

Political Correctness in the Land of Conformity

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The ideological mindset often labeled “political correctness” is by no means confined to the West. For years I have been toting around a bag I received in Singapore emblazoned with the words “Re-envisioning Education: Innovation and Diversity,” the theme of the Asia-Pacific Conference on Education held June 3 to 5, 2003. As another example, Bangkok, Thailand, hosted the 2012 Conference on Anthropology and Sustainability in Asia on December 15 to 17. Among these Asian nations, Japan also presents an instructive instance of pop ideology in the world of higher education. At the same time, the history of higher education in Japan shows what is more substantial and commendable in traditional Western academia, which became the model for Japan, just as it did for many in the world.

I have lived in Japan over twenty-five years, teaching in higher education for more than twenty. It has been alarming to see the inroads of ideological activism in the academic community here, which is having unfortunate effects on the curricula of many schools, including my own, Hokusei Gakuen University. In this article, I touch on some positive and also some fundamentally problematic features of Japanese higher education, especially since the end of World War II. Then I examine historical peculiarities of the Japanese educational scene that have fostered the rapid progress of politically correct ideologies on campuses. Next, I look at the current state of college education in Japan. Finally, I endeavor to draw some practical implications from all of this.

I believe Japan demonstrates the dangers for many non-Western societies of adopting Western-style political correctness in higher education. It tends to exacerbate social tendencies and traditions that already work against rational scholarly inquiry. Furthermore, it militates against the educational reforms and progress that have been made since World War II. Just as in America, political

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correctness in Japan is enforcing ideological conformity and turning classes into forums for indoctrination rather than venues for intellectual debate and exploration.

Commendable Aspects, Special Problems

Some praiseworthy features of Japanese higher education deserve mention. Most are simply characteristics common among Japanese people and hence a part of education in Japan. One is the high value placed on teachers and learning. As a result, many Japanese people are deeply grateful for the guiding hand of dedicated academic missionaries and other Western intellectuals who have contributed to the development of higher education here since the beginning of Japanese modernization about 150 years ago. In Sapporo, where I live, two popular tourist landmarks are statues of William S. Clark (1826–1886), an American academic who helped to found Sapporo Agricultural College, which later became Hokkaido University, the most prestigious university on Hokkaido Island. Clark's parting words to his students, "Boys, be ambitious!" are famous throughout Japan.

The statues of several other foreign academics grace downtown Odori Park. My own university began as a girls' school founded over a century ago by a Presbyterian missionary from America named Sarah Smith. A large portion of women's colleges were started by missionaries, since the status of women in Japan was very low before the advent of foreign influence, and there was considerable doubt about the desirability of educating women before Japan opened its doors to the West.

So many in Japan gratefully acknowledge the significant contributions by Western educators to the Japanese educational system and society and charges of cultural chauvinism and colonialism are rare. Moreover, the behavior of politicized professors in Japan has thankfully not yet dropped to the level of the horrors described in books such as *Profscam* and *One-Party Classroom*.¹ I doubt that one could find a group of Japanese professors foolish or vindictive enough to take out a newspaper ad condemning students accused of rape, as happened at Duke University concerning false charges later dismissed against the lacrosse team. American professors often display behavior much more impulsive, unethical, and lacking in common sense than their Japanese counterparts. I credit

¹See Charles J. Sykes, *Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1988); David Horowitz and Jacob Laksin, *One-Party Classroom: How Radical Professors at America's Top Colleges Indoctrinate Students and Undermine Our Democracy* (New York: Crown Forum, 2009).

Japanese civility and love of harmonious relationships for restraining the behavior of even the politicized professors here.

On the other hand, Japanese society also presents a set of fundamental problems for higher education perhaps not found to the same degree in other places. In *Japanese Higher Education as Myth*, Brian J. McVeigh puts his finger on some of these issues. He observes that college students in Japan are often not seriously interested in studying and do not have the ability to think critically, write well, and engage in discussion. McVeigh believes that students lack these basic academic skills and the motivation to acquire them mostly because the education system is controlled by government and business interests in Japan, which are more interested in producing obedient future workers than in promoting intellectual development. Entering college in Japan depends almost entirely on passing university entrance examinations, so students tend to lose any motivation to learn for knowledge's sake. As a result, college becomes "simulated education," a kind of game in which everyone—including parents, teachers, and students—participates.² Though there are exceptional colleges where students are really expected to learn, International Christian University in Tokyo, for example, and Akita International University, I basically agree with all of McVeigh's points and have written about some of these issues myself.³

The main flaw in *Japanese Higher Education as Myth* is McVeigh's advocacy of postmodernism, which in my view undermines his thesis. As readers of *Academic Questions* know, postmodernism works against meaningful intellectual activity more than careerism does. I have certainly found this to be so in facing opposition from postmodern Western academics who contest the kind of critical thinking education I do, viewing it as a kind of cultural colonialism in places like Japan.⁴

²Brian J. McVeigh, *Japanese Higher Education as Myth* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 2002).

³Bruce W. Davidson, "Critical Thinking Education Faces the Challenge of Japan," *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 41–53.

⁴See a representative statement of this mentality in Dwight Atkinson, "A Critical Approach to Critical Thinking in TESOL," *TESOL Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 71–94, along with my response in "Comments on Dwight Atkinson's 'A Critical Approach to Critical Thinking in TESOL': A Case for Critical Thinking in the English Language Classroom," *TESOL Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 119–23. Critical thinking briefly became a fad in the EFL ("English as a foreign language") teaching community, but later many came to reject critical thinking as unsuitable for non-Western students. Oddly enough, those who oppose it are often the same people who censure the sin of "othering" those outside the West.

By "critical thinking," I mean rational judgment about objects of belief, as defined by Harvey Siegel and Robert Ennis. Siegel explains it as being "appropriately moved by reasons," while Ennis calls it the process by which one makes "reasonable decisions about what to believe and do." Unfortunately, many on the academic left have hijacked the term and use it to mean questioning and attacking Western traditions and all things politically incorrect. Siegel and Ennis would certainly consider that a misuse of the term. See Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (New York: Routledge Press, 1988) and Robert H. Ennis, *Critical Thinking* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1996).

American universities are now reaping the results of ideologies that devalue truth and glorify political activism. It is sad indeed to find academics here in Japan attempting to follow the failing American university model in trying to reform their own institutions. That is certainly not a prescription for true reform, but is simply bringing in many of the same problems that plague higher education in the West.

Evolution of the Current Educational System

After centuries of national isolation until the mid-nineteenth century, Japan embarked on a rapid program of modernization. In contrast to imperial China, Japan quickly recognized the necessity of embracing Westernization; however, remnants of a tribalistic mindset never fully succumbed, impeding the process of democratization. As a result, Japan's leaders believed that they could mold their own reality in accordance with their national spirit and unique culture, which they believed would triumph over even the considerable material odds against them from a highly productive, highly industrialized West.⁵ Japanese military leaders during World War II believed they were fighting a holy war for a divine emperor and could not be defeated simply by better technology or industrial might. The policies based on this deluded outlook were soundly defeated, providing some decisive proof that societies cannot mold reality to fit their romantic preconceptions.

Following World War II, many Japanese intellectuals and educators aimed at cultivating a new type of person in Japan—one who could stand apart from the crowd, maintain some skepticism, and not be so easily swept up in mass movements and popular opinion. They pointed out that passive conformity had dominated Japanese society in the years before the war, resulting in disaster. A 1946 report by the Japanese Ministry of Education set forth the paramount goals for Japan's postwar educational system:

Teachers and administrators were called on to engage in deep reflection on the shortcomings of a society that had led to the war and to the country's present sorry state. Modernization since the Meiji period... had consisted primarily of borrowing the material aspects of Western civilization while ignoring the basic spirit behind them. The Japanese

⁵John D. Beatty and Lee A. Richweger, *What Were They Thinking? A Fresh Look at Japan at War, 1941–45* (Bennington, VT: Merriam Press, 2009).

had “learned how to use trains, ships, and electricity, but did not sufficiently develop the scientific spirit that produced them.” At the same time, war and defeat had come about because the people did not have proper respect for “human nature, personality, and individuality.” Failure to develop a rational, critical spirit had allowed militarism and ultranationalism to arise.⁶

Obviously, the Ministry of Education at that time was interested in fostering the spread of a Western-style spirit of serious, objective inquiry beyond the physical sciences as a way to prevent another national disaster.

Regrettably, a countervailing movement later developed among the political and bureaucratic elite, who desired to whitewash Japan’s wartime misbehavior and reassert Japanese cultural pride instead. Terms like “fascist” and “reactionary” are often misused in the West to caricature conservatives, but in Japan these terms often really do seem to apply to certain politicians and individuals with a right-wing orientation. As Ivan P. Hall observes in *Cartels of the Mind*, “the political magnitude of Japan’s better known dual-track realities, however, can be quite breathtaking. A national textbook screening system has for half a century cosmeticized Japan’s role in World War II.”⁷

A number of prominent public figures are spearheading the modern face of Japanese ultranationalism, such as the former charismatic governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara. He looks back nostalgically to the days of the kamikaze suicide bombers, whom he holds up as a model of self-sacrifice for modern Japanese young people. In 2007 he even produced a major movie drama that glorifies the kamikaze, titled *I Go to Die for You (Ore Wa, Kimi No Tame Ni Koso Shi Ni Iku)*. Ishihara denies that the Nanking Massacre took place, a stance provoking Japan’s neighbor China. This sort of behavior gives patriotic conservatism a bad name in Japanese educational circles and also often puts leftists in Japan in the role of champions of intellectual honesty about recent Japanese history.

Consequently, the Japanese intelligentsia has tended to lean to the left, with some exceptions. In addition, just as many current professors in the U.S. came out of the student protest movements of the sixties and seventies, so too

⁶John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999), 248.

⁷Ivan P. Hall, *Cartels of the Mind: Japan’s Intellectual Closed Shop* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1998), 152.

in Japan many professors are former leftist demonstrators from their university days. And unfortunately, like their American counterparts, they have tended to use the classroom as a forum for ideological indoctrination. This brainwashing has probably proven even more effective in Japan, thanks to powerful, prevalent groupism and the habit of submission to hierarchical authority.

Contemporary Manifestations of Political Correctness

Spurred on by their contemporaries in the West, many Japanese left-leaning academics are turning to the ideological romanticism of postmodernism, which they want to make the new foundation for education in Japan. Coming from a relativistic culture with a longstanding tendency to avoid explicit verbal communication, many Japanese academics have imbibed multiculturalism and postmodernism with little strain. In this denial of truth and reality, they become the mirror image of their right-wing adversaries. There is, for example, the Communication Association of Japan (CAJ), an association of scholars in the fields of communication studies and English language higher education. In the opening address of its annual conference on June 24, 1995, the CAJ chair declared postmodernism to be the association's official creed. Other academic associations, such as those for foreign language teachers, read from the same script. Not surprisingly, two recent presidents of Hokusei Gakuen University proclaimed the virtues of postmodernism in chapel messages, despite professing to be Christians. In its admissions materials, a school official expressed the school's educational goal this way: "[Hokusei Gakuen University wishes to develop] an attitude that relativizes one's own self and country...open-minded people who respect heterogeneous people and consider everybody at home and abroad as neighbors...free from oppression and prejudice."⁸ This type of language has a familiar politically correct ring, and the notion of "diversity" permeates this description. Perhaps these are all laudable goals, but they seem to reflect similar cant in the self-descriptions of colleges in the U.S., the UK, and Australia.

Universities in Japan have also been quick to embrace other current academic fads. Every fall since 2007 Hokkaido University has had "Sustainability Weeks," a twelve-week program featuring films, lectures,

⁸*University Profile 2012*, Hokusei Gakuen University, http://www.hokusei.ac.jp/en/vision/president_message.html.

and other activities aimed at raising consciousness of this current environmental watchword.⁹ In a similar vein, the junior college associated with Hokusei Gakuen University often shows the global warming propaganda film *An Inconvenient Truth* to student assemblies. (Interestingly, though there are Japanese climate alarmism skeptics such as University of Alaska's Shunichi Akasofu, I have yet to meet a Japanese familiar with Climategate.) Another mission-related institution, nearby Rakuno University is an agricultural college with a veterinary school, a school of dairy science, and a school of "environmental system," which is further divided into various departments related to environmentalism.¹⁰

In many cases, curricular innovation is not so much a response to campus unrest or demands for change as it is a ploy to appeal to the declining population of college-age students, whose ears are often attuned to current ideological shibboleths. American professors and college students visiting Japan might be surprised to see ads for colleges plastered all over the insides of subway cars and on TV during the college admission season. Colleges even develop their own advertisement slogans—my university's is "Shine Like Stars," broadcast in English, not Japanese—which makes it rather obvious that they are businesses as much as educational institutions. Competition for the decreasing pool of prospective students is fierce and calls for such measures.¹¹ So the motive for advocacy education in Japan is often not so much PC as PR.

The founding of a new department at my university is a case in point. An original department name was created, the Department of Psychology and Applied Communication, in response to data from a survey conducted by a public relations firm, which concluded that the words "psychology" and "communication" had the most positive response among prospective students. The stated goal of the department is to apply psychology and communication techniques to world problems, in the hope of furthering cooperation and peace. This accords well with the pacifist, utopian outlook of many a modern university. In my view, factors inaccessible to psychology and communication

⁹Hokkaido University Sustainability Weeks, <http://www.sustain.hokudai.ac.jp/sw/>.

¹⁰"Organization of University," Rakuno Gakuen University, About University, <http://www.rakuno.ac.jp/english/cigo-gaiyosiki.html>.

¹¹This problem recently led Education Minister Makiko Tanaka suddenly to refuse permission to open to three newly constructed colleges that had previously gotten the Ministry's go-ahead. The decision created an uproar and was soon rescinded, but it was based on the realities of higher education in Japan, where there are too many colleges and too few students. "Education Minister's Outrageous Decision Generates Chaos," *Daily Yomiuri*, November 4, 2012, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/editorial/T121104002925.htm>.

techniques such as ideology play a far greater role in many modern conflicts, but that perspective is definitely in the minority within academia here and in Japanese society.

One can also find pure ideological advocacy in Japanese higher education. A popular pastime among many European and American academics, condemning Israel, is also widespread in Japanese academia and mass culture. I taught a course on the Arab-Israeli conflict at a junior college in Osaka for a number of years, and it was hard for me even to find any academic resources in Japanese that were not pro-Palestinian. Academics in Japan have largely imbibed and transmitted uncritically and almost word-for-word the views of the conflict promulgated by Soviet and Arab propagandists. This propaganda includes such claims as the notion that the Jews do not constitute a real ethnic group and the charge that American foreign policy is controlled by a Jewish cabal.

In turn, the Japanese mass media have spread such dubious ideas gleaned from leftist Japanese academia and its Middle East “experts.” One professor at Tokyo University, Yuzo Itagaki, played a key role in establishing the Tokyo office of the PLO in 1977. In their book on Japanese anti-Semitism, David G. Goodman and Masanori Miyazawa observe that “Itagaki Yuzo has consistently ignored the essential distinction between scholarship and political advocacy.”¹² Like many leftist American academics, scholars such as Itagaki equate Zionism with Nazism and make Israel morally equivalent to the Third Reich. Despite the existence of some excellent works on Israel and the Jews in Japanese, in general, the Japanese intelligentsia has failed to confront the progress of anti-Semitism and disinformation about Israel and the Jews in Japan.¹³ Such vitriol can have violent results: leftist propaganda helped to inspire the Lod Airport Massacre in 1972 in Israel, in which three Japanese Red Army terrorists killed twenty-four people and injured another seventy-six. The miseducation campaign about Israel and the Jews continues today.

In other academic fields, a similar mentality often predominates. Despite its roots in Christian missionary activity, for example, my university now usually teaches religion in a multicultural fashion. The greatest sin would be to imply that one can make judgments about the relative merits of religions. A Muslim once gave a chapel message, and several faculty members are

¹²David G. Goodman and Masanori Miyazawa, *Jews in the Japanese Mind: The History and Uses of a Cultural Stereotype*, expanded ed. (Boston: Lexington Books, 2000), 197.

¹³Ibid., 251.

open apologists for Islam. Similarly, there is a gender feminist movement among female Japanese scholars. Female professors remain in the minority at most Japanese universities, however, so the militant feminists seem to be less outspoken than their American counterparts.

At my university a gender study circle of female professors plans lectures and other activities aimed at students and the public to inform them that their quaint notions about innate sex differences are outmoded, since gender is a social construct. A popular lecture course, *Introduction to Gender*, is offered, as is *Gender and Society*, a seminar taught by a former English student of mine who was converted to gender feminism by the efforts of feminist faculty on campus. At the same time, transvestites and gay celebrities are currently all the rage in Japanese pop culture and mass media, so it does not require much radicalism for professors to approve of transgressive sexuality and sexual liberation. They may only be leading from behind. Nevertheless, frustrating the efforts of militant feminists in Japan is the resistance of many Japanese young women, who still often value a traditional feminine role. Radical feminism can be a hard sell in Japanese society, but it seems to thrive to a limited extent on campus.

Conclusion

Regrettably, just when Japan was emerging from decades of rigid conformity enforced by a totalitarian state, along comes political correctness to impose a new kind of thought control. By cultural disposition, the Japanese are all too prone to the temptation to go down that path. Political correctness undermines the higher educational enterprise in Japan as the postwar Japanese planners envisioned it. Just like Japanese students during World War II, indoctrinated students today are being handicapped in their ability to think rationally and critically about many matters, including ideology. This was brought home to me recently as I evaluated a graduation thesis on the Sokal hoax. Despite being a bright young woman, the student who wrote the paper completely misunderstood the controversy as an instance of simple miscommunication because she was unable to grasp its ideological content—even after I tried at length to explain it to her in Japanese.¹⁴ Her case is not unique.

¹⁴Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures* (London: Profile Books, 2003). The student's Japanese scholarly sources may not have understood the controversy well either.

Political correctness creates problems beyond the Western world. In places such as Japan it threatens intellectual discourse as well as civilization—as much as it threatens it in the West. Unfortunately, Asia has often demonstrated a penchant for embracing many of the worst ideas of the modern West, such as Marxism. The effects of Western ideological nihilism reverberate as the mass media carry the news of the disintegration of Western cultural confidence to foreign shores.¹⁵ Non-Western peoples have other models they can look to, militant Islam, for example, which in recent days seems more self-assured to many than the self-loathing West. In the case of Japan, a historical ideology of militarism and chauvinism is showing signs of revival.

An intellectually self-confident West would be a greater deterrent to such developments than the superficial remedy of promoting shallow concepts such as multiculturalism. In the past, the superiority of Western creativity, rationality, industry, and science thwarted the ambitions of the Japanese militarists. Victor Davis Hanson has described how the egalitarian, individualistic characteristics of American democratic society helped to defeat the conformist Japanese. For example, the Japanese military code was broken by eccentric mathematicians in the American military, such as one who wore a smoking jacket and slippers on duty. Such quirky but creative individuals would never have been tolerated in the inflexibly hierarchical Japanese military.¹⁶ Disaster in wartime also resulted from the Japanese national commitment to an irrational ideology that was doomed to fail in the long run. Many Japanese academics understand that very well. They know that Japan's modern history is a dramatic object lesson in how ideology can be a powerful force in education and society—for good or ill. Those statues of William Clark, standing confidently with his arm outstretched, continue to remind me of how much good an unabashedly Western academic can do, even outside the West.

¹⁵Steven Balch, "Metamorphosis," *Academic Questions* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 46–53.

¹⁶Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise to Western Power* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 334–438. Similar problems, along with a lack of access to uranium, also stymied Japan's attempt to build its own atomic bomb.