these issues.

Parts of this article are reworked from my master’s thesis “*Selling successful futures: lived experiences and promotional material of the shingakujuku industry in Tokyo*” (Sihvonen, 2024).

Primarily, this article uses data from nine interviews with former *juku* students conducted during fieldwork in Tokyo between January–February 2024. My thesis explored the idea that *juku*, for a subset of Japanese students, has the potential to be a lifelong relationship, which the individual interacts with through different roles throughout their

life as students, teachers and parents. The main aim of this article is to look at these different roles and discuss the motives and reasonings each role operates through, using my fieldwork data and situating these findings within the existing research on *juku*. The focus of my discussion is on entrance examination *juku* (*shingakujuku*) with a primary focus on *juku* aimed at the junior high school (hereafter, JHS) entrance examinations.

### **The role of *juku* in Japan**

To understand the role *juku* play in Japan, it is necessary to also understand the credentialist aspects of Japanese society and education. Japanese education becomes increasingly stratified as the grades progress. Schools are ranked according to results and number of students sent to top ranked universities while students are ranked against their grade according to their test results. This creates an environment where everyone always knows where they are and what is needed to progress to the top of the next stage. On top of this, a clear hierarchy exists between Japanese universities and thus the name of one’s university is seen as having a significant impact when it comes to job searching and social status (Stevenson & Baker 1992, p. 1642; Sugimoto 2020). Shadow education is viewed as an investment to enhance students’ chances of winning in the contest of allocation for higher education (Stevenson & Baker 1992, p. 1655). Furthermore, university education in Japan is seen as “a private privilege rather than a public commodity” (Sugimoto 2020, p. 142); thus, families are expected to and prepared

to spend large sums of money on their children. By spending money on *juku*, private school, and university, parents and children hope to gain access to the highest strata of society or at least to better their chances of securing a good job.

Data from a 2017 Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute (BERD 2017) survey found that 43.1% of students in the final year of elementary school attended some type of *juku*, and of that percentage, 28.3% were children who attended a *shingakujuku*. It is also worth noting that around 50% of all students who graduate high school in Japan go on to attend university (Sugimoto 2020, p. 136). Although the path of private school - top university – top job may be painted as an aspiration for Japanese families, the group of children actually going through this system is narrow but still significant.

*Juku* had their original boom in the 1960s and 1970s and were initially criticized by the media and government for hampering mainstream education. However, as *juku* have continued to fill the gaps left by mainstream education, the official attitude against them has softened and become more accepting with more collaborative efforts made since the 2000s (Yamato & Zhang 2017). Mawer (2015, p. 134) proposes that “the *juku* sector has been able to remain pervasive because it is highly perceptive to a variety of needs that are not answered within formal schooling.” Some of Mawer’s *juku* operator interviewees also stated that they felt as if schools relied on students attending *juku* to catch up on what they could not comprehend at school (2015, p. 145). This further highlights the shadow aspect of education where *juku* can stay relevant due to their adaptability, while regular schools are able to survive despite issues since *juku* are there to fill in the gaps. Neoliberal school reforms have fueled this development in all levels of education. An example of this is the *yutori kyōiku* (‘no-pressure education’ aimed at reducing stress, curriculum and teaching hours for school), which left worried parents to seek out private educational services from *juku* in

order to counteract the feared drop in knowledge and ability left by the reductions (Roesgaard 2006). Another example is the 2000 decision to make people without working experience in schools eligible to apply for school principal positions (Yamato & Zhang 2017, p. 330), further marketizing Japanese education.

The economic burden of education resting on families makes attending *juku* and private schools a costly investment for families and equality gaps are a major concern. Matsuoka (2015); Stevenson & Baker (1992) found that students with a higher socio-economic status (SES) were more likely to participate in shadow education compared to their peers with a lower SES. They also did so with the explicit intention of improving academic results in order to access higher levels of higher education. Enrich (2018) found that students from higher SES gained significant advantages in their advancement to university if they made long-term investments in private tutoring and enrolled in a *shingakujuku* (2018, p. 262). Dierkes (2010) reported that “As a rule of thumb, most *juku* operators consider the bottom 20% of the Japanese income distribution to be unable to afford *juku* instruction.” (2010, p. 27). Moreover, Dawson (2010, p. 17) reported that the average monthly *juku* cost for JHS students doubled between 1985-2007, which Samuell (2023, p. 50) points out happened despite Japan’s low inflation levels and declining demand for *juku*. Roesgaard (2006) also points out that it is not only the fees of the *shingakujuku* that are high but that the fees of the private schools that families are aiming for are also significant and spanning over several years. This fact further narrows the accessibility of both *shingakujuku* and private schools.

However, this gap is not only monetary, *shingakujuku* for the JHS entrance examination was deemed necessary to attend by my interviewees. These institutions play the role of guidance counselors, tutors, and recruiters. They have extensive experience and knowledge about private schools and what each school’s exam looks like and also

hold extensive knowledge about general exam strategies, solutions, and design. In a 2024 pamphlet from Nichinōken (a major chain of *shingakujuku* for the JHS exams) they even call themselves “private school sommeliers”. Perhaps the biggest reason for their importance is because of the curriculum in public elementary school which is on a lower level than what is tested for in the entrance examinations for JHS. This fact makes *juku* attendance necessary for children to grasp the more advanced material needed for passing the examinations. One informant I spoke to said that out of 45 students in her private JHS class, 44 had gone to *juku* and only one had studied independently.

## Students

Students are an important part of Japan’s globalization strategies - Japanese postwar media framed students and the salaryman as soldiers in the new global economic warfare where “education was all that remained for parents to give to their children [...]” (Thorsten 1996, p. 53). Today, Japan has kept its focus on developing *gurōbaru jinzai* (global human resources) which higher education is used to foster. Universities are in turn, trying to appeal to these ideals in a saturated university market. The Japanese government have launched projects such as the Top Global University Project (TGUP) which aims to increase globalization and graduates from TGUP universities have an easier time securing full-time positions after graduation (Samuell 2023, p. 46). Within the entrance examination public discourse, the race for school placements is framed as battles, at the JHS stage this battle is framed as a family fight, where parent and child must prepare together to win. This framing then shifts to more of a solo fight for the university exams, with most of the responsibility being on the students’ shoulders. One of my interviewees described the contrast like this:

“[...] For the university exam, no parent goes to the school and wait in front of the gate for their sons or daughters. We just go there alone, we take the exam alone, come home alone. But for the *chūgakujiken* [JHS entrance examination], because as you said we are very small, my mom took me. We took the train together, and we walked to the gate together, and she was waiting for my test, and we came home together”

-Interviewee B describing the difference in experience between the JHS and university entrance examinations.

At the primary school stage (until age 12) students have less and parents more say when it comes to deciding to enroll in *juku*. Students gain more say in the decision-making process with age (Enrich 2015, p. 212; Ozaki 2015). Fülop & Gyori (2021) point out that the students are active actors within the shadow education scene and that the reason the *juku* industry is still flourishing (despite the plummeting birthrate) is because students agree with and consider them to be important tools when aiming for higher education (2021, p. 163). Ozaki (2015) found that many of her interviewees felt that attending *juku* was needed due to unfavorable teaching in regular school. The main expense of younger students attending *juku* was the personal time lost to the extra workload. Moreover, the more individual climate of the *juku* compared to the more communal spirit of school was found to be a positive aspect of attending (Ozaki 2015, p. 223).

Similar tendencies were found in my interviews. All interviewees described joining *juku* at a young age because their parents wanted them to or because their family and friends already attended. As motivation and goals become more tangible with age (specific personal goals of attending a certain university, etc.) the interviewees themselves decided which *juku* to attend and if they wanted to go or not. Despite some initial negative experiences

as children, with age and perspective, many ended up feeling grateful for the time spent at *juku* due to achieved goals, skills gained, etc. *Juku* was described by some as a negative experience because of the loss of personal time while also being something positive because of friends, class content and teachers. This social aspect could also, much like in regular school, be negative or positive with bullying and bad teachers as well as inspiring teachers and fun friends. One interviewee described attending *juku* in primary school as “pure fun” finding the learning environment stimulating and motivating. Another hated attending as a child and had to be forced to study but was now grateful for the results he was able to achieve through this applied pressure. These factors create a complex environment not easily labeled as positive or negative while the outcomes of attending *juku*, at least for the ones who succeed in the examination, is framed as something positive even when the experience itself was grueling or negative. This trend of self-rationalization was found in all nine of my interviews.

The role of university, university name and employment were brought up in different ways in the interviews. Most interviewees agreed that the name and prestige of one’s alma mater still has a significant impact when job-hunting and that it is a deep-rooted problem in society, but that it is changing (although one interviewee said that he did not think it would change drastically during his or his potential children’s lifetime). One interviewee described that she aimed for Tokyo University in high school (largely viewed as the best university in Japan) because she thought “if I go to Tokyo University, I can be anything”. Another reason she aimed for Tokyo was the fact that it is a national university, therefore having far lower tuition fees compared to private institutions. Another interviewee (who attended a top university) expressed that he would want his children to aim for Tokyo University since he witnessed the superiority of

Tokyo graduates on the job market when he was job-hunting. These examples show that although attitudes and realities may be changing, ingrained thoughts will take a long time to change.

## Teachers

For many, the *juku* journey does not end with the JHS or university entrance examinations. Seven out of nine of my interviewees who had previously attended *juku*, also had experience teaching at *juku* as university students. Some taught at their previous *juku* while some taught at other institutions and types of *juku* such as classrooms catered to more remedial needs. The monetary aspect was broadly the main motivator for choosing the job as *juku* generally provide better pay than other part-time jobs in Japan. Being familiar with the system and experience was another factor in the decision-making process. However, the level of training received from their employers varied, and many wished they had received more. Work was sometimes grueling with long work hours and extra hours during school holidays (due to the intensive courses given to students during these periods). Having to deal with children refusing to study or not paying attention as well as communicating with parents were some of the negative aspects the interviewees brought up. Many of the former students who ended up working at *juku*, did not necessarily enjoy going to *juku* as children. However, as teachers they used these past negative experiences to make class more enjoyable for their own students. Although a challenging job, many also mentioned enjoying spending time with the children and wanting to support them, feeling joy when they succeeded or passed tests. The teacher experience coupled with the student experience applies a further nuance to the relationship between *juku* and individual and may influence feelings when moving onto parenthood and the decision of whether to enroll children in *juku* or not.

## Parents

"I think it was totally my parents' decision because both of my parents didn't enter university, and they struggled getting their jobs because they didn't have a high academic background [...] So, my mother thought going to university is very important in Japan, and I thought that as well. So that's why I think that my parents decided to make me go to *juku*. And go to private junior and high school."

-Interviewee C on her parents reasonings for enrolling her in *juku*

When it comes to parents and the decision-making process, fathers have very little influence while mothers are much more involved and influential in the process (Enrich 2015, p. 212). Regarding the prominent role of the mother within this scene, Thorsten (1996) describes how "education mamas" are framed as something negative but that they are often a necessary role Japanese mothers are made to play in society: "Far less frequently is it understood that mothers' "pushy" roles have been pressed upon them by social and economical circumstances, that they are themselves products of the competitive system they foster." (1996, p. 52).

"I asked my mom and she said I think it was her decision [to enroll in *juku*]. Because I have two older brothers and the oldest one went to public school, so he did not go to *juku* or prepare for the entrance examination. The other one went to *juku* and he went to private school. And my mom knew that it is very difficult to – it is hard to do the entrance examination for university, so she wanted me to not suffer from it so. She thought it would be better if I did the entrance examination for the junior high school. Then I can just go to university without the entrance examination [...]"

- Interviewee F on the decision-making process for her university affiliated school and *juku* enrolment

Private schools, and especially combined schools (one school combining junior and senior high school) or university affiliated schools, are seen as a safe choice for parents who want to ensure that children are set up for success while also being seen as a less stressful choice. These *escalator schools* are framed as the best choice for families wishing to see their children receive quality education as well as what one could call education security, knowing that children would not have to take several entrance examinations in order to go on to the next stages of education. The popularity of affiliated schools or feeder schools (Matsumoto 2019) saw their rise in the 1980s when they became increasingly seen as exclusive due to the difficulty to enter them. The entrance examination competition for JHS peaked in the 90s but the number of affiliated schools has increased in the years since. In 2000 families were given more choice of schooling for their children by eased restrictions on public school zones, which also expanded competition between private and public schools (Yamato & Zhang 2012, p. 330). Matsumoto labels families' returning main aim for these schools as risk avoidance. He also identifies the quality of education and potential academic assets from the affiliated university as other main reasons why these schools are seeing a rise in applications as well as due to anxieties over the proposed 2021 entrance examination change (Matsumoto 2019). The 2021 change to the entrance examination system included written answers in the Japanese and math section instead of solely multiple-choice questions, as well as an increased focus on English ability aiming to test students on writing, speaking, vocabulary and listening. The English tests were supposed to be carried out by the private sector but faced large criticisms of unequal access due to the large costs families would have to pay to take the tests. Both proposed

changes were scrapped for general implementation in July 2021 and instead the education ministry aimed to encourage individual implementation by the universities themselves (Mainichi Shimbun 2021, Sep 4).

As a result of the proposed changes to parts of the system, families are looking to set their children up for success through private institutions. A 2024 article in the *Asahi Shimbun* reported how the ratio of kids attending private JHS are increasing and how university affiliated schools are becoming more and more popular “due to concerns about intensifying competition for university entrance examinations, triggered by a government policy change.” (Takashima 2024, Feb 1). In Tokyo the ratio of students attending private JHS is steadily increasing, and in some wards almost one in two primary school graduates go on to enroll in a private school (Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education 2023). When questioning my interviewees for the reason behind choosing to go for a private combined school, some highlighted the advanced curriculum (in some cases front-loaded), nicer facilities and the number of alumni who went on to prestigious universities. The absence of official entrance examinations to high school also meant that students had six “uninterrupted” years of schooling and therefore more freedom to pursue extra curriculars. However, in some cases this perceived safe and easier path does not end up being as easy or stressless as families hoped. Students still have to keep good grades, and one interviewee described how the regular testing in her university affiliated school turned into unofficial entrance examinations at the high school stage. This was because not all students could go on to the affiliated university and therefore only the ones with certain grades could stay on the escalator. This interviewee’s description of her mental and physical health during her final year of high school, mirrored other interviewees’ (who went to non-affiliated private schools) descriptions of their health when they were preparing for and sitting the official university entrance examinations.

When it comes to previous *juku* attendees and their decision-making process as possible parents, among my interviewees, many explicitly said that a) they wanted to listen to their future children and not force them to attend *juku* if they did not want to attend and that they did not care whether their children attended a private JHS or not, but that b) attending *shingakujuku* was necessary in order to pass the JHS entrance examinations. Some also expressed more interest in other types of *juku* such as ones for music, language or sports. Others saw their own successful experience of the system as a motivator for wanting their future children to follow the same path.

## A Necessary Evil?

For now, it looks like educational reform in Japan has exacerbated unequal access to education in practice. As long as parents are able to buy better opportunities for their children, people will continue to make these investments, and the entanglements present in the Japanese educational landscape makes it difficult to believe that any productive change will come soon. The symbiotic nature between school and *juku* is concerning, and perhaps the situation is at a standstill where both sides stand too much to lose to warrant any real changes. Furthermore, private schools and *juku* both make money off of families’ anxieties around education and therefore directly or indirectly support each other. This is evident in promotional material from *juku* which paints private schools as the superior choice and sometimes even features adverts from private schools.

Each role within the *juku* system has different motivations, responsibilities and reasonings. The interplay and experience of each role influences the next. Among my interviewees, the students who became teachers knew how grueling the *juku* experience could be and actively tried to make the experience for their students more enjoyable. At the JHS entrance exam level, unequal access, largely due to

the curriculum levels and examination contents as well as the monetary aspects, gatekeeps education and creates an unfair playing field from the start. Families with money are able to pay for the supplemental education needed in order to pass the examinations and can pay the expensive tuition fees of the private school as well.

Regardless of the positive outcomes *juku* produces when it comes to education and access to private and higher education, the possible negative aspects remain. Yes, *juku* can be a positive experience but at the same time it is a loss of personal time and independence, especially at the JHS entrance examination stage. This raises the question of what is most important for parents and society – happy children, or successful adults. This is not a question only valid within the context of education or for Japan or Asia, but a universal one. While the role of this article is not to discuss whether it is morally right to send children to cram schools, this was an aspect implicitly lingering over my interviews. But as Ozaki points out “[...] an application of a conventional approach to child well-being, which is developed in Western culture does not capture the particular social demands and expectations that are generated in the Japanese context” (Ozaki 2015, p. 221). It is hard to criticize a different context and culture from a Nordic perspective which operates under totally different rules and expectations for children. Also, many can probably relate to hating attending music lessons as a child but now being grateful to their parents for forcing them to go. Still, whose opinion is most important, the child or the adult which that child will become?

---

**Lisa Sihvonen** holds a MSc in Asian Studies from Lund University. **E-mail:** lisa.sihv@gmail.com

# References

Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute [BERD] (2017). 第3回 学校外教育活動に関する調査 2017 [Third survey on out-of-school educational activities 2017]. Available at: [https://benesse.jp/berd/shotouchutou/research/detail\\_5210.html](https://benesse.jp/berd/shotouchutou/research/detail_5210.html) [Accessed: August 14 2024]

Bray, M. (1999). *The shadow education system: private tutoring and its implications for planners*. Paris: Unesco, International Institute for Educational Planning (Fundamentals of educational planning, 61).

Dawson, W. (2010). Private tutoring and mass schooling in East Asia: reflections of inequality in Japan, South Korea, and Cambodia. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 11(1), pp. 14–24. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-009-9058-4>.

Dierkes, J. (2010). Teaching in the shadow: operators of small shadow education institutions in Japan. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 11(1), pp. 25–35. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-009-9059-3>.

Enrich, S.R. (2015). The Decision for Shadow Education in Japan: Students' Choice or Parents' Pressure? *Social Science Japan Journal*, 18(2), pp. 193–216.

Enrich, S.R. (2018). *Shadow Education and Social Inequalities in Japan: Evolving Patterns and Conceptual Implications*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69119-0>.

Fülöp, M. and Gordon Győri, J. (2021). Japanese students' perceptions of the role that shadow education plays in competition in education, *Hungarian Educational Research Journal*, 11(2), pp. 143–165. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1556/063.2021.00059>.

Mainichi Shimbun (2021, Sep 4). Japan college admission English exam reforms stunted by economic, regional disparities. *Mainichi Shimbun*. Available at: <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20210903/p2a/00m/0na/029000c> [Accessed: Nov 28, 2024]

Matsumoto, Y. (2019). 雑誌における中学入試に関する記述 -私立大学の付属校の事例からみたその変遷と多様性- [Descriptions on Junior High School Entrance Examination in Newspapers and Magazines: Transition and Diversity Seen from the Case of Private Universities' Feeder Schools in Japan]. 早稲田大学大学院教育学研究科紀要: 別冊 26 (2), 65-76 [Waseda University graduate school of education bulletin 26(2) pp. 65-76]

Matsuoka, R. (2015). School socioeconomic compositional effect on shadow education participation: evidence from Japan. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 36(2), pp. 270–290.

Mawer, K. (2015). Casting new light on shadow education: snapshots of *juku* variety. *Contemporary Japan*, 27(2), pp. 131–148. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1515/cj-2015-0008>.

Ozaki, M. (2015). *A Juku Childhood: Children's experiences in Juku attendance and its relation to their wellbeing in Japan* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Bath].

Available at: <https://researchportal.bath.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/a-juku-child-hood-childrens-experiences-in-juku-attendance-and-its>

Roesgaard, M. H. (2006) *Japanese education and the Cram School Business: functions, challenges and perspectives of the juku*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press

Samuell, C. (2023). Shadow education, Bourdieu, & meritocracy: towards an understanding of Juku and inequality in Japan. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, pp. 1–22. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2023.2209467>.

Sihvonen, L. (2024). *Selling successful futures: lived experiences and promotional material of the shingakujuku industry in Tokyo* [Master's Thesis, Lund University]. Available at: <https://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/search/publication/9175496>

Stevenson, D.L. and Baker, D.P. (1992). Shadow Education and Allocation in Formal Schooling: Transition to University in Japan. *American Journal of Sociology*. 97(6), pp. 1639–1657.

Sugimoto, Y. (2020). *An Introduction to Japanese Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Takashima, M. (2024, Feb 1). Private junior highs see surge in entrance exam takers' ratio. *Asahi Shimbun* <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15142807>

Thorsten, M. (1996). A Few Bad Women: Manufacturing “Education Mamas” in Postwar Japan. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 10(1), pp. 51–71.

Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education (2023). 令和5年度公立学校統計調査報告書 [2023 Statistical survey of public schools]. Tokyo: Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education. Available at: [https://www.kyoiku.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/administration/statistics\\_and\\_research/](https://www.kyoiku.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/administration/statistics_and_research/) (Accessed: Nov 27 2024)

Yamato, Y. and Zhang, W. (2017). Changing schooling, changing shadow: shapes and functions of *juku* in Japan. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 37(3), pp. 329–343. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2017.1345719>