

ford's writing approach would you want to imitate, and why? Which elements would you prefer to avoid, and why?

5. Reevaluate the writing you did about the meaning of ice cream or some other food in your life. In what ways might you argue that the cultural significance of ice cream (or the food of your choice) is continuing to evolve, if your use of it can be taken as an example of its present history?

CAROL SIMONS



Kyoiku Mamas

A former associate editor at the Smithsonian magazine, Carol Simons has lived in many parts of Asia with her children and her husband, a foreign correspondent—including Vietnam, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Thailand, India, Japan (for six years), and most recently, Beijing, China. She continues to write for the Smithsonian and other publications on such issues as education, horticulture, nature, and popular technology. "One of the advantages of journalism," she writes, "is that it is transportable and adaptable; not only have I been able to work in many countries, but I have been able to learn about them as well."

"Kyoiku Mamas," published in the Smithsonian in 1987, grew out of Simons's interest in what mothers in Japan do on a day-to-day basis to help their children achieve academically. "While my small son played in the afternoons," she explains, "theirs were going to music classes, gymnastics, math. At one point, I even suggested to my son, then seven, that he go to after-school math classes to speed up his computation, but he looked at me like I was crazy." The author wrote this essay over a period of two years, finding it difficult to reach a conclusion. "At first, the advantages were more obvious than the disadvantages," she says. "But after interviewing many women, and observing the pressures as we became friends, I decided theirs was a plight, forced by competition in the system, that I was fortunate to escape. Most Japanese mothers, though proud of their roles, felt burdened by them and wished their children could have more of a childhood."

Before you read "Kyoiku Mamas," reflect on and then write about the ideas of duty and responsibility and the cultural dictates or standards that influenced your mother or the person who cared for you as a child. What were her major convictions as a parent—as you know them directly and in-

directly—and why and where do you suppose she found them? If you are now a mother, you might prefer to examine the cultural dictates or standards influencing you.

Two-year-old Hiromasa Itoh doesn't know it yet, but he's preparing for one of the most important milestones of his life, the examination for entry into first grade. Already he has learned to march correctly around the classroom in time with the piano and follow the green tape stuck to the floor—ignoring the red, blue and yellow tapes that lead in different directions. With the other 14 children in his class at a central Tokyo nursery school, he obeys the “cleaning-up music” and sings the good-bye song. His mother, observing through a one-way glass window, says that it's all in preparation for an entrance examination in two or three years, when Hiromasa will try for admission to one of Tokyo's prestigious private schools.

Forty-five minutes south of the capital city by train, in the small suburb of Myorenji, near Yokohama, 13-year-old Naoko Masuo returns from school, slips quietly into her family's two-story house and settles into her homework. She is wearing a plaid skirt and blue blazer, the uniform of the Shoe-ei Girls School, where she is a seventh-grader. “I made it,” her smile seems to say. For three years, when she was in fourth through sixth grades in public school, Naoko's schedule was high-pressure: she would rush home from school, study for a short time and then leave again to attend *juku*, or cram school, three hours a day three times a week. Her goal was to enter a good private school, and the exam would be tough.

Her brother, Toshihiro, passed a similar exam with flying colors several years ago and entered one of the elite national schools in Tokyo. The summer before the exam, he went to *juku* eight hours a day. Now, as a high school graduate, he is attending prep school—preparing for university entrance exams that he will take in March.

Little Hiromasa, Naoko and Toshihiro are all on the Japanese road to success. And alongside them, in what must surely be one of the world's greatest traffic jams, are thousands of the nation's children, each one trying to pass exams, enter good schools and attain the good jobs that mark the end of a race well run.

But such children are by no means running as independents. They are guided and coached, trained and fed every step of the way by their mothers, who have had sharp eyes on the finish line right from the start.

No one doubts that behind every high-scoring Japanese student—and they are among the highest scoring in the world—there stands a mother, supportive, aggressive and completely involved in her child's education. She studies, she packs lunches, she waits for hours in lines to register her child for exams and waits again in the hallways for hours while he takes them. She denies herself TV so her child can study in quiet and she stirs noodles at 11 P.M. for the scholar's snack. She shuttles youngsters from exercise class to rhythm class to calligraphy and piano, to swimming and martial arts. She helps every day with homework, hires

tutors and works part-time to pay for *juku*. Sometimes she enrolls in “mother's class” so she can help with the drills at home.

So accepted is this role that it has spawned its own label, *kyoiku mama* (education mother). This title is not worn openly. Many Japanese mothers are embarrassed, or modest, and simply say, “I do my best.” But that best is a lot, because to Japanese women, motherhood is a profession, demanding and prestigious, with education of the child the number-one responsibility. Cutthroat competition in postwar Japan has made her job harder than ever. And while many critics tend to play down the idea of the perpetually pushy mother, there are those who say that a good proportion of the credit for Japan's economic miracle can be laid at her feet.

“Much of a mother's sense of personal accomplishment is tied to the educational achievements of her children, and she expends great effort helping them,” states *Japanese Education Today*, a major report issued in January by the U.S. Department of Education. “In addition, there is considerable peer pressure on the mother. The community's perception of a woman's success as a mother depends in large part on how well her children do in school.”

Naoko's and Toshihiro's mother, Mieko Masuo, fully fills the role of the education mother, although she'd be the last to take credit for her children's accomplishments. This 46-year-old homemaker with a B.A. in psychology is a whiz at making her family tick. She's the last one to go to bed at night (“I wait until my son has finished his homework. Then I check the gas and also for fire. My mother stayed up and my husband's mother, and it's the custom for me, too”) and the first one up in the morning, at 6. She prepares a traditional breakfast for the family, including *miso* soup, rice, egg, vegetable and fish. At the same time, she cooks lunch for her husband and Naoko, which she packs up in a lunch box, or *o-bento*. She displays the *o-bento* that Naoko will carry to school. In the pink plastic box, looking like a culinary jigsaw puzzle, are fried chicken, boiled eggs, rice, lotus roots, mint leaves, tomatoes, carrots, fruit salad and chopsticks. No pb&x sandwiches in brown bags for this family.

“Every morning, every week, every year, I cook rice and make *o-bento*.” Mrs. Masuo says with a laugh, winking at Naoko. “I wouldn't want to give her a *tenuki o-bento*.” Naturally. Everyone knows that a “sloppy lunch box” indicates an uncaring mother.

But Mrs. Masuo doesn't live in the kitchen. She never misses a school mother's meeting. She knows all the teachers well, has researched their backgrounds and how successful their previous students have been in passing exams. She carefully chose her children's schools and *juku*, and has spent hours accompanying them to classes. “It's a pity our children have to study so much,” she apologizes. “But it's necessary.” She says that someday she'd like to get a part-time job—perhaps when exams are over. “But at the moment I must help my children. So I provide psychological help and *o-bento* help.” Then she laughs.

Toshihiro says that it was his mother who drilled him in elementary school and instilled in him his good work habits. And he says it was she who “forced” him

to go to *juku* from fifth grade on, even though he hated it and “missed being able to play after school.” And it was she who made sure the money was set aside to pay for his many lessons—up to \$12,000 for two years before he took the junior high exam. Mrs. Masuo explains that her husband, who works for an oil company, didn’t feel *juku* was necessary “because he didn’t go when he was young.” But, like most Japanese husbands, he works late and doesn’t get involved in the children’s activities. “So what happened was that Toshihiro just started to go, and afterward the subject was raised. Naoko, being the second, was no problem.”

Some evenings she went with Naoko to *juku*. Mother and daughter walked the 15 minutes down the hill to the train station and took the Tokyo line four stops to Yokohama, then walked past the brightly lit shops and kiosks and along the glittering lanes that make so much of Japan’s shopping streets look like Coney Island. They passed *sake* shops and bakeries, Kentucky Fried Chicken and a clanging pachinko parlor, and turned in at the modern high-rise where the *juku* occupies two floors.

Naoko studied Japanese, math and science. Today, in her former math class, the *juku* teacher rapidly explains algebra problems to 50 fifth-graders. He lectures; they listen. In a science class down the hall, a young teacher explains photosynthesis and pretends to be a drooping plant. Seated at long tables, the children listen attentively, occasionally giggling at his antics. It is almost 8:30 P.M. and many of them haven’t been home since breakfast.

“Yes, it’s difficult,” says Masato Nichido, assistant director of the *juku*. “But most of these children like *juku* better than public school. These children want to study more. And whether they want to or not is beside the point. They must, in order to pass exams.”

It is this prospect of exams, known in Japan as “examination hell,” that has prompted Yukiko Itoh to expose little Hiromasa to early training in the hope that he will get into a prestigious private school. Just over ten percent of Tokyo’s children attend private schools, some of which run from first grade through high school and even through university. Assuming there are no major mishaps, a child who enters one of these schools can pass the rest of his academic career without the fierce examinations children such as the Masuos must face.

Like most Japanese mothers, Mrs. Itoh spends most of her time with her son and her six-month-old daughter, Emi. Babysitters and play groups are not part of her life. She has dinner with the children well before her husband comes home from work. She takes them to the park, to swimming lessons and music, much of the time carrying her baby in a pack on her back. Indeed, a young mother with an infant in a sling and a toddler by the hand walking along a subway platform or a city street is a sight that evokes the very essence of motherhood to most Japanese.

This physical tie between mother and child is only a small part of the strong social relationship that binds members of the family together in mutual dependency and obligation. It’s the mother’s job to foster this relationship. From the

beginning, the child is rarely left alone, sleeps with the parents, is governed with affectionate permissiveness and learns through low-key signals what is expected and what to expect in return.

Many American children are also raised with affection and physical contact, but the idea is to create independent youngsters. Discipline begins early. Children have bedrooms separate from their parents. They spend time playing alone or staying with strangers and learn early that the individual is responsible for his own actions. An American mother, in disciplining, is more likely to scold or demand; a Japanese mother is apt to show displeasure with a mild rebuke, an approach that prompted one American six-year-old to tell his own mother: “If I had to be gotten mad at by someone, I wish it would be by a Japanese.”

Even a casual observer is struck by the strong yet tender mother-child connection. A Japanese senior high school teacher said that many wives, including his own, sleep in a room with their children and not their husbands. “Is it the same in America?” he asked. At a dinner party, a businessman made his wife’s excuses: “I’m sorry she couldn’t come tonight. My son has an exam tomorrow.” Even if the excuse was not true, the use of it says a lot.

You Must Do Well or People Will Laugh

The relationship of dependency and obligation fostered in the child by the mother extends to family, school, company and country, and is the essence of Japanese society. The child is taught early that he must do well or people will laugh at him—and laugh at his mother as well. “Most Japanese mothers feel ashamed if their children do not do well at school,” said one mother. “It is our responsibility to see that the child fulfills his responsibility.” Bad behavior may bring shame, but good behavior has its own rewards. One woman described a friend by saying: “Her son studied very hard in order to get into a good high school and he got in. She is very clever.”

This attitude is precisely what gives education mothers such as Mrs. Masuo and her *o-bento* philosophy such esteem and why they take such pride in their role, even if they don’t admit it. Their goal is clear: success in entrance exams, good school, a good college and a good job. (For daughters the goal has a twist: good schools lead to good husbands.)

For the majority of students who go the public school route, test scores become key and it is this fact that motivates many of the 11- and 12-year-olds traveling home from *juku* on evening trains. Many try out for the elite national junior high schools which, because of the demand, grant entrance on a combination of scores and lottery. Three years later they test again, for placement in high schools which, unlike the egalitarian lower grades, are organized according to ability. And three years after that, they test for college.

Passing the final obstacle isn’t easy; only about half get into college on their first try. Many try again, for a year or two, attending prep schools and *juku*, memorizing facts for exams to come. Such students are called *ronin*, literally

“masterless samurai,” and even are referred to in government statistics by this term.

A \$5 Billion-a-year Industry

But “exam hell” doesn’t stop with college. Companies and government ministries administer highly competitive tests to prospective employees, sometimes only to graduates of the prestigious universities—a system that increases the pressure even more.

This competition at all levels has generated the “*juku* boom,” a \$5 billion-a-year industry of prep schools for *ronin*, cram schools, tutors and special courses. Over the past ten years, the number of children attending *juku* has increased by half—now more than 16 percent of the primary school children and 45 percent of junior high students. Attending *juku* can cost well over \$200 a month.

Even the *juku* compete with each other—there are now 36,000 of them in Japan. One Tokyo *juku* administers practice exams to 20,000 youngsters on Sundays. Some of the more famous cram schools give their own admission tests, promoting jokes about going to *juku* for *juku*. Can a student get into a prestigious high school or college with just the information learned in public school? “Highly unlikely,” said one local public high school teacher. “The exams are very severe.”

So, in the evenings and on Saturdays and Sundays, subway platforms are crowded with students of all ages. Dressed in casual clothes or sober midnight blue school uniforms and lugging heavy black leather book bags, they are traveling to the thousands of cram schools tucked into office buildings, down side lanes and in every corner of every neighborhood.

Sometimes, children are launched into the system when they are barely old enough to walk, some of them starting “school” when they are still in diapers. They learn to obey such commands as how to clench and open their fists. “The future of a child here begins with conception,” said one Tokyo mother. “Schools, after-school schools, calligraphy, piano, exercises—Japanese mothers don’t waste any time.” A documentary film on nursery schools by the Japan Broadcasting Company followed a five-year-old named Yasukata and his mother around on their weekly activities. Every morning he went to kindergarten. Three afternoons a week he attended “special strengthening class” (\$500 a month), which included rhythm exercises, simple academics and etiquette. His mother waited two and a half hours while he took the class. On another afternoon, she took him to athletics, and on another to drawing. Such preparations, the mother said, would help her son “jump the puddles” ahead of him. By the program’s end, Yasukata was one of 1,066 to “challenge” the prestigious Keio private school—which continues through university—and one of the 132 first-graders to gain entrance. On the same program, a mother of twin girls who had also been accepted to a famous private school said, “It’s as though I have received a long-distance ticket to life.”

Hoping for the same ticket are many of the mothers sitting on the benches

in the large gymnasium at a branch of the ponderously named Japan Athletic Club Institute for Education of Infants (JAC for short), the school that Hiromasa attends. They are watching an afternoon class of about 50 four-year-olds in their regulation red-and-blue shorts and T-shirts. The children have finished exercising and are beginning a “voice obedience” session. Abreast in a straight line, the group is told to “hop forward to the beat of the tambourine, jump in place to the tweet of the whistle.” It sounds easy but not everyone arrives at the finish line at the same time, indicating a slipup in obeying the tweets and beats. Some private primary schools might use such exercises in their entrance exams, so practice is considered practical.

Watching the mothers watch their children, JAC Director Naomi Ooka says he is dismayed by the pressure of the exams on the mothers and their children. In his view, modern Japanese mothers and children spend too much time together. “It’s not good,” he says.

Today, more and more educators and parents are questioning the high-pressure system that gives rise to such popular sayings as “Sleep four hours, pass; sleep five hours, fail.” Educationists speak of lost childhoods, kids never getting a chance to play, “eating facts” to pass exams, and the production of students who memorize answers but can’t create ideas. They cite the cruelty of students who take pleasure when their classmates fail, increasing delinquency, and high incidence of bullying in the schools.

Not surprisingly, Japanese mothers have been among the major critics, perhaps because they bear much of the brunt and witness the effects of the pressure on their children. “My son kept getting headaches and then he didn’t want to go to school,” said one mother. “So I stopped the *juku*.” Recently, such mothers have gained an ally in Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, whose government has been seeking ways to depressurize the education system. Nevertheless, many doubt that his efforts will have any effect in a society dedicated to hard work and competition.

For on a measuring stick, the competition has surely paid off. In math and science, Japanese children rank highest in the world. They do long division before American children, take more years of a foreign language (English), learn chemistry earlier, and are overflowing with factual knowledge about history, geography, scientific formulas and other bits of information that to many Americans would seem encyclopedic.

And the accomplishments don’t stop there. A stunning 94 percent of Japanese youth go to high school. Some 90 percent graduate (compared with 76 percent in the United States) and are well qualified to take their place in the work force. At the college level, the comparison shifts: only 29 percent of Japanese high school graduates go on to college (compared with 58 percent of American graduates). It is here, at the highest level, that Japanese education is considered inferior to that in the United States. The Japanese college years are often referred to as a “four-year vacation,” although a well-earned vacation since the years through high school produce students who shine.

Among Japanese who are beginning to fight the system are the increasing

numbers who have lived abroad. Quite simply, they want their children to have more time to play; they want them to learn more and memorize less; they want them to be more creative and independent. Critics say that small families, small houses and modern conveniences lead to children being babied by mothers who don't have enough to do; and that mothers themselves are stifled at an age when women should have more freedom.

Chikako Ishii claims to know a better life. She spent several years in New York City with her family and is an outspoken opponent of the education mother and the highly competitive education system. "I don't think women like this role," she says, "but the competition is pushing them into it."

Mrs. Ishii teaches Parent Effectiveness Training, an approach to learning that emphasizes the individuality of the child. It's an idea long accepted in the West but anathema in group-oriented Japan, where one of the most repeated proverbs is the "nail that protrudes will be hammered down." Her two sons go to neighborhood schools. Masahiro, 12, is in the sixth grade and Hideaki, 14, is in the eighth, where he is ranked number one in his class. They do not attend *juku* and do not have tutors. "So far they're both doing well," remarks their mother. "I am watching to see how they develop."

Like those around them, the Ishiis have high expectations for their children, but their wait-and-see approach is baffling to many. "She's brave," said one young mother. "It's fine, I suppose," allowed another. "But what if she fails?"

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. By what cultural patterns of values and expectations is the mother-child relationship governed in Japan? In what ways are the achievements of both mother and child intertwined?
2. What contrasting cultural patterns of values and expectations underlie the mother-child relationship in the United States?
3. In what ways might "one of the world's greatest traffic jams [of people]" (p. 100) influence the patterns of values explored in this essay?
4. What are your responses to Simon's descriptions of the demands placed on Japanese mothers? What elements in your background influence your responses?
5. Why or why not do you agree with the author's assertion that "theirs [Japan's mothers'] was a plight forced by competition in the system" (p. 99)?

WILLIAM D. MONTALBANO



Latin America: A Quixotic Land Where the Bizarre Is Routine

Born in 1940, William D. Montalbano is a writer and reporter. He is currently working as a foreign correspondent in Rome, where he writes news and feature stories on Italy and the Vatican and travels with the Pope. He also reports on Greece, Turkey, Spain, and Portugal. The recipient of numerous journalism awards, Montalbano sometimes finds time to write novels, too—"flighty airplane books," as he calls them.

In his work as a foreign correspondent, information is his trade. "To be able to write a story about anything—a person, an issue, a country, a continent or a state of mind, I assemble a welter of data, much more than I could ever get into the paper," Montalbano explains. "Then I hone, trying to build a word picture that will make people read, and learn, about things for which they have no innate interest. When reporter becomes writer, he can bob and weave, he can back and fill. One thing he can't do is write good copy with bad information."

The essay that follows—"that surrealism piece," as Montalbano describes it and one of his all-time favorites—was first published in the Los Angeles Times in 1986. "After covering Latin America for a long time, it finally dawned on me that the two halves of the hemisphere are cursed into examining one another through opposite ends of the same telescope. The latinos see us bigger than life. We see pygmies. Not true. Not true. The incomprehension is fueled by a skewered mindset. We think that if we only got to know them, why, they'd be just like us. Baloney. They're different, man; different products of a different, whacky, magical kind of place. . . . So the story is about incomprehension, or it's an aide to understanding misunderstanding."

According to Montalbano, the essay was created as a result of a "feet-on-the desk review of snippets of anecdotal string" he'd been