Every year in South Korea for one day, usually in December, airplane routes in Seoul are redirected for an hour, government workers are told to report to work an hour later than usual, police cars are placed on emergency standpoint. Prior to this day, high school seniors have stopped cutting their fingernails, drinking milk, taking showers and eating seaweed soup, and some pay a special visit to temples or shrines. These students are also traditionally given special presents of traditional candy, forks, and glutinous rice cake. Versions of these activities can also be annually seen in various other Far East Asia countries. What is going on? It is time for the taking of the college entrance examination.

It is difficult to communicate to Western audiences the onerous nature and overwhelming importance of this exam, for unlike the West, the college entrance exam is actually the centerpiece of the entire educational system in countries like South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and China. It shapes definitions of education and determines which subjects are taught on the pre-college school level, how they are taught, when they are taught, and the way students learn. This is not to say that testing and entrance exams play an insignificant role in American education; they do and to a far bigger degree than most people are aware of, as Nicholas Lemann has brilliantly shown in his history of the Educational
Testing Service in the recent book *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux: 1999). However, even this role pales in comparison to the significance of the entrance exam system in Asia.

In addition to laboriously preparing for the exam in regular school, many Asian students also attend special expensive cram schools after their regular classes where they only study how to take the college exam. In short, for most Far East Asia high school students, even today, their chance to go to college rests entirely upon passing the university entrance examination (teacher recommendations, high school grades, club activities, essays, and interviews generally play no real role in the admission process). [-1-]

But this does not capture it all, for the expressed intention of the entrance examination goes beyond the simple testing of a student’s knowledge and ability for meritocratic purposes. For cultural reasons that will be explained later, the test is not viewed primarily as an aptitude or I.Q. test, as in the West; rather, what is being measured is how well trained a student is. In other words, what is valued is not the ability to acquire information, to efficiently learn new things, and make connections between them, but the personal qualities—discipline, obedience, ‘spirit,’ a good memory, the ability to postpone gratification—of the individual who can successfully pass the test. (Evidence of this can easily be found by a quick perusal of examples of the examination questions used, almost entirely of a multiple choice and brief answer nature, often about arcane subjects, with very few essays or interpretative questions.) Hence proper effort is the overriding concern, not ability.

All of this is comprehensively captured in the new book, *Dragon Gate: Competitive Examinations and Their Consequences*, by Kangmin Zeng of the School of Education at Stanford University. The book is a detailed study of the university examination systems in South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. As Zeng astutely
notes, “The history of exams is a history of an institution, a system. On the other hand, this system is not an empty shell, but a structural order governing human behavior and consciousness. In that sense, what we have been studying is a key behavioral pattern, the history of the pattern, and the power behind that power” (p. 329).

To present his history of exams in these three countries, Zeng employs three basic methods: “(1). Comparison, (2). Historical perspective, and (3). An emphasis on the transition between micro and macro-level analysis” (p. 14). He also uses autobiographical asides and numerous charts, graphs, drawings, and summary boxes to augment his arguments.

The book consists of ten chapters. Chapter one sets the basic analytical framework for dissecting what Zeng calls “The core role of the university entrance exam system and its corollary culture, in both the behavioral and institutional dimensions” (p. 13). His main point is that “entrance exams have come to be a significant part of the legitimating norm for education and quality” (p. 12).

Chapter two is a comprehensive comparative history of university entrance examinations from the beginning to the end of the Japanese Empire. It starts with a discussion of Confucius and his philosophy, and moves on to the Chinese imperial model, which provided the political and moral basis for the examination systems in the Far East. The chapter continues with an analysis of how Japanese imperialism and Western educational models molded the examination systems in Korea, Japan and Taiwan. Japan is given the most attention since both Korea and Taiwan were colonies of Japan during this decisive period. Zeng also details the types of exam questions and exactly which elements of the school system were based on Western models.

Chapter three presents a comparative history of the systems
since 1945. Beginning with the immediate postwar period and the American educational reforms during the occupation of Japan, Zeng goes on to show the various education reforms in the three countries and the dissimilarities in the exam systems. In a very telling section on the way the Japanese and other East Asians view the purpose of tests, Zeng shows that while the SAT was introduced by American educators in 1948 during the occupation, it was abolished in 1955 because “The aptitude test or I.Q. test does not sample some important traits . . . motivation, personal characteristics (such as honesty, neatness, integrity, perseverance, promptness or orderliness), or anything about the person’s social skills . . . While the neglect or dismissal of these personal traits may be tolerated in the U.S. . . . in East Asian societies, some of these factors especially motivation, perseverance, neatness, orderliness, etc., are highly appreciated and directly associated with that form of intelligence” (p. 81).

The fourth chapter is concerned with the question “What knowledge has been tested in exams?” (p. 120), that is, what is the rationale of the entrance examination systems. As a way of answering this question, Zeng looks at “what the exams required the students to know” (p. 121). He next carefully examines world history and mathematics exam questions in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan and what these questions say about the kind of knowledge students are learning.

Chapter five explores the role of cram schools. Zeng gives a portrait of three popular cram schools in Tokyo, Taipei, and Seoul, describing daily routine of students in the schools, their history, competition in the schools, costs, and the social and educational role they perform and the effect the schools have on students.

In the next chapter, religious aspects of examination life are shown. Zeng refers to this as “With help from the gods: prayer, luck and spiritual strength: the desecularization of entrance
exam systems” (p. 202). The place of Buddhist, Shinto, Confucian and even Christian beliefs in the exam process is mapped out. In chapters seven and eight, he writes about the topics of money and education, adolescent suicide and exam pressures, and cheating. The final chapter is a summation of the main themes of the book.

All in all, this book is an excellent introduction to what can be called the “culture of exams” in the Far East. It is a badly needed sourcebook and rare history of a topic which encompasses such diverse subjects as history, education, politics, and religion. Zeng is quite good at delineating the precise influence of Japan on the exam systems, general historical trends in the development of these systems, and the social roles that the exams serve.

There are, however, several drawbacks to the book. Zeng’s writing style is often quite dry and sometimes awkward, and in certain sections the book is not very well organized. Finally, at $75 US, quite pricey. But these faults do not ultimately detract from the importance and novelty of this study.

Although Zeng does not expressively discuss the ESL/EFL implications of the test, it can be easily inferred. While there are several important ones, for reasons of space, only two will be mentioned. English, like the bulk of the subjects students study for the exam, is taught primarily so that the students can pass the entrance exam. The mode of instruction for English is usually that of the grammar-translation method. Thus, while students are generally relatively strong in vocabulary and grammar (this statement needs the qualifier because quite a few are not as good as is popularly believed), their communicative ability is quite low. Another outcome of the way East Asian students are taught is that their learning or cognitive styles are highly visual (also due to the pictorial nature of their native languages), and authority-oriented. [-3-]
The second major consequence of the exam system is in the way many students view college. Once the student passes the hurdle of the test, his situation greatly changes. This is because the carrot that is dangled before the student while he diligently studies for the exam is a tacit social contract, regarding awards, established between the student and the system if he is successful. (Another legacy of the Confucian Mandarin model.) One reward is a virtual guarantee of a good job (that is, if the student attends a good school, but with the recent economic problems in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, this is no longer a certainty).

But the most important reward is that the student is finally granted some personal freedom. For many Far East Asian students, this freedom translates institutionally at the university level into a general respite, usually for the first couple of years of college (except for engineering and science students), from the demands of academic responsibilities. What this means for the foreign EFL teacher in these countries is that they will, in many cases, find their students rather apathetic and ill-motivated in their studies (and occasionally even quietly resentful about having to devote time to the studying of English).

Socialization is in many cases given a much higher priority over learning. For this is the time for students to join clubs, develop social skills, make connections for the future, find potential mates and explore personal interests. In short, it is a chance to experience those things that were long denied because of the strict and onerous educational system. (This of course is not to claim that all students view the initial years of college in this way; some are well motivated and interested in learning subjects like English, but it is a bald fact that during their first couple years of college, many are not. Nor is it to say that an effective and culturally flexible teacher could not overcome many of these difficulties).

While there has been a great detail of discussion in the last few
years by Asian governments and educators about scrapping or greatly modifying the university examination system (especially in Korea), no real and practical change has occurred or looks to happen in the immediate future. Consequently, it is very important for any present or future ESL/EFL teacher of Far East Asian students to have a good understanding of the educational and cultural background of their students. Fortunately, this book more than amply provides just that.

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