

With Just a Little Bit of Help

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

Some things never leave us. When I pass a gaggle of book-laden students on the street, I can still easily summon the tingle of expectation I once felt at the beginning of a new school term, or the onerous challenge of the last examinations before the end of a term nearly done. Summer's passing into autumn meant a return to classrooms and pencils and notebooks and even such now-endangered species as the slide rule. On the other hand, the hastening pace of those last weeks of spring heralded the sweet freedom of another California summer, a time when the trappings of the classroom faded utterly from conscious thought. After living in Japan for a decade and a half, those old associations are still strong; even though the Japanese school year traditionally begins in April, the fact of that timing is still something I cannot quite accustom myself to. I am still surprised to see school uniforms after the onset of summer.

Much has been made of Japan's educational system in recent years. It has been lauded and decried both at home and abroad, and I have found my own judgement swaying with the tone of each article or book on the subject that I read. Particularly criticized are the Japanese "examination hell" system and the special extracurricular cram schools—called *juku*—that prepare students to deal with those all-important school entrance exams. While criticism and theories abound, these two aspects of the educational system are part and parcel of modern life in this country. It is hard to imagine Japan without them.

I did not expect to find the small *juku* classroom to which I have been invited to be as calm and quiet as it is. My expectations were of a huge lecture hall packed wall-to-wall with exhausted but high-strung youngsters, all of them bleating out rote formulas, equations, or sets of historical dates. I am sure that there are such halls, but this is obviously not one of them.

The desks are sparsely occupied and I discover that I have arrived a bit on the early side; the present pupils are all of

preschool age. The older pupils will arrive over the next hour or so as their schools let out. I must admit that I am a little surprised to find preschoolers this young; none of them is older than five.

At first, the presence of a towering foreigner with a bagful of cameras and other strange things causes a ripple of mild excitement, but this subsides after some minutes and the young scholars soon return to their tasks at hand. Two of them are hard at work at learning the *hiragana* syllabary and the kanji—ideographic characters that were originally Chinese—for numbers. Their concentration is intense and unbroken. I stand and watch as they maneuver their pencils into the patterns they must learn.

The kanji do not all come easily to the boy, and as he at last hesitates, the teacher—who is also a housewife and mother with her own school-age son—steps to his side and gently begins to guide his hand. His deskmate stops in the midst of her own efforts and watches. He tries on his own again, and hesitates, and again comes the teacher's gentle guidance. Once more he tackles the characters for five and ten and this time he gets them right. His face lights up in a toothy little smile as he sets to work on the next page. The land and language are utterly different, but his little success kindles long-cold memories of my own. There was a period when I thought that long division was something created just to torment me.

The door opens and a quartet of pupils enters. Regular school is out and now the rhythm quickens. As I make my exit a short time later, the room is nearly full, and more pupils are arriving. The teacher and her assistants barely have time to look up; the room is alive with learning. For a moment, I wish I could slip off my age and find a desk and a workbook and pencils. I linger, looking back. But I must at last close the door and step out into the spring afternoon. ■

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