

EXAMINATION HELL

Every year in Japan, senior high school students face make-or-break university entrance exams. The exams are extremely difficult and the preparation period is long and grueling. That's why the testing process is called *juken jigoku*, or "examination hell."

For many students, these admissions exams are crucial. A university degree is required for most desirable jobs, and a diploma from a leading university is almost a guarantee of career success. However, the number of applicants to the universities is far greater than the number accepted. In fact, only about one out of four students who test for leading universities are admitted the first time they test.

Examination hell begins early. The pressure to succeed often starts in preschool. Attending a well-known kindergarten is the first step. Students who do well in kindergarten can take admission tests to elite elementary schools, and then to choice junior and senior high schools. The pressure becomes greater as students near college age. In some ways, elementary and secondary education in Japan is one long cram session¹ for college admission.

The entrance exam is actually two tests. The first, taken in January, is the Joint First Stage Achievement Test, or the Center Test. It is based on the curriculum of Japanese high schools and is a lengthy multiple-choice test. The answers to the questions appear in newspapers the following day. Several months later, students take second-stage examinations given by individual universities. Some universities use the first test to select candidates for the second-stage exam. The second-stage exams include short-answer and long essay questions, but most of the problems are again multiple choice. They cover Japanese language, mathematics, science, history, social studies, and English.

For students who get through examination hell, heaven waits on the other side. University days are generally carefree. Many students join social clubs, such as jazz clubs or tennis clubs, and spend their time hanging out with friends.

This system of testing has both supporters and critics. Supporters say that the system is fairer than systems that depend on recommendations, essays, or high school grades. Some supporters claim that the time spent in *juku* gives Japanese students an advantage over the students of other nations and that it teaches children self-discipline. However, critics say the system creates unnecessary stress in young peoples' lives and robs them of a happy childhood. This leads to depression and exhaustion. There is a saying among high school students: "pass with four, fail with five." In other words, students who sleep five hours a night will fail. Critics also say that, because the exams test memorization of facts, students do not learn analysis and creativity.