

The Crisis of Academic Freedom and University Autonomy in Contemporary Japan —A Socio-historical Perspective—

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1

In early Spring 2017, 62 former employees of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, Japan) were penalized for illegally finding university jobs for retired bureaucrats. During this decade, former MEXT bureaucrats were appointed not only to administrative posts but also to professors' posts at many universities.

In addition, at many universities, including Okayama University (national), Miyazaki University (national), Fukuoka University of Education (national), Hokkaido University of Education (national), Hiroshima City University (public), Chukyo University (private) in Nagoya, and Otomon Gakuin University (private) in Osaka, faculty professors have received severe disciplinary actions because of their careless mistakes or false charges. Most of these professors were critical of dictatorial behavior by the president or board of directors. This marks a change from the 20th century, when such unfair disciplinary actions often occurred only in small colleges. Now, however, these unfair practices are occurring in famous private universities and national or public universities.

Why have many important university positions been filled by former MEXT bureaucrats? Why have the authorities imposed such unfair disciplinary actions at well-known universities? The reason is that the Japanese government has strengthened the power of university presidents, and in doing so, it has violated even minimal academic freedom and university autonomy.

2

In 2015, Japanese ruling parties introduced a new School Education Act and a new National University Corporation Act. The former School Education Act guaranteed that faculty meetings at all universities could deliberate upon and make decisions about important matters about teaching and studying. This included research and teaching content, curriculum, and the recruitment or promotion of colleague professors. However, the new School Education Act deprived faculty meetings of all decision-making power. Instead, it is the university president who now has the power to order changes in research, teaching content, and curriculum and who now has the authority to abolish any

department or major field.

A new National University Corporation Act gave the “presidential election committee of universities” the right to nominate their president. At many universities, the members of the presidential election committee consist of former MEXT bureaucrats, politicians, or presidents of large commercial companies, as well as scholars. The ruling parties’ intentions behind the new National University Corporation Act is to abolish the influence of professors in universities’ presidential elections and eliminate faculty members’ vote in deans’ elections.

Now, the ruling parties, MEXT bureaucrats, and presidents of large commercial companies wish to control teaching and research content in universities for their own interests. In 2015, MEXT instructed all national universities to curtail or abolish the departments of humanities and social sciences.

3

In 2017, during the general election of the House of Representatives, Japanese ruling parties promised tuition-free higher education. Many voters thought that national universities were going to be tuition-free, and that the tuition fee of private universities would be reduced by an amount equivalent to the national university tuition fee.

However, after the election, they announced that only households with an annual income of less than approximately 2.6 million yen were to receive tuition assistance. Under criticism from opposition parties and

citizens, the ruling party raised this to 3.8 million yen.

Moreover, in May 2018, they indicated certain conditions under which students would be able to receive tuition assistance:

- (1) More than 10% of the total number of university courses have to be conducted by businesspersons or non-academic professionals
- (2) More than 20% of the total number of university directors have to be non-scholars.

The Japanese government currently intends to conduct a direct examination of the contents of education, curricula, and personnel selections for the posts of directors and professors at universities, in exchange for extremely limited tuition fee assistance.

4

After the end of the 20th century, universities in developed Western countries, including Japan, received various demands and pressures from external forces, such as state authorities and business associations. However, although Japanese authorities have intervened in the forms or types of university education, they had not thus far intervened in matters of teaching content and faculty professors’ personnel selections.

Article 23 of the Constitution of Japan (1947) states that “academic freedom is guaranteed.” The constitution, the School Education Act, and other related laws guarantee academic freedom and university autonomy for professors. Autonomy in this context has meant the legal rights of faculty

members and the Education and Research Council to decide on important educational matters, including content, curricula, and faculty professors' personnel selection.

The new School Education Act violates the Constitution of Japan by introducing a new order in Japanese universities. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe wants to destroy the Japanese Constitution regime, particularly Article 9, which outlaws war. The Abe government also intends to violate Article 23. In particular, the current "free higher education" policy of the Japanese government will fundamentally destroy the academic freedom and university autonomy that has been maintained for 70 years since World War II.

5

Article 23 of the Constitution of Japan is independent from Articles 19 and 21, which protect freedom of thought and freedom of expression, respectively, because academic freedom and university autonomy were suppressed under the Japanese totalitarian regime. However, as the memories of the totalitarian regime have faded, most Japanese researchers have forgotten the historical and social significance of academic freedom and university autonomy.

In addition, Japanese scholars have forgotten that academic freedom and university autonomy, as defined under the Constitution of Japan, were a privileged right during the global Cold War regime. Academic freedom and university autonomy were guaranteed only in a few developed Western

countries, including Japan, during the Cold War era. In many countries, academic freedom and university autonomy are rights that have been won after great sacrifice and struggle in the process of democratization, as is the case in South Korea and Taiwan (former colonies of the Japanese Empire.)

Throughout the 2010s, in many universities in Japan, most professors and researchers have not been able to write, express ideas, or teach without following the wishes of their president or board of directors. This situation not only violates professors' academic freedom, but it also endangers students' freedom of thought and study and poses a threat to civil liberties for the culture of Japan. Can Japanese scholars imagine the struggle for academic freedom and university autonomy by Japanese predecessors, and by East Asian neighbors? The reconstruction of academic freedom and university autonomy in Japan surely must be based on understanding the sacrifices made to achieve them.

6

Now, under such critical conditions, protecting academic freedom and university autonomy is important not only for professors and academics but also for university students.

In the 2010s many Japanese politicians, large business organizations, and some parts of civil society have come to expect universities and academics to be beneficial to society and to be aligned with national goals. They argue that academic resources within universities should be reallocated to advanced

technology research and to workforce training. In the last half of the 20th century, the phrase "beneficial for society" still carried a more diverse and rich meaning in Japan. However, it currently refers only to making money and workforce training. Beneficial for society has been defined by the interests of the state authorities or the business organizations.

Executives of large corporations often accuse most Japanese universities of serving as "leisure lands," and most Japanese students of not making enough effort to self-develop as a worker, still content with their "moratorium" status (Erikson 1968). However, current Japanese university students have lost most of their moratorium status, which many university students of the 20th century had enjoyed. Many current students hold part-time jobs for longer periods of time than their predecessors, because of the declining economic power of their parents. They are also compelled to participate in corporate internships starting at lower grades in school. Many of them are exhausted and end up becoming industrial reserve labor.

Under these conditions, universities and professors have the vital task of helping students regain opportunities to freely learn and think, and of developing free-thinking activities such as artistic, literary, social, political, or other autonomous activities.

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