# ASIA IN FOCUS

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# Contents

ISSUE 11

# Editorial Note

Welcome to Issue no 11 of *Asia in Focus*.

The year of publication for this issue has been a hectic one. 2025 has brought new threats to academic freedom, democracy, and student safety. The development we are seeing in the United States is not a new one globally as evident to anyone in Asian studies but nonetheless worrying to behold.

Although we did not specify a theme in the call for papers, a commonality has been identified. In this issue, you will find three articles written on topics that, in one way or another, pertain to most of our authors, as well as to our main source of responsibility as educators: our students.

In the current global climate, we believe that open-access, critical academic publications are as imperative as ever, and we are proud to be able to provide it. As always, we would like to thank our reviewers without whom this journal would not be possible. We would also like to thank our contributors for entrusting us with their work and for their hard work. Finally, we would like to thank our readers. We hope that you will enjoy this latest issue.

Maaike van der Burg starts this issue off by examining how universities in Japan have positioned themselves as protectors of youth in discourse on 'new religions', drawing a line between what is considered legitimate or illegitimate, effectively shaping the understanding of religion itself.

Yuchen Viveka Li focuses on the A4 Revolution, where Chinese students abroad organised both offline and online protests and forums. She brings insight into contemporary student activism and emphasises how online spaces "provide room for marginalised voices to resist authoritarian regimes".

Finally, Lisa Sihvonen investigates *juku*, Japan's private after-school education industry. She traces how students, parents, and educators relate to these institutions, and her work reveals that perceptions of *juku* are embedded in ambiguity. In this article, Sihvonen poses the important question: when we discuss education, whose perspective should be given priority?

Happy reading!
Julia, Paul, Karin, & Nicholas
2025-05-15

# Anti-Cult Measures at Universities in Japan
## The Production of Knowledge on Religion as a Category

MAAIKE VAN DER BURG

The assassination of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in 2022 illustrated the complex relationship between the public and religion, specifically with "new" religions. This category is often associated with the term "cult", a label applied to religious groups considered hostile. The attack on Abe's life reinvoked memories of violence and religion in the public sphere, such as the 1995 Aum Affair. These events led to the university's role in protecting and guiding Japan's youth to become part of this debate. It considers universities as central actors to investigate their responses to the phenomenon of religion and new religions through anti-cult measures. These measures can be defined as warnings against cult recruitment in the university sphere. I draw on the framework of moral panic and the concept of moral entrepreneurs to demonstrate how universities select and represent information on religion as a category in their anti-cult measures. The study reveals that this is done through the primary mechanism of language. A fear-invoking lexicon is leveraged together with terminology that underscores a binary between "accepted" and "unaccepted" religions.

I n July of 2022, former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo was shot in broad daylight while he campaigned for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Nara City. The perpetrator's motive was connected to the new religious group, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, unofficially known as the Unification Church. The attack and Abe's subsequent passing reinvoked anxiety stored in the collective memory of the Japanese public. In 1995, members of the new religious group Aum Shinrikyō released sarin gas in the metro system of Tokyo, with severe casualties as a result. This invoked fear specifically regarding the label of "new" religions (*shinshūkyō*), a category assigned to groups to highlight their contemporary nature (McLaughlin, 2023, pp. 209–210; Reader, 2000, pp. 23–25).

Both the attack on Abe and the Aum Affair have undeniably influenced the broader perception of religion in the Japanese public sphere. This sentiment was illustrated in the Japanese General Social Survey, in which 67.6% of the sample group stated that they trusted religious organisations "not very much" (Noriko et al., 2015). Kyodo News+ (2023) surveyed universities throughout Japan on their responses to the assassination. Of the 50 sampled universities, 28 stated that they had strengthened their anti-cult measures to warn students of potential cult recruitment. Anti-cult measures or cult prevention measures (*karuto taisaku*) include posts on university websites, warnings in student guides, flyers distributed on campus, and video materials

shared through universities' intranets and websites (n.p.).

This study examines these anti-cult measures through the prism of the university, which operates as a "moral actor" that selects and represents information. It was found that universities engage in knowledge production on religion through these measures. In this contribution, "cult" is defined as a label assigned primarily to new religions to juxtapose them against religions considered acceptable. The research inquiry was approached through data analysis of publicly available warnings and interviews with university student support and health centre staff. By examining anti-cult measures through the lens of moral panic, it becomes evident that language plays a central role in two ways. First, a lexicon of fear is deployed that leads to increased anxiety. Second, the terminology used underscores a binary of socially "accepted" and "unaccepted" religions.

## The Context of Karuto Mondai

Anti-cult measures are embedded in the context of Japan's "cult problem" (*karuto mondai*). This term addresses mainly incidents in the public sphere associated with groups considered cults, often new religions. The category of new religions emphasises the contemporary origin of groups that date back to the beginning of the Meiji Era (1868-1912). However, the foundation of this definition is porous. It includes

religious groups labelled as "new" that actually have lengthy historical roots (Baffelli, 2023, p. 226). This contribution leverages this category to understand how the perceived contemporary nature of certain religious groups influences knowledge production.

As previously mentioned, the category of new religions is often associated with violence and fear. This is exemplified by two cases that were landmarks in Japanese contemporary history. One of these is the previously mentioned 1995 metro gas attack by members of Aum Shinrikyō. While religion had not necessarily been viewed as something solely favourable before 1995, the attack introduced strong feelings of fear and anxiety into this debate. A key detail is that Aum Shinrikyō had been registered under the Religious Corporations Law (*Shūkyō Hōjin Hō*) enacted in 1951. They were categorised together with schools, hospitals and other institutions deemed beneficial to society (*kōeki*) in the eyes of the law. This legal status came with potential tax deductions, which were seen as the primary incentive to apply. Several adjustments were made to the law in response to the attack. For example, Article 5 was altered to enhance oversight of registered religious corporations. However, the sheer number of these entities, around 184,000, made this task difficult, if not impossible (LoBreglio, 1997, pp. 41–42; Mullins, 2021, p. 123). In sum, this association with violence and anxiety transformed the image of religion from considered public good to something to be wary of.

Following the attack, the public put the roles and responsibilities of several social institutions into question including universities. They were inquired regarding their capacity to safeguard Japan's youth. This was due to the fact that some members of Aum Shinrikyō involved in the attack were alumni of prestigious institutions, such as Waseda and Tokyo University. In addition, from 1991 to 1993, Asahara Shōkō, Aum Shinrikyō's former leader, had been permitted to give speeches at several campuses. This led to reconsiderations of universities' roles in engaging with religion in the campus environment

and if or where boundaries should be established (Baffelli & Reader, 2012, pp. 5–6; Reader, 2000, pp. 97, 100, 199).

The second landmark regards the previously discussed assassination of Abe Shinzo in 2022. The attack became associated with the new religious group, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification. This was due to the perpetrator's status as second-generation religious (*shūkyō-nise*), which invoked a debate on issues regarding this topic. This is also a highly publicised book category that entails testimonials of those who grew up in new religious households (McLaughlin, 2023, p. 209). In relation to these themes regarding youth and religion, universities were once again inquired about their responsibilities, which resulted in the reinforcement of their anti-cult measures on campus.

Literature on anti-cult measures has been published, but not without issues. They were initially addressed in a conference paper that argued they limit students' privacy and freedom of thought (Uotani, 2012). Nevertheless, the paper contains inaccuracies and shows a speculative, unrealistic picture of the situation on university campuses in Japan. Moreover, it does not consider the expectations by the Japanese public of universities to inform and protect their students from this "threat". This is likely related to the author's association with the Universal Peace Federation, which is affiliated with the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification. Sakurai (2012) published a book to convince universities of the anti-cult measures' relevancy. However, the author's mass publications on the cult problem, both in journals and popular media, and previous involvement in de-cult counselling bring along implications. They show the potential presence of an agenda to portray religious groups in a certain way. The shortcomings of both these works emphasise the need for rigorous research on this topic. A nuanced analysis that considers the broader context of anti-cult measures is required to understand how they produce knowledge on religion in the public sphere.

## The Making of a Moral Actor

The Aum Shinrikyō attack and the Abe assassination illustrate unease with religion in the public sphere. In turn, this affects how knowledge on religion is produced and disseminated. To investigate this, the anti-cult measures and the university as a central actor are viewed through the theoretical lens of moral panic. Morals, societal reactions, and processes of deviance-making, which are present in these measures, are central to this framework. Moral panic refers to anxiety about the erosion of collective morals within a society. During a period of moral panic, the "folk devil", the entity that portrays considered deviant behaviour, is established in opposition to these shared morals (Cohen, 2011, pp. 1–2). In this study, folk devils are considered religious groups which have been labelled as cults in the anti-cult measures.

Becker (1963) defines the entity that attempts to eradicate the folk devil as a "moral entrepreneur", an actor highly motivated to relieve society from this threat. Moral entrepreneurs are classified into two groups: those who either create or enforce rules on how to cope with the situation (pp. 144–155). Universities fit into both these categories, as they produce and enforce anti-cult measures. However, this concept alone is insufficient to address the complete picture. First, Becker's (1963) standard of a moral entrepreneur leaves limited room to consider the broader societal context. He defines moral entrepreneurs' sole purpose as "interested in forcing his own morals on others" (Becker, 1963, p. 148). However, as previously discussed, universities are expected to inform and protect their students. Therefore, room should be made to understand the motivations and reasons of universities to develop and distribute these measures.

The second shortcoming is the lack of the "entrepreneurial" dimension. While universities create rules to a degree, a large share of the information in the measures is cross-referenced and taken from other sources. This can be established when one compares the similar language usage between the 68 universities in this research. Yet, the idea of a moral entrepreneur still provides the theoretical foundation needed to understand knowledge production on religion as a category. First, it takes into account the central role of the university in this process as it actively engages with the production and dissemination of the measures. It is through its actors that what is deemed deviant can be understood and how this influences knowledge production. All the above considerations led to the modification of this term to "moral actor" in this contribution.

## Analysis of the Anti-cult Measures

A qualitative research approach was deployed to study the anti-cult measures through the prism of the university. As moral actors, they select and reproduce information. Consequently, they contribute to the production of knowledge on religion as a category. The process of data collection consisted of two phases. First, publicly available materials were extracted from university websites. This corpus of data consists of 60 warning posts, six flyers available online and handed out on campus, nine warnings in student guides and five videos from Youtube. The complete dataset includes information from 68 universities throughout Japan. These can be classified as national, public, and private institutions, some of which are of confessional nature. It is worth noting that differences in anti-cult measures based on these categories can be observed. For example, the sources selected to compose the measures or how religion is represented as a category.

The second phase consisted of 10 weeks of fieldwork in Japan from early January to mid-March in 2024. This included on-site and asynchronous email interviews with staff members of student support or health centres involved in the production and dissemination of anti-cult measures. All interviews in this article have been anonymised by using non-identifiable initials. Visual materials were collected together with field notes of observations.

These observations primarily focused on campus visits and included notes such as the placement of signs and their design. However, observations of the "cult issue" in broader society were also made.

The complete body of data was analysed through thematic coding, which revealed how universities produce information on religion in these measures. The main finding was that language is used in two ways. First, it invokes anxiety regarding past cases of new religions and violence. Second, the use of specific terminology establishes a binary of considered acceptable religion.

## The Lexicon of Fear: Youth, Violence and Anxiety

I witnessed the reality of the anti-cult measures during a field visit to K. University in Kansai. Here, I was invited to talk about the measures deployed on campus with a staff member from the student support centre. As I entered the campus grounds, I noticed that signs with large lettering and bright colours marked off the area. They emphasised that solicitors were not welcome and that students should be aware of them. On the central road of the campus, six of the same signs were lined up to warn students of possible cult recruitment. They stated that students should not provide personal information to strangers and should contact the student office in case of recruitment. The on-campus telescreen displayed several warning videos in which cult recruitment was acted out.

To understand the folk devil or the deviant behaviour, we should initially explore what it deviates from (Cohen, 2011, p. 5). In this example, the university attempts to protect students from groups labelled cults. Yet, the question is, what exactly do they aim to protect? While the on-campus anti-cult measures focus on the threat itself, the measures online tell a different story as they build on narratives of a precarious, youthful student body.

Through students' youth, vulnerability is emphasised in the measures. They live by themselves for the first time (*hajimete hitogurashi*), as young people (*wakamono*) who have left their parental home (*oyamoto o hanere*). In total, 21 universities use the term 'newly admitted students' (*Shinnyū gakusei*) to emphasise this status. Osaka University of Education (2022) suggests that one's "precious youth" (*kichōna seishun*) can be lost if one engages with cults (n.p.). Two interviewees noted that students do not have enough experience (*keiken ga sukunai*). This sentiment is also reflected in four online warnings and five asynchronous interviews in which university staff discussed their former status as high school students. "Compared to high school, they (university students) have more freedom." a student support staff member of N. University elaborates, "They are more likely to be approached by these groups, which guardians and teachers previously prevented." (interview, February 8, 2024).

These similarities in deployed language in the warnings can be explained in two manners. First, cross-references between anti-cult measures are present. In total, 10 universities included links to videos uploaded by Osaka University that enact cult recruitment on campus. Second, the measures include information from external organisations. Three universities provided links to the website of the Japan Society for Cult Prevention and Recovery (*Nihon Datsu Karuto Kyōkai*) and to a flyer by the Consumers Affairs Agency. Several warnings contain similar information from these sources but do not provide references. Reliance on only a few sources can lead to exaggeration and misinterpretation of the situation. It could furthermore result in increased anxiety and stress amongst both students and staff.

Cohen (2011) acknowledges that language has a taken-for-granted status within moral panic and should be interrogated (p. 5). It is not just that they are young or that youth is precious, but the alteration of life phases. As high school students they received supervision from adults. As university students they have more responsibility and autonomy, which they must learn to navigate in a university

setting. As previously noted, the university is expected by the public to mitigate this situation. Thus, this is not solely an entrepreneurial affair but also a response to this societal inquiry to inform and protect students.

Potential harmful consequences to this precarious student body are outlined to emphasise this threat. In total, 65 universities make use of fear-invoking language to some degree. Yamaguchi University (2007) writes that cults may contact you at night and, in extreme cases, have you abducted, confined, assaulted, or even murdered (n.p.). Kyoto University (2018) expresses that threats and extortion by cult groups have also taken place (n.p.). Vocabulary used to describe this threat are adjectives such as dangerous (*kikenna*) or terms like evacuate (*hinan*) and run away or flee (*nigeru*). A layer of threat without explicit mention of violence is the ungraspability of groups labelled cults. They hide their true form (*shōtai o kakusu*) and pretend to be other types of activities (*yosōu*). Universities emphasise that you will lose your "free will" and capacity to make "proper" decisions as a possible consequence. The terms brainwashing (*sennō*) and mind-control (*maindo kontorōru*) are deployed by 24 universities.

In total, 29 universities stated that recruitment has taken place. However, this is difficult to confirm, as some universities consider being approached already as potential recruitment. Most institutions briefly mention that this has happened without specifically confirming whether it took place on campus or not. Yet, hypothetical cases are often described in detail. For example, the video materials by Osaka University (2017) and Kyushu University (2022) display scenarios of possible cult-recruitment. When directly asked about cases, five out of the eleven questioned universities responded positively. Two interviewees provided online news articles on recruitment cases in which their students had been involved. Three others mentioned that students complained about unapproved club activities on campus at the beginning of the academic year in

April. W. University stated that they specifically started to alert their students in response to these complaints (interview, March 3, 2024). In sum, it is a challenge to define what is considered recruitment, as this is not immediately evident when students are approached. Furthermore, it can be understood that anti-cult measures are not solely a reaction to events related to religion in the public sphere, but also in response to concerns by students.

The language used in anti-cult measures highlights potential violence and constructs an ungraspable threat potentially present on campus. However, the data shows that it is difficult to measure these cases. Universities take a preventive approach as they present hypothetical scenarios and respond directly to students' concerns. The next section shows how religion as a category is included in this lexicon of fear and how this contributes to a binary of accepted and unaccepted religion.

## The Construction of a Religious Binary

Underpinned by expected accountability, universities aim to inform and protect their students. Yet, precisely what is it they aim to protect students *from*? Cohen (2011) defines this as a folk devil, the entity that deviates from the accepted values. He describes it as "a reminder of what we should not be" (p. 2). In the case of the anti-cult measures, this term applies to both groups labelled as cults as well as to those who become associated with them.

Universities attempt to distinguish between cults and religion in their measures. Several institutions use the labels cult (*karuto*) or cult groups (*karuto shūdan*) without any reference to religion directly. Universities also state in the warnings that freedom of thought and religion are not interfered with on campus. A total of 12 universities refer to articles in the Constitution that pertain to these rights to illustrate their awareness of this matter. Nevertheless, the data shows that 51 of the 68 universities refer to religion directly. This was done through labels such as religious cult groups (*shūkyō*

*karuto shūdan*), cult religions (*karuto shūkyō*), religious organisations (*shūkyō dantai*) or anti-society religious groups (*hanshakai shūkyō shūdan*). Five universities used one of these labels in the asynchronous interviews. It shows that universities actively select which terms they use to represent a specific type of religion.

In turn, this leads to a differentiation between accepted and unaccepted religions. This is present in the following quote from a post by a Christian study club listed on Osaka Metropolitan University's website under approved student clubs (2016):

> "We do Bible readings together. We do not only discuss and share its content but also talk about everyday problems and concerns … (warning note!) We are a university-approved club not associated with any cults or new religions" (n.p.).

This was likely written by one of the club members rather than by university staff. However, it indicates views on religion in the campus environment as it probably had to be reviewed or approved by the university. The Christian student club illustrates their need to set themselves apart from unaccepted religion, specifically the category of new religions. Three other universities used new religions as a category in their measures.

New religions have been viewed as a nuisance and a potential public safety hazard (Baffelli, 2023, pp. 224–225). In this case, Christianity is seen as a familiar and "safe" religion. This was also emphasised in an interview at K. University with a student support staff member. According to them, Japanese university students do not have the awareness (*ishiki*) of what "actual" religion entails. The interviewee contrasted this against their image of European students. They suggested that these students had grown up with religion and, therefore, understood this better. During my field visit, I observed a Buddhist temple located a short walk from the campus' main entrance. I was thus curious about my interviewee's opinion on considered religious practices and elements related to Buddhism and Shinto, which I assumed most students were to some degree familiar with. The interviewee replied that these were a part of Japanese culture rather than religion (interview, March 14, 2024).

## Conclusion

This contribution focused on universities as moral actors in their capacity to produce knowledge on religion. The data shows that this is done through the mechanism of language in the anti-cult measures. First, by deploying a lexicon of fear, they describe a precarious student body and include descriptions of violence and other consequences if one engages with groups labelled cults. Second, religion as a category is present in the dataset as it is directly mentioned by the majority of universities. They invoke a binary that juxtaposes unaccepted religion against accepted religion. The framework of moral panic and the notion of moral entrepreneurs were applied to understand this phenomenon through its actors. Yet, several theoretical adjustments were made to enable a nuanced analysis that considers the complex contemporary background of this issue. This includes the 1995 Aum attack and the 2022 assassination of Abe Shinzo. However, universities also state that they directly respond to concerns raised by students. Although some universities attempt to navigate the precarious and unclear area of religious freedom, knowledge production on religion does occur through their anti-cult measures. Yet, several questions remain open to academic inquiry on this matter. For example, how does the categorisation of universities influence the representation of religion in anti-cult measures? Furthermore, how do the ramifications of these measures both in university and religious spheres manifest? These gaps highlight the need for future research to understand how universities engage in knowledge production on religion.

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# Dancing in shackles
## The A4 Revolution Launched by Chinese International Students

YUCHEN VIVEKA LI

This paper explores the A4 Revolution, a civic movement initiated by Chinese international students in response to the tragic fire in Urumqi, China, and the delayed rescue due to strict COVID-19 policies. The movement, symbolised by blank A4 paper, reflects the creative resistance to censorship while highlighting the ongoing struggles against state control. Through a combination of online and offline activism, participants used platforms like Instagram, Telegram, and Facebook to organise events, share personal experiences, and navigate ideological differences. This study employs online ethnography and autoethnography to analyze how Chinese students across the globe engaged in the movement, examining the interaction between digital platforms and physical protests. It emphasises the complexities of identity, where participants' political, gender, and class backgrounds intersected, causing internal conflicts. By exploring these contradictions, the paper sheds light on the decentralised nature of the movement and the ways in which online spaces provide room for marginalised voices to resist authoritarian regimes. Ultimately, the A4 Revolution is a poignant reflection of Chinese democracy activism and the power of online platforms in shaping collective resistance across borders.

**Keywords:** A4 revolution; digital activism; decentralised movements; China

If one had passed by Petriplatsen in Lund on the evening of 2 December 2022, they would have encountered a group of Chinese students, faces obscured by masks and caps, solemnly gathered for mourning. Encircled by flowers and candles, the setting was punctuated by posters dispersed across the ground, and most notably, sheets of blank A4 paper. The gathering was part of the global A4 Revolution, a grassroots movement organised by Chinese students worldwide in response to growing discontent within China.

On 24 November 2022, a fire erupted in the Jixiang Yuan district of Urumqi, China, resulting in ten fatalities and nine injuries. The public outcry that ensued quickly intensified, with many attributing the delayed rescue efforts to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rigid Zero-COVID policies (BBC News 2022). On 26 November A protest began at Nanjing Media University, where a blank sheet of A4 paper was raised as a symbol of dissent against the regime's excessive pandemic control measures and suppression of free speech. This act of defiance was the catalyst of a civic movement, that rapidly spread across 21 provinces and over 207 universities (Crossing 2022). Protesters took to the streets, holding up blank A4 sheets as a form of silent resistance.

The significance of the A4 Revolution extends beyond immediate political demands; it represents a powerful critique of state censorship, authoritarianism, and the tension between civil rights and state control in contemporary China. What makes this movement particularly noteworthy is its global resonance. Chinese students abroad rapidly mobilised, utilising digital platforms such as Instagram to connect with others in their cities and to organise public events, including candlelight vigils and

poster displays. Digital creators with substantial followings played a pivotal role in the dissemination of information, the facilitation of event coordination, and the amplification of voices that might otherwise remain silenced within China's heavily censored media environment.

However, the diversity of political ideologies expressed through the movement's posters and slogans highlights the inherent tensions and contradictions within the campaign. These ideological differences sparked debates in both online and offline spaces, raising important questions about the role of digital platforms in shaping civic movements. This paper investigates these dynamics by examining the interaction between online and offline activism in the A4 Revolution, emphasizing the significance of digital platforms as spaces for civic engagement and resistance. The aim is to contribute to the broader understanding of how diasporic communities, particularly Chinese students, navigate complex transnational political landscapes through both virtual and physical activism.

## Background

*Theoretical Framework*
Culture, as defined by Clifford Geertz (2008), is not a static set of principles governing behaviour, but a dynamic system of meaning constructed through symbols, which individuals and groups use to interpret and reflect upon their lives (p. 31). In the context of the A4 Revolution, the blank A4 paper emerged as a potent symbol of both resistance and mourning, ingeniously satirizing the Chinese government's censorship practices. By holding up a blank sheet, protesters conveyed the stifling limitations imposed on free speech, where even silence becomes a

powerful political statement. This cultural symbol thus functioned as a vehicle for critique, not only of the Chinese state's censorship but of the broader, repressive political environment in which dissent is silenced.

The blank A4 paper as a visual representation of repression is understood as a "symbolic act", as discussed by Abu-Lughod (2008), that critiques hierarchical structures of power. In this case, culture functions as a mechanism for "othering," whereby those who resist are marked and marginalised by the dominant order (p. 51). The A4 paper, however, disrupts this othering process by transforming absence (of text, of explicit demands) into presence, thereby rendering the unspoken suppression itself the subject of protest. This tactic underscores the complexities of resistance within a regime that seeks to eliminate political speech.

Analysing this movement through Geertz's interpretive lens allows to deeper understand the A4 Revolution as part of China's evolving democracy movement, a subject that remains underexplored in academic discourse. As Geertz (2008) reminds us, ethnography's primary object is not to provide solutions to universal problems, but to uncover how people within specific contexts make sense of their circumstances (p. 39). In this case, the A4 paper assumes a central role as a symbol through which we can interpret the broader dynamics of Chinese civic movements and the forms of agency expressed by participants, particularly in diasporic communities where the movement's symbolic power resonated across borders.

*Literature Review*
The internet has become a critical tool for activism, especially in heavily censored environments. As Bishop and Kant (2023) argue, digital platforms provide marginalised groups with spaces to communicate, organise, and resist censorship. Denning (1999) highlights the internet's transformation of traditional media from a "one-to-many" model to a "many-to-many" dynamic, enabling more participatory forms of activism. Soriano (2014) expands on this by noting that online platforms foster the creation of collective identities and political mobilization, particularly for groups facing repression. These insights helps to understand the role of digital spaces in the A4 Revolution, where Chinese activists both inside and outside China relied heavily on online platforms to coordinate their efforts and express dissent.

To date, only a limited number of scholarly works have specifically addressed the A4 Revolution. Thornton (2023) provides a comprehensive analysis of the protests, situating them within the broader political context of Xi Jinping's authoritarian rule, and emphasises the role of various social groups, including the Chinese diaspora, in the movement. Peng (2024) explores the intersection of feminist activism and civil disobedience, highlighting the significant role played by women in expanding the movement's scope from anti-COVID measures to broader demands for democratic reform. Chan (2023) examines the revolutionary potential of the A4 movement, arguing that the protests demonstrated the possibility of resistance even under China's increasingly totalitarian regime. Collectively, these studies provide foundational perspectives on the A4 Revolution, yet many aspects of the movement remain underexplored.

I will examine the interaction of online and offline strategies related to this civic movement, specifically asking two questions. One question is about "connection", how participants use social media in the context of the complex relationship between state power and civil rights. The other question concerns what internal contradictions emerged within the A4 Revolution, and how these tensions were negotiated among participants.

## Method

*Data Collection*
This research employs a dual-method approach, combining participant observation with

autoethnography. As the primary research site I selected @citizensdailycn, a digital creator on Instagram with a following of over 73,000. The selection of this site was made due to its role as the largest resource aggregator for the movement. The "scroll back" method (Robards & Lincoln, 2017) was utilised to systematically track and analyse the digital traces of the campaign, encompassing 42 posts, 379 stories, comments, and 10 media reports. The data sources provided key insights into the movement's development and its digital strategies, with themes covering event recruitment, posters, photographs, anonymous communications, media coverage, and personal experiences. Conducting content analysis of this data allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how participants utilised social media to build a global activist network, thereby expanding the sociality of the movement.

Furthermore, I incorporated autoethnography, which allowed me to focus on individual participant experiences, with particular attention to their sense of agency (Chambers 2017). As a participant in the movement, I followed the Instagram account from its initial promotion of the A4 Revolution and joined a Telegram group in Skåne through the shared event posters. My role as an insider researcher enabled me to observe and partake in both online and offline activities, enhancing my engagement with the subject. Throughout this process, a reflexive and critical approach was adopted, recognising the author's own positionality and the ethical complexities involved in conducting research on sensitive political topics (Hine 2015, p. 85; O'Reilly 2012).

*Data Analysis*
Ethnography, as Geertz (2008, p. 31) asserts, is an interpretive science aimed at uncovering the meanings that individuals and groups assign to their experiences. The process of analysis, therefore, involves more than merely the collection of data: it also necessitates the careful interpretation and organisation of the data to reveal patterns and cultural significance. In this study, Geertz's concept

of "thick description" (2008, p. 36) is of particular relevance, insofar as it demands that ethnographers contextualise and analyse data in a way that explains how participants construct meaning within their socio-cultural frameworks.

This research incorporates both online traces and my immersive autoethnographic experiences. This methodological combination was employed to examine how participants in the A4 Revolution used digital platforms to articulate their agency. Whilst Instagram was the dominant platform for the organization and the promotion of the movement, other apps like Telegram and Facebook also played significant roles in facilitating communication and coordination. The study draws upon the concept of "polymediated communication," which highlights how marginalised or vulnerable groups often utilise multiple communication channels to meet their diverse needs (Chambers 2017). By examining participants' use of various digital platforms, this analysis captures the nuances of how online spaces enabled both collective action and individual expression.

A key focus of the analysis is to elucidate the internal differences among participants, with a particular focus on the debates surrounding political demands and ideological positions. These debates, which occurred in both online and offline contexts, reveal the complexity of group dynamics within the movement. By addressing these internal contradictions, the study contributes with a multidimensional understanding of the A4 Revolution, challenging monolithic interpretations of culture and resistance (Abu-Lughod 2008, p. 58). The interactions between participants in both online and offline spaces created a unique cultural climate in which anonymity played a central role, allowing for both solidarity and ideological divergence.

*Ethical Considerations and Data Privacy*
Given the sensitivity of the A4 Revolution, ethical considerations such as privacy and security were paramount throughout the research process. I collected data from two perspectives, online and

offline (Boyd 2015), and to analyse users' use of social media in a specific context (Postill & Pink 2012). This "unobtrusive research method" minimises direct interference by the researcher in participants' activities (Hine 2015, p. 159). Autoethnography, as opposed to conventional interviews, allowed for deeper immersion in the movement without compromising the safety or anonymity of the participants. To prevent potential identification I removed identifiable information, such as specific dates, locations, and account details from the participants digital traces (Boyd 2015; Robards & Lincoln 2017; Hine 2015, p. 163). Sensitive information such as school names, personal names, and physical appearances were also excluded to prioritise privacy protection.

The public-private dichotomy of social media further complicates ethical considerations (Robards & Lincoln 2017). Digital platforms like Instagram and Facebook operate in both public and private spheres, allowing users to control the visibility of their posts. For this study, I collected only publicly visible data and avoided private content whenever possible. To ensure ethical compliance, I sought permission from @citizensdailycn to use their published content as research data and received approval. For Telegram, where anonymity is crucial, I refrained from collecting chat messages without authorization from all members in the chat group, focusing instead on my personal observations of how participants used the platform.

In terms of analysis, I avoided making "personalized diagnoses or moral judgments" (Hine 2015, p. 163). Although my own positionality involves opposition to the state control, capitalism, and patriarchy, I adhered to the principles of decentralization, respecting diverse viewpoints within the movement. All data involving ideological positions were categorised rather than ranked or judged. By employing autoethnography in conjunction with these ethical guidelines, I maintained an immersive and reflexive cultural experience, ensuring that my analysis remained balanced and avoided overly self-centred perspectives.

## How we make connections under siege

On the afternoon of 25 November 2022, as I prepared to attend a public event in the town square, I encountered disturbing news on Weibo, a Chinese social media platform, about a fire in Urumqi, Xinjiang. Despite the initial reports, the video of the fire was expeditiously censored on Weibo, thus prompting me to turn to Twitter (now X) for more information. Amidst the festive atmosphere of a Christmas tree lighting ceremony, I watched a video showing the devastating fire and heard the haunting cries of women trapped inside the inferno. The stark contrast between the celebratory environment around me and the horrific scene on my phone induced a profound sense of disconnection and alienation.

Subsequent reports revealed that the victims, including women and children, had lost their lives due to delays in rescue efforts, which many attributed to the strict Zero-COVID policies. Although government officials were swift in attributing the tragedy to structural factors such as narrow gates and poor evacuation protocols (光明网 2022), these explanations did little to appease public anger. The incident was a seminal moment that incited widespread outrage against the Chinese government's policies and a focal point for the A4 Revolution.

In the aftermath of this event, I joined discussions on Twitter and soon discovered @citizensdailycn, an Instagram account dedicated to promoting China's democracy movement. This account became a critical hub for the organisation and the mobilisation of the A4 Revolution. Due to censorship within China, activists—both domestic and abroad—relied on VPNs and foreign social media platforms like Instagram and Telegram to coordinate their efforts while ensuring anonymity and security.

@citizensdailycn functioned as an anonymous submission platform that facilitated the movement's expansion. On November 25, the account made its first public call for candlelight vigils. Participants who wished to organise vigils in their cities created posters containing event details, including

information about time, location, and Telegram group QR codes. The posters were submitted privately to the account and subsequently published as Instagram Stories, allowing for rapid dissemination across global networks. Between October 2022 and January 2023, nearly 60 candlelight vigils were held across Europe, including in major Chinese student hubs in Sweden such as Lund, Gothenburg, and Stockholm.

The @citizensdailycn account functioned in a capacity that extended beyond the coordination of events, serving as a repository for protest materials. By 27 November, the account was using the hashtag #A4Revolution, featuring a then iconic image of a female student at Tsinghua University holding a blank sheet of A4 paper. Individuals worldwide designed posters that reflected diverse themes and styles. These materials were disseminated via @ citizensdailycn, making them widely available for anyone to download, print, and display. Participants documented their efforts by taking photographs of the posters displayed in public spaces such as university campuses. The photographs were then reposted to the account, creating a powerful cycle of inspiration and replication. The slogans adopted by participants, such as "Free China" and "Stand With All People Resisting Dictatorship", further illustrate the movement's diverse motivations and demands. This subject will be examined in greater detail in the following section.

As the movement grew, the account evolved into a collective emotional space where individuals anonymously shared their personal experiences and struggles during the pandemic and under China's restrictive Covid-19 pandemic policies. Many contributors expressed their grief over the inability to return home due to the pandemic, their frustration with the high cost of travel, and their anger at the numerous tragedies caused by the policies. Others reflected on the privilege of being an international student and the solace that they found in connecting with like-minded individuals through offline activities. Whenever these sentiments touched on

specific policy grievances or criticism of the ruling party, they were virtually always censored or removed from domestic Chinese platforms, driving participants to seek the safety and anonymity of overseas digital spaces for expression.

The anonymous submission system ensured the safety of contributors, with all content –whether posters, event details, or personal stories – privately messaged to the account for publication. This allowed participants to voice their dissent without fear of retaliation while maintaining a decentralised and inclusive approach to activism.

Whilst Instagram served as the primary platform for promoting the A4 Revolution, the role of other social media platforms should not be overlooked. Telegram was crucial for maintaining anonymity of participants, for facilitating group chats, and managing offline events, while Facebook's Event function was utilised to streamline event organization and ensure accurate information dissemination.

## Ideological Tensions and Decentralization in the A4 Revolution

As previously mentioned, the diversity of ideological slogans featured on the posters reflects the plurality of perspectives among participants in the A4 Revolution. Upon categorizing these slogans, several key themes emerged. The most prominent theme was opposition to President Xi Jinping, with slogans such as "Remove Xi Jinping". The second major theme targeted dissatisfaction with the CCP's policies and broader authoritarian governance, reflected in slogans like "No lockdowns, we want freedom" and "Stand with all those resisting dictatorship, oppression, and violence globally". Additionally, feminist slogans such as "Yes to Love, Yes to Queer" and "No to patriarchy, No to capitalist giants" highlighted the intersectionality within the movement. However, ideological differences soon sparked tensions, both online and offline.

Tensions typically surfaced during offline events where participants gathered physically.

Some participants anonymously reported concerns that certain protest slogans were inappropriate or divisive. For instance, at one event, an individual shouted derogatory remarks about President Xi's mother, which was perceived as misogynistic by others in attendance. Others expressed discomfort with the overtly political nature of the protests, arguing that the events should focus on mourning the victims of the Urumqi fire rather than broader political demands. Conversely, other participants called for the establishment of a unified set of slogans and political objectives to give the movement a more cohesive and powerful message. This proposal, however, was met with resistance from those advocating for decentralisation, who emphasised the importance of respecting diverse viewpoints and allowing individuals to express their own grievances and demands.

In response to these growing tensions, on 29 November, @citizensdailycn published a post explicitly stating that "avoiding division should be the baseline for all protesters." The post emphasised the importance of mutual understanding and active listening, urging participants to recognise each other's perspectives as rooted in personal experiences rather than ideological opposition. The emphasis placed on decentralization was evident in the organization of mourning events, such as the one held in Lund on 2 December, where the proceedings were not directed by a single organiser or moderator. Participants were encouraged to take the initiative, whether that involved speaking, creating posters, purchasing candles, or selecting music. This configuration enabled an organic and participatory form of activism, where individuals could engage on their own terms.

The ideological debates within the movement also highlight broader issues related to identity. As Hall and Gay (1996, p. 277) argue, identity is inherently fluid and complex, especially within the context of postmodern theory. Each individual within the movement embodied a constellation of intersecting identities, including Chinese, student, feminist, man/woman, member of the diaspora, and various political and class positions. These identities, which at times appeared contradictory, coexisted within the same person, resulting in internal tensions and differing motivations for participating in the A4 Revolution. Postmodern theory rejects the notion of a unified, coherent identity, suggesting instead that individuals navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting, subjectivities. As cultures and contexts shift, individuals may temporarily align with different aspects of their identity (Hall and Gay, p. 598).

The A4 Revolution's decentralized nature aligns with contemporary understandings of networked activism, where movements are often leaderless and rely on digital platforms to facilitate participation. Such movements have the potential for rapid mobilization but may struggle to sustain momentum or translate grassroots energy into concrete political outcomes. In the case of the A4 Revolution, the utilisation of multiple social media platforms, namely Instagram, Telegram, and Facebook, enabled a flexible, polymediated form of activism (Chambers 2017).

The A4 Revolution illustrates the complexities of modern resistance movements, particularly those that emerge from within authoritarian contexts. While the diversity of political demands within the movement reflects the broad-based discontent with China's Zero-COVID policies and the CCP, the decentralised and diffuse nature of the movement raises questions about its ability to achieve lasting change. Nevertheless, the movement's strength is rooted in its ability to create spaces for collective expression, also in the presence of ideological differences, and to challenge hegemonic power structures in innovative ways. The A4 Revolution, like other decentralised movements, demonstrates that resistance can take many forms, and that even in the absence of a unified political program, the act of dissent itself can be a powerful force for social and political transformation.

## Conclusion

The A4 Revolution exemplifies the creative strategies employed by participants to expand public participation, resist censorship, and maintain anonymity under an authoritarian regime. Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, as exemplified by the account @citizensdailycn, has been instrumental in facilitating anonymous communication, event organisation, and the dissemination of personal experiences. Telegram and Facebook also played key roles in facilitating the logistical aspects of offline activities, enabling participants to form a decentralised yet coordinated campaign chain across multiple digital spaces. The interaction between online and offline strategies revealed the potential of digital activism to influence real-world outcomes, as tensions in offline events sparked online debates that subsequently shaped the organization of future activities. This decentralised structure fostered inclusivity and flexibility, enabling participants to navigate ideological differences while preserving overall cohesion. It is evident that through these platforms, participants circumvented China's Great Firewall and leveraged the anonymity of digital spaces to sustain a transnational movement.

While the A4 Revolution underscores the possibilities of digital activism, its limitations also highlight the complexities of transnational resistance. Applying Geertz's interpretive lens, the movement can be understood as a site of meaning-making where the concept of "Chineseness" is neither fixed nor monolithic but instead represents a dynamic and contested identity constructed through symbolic acts of resistance. The blank A4 paper itself became a multifaceted symbol, simultaneously representing silenced voices, state censorship, and the fluidity of collective identity in a diasporic context. As Soriano (2014) observes, digital platforms offer marginalised groups avenues to resist power structures and challenge authoritarian regimes, even when physical spaces for dissent are severely limited. The participants represented a wide range of backgrounds and political perspectives, including those from the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Xinjiang, and the broader Chinese diaspora. Each participant interpreted the movement's goals through the lens of their unique socio-political experiences. This interpretive diversity expanded the space for marginalised voices, thus allowing individuals who might otherwise remain unheard – such as feminists, queer activists, and ethnic minorities – to articulate their demands within a shared yet decentralised framework.

The A4 Revolution can be regarded as a form of resistance akin to "dancing with shackles"– a metaphor for the precarious balance between self-expression and suppression. The movement's decentralization served a dual function: it allowed diverse political positions to coexist without fracturing the movement, while also ensuring safety through anonymity. However, this very structure also resulted in the dispersal and depoliticization of the movement, thereby hindering the capacity to sustain long-term mobilisation or translate digital resistance into structural change. Nevertheless, the significance of the A4 Revolution does not lie in its sustainability as a prolonged struggle but rather in its ability to ignite transnational solidarity, using social media to create networks of resistance, amplify marginalised voices, and challenge state power beyond national borders. The movement thus constituted a moment of defiance, thereby disrupting the illusion of state omnipotence in China's authoritarian regime. In a tightly controlled society, the most significant consequence may be the fostering of a consciousness of dissent, thereby demonstrating that resistance, however transient, has the capacity to reconfigure the political imagination.

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ISSUE 11

# 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.

ASIA IN FOCUS

*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. Entrich (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 *chūgakujuken* [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 (Entrich 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 (Entrich 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 20127, 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?

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