

## Cram Schools: Immigrants' Tools for Success

Written by The New York Times

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### [\(Original New York Times Article\)](#)

By *ASHLEY DUNN*

On a brisk Saturday morning, while most of their friends were relaxing at home, 16-year-old Jerry Lee and eight other Asian teen-agers huddled over their notebooks and calculators for a full day of math and English lessons.

During the week, they all attend public schools in the city. But every Saturday, they go to a Korean hagwon, or cram school, in Flushing to spend up to seven hours immersed in the finer points of linear algebra or Raymond Chandler.

"I complain, but my mom says I have to go," said Jerry, a Stuyvesant High School student from Sunnyside, Queens, who has already scored a 1520 on the Scholastic Assessment Test for college, but is shooting for a perfect 1600. "It's like a habit now."

Long a tradition in the Far East, where the competition to get into a top university borders on the fanatic, the cram schools of Asia have begun to appear in this country too, in Queens and New Jersey and Los Angeles and elsewhere, following the migration of many Koreans, Japanese and Chinese over the last two decades.

In the last 10 years, the cram schools -- called juku in Japanese and buxiban in Chinese -- have become a flourishing industry, thriving on immigrant parents' determination to have their children succeed. Only a handful of cram schools existed here when the hagwon that Jerry attends, the Elite Academy, opened in 1986. Today, the Korean-language yellow pages list about three dozen Asian cram schools in the New York area. In Los Angeles, the Chinese yellow pages list about 40.

In Asia, academic competition begins as early as age 4 or 5, as children vie for the best preschools so they can have an edge in getting into the best elementary schools. By the time

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they enter high school, the competition to get into a prestigious university like Seoul National University or Tokyo University is famously intense.

While the pressure to get into a good school is not nearly so extreme in the United States, the cram schools, like the Elite Academy in Flushing or the ambitiously named Nobel Education Institute in Arcadia, a heavily Asian suburb of Los Angeles, have nonetheless found a burgeoning niche in Asian communities. Chinese and Korean newspapers bulge with cram school advertisements. Some schools simply print lists of their graduates who have been accepted to New York City's specialized high schools, Hunter College High, Stuyvesant and Bronx Science, as well as to Harvard, Stanford and M.I.T.

For some busy parents, the schools have become a kind of academic baby-sitting service. But most see them as a way of insuring that their children excel in spite of public schools that they perceive as lax and unchallenging compared with those in Asia.

Since language and cultural barriers prevent many of them from moving easily in American society, they are willing to invest whatever is required to insure that their children, armed with diplomas from the best universities, will not face the same hardships. Tuition averages about \$200 a month.

"We try to make sure that our children have as much opportunity as possible," said Sung Kim, the father of an Elite Academy student who now attends M.I.T. "They will have a better life."

The rigor and discipline of the cram schools have even begun to attract a growing number of non-Asian parents who want their children to excel.

"The Asian people are willing to invest in their children," said Miri Kessar, an Israeli immigrant who sent her 11-year-old daughter to a Flushing hagwon to study. "They want the best for them. They want Harvard, Yale and Princeton."

Mrs. Kessar, principal of the Woodbury Jewish Center Religious School on Long Island, said she still feels guilty that she didn't discover the hagwon earlier, despite her daughter's perennial

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straight A's in school.

"It's like a hot iron on my heart knowing that my daughter is being introduced to this so late," said Mrs. Kessar, a Forest Hills resident. "When my youngest is in third grade, he will be the first one at the door."

In the drafty basement of an office building on 39th Avenue, nine students at the Elite Academy sat bundled in ski jackets as they wrestled with a long list of vocabulary words.

They breezed through "ephemeral," "loquacious" and "effervescent," as their teacher, a graduate student in English at Columbia University, prodded them with rapid-fire banter that kept them laughing.

They occasionally stumbled. "Voluptuous" drew a puzzled look from one student; "equanimity" was quickly defined, but one student said, "I don't know what they mean by 'evenness of temper.' "

A voice from across the room piped up: "Cool."

After lunch, the cheery banter died away during a three-hour lecture on mathematical matrices.

The lecture went well beyond the subjects of the S.A.T. The teacher explained that the idea was not only to teach the students test-taking skills, as do places like the Stanley H. Kaplan Educational Centers, but also to push the students beyond what they learn in public schools.

Young Dae Kwon, director of the Elite Academy, said that many of the students have attended the evening or Saturday classes since they were in third grade.

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Mr. Kwon, an engineering graduate of Seoul National University, said that compared with cram schools in Korea, his is a breeze. Students do not bow to their teachers, discussion is encouraged, no one yells out the stern command, ch'aryot! that snaps students to rigid attention in Korea. His only request is that student not put their feet up on their desks.

"The kids are different here," he said. "Even Korean kids are different. They are much more talkative."

Mr. Kwon came to the United States in 1979, and after working for several years for the Korean Institute of Machinery and Metals, decided to start a small hagwon to help his own young children. "They had so much free time," he said. "I just thought they could use that time to study more."

He started the school with just 16 students. Today, the school has about 400.

The Japanese schools, such as Hinoki International School and the ENA-KG Kunitachi Gakuin Yobiko in Scarsdale, primarily serve the children of executives who are in the United States for a few years. They are identical to juku in Japan; classes are conducted only in Japanese.

The Chinese and Koreans, most of whom have come to settle in this country, have geared their cram schools to help students succeed here. At the Elite Academy, English is the language of instruction and the only tests that count are those to get into American schools.

Jeong Kim, an 18-year-old freshman at M.I.T. who attended the Elite Academy, said there was never any debate in his home over whether he would go to the school. From the seventh grade on he spent all of his Saturdays at the school.

"Of course, I didn't like it too much, but my parents said go, so I went," he said.

His father, Sung Kim, had gone to a hagwon in Korea and knew how hard it was. But he sent

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his children anyway.

"In human life, there are certain periods in which we must do certain things," he said. "When you are in school, it is time to study."

Mr. Kim graduated in business from one of the best universities in Korea. He owns a dry-cleaning store in Queens, where he works 14 hours a day, six days a week. No vacation. No holidays.

"I would never be doing this kind of work in Korea," he said. "But here, we have to do anything we can to survive."

After years of paying for classes at the hagwon, he now has one child in M.I.T. and another in Harvard.

"I think it has paid off," he said. "They will be able to get any job they want."

Photos: Asian parents who want their children to excel turn to cram schools like the Elite Academy in Queens. (Chang Lee/The New York Times) (pg. 1); The Elite Academy in Flushing, Queens, is one of a growing number of cram schools in which Asian students can bone up for college admission tests. Students studied recently in an intermediate English class. (Chang Lee/The New York Times) (pg. 24)